

Evelyn Gajowski, ed. 2021.
*The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary
Shakespeare Criticism.*
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A handbook is a compilation of established knowledge on a given topic. *De iure*, none of the essays contained in a handbook need to provide new research output; *de facto*, we have expectations for a handbook on Shakespearean criticism (setting aside our professional need to be served with an impeccable state of the art).

Regarding state of the art, this volume passes the test with flying colors. But a challenge to be faced by a handbook's editor is to decide on the vantage point from which the abovementioned established knowledge should be organized. In "Introduction: Twenty-First Century Shakespeares" (1-18), Evelyn Gajowski alludes to a well-known nostalgia for the Shakespeare that, she suggests, resembles that teddy bear from our childhood—a memento from a fixed, stable and comfortable past. A number of studies have, of course, challenged the interest of this fixed, comfy, and foundational Shakespeare. Rather than reformulating this challenge to traditional perspectives (whether in private rooms or classrooms), the volume reminds us that, at least in academia, traditional approaches to Shakespeare were never meant to *be traditional*. Disciplines such as New Criticism, Formalism, and Character Analysis once constituted vigorous and fresh perspectives. Crucially, I find that the volume shows that, after all, these are still vigorous and fresh perspectives and that new ones would not have come to the academic arena if not preceded by them. The essays show that "Foundational studies," "Challenges to traditional liberal humanism," "Matters of difference," "Millennial directions," and "Twenty-First Century directions"—the sections into which the book is divided—are applicable, fertile, productive, and, importantly, mutually enriching.

One of the book's strengths is its structure: a stage-by-stage explanation of the succession of approaches to Shakespeare which

developed across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Over consecutive chapters, the contributors cover theoretical tenets on Close Reading (Ken Cartwright), Genre (Michelle M. Dowd), Character Analysis (Michael Bristol), Marxism (Christian Smith), New Historicism (Hugh Grady), Cultural Materialism (Christopher Marlow), Feminism (Jessica McCall), Psychoanalysis (Carolyn E. Brown), Critical Race Studies (Arthur L. Little, Jr.), Postcolonialism (Ruben Espinosa), Queer Studies (Anthony Guy Patricia), Ecocriticism (Randall Martin), Computational Studies (Brett Greatley-Hirsch), Spiritual Studies (Peter Atkinson), Presentism (Miguel Ramallete Gomes), Global Studies (Alexa Alice Joubin), Disability (Katherine Schapp Williams), Ecofeminism (Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche), Posthumanism (Karen Raber), and Cognitive Ethology (Craig Dionne).

As a rule, each contributor focuses on at least one Shakespearean work to test a theoretical point. As a large part of the Shakespearean canon is covered, specific critical approaches are offered as tools for each of the works selected – and, potentially, for other works too. For instance, Ramallete Gomes' chapter, "Presentism," focuses on *Sir Thomas More* as received in the context of the refugee crisis and the Brexit referendum; the results of this work permit us to perceive this play as a failed attempt to raise empathy with masses of foreigners which likewise failed to gain the sympathy of the English population in 1517, a situation powerfully mirrored during Brexit. Atkinson's analysis of *Henry V* exposes the war-driven appropriations of spirituality in this problematic history play, thus offering insights on the religious and spiritual subtexts in Shakespeare; Bristol illustrates the manner in which Character Analysis invites self-reflexive response. Such a response may, as Bristol's essay shows, be emotionally intense, even risky, for readers moved by the tragic truths depicted in dramatic works such as *King Lear* or other arresting tragedies.

Despite the range of subfields covered, the volume is sufficiently coherent to insinuate, to my mind, an underpinning, intended or unintended, editorial policy: So-called traditional forms of criticism had already called a previous establishment into question; these forms were later challenged by anti-hierarchical approaches (Marxism, New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, etc.); these were sharpened thanks to the development of even more

politically daring views (Queer Theory, Postcolonialism, Critical Race Studies). More complex systems of enquiry into the unknown contained in Shakespearean texts waited outside the familiar—the global, the ecocritical, the posthuman—or inside the human brain and spirit—Cognitive Ethology, spiritual approaches, etc. Interdisciplinary angles which combine the psychological, the physiological, and the social—disability, ecofeminism, etc.—came to refine this complex but firm forward-looking agenda that characterizes the discipline. If this is so, the agenda of Shakespeare Studies could never tell ethics apart from aesthetics; politics were never divorced from literary appreciation, even though the means for that appreciation were (and are) diverse.

The volume is as such valuable as it brings to the fore the potentialities of traditional methods in contemporary criticism. For instance, the influence of Marxism in Shakespeare, reexamined by Smith, is used as a link to several other political approaches to the plays, including Feminism, Psychoanalysis, or Postcolonialism. Grady strengthens continuities between New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, two angles which used to be regarded as relatively opposed. Brown's psychoanalytical approach throws light on sadism and masochism, two features which explain the success of a feminine character like Rosalind in the hostile and male-chauvinist culture of *As You Like It*. Traditional and new approaches are, likewise, seen as complementary. Reliant on variables such as language, genre, and character analyses, Greatley-Hirsch proves that Computational Studies demystify prejudices about Shakespeare's language supremacy; meanwhile, he demonstrates that computational analyses contribute, through the use of software, to provide solid linguistic grounds to intuitions on the convergences between genres in the plays.

As it happens, the volume reminds us that critical approaches do not work in isolation. To the known forms of close reading—disruptive, ethical, immersive, etc.—, Cartwright adds “dramaturgical reading”—a search for subtexts in the plays' dialogue—as an intellectually compelling approach to read plays in the present, a time in which Shakespeare Studies, as contemporary critical editions show, are inseparable from a performance perspective. Dowd embeds Genre Analysis within the framework of Feminist Formalism to read *The Winter's Tale*; in this way, she teaches readers to comprehend the

structures and frames of genre while taking into account historical contingency—e.g. that of the Elizabethan period or of the current feminist wave. Similarly, McCall’s feminist approach to Isabella in *Measure for Measure* is buttressed by a presentist lens which is informed by current social alarm about the treatment given to victims of sexual assault. Martin reads *Coriolanus* by combining Presentist and Ecocritical lenses that invite us to read in the play’s water imagery the interconnections between Rome—as depicted by Shakespeare—and London’s locality in Shakespeare’s time. Poignantly, Dionne’s chapter on Cognitive Ethology—with *Hamlet* as case study—creates interrelations between post-humanism and rhetoric by showing the power of certain literary devices—e.g. Hendiadys—to reach an effect that is facilitated by memory mechanisms such as repetition and imitation. These patterns of repetition and imitation may lead, thanks to the plasticity of the brain, to artistic or intellectual brilliance. In this way, Dionne strengthens continuities between skills which are traditionally associated with animals (imitation, repetition) and qualities associated with humans (intellectual capacity); *Hamlet* does not so much prefigure the human as the posthuman.

While reading the book, I felt that it pointed at several issues which affect current critical practice on Shakespeare. As Cartwright observes, reading literature closely has become a “counter-cultural activity” (21). How could a statement like that leave any literary scholar indifferent? The instrumentalization of the humanities, boldly pointed out by Cartwright, throws light on the precarious position of close reading; a precariousness produced by the slippery position of the departments which are expected to stand their ground in favor of that close reading. The book offers, I think, some strategic routes around this real-life intimidation which affects students and researchers. If, as proved by adaptation scholars, Shakespeare’s texts were never pure, the essays show that Shakespearean subfields and subsubfields are not pure either. The volume reminds us that Shakespeare criticism is not just a matter of grabbing academic credentials and skills for monoculture, but also a matter of mutual care within a large international Shakespearean community. I would argue that the book shows that ethics, a feature inseparable from analyses, resurfaces in essays. Taking the example of *Richard III* as vantage point, Schaap Williams’ chapter on disability explores concepts of fairness as constructed in Western culture in the light of a visual economy

of beauty which sets normative standards; standards against which non-normative characters are, of course, forced to resist. A mirror of democratically advanced and inclusive societies, ethical approaches to study Shakespeare emerge as a middle ground between orthodox critical practices and the narrowness of subsubfields in academia's era of Safety First. To my mind, this symbiosis between ethics and methodology may have directly or indirectly facilitated Joubin's chapter on "Global Studies," which offers a set of tools (censorship and redaction, genre, gender, race, and politics of reception) to systematically address Global Shakespeares. This set would not have been produced, in my view, without an ethical lens. If progressive politics have learned anything in the last two decades, it is that dismissing traditional schools of thought and failing to integrate new ones is impoverishing and counter-productive; if Shakespeare Studies have learned anything from this – and this, I think, is what one learns from this volume –, it is that our understanding of the plays and the poems is richer, more profound – and yes, also academically fitter – if methodologies, old and new, are combined.

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