

Women and Shakespeare's Cuckoldry Plays: Shifting Narratives of Martial Betrayal. Cristina León Alfar.

Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. London: Routledge, 2017. xii + 244 pp. \$165.

In readings of six plays, Cristina Alfar analyzes how men's false narratives of wives' sexual betrayal and their own cuckoldry, ostentatiously concocted by a male rival, threaten marriage and social relations. But women's vigorous counternarratives, propelled by female bonds, justly accuse the men themselves of dishonor and betrayal. Because their stories prove true, women gain agency and exoneration. The first chapter summarizes contradictions in the prescriptive literature on marriage and analyzes court cases in which wives successfully win damages from slandering spouses, supplying the historical context that provides precedent for disproving slanderers. Women characters cannily deploy the dominant ideology to attack men by defending their own obedient chastity. Alfar shrewdly uses Judith Butler's theory of the performativity and citationality of language to illuminate how women recite "whore" to defang it: "The word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance" (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* [2013], 163; Alfar, 62). Generous notes acknowledge the book's debt to four decades of feminist Shakespeare criticism.

Chapter 2 treats outliers in the canon and among cuckoldry plays: *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a satiric and a farcical comedy. Although the female protagonists in each play defend themselves with witty mockery against accusations of betrayal, Cressida's defense fails utterly, whereas the wives' succeeds brilliantly. Because she is friendless in the midst of war, Cressida becomes an object of exchange among men and nations. She strenuously refuses the name "whore" and skewers men's hollow heroism, but cannot dispel the myth of female betrayal on which male power depends (70). By contrast, the two wives join together with other women to defend their virtue and unman Falstaff, debunking male fantasies of cuckold and cuckold.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the comedy and tragedy that definitively unfold the book's competing narratives. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John's rivalry with Don Pedro drives him to contaminate Hero's honor to destroy the marriage his brother authorizes. But the scheme of Hero's mock death trumps that of the window trick. Beatrice from the start mocks men's pretensions to manhood and staunchly defends Hero. She redefines male honor in her preposterous demand that Benedick, "Kill Claudio," to revenge his friend's slander. But additional proof is required to produce the strained reconciliations typical of all the plays. In *Othello*, racial animosity heightens male rivalry. Alfar suggests that not only Iago's loss of the lieutenantcy but also his (imagined) cuckoldry by Cassio and Othello drives him to slander Desdemona. Emilia's defense of Desdemona's chastity is thrilling, but comes too late to prevent the women's deaths. However,

through her “insurrectionary moment,” the women’s narrative triumphs (Butler, *Excitable*, 145; quoted in Alfar, 156).

In the final chapter, the book’s painstaking analysis generates fresh interpretations of *The Winter’s Tale* and *Cymbeline*. Haunted by *Othello*, each play resists and revises the established pattern. Leontes’s jealousy and imagined cuckoldry, lacking a prompter, are self-generated and so can’t be proved false. Hence both marriage and patrilineal rule are disrupted. Restoration requires that for sixteen years, Perdita is lost; that Hermione voluntarily withdraw from marriage and kingdom; and that Paulina strenuously enforce Leontes’s penance. Hermione’s return to see Perdita is tortuous and leads only to a “wary and melancholy reunion” (185). *Cymbeline* diffuses and reconceives the cuckoldry narrative. Innogen, like Cressida, without any defender, nevertheless defies her father to marry Posthumous, excoriates her husband’s accusation of infidelity, and seeks autonomy in male disguise. Posthumous, the most clueless and credulous of husbands, wagers on Innogen’s chastity and believes his Italian deceiver’s flimsy proof. But uniquely, Posthumous needs no woman’s defense to accuse himself, forgive his wife even if guilty, and seek self-punishment in battle. Giacomo, his prompter, likewise acknowledges guilt and vows to die. Alfar claims *Cymbeline* abandons his masculinist principles by seeking peace with Rome and becoming a “Mother to the birth of three” at the restoration of his lost sons. But women’s narratives seem in abeyance here, and, as Alfar notes, jarring reconciliations call permanent harmony into question.

Christina Alfar lays out this pattern more subtly and persuasively than earlier scholarship and lucidly reveals the power and limits of women’s agency. I would have welcomed more attention to the part genre plays in the pattern’s shifts. Additional exploration of how the plays work as theater performance to affect audiences could have broadened the book’s scope. But such additions would have diluted the deep focus that is its strength.

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Staged Normality in Shakespeare’s England. Rory Loughnane and Edel Semple, eds. Palgrave Shakespeare Studies. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. xiv + 298 pp. €83.29.

This volume focuses on the everyday, the habitual, and the mundane as staged in early modern drama. It is a companion to the earlier volume *Staged Transgression in Shakespeare’s England* (2013). The central argument is articulated in the introduction: “It is that which does not grab and retain our attention, but that which is assumed, understated, unremarkable, overlooked, or, in essence, deemed to be normal, that merits and rewards improved understanding” (3). The volume is arranged in three sections.