

# Introduction

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## Abstract

This Introduction analyzes the rise of twentieth-century Shakespeare as a reaction against not only Romantic versions of Shakespeare, the usual target of academic analysis after T. S. Eliot, but also feminine, and often feminist, approaches to Shakespeare produced by women actors, artists, and authors in the nineteenth century. These women, in turn, engage not just with the nationalist figure of King Shakespeare, as epitomized by Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, but also with one another in networks that are sometimes personal, sometimes dispersed.

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Perhaps the most influential document in twentieth-century Shakespeare studies was L. C. Knights's *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* (1933). A scathing attack on nineteenth-century character criticism and particularly A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1905), Knights's essay declared the Shakespearean play to be not a "little world of persons," as Bradley had claimed, but a poem, whose words and patterns of words must be read attentively if readers are to enjoy a "total complex emotional response" (1933, 11). Knights complains that Bradley treats Shakespeare's plays as if they were second-rate novels. But few readers remember that Knights's first and most vitriolic volley was against retired actress Ellen Terry. After a long career on the theater, between 1911 and 1921 Terry had developed a slate of lecture-performances on Shakespearean topics that she delivered throughout Great Britain, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. Best known and loved among the lectures were those on Shakespeare's heroines. In 1932, after Terry's death and one year before the appearance of *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* Christopher St. John published Terry's *Four Lectures on Shakespeare* (1932a).

In his landmark essay, Knights takes the same tone toward Terry that Dr. Johnson took generally toward women authors: "Ellen Terry does not, of course, represent critical Authority; the point is not that she could write as she did, but that the book was popular" (1933, 4). Knights exhibits an obvious degree of antifeminism, but he also claims for (white English) men, for academics, and for solitary readers the right to literary criticism as a profession. To this end, he objects to Terry

not as a theatrical icon, but as a lecturer-critic who *performs* a woman-centered Shakespearean criticism.

The women discussed in this essay cluster "perform" in multiple artistic arenas, and they are aware of their place in an emerging network that links women through Shakespeare. (For an important discussion of the connection between female performance and friendship, see Ehnenn 1997). Joanna Baillie, as Judith Bailey Slagle discusses in her essay, reacted against an audience who insisted on identifying her with Shakespeare by writing her own plays rather than be absorbed into the ideological complex that is Shakespeare. Baillie was also friends with Sarah Siddons, the iconic Shakespearean actress of the late eighteenth century, who played the role of Jane de Montfort in Baillie's play of that name and became a major figure in the intellectual lives of later women Shakespeareans. Ellen Tree — who in 1832 played Romeo, with Siddons's niece Fanny Kemble cast as Juliet — was involved, as Anne Russell demonstrates, in an artistic genealogy that includes Kemble, Kemble's sometime friend and critical compatriot Anna Jameson, and the later actress-critic Helen Faucit, to whom Fanny's father Charles Kemble bequeathed Fanny's Shakespeare volumes.

Jameson is an important and often unacknowledged agent in the network of women Shakespeareans in nineteenth-century. As Russell notes, in their early life Jameson sought to influence Fanny's theatrical opinions about Shakespeare, and Kemble's late volume of criticism, *Notes on Some of Shakespeare's Plays* (1882) clearly is descended from Jameson's influential *Characteristics of Women* (first edition 1832; see Jameson 1890). Ellen Terry also owned and annotated work by previous women critics, and Christopher St. John thinks that she drew on them particularly for her opinions about Shakespeare's women characters (Terry 1932b). The Ellen Terry Museum at Smallhythe in Kent possesses Terry's copy of Jameson's *Characteristics of Women*, complete with the actress's annotations. On both sides of the Atlantic, women Shakespeareans also engaged more overtly with national and gender politics. As Tricia Lootens discusses, Porter and Clarke's journal *Poet-lore* "performed" through its Shakespearean criticism political debates on topics ranging from Carlyle's nationalistic King Shakespeare to the New Woman. Finally, at the end of the nineteenth century, Sarah Bernhardt comes to epitomize feminine performativity through her immersion, in a variety of artistic media, in the experience of death through the figure of Shakespeare's Ophelia.

Thomas Carlyle asks, "Will you give-up your Indian Empire or your Shakspeare, you English?" The answer is well known: "Indian Empire will go, at any rate, some day; but this Shakspeare does not go, he lasts for ever with us; we cannot give-up our Shakespeare!" (Carlyle 1969, 113). The women authors, actresses, and artists discussed in this essay cluster address this same question,

but their answers challenge and complicate Carlyle's image of the English Shakespeare in multiple ways, and so enrich our understanding of the plays, Shakespeare's female characters, and the women themselves who "performed" Shakespeare in different critical and artistic spaces.

## References

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