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Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time / Jeffrey Masten

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Jeffrey Masten. *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 368 pp.

Reviewed by ANDY KESSON

Who knew that Q fucked U? Where is the bum in bombast? And is Marlowe's homosexuality just a passing phase? These are but some of the questions that propose themselves in the course of Jeffrey Masten's expansive, multifarious exploration of the links between language, sex and affect. "[T]here can be no nuanced cultural history of what we now call *sexuality*," Masten claims, "without also working in detail through the history of its languages," and he accordingly calls for "a philology of the queer," attending to rhetorics underpinning practices deemed now or then nonnormative, as well as for "a queer philology" that attends to the way philology itself normativizes very partial kinds of subjectivities (214; all emphasis in this review Masten's). Masten reflects often and productively on his own methodology and the methodological context of his various fields, taking the reader from the current limitations of Google (103) to "the surprising terrain of so apparently unsexy a traditional literary concern as *genre*" (192). His own reflections on the history of sexuality are often productively surprising, and include the observations that compositor analysis has historical connections with wartime intelligence gathering and a post-war concern for "the visible signs and detection of homosexuality" (52); that some forms of erotic relationships between men in the early modern period "might appear to be more equitable" to contemporary "political values" than such relationships between men and women (105); that "nonadulthood" often constituted "the majority of a life" (113); the discovery of a potential "history of sexuality in a preposition, a prefix" (159), bringing with it questions about "those syntactical markings of positioning that we less often attend to or bother to gloss: pre-positionality" (218); a description of the early modern education system as designed to produce "men who [...] tender the late textualized desires of other men" (168); and the description of Shakespeare's Bottom (the character, not the body part) as "a historian of the experience of his own body" (190).

It is difficult to offer a summary of a book that playfully offers two contents pages, but compositor analysis, male friendship and its intersections with modes of authorship, real and iconographic boys, representations of the fundament, genre and the politics of editorial glossing all animate sections of this book's argument. Uniting these subjects is Masten's interest in the materiality of words in time and a tendency for scholarship to flatten, unpick or censor what are otherwise productively hybrid forms of writing, processes that impact on the ability to write histories of sexuality. Masten unpacks the yearning "of compositor analysis [...] to convert characters to character" (47) with the result that "The spelling evidence may be composed of temporary aberrations, but the compositor is now a species" (49). He uses controversies around the opinions and writings of Kyd and Marlowe to note that "early modern playwrights were far less interested in keeping their hands, pages, and conversation separate than are the twentieth-century critics who have studied them" (87). He observes that scholarship's prioritization of authorship means that "one of the queerer aspects of *Sir Thomas More* is an almost complete absence of critical

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analysis of the play” (234), obviating “almost all critical, interpretive discussion of this play” (241). “Boomerang-like, such discussions “only [. . .] sort-circuit back to authorship” (241). As these examples show, Masten’s book repeatedly challenges scholarly investments in anachronistic models of individuation, with a welcome focus on the conceptual congestion and impasses caused by narrow definitions of authorship.

The methodological focus of this book is especially generative. In his study of modern editorial practices, Masten warns that “the gloss functions as an editorial emendation,” offering an act of translation that occludes etymological and conceptual difference (226), the “textures of alterity” in histories of sexuality, as Masten elsewhere calls them (228). Pointing to apparent words whose spelling and shared meaning shear into one another in the early modern period, Masten notes that “here the very notion of ‘the word’ as a bounded, philological category begins to unravel” (229), whilst in his focus on compositorial analysis, he points us towards the link between notions of textual corruption and of sexual degenerates (122). Instead of authorial subjectivity, individuation and textual corruption, Masten asks how “modes of attachment, identification, and eroticism are intended by, or legible to, a particular or more general set of print producers or readers”, how we might shift our focus onto “meaning production, ideological freight, instrumentality, and reception” (140). Masten asks “what subject positionings could be imagined out of the material circumstances of writing, copying, tracing out, reading [a particular] manuscript” (189), recruiting “some neglected but familiar questions asked by Michel Foucault” about “the modes of existence” of a discourse, its uses, circulation and appropriation (155). “[W]e are,” Masten suggests, “only beginning to develop appropriate (non-nineteenth- and twentieth-century) models to analyze psychic structures in operation prior to the emergence of the modern subject, identity-based models of sexuality, and ‘internalized mechanism[s] of discipline’” (169). As Masten repeatedly hints, this has implications for the histories of authorship, reception, etymology, word use and textual transmission as much as for sexuality. When Masten later observes that genre scholars have “a resistance to hybridity” (193), he is making a point that can also be applied to attribution scholars, and he warns against histories of early modern genre that begin with “Sidney’s or Fletcher’s definition,” and then look for evidence matching those definitions (194). Masten is especially fascinating in his observations of a recent turn to distance Marlowe the man from the apparent erotic identifications of his work and, often by the same scholars, an insistence on the ready discovery of Shakespeare’s intentions, subjectivity and individuation (150-154).

This book repeatedly and generously points the way towards future work in the fields and on the primary material Masten adopts. On two occasions some of that work might have helped bolster the argument advanced here. For example, Masten’s discussion of slippage between pronoun markers of gender in *As You Like It* (60-65) focuses on “a historically inappropriate notion of impeded, solitary authorial agency” which imagines a compositor “obstructing the ideally unmediated transmission of the authorial text” (64). Masten warns that, “even were we to possess [his] manuscript, we would not know whether Shakespeare made an error or performed an easy misreading of his own intention” (64). This is perhaps a revealing set of alternatives, lacking another possibility: Shakespeare’s play was a dramatization of Lodge’s *Rosalind*, and pronoun confusion in *As You Like It* itself mediates Lodge’s gender plurality. Masten’s interest is in the “other potential agencies that lie between Shakespeare and the text of *As You Like It* as it reached its

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eventual readers” (63); the mediation of these pronouns began before Shakespeare got to them. Masten is clear that his focus on canonical writers is intended to give his work “*methodological* traction,” but further work on the interplay between Lodge and Shakespeare might have furthered the book’s project to disrupt scholarly assumptions about authorial agency.

In his discussion of editorial glossing, Masten suggests asterisking uncertain letters and forcing readers “into the glossarial notes more actively to produce the meaning of the text” (229). Ironically, though, his own example of how this might work suggests the following gloss for a word in *Othello* which might be *topped* or *tupped*: “Either ‘topped’ [. . .] or ‘tupped’” (229). Masten warns that editorial glosses often “separate” words which early modern usage might “collate or conflate” (237), but it is unclear to me how the either/or gloss suggested here avoids such separation or challenges this modern urge for the divisive, individuating binary. Perhaps there is more practical work for all of us to do to further the radical ideas Masten presents.

At a time when we are still working through potential relationships between theorizing and historicizing work in early modern studies, Masten repeatedly demonstrates the rich possibilities of bringing both approaches into dialogue. Focusing on etymology’s ability to show us the “lingering tastes of the past in the present” (77), Masten demonstrates how such work might proceed by giving a transformative reading of Shakespeare’s frequent association with sweetness on the part of his contemporaries (Meres, Jonson and Milton included), and thereby with discourses of sexuality and gender. This “more labile, deconstructive history of sexuality and sexual meaning” offers rich material for anyone interested in methodology, early modern studies and the history of sexuality.

Andy Kesson is a Reader in Renaissance Literature at the University of Roehampton, the author of *John Lyly and Early Modern Authorship* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014) and, with Emma Smith, the co-editor of *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England* (Farnham, VT: Ashgate, 2013). He is currently leading a project on London’s earliest playhouses, which can be consulted at www.beforeshakespeare.com.