

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Suparna Roychoudhury, *Phantasmatic Shakespeare* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2018). 203pp. ISBN 9 781 5017 2656 9.

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In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus muses on the idea of imagination, proclaiming it to belong to the lunatic, the lover, and the poet. It is with this idea that Suparna Roychoudhury begins her book *Phantasmatic Shakespeare*. This book investigates the presence of early modern philosophical discourses on the mind and imagination in Shakespeare's work. Roychoudhury shows that these representations of imagination are not merely mirrors to the contemporary arguments of his day, but that they show independent thought on Shakespeare's part. She purports that this thinking takes place in the spaces of ambiguity inherent in debates of the imagination. This book weaves between dense humanist discourses and their application to Shakespeare's writings in a study that is interdisciplinary in nature, incorporating readings of early modern science, medicine, and philosophy with literature. While at times the claim can be made that too much gravitas is given to Shakespeare as an author who is in some way special in his dealing with this topic, Roychoudhury challenges this privileging of Shakespeare with the inclusion of other literary authors of the early modern period such as Spenser, Nash, and Milton.

This book's primary argument is laid out in the introduction, where Roychoudhury asserts its central claim to be 'that Shakespeare does not so much draw on the epistemological tradition of imagination, but repurpose the deepening ambiguities of that tradition into the basis of aesthetic representation' (p. 19). In doing this, Roychoudhury participates in what she calls the 'new literary historiography of science' (p. 18), a relatively recent move in criticism that concerns itself with the relationship between Renaissance art and science. The book therefore is organised so that each chapter considers a different aspect of the imagination with which Shakespeare was concerned.

The first chapter addresses the question of the imagination's physical location in the body. In the first section of this chapter Roychoudhury details the various classical and early modern theories for this location. The eye was of particular importance for these early modern philosophers as it communicated the outside world to the imagination, and so was a point of conflict and contradiction when it came to working out their exact relationship. It is for this reason that Roychoudhury focuses on Shakespeare's sonnets that concern images of the eye. The integration of science and literature studies seems to falter here as Roychoudhury separates the scientific history and the analysis of Shakespeare's sonnets into distinct sections with the literary focus only referring back to the previous section, rather than being wholly integrated. This is perhaps due to the way Shakespeare's sonnets, as Roychoudhury concludes, 'constitute their own sort of anatomical illustrations' (p. 55), and so this link between the humanist discourse that began the chapter can almost be seen to stand apart from the analysis of Shakespeare's work.

Chapter two begins with an introduction to the word 'idleness'. Roychoudhury situates this term within its cultural context by analysing its discussion in essays and poems by philosophers and poets alike. This makes it clear that idleness is for the most part agreed to be a fancy for children that should not be entertained into adulthood. In quoting *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton, Roychoudhury connects the idea of idleness to the mind-body problem of her first chapter, with Burton linking idleness to physical sickness. Roychoudhury reads *Loves Labour Lost* as a satire on these foregrounded cultural considerations of idleness. This satire questions preconceptions about knowledge, how it is formed and how it is evaluated. Roychoudhury discusses the culture around courtly pursuits of knowledge and shows how Shakespeare's parody of this not only mocks the superiority of these scholars, but also self-reflexively asks the question of the place of imagination in the creation of knowledge. This chapter more effectively integrates the philosophical discourse with the literary discussions.

Roychoudhury moves from the consideration of idleness to discussing the meanings of vanity in the context of the early modern imagination in chapter three. She foregrounds this discussion with a reading of Mercutio's description of dreams as 'nothing but vain fantasy' in *Romeo and Juliet* (p. 83). In giving context to the attitudes surrounding vanity, particularly in relation to its connotations of imagination, Roychoudhury explains its links to religious discourse and the criticisms of transubstantiation that developed in post-Reformation dialogues. After this historiographical foregrounding, she returns to close readings of *Romeo and Juliet* where she positions the lovers as victims of fancy, showing that while it seems as though the early modern anxiety to do

with fancy is due to it being 'emptily vain' (p. 94), it is instead due to the fact that it may not be.

Chapter four returns to the subject matter of chapter one and looks at the relationship between fantasy and vision. This chapter does a better job at being cohesive in its interdisciplinary nature, as the groundwork has been done in chapter one. However, in her introduction Roychoudhury asserts she would address a different line of thought in each chapter. Given the similarity of the themes in these two chapters, they could perhaps have been combined. While this chapter deals with the same connection between seeing and the faculty of imagination, it applies the notion of 'seeming to see' to readings of *King Lear*. Where it departs from the discussion of the physical relationship between the eye and the imagination, this chapter concerns itself with how seeing works and how it interacts with the mind as if functioning as a lens. While both the first and the fourth chapter make use of readings that offer eye imagery, chapter one reads like an introduction to the way in which the eye was spoken of in relation to the mind, whereas chapter four shows how this literary trope can be used to convey flawed perception.

In chapter five Roychoudhury uses the medical history of imaginative dysfunction as a symptom for melancholy and applies this tradition to a reading of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Through these readings she demonstrates the link between imagination and mental disorders and the detrimental effects this can have on society as a whole, continuing in a similar vein to Chapter three. This chapter will also be of interest to feminist scholars in its commentary on witches and in particular the battle between delusion and actual supernatural evil.

The final chapter moves outside the body to the topic of Chimeras. With the chimera being a mystical creature made up of a combination of animals, Roychoudhury skilfully applies this notion to travel and zoological writings. Through textual studies she shows that though the creation of chimeras was considered a dangerous mental exercise, it was at the same time a productive contribution to the collective knowledge of the wider world back at home. In this chapter, she also shows how Shakespeare was aware of the way the mind processed unfamiliar experiences, as is evident in his play *The Tempest*. This chapter's conclusion that 'imagination is not so much a systematic failing as a predictable cognitive procedure' (p. 190), somewhat contradicts the sentiments of chapter five on melancholy. However, this only strengthens Roychoudhury's argument for Shakespeare's changing thought processes on the different facets of the imagination.

Ultimately Rouchoudhury contributes a much-needed addition to the corpus of mental studies in Shakespeare. Departing from a critical tradition invoking ‘the cognitive theory of imagination passively’ (p. 9), Rouchoudhury successfully broadens the scope by thinking of these representations in relation to the philosophic and scientific dialogues of the time. With this in mind, this book will be of interest to anyone interested in mind body dualities and the mental in Shakespeare and the early modern period more widely. This book also functions as a case study for the way in which the literary historiography of science can be applied to other topics. It is also a useful introduction to early modern scientific practices for those interested in an exploring the field. As highlighted throughout this review, this study can be used to prompt further research in other methodologies such as feminist criticism. Most of all, however, this work serves as an important reference point for scholars looking to consider interdisciplinary Shakespeare studies in a new way.