

Gwynne Kennedy, ed. *Feminisms and Early Modern Texts Essays for Phillis Rackin*.

Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010. 216 pp. index. \$53. ISBN: 978-1-57591-136-6.

Feminisms and Early Modern Texts poses the usual problem for the reviewer of a *Festschrift*: how to comment critically on a work that is clearly intended to be a celebratory and complimentary offering to a senior scholar? It seems churlish and somehow *ad feminam* to be either in whole or in part less than enthusiastic about intellectual gifts offered in homage. It might perhaps be said that reviews in such a case are irrelevant or inappropriate; but since this volume is now and will continue to be part of our scholarly conversations, it deserves a serious reading.

Fortunately in this case, the dilemma is easily resolved. This collection of essays, which sprang from a conference (“Contestation and Renewal”) in honor of Phyllis Rackin’s retirement from the University of Pennsylvania, is both rich and concise. With heavy hitters like Wendy Wall, Julie Crawford, and Barbara Hodgdon, the *Festschrift* essays themselves can’t help being intelligent and

provocative. Newer scholars like Will Fisher and Lisa Freeman likewise provide thought-provoking and engaging essays with which Rackin could justly be pleased. The essays are all nicely compact and suggestive, which provides the book with a pleasant sense of forward momentum and territory still unexplored.

Jean E. Howard's introduction maps out not only Rackin's career and intellectual achievements but also a critical overview of the developments in feminist criticism, especially of the early modern period, with which Rackin has been so influentially engaged. The essays that follow focus primarily on Tudor-Stuart drama, especially Shakespeare, but also include the broader span of early modern into the eighteenth century. Several chapters pick up on the editorial and critical afterlife of Shakespeare's plays, in keeping with the cultural engagement for which Rackin is rightly honored. The final two chapters go further still, addressing modern cultural questions of pedagogy and performance theory in Shakespeare studies.

Of the first three essays, a little grouping on the culture of food vis-à-vis drama, my personal favorite is Wall's "Household 'Writing': or the Joys of Carving." Though the themes of dangerous domesticity and the materiality of writing are familiar from Wall's previous work, her vigorous and suggestive analyses of a treasure-trove of fascinating evidence provide as always a stimulating and provocative education. Of the essays focusing on sexuality, I particularly liked Rebecca Ann Bach's analysis of Desdemona and Othello, how they are reinvented as sexual exemplars through the critical-editorial tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The two non-dramatic essays, Crawford's on Mary Wroth and Freeman's on Elizabeth Carter, both shed light on one of the themes running through the entire collection: a productive problematizing of the notion of the private sphere for women. Crawford reads female closets and "casks" in Wroth's *Urania* as metonymic frames for how sonnets and other gendered secrets are strategically withheld or exposed. Freeman considers how Carter and other "Bluestockings" were framed as good makers of shirts, but also reinvented their own intellectual work under the mask of "conversation." From Wall's opening essay onward, this questioning of what is private, what is domestic, what is feminine is one of the real strengths of *Feminism and Early Modern Texts*.

One of the nicer aspects of the Crawford and Freeman essays is also their introduction of women writers into the collection. In Shakespeare studies, feminist scholars can be tempted to cast female characters as real women so as to resist, if only rhetorically, the feeling that it's all a man's world. The turn to cultural readings in this book solves part of this problem: if you can talk about how Desdemona is read, it is easier to avoid becoming entangled in misleading debates about Desdemona's own value or feelings. The turn to pedagogy and theory in Sarah Werner's essay "Teaching Cordelia" and Hodgdon's "*Un*-marking, *Re*-marking and Difference" likewise provide meta-analyses about cultural transmission and reinvention that assist in this necessary resistance.

Phyllis Rackin should be pleased to have inspired so much fine scholarship. “The ends crown our works,” as John Donne says; *Feminism and Early Modern Texts* is a very nice crown.

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