

Patricia Parker. 2018. *Shakespearean Intersections: Language, Contexts, Critical Keywords*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

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Published over twenty years after *Shakespeare from the Margins* (1996), Patricia Parker's new book, *Shakespearean Intersections*, brings a highly anticipated sequel in which the paths and crossroads transited in the former volume take the form of unforeseen revisitings and unexpected bifurcations. Between these two extraordinary books, a series of articles and book chapters (see 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2013), witness to Parker's commitment to her unique approach to Shakespeare's texts. The more than four hundred pages of *Shakespearean Intersections*—eighty of which are of copious, learned endnotes—give little room to the explication of a methodology that demands from readers a habituation to Parker's characteristic critical idiom and a substantial training in literary theory, Shakespearean criticism, and early modern studies. The book's subtitle—*Language, Contexts, Critical Keywords*—replicates two terms from the former volume's—*Language, Culture, Context*—in a clear gesture of continuity. Both the similarities and differences between these subtitles are significant for clarifying Parker's renewed confidence in her distinctive philological practice as an analytical tool that unsettles received assumptions of genre, gender, sexuality, history, and politics in the Shakespearean text. As for similarities ("language," "contexts"), the concision with which Parker states her thesis in *Shakespearean Intersections* is inversely proportional to the rewards of her critical practice: in Shakespeare's plays, she asserts, "the boundary between language and context is an incontinent divide" (2). Unfolding the encounter of a verbally and ideologically uncontained Shakespearean text with its plural, multilingual early modern contexts has been the aim of Parker's lifelong dedication to Shakespeare studies. Shakespearean texts do not merely reflect their early modern contexts, and those contexts do not comfortably frame the texts. Rather, texts and contexts overflow each other incessantly, stretching Shakespeare's linguistic uses across changing semantic fields, unstable genre conventions, and

multiple tongues. Echoing scholars like Martin Jay (1998), Parker has elsewhere labelled her method “cultural semantics” (2002). For Parker, the fertile instability of the Shakespearean text is manifested through intricate networks of spellings, pronunciations, collocations, puns, compounds, translingual etymologies, and multilingual intersections. Words do not interpenetrate one another only within the protean dramatic genres of Shakespeare’s England. Their semantic quaintness resonates in a rich textual web of literary, rhetorical, moral, historical, political, economic, and religious discourses whose signifiers and referents permeate Shakespeare’s practices of naming, characterization, and dramatic design. Attention to these complexities paves the way to a critical practice that turns inside out some of our most confident assumptions about the plays.

Yet Parker’s novel use of “critical keywords” validates her method beyond the mere accretion of additional evidence to support old themes in her work. Following the lead of materialist critic Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), Parker joins the efforts of other recent early modernists—Greene (2013), Mac Carthy (2013)— in their conviction that “important social and historical processes” are shown to “occur within language” (1976, 22). In the introductory essay to Mac Carthy’s collection, Richard Scholar argues for the need to add to this aim a sensitivity to the complex webs of contradictory cultural notions occurring across the languages of Renaissance Europe. Scholar invokes, among others, Edward Said’s epitome of the philological virtues of “reception” and “resistance,” combining our accruing of the cultural and historical heritage stored in words with a practice of a “para-doxal mode of thought,” always alert to critical questionings of received knowledge (Scholar 2013, 8; Said 2004, 83). Parker’s practice in *Shakespearean Intersections* is exemplary of this much needed commitment to renewed philological methodologies in early modern studies.

Beyond acknowledged affinities, Parker’s Introduction does not claim her choice of words to be “key” or essential for the interpretation of Renaissance culture. Rather, their value as keywords is granted by the adjective “critical”: these words “are chosen from the language of particular plays themselves” in order to work “as a heuristic methodology for particular critical analyses and

interventions” (1). Thus, they offer a critical portal into the contexts of the plays, along with “issues and historical intersections that have been marginalized or have gone unnoticed by their editors and critics” (1). Initially, the list of words might seem capricious: terms like “arsy-versy,” “awkward,” “breach,” “change,” “cashier,” “incontinence,” “latter end,” “suppose,” “quince,” or “preposterous,” and proper names like “Brabant,” “Low Countries,” or “Ganymede” may have a more or less iterative presence in Shakespeare’s work either in the quoted forms here or in their participation in intersectional semantic fields. Yet, in their shared marginality, these words construct a powerful network illuminating forgotten or consciously ignored corners of Shakespearean meaning with profound repercussions to our understanding of the plays. Of these words, “preposterous” comes foremost as “the most pervasive ‘keyword’ in this book” (9–10). Its suggestions of spatial and temporal transposition, as well as its association with the rhetorical figure of *hysteron proteron*, enable Parker’s scrutiny of the word’s conceptualization of multiple forms of inversion including historical chronology, typological structures, biological life, familial lineage and inheritance, socioeconomic order, political hierarchy, sexual identities and practices, rhetorical and social propriety, as well as generic prescriptions and expectations—namely, beginnings, middles, and ends in relation to tragedy, comedy, and mixed genres. Preposterousness fosters an alternative Shakespearean poetics, while a critical practice sustaining its ubiquity in the plays recommends attention to a set of words that other methodologies would condemn to insignificance.

Parker’s choice of plays in *Shakespearean Intersections*, not entirely new to her work, observes a careful arrangement. In what is perhaps the book’s only nod to critical correctness, Parker’s narrative thread proceeds by genre: *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1594), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1596) occupy the first three chapters on comedy; *Henry V* (1599) in the context of the serial history plays is the subject of chapter 4; tragedy is represented by *Othello* (1604) in chapter 5; finally, tragicomic romance is served by *Cymbeline* (1610) in chapter 6. With the exception of the inverted order in the first two chapters, Parker is also observant to received Shakespearean chronology. Surprising as this may sound in a book so insistent on unsettling temporal structures and lineal orders, this procedure may reveal further subtexts. Although Parker shuns

explicit biographical narrative or claims to authorial intention, an effect of reading Shakespearean Intersections lineally is an implicit conviction that Shakespeare's knowledge, art, and ideological concerns develop by accumulation of authorial experience.

Parker's analytic procedure combines, in her own words, varying ratios "of attention to language, contexts, and close reading" (2). A balance between these three areas of interest is more rationally observed in the three chapters on comedy opening the book. Chapter 1, "Preposterous Reversals, Latter Ends: Language and Contexts in Love's Labor's Lost" starts on Armado's accusation of Costard's affair with Jacquenetta, which he defines as an "obscene and most prepost'rous event" (1.1.241-42), to argue that the play's preoccupation with the "preposterous," "backward," and "arsy-versy" runs counter to a critical tradition that has marginalized its bawdy and scatological subtexts for the sake of a civilizing idea of comedy (32-33). Tracing the word's presence in manuals of orthography, rhetoric, and multilingual dictionaries, Parker reads the play's rich textures of linguistic and sexual inversion, such as the incontinence of its verbal riddling, which transmutes enigmas into "egmas," or enemas (3.1.71); or the calling of Holofernes "Jud-ass" (5.2.628), which plays with current associations of Jews with sodomy; or the references to "latter ends" as tropes for the open-endedness of a comedy, whose implicit deviancy exorcises romantic expectations of heterosexual marriage. Cueing on similar arguments, Chapter 2, "Mastering Bianca, Preposterous Constructions and Wanton Supposes: The Taming of the Shrew," challenges the critical tradition that presents Bianca as a potentially tractable maid, particularly through the use in Lucentio/Cambio's mock Latin lesson of Penelope's complaint about Ulysses' failure to return home in Ovid's *Heroides*, which projects a view of wifely behavior that is "anything but submissive" (91). Parker's detailed analysis of the play's intimations of sexual deviancy also looks into the language of backwardness in "backare" (2.1.73) and fiddling in relation to Lyly's *Midas* (1592) (106-109), or the Bianca plot in relation to its multilingual source in Ariosto's comedy *I Suppositi* (1509), translated by George Gascoigne as *Supposes* (1566), whose original paratext plays on the sodomitical senses of "supposition" (113-22).

Chapter 3, "Multilingual Quinces and A Midsummer Night's Dream: Visual Contexts, Carpenters' Coigns, Athenian Wedding"

defies the tradition that has associated the name of Peter Quince exclusively with carpenters' coigns—an issue that Parker had examined elsewhere (1996, 83–115). Noting previous editorial failure to find in Quince's name resonances of the fruit that it designates in English, Parker embarks on a fascinating philological excavation of the word's meaning and connotations in classical and modern languages, as well as the rich textual tradition associating the quince with marriage and fertile sexuality, but also with deviant forms through dizzying intimations of swelling organs and open tracts. Attention to a rich emblematic tradition and to the influence of Plutarch's *Conjugal Precepts* (129–42) reopens the issue of Shakespeare's sources for the *Dream*, signaling the way to necessary editorial revisions. Her method shines here at its most resourceful and fruitful in terms of the rewards that we traditionally expect from outstanding literary scholarship: a cornucopia of positive, material evidence at the service of persuasive explications of the seldom straightforward courses of the best literary texts.

The move to other genres in the second half of the book shifts emphasis from close reading to contextual analysis. Chapter 4, “‘No Sinister Nor No Awkward Claim’: Theatrical Contexts and Preposterous Recalls in *Henry V*,” begins at the play's end by invoking its Folio epilogue as the inception of a narrative that simultaneously looks forward into English history and backwards into Shakespearean chronology. Parker argues that recent work on memory in the histories tend to neglect the fact that for London theatregoers the memory of *Henry V* lay preposterously in the historical future of the earlier *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* as much as it did in *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV*. The epilogue's deflating rhetoric stresses the play's faultlines by reference to the first tetralogy. A small-scale approach to significant keywords, echoing Exeter's disclaimer of the “sinister” and “awkward” quality of Henry's dynastic rights to France through female descent (2.4.85), as well as the rhetoric of “marches” and “borders” that serves to contrast Henry's rights to the English throne in opposition to the stronger Mortimer claims suppressed in the Cambridge rebellion, points to a complex narrative of familial and political breaches whose “preposterous recalls” in the *Henry VI* plays compromise sequential order as the basis for heroic notions of history.

Chapter 5, “What’s in a Name? Brabant and the Global Contexts of Othello,” replaces interest in the English past with contemporary history leading from the play’s traditional focus on European-Ottoman conflict around Cyprus to Spanish-Dutch-English wars throughout the sixteenth century by reference to the Spanish devil/saint “Iago,” and the Spanish Netherlands evoked through the “Brabant” that previous criticism has failed to associate with Desdemona’s father, Brabantio. Parker’s reconstruction of sixteenth-century warfare contexts through the presence of Brabant in European and English military history is an exemplary exercise in archival research and philological acuteness. One could object that context in this chapter almost entirely swallows the play. Yet Parker’s focus on the relevance of Brabant as an “alarum” prefiguring the Armada episode certainly resonates in the “alarums” for Turkish wars in Othello in the context of the frequent conflation of Spaniards and Turks found in sixteenth-century English texts. The ultimate reasons for Shakespeare’s name Brabantio project Othello beyond its plot into “extended global context [...] without having to entail any literalistic one-to-one-to-one relation with the character himself” (258).

Contemporary local history also presides over a final chapter, “Intimations of Ganymede in Cymbeline,” which works both as a recapitulation of the book’s concerns and as a companion piece to Parker’s recent work on this play (Parker 2013). Beginning in a sort of nothing-up-my-sleeves maneuver that seeks to demonstrate the pervasiveness of a name in a play in which it never appears, Parker argues that “Ganymede” enters Cymbeline in the spectacular scene of Posthumus’ dream presided over by Jupiter’s descent “sitting upon an eagle” (5.5.91). Yet this ghostly entrance at the end of the play has been preceded by the earlier suggestion of Posthumus as a Ganymede figure “raised” by Cymbeline in a gesture that evokes King James’s “raising” of his favorites Robert Carr and James Hay. Reading through literary and emblematic sources on Jupiter’s rape of Ganymede (Drayton, Spenser, Peacham, Beaumont and Fletcher), Parker reconstructs the play’s breach of the homo/hetero divide in its representation of the cross-dressed Innogen as Fidele, and more particularly in its re-elaborations of the ring plot of *The Merchant of Venice* (1596). Replicating this interest in preposterous venery, Cymbeline builds up a preposterous time in which invasion and peace negotiations speak to James’s controversial peace with Spain

in 1604, thus compounding “a temporal palimpsest” of ancient and contemporary histories around British-European conflicts (296–97).

Numerous other critical narratives that fall out of the scope of this review run through the winding circulatory system of *Shakespearean Intersections*, a book whose festive tones and often mischievous topics are never at odds with its admirable learning and rigor. Her witty, consciously iterative prose, in which keywords and key phrases reappear with the formulaic persistence of an epic poem, parallels Shakespeare’s own penchant for restatement. A lively reminder to early modernists of how much our contextual explanations may gain from attention to the details of language, Parker’s magisterial close readings of Shakespeare make of her critical writing a genre in its own right: *Shakespearean Intersections* is to this date its most accomplished exemplar.

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