

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Goran Stanivukovic, ed., *Queer Shakespeare: Desire & Sexuality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). xiii + 406 pp. ISBN 978 1 4742 9524 6.

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The lively and eclectic collection of thirteen essays in *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality* is a testament to the claim made by editor Goran Stanivukovic in the volume's introduction: that 'queer early modern studies, and queer theory more broadly, is far from over' (p. 17). Stanivukovic defines 'queer Shakespeare' as both 'a matter of theoretical perspective' and a 'subject of critical inquiry' (p. 6). So while the volume centers on investigations of desire and sexuality in Shakespeare's works, the invocation of 'queer' here is also to pressure (and thereby expand) the theoretical and methodological boundaries of both queer and literary studies. Stanivukovic reframes the chronological position of early modern literature as anterior to queer theory to advocate for the ways in which Shakespeare's works may have anticipated — or, perhaps, generated — the tenets of queer theory (p. 13). In this sense, *Queer Shakespeare* builds upon Madhavi Menon's 2011 collection *Shakespeare*, which took the *always-already* queerness of the Renaissance as one of its central premises (p. 10). Advocating for the expansion of queer theories' territory and the extension of the historiography of queer approaches to Shakespeare, Stanivukovic and the volume's contributors effectively illustrate the value of queer theory's sustained engagement with texts of the early modern period in the continued project of advancing both queer and literary studies (p. 23).

Queer Shakespeare is divided into three sections — 'Queer Time', 'Queer Language', and 'Queer Nature' — though Stanivukovic welcomes the inevitable 'conceptual overlap' among chapters (p. 26). Indeed, these sectional divisions, nominally detached from the volume's titular umbrellas of 'desire' and 'sexuality', nod to a more recent and large-scale conceptual shift in queer theories toward considerations of temporalities, forms, and

ecologies, among other (less anthropocentric) horizons. An example of such critical and methodological expansion can be found in David L. Orvis' contribution to the collection. Orvis adopts James M. Bromley's anti-teleological hermeneutic to read brief or seemingly insignificant moments in *The Two Gentleman of Verona* as monumental in significance to his feminist and queer reading of Julia in the play (p. 49). Stephen Guy-Bray, in a similarly inventive move, attends not to lexicon but to narrative as a site of queer production in *Cymbeline*, understanding the play's intentional and unnecessary narrative complexity as overproduction, itself an inherently queer formal phenomenon (p. 136). Exemplifying the merits of chronologically uncanny comparative work, Ian Frederick Moulton positions Lodovico Beccadelli's (backward-turning) epigrams against Shakespeare's (forward-looking) sonnets to examine the differing directional teleology of male desire (p. 103). And in an equally pioneering spirit, Melissa E. Sanchez manipulates queer ecological methods to analyze the violation of 'natural' processes of procreation in *Measure for Measure* (p. 266).

Though the volume's essays are explicitly organized around these three broad concepts of time, language, and nature, other governing threads run throughout. Queer excess — of production, and of performance — links Guy-Bray's analysis of narrative in *Cymbeline* to Stanivukovic's consideration of style in *Twelfth Night* and to Simone Chess's treatment of male-to-female cross-dressing in selections across Shakespeare's canon. The expansion of (new) materialist theories, object-oriented ontologies, and the recent turn in queer studies toward the post- or non-human associates John S. Garrison's look at glass in Shakespeare's sonnets with Holly Dugan's inspired phonological interrogation of the letter 'H' in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Melissa E. Sanchez's account of the reproductive human body in *Measure for Measure*, Kathryn Schwarz's attention to the seductive potential of the bubonic plague in *Romeo & Juliet*, and Christine Varnado's examination of the language of queer weather in *Macbeth*. And Kirk Quinsland's advocacy for metatheatrical antihomophobic strategies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Valerie Billing's canvassing of a lexicon of size in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Eliza Greenstadt's reading of the gendered and sexualized nature of usury as depicted in *The Merchant of Venice* each riff creatively on the formal and stylistic valences of 'queer' as a 'matter of theoretical perspective' (p. 6).

But perhaps the most critical theme of the collection is an engagement with the debate over queer futurity, and consequently the future of queer Shakespeare studies. Melissa E. Sanchez deals extensively with the work of Lee Edelman, who polemically embraced the

‘death drive’ as the ‘future’ of queer in his 2004 monograph, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Sanchez takes up Edelman’s challenge to reproductive futurism by placing his ‘no future’ stance in conversation with her new materialist attention to ‘the “vitality” of matter’, specifically the matter of reproduction in *Measure for Measure*. Similarly, Kathryn Schwarz’s reading of the bubonic plague in *Romeo and Juliet* reveals the play to be ‘saturated with epidemic potential’ and thus a hotbed for contagion which ‘expands propagation beyond generative descent’ (p. 249). Both position an analytical link between materialism and reproduction, but Schwarz warns against the pessimism of such ontologies, for they are incompatible with what Schwarz labels as ‘a queer utopian future’ (p. 261). Though Schwarz does not refer explicitly to the work of José Esteban Muñoz, her utopian vocabulary invokes Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009), which challenged Edelman’s ‘no future’ philosophy by offering performance as a potential site of queer utopian existence.

Performance-based analyses are programmatically unaddressed in the volume, and yet performance inevitably inserts itself into the conversation over queer futurity. Like Schwarz, Stanivukovic alludes to Muñoz’s investment in queer futurity through performance in his own contribution to the volume. Stanivukovic interrogates the queering of the Petrarchan style of desire in *Twelfth Night*, and finds that queer style ‘animates, moves, and energizes the *speakers* to discover erotic meanings’ (p. 173, emphasis mine). The way for this queer style to be fully realized, in other words, is through dramatic performance. So while *Queer Shakespeare* smartly siphons off considerations which deal exclusively with stage performance (or other media) for requiring ‘a critical apparatus that is different from that of literary criticism’, Stanivukovic’s work testifies to the porous boundaries of literary studies and performance studies when it comes to the works of Shakespeare (p. 24). Indeed, Stanivukovic opens the volume with a consideration of Emma Rice’s subversive production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Globe Theater in 2016. This gesture toward performance as a site of queer futurity (in the Muñozian sense) feels appropriate amidst *Queer Shakespeare*’s more general investment in Shakespeare’s queer future. If anything, in Stanivukovic’s words, Shakespeare’s ‘cultural visibility assures that Shakespeare has a queer future as well’ (p. 7).

In a welcome closing gesture to the volume, Vin Nardizzi’s ‘Afterword’ continues this work, drawing on Stanivukovic’s use of the Globe’s *Midsummer* to consider the production’s musical incorporation of John Donne’s ‘Elegy 19’. Nardizzi’s intertextual

investigation turns to Puck and his task — to ‘put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes’ — as a pathway into an ecocritical and environmental literary-historical reading of the play. Juxtaposing the temporal poles of the Anthropocene era that we and Shakespeare inhabit, Nardizzi’s conclusion appropriately caps the volume’s previous expansion of comparative/intertextual readings and queer ecologies.

To end the volume on an extended discussion of the queer potential of Shakespeare in performance is fitting, given the volume’s pervasive interest in queer futurity, and the theoretical and methodological future of queer studies of Shakespeare and early modern literature. These considerations become even more urgent as we enter a less certain (and less-optimistic) era regarding the fate of our planet, as Nardizzi soberly reminds us. The volume, then, is best read as an exemplar fulfilling its own scholarly invitation to see queer early modern studies as dawning. If Shakespeare’s queer potential lies in futurity, then it will be up to future performances — edited and printed, as well as rehearsed and staged — to see it realized.

Works cited

- Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2011).
- Menon, Madhavi, *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2011).
- Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).