

Early Modern Literary Studies

**Ruben Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare's England*
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Ruben Espinosa's *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare's England* contributes to the emerging critical focus on Marian appropriation in early modern culture and literature. Such work has drawn attention to an interpretive reshaping of the Virgin Mary's significances in the early modern period: so that rather being associated with 'loss', it is argued that Mary continues to be imaginatively employed in a variety of texts and for a range of purposes. Espinosa's study distinguishes itself by entirely focusing on how Shakespeare employs the Marian trope to negotiate religious, national and gendered identities, and particularly to scrutinise the cultural construction of (English) masculinity.

Espinosa introduces the book with a detailed and absorbing introduction which provides a chronological overview of the Marian cult in England from its origins, through its popularity in the medieval period and then eventual marginalisation after the Reformation. Additionally, each chapter is organised around a Marian theme and opens with an overview of the particular aspect of Mary's persona under discussion, including her strength, intercession, simultaneous virginity and motherhood, and miraculous power. The four chapters offer a broadly chronological survey of nine of Shakespeare's plays which, Espinosa argues, contain Marian elements in characterisation, staging and theme.

Opening the first chapter by surveying the cultural anxiety surrounding religious identity in England, Espinosa makes the bold claim that 'Shakespeare's plays...offered relief from this religious anxiety, and envisioned a kind of potent fellowship.' (p. 45). Rather than a theatre emptied of religious meaning, Espinosa's arguments rely on the understanding that Shakespeare's stage was infused with various religious signifiers. The chapter contends that Marian strength, as explicitly personified by Joan La Pucelle in *1 Henry VI*, is employed to interrogate the anxiety surrounding religious identity in

the period. Joan's formidable persona and rallying of the French in the play asserts the value of Mary's influence in building communities and exposes that Mary had the (hypothetical) potential to unite the English in the early modern period. Joan's powerful feminine character is also the site upon which masculine identity is promoted, through violence against her. As Espinosa persuasively claims 'the violence and aggression behind war seems to provide the male with an imagined potency, and perhaps for this reason, the Virgin Mary's enduring aura of compassionate strength was fashioned as threatening to a masculine culture in search of its identity.' (p. 57).

Marian strength is also revealed in Joan's intercessionary powers, and such influence is the focus of chapter two. Espinosa argues that Portia and Isabella in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, respectively, embody differing aspects of Marian intercessionary influence. Both plays scrutinise 'the perceived value of female intercession in a world anxious about masculine control and providential design.' (p. 78). Portia successfully intercedes for Antonio without direct supplication, but Isabella, although called upon to intercede, is ultimately powerless in the face of predetermined events. Their influence also encompasses a provocative feminine sexuality, particularly in regards to Portia and also in relation to Isabella's beauty. Both plays reveal the enduring cultural desire for and yet simultaneous threat perceived by such female and Marian intercession.

Chapter three, the predominant central section, traces this concept of Marian influence onto her virgin motherhood. First, through readings of Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia, it is argued that their perceived purity influences the masculine identity of their male counterparts. This influence grants each female character potency, power and a subversive potential. Secondly, this female influence is also imagined as a positive, liberating force by reading the masculinity of Othello and Hamlet in relation to the maternal compassion of Desdemona and Gertrude, respectively. In this way, Espinosa refines the argument of Janet Adelman in *Suffocating Mothers* to instead suggest that maternal sexuality is a liberating force to promote a self-understanding that is grounded in the maternal.

The final chapter explores the Marian resonances in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale*, with particular attention to how the 'miraculous' events of the plays are effected by Cleopatra, Marina and Hermione, respectively. The Marian strength displayed by the female characters exposes the power of iconography, and highlights both the threat and the potential of miracles. By keeping Mary a 'visible' presence on the stage, Shakespeare reveals how Marian strength and influence impacted on perceptions of masculinity and community. In the afterword, Espinosa neatly

summarises a progressive shift of perspectives from clear identification and promotion of Marian strength in Shakespeare's earlier plays, through an interrogation of the potential of Marian iconography, and finally a nostalgia in the later plays.

Espinosa's arguments are certainly illuminating, and present compelling new readings of the Virgin Mary, Shakespeare's plays and also constructions of masculinity in early modern England. However, there is a general tendency to overstate the relevance of Mary within Shakespeare's plays and in the culture more broadly. On occasion, the attempt to read Mary in the plays produces rather insubstantial claims, such as asserting intercession and virginity as particular and specific qualities of Mary. Nevertheless, the study powerfully registers the enduring relevance of Mary as a tool to conceptualise religious, gender and national identity. Espinosa identifies the potential and significance of even covert Marian resonances and contributes to a rich field of study that requires further critical attention.

Work Cited

- Adelman, Janet, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest'* (London: Routledge, 1992).