

Book Review

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Telltale Women: Chronicling Gender in Early Modern Historiography. Allison Machlis Meyer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. 321pp. \$60 (cloth, Ebook-PDF, Ebook-Epub); ISBN 978-1-4962-0849-1; 978-1-4962-2446-0; 978-1-4962-2444-6.

While it might seem commonplace to note that we should attend closely to the representation of women in texts generally regarded as primary historical sources for Shakespeare, that does not mean those sources can be taken for granted, even now. Allison Machlis Meyer's *Telltale Women* treads a seemingly familiar path across sixteenth-century chronicle texts, putting them in conversation with the Elizabethan and Jacobean history plays they inspired, but does so in genuinely new and thought-provoking ways.

The book's engagement with Shakespeare and adaptation studies is not immediately apparent from its title and subject matter. One of its strengths is that it spends only one chapter on Shakespeare before turning to other, less prominent, early modern writers and offering the kind of nuanced close reading and adaptational analysis normally reserved for Shakespeare. Meyer proposes an alternate framework for considering the relationship between early modern dramatists (including Shakespeare) and the sixteenth-century prose chronicle; rather than viewing the chronicles independent of the plays, as sources whose influence moves only in one direction, she suggests we should regard the two as being in an intertextual relationship of (rough) equals. Doing so, she argues, can "explain the individual relationships among historical plays and their narrative predecessors as well as the larger patterns of change within historiography that provide competing historical accounts of women's political participation and implicitly register the contingencies of historical truths" (18). I find this to be a compelling reading that places historical prose and historical drama on similar footing, influencing one another, speaking back and forth. Her approach is similar to Douglas Lanier's "rhizomatic" formulation for discussing Shakespearean adaptation, but she does not use his terminology. Indeed, if there is one weakness in this book, it is that the introduction is too narrowly focused on historiography. I was able to see potential in Meyer's readings because of my own background in queenship studies, adaptation, and fan/reception studies, but on its own, those potentialities largely remain implicit rather than explicit.

Meyer's framework involves choosing several medieval English queens and placing dramatic and historiographic representations of them in conversation with one another. The first of these "telltale women" is Eliz-

abeth Woodville, wife to King Edward IV, and one of a cluster of mourning queens in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. While acknowledging Elizabeth's rhetorical power, particularly in the latter half of the play, Meyer calls attention to several elements that Shakespeare omits, including the alliance between Elizabeth and Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and mother of the future Henry VII. This alliance is foregrounded in all the major sources for the play, from Thomas More's *History of King Richard III* (ca. 1513) through the chronicles of Grafton, Hall, Holinshed, and Stow, but Shakespeare aligns his Elizabeth with a very different Margaret, rooting her power in the emotional and supernatural, rather than the political and dynastic. By placing these two sets of tropes in parallel, Meyer sidesteps the tired argument about what is and is not good about Shakespeare's version and instead imagines a reader/viewer for whom multiple versions exist simultaneously as an illustration of the historical and adaptational process at work. It is at moments like these when a fan/reception studies approach that interrogates the relationship between author and reader/viewer would have added more complexity to Meyer's argument.

The subsequent chapter addresses two other contemporary plays about Richard III, the anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard the Third* (ca. 1595) and Thomas Heywood's two parts of *Edward IV* (1599), before Meyer turns to an earlier queen, Isabella of Valois, wife to Edward II and mother of Edward III. Over two chapters, Meyer dissects chronicle accounts alongside Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (ca. 1591), and the convergence of Isabella's two representational threads in Elizabeth Cary's Jacobean prose history of Edward II (1680). Where this study shines brightest, however, is in the detailed analyses of later and lesser-known plays such as Heywood's *Edward IV* and John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* (1634)—a sadly understudied piece of Jacobean historical madness—as well as her close reading of Elizabeth Cary's portrayal of Queen Isabella. The chapter on *Perkin Warbeck* is particularly rich with new and thought-provoking material, and I look forward to rereading it alongside other recent work about seventeenth-century queenship.

As a study of adaptation that includes but does not privilege Shakespeare, *Telltale Women* offers a compelling model for adaptation scholars and scholars of early modern drama overall. The unusual structure allows parallels and echoes to appear more clearly than they would have with a more traditional chronological approach. In a piece she wrote for the University of Nebraska Press to accompany the book's release, Meyer observed that it had taken her ten years to revise her doctoral thesis into this book, and she was ultimately glad that she had allowed her ideas the time to develop. Given the finished product, I cannot disagree; this is a meticulous, elegant book, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading it.