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Magdalena Cieślak, 2019. *Screening Gender in Shakespeare's Comedies: Film and Television Adaptations in Shakespeare's Comedies.* New York/London: Lexington Books

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The field of academic research on Shakespeare and screen adaptations has been rapidly expanding over the past decades, and Cieślak's interdisciplinary study provides a welcome critical addition. The author has chosen a focused approach, limiting her attention to twenty-first century film and television adaptations of Shakespeare's comedies which she analyses through the lens of gender politics. Rather than choosing a wide angle, she has decided to zoom in on seven productions: four cinematic productions and three television adaptations from the BBC series ShakespeaRe-Told. In a highly topical book, also considering the ongoing #MeToo debate, the author explores the tensions and negotiations between early modern attitudes towards gender and the way twenty-first century adaptations relate to those issues in terms of current gender politics. In this process, the study discusses the interpretative strategies that productions employ in accommodating the early modern constructs, how they disregard, apologize for rationalize or even drastically rewrite these constructs, and how that relates to present-day concerns with gender issues.

In the introduction, Cieślak broadly sketches the background of her study and, relying strongly on Phyllis Rackin, she argues how the extent of patriarchal oppression in earlier centuries is often "overdone to highlight the democratic achievements of the present" (11). While acknowledging the disadvantageous position of women in early modern England, she discusses how, in some respects, their society may have been even more liberal than today's. In the remainder of the introduction, she places her research within the field of adaptation studies and feminist and gender studies, mainly as they relate to Shakespeare's comedies. This provides a useful general introduction to the topic, although, in attempting to discuss such a wide range of perspectives in some twenty pages, it is almost inevitable that the introduction tends more towards an overview than towards a critical

positioning in the field. The author herself also acknowledges this, but argues, perhaps slightly gratuitously, that the very plurality in the field and the many unresolved debates only serve as a propelling force for the dialogue between past and present.

The first section of the study is titled "Doing It 'Straight'" and contains four chapters, each of which discuss a cinematic production: Michael Redford's The Merchant of Venice (2004), Kenneth Branagh's As You Like It (2006), Julie Taymor's The Tempest (2010) and Joss Whedon's Much Ado About Nothing (2012), respectively. The title of the section refers to the fact that these straight adaptations directly rely on the source in that they use the language of Shakespeare's plays; through the pun on "straight," the author already indicates the problematic nature of the interaction between the gender and fidelity discourse of the films. In these four chapters, the author moves continually between the early modern context of the plays, current readings from a feminist and gender perspective and an interpretation of the films in relation to this context and perspective. In sketching the early modern context and current readings, Cieślak leans heavily on other authors and may be said to be more of a thread that weaves together the many voices that form the tapestry and the discourse behind the four movies. While useful, the real value of the book lies in the parts where Cieślak's own voice is heard more prominently: in the, at times, detailed analysis of the four films and also in her conclusions as to how they accommodate the narrative of the plays in light of today's concerns.

Cieślak's eye for detail finds for example expression in her analysis of minor characters, such as Caliban, but also in the way she analyzes the silent mini-narratives, such as the end of Radford's Merchant of Venice or the opening of Whedon's Much Ado About Nothing, and the impact these have on the emotional and political reading of the movies. While there is enough differentiation between the four movies, Cieślak is critical of the quartet, with Branagh's movie bearing the brunt of the criticism, as a simplified, feel-good romantic comedy, ignoring any ambivalence and "not a way to sell Shakespeare anymore" (96). Although she is slightly more sympathetic to the other three movies, she argues how Radford, while sympathetic to women's plight, still depoliticizes their subordination. The gender change in Taymor's movie (from Prospero to Prospera) is shown to soften the protagonist's relation with Miranda, Ariel and Caliban, but also turns

her into a formidable and strong woman, who only manages to survive by adopting the very terms of patriarchal society, thereby foregoing the chance to redefine these power relations. Whedon's movie is today perhaps even more relevant than ever, originating from and set against the background of "leisurely Southern California, […] buzzing with eroticism and desire" (138). Following one disclosure after another in Hollywood, it is ironic and troubling that this version of Much Ado about Nothing almost seems to mirror the context that gave rise to these events. Although never referring directly to this, Cieślak argues how the movie, while sympathizing with the wrong done to women, can do no better than absolve men and praise women for their ability to endure in silence.

The second section contains three chapters, which discuss three 2015 television adaptations in the BBC Shakespea Re-Told series: Much Ado about Nothing (dir. Brian Percival), The Taming of the Shrew (dir. David Richards) and A Midsummer Night's Dream (dir. Ed Fraiman), respectively. Rewritten in contemporary language and set in present-day contexts, the series aimed at modernizing the plays and adapting them to suit politically "correct" tastes and concerns, particularly regarding gender politics. Where Whedon's Much Ado About Nothing, for example, sympathizes with Beatrice on account of her bad treatment, the BBC version presents a far more self-confident and intelligent woman and paints Benedick as a "[…] a loser. Unable to commit, cowardly, and narcissist" (162). It is a pattern that we see recurring in all of the three adaptations, where the female characters are presented as far more mature than their male counterparts (so much so, that one may wonder why on earth someone would ever fall in love with them). In The Taming of the Shrew, by many considered to be the best of the series, Cieślak argues how on the one hand the same, almost apologetic correctness on gender politics seeps through the movie, while on the other hand the heteronormative traditions keep informing this production, as in the ending where a marriage based on love and a happy family life are presented as ultimate ideals. Interestingly, in A Midsummer Night's Dream, the attention is focused more on the maturer marriages, between Oberon and Titania and Theo (a blend of Theseus and Egeus) and Polly (Hippolyta) rather than on the young lovers. While the film demonstrates that marriage requires wisdom, compromise and respect and shows the gradual change of the obnoxious Oberon and Theo into more caring men, the real issue is their obliviousness to their behavior, and it is here that

Cieślak rightly draws a parallel with a standard #MeToo defense: I never realized my "behavior was abusive or problematic" (218).

In her book, Cieślak analyses many of the problems that cinematic and television productions encounter when adapting Shakespeare's comedies for a present-day audience. While the BBC series is more explicitly and politically "correct" when dealing with gender politics, the author shows how these series also adopt a generally one-dimensional vision of relationships and adhere to many of the norms of the romantic comedy. Cieślak rightly challenges the screen adaptations and shows how they fail to explore the variety and extremity in ongoing marital abuse, how they simplify both the problems and the solutions, stereotype women and men, ignore class and ethnicity, and generally recycle heteronormative standards and traditional values. A potential drawback of the book might be the limited choice of these specific seven productions. Cieślak herself is aware of this, and readily points out that her exclusive focus on English language productions is troubling, precisely because they tend to adopt a universalizing tone, projecting a vision and standards that are assumed to be global. Which, of course, they are not. More detailed research into other language screen adaptations of Shakespeare's comedies might offer a fruitful area of further research and possibly unveil more challenging or radical approaches to the plays' gender ideologies than these specific adaptations. With all the insightful analysis in her timely book, Cieślak has hopefully also provided an impetus for further research in this highly topical field.

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