

2012

Kathryn Schwarz, What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space

Niamh J. O'Leary
Xavier University - Cincinnati

Follow this and additional works at: http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Leary, Niamh J., "Kathryn Schwarz, What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space" (2012). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 262.
http://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/english_faculty/262

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact exhibit@xavier.edu.

Labors Lost: Women's Work in the Early Modern English Stage. Natasha Korda. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 334 pp. \$69.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-434-4-7.

REVIEWED BY: Katherine L. French, University of Michigan

Natasha Korda's new book is a wonderful and insightful study of the diverse and crucial work performed by women in and around the London-area theaters. Using a wide range of textual, pictorial, and material evidence, and building on the scholarship about medieval and early modern women's work, Korda recovers long-forgotten tasks and shows us how understanding these tasks necessarily transforms our readings of early modern plays, from Shakespeare's well-known *Merchant of Venice* to lesser known plays such as Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613). Korda is not only interested in how understanding women's work changes our readings of plays as literature, but also as performances that were enabled by women's money and labor. She situates her readings against a changing economic and labor landscape, arguing that the "all-male" theater of Shakespeare's time was a myth that served important ideological functions, but which does not hold up under scrutiny.

In chapter 1, Korda surveys the various jobs and contributions women made to the early modern London theater. While not on the stage, women provided important streams of credit, made, repaired, and laundered costumes, and sold food for the audience during performances. By comparing legal records to religious tracks, Korda outlines the moral as well as economic weight given to women's work. Women's work was frequently stigmatized as morally suspect; theater work was similarly problematic because it trafficked in illusion and its workers fell outside the boundaries of the regulated guild economy. Thus women's labor on behalf of the theater was doubly problematic, and therefore rendered invisible. In chapter 2, Korda looks at the financing of theaters, often carried out by the widows of theater patrons. London's expanding seventeenth-century economy reconfigured the moral worth of money lending. While the early part of the sixteenth century inherited medieval attitudes toward usury, the end of the century saw a change, where "an emergent ethos of Christian exactitude began to revalue diligence and precision in (ac)counting as virtues..." (57). Women's work with money could now be understood in other than sexualized ways. This change Korda argues is implicit in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Portia's wit and skill with money can be reinterpreted in the context of accounting skill rather than as generosity. Chapter 3 shifts to the female-dominated laundry and starching industries, which also increased in status over the course of the sixteenth century. Laundresses and tirewomen provided the necessary labor to create and maintain the elaborate starched ruffs, collars, and cuffs that are so emblematic of early modern clothing. While laundresses and seamstresses were essential to urban life, they were low status. The influx of immigrant women from the Low Countries with starching and lace making skills increased the status of this labor. At the same time, however, moralists sexualized their tools and the skills necessary to fashion ruffs, denouncing their work as immaterial even as it involved material. Playgoers would have been aware of women's difficult and time-consuming labor necessary to shape the starched ruffs. This understanding of the multivalent significances of women's labor, Korda argues, was imbedded in performances. Chapter 4 considers the relationship between the voices of the hucksters and peddler women, who proclaimed their wares to the public in and around the theater districts and the voices of players on stage. The public nature of their cries was caught up in the debate about the value of the theater. A loose tongue was equated

to sexual promiscuity and the women's cries competed with actors' speech during performances. Women's voices were thus a foil for actors forced to define and defend their own public voices as legitimate, rather than womanly, unworkmanly, or amateurish, a process that Hamlet's advice to the players both describes and enacts. Lastly, chapter 5 looks at false wares, an issue that again addresses both the legitimacy of the theater and women's work. False wares were a major issue for London guilds as they tried to protect their franchises against nonguild workers. The ways in which London understood legitimate and illegitimate wares and how it policed these boundaries was continually inflected with gender, as false wares were stigmatized in sexualized ways. Closed out of London's powerful artisan guilds, women worked on the margins of London's bursting economy, working within an equation of false or counterfeit wares as promiscuous and therefore feminine. The lack of economic and professional legitimacy ascribed to much of women's work must be understood, Korda argues, against the backdrop of actors seeking to understand their work as legitimate and moral, even though they too were outside the guild structure, and denounced by religious leaders as an immoral and lazy group, who produced nothing.

Korda's tour de force not only shows us women's contributions to the early modern theater, but it shows us that women's work is crucial for understanding the arguments put forth about the theater's legitimacy. Both denouncements and defenses of the theater drew upon the long practice of stigmatizing women's work, even as the value of women's work and financial worth changed over the course of the early modern period. Korda skillfully handles these numerous changing discourses, and in the process offers new readings of the actual plays that men and women worked so hard to stage.

✽✽✽

What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space. Kathryn Schwarz. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 320 pp. \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-8122-4327-7.

REVIEWED BY: Niamh J. O'Leary, Xavier University, Cincinnati

Kathryn Schwarz's monograph offers an intense exploration of will and its relation to patriarchal order in early modern England. The book's chief contribution is that it brings together a rich catalogue of historical texts alongside a densely documented exploration of theory and criticism more contemporary to the reader. There can be no doubt that Schwarz's claims are all rigorously researched and she moves with astounding agility from consulting Renaissance authors, such as Elyot and Hooker, to contemporary scholars, such as Belsey, Dolan, and Paster. Sometimes the speed of this movement is dizzying and her point verges on being lost in a sea of quotations, but for the repetition she employs.

Schwarz sets out to answer the central question, "with what agency, and to what effect, do feminine subjects occupy the conventions of femininity" (9)? In answering this question, she situates herself in relation to Foucault and Butler, as well as Irigaray and Žižek, and others who "investigate the ways in which a faithful reproduction of social codes can constitute betrayal" (10). Schwarz claims that patriarchal order depends upon feminine volition and complicity, and yet, danger inheres in this, as willing women can become threatening. Schwarz examines how female will can destabilize as well as undergird patriarchy, particularly through impressive readings of the *Sonnets* and three troublingly (un)willing Shakespearean women: Helena of *All's Well That Ends Well*, Isabella of *Measure for Measure*, and Cordelia of *King Lear*.

After a brief introduction, Schwarz's initial three chapters provide a daunting theoretical grounding for her subsequent readings of Shakespeare. These chapters explore the three discourses of faculty theory, rhetorical theory, and misogyny. In the first chapter, Schwarz teases out the place of will among the faculties (that is, intention, reason, judgment), while taking into account when and how will is gendered, and how understanding its place differently can change our understanding of how hierarchy or patriarchy was constructed or maintained—in all cases, tenuously and always dependent on female volition. Focusing on the ways in which women could knowingly consent to being a part of the heterosocial hierarchy, Schwarz argues that "informed consent to prescribed work demonstrates that hierarchy emerges from a dynamic process: it is a product rather than a negation of will" (27). Wary readers will be happy to know that Schwarz is careful not to push the significance of female will too far, noting that "heterosociality can hardly constitute freedom of speech" (48).

In her second chapter, Schwarz takes up the intersection of rhetorical theory and will, in this case focusing on metonymy as a figure for understanding feminine volition. She examines feminized figures of speech and the ways in which they create dualities of meaning, and emphasizes the importance of the feminization of the vernacular, a "mother tongue." In the third chapter, Schwarz sets up a tightly nuanced map of the treacherous territory of historicizing misogyny, warning us, "the danger lies in reproducing cultural theory under the illusion that we are studying social history" (82). She traces a history of misogyny that begins with Eve as a figure of "consequential volition," and the chapter closes with a section that takes on performance and the importance of a performative willingness.

The fourth and fifth chapters have previously appeared as articles in *Shakespeare Quarterly* and *ELH*. In her chapter on *All's Well That Ends Well*, Schwarz accuses us of "misremembering" the play, claiming that we have come to call Helena disorderly when, in fact, her motives are "conservative"—she seeks to act in a way that would ensure the survival of the patriarchy. She also credits Helena with exposing what should be the "intrinsic" resolution of the comedy as "her resolution" in her twice-stated comment, "All's well that ends well": "In order to end well, the story requires Helena to tell it as she submits herself to it" (114). The fifth chapter considers the final 28 sonnets and examines how they mirror the complex multivocal world of will. Schwarz sees them as playing with the discourse of misogyny, highlighting its fictions and drawing attention to the "contracts" it requires. She argues that these sonnets reflect the socially constructed nature of beauty, emphasize the need for performance and deception, and demonstrate the ways in which will destabilizes both male and female concepts of patriarchy.

Her final two chapters provide compelling previously unpublished readings of *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*. Schwarz claims that one of the chief problems of *Measure for Measure* is Angelo's and the Duke's inability to accomplish what they mean to: their will yields no results. She locates in Isabella a "chaste volition" that sets this disjunction to rights (157). And yet, while Isabella's will effects the generically appropriate conclusion of marriage, it is troubled by her own failure to respond to the Duke's proposal. Schwarz reads the play as an investigation of the complex operations of chaste will that exposes "the conflict entrenched within heterosocial bonds" (167). Of *Lear*, Schwarz claims it "plays out the possibility that feminine will might circulate on its own terms, cut free from masculine absolutism and animated by independent intentions and desires" (182). The play stages the folly of separating men and women from equal participation in social contract. Schwarz considers this an extreme enactment of misogynist discourse, one that proves its failures.

It's apt that Schwarz concludes with *Lear*, because in it she reads the fulfillment of her contention that patriarchy depends upon the willing participation of women: "When *Lear* eliminates women, it actualizes the self-destruction implicit in heterosocial hierarchy" (201). While one may be familiar with Schwarz's readings of *All's Well That Ends Well* and the *Sonnets* from these chapters' previous publication in journals, the book as a whole presents a meticulously constructed and rigorously theorized argument, and one well worth reading in its entirety.

✽✽✽

Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture. Sara E. Melzer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-8122-4363-5.

REVIEWED BY: Jason Sager, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Sarah E. Melzer's important contribution to postcolonial studies argues that early modern France's emerging cultural identity was directly connected to the way France's cultural elite constructed its colonial narratives. The first narrative arose in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as humanists sought to reclaim France's ancient past. The second narrative concerned France's own colonization efforts. These two narratives intersected during the Quarrel between groups known as the ancients and moderns, which erupted at the Académie française in 1687. Occurring during a period when the French colonial project was in full swing, Melzer presents a persuasive case that the Quarrel was more than another skirmish between diverging intellectual traditions, but was, in fact, part of an enduring colonial battle in which both parties' efforts to construct a Gallic past would have major consequences for French colonial efforts.

The Quarrel, informed to a considerable extent by the Jesuit *Relations de Voyage*, hit a nerve over the idea of imitation—a tension dating to the late fifteenth century and still current in the seventeenth century—and was the "tip of the iceberg of the debates of the late medieval era" (33). The discovery of the ancient world coincided with the discovery of the New World and both were situated on the same "evolutionary continuum from barbarism to civilization" (17).

Woven into this evolutionary continuum was an underlying cultural narrative. The ancients' and the moderns' efforts to construct a Gallic past incited a memory war in which the very nature of France was at stake. The result of this memory war would have far-reaching consequences for France's own colonial policies and its own emerging cultural identity. The moderns championed an image of a precolonized Gaul whose own civilization was suppressed by Roman imperial power. The ancients condemned this image, maintaining that this made the Gauls no better than slaves of Rome. On the other hand, the ancients preferred to imagine a Gaul which recognized the superiority of Roman culture and assimilated this culture as part of the Gauls' own civilizing process. As the moderns pointed out, this image of Gaul ran the risk of emphasizing its barbaric pre-Roman history raising uncomfortable questions about the origins of France. In the end, however, the ancients' case for a colonized Gaul was victorious and this triumph dominated the discourse of French cultural identity as France pursued its own colonial project.

This victory had three consequences: first, it grounded the disjunction between the nation's own cultural and colonial stories; second, it allowed French colonizers to separate out the colonizing and civilizing missions and convince themselves that their colonial efforts civilized New World natives in the same way the Romans had civilized the Gauls; and