

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Emma Smith, *This Is Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 2019; repr. in paperback, New York: Random House, 2021). 349pp. ISBN 978 1 9848 9815 98.

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This Is Shakespeare, by Emma Smith, is accessible, engaging, and surprisingly funny at times. Here readers will find a Shakespeare that ‘you could have a drink and a good conversation with, rather than one you have to bow before’ (p. 5). So, while Smith does employ the required scholarly background for any exploration of Shakespeare’s work, her deft but minimal use of it creates a context for a ‘book about Shakespeare for grownups who don’t want textbook or schoolroom platitudes’ (p. 4). In short, these essays are as close to being a conversation with the reader as is possible for an author and critic to achieve.

Rather than espousing a theoretical position or methodology by which to attack Shakespeare’s work, worth, or reputation, Smith focuses on what he does not give us. ‘Shakespeare’s plays are incomplete, woven of what’s said and what’s unsaid, with holes in between. This is true at the most mundane level: what do Hamlet, or Viola, or Brutus look like? A novelist would probably tell us; Shakespeare the dramatist does not. That means that the clues to personality that we might expect from a novel, or from a film, are not there’ (p. 2). For her, ‘the silences, the inconsistencies and, above all, the sheer and permissive gappiness of his drama’ (p. 2) with its lack of authorial voice, stage directions, and social narrative generates gaps which we fill in, leaving the execution of the lines up to actors, directors, and readers informed by their own perceptions and/or expectations. In this way, we make Shakespeare our own. Our perspectives fill in the blanks he has created by not dictating every detail of production as another playwright might.

Originally conceived as a series of podcasts, *This Is Shakespeare* contains twenty self-contained essays on his most popular or most problematic plays. Smith explores the plays that everyone expects to see in a discussion of Shakespeare's work: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as a selection of the histories such as *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *Julius Caesar*, and a few other plays that she finds interesting: *Coriolanus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Winter's Tale*. In doing so and in dealing with the plays chronologically, she succeeds in pointing out how his writing creates 'spacious texts to think with — about agency, celebrity, economics, friendship, sex, politics, privacy, laughter, suffering, [and] a tonne of topics' (p. 5). Each chapter explores the gappiness in a single play and from a specific point of view, some of which are intriguing and certainly unexpected. For example, her *Hamlet* is more about the prince's nostalgia for his father's Elsinore than about his indecision or possible madness; her *Macbeth* questions who is really responsible for the chaos that results from a random (or not) meeting with the witches and whether or not it is possible to absolve the major characters of murder; and her *Anthony and Cleopatra* explores the similarities to a *Hello! Magazine* cover story. While we expect *The Merchant of Venice* to explore relationships, we may be surprised by the outright commodification of those relationships. Similarly, we expect *Twelfth Night* to address sexual transgression, but here we learn how completely the female presence of Viola is erased from the play and the ramifications of that erasure in achieving queer comedy. Readers may be surprised to find themselves, along with the other characters, seduced by Richard in *Richard III* in spite of, or perhaps because of, his outright villainy and that the focus of *Much Ado About Nothing* on relationships is far more about friendships between men than romance between men and women.

All of this is possible, as Smith repeatedly points out, due to the gaps Shakespeare has left in the texts because there are no explanatory stage directions to hint at what he might have wanted. Rather, the written text leaves it up to us as 'descriptive directions that say *how* action is conducted — angrily, happily, quickly — are virtually non-existent: the action of the plays is thus up for grabs by actors, directors, and readers too' (p. 13). By his not filling in the details, we can continually reinterpret the work according to what we want it be, remaking it each time an actor or director engages with the text based on a desire to say something new, yet still applicable and plausible for today. Thus, 'readers, critics and performers have tended to find confirmation of their own politics in the play's careful impartiality: again, we make Shakespeare mean what we want him to mean' (p. 66).

An example of the gappiness Smith explores occurs with the first play she takes on: *The Taming of The Shrew*, popular with audiences but difficult to work with in a feminist/#metoo world, sets many of her themes in place and serves as a primer for the remainder of the essays. ‘The title [alone can be] a plot synopsis, a how-to guide, a raised eyebrow, or a satirical joke’ (p. 9). As she notes, ‘everything [about it] is contested to the extent that it is impossible even to begin with a neutral synopsis of the play’ (p. 7). Is Kate a feisty but misunderstood woman or an out-of-control virago? Is Petruchio quirky or sadistic? Is Kate’s final speech a capitulation to patriarchy or an ironic declaration designed to win a wager? It all depends on how you look at it, a phrase Smith employs seven times in the second paragraph alone as she walks the reader through the dichotomies of traditional thinking versus more contemporary issues. All the points she raises are valid and interesting, but each one significantly changes the focus of the play and its engagement with the viewer or reader. For Smith, the gaps prompt exciting questions, not answers, that engage thinking from both points of view without prejudicing a reader towards one or the other, eliminating the need to choose a ‘correct’ version.

She ends the book with a brief discussion of the convention of an epilogue’s purpose — to bring audiences and readers back to the real world from the fictional world they’ve just inhabited — that also serves as a reminder of why we watch or read Shakespeare in the first place. Occasional theatergoers searching for information before attending a production of a Shakespeare play will find much in the essays helpful and enlightening. Teachers and professors will be enthused and energized by her passion for the plays and her spot-on questions about rethinking accepted and, perhaps, outdated perceptions of generations of discussion. Scholars looking for a new direction or new interpretation of Shakespeare’s works will be intrigued by her discussions and grateful for the suggestions of her exploration which offer us ‘different reading priorities [...] permissive, modern, challenging, gappy, frustrating, moving, attenuated, beautiful, ambiguous resourceful, provoking, necessary’ (p. 324).