
The Ladies' Shakespeare

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On July 3, 1925, together with Lord Balfour and Rudyard Kipling, James Barrie was granted the freedom of the Stationers' Company. The text of Barrie's acceptance speech was printed the following morning in the London *Times* (and subsequently by Clement Shorter in a private edition of twenty-five copies). The speech, which posited the existence of an edition of Shakespeare newly sensitive to the needs of women, is here quoted at length:

The other sex – if so they may still be called – have long complained that his women, however glorious, are too subservient to the old enemy for these later days, as if he did not know what times were coming for women. Gentlemen, he knew, but he had to write with the knowledge that if he was too advanced about Woman his plays would be publicly burned in the garden of Stationers' Hall. So he left a cipher, not in the text, where everybody has been looking for them, but in the cunning omission of all stage directions, and women, as he had hoped, have had the wit to read it aright, with the result that there is to be another edition, called appropriately "The Ladies' Shakespeare." For the first time on any stage, some fortunate actress, without uttering one word, but by the use of silent illuminating "business," is to show us the Shrew that Shakespeare drew. Katherine was really fooling Petruchio all the time. The reason he carried her off before the marriage feast, though he didn't know it, was that her father was really a poor man, and there was *no* marriage feast. So Katherine got herself carried off to save that considerable expense. On that first night in Petruchio's house, when he was out in the wind and rain distending his chest in the belief that he was taming her, do you really think with him that she went supperless to bed? No, she had a little bag with her. In it a wing of chicken and some other delicacies, a half bottle of the famous Paduan wine, and

such a pretty corkscrew. I must tell you no more; go and book your seats, you will see, without even Sir Israel Gollancz being able to find one word missed out or added, that it is no longer Katherine who is tamed.

Barrie is mimicking many of the various resources that women (or at least, those women who have wished to retain the poet as an object of affection and veneration) have repeatedly brought to the problem of Shakespeare. These include resources of editing, reading (both individually and in societies), and the development of character criticism; the adaptation of Shakespeare's stories for specialized (usually juvenile or school) audiences; the performance activities of producing, acting, and directing; and women's promotion of Shakespeare, within the heritage industry, as a man who loved women (it was, for example, with the crucial support of the Shakespeare Ladies Club that in 1741 a monument was erected to Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey, copies of which were subsequently placed in Stratford, and in Leicester Square).

Women have also been interested, as "The Ladies' Shakespeare" suggests, to "reread," "rewrite," "refigure," "re-vision," or "decenter" Shakespeare – that is, to criticize the poet from a woman's point of view while continuing to appropriate the cultural capital that accrues to his name. In this essay, I use the term "The Ladies' Shakespeare" to describe both the imaginary text that is the object of Barrie's joke, *and* the set of gestures whereby some critics have asserted a particularist, woman-centered interest in Shakespeare – and whereby other critics, taking such assertions at face value, have understood them to represent errors of judgment within Shakespeare criticism. Both as an essay and as a concept, "The Ladies' Shakespeare" is intended to demonstrate that the "woman-question" within Shakespeare criticism is a reflex whereby such criticism recognizes and castigates itself: neither as essay nor concept does it therefore attempt to account for the differences of class, nationality, and ethnicity as these have recently become visible within feminist criticism, and as they continue to make their difference to the ways in which Shakespeare may be read, viewed, and valued.

As Barrie's admixture of suffragist gender politics to Shakespeare criticism and performance suggests, women have regularly taken pleasure in, and understood the contemporary material benefits of, the enterprise of arguing the case for women's special relation to England's national poet. While women's labor has contributed to the development of Shakespeare studies, the study and performance of Shakespeare may have helped to articulate the interests of (and hence offer benefits to) women as a group. In "Shakspeare Talks with Uncritical People" (1879–91), Constance O'Brien imagined women gathering in small, informal groups to talk over characters "whose life seems as vivid as our own."¹ Through such meetings, as well as through more organized Shakespeare study clubs and the distribution of what Elizabeth Latimer (herself a speaker on the study-club circuit) called their "fugitive Shakspearian Criticism," women articulated social and intellectual communities that intersected, but were not entirely coincident with, those of their male counterparts. So the study of Shakespeare cemented the friendship of critic Anna Jameson and actor Fanny Kemble; Mary Cowden Clarke learned her love for Shakespeare from her tutor Mary Lamb, and

conceived the idea for her *Shakespeare Concordance* (1845) at the Lambs' breakfast table; Mary Lamb was encouraged to write *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) with her brother Charles by the publisher Mary Jane Godwin; the actress Helen Faucit wrote her volume *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters: By One Who Has Personated Them* (1885) in the form of personal letters to her female friends; and Elizabeth Griffith was "stirred" to write *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated* (1775) by her desire to emulate Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769).

Less clear, within Barrie's parody, is the fact that self-directed humor has also been characteristic of women's approaches to Shakespeare. In 1896 Emily Bissell (Priscilla Leonard) published an antisuffragist article in the conservative *Century Magazine* which has obvious affinities with Barrie's speech. Claiming to be an account of a lecture given in a Twentieth-Century Women's Club, "The Mistaken Vocation of Shakespeare's Heroines" charges Shakespeare with having put his female characters in the wrong plays ("in a word, ladies, with these heroines in their appropriate places, there would have been no tragedies at all among Shakespeare's works!"). To prolonged applause, and cries of "Down with Shakespeare!" the speaker reassigns the female roles of an author she considers "well-meaning, but inadequate – blind to the true powers of Woman and the illimitable wideness of her sphere." Mrs. Lauch Macluarin also anticipated the tone of Barrie's address in a paper delivered to the Dallas Shakespeare Club in 1897. Beginning from the premise that "Shakespeare has told us everything, about everything, that is, and was, and is to come," Macluarin pretends to search for the figure of the business woman in his plays, before finally forgiving Shakespeare for his omission of the character. For "how could he anticipate her, great man that he was, any more than he could the typewriter and the phonograph and other pleasant and surprising things we have?" Bissell and Macluarin republished their essays in the *American Shakespeare Magazine*, the journal of the largely female-staffed Fortnightly Shakespeare Club of New York. Mocking themselves as lady Shakespeareans, Bissell, Macluarin, and the women who laughed with them explored what was not in Shakespeare primarily in order to demonstrate and enjoy their familiarity with what *was* there. Even as this strategy stakes its claim to some part of the cultural territory that is Shakespeare studies in the late nineteenth century, however, it hints at the pleasures of a criticism that, departing from strict textual considerations, is free to ask not what women can do for Shakespeare, but what Shakespeare can do for women.

The essays of Bissell, Macluarin, and Barrie are written from a culturally conservative position which uses the specter of a ludicrous and anachronistic feminist criticism to deflect attention, both from a serious consideration of women's rights, and from a critical analysis of the premises of Shakespearean criticism itself. It is the argument of this essay that if the extravagancies that Barrie attributes to "The Ladies' Shakespeare" have been legible within woman-centered criticism of Shakespeare, they have been equally legible within a more general appreciation of Shakespeare as that has been developed both within and beyond the academy. I am suggesting that in "The Ladies' Shakespeare," and in subsequent attacks on feminist approaches to the plays, scholars and others attempt to distance themselves from the undesired consequences of some of

their *own* readings of Shakespeare by projecting them onto women. Conducted by men or by women, such readings begin from the unexceptionable premise that literary criticism necessarily responds, in however mediated a form, to current political concerns. The criticism that follows is itself what Marx called “ideological” to the extent that it attributes to acts of intellection (such as Shakespeare’s, or its own) the power to change the circumstances of men’s and women’s lives. The fantasy that is “The Ladies’ Shakespeare” is not the fantasy of women alone – it is the productive and necessary fantasy of all those who have allowed themselves to read Shakespeare as if it mattered to do so. I am proposing, then, that the specificities of woman-centered criticism as mocked by its detractors are almost always standing in for the specificities of Shakespeare criticism in general as these are recognized and disavowed by its own practitioners – laugh at “The Ladies’ Shakespeare,” and “The Ladies’ Shakespeare” laughs at you. But my argument is twofold, for if there is nothing particularly unusual, subjective, or particularist about the grounds on which woman-centered criticism of Shakespeare proceeds, then such criticism cannot be distinguished, for good or ill, from that which surrounds it. That is to say, there *is* no feminist criticism of Shakespeare, but thinking makes it so.

I

Women’s deployment of the critical resources of editing, character criticism, performance, adaptation, and the promotion of Shakespeare has been largely and variously governed by the assumption (questioned by Macluarin, and mischievously dramatized by Barrie when he pretends to read Shakespeare as a suffragist *avant la lettre*) that Shakespeare’s plays can and should be made to speak to present concerns. According to “The Ladies’ Shakespeare,” the plays anticipate the affective needs of future generations, and to find those needs met is consequently to read Shakespeare “aright”:

Shakespeare has heard that he is to be understood at last. ... They say that a look of expectancy has come over the face of the statue in Leicester Square. If the actress who is to play the real Katherine has the courage to climb the railings, while the rest of London sleeps, she may find him waiting for her at the foot of his pedestal to honour her by walking her once round that garden, talking to her in the language not of Petruchio, but of Romeo.

After three centuries of immobilization, Shakespeare is to be “understood at last,” his intentions reanimated by a feminist sympathy that is here imagined as the product of a complex process of identification between Shakespeare and the women who love him. The term “identification” indicates the psychological process whereby a subject assimilates an attribute of another person, and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. But identification operates in two directions: the subject can identify her own self with the other, or the other with herself. In practice these

tendencies are mutually involved and together they comprise a complex mode of identification that can be used to account for the constitution of a "we." In Freud's work, identification describes the various operations of imitation, assimilation, and indifference to difference that constitute, more or less favorably, the human subject. In more general terms, a reader or spectator may be said to identify herself with a particular character, and thereby to "enrich" and pleasurably reencounter her own personality. To identify with a character or writer is to read with confidence in our ability to understand, and with a feeling of companionship that comes from a sense of being understood. "The Ladies' Shakespeare" invokes this complex, reciprocal mode of identification, which it imagines to be present in both Shakespeare and the women who love him. The actress (who is standing in for the female reader) identifies Shakespeare as a feminist, like herself, and identifies herself with what she sees as Shakespeare's feminism; while Shakespeare identifies the actress as a feminist like *himself*, and consequently falls in love with her.

Barrie intends such identifications – which originate in the mind of the female reader, where their logic may be summarized as the claim that "Shakespeare loves me *because I am a feminist*" – to raise a smile in his audience. He underlines the solipsistic nature of the fantasy he is attributing to women (a fantasy whose inverted form constitutes the pleasure of entertaining Shakespeare's thoughts *as if they were our own*) by borrowing its motifs of reciprocated love from *Romeo and Juliet*, and from *The Winter's Tale*. In the first case, the female reader identifies with the character of Juliet, with whom she has in common the wish to be loved. The plot being what it is, the reader is then able to feel loved herself – first by Romeo, and then by Shakespeare, who talks "to her in the language . . . of Romeo." In the second case, Shakespeare himself is saved, by the courageous action of a woman, from the pedestal on which he has been fixed. Standing in the place of Hermione, and now the grateful object of a heroic female rescue, the revived Shakespeare briefly figures the love between women that underpins women's identification with female characters and the man who made them. For Shakespeare loves the actress both as Romeo loved Juliet, and as Hermione loved Perdita. The composite figure of Romeo – Hermione – which is really the figure for the position of sympathy toward women out of which Shakespeare is supposed to write – responds with maternal love and with sexual interest to the actress who scales the railings to save her; while the actress embodies the gallant femininity that has always rendered Shakespeare's heroines the object of erotic approbation. Directed, as here, toward the imaginary object that is Romeo–Hermione (an object we may call *the woman in Shakespeare*), such gallantry marks the presence both of a complex mode of identification, and of a sexuality whose object is neither male, nor female, but both at once.

The joke that is "The Ladies' Shakespeare" derives in part from Barrie's intuitive recognition of the complexity of patterns of identification as these operate within theatrical performance – a complexity that other forms of criticism have been comparatively slow to recognize. Recent discussion of the fact that, before the Restoration, women did not appear on the public stage in England, where female parts were taken by boys (or, possibly, by adult men), has centered on the male homoeroticism of the

spectacle of boys dressed as women (a spectacle that is held to be intensified when female characters are then “disguised,” as Shakespeare’s heroines often are, as men). For critics such as Lisa Jardine, there are *no* women on Shakespeare’s stage, and few of any account in his audience: “playing the woman’s part’ – male effeminacy – is an act for a male audience’s appreciation” (1983: 31). Jardine’s argument operates as a timely warning against the historical error of imputing “peculiarly female insights” to characters who are merely theatrical ciphers. But other critics have objected that Shakespeare’s plays are not most usefully read as if they were historical documents *tout court*, and that critical concentration on the body of the boy actor beneath the female character’s clothes, however historically accurate, “erases” women from the spheres of representation and discussion. Countering Jardine on her own ground, Jean E. Howard has worked to demonstrate the importance of women as spectators, paying customers, and “desiring subjects” in the early modern theater (1989a: 225); while Jardine’s work has also been extended, and its heterosexist bias corrected, by Stephen Orgel (1996), Laura Levine (1986), and Jonathan Goldberg (1992), who argue for the constructedness of sexuality, as well as of gender, on the English Renaissance stage. The amalgamation of these critical insights – of Howard’s desiring women (“stimulated to want what was on display at the theatre” (1989a: 225)), with the labile sexuality of Goldberg’s transvestite boy, and the “unmooring of desire” from gender that Stephen Greenblatt has suggested is “the special pleasure of Shakespearean fiction” (1988: 89) – culminates in the work of Valerie Traub, who argues that erotic desire circulates through and across “‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ sites” in Shakespeare’s drama (1992: 113), where it elicits and expresses heterosexual and homoerotic fantasies and fears. Of course it does so not because of Shakespeare’s unusual empathy with marginalized sexualities, or oppressed genders, but because gender identities in early modern England appear, with hindsight, to have been more fluid than they have since become. But Traub’s work allows us to imagine Shakespeare’s theater as a site of identification between women who can desire each other, differently but equally well, through identification with male, with female, or with transvestite characters. In this it can be said to have arrived back at Barrie’s vision of a woman who loves herself as a woman through loving the woman in Shakespeare.

II

Of course, not all women have chosen to read Shakespeare from an overtly sexed or gendered position. In the first decade of the New Shakspeare Society, which was founded by F. J. Furnivall in 1874 for the purposes of encouraging “the widest study of Shakespeare” in “every English-speaking land,” and admitted women on an equal footing with men, women gave papers on the First and Second Quartos of *Hamlet* (Teena Rochfort-Smith, who was preparing to edit the play); the medieval source of the bond story in *The Merchant of Venice* (Teena Rochfort-Smith again); the authorship of *Henry VI* Parts 2 and 3 (Jane Lee, editor of the Society’s parallel text of that play);

natural history similes in *Henry VI* (Emma Phipson); a reading of *Julius Caesar* (E. H. Hickey); "Shakespeare's Old Men" (Constance O'Brien); and the construction of Shakespeare's verse (Grace Latham). Some also gave more woman-centered papers (for example, Latham's defense of Ophelia), but this was an enterprise in which they were encouraged and joined by their male colleagues, and within which both women and men employed strategies to distance themselves quite markedly from the identificatory practices with which they engaged.

So, according to the *Transactions* of the Society, in 1881 Hickey gave a paper on *Romeo and Juliet* that noted an "element of cunning" in Juliet's character (who had "arranged" for Romeo to overhear her declaration of love, just as Barrie's Kate "arranged" to have herself carried off before the wedding feast). The paper sparked a brisk debate between Furnivall, Peter Bayne, and the Rev. W. A. Harrison concerning the cunning propensities of Shakespeare's women in love – a discussion which was closed, for the time being, by Emma Phipson's observing in all Shakespeare's characters "an indifference to truth" characteristic of his era. This debate, and one of 1882 in which Peter Bayne led a discussion comparing Shakespeare and George Eliot in terms of what each knew about women (eliciting from Joseph Knight the opinion "that there never had been in the world any man at any time who knew anything at all about women"), demonstrate two things. First, that a concern with what Shakespeare understood "of a woman's heart" was shared among the female and male members of the New Shaksper Society (as it was by nineteenth-century Anglo-American middle-class culture more generally). Second, that the question elicited a marked degree of self-irony from its participants, who used it to explore the potential for anachronism, special pleading, and self-interest in Shakespeare criticism at large. Leaving the "sound basis" of textual studies to take passionately interested sides on the well-worn topic of woman's nature, the men and women of the New Shaksper Society showed themselves more interested in quarreling with and courting each other than in accounting for the poet under whose aegis they had gathered. Embracing the misogynist assumption that women's interests are "sectional" rather than general or objective, and proceeding with the topic nevertheless, members at once celebrated, and remonstrated with themselves for the realization that their criticism of Shakespeare was the product of contemporary desires.

If woman-centered readings are often made to function as the scapegoat for the tendency to read Shakespeare's plays as political commentaries on present moments, that is in part because the articulation of women's concerns is only too readily understood as the special pleading of a "minority" interest. But it is also because women have themselves been prepared to frankly disavow attempts to produce generally valid readings of the plays. Mary Cowden Clarke understood her notorious book *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines in a Series of Fifteen Tales* (1850), as few have understood it since, as a work of fiction. "It was believed that such a design would combine much matter of interesting speculation, afford scope for pleasant fancy, and be productive of entertainment." The work of Anna Jameson now known as *Shakespeare's Heroines* was originally entitled *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Political, and Historical* (1832), and was designed as a treatise on the nature of women, illustrated with examples from

Shakespeare's plays. Although Clarke and Jameson each undertook a deliberately instrumental reading of Shakespeare, they were subsequently vilified for lack of an "objectivity" to which they had never aspired. "The Ladies' Shakespeare" may be understood as the name for the critical impulse that impelled Clarke and Jameson, as it impels others, to acknowledge their own situatedness *vis-à-vis* Shakespeare.

A list of those who have read Shakespeare from a woman's point of view would necessarily include the names of some men – Barrie himself, for example, who played the woman's part after dinner in Stationers' Hall in order to charm and disarm his colleagues; John Fletcher, whose play *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tam'd* was performed ca. 1611 as a sequel to *The Taming of the Shrew*, and was subsequently dedicated to the "Ladies ... in whose defence and right / Fletchers brave Muse prepar'd herself to fight"; and more recently, Peter Erickson (whose *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* is a useful study of the ways in which a feminist interest such as his own may appropriate and rearticulate the legacy of Shakespeare). In fact, the majority of those writing as women have perhaps *been* women. But if the body of criticism that they have produced is largely conformable with that parodied by Barrie, this is true because, good and bad, the presumptions and techniques of "The Ladies' Shakespeare" are characteristic of those of Shakespeare criticism as a whole.

III

The typicality of "The Ladies' Shakespeare" may be demonstrated, in the first instance, if it is considered as an acting script – one that alters the inherited text in order to "restore" onstage what it takes to be Shakespeare's original intention. In *The Shakespeare Key* (1879), Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke remarked with interest "the meagreness of the stage-directions" in the "earliest printed copies" of the plays (which they took to be an index of Shakespeare's intent). As well as describing the modern practice of altering, elaborating, or adding stage directions ("the needful particulars being either deduced from the dialogue text, from the situation, or from known historical details"), the Cowden Clarkes also noted "a few stage situations ... which have no accompanying stage direction either in the ancient or modern editions of his works; yet which require bearing in mind duly to comprehend the passages where they occur." To "bear in mind" the actions implied by Shakespeare's text is the first principle of dramatic exegesis. But it is also the principle whereby "The Ladies' Shakespeare" is able to invert the received meaning of Shakespeare's text "without one word missed out or added." As a performance script, "The Ladies' Shakespeare" authorizes an actress to countervail the action of (and therefore to preserve within the canon) a play that Bernard Shaw notoriously found "altogether disgusting to modern sensibilities." Refusing to equate the perspective of the male characters with authorial intention, the "restored" performance demonstrates what many have argued before and since – that Katherine knows more about Petruchio than he knows about himself, and that her taming is nothing more than his own mistaken fantasy.

Attending to Shakespeare as a writer for the stage, *The Shakespeare Key* identifies other moments in which the author's intention has to be *added back in* in the course of performance. So there are "several passages in Shakespeare's plays where a word must be emphasised in order to develop the full meaning of the sentence" – as if without emphasis, or with the wrong emphasis, the original meaning would be missed. Then there are points left "for filling up as occasion served, or as the ingenuity of the actor entrusted with the part . . . might suggest," such as songs ("the choice of which was left to the singer or to the theatrical manager or for improvisation"), and certain of the clown's routines ("some of the scraps of quoted ballad, or impromptu levity, which he had to utter, being left to the memory or extempore wit of the performer to supply"). Like Barrie, the Cowden Clarkes also note the theatrical opportunities posed by Shakespeare's "admirable power in indicating silence in certain of his characters"; as well as by his "potent art in conveying perfect impression of a speaker's meaning, through imperfectly expressed speech"; and his skill "in introducing upon occasion an unfinished sentence," as when a character is interrupted, or distracted by his own thoughts. In this last case, however, it is conceivable that the actor occasionally works to dramatize not Shakespeare's intention, but a textual corruption:

In the Folio, these unfinished sentences are generally indicated by a dash (that is, by a long line or a line composed of short hyphen-marks, thus - - -); but, in several cases, are so imperfectly indicated (by a full stop, by a comma, by no stop at all, or even by a blank space) that it is difficult to decide whether an interrupted sentence is really intended by the dramatist, or whether the printer may not have made a blunder, and even (in the last-mentioned case) have left the passage incompletely given.

Here the "unfinished sentence" becomes one more "point for improvisation" on the part of the actor or editor. Exacerbated as it is by the complex materiality of the surviving texts, the identification of significant absences or silences in Shakespeare's plays starts a series of questions that finally make nonsense, even on the pragmatic level, of our will to know and stabilize the author's "intention." Where is improvisation intended, and where not? How can we know when silence "speaks," how long it lasts, and when it is just silence? To ponder such questions is to realize that Shakespeare's work is not an object of the type that could ever be restored or "completed." It thus replicates, in a material register, the capacity of texts to release new interpretations on being read. And it is these two indeterminacies – the material and the textual – that have allowed to each generation the impression that Shakespeare is still waiting to be understood.

It is as a practitioner of techniques exemplified in "The Ladies' Shakespeare" that, in "The Shakespearean Editor as Shrew-Tamer" (1995), Leah Marcus discusses the causes and consequences of the differences between the 1594 Quarto and the 1623 Folio versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* – differences so marked that the two are considered sometimes as earlier and later drafts, and sometimes as discrete plays. Where textual criticism has tended to concern itself with the question of which text or textual part

bears the imprint of the “true” Shakespeare, Marcus argues that this critical enterprise can itself be seen as an act of taming: one which reduces textual indeterminacy by invocation of what Foucault calls the author function. After arguing a case for the “bad quarto” as the record of a performance with its “own logic and artistic merits” (and with less pernicious gender politics), Marcus finally advocates an editorial practice that would think of the different versions of the play “intertextually – as a cluster of related texts which can be fruitfully read together and against each other as ‘Shakespeare’” (1995: 198). Marcus speaks from her moment when she proposes to disestablish the texts that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors worked to establish; for modern critics have increasingly come to recognize and value the non-uniformity of early modern printed books, and the consequent provisionality of any single-text edition. But the instability of the Shakespearean text is something that editors in the tradition of “The Ladies’ Shakespeare” have long known, and sometimes admitted. Preparing multiple-text editions of Shakespeare’s works for the New Shakspeare Society in the late nineteenth century, Teena Rochfort-Smith (who worked on a four-text *Hamlet*) and Jane Lee (a parallel text of *Henry VI*) were already working deep within the consequences of the fact that to edit a play is to *produce* variant readings.

In the preface to their edition of *The Works of William Shakespeare* (1864), the Cowden Clarkes remarked on the impossibility of isolating “the genuine Shakespearian reading in disputed passages,” and went on to imagine a reading practice that has since become possible through the medium of hypertext:

The time may come, when every reader of Shakespeare will be, to a certain extent, his own editor; and the difficulties arising out of the early and original copies almost demand this: meantime, the best thing that an appointed Editor can do, is honestly and conscientiously to set forth the text according to his own belief of what it is, as gathered from such (in many cases imperfect) materials as exist to found it upon. . . . These anxious deliberations, these conscientious cares on the part of Editors in selecting what they conceive to be the genuine Shakespearian reading in disputed passages, – leading to occasional variance even in *their own individual opinions*, and to differing actually *with themselves*, – ought surely to teach diffidence in maintaining their own decision. (1864: xxiii; emphasis in the original)

While the Cowden Clarkes remain visibly anxious at their inability to fix “the genuine Shakespearian reading,” they are able to take pleasure, both in the lesson in humility that is Shakespeare’s special gift to his editors, and in imagining a text that is so multiple that the question of Shakespeare’s original intention is dissolved by the proposition that no single variant need be cut off, and no possible meaning denied.

Of course, the impossibility of fixing the text correctly can also justify a different editorial practice, one based on the conclusion that Shakespeare’s texts are the result of a collaborative process so extensive, and so various, that there *is* no originating intention to recover. Since Shakespeare’s plays were adapted by actors, changed by other writers, and altered by theatrical scribes, censors, compositors,

and proofreaders – since, beyond this, the texts varied from themselves at the moment of their first publication – the editor is free to modernize them in her turn. Women editors of Shakespeare have implicitly followed this line in their production of editions to meet particular educational or other needs: Henrietta Bowdler cut passages and entire plays in order to produce *The Family Shakespeare* (1807), a work fit to be “placed in the hands of young persons of both sexes.” Bowdler’s work is notorious; her name is now used as a verb to describe the expurgation of indelicate passages in texts; and her edition of Shakespeare is regarded as the mistaken product of an overly nice pre-Victorian sensibility. But, as more recent critical practice has been forced to admit, every new edition addresses itself to a particular audience, and every edition is, to that extent, an “adaptation.” In their article “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text” (1993), Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass argue that “there is no intrinsic reason *not* to have a modernized, translated, rewritten ‘Shakespeare’” – indeed, because even the material signs of the original printed texts are reinterpreted as their meaning is apprehended by modern sensibilities, “in an important sense, that is all we *can* have.” In other words, however energetically we work to develop an active historical imagination, and a “context” within which to read Shakespeare outside the ambit of our own concerns, in the end we will still have some version of “The Ladies’ Shakespeare.”

IV

In order to elaborate and remotivate Katherine’s part, “The Ladies’ Shakespeare” has recourse to a critical practice that is sometimes held to be women’s special contribution to Shakespeare studies (though it was begun by Alexander Pope and continued by A. C. Bradley, among others). Character criticism concentrates its energies on the dramatic personae of a play, and works, according to a logic of realism derived from the novel, to supply their actions with psychological motivation, and consequently to explain them as resulting from a combination of inborn traits, early life experience, and current circumstances. So, according to “The Ladies’ Shakespeare,” Kate has herself carried off before the marriage feast because she “knows” what no critic has thought to assert before – that “her father was really a poor man and there was *no* marriage feast.” A strong form of such criticism, and its most famous example, is Cowden Clarke’s *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines*, which aimed “to trace the probable antecedents in the history of some of Shakespeare’s women ... to invent such adventures as might be supposed to colour their future lives” and “to place the heroines in such situations as should naturally lead up to, and account for, the known conclusion of their subsequent confirmed character and after-fate.”

Cowden Clarke’s “prequels” to Shakespeare’s plays are now discounted as exemplifying the naivety of a criticism that, blind to the historical and textual integrity of his works, *adds itself* to Shakespeare. But Cowden Clarke’s “speculations” are structured by a self-deprecating wit that has already taken account of the problem that to write

about Shakespeare may be seen as an act of presumption. Beginning both before and after Shakespeare's plays, and working to motivate something that has already occurred there, they function to propose that (at least in the curious genealogy that is literary criticism) the cause of events can come after their happening. The logic of time's inversion, whereby we see the trace of an object's vanishing before we see the object itself, has occupied philosophers (it is used, for example, by Lacan when he describes the symptom as something that returns *from the future*). Here it is being used to suggest the proper relation of subsequent writers to Shakespeare, for if his plays represent the vanishing of the (subsequent) girlhood of his heroines, they also represent the vanishing of Cowden Clarke's work back into his. In this aspect – the aspect of time's inversion – *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* represents a filial model of criticism that, loving its object, seeks first to “restore” and then to be erased by Shakespeare's prior truth. But to come, however tactfully, to the aid of a parental text – to suggest that it now needs support – is to begin to supplant it; and Cowden Clarke's work has consequently been read as the type of a criticism that holds Shakespeare to be an object whose origin and utility are discontinuous, so that the plays constantly need to be redirected by some power superior to them. This is the premise on which most criticism of Shakespeare continues to proceed. As represented by its detractors, however, it is governed by the figure of the inappropriately masterful daughter – for example, of Cowden Clarke herself, or of Barrie's suffragist, who makes common cause with Shakespeare's Shrew.

Character criticism can extend its reach after, as well as before, the action of a play. In *Shakespeare's Garden of Girls* (1885) (a series of talks originally given to the New Shakspeare Society), M. Leigh-Noel speculated (as many have done since) on how the married life of Katherine and Petruchio “turned out.” Leigh's portrait includes that inversion of apparent power relations that “The Ladies' Shakespeare” also read into *The Taming of the Shrew*: “we should think it was a very happy [marriage], and that in time Katherine ... having learned the secret of making her lord imagine that he was the master, while she was really directing everything he did ... would prove to have tamed Petruchio, rather than he to have subdued her” (a fable that, in another register, functions as an allegory for the kind of “bad” feminist criticism that would “tame” Shakespeare). Helen Faucit identified (and allowed herself to be identified) so closely with Shakespeare's heroines that she acquired the power to “interpret” their subsequent actions. As she explained in her widely admired writing on the roles she had played, “I could never leave my characters when the curtain fell and the audience departed. As I had lived with them through their early lives, so I also lived into their future.” Faucit based her claims to be Shakespeare's “interpreter” on her own considerable acting skill: a power that she felt Shakespeare had been counting on when he left to sympathetic actors such as herself the task of “filling up his outlines, and giving full and vivid life to the creatures of his brain.” A character is necessarily what an actor does with the script before her – the special extravagance of Faucit's claims to “read Shakespeare aright” resides in her belief that such “doing” returned Shakespeare to himself.

V

For Helen Faucit, as for others, Shakespeare was an author who wrote for the future. In Faucit's case he wrote in anticipation of the coming of the actress to the English public stage:

Without this belief, could he have written as he did, when boys and beardless youths were the only representatives of his women on the stage? Yes, he must have looked beyond "the ignorant present," and known that a time would come when women, true and worthy, should find it a glory to throw the best part of their natures into these ideal types which he has left to testify to his faith in womanhood. . . . How could any youth, however gifted and specially trained, even faintly suggest these fair and noble women to an audience? Woman's words coming from a man's lips, and man's heart – it is monstrous to think of! One quite pities Shakespeare, who had to put up with seeing his brightest creations thus marred, misrepresented, spoiled.

Erasing the material practices that constitute the actor's art, Faucit was able to understand her stage career as a form of moral philosophy. Her aim was to make Shakespeare's "ideal types" into "living realities for thousands to whom they would else have been unknown." The decision to read Shakespeare's plays as works of moral philosophy found its license in Pope's much-repeated assertion that the dramatist provided a model for, rather than a copy of, nature. Elizabeth Montagu subsequently undertook to prove that Shakespeare's works "answer the noblest end of fable, moral instruction"; while Elizabeth Griffith read each play not only for its "general moral," but also for local ethical maxims, and situations illustrative of the truths and dilemmas of "general life." Anna Jameson gave a strong gender inflection to this tradition when she used the plays, more instrumentally still, as evidence of what women could become if they were freed from the oppressive conditions and mistaken educational system of nineteenth-century Britain; while M. Leigh-Noel quoted Charles Cowden Clarke to the effect that Shakespeare's writings had, by their influence, changed the conditions of existence for early modern women:

Shakespeare is the writer of all others whom the women of England should most take to their hearts; for I believe it to be mainly through his intellectual influence that their claims in the scale of society were acknowledged in England, when throughout the civilised world, their position was not greatly elevated above that of the drudges in modern low life.

Shakespeare's moral efficacy is usually derived from his capacity, as Montagu put it, to "throw his soul into the body of another man." Or, of course, of another woman. "How Shakespeare attained to such familiarity with the feminine nature it is impossible to say" (M. Leigh-Noel), but Shakespeare's reputation as the man who understood women has been established – though contested – since Margaret Cavendish remarked his capacity to "Metamorphose from a Man to a Woman" in the first critical essay to be published on his work (in her *Sociable Letters* (1664)). To those women who have loved

him, Shakespeare's great gift has usually been said to be his ability to draw women "from life": "of all the male writers that ever lived, he has seen most deeply into the female heart; he has most vividly depicted it in its strength, and in its weakness" (M. Cowden Clarke). Such critics have tended to stress the strengths rather than the weaknesses of Shakespeare's women; working to find good things to say about Ophelia, Volumnia, and Lady Macbeth, and praising more obvious heroines as ideal types. The tension in such criticism between finding Shakespeare's women to be at once thoroughly sympathetic *and* thoroughly realistic is resolved by the assumption that Shakespeare was able to understand women as they really are, rather than as they have been made to appear and act by prevailing social conditions. If Shakespeare's heroines appear to be idealized, that is because woman's nature – the nature she will be free to express only once she has been liberated from the distorting influence of her current constraints – *is* ideal. It is in this sense that Shakespeare can be said to understand the women of the future while – this happens in "The Ladies' Shakespeare" – the women of the future will be able to recognize themselves in Shakespeare's heroines.

Mary Cowden Clarke built rather differently on Shakespeare's reputation as a moral instructor in "Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend" (1887), an essay which describes Shakespeare's heroines offering themselves as ego ideals to young women:

To the young girl, emerging from childhood and taking her first step into the more active and self-dependent career of woman-life, Shakespeare's vital precepts and models render him essentially a helping friend. ... Through his feminine portraits she may see, as in a faithful glass, vivid pictures of what she has to evitate, or what she has to imitate ... in accordance with what she feels and learns to be the supremest harmonious effect in self-amelioration of character. She can take her own disposition in hand, as it were, and endeavour to mould and form it into the best perfection of which it is capable, by carefully observing the women drawn by Shakespeare.

While Cowden Clarke leaves unspecified the principle according to which the young woman knows what to "evitate" and what to "imitate" in Shakespeare, she implies that it originates with feeling, and is subsequently ratified by the reader's own experience of "self-amelioration of character." Through their identification with the different aspects of Shakespeare's heroines, Cowden Clarke expects readers to "gain lessons in artlessness, guilelessness, modesty, sweetness, and the most winning candour ... moral courage, meekness, magnanimity, firmness, devoted tenderness, high principle, noble conduct, loftiest speech and sentiment." According to Cowden Clarke, Shakespeare works his effects by requiring readers to give themselves up, through identification with one of his characters, to his own ethical intelligence, and, by rehearsing the ethical position so offered, to gain knowledge both of themselves and of an ideal to which they might aspire. This introduces a prosthetic element into the circular logic of an ethical education whereby, without it, only the good would be moved to identify with the good. Shakespeare, it seems, is morally efficacious not because his portraits are uniformly good, but because of his ability to effect a logic of identification whose object is finally himself.

The operation of this logic can be seen within "The Ladies' Shakespeare" in the fantasy whereby a woman's unique capacity to understand Shakespeare renders her heroic to herself and others. That the fantasy exists outside Barrie's joke is demonstrated in the reception of Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay*, which defends Shakespeare against the criticism of Voltaire, and was commended by Garrick in a poem that represents Montagu as an armed Pallas, rushing to "protect the Bard" from the malice of the Gallic Giant; and by the case of Elizabeth Griffith, who modeled herself on Montagu as a "Lady ... champion in [Shakespeare's] cause." In 1736 the Shakespeare Ladies Club, which was established to petition theater managers to stage Shakespeare's plays, was praised in similar terms by Mary Cowper, in a poem that attributes Shakespeare's revival in the eighteenth century to women alone: "the softer Sex redeems the Land/ And Shakespear lives again by their Command"; while in 1833 Fanny Kemble wrote to Anna Jameson: "A lady assured me the other day, that when you went to heaven, which you certainly would, Shakespeare would meet you and kiss you for having understood, and made others understand, him so well."

The tone of these tributes is mock-heroic and raises the important question of what it means for women to read and defend a poet whom everyone is reading, and who needs no defending. In 1726 Lewis Theobald underlined the "universal" popularity of Shakespeare by noting there were very few English poets "more the Subject of the Ladies Reading" – a statement which should not be taken as an index of women's serious involvement with Shakespeare, for Theobald seems to have found it remarkable not that *only* women read Shakespeare, but that *even* women did. To value a poet and believe him in need of defending – perhaps especially if others agree with you – may act as an ethical tonic on an individual's life; while the role of Shakespeare's champion may have resulted in real, if incalculable, cultural benefits, individually and as a group, to the women who have accepted it. But Barrie's essay suggests, rather, that where women and their interests are included in the study of Shakespeare, there that study is liable to derogation. For Barrie's talk erects a structure of exclusion *within* the Stationers' Company dinner – on the one side Lord Balfour, Kipling (the most manly of writers, as Virginia Woolf called him), and the Company members; on the other Barrie (who represented himself the least serious of the new members), the women who, not being Company members, could not be there, and Shakespeare. And here Shakespeare has become, in jest, the figurehead for that coalition between women and literature that has – in earnest – rarely translated into increased cultural authority for either one of them.

VI

Barrie ended his speech at Stationers' Hall by invoking its ghost, at once "the glory and the terror" of the Company. This specter is the ghost not of Hamlet's father (in which guise the poet has revisited Shakespeareans since Rowe), but of his mother:

As I understand, all of you who are members have seen it. It is what gives you that look that is to be found on no other faces ... The ghost is a scrap of paper which proves that

Bacon did not write the plays, and so far so good, but – I get this from “the Ladies’ Shakespeare” – but Bacon was not the only author in that household. The document is signed by Shakespeare and is in these words: “Received of Lady Bacon for fathering her play of *Hamlet* – five pounds.”

The proposition that Shakespeare was a woman was repeated – with a difference – in 1985 by Maya Angelou, who in an address to the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies in Washington, DC famously remarked “William Shakespeare was a black woman,” for he had marvelously understood and written about her “outcast state.” Angelou produced this witty formulation by extending two assumptions that she expected her audience to share: that Shakespeare’s empathy reached into every subject position, and that his work can properly be appropriated in order to give voice to such positions. Barrie puts the same assumption, in what he considers to be a ludicrous form, on display in “The Ladies’ Shakespeare” when he also claims that Shakespeare was a woman. In either form, the claim is only a strong registration of that need to identify Shakespeare’s interests with our own which is the premise of historicist as well as feminist criticism.

Barrie’s identification of Shakespeare’s signature as being that of Lady Bacon is also designed to invoke the Baconian controversy; an argument which first emerged within Shakespeare criticism with the suggestion, in the eighteenth century, that “the Shakespearian works” had been written by Sir Francis Bacon. The theory received important impetus from the work of Delia Bacon, whose *Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded* (1859) argued that “Shakspeare” was the name of a consortium of writers, who wrote the plays in order to promote (in “carefully hidden, yet not less carefully indicated” form) Bacon’s new system of philosophy, and to prepare the populace for the social revolution that was to follow. According to Delia Bacon, Bacon and his associates were writing both for and to bring about the future age that would understand them, and they had recourse to literature in the first instance “for the purpose of instituting a gradual encroachment on popular opinions.” But they were also living in dangerous times, when the new absolutism of the Tudors was sitting athwart an intellectual renaissance, and they consequently deployed a “rhetoric of secrecy” that hid their purposes from the authorities of the state, while at the same time provoking the “philosophic curiosity” of those fit to learn them. Explaining that the language of literature uniquely met these conflicting needs of communication and disguise, education and discretion, Delia Bacon argues that literature, and drama in particular, provided the radical “Few” with a register into which they could “translate their doctrine,” as well as with a philosophical style which could address quotidian circumstances:

That is the reason why the development of that age comes to us as *Literature*. ... The leadership of the modern ages, when it was already here in the persons of its chief interpreters and prophets, could as yet get no recognition of its right to teach and rule – ... it could only wave, in mute gesticulation, its signals to the future.

Subsequent Baconians, such as Constance Pott, elaborated this argument, tying it ever more tightly to the person of Francis Bacon and his known interest in cryptic wisdom.

According to Pott's bathetic account, Bacon (who was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth I) decided at a young age to "set to work and endeavour to bring about a universal Revival or Renaissance." After traveling in France (where he wrote the first draft of Montaigne's essays), Bacon founded a secret intellectual society, wrote "the Shakspeare plays" and other works (which he gave "to be fathered and adopted by anyone who gave promise of . . . sending them out into the world to do their destined work for the good of humanity"), and lived beyond 1626, revising and enlarging former works, and writing "a mess of new books, historical, scientific, religious." Believing that Bacon "left his fingerprints" – both his signature and his true message – in the works he did not dare acknowledge as his own, Pott and others searched "Bacon's" works for cryptograms; and secret signs that had been seeded in them as signals to posterity were subsequently found, not only in the writings themselves, but in title pages, chapter headings, page numbers, printer's marks, textual discrepancies, and, in the case of the Shakespeare plays, in the differences between the Quartos and the Folios.

For those outside it, as for Barrie himself, the Baconian theory has come to embody the madness of unregulated scholarship; a spectacle instructive only as a demonstration of the way in which historical naivety may elaborate itself on the margins of an academic field. But Delia Bacon's proposition that "Shakspeare" was the name not of an author but of a book produced by multiple hands and collaborative intellectual practices is no longer scandalous within a discipline that is currently itself working to think outside the author function. Similarly, her argument that Shakespeare's plays code a criticism of the prevailing order that dare not speak its name, her belief that there are "heroic intellects" who are not simply "blind historical agents" but can see beyond the circumstances of their moment, and her conclusion that works of literature have political meanings that can become legible only under certain historical circumstances, are also familiar suppositions within Shakespeare criticism, and may be summed up in the line from *Coriolanus* which Bacon used as the epigraph to her work: "One time will owe another." In Bacon's work, this line functions to propose that the present both owns and remains in debt to the past, while the past both owns and remains in debt to the present for its realization. It is this proposition (startling only because it usually lies unnoticed behind the various critical practices for which it is the final motive) that is given full parodic form in "The Ladies' Shakespeare" – a text that, deriving its being from Shakespeare, manages nevertheless to put him in debt to itself. The critical practice that is being mocked here is both intelligent and historically naive, ethically strenuous and narcissistic, loving and unfilial: for Shakespeareans, it is both "The Ladies' Shakespeare" and the only form of criticism we have.

NOTE

1 This piece has also been reprinted in the immensely useful collection of women's responses to Shakespeare prior to the advent of

feminist criticism in the Thompson and Roberts' anthology *Women Reading Shakespeare 1600–1900: An Anthology of Criticism*.

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