



1993

**Review Essay: Wayne, Valerie, ed. *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare***

Peggy Muñoz Simonds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Simonds, Peggy Muñoz (1993) "Review Essay: Wayne, Valerie, ed. *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 14 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol14/iss1/37>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Puritan education writing is revolutionary because it is the first to make a clear contrast between education and indoctrination.

*The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England* concludes with an analysis of the inescapable tension between movements and families — a tension that can be traced back to the inception of Christianity itself. This tension was submerged for a time through co-optation by an official Christian establishment, but then at last reemerged in Puritanism. Here, the individualist focus threatened the cohesion and authority of the family, which could constitute, at times, dangerous, unwarranted mediation between the individual and God.

Finally, this Reformation attitude toward family is traced through Dissenting sects into the English Jacobin radicalism of the 1790s as Sommerville connects the earlier religious emphasis to later political reform efforts in Thomas Paine and William Godwin in an effective, persuasive manner. The centrality of childhood and family as dynamic agents of progressive, significant change is convincingly established. And through that change, far-reaching social and political currents continue to influence contemporary culture. This secular heritage of an overwhelmingly religious perspective further clarifies our complex debt to the Puritan experience.

Daniel W. O'Bryan  
Sierra Nevada College

Wayne, Valerie, ed. *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1991. x + 227 pp. \$48.95 / \$18.95.

Gajowski, Evelyn. *The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare's Tragedies*. University of Delaware Press, Newark 1992. 153 pp. \$32.50.

Two new feminist studies employ very different approaches to Shakespeare's work. *The Matter of Difference*, a stimulating collection of ten essays with an introduction by Valerie Wayne and a theoretical afterword by Catherine Belsey, is motivated by a political agenda (generally Marxist and indebted to the new theoretical stance of Louis Althusser). It emphasizes what the contributors call 'cultural materialism', or the study of culture as it materializes beliefs through actual behavior. In contrast, Evelyn Gajowski's study, *The Art of Loving*, offers a more conventional modern (rather than Renaissance) view of sexual love and of female superiority in the realm of feeling. Both volumes properly criticize the 'new historicist' position as once again 'marginalizing' the female characters of Shakespeare and female audience responses by its critical concern with masculine power politics.

Although *The Matter of Difference* often disturbs the reader by its reliance on the academic jargon of an outworn Marxism, the essays in it often reveal sound historical scholarship and teach new material relevant to our understanding of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the Renaissance context. Some of the authors discuss popular topoi of the period, while others examine the laws concerning rape and theatrical performances at the time. In respect to topoi, Valerie Wayne argues

in her important essay, 'Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*', that the tragedy 'articulates three different ideologies of women and marriage . . . : the residual ideology of misogyny and the dispraise of women, the dominant ideology that advocated marriage and praised women, and the emergent ideology that emphasized the likeness between the sexes, especially in relation to desire' (p 16). Peter Stallybrass offers an interesting discussion of the world-turned-upside-down topos, although he does little to relate his observations to Shakespeare, while Carol Leventen focuses on *The Merchant of Venice* in her study 'concerned with the relationship between patrimony and patriarchy, and with ways in which the play's mimetic strategies serve to encode patriarchal values' (p 59).

In respect to Renaissance law, Jean Howard discusses the laws regulating public performances of plays, the presence of women as judgmental spectators at such performances, and the fact that female spectators were not only gazed at by males in the theater but also that they gazed back as well. Marion Wynne-Davis offers an equally interesting discussion of *Titus Andronicus* in the light of Renaissance legislation concerning rape.

Evelyn Gajowski makes a number of significant observations on the rhetoric of love in her book *The Art of Loving*, which examines *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The author indicates how Shakespeare manipulates the two major discursive traditions on love that were popular during the Renaissance: the 'antiromantic' tradition of Ovid, and the 'romantic' tradition of Petrarch, both of which situate the female as an object. She also discusses a third tradition that involves cultural differences, in this case the 'Orientalism' expressed by the Roman characters in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In any case, the heroine becomes a subject rather than an object in the drama when she speaks out and actively begins to educate the male in the art of loving well. Through this process, according to Gajowski, the male protagonists begin to reconstruct themselves and finally achieve self-realization. 'For Shakespeare, . . . in the love tragedies as in the comedies, the emphasis falls on female protagonists who are profounder in feeling, more realistic, and more mature in love than are the male protagonists' (p 25).

Unfortunately, Gajowski's thesis on love and feeling reactivates and again makes legitimate the ancient patriarchal dichotomy between male and female: men think, and women feel. Moreover, in comparing the love tragedies to the comedies, the author fails to observe that the female protagonists generally succeed in the comedies through their patience and their cleverness (rationality) rather than through giving in to their sexual desires and rushing into hasty marriages or relationships that are fatal to both partners. Shakespeare's strategy in the comedies, in direct contrast to the love tragedies, is often to have a secondary character advise the female protagonists to behave more like men and to provide them with a suit of masculine clothing with which to disguise their feminine vulnerability. In Shakespeare's dramatic world, girls in breeches triumph; passionate women, although often admirable as Gajowski insists, usually destroy both their lovers and themselves.