

a play which “focus[es] on the diseased body in light of its source texts – Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*” (p. 404) – with its author’s advanced ALS that led to his death the following year. Lastly, “Opening up Discoveries through Promised Endings: An Experimental Work in Progress on *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*” by Nicholson and Sidiropoulou is an informative, review-like article describing and commenting on a theatrical project “co-produced and co-directed by the authors in Verona, Italy, in Spring, 2018” (p. 414), which staged some scenes from *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, thus creating, as the authors call it, a “particular kind of *contaminatio*” where “[d]eliberate, risk-taking hybrids and paradoxes abound” (p. 415).

Far from being the expected, predictable book about the reception of the classics in early modern England, the originality of this essay collection lies in having chosen to focus on two specific tragedies, i.e., Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which are not inextricably correlated yet share “intersections” (to quote from the book’s title). This choice of a specific, restricted – also niche – content allows the volume’s contributors to scrutinise the full array of potentials offered by the two plays’ interdiscursive network within a wide range of coherent methodological frameworks whose application reveals that the links of this network are even tighter than as hypothesised in Bigliuzzi’s introduction.

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**Gajowski, Evelyn, ed., *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 392 pp.**

*The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism* offers an extensive array of critical approaches to Shakespeare by some of the most distinguished international academics who chart key developments and innovations in this composite field between the end of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first. The book contains twenty chapters, arranged chronologically, each providing an extensive description and history of a particular

critical practice with its underlying theoretical assumptions. Each chapter closes with useful examples of the possible application of the critical approach through a brief analysis of a Shakespearean text, thus actually showing the theory in practice. Helpful appendices at the end of the book clarify important terms, schools of thought, and provide an exhaustive annotated bibliography, making this handbook truly accessible even for those who are not familiar with the developments in critical theories.

As the editor, Gajowski, indicates in the introduction, the book traces the evolution of theoretical developments that evolved in response to “traditional liberal humanism” (p. 3), with the object of reaching conclusions or making assumptions as to how we characterize Shakespeare studies today, but also to clarify affinities and tensions among these approaches. It will be interesting to note, for instance, that many of the most recent trends owe much to the preceding – and apparently discarded – critical approaches. The other implicit question which emerges from this collection of articles is, of course, that of the role of the critic: how much of the critic’s own subjectivity enters a critical analysis? Is it right that it should? Is it possible, or even useful, to concentrate solely on the object of study?

The first part of this collection of essays is labelled “Foundational Studies” and includes close reading, genre and character studies, approaches which had seemed to be dismissed but, as these articles show, have rather been renovated and refreshed. Genre studies, for instance, which traditionally dealt with the formal properties or stylistic norms of a text, are shown to include now the study of the fluid nature of genre, adopting historicist and feminist perspectives. The first “challenges to traditional liberal humanism” appear in the second section, which covers the 1970s and 1980s; in this section the fundamental elements of this approach – the nature of the subject, of reality and language – are questioned, by opposing, instead, the idea of a constructed, rather than essential, human being. This portion of the book includes Marxist, new historicist, cultural materialist, feminist and psychoanalytic studies, and examines the impact of the pioneering works of scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Coppélia Kahn and others. What links

these approaches is essentially the idea of a decentred human subject together with an opposition to hierarchy; in the case of Marxism and cultural materialism, notably, the assumption that the human subject is exclusively upper class, in the case of feminism solely male. Marxism, particularly, as the essays which follow show, plants the roots for the blossoming of new historicism, cultural materialism and presentism which we will come to. The interesting article on feminist studies, which recommends a resistance to homogenization and, as with many articles in this book, suggests a plurality which denies the possibility that a single prescriptive approach may resolve any critical interpretation, offers as its case study an analysis of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and the “doctrinal fetishization of her chastity” (McCall, p. 112), a critique classified as “presentist-feminist”, a title which emphasizes the intersectionality of critical approaches constantly at play. The article concluding this section traces psychoanalytic approaches to Shakespeare beginning with Freud but expanding into the works of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott; the adaptability of these developing concepts is shown in an interesting reading of *As You Like It* which proposes the lens of sadomasochism for an interpretation of the play and particularly for the character of Rosalind.

The question of ‘otherness’ which had emerged in postmodern critical practices reaches its apex with the development of critical race, postcolonial and queer studies, which form the third section of the book, “Matter of Difference”. As the editor puts it: “Even as cultural materialist studies and feminist studies challenge the premises of traditional liberal humanism on the basis of class difference and gender difference, respectively, so in turn critical race studies, postcolonial studies and queer studies destabilize the challengers themselves” (p. 7), and prioritize the voices of people of colour, colonized people and all those with diverse sexual orientations. The chapter on postcolonial studies, for example, focuses on how Shakespeare has been used as an instrument of domination and draws from theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, thus giving the reader, as most of these chapters do, a clear picture of the ‘state of the art’ but at the same time opening up possible paths for the future of

Shakespeare studies which must take into account issues of political nature which inform colonialism, ethnicity, hybridity economics and the like. In the approach to queer studies, surprisingly, the play taken into consideration is *Much Ado About Nothing*, a traditionally 'straight' play in which what is highlighted is the dramatization of homosociality, desire and gender roles.

In part four of this collection, we reach "Millennial Directions", where the practices appear more innovative, though most still evolve out of those we have seen at the close of the twentieth century. Apart from computational studies, which involve the use of analytical-digital tools in order to process large quantities of data through specific algorithms, and have been successfully applied to Shakespearean texts allowing the detection of linguistic patterns or style which have contributed significantly to the determination of Shakespeare's canon chronology, the other theories proposed can be seen to rise from concerns which originate from outside of the academic world and therefore "emphasize the inevitable embeddedness of the text in its political, social, and economic context" (Gajowski, p. 9). Ecocritical studies, which in their simplest terms involve the treatment of nature, are explored through their major orientations which include environmental history, but also ecofeminism and posthuman theory. The latter two will appear in the concluding part of this book, but it is useful to clarify here what is intended: ecofeminist studies analyse the modes by which relationships between humans and other-than humans affect social injustices whereas posthumanism aims at decentring the human from its superior position with respect to other forms of nature. Ecocriticism, then, not only accentuates the problems related to natural calamities but also invites audience and readers to take action. The chosen play to which the theory is applied is *Coriolanus*, which dramatizes, among others, problems over food shortages, famine, struggle for water, and generally can be read through the lens of ecology. Another critical branch contained in this section is that of spiritual studies, which investigates the concept of spirituality or theology comparing current spiritual-critical practices to those of earlier scholars and delving into the possibility of recognizing Shakespeare's own position through his use of the Bible and other spiritual sources.

Presentist and global studies close this penultimate section, and the former is traced back to cultural materialism and the work of Terence Hawkes. Presentism, perhaps more evidently – or more challengingly – leads us back to our initial question concerning the role and the function of the critic, in that it maintains that the positionality of the critic cannot, but mostly, should not, be circumvented. The role of Shakespeare, then, should be considered in the here and now, and the only way to ‘make meaning’ with Shakespeare is to view him in the current political and social times. Rather than being opposed to a historicist perspective, it supplements it, extending it to the moment in which the critic is writing; in fact, the examined text in this article focuses on Shakespeare’s much discussed contribution to *Sir Thomas More* seen in the framework of Brexit and of the refugee emergency. Global studies, broadly speaking, encompass issues which go beyond the national, adopting an interdisciplinary methodology which tackles questions related to politics, economics, ecology and generally spans across geographic and cultural spaces. The subjects include race and gender studies, and of course postcolonial issues, but unlike the latter they move beyond the customary criticism of Western hegemony and the reactions of previously colonized countries, moving towards the effect of Shakespeare reception in a global context. Films and performances throughout the world are studied in order to construct, or reveal, “Shakespeare as a cosmopolitan brand” (Gajowski, p. 12).

Finally, in the last articles, attention is turned to “Twenty-First-Century Directions”, namely, disability, ecofeminist, posthumanist and cognitive ethology studies. Disability studies revise previous assumptions on disability, most famously those which considered physical disability as a sign of guilt or moral evil, as in the case of Richard III, and consider how analyses of Shakespearean texts can question those notions. The chosen play to illustrate the theory is, apparently paradoxically, one which does not present disabled characters, *Romeo and Juliet*. The choice is determined by the fact that it offers deep understanding into ideologies of ability, and at the same time “asks us to understand disability as a problem of agency, expressed in the body’s lapses” (Williams, p. 275). The theory derived from cognitive ethology closes this selection of

contributions. Possibly partly overlapping with posthumanism in its critical application, the theory studies animal behaviour from an evolutionary point of view and through it examines human psychological processes as inherited characteristics shaped by natural selection. Human behaviour, from this point of view, is therefore the result of traits we have absorbed from our predecessors, attitudes adopted in order to deal with dangers and the natural environment. Its critical application to Shakespeare studies is exemplified through an analysis of *Hamlet* which aims at putting the theory into practice through an investigation of mechanisms of memory and of mimicry and the automatic responses to language and events. The author of the last essay, Dionne, concludes: "In his most profoundly self-reflexive play, Shakespeare explores the thin line that separates the human from its imagined primate original. And in the graveyard [...] it is hard not to see the 'prating' and 'ranting' of its two central heroes behaving like hooting monkeys throwing handfuls of dirt in their rhetorical pantomimes" (p. 316).

One aspect which is less apparent in this collection of essays is language-based critical analysis (though computational studies go in that direction), a rapidly growing field in Shakespeare studies which may, in the future, enhance a 'return to the text' in its more specific nature. In the last decades, in fact, as we have seen, literary criticism has mostly derived from the social and cultural climate of the time, and this prompts readers to interrogate themselves over what new paths will be taken by Shakespearean criticism, whether the trend will continue and if new theories in "accents yet unknown" rising outside of academia will sooner or later be applied to Shakespeare, which inevitably remains a touchstone for the 'testing' of any literary critical theory.

In conclusion, this book offers multi- and inter-disciplinary critical approaches and is an essential compendium for researchers and scholars, or indeed for anyone involved in Shakespeare studies. Its exhaustiveness and accessibility are probably its greatest asset. At the same time, as mentioned before, it poses important questions on the functions of critical theory: some authors seem to privilege an approach through the lens of contemporaneity whilst others find it more fruitful to interpret the

Shakespearean text in the light of its own time. Mostly, the different contributions imply that these methodologies, together with others exposed here, have become inextricably linked.

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**Hartley, Andrew James and Holland, Peter, eds, *Shakespeare and Geek Culture, The Arden Shakespeare*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 336 pp.**

This edited collection of essays, whose seeds were sown at the homonymous 2017 Shakespeare Association of America seminar led by Andrew James Hartley and Peter Holland, takes its cue from previous studies on Shakespeare and current popular culture. Approximately twenty years ago, Douglas M. Lanier, who was later to contribute a riveting book chapter to *Shakespeare and Geek Culture*, accepted Holland's invitation to write precisely one of such studies for the Oxford Shakespeare Topics series. It is on Lanier's definition of his object of study as "what is often dismissed as Shakespearian kitsch" (*Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 3) that Holland, in his turn, seems to elaborate in an attempt to clarify the scope of "Shakespeare geek culture", which, he writes in the final essay of the collection, "takes pleasure in the kitsch, the ephemeral, the obsessive, the fringe, the enjoyable pointless manifestations of that cultural engagement with Shakespeare [...] which we used to be told were irrelevant to scholarship" (p. 303). Building upon Lanier's and others' investigations of 'Shakespop', the nineteen contributors have joined forces to explore "the interplay between Shakespeare and geek culture in its disparate forms" (Hartley and Holland, p. 9), hence paying due attention to "aspects of popular culture with which much Shakespeare criticism, the main stream, has not yet concerned itself" (Holland, p. 303).

Drawing upon several fields of study (media, film, game, adaptation and fan studies, among others), this rather heterogenous volume comprises eighteen chapters which are loosely grouped into four sections ("Geek Culture and Fiction", "Geek Culture and the Shakespeare Sandbox", "Pastimes, Gaming