
Kathryn Schwarz begins this study with a clearly articulated problem: early modern literature exposes anxiety about the existence and power of the female will by abundantly representing women who “too willingly” perform according to social expectation. Such figures are problematic, Schwarz explains, because the tenets of heterosexual hierarchy posit the objectified and will-less nature of women as a reason for their inferiority. That women could choose to perform according to social prescription and that these choices could be visible reveals that feminine will was the means of social contract.

Schwarz makes it clear that understanding her argument requires a familiarity with early modern rhetorical discourses, didactic treatises, and material theatrical practices. She explains how these matters overtly shaped the period’s literature — and specifically Shakespeare’s work — and its representation of women’s intentional compliance with behavioral expectations. The introduction provides readers with crucial historical context by detailing how early modern conduct literature repeatedly attempted to gloss over paradoxes of the female will, thus troubling gender hierarchies by suggesting women’s power. The manuals’ repetitious rhetoric exposes the didactic writers’ failure to contain and erase the problem of female agency. According to Schwarz, this exposure was ultimately unavoidable because women’s compliance was a necessary component of the patriarchal system.

Expanding on the issues of the introduction, the first three chapters examine in-depth the influential discourses of faculty theory, rhetorical theory, and misogyny. Chapter 1 establishes that faculty theory’s assumptions regarding the well-ordered psyche shaped concerns about social order and women’s importance in upholding it: “The idea that feminine subjects might know the rules, and use them to authorize constitutive action, reflects the steps of translation through which abstract ideals become social tenets” (27). Chapter 2 demonstrates the limits of rhetorical mastery and, in particular, its problems for English-speaking men.
Rhetorical mastery is always impossible because “subjects are alienated by their constitution in language, and language exceeds the speaker’s intent” (52). The gendering of the English vernacular as a feminine “Mother Tongue” represents fantasies of masculine rhetorical authority and points toward the shifting feminine qualities existent within men themselves and their social structures. Chapter 3 heightens concerns of alienation by raising questions about signification that underlie masculine discourse. Here, Schwarz pushes beyond asking how misogynist didactic texts seek to preserve the illusion of prescriptive control over women by unpacking instead the meaning of women’s willful enactment of those prescriptions. As she argues, men and women share a complex relation within a misogynist structure that assumes the shared acceptance of social codes both by those who speak and those who are spoken of.

The latter half of the book turns to a consideration of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how the overt pursuit of conservative ends can strain the hetero-hierarchical expectations of gender and genre. While Helena in All’s Well That Ends Well passionately seeks compliance with social rules as an end, she deflects the achievement of those goals by making them transparent, undeniable, and therefore ideologically unsatisfying. Alternately, the sonnets willfully give poetic form to the misogynist project of reducing women and excluding them from masculine bonds. In the process, the poems scatter the components of misogyny and expose their failure to cohere into a whole. Both the play and the sonnet sequence reveal will as a site where masculine and feminine must meet in social contract. Chapters 6 and 7 continue this topic, exploring what political consequences emerge when social contracts lack a balance of masculine and feminine wills. In Measure for Measure, male characters’ alienation from active will and political duty causes social fracture, leaving women such as Isabella to “rewrite the social order in the terms she takes as prescribed” (158). Feminine action of this kind, Schwarz asserts, prevents the naturalization of the social order. In a similar fashion, King Lear locates chaos as originating in men’s failure to govern themselves and participate in exchange, all the while excluding Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, who variously seek to uphold those practices. By eliminating the female characters, Schwarz argues, the play enacts the self-destruction inherent in misogynist
heterosocial hierarchies that fantasize about women’s absence. For both the comedy and tragedy, political and social stability depend on the merging of masculine and feminine wills in contract.

The epilogue provides an ending rife with “messy” and productive paradoxes. Focusing on Coriolanus, Schwarz maps the effects of equating a state with feminine will. Unlike the masculinized nations of Measure and Lear, Coriolanus’s Rome both survives and thrives. Yet just as the preceding comedy and tragedy end in barrenness, so too does this play. Futurity, then, relies on the intersection of wills rather than the emergence of one gender into power.

What You Will is a tightly woven tapestry of archival documents, early literature, critical dialogue, and theoretical grounding that complicates questions of agency and objectification. So much of the book’s success comes from Schwarz’s deftness with language. Her sentences eloquently and joyfully enact their own subject matter, rhetorically combining claims and reversals into one space in order to show their intersections rather than their separation. The complexity of the prose and its fast pace—established by three opening chapters that assume the reader’s intimate familiarity with literary theories ranging from psychoanalysis to queer theory—make this a valuable text for specialists. Speaking to this audience, Schwarz is forthright about her choice of author in the discussion “Why Shakespeare?” Yet in a book concerned with genre, further explanation of Schwarz’s specific textual choices would have been helpful. All but one chapter deals with drama. In it, Schwarz’s impressive analysis could be brought more directly into dialogue with the book’s other pieces by addressing the role of genre and, perhaps, by analyzing what happens when the willful poetic representations of Shakespeare’s sonnets are performed collaboratively within such a play as Romeo and Juliet. Yet this is a small issue in a book of such magnitude that enters into so many conversations about the constitution of social, political, and gendered identity in the past and now.

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