
Stanley Wells. *Shakespeare, Sex & Love*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012, xi + 304 pp., \$ 17.95.

“How did Shakespeare portray sex and love? How was this shaped by the sexual conventions of his time?” are questions raised on the back cover of the new paperback edition of Stanley Wells’ *Shakespeare, Sex & Love*, which was first published in 2010 in hardback. These questions are very straightforward for a scholarly book, and indeed, *Shakespeare, Sex & Love* is perhaps more directed at the general public than the academic community. Other eminent Shakespeare scholars besides Wells, among them Stephen Greenblatt and Marjorie Garber, have recently published books that are addressed to a larger market. In a clear and sometimes entertaining way of arguing, Wells makes Shakespeare’s work accessible for all readers, for example by explaining historical expressions and by avoiding specialist terms of literary and cultural analysis (indeed, by avoiding any cultural theory at all). The drawback of this broader appeal is that, for an academic, this makes *Shakespeare, Sex & Love* not the “terrific read” as which it is praised on its front cover. Many aspects of the book are interesting, and Wells of course has thorough knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets and the historic situation in which they were written, but there are not many unanticipated theses in this book, and, in order to make its arguments understandable for non-experts as well, it often has to include plot summaries and explanations that would have been dispensable in a monograph for specialists. It could be seen as a strength of the book that it synthesises earlier research on the topic without going into depth about secondary sources. Yet, I would have appreciated a more nuanced engagement with, for instance, feminist research on sex and love in Shakespeare’s oeuvre (particularly in the chapter on whores and saints). Having said that, *Shakespeare, Sex & Love* is nonetheless a convincingly and elegantly argued book, which offers an excellent starting point for exploring the topic.

As Wells points out in his introduction, the sexuality of Shakespeare's language and plots was frequently repressed and glossed over in later centuries. Yet, as he shows in his first chapter on the historical background of Shakespeare's works, early modern literature was replete with sexual allusions and erotic plots. Avoiding both prudery and what he calls the 'pornographic' approach of Pauline Kiernan's *Filthy Shakespeare* (Quercus, 2006), Wells addresses these topics in an open, unembarrassed manner. The introduction sheds light on the close interactions between theatres and brothels, the eroticisation of actors in early modern discourses, and the homoerotic culture of the Jacobean court. This first chapter also revisits the events of Shakespeare's own life from the perspective of sex and love, drawing attention, for example, to the fact that Shakespeare's first child was conceived before her parents were married – an offense that could have been punished as 'incontinency' by church authorities in so-called Bawdy Courts.

The second chapter focuses on the poetry by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, notably by Thomas Nashe, Richard Barnfield, Michael Drayton, Christopher Marlowe, and John Donne. Drawing on Mary Bly's research, Wells suggests that in the 1590s, a group of poets might have consciously addressed a homoerotic community in their works. Pondering on their relationship to Shakespeare, Wells also revisits his earlier argument, developed together with Paul Edmondson, that Shakespeare's sonnets were not written as a cycle and that hence not all sonnets up to number 126 are addressed to a man – and, what is more, that those poems that are clearly addressed to a man might not all be written for the same person. Wells diagnoses a troubled heterosexuality in the sonnets directed to a woman, for instance in sonnet 147: "My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease, / Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill, / Th'uncertain sickly appetite to please. / ... / For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night". Since the poems addressed to a man are less explicit about sexual matters, Wells concludes that they "certainly appeal to a homoerotic readership but ... transcend ... the boundaries of subdivisions of human experience to encapsulate the very essence of human love" (67) – or rather, as he argued eloquently before, the many possible essences.

"Shakespeare and Sex" – this was the title which Wells first had in mind when writing his book. It has now become the heading of the third chapter, which is concerned with Shakespeare's own knowledge and experience of sex, thus taking a biographical turn that has recently found renewed interest, in particular in scholarship written for a larger public. The chapter cannot avoid some repetitions from the first chapter, but Wells entertainingly discusses sexual matters in Shakespeare's writing and the possibilities that they can be read as auto-

biographical. For instance, can we infer from his knowledge of sexual diseases that he himself suffered from them? Refreshingly, Wells denies this, noting that “Shakespeare does not need to have been a rapist to have written *The Rape of Lucrece*” (74). Wells proposes, however, that the sonnets might have had an autobiographical inspiration, in particular because they appear not to have been “professional exercises” (77): Even though they were written in the 1590s, a time in which the sonnet form was highly popular, they were not immediately published. Read in an autobiographical light, Wells finds in the sonnets a man who has both homo- and heterosexual extramarital affairs, but who at the same time suffers from his betrayal.

The second part of the book turns to the plays of Shakespeare, first discussing “The Fun of Sex” that stems from the sexual innuendo and sexual encounters in the comedies and then focusing on more problematic aspects of sex and love, such as jealousy and ‘forbidden’ forms of love. Wells’ exploration of Shakespeare’s sexual wordplay impressively demonstrates his historical knowledge and his skill of sensitive close-reading. The fifth chapter looks at how Shakespeare differentiates love and lust. One of the main theses of this chapter, that the bed trick played upon a man is comparable to rape, seems problematic to me. Certainly the bed trick is a deception and possibly an act of psychic cruelty, and it means coercion into marriage in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, but the differences to the rapes of Lucrece and Lavinia are much stronger than the resemblances. Some of the male characters upon whom the bed trick is played quite clearly enjoy the sexual act itself, even if they mistake their sexual partner for someone else – this stands in stark contrast to Lavinia’s rape by two men next to the corpse of her dead husband and before her hands and her tongue are cut off. What is more, sometimes the bed trick is a means of defending a woman’s honour – for example in *Measure for Measure*, where Isabel finds no other means of self-defence against Angelo’s attempt at sexual blackmail (which, as Wells acknowledges, itself comes close to rape). Wells’ observation could have been the starting point for an exploration of the (sexualised) violence perpetrated by women against men, a rather innovative question, but Wells instead proceeds to revisit more well-known ground: The most famous story of sex and love in world literature, *Romeo and Juliet*, is the sole topic of the following chapter. Wells examines its blending of romantic rhetoric and sexual puns and shows that after the play’s turning point, when the tragic catastrophe becomes inescapable, the sexual wordplay disappears in favour of “an elegy of wedded love, a condition in which sex, while it is important, is subsumed in celebration of spiritual as well as physical unity” (167).

The subsequent discussion of sexual jealousy demonstrates how the reductive attitude towards sex with which Iago infects Othello leads to the protago-

nist's tragic downfall. It then explores the different forms of jealousy represented in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *The Winter's Tale* – one of the weaker parts of the book which produces hardly any new insights into Shakespeare's treatment of jealousy. More unusually, "Sex and Experience" is the topic of the eighth chapter, which looks at Hamlet's view of the sexual relationship between Gertrude and Claudius in Shakespeare's "transgenerational" play (198). King Lear is shown to be as obsessed with (and disgusted by) female sexuality as Hamlet, and in both cases, this obsession testifies to the mental instability of the protagonists. Wells assesses *Antony and Cleopatra* as the most complex investigation of the interplay of sex and love, of trust and jealousy, of erotic obsession and selfishness. Wells' exploration of "Whores and Saints" traces the depiction of prostitution and the focus on exceptionally virtuous women in Shakespeare's last four plays. The final chapter looks at same-sex friendship in Shakespeare's writing and explores the fine line between passionate friendship and homosexual love. That many contemporary productions of *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* have presented clearly homosexual relationships is, according to Wells, a result of our projections today rather than of Shakespeare's intentions. "The plays read us, just as we read them", are the wise closing lines of this study of Shakespeare, sex, and love.

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