

What can the letter Q teach us about Shakespeare?

Tom Clucas

Abstract:

Jeffrey Masten's new book examines connections between sex, language, and affect in Shakespeare's time. Masten argues that the traditions of performance, orthography, and textual editing can be used to reveal important facts about gender and sexuality during the Renaissance. Taking a deconstructive approach to a series of key words, the book offers many new perspectives on sexuality and embodiment in British Renaissance culture. It also constitutes an important contribution to queer theory and offers surprising and often insightful readings of many famous plays.

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Masten, Jeffrey: *Queer Philologies. Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 368 pages, hardcover, 55.79 Euro. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4786-2

Jeffrey Masten will be well known to students of gender and sexuality studies. His latest book, entitled *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time*, tackles the complex relationship between sexuality and language in British Renaissance culture from an unusual perspective. The book aims to develop a series of "queer philologies", arguing that "[t]here can be no nuanced cultural history of early modern sex and gender without spelling out its terms" (p. 16). In practice, this means revealing the surprising and often hidden assumptions about sexuality that lay behind philological activities (such as teaching the alphabet, regularising spelling, editing literary texts, choosing between manuscripts, and attributing authorship) from the sixteenth century to the present day.

The book sets out obliquely from a queer reading of the letter Q, showing how humanist scholars figured this letter, often in bodily terms, as reaching out to and unnaturally desiring its partner 'V' (the letter 'U' was introduced at a later date). Though unexpected, this discussion persuasively sets up the relationship between bodies and letters in Renaissance literary culture. It also justifies Masten's adoption of a historicist approach, albeit a deconstructive one, against the backdrop of recent debates about how queer theorists should position themselves relative to a historical tradition that was predominantly homophobic (see, for example, Madhavi Menon's argument for 'unhistoricism' in Madhavi Menon (ed.): *Shakespeare. A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Durham/London, 2011). From here, the book proceeds through four sections which can either be read sequentially or using the alternative index of queer key words which Masten offers at the outset.

The ensuing chapters offer queer readings of a variety of Elizabethan and Jacobean texts, mainly by Shakespeare and Marlowe. These readings use the idiosyncrasies of Renaissance spelling, or errors in typesetting (for example the printing of 'his' for 'hir' in an unintentionally (?) queer passage of *As You Like It* in the First Folio), to reveal how modern literary scholarship has repeatedly sought to suppress the queer connotations of Shakespeare's language. A particularly good example of this comes in Chapter 8, where Masten points out that the Norton Shakespeare glosses the word 'lover' as 'friend' in Bassiano's line "How dear a lover of my lord your husband" in *The Merchant of Venice* (p. 224). Masten argues, convincingly, that this editorial restriction of meaning needlessly straightens out Bassiano's identity for the non-specialist reader.

On the whole, these readings do an excellent job of revealing how modern glosses "can blind us to other, more complex histories of sexuality, gender, and race in these plays and the culture in which they were produced" (p. 227). Masten offers a judicious discussion, in Chapter 2, of how modern editorial theory developed in the context of a homophobic Cold War culture that attempted to monitor and detect sexual identities "on the basis of visible physical signs and behaviors" (p. 53). In this context, he argues, there was no space for investigating the queer connotations—sometimes accidental, sometimes deliberate—of Shakespeare's plays. For this reason, many double entendres were suppressed through modernised spellings and queer puns were 'corrected' out of the text. The argument builds towards a discussion of same-sex desire in the apocryphal text *Sir Thomas More*, arguing that "[i]n modernity the play is so queer as hardly to be extant, a play that dare not speak its name" (p. 232).

As this necessarily incomplete summary has hopefully made clear, *Queer Philologies* has an impressively wide scope. The book's greatest limitation is its tendency to restrict its discussion of sex, language, and affect to male sexuality. Although Masten acknowledges this fact (p. 35) and attempts at times to engage with feminist critics like Valerie Traub, the final discussion of "Female 'Bumbast'" does not go far enough in recognising a full spectrum of sexual identities in Renaissance Britain. Scholars like Dymphna Callaghan have already begun this task, which will no doubt continue elsewhere. However, Masten's novel approach to queer philology opens up fascinating avenues for both queer theory and Renaissance scholarship. Above all, it is a delight to read, with its wealth of plates, use of contemporary spellings, and impeccable production quality from the University of Pennsylvania Press making it an immersive and highly enlightening guide to queerness in the Renaissance.