

Shakespeare's Binding Language. John Kerrigan.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xi + 622 pp. \$60.

John Kerrigan's focus in this absorbing, beautifully written study is on the oaths, vows, and pledges we hear uttered by Shakespeare's characters in his plays as they commit themselves to marriage, to legal obligations, and to religious observances, or as they express themselves in the casual profanity of day-to-day gossip. To what extent do those characters find themselves bound by what they say? How sincerely are they undertaking the obligations that they seemingly swear to uphold? How do such commitments grow out of and respond to the institutions of a country deeply involved in sectarian controversy?

In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, oaths are uttered with the apparent purpose of resolving issues under dispute. Hector declares to his wife Andromache that he must and will go to battle on the fateful day in question: "By all the everlasting gods, I'll go" (5.3.4–5), "The gods have heard me swear." Yet his sister Cassandra can swiftly parry these oaths with her insistence that "The gods are deaf to hot and peevish vows." Vows may appear to strengthen oaths, "But vows to every purpose must not hold" (5.3.15–24). Her position is orthodox in Elizabethan terms, as seen in the homily "Against Swearynge and Periury." It is also Senecan and Virgilian. A moderate Royalist position in the early seventeenth century, a kind of "mainstream casuistry," declared that "words need only be kept if they are not overruled by a higher power," such as

a father's authority over his son or a king's over his subject (3). Where does that leave us with the oaths that Troilus and Cressida propound to each other? Word-bound relationships are "cut across by war." Does Cressida's unprotected situation in the Greek camp exculpate her in transferring her oath-bound loyalty from Troilus, no longer able to guard her, to Diomedes, who in Thersites's view at least is a "notorious vow-breaker" (5.1.80–86)?

As Kerrigan shows, the question is everywhere in Shakespeare's plays, early to late. *Love's Labour's Lost* offers a feast of broken oaths, especially among the three young aristocratic men vowing to eschew female company in the interests of serious study. Pandulph in *King John* is a master in the sort of casuistry that the English associated with Catholic infiltration into the English countryside. The issue takes on deadly seriousness when Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* is accused of sexual promiscuity and when Shylock's bond threatens the life of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. Perjury and betrayal are major motifs in *Julius Caesar*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Henry VIII*, and many more.

Kerrigan's chapter on *Measure for Measure* illustrates how well his line of investigation yields rich interpretation. *Votarists* becomes a key word. *Vow* and *oath* are interchangeable, leading to precise distinctions in our understanding of religious and secular vows. To many Protestant Reformers, cloistered vows were "Judaic, mechanical, absurd" (291). In Shakespeare's play, the "volatility of binding language" (298) is everywhere apparent. So is licentious language. King James's royal view was that liberty in speech was acceptable so long as it did not intrude into matters of royal decisions, at which point it would become slander. Lucio's impudent testing of the limits of free speech was of the sort calculated to awaken official sensitivity to unrestrained language. Official actions against defamation were on the increase in Jacobean England. Angelo, a liar who "does not even bother to equivocate," lends an anti-Puritan aspect to the play that is characteristic of Shakespeare's work elsewhere. When Angelo breaks his promise to Isabella and then lies about it to the duke, "the precise, hypocritical deputy is like the puritans that James denounced, in *Basilikon Doron*, 'whome . . . neither oaths or promises binde'" (306). Isabella and Mariana both engage in perjury and riddling slander. In the play's "most direct encounter with the Sermon on the Mount" (308), the duke instructs Isabella that she must pardon Angelo for attempting to assault her virginity, but insists that Angelo must nevertheless die for "promise-breach" and for executing Claudio. This impasse is gotten over, but in ways that are unresolved. Can Angelo be released from the bond of sin? Slander's "ability to exploit loose, binding language cannot be abolished by the uneasy ending of the play" (312).

This fine book offers an extensive set of close readings in a similar vein covering many but not all of Shakespeare's plays. The readings are uniformly brilliant, learned, astutely argued, and insightful.

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