

Shakespeare and Queer Theory (2019) by Melissa E. Sanchez

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1 Melissa E. Sanchez' monograph, *Shakespeare and Queer Theory* (2019), published in the Arden Shakespeare Series, is situated at the intersection of Shakespeare and Early Modern Studies with Queer Theory, foregrounding how these fields "are not only valuable in themselves, but mutually useful and illuminating" (2) and "have a lot to contribute to that collective project" (55). The idea of the book is to present "queerness as a mode of critique" (Halberstam 2011: 110 in Sanchez 2019: 150), and to explore how "[q]ueer theory reveals the queer within the normal and the ordinary [. . .] [as well as] the normal and the ordinary within the queer" (7). In this sense, Sanchez follows the path of other contributors to the debate, such as Menon (2008; 2011), and Stanivukovic (2017). The book is directed at students and scholars alike and provides a comprehensive introduction to the central concepts, as well as the historical background and origins of the debate. Sanchez furthermore presents the mutual benefit of the intersection of Shakespeare and Queer Theory by supplying her own analyses of several of Shakespeare's works. Sanchez emphasises that "this book [is not offered] as the 'truth' . . . , but as one contribution to an ongoing, productively un-wieldy conversation" (2) and "will [hopefully] not be the last word on either topic, but in its very limitations will catalyse newer, stranger theoretical work and political worlds" (178).

2 Situating herself within the field of academic work on the intersection of Shakespeare and Queer Theory, Sanchez differentiates not only between queer and homosexual, like Menon (2011), but also between queerness and normativity, and extends these distinctions to issues beyond the sexual, as found in, for example, Anthony Guy (2016). Apart from taking up the discussion of aspects of sodomy and usury, as in Stanivukovic (2017), Sanchez additionally looks into aspects of religion, friendship, race, rhetoric, and empiricism. Sanchez shares Menon's (2008; 2011) approach of a re-evaluation of Queer Studies through an analysis of Elizabethan England. However, while Menon (2008; 2011) stresses the comparability of present and past in terms of Queer Studies, Sanchez highlights the differences in the reception of queer issues between Early Modern England and now. Moreover, in her analysis of current Shakespeare reception, Sanchez includes a new set of film adaptations. In sum, Sanchez presents a new approach to analysing the intersection between *Shakespeare and Queer Theory* by offering a self-reflexive 'queer' reading.

3 At the outset of the book Sanchez introduces her terminological uses, f.e. with regard to the difference between "heterosexual desire", "heterosexuality", and "heteronormativity" (7).

Sanchez equips the reader with basic tools to enter the debate around Queer Theory by prompting to read critically in the section “Caveat lector” (18-20), where she emphasises the importance of seeing the fields of Queer Theory and Shakespeare Studies “as recursive and multifaceted”, and her chapter organization as “a rough roadmap” rather than “an exhaustive” and “linear” story (19). In Chapter 1 Sanchez explains the “intellectual forces” and “key investments” (16) of Queer Theory, the difference between Queer Theory and Gay and Lesbian Studies, as well as the historical origins of Queer Theory. Chapter 2 presents the history of Queer Studies and Shakespeare with regard to concepts of homoerotic relations and their influence on “shaping” Early Modern society (16). Chapter 3 displays “forms of queerness that go beyond the gender of object choice” (16) and probes the difference between ‘queer’ and ‘normative’ and how to deconstruct, challenge, and rethink this distinction. In Chapter 4, Sanchez presents “queer readings” (17) of six of Shakespeare’s texts, looking at “[t]he limits of polymorphous perversity” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Venus and Adonis* (112-20), “[t]he erotic life of racism” in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* (121-30), as well as “history, memory and futurity” in *Henry V* and *Hamlet* (130-42). Chapter 5 examines queer film adaptations, looking at punk and camp in Derek Jarman’s *The Tempest* (1979), at the representation of the relation between past and present in Jarman’s *Edward II* (1991) and Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), as well as at conservative readings of Shakespeare with regard to Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (1999). The analyses Sanchez provides are very powerful in their comprehensive structuring, as well as their connection to Queer Theory.

4 Throughout the book, the benefit of intersecting Shakespeare and Queer Theory becomes increasingly evident, as “Shakespeare’s oeuvre” not only “depicts a distinctly queer assortment of desires and acts that do not correspond to modern taxonomies” (10), but Queer Theory also presents a new lens for reading Shakespeare by challenging “the normative” (40).

5 *Shakespeare and Queer Theory* is a comprehensive guide, or “rough roadmap” (19) as Sanchez terms it, for acquiring the basics of Queer Theory, and proves the fruitfulness of exploring intersections between Shakespeare and Queer Theory. It equips the reader with the necessary tools to enter the discourse around Shakespeare and Queer Theory, and teaches the importance of a critical reading. In contrast to other works on the intersection between Shakespeare and Queer Studies, Sanchez goes beyond reflection on the sources she analyses, as she productively foregrounds and fundamentally applies “queerness as a mode of critique” (Halberstam 2011: 110 in Sanchez 2019: 150) to her own text.

Works cited

- Menon, Madhavi. *Shakespeareer. A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Duke University Press, 2011.
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- Menon, Madhavi. *Unhistorical Shakespeare. Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2008.
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