FEMINIST CRITICISM of Shakespeare appeared on the scene as an identifiable "movement" a little over ten years ago, with the publication of Juliet Dusinberre's Shakespeare and the Nature of Women in 1975 and the first Modern Language Association special session on the subject in 1976. In this brief period it has enlisted a number of intelligent and dedicated critics and has produced a substantial body of publications. Its remarkable growth can be measured, moreover, not only in these statistics but also in the steady enlargement of its range from the first tentative efforts, aimed primarily at rectifying sexist misinterpretations of Shakespeare's female characters, to much more confident and ambitious studies of many other aspects of the canon. I. Today it may surely be said to have come of age and to have taken its place as one of the established branches of Shakespearean research.

It seems to me, then, that this is an appropriate time to examine the nature of this criticism, for while some of the individual studies have been subjected to scrutiny over the years (including some searching scrutiny from the feminists themselves2), there has not yet been any systematic investigation of the methodology and consequences of the enterprise itself. Its very success has made such an undertaking difficult, since the quantity and diversity of the interpretations it has generated cannot be encompassed within a single article. I have therefore narrowed the scope of this inquiry to one major trend of the movement in this country, which defined itself in 1980-82 in our only anthologies of feminist criticism of Shakespeare—The Woman's Part (Lenz et al.) and two special issues of Women's Studies (Greene and Swift). Most of the contributors to those anthologies (many of whom went on to write other essays and books) shared an interpretative approach, which a number of other critics have also employed and which I focus on in this investigation. This focus means that I have had to exclude those feminist critics who adopt other approaches, even though some of them have given us significant studies that may be riding the wave of the future. It should be understood, therefore, that the following inquiry is meant to refer only to the particular body of work produced by this one approach within the larger enterprise of feminist criticism of Shakespeare, and to the critics actually named here, although I think much of the discussion will also apply to similar kinds of feminist criticism in other fields. Because of space limitations, I have further narrowed my focus to the tragedies, which are generally regarded as Shakespeare's greatest achievement and so should provide the clearest test of this approach.

Probably the best way to begin the investigation is to ask what these critics think the tragedies are—or what they are about, which amounts to the same thing—since that should lead directly to a definition of their approach. On this crucial question there seems to be virtual unanimity, as some representative quotations demonstrate. Coppélia Kahn finds in Romeo and Juliet "a critique of the patriarchal attitudes expressed through the feud" (86). According to David Leverenz, Hamlet is concerned with "the opposition between male and female"—between "the world of the fathers," dominated by reason, public roles, and duty, and the feminine world of emotion and the true self (125-26). Irene Dash says that Othello is a "study[y] of the complexity of marriage and of the pressure of conventional patterns" or "stereotyped ideals" of marital roles (129-30), and Gayle Greene says it is a "radical critique of some society's most cherished notions [concerning] accepted ideals of manly and womanly behavior" ("'This . . . '" 30). Edward Snow tells us that this play "treats jealousy . . . [as] an object of inquiry, and pursues it beyond superficial explanations to the grounds of human tragedy" in the "pathological male animus toward sexuality" (387-88). Harry Berger claims that Macbeth portrays "the dialectic of gender conflict" (73), and Robert Kimbrough finds that it "contains a fierce war between gender concepts of manhood and womanhood played out on the plain of humanity" (176). Madelon Gohlke says all the tragedies "may be viewed as a vast commentary on the absurdity and destructiveness of th[e] defensive posture" of "the masculine consciousness" in relationships with women ("'I Woos . . . '" 162-63). For Marilyn French, the entire canon is examining the "division of experience" into a "masculine principle" and a "feminine principle" that are often "at

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war” (41, 60, 139, 199, 290). Peter Erickson finds “a pervasive motif in Shakespeare’s drama” in its “sustained critical exploration” of “the basic conflict” between “male-female relations” and “male bonding,” which he sometimes simplifies to “the male/female dialectic” (Patriarchal 1, 122). And Marianne Novy believes all the plays deal with “the conflict between mutuality and patriarchy and the conflict between emotion and control. Both conflicts involve the politics of gender: the first, in power relations between the sexes; the second, in the relative value of qualities symbolically associated with each gender” (3–4).

More quotations of this sort could be produced, but these should be enough to make the point, which is, quite simply, that this body of criticism is thematic. These critics agree that the plays are not really about the particular characters who appear there but about some general idea and, consequently, that they are not primarily dramatizations of actions but explorations of or commentaries on or inquiries into or critiques of that idea, which the characters and actions subserve. Some of the critics are explicit about this conception of drama—Gohlke, for example, says the tragic plots “may be regarded as expanded metaphors” for that masculine defensive posture (“‘I Wooed . . .’” 152), and Novy asserts that the plays are “symbolic transformations” of attitudes toward gender and that Shakespeare “used the potential of the theater to personify” these attitudes (3, 202). But even those who do not make such statements usually assume that character and action exist for the sake of the thematic idea. It is true that there are few appearances of the term central theme, which seems to be going out of fashion, and very few of the “my theme can lick your theme” arguments that used to serve as the standard opening gambit of thematic readings; in fact, some of these critics (as may be seen in the phrasing of the two quotations from Gohlke) state or imply that they are only presenting one possible way of viewing the plays. But whether they claim to have found the only correct theme or not, it is clear that they all interpret the tragedies in terms of a theme.

It is also clear that the themes employed in their interpretations are basically the same. Although the terminology may vary, these critics all find that the plays are about the role of gender in the individual and in society. Moreover, their formulations of this theme usually turn on a polar opposition between two abstractions that are supposed to encompass and divide the world of the play and all human experience. This kind of formula was very common in the older thematic criticism of Shakespeare, which regularly discovered that his plays portrayed the conflict of appearance and reality or reason and passion or the like, so we might expect these new gender thematists to adopt the same strategy, especially since it is implicit in the very concept of gender, which comes in two varieties. Thus their thematic dichotomies usually turn out to be some version of the eternal struggle of yang and yin. Even the readings that make “patriarchy” the theme are really not an exception, since they always define it in terms of this gender opposition. And that opposition, we must remember, is not between the female and male characters (although there may be some relation to them) but between two abstract entities that can “conflict” inside one character or outside any character in the thematic ether, just like “appearance versus reality.”

This last point is especially important when we are dealing with tragedies, which all end in disaster, because any reading will have to account for this disaster, and any thematic reading will have to account for it in terms of the critic’s formulation of the theme. We will not be surprised to learn, therefore, that in these studies the cause of the tragedy is located not in the particular characters but in one of those two abstractions whose opposition constitutes the theme, nor will we be surprised to learn which one always turns out to be the guilty party. According to Kahn, “the primary tragic force” in Romeo and Juliet is “the feud as an extreme and peculiar expression of patriarchal society, which Shakespeare shows to be tragically self-destructive” (84). Leverenz says that “Hamlet’s tragedy is the forced triumph of filial duty over sensitivity to his own heart,” wherein resides “the woman in Hamlet [that is] the source of his most acute perceptions about the diseased, disordered patriarchal society” that destroys him (111, 113). For Snow, “the principle of evil and malice” in Othello is “the outraged voice . . . of the patriarchal social order,” which kills Desdemona to “undo the breach her sexuality has created in the stable male order of things” (410–11). Berger finds that not only Macbeth but all the thanes are guilty of a “pathologically protective machismo,” supported by their “mystified male-dominated cosmology,” which is responsible for every crime in the play (68, 74); and for Kimbrough, Macbeth’s downfall is caused by “a definition of masculinity which comes from dominant societal
norms that equate machismo with manhood” and thus teaches us the “destructiveness of polarized masculinity and femininity” (177, 183). Novy concludes that the sufferings of Lear and Cordelia are “created by [sex-role] behavior patterns” and show the “vulnerabilities of men and women in a patriarchal society” (162).5 “What Shakespeare's tragedies portray,” according to Gohlke, “is the anguish and destruction attendant on a . . . culturally supported set of fictions regarding heterosexual encounter,” embodied in that “defensive posture” of “the masculine consciousness” (“‘I Woed . . . ’”) (161–63). French asserts that the tragedies of Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Timon, and Coriolanus turn “on ‘masculine’ values,” since their worlds “place supreme value on the qualities of the masculine principle” and show a “blindness to or rejection of ‘feminine’ values” (200). And Erickson finds that a number of tragic catastrophes are brought about by the inability of heterosexual relations to overcome “male bonds that have behind them the force of patriarchal social norms” (Patriarchal 1). Of course, the characters themselves are unaware of the real cause of their misfortunes (as many of the critics acknowledge), which seems a pity, for if they only knew they might have given us some great last words. When the dying Desdemona is asked by Emilia, “Who hath done this deed?” she could have answered, “Nobodie, twas the male order of things, farewell.” And the dying Laertes could have ended his confession to Hamlet by exclaiming, I can no more; the Patriarchie, the Patriarchie's to blame!

I think we can conclude, then, that one defining characteristic of this approach to Shakespearean tragedy is its location of the cause of the tragic outcome in “masculinity” or “patriarchy,” operating through individuals and the society as a whole. (Even critics like Dash, Greene, and Novy, who put part of the blame on a stereotype of “femininity,” agree that the stereotype is imposed by the patriarchal ethos, so the result is the same.) There is some truth in this view. Except for Antony and Cleopatra (which many of these critics treat separately), the tragic actions all take place in societies dominated by males and male attitudes and could not have taken place in a society that was matriarchal or androgynous or egalitarian, because gender relations are an essential aspect of the “world” of each play, and this “world” is built into the author’s dramatic conception so that it is inseparable from the charac-


ters and actions, as they are from it. But this intimate connection between the characters and their society means that we really cannot say Lear would not have come to grief if he had not lived in a patriarchy, for if he had not lived in a patriarchy he would not have been Lear. Moreover, it is equally true that none of these tragic actions could occur in a capitalist or socialist economy or in any “world” significantly different from the one presented in that play (which would even include other forms of patriarchy: Lear, for example, could not exist in Othello's Venice). And since gender relations are only one of the components of each “world,” we have no reason to single them out as the basic cause of events. Actually, these components cannot be called causes in the usual sense: they are necessary conditions of the action but are not in themselves sufficient to cause it. Many of these critics seem to have confused these two different kinds of agency.

The distinction may become clearer if we look at some of the crucial actions that these readings blame on patriarchy. Novy, for instance, devotes some time to arguing that Lear’s rejection of Cordelia in the opening scene is based on patriarchal assumptions concerning the father-daughter relationship (151–55). But the witnesses to this rejection—Kent, Gloucester, Burgundy, France, even Goneril and Regan—all of whom presumably share these patriarchal assumptions, regard his behavior as a shocking abnormality, which must mean that, while the assumptions made his behavior possible (by giving him absolute power over Cordelia), they cannot have caused it, for then it would appear normal. Similarly, Greene argues that Othello’s killing of Desdemona is the consequence of the gender roles imposed on the pair by their patriarchal society (“‘This . . . ’”); but, again, we note that the characters who comment on it (including Othello himself after he learns the truth) do not view it as one of your everyday patriarchal events; instead, they consider it a horrifying violation of the norms of their world. The same must be said of the tragic deeds in the other plays: they are all made possible by the kind of society in which they occur (otherwise they would not seem convincing), but they are all regarded by that society as extraordinary calamities (otherwise they would not seem tragic).

It is hard to see, then, how these plays could be blaming the patriarchal society for the tragic outcome. It is even hard to see how they could be conducting an inquiry into patriarchy, when the actions
they focus on are clearly meant to be atypical.

This attempt to blame the catastrophes on patriarchy is illogical in another sense as well, for while it is true that they would not have occurred in a non-patriarchal society, it is also true that they would not have occurred in a society that was even more patriarchal than the one we are shown—a society, for instance, where Juliet and Desdemona could not be married, or Ophelia be courted, without the consent of their fathers, or where Goneril and Lady Macbeth were completely subservient to their husbands (which is just another way of saying that each tragedy could only take place in the specific “world” depicted in that play). Moreover, if patriarchy is held responsible for the unhappy endings of the tragedies, then it must be equally responsible for the happy endings of the comedies and romances, which are also brought about in patriarchal worlds. Some of the critics try to account for the happy endings by claiming that women have more active roles in these other genres, which is true (with a few notable exceptions), but that does not alter the nature of the society. In fact, in their final scenes all these “strong” heroines reinsert themselves into the patriarchal structure, which presides over the marriages and reconciliations. It seems evident, then, that patriarchy cannot have any necessary causal connection to misery, when it is just as capable of producing happiness. Nor can this conclusion be averted by distinguishing, as Erickson does, between a “harsh” form of patriarchy that creates problems and a “benign” form that resolves them (Patriarchal 12, 32, 148), although this is a step in the right direction, since “patriarchy” is obviously not a single entity, or even two, but a general class covering a wide range of attitudes and practices found in very different societies (and in very different individuals). It is only the logic of this critical approach that has reified it as a sort of Platonic Idea that is supposed to serve both as the subject of these tragedies and as the cause of their catastrophes.

The preceding difficulties are peculiar to this feminist branch of thematism (i.e., to the kind of central theme it employs), but there is another, more general difficulty that it shares with all other thematic criticism of Shakespeare—namely, that it does not work. In the older thematic readings that I have examined, the concrete facts of the play never really fit the abstract theme of the critic, and I am afraid the same must be said of these new feminist readings of the tragedies. Thus in the first example cited above, the actual presentation of the feud in Romeo and Juliet does not support Kahn’s attempt to subsume it under her theme of “patriarchy.” The chief patriarch of the play’s world, Prince Escalus, is vehemently opposed to the feud, and although the patriarchs of the Montague and Capulet clans are drawn into the brawling of the first scene (where both seem ridiculous), they are then pledged to keep the peace (1.2.1–3). After that we never see them fighting or encouraging anyone else to fight; in fact, Shakespeare shows Capulet exercising his patriarchal authority at the ball to prevent Tybalt from challenging Romeo. The feud is carried on by the young men, who are not acting “on behalf of their fathers,” as Kahn claims (83, 86, 93): Tybalt does not pursue Romeo on behalf of Capulet (who is not his father), Mercutio is not even a Montague, and when Romeo finally attacks Tybalt, his motive is not to uphold “the honor of his father’s house” (93) but to avenge Mercutio. She is surely right in pointing out that some of the youths treat the feud as a test of manhood, but it is, if anything, an antipatriarchal test in defiance of the older generation and its laws. Moreover, the reconciliation of Montague and Capulet that ends the feud (and that Kahn never mentions) does not weaken the patriarchy but strengthens it, by joining their power with the prince’s. I do not see, then, how Shakespeare can be presenting the feud as an expression of patriarchal attitudes.

Kahn’s essay struck me as one of the most perceptive of these readings, especially in its treatment of Juliet’s growth and the lovers’ deaths; yet even it is undermined by this basic weakness of thematism, which can be found in all the others. Since I cannot discuss each of them in the same detail, I must limit myself to some representative examples of the principal ways by which these critics accommodate Shakespeare’s facts to their themes. By far the most common of these strategies is selectivity—the critic just cites those facts that support the theme and ignores those that do not. (This need not imply conscious deception, for the thematic idea can function as a kind of lens in the mind’s eye that brings only the “right” facts into focus and filters out all the rest, so that the critic may not even notice them.) Often the selectivity simply involves passing over the material that is not relevant to the critic’s formulation of the theme. Greene’s essay on Othello, for instance, never refers to the cashing of Cassio or the loss of the handkerchief, which do not seem to figure in the play’s
“critique” of gender roles; and many more examples could be cited, since none of the themes espoused by these critics (or by nonfeminist thematists) accounts for all the significant characters and actions in the play.

The selectivity becomes much more disturbing when the facts omitted are not merely irrelevant to the critic’s theme but actually contradict it. A striking example is provided by Berger in his handling of the episode in *Macbeth* where Macduff learns that his family has been killed: he quotes Malcolm’s line urging Macduff to “dispute it like a man” (4.3.220), which fits his theme of an all-pervasive “machismo” (70), but he passes over Macduff’s answer, “I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man,” which asserts a very different sense of manhood. And Neely gives us several examples in her attempt to prove that the thematic “central conflict [in *Othello*] is between the men and the women” (*Broken* 108), which leads her into a series of contrasts placing all the men on one side (always the wrong one) and all the women on the other. In one part of this demonstration, she accuses the men of “persistently placing blame for their actions outside themselves” and compares this attitude to that of Desdemona, whose last words exonerating Othello and assuming responsibility for her own death “provide the sharpest possible contrast to the men’s excuses” and to “Othello’s evasions” (124–25). But Neely fails to mention Othello’s response, “She’s like a liar gone to burning hell: / ‘Twas I that kill’d her” (5.2.129–30), which rather blunts that sharpest possible contrast. (Nor does she mention here Desdemona’s crucial evasion of responsibility about the handkerchief in 3.4.80–87.) And in an earlier section showing that the play “sharply contrasts the genuine intimacy of the women with the hypocritical friendship of the men,” she asserts that “romantic love is destroyed by the semblance of male friendship” (121–23), ignoring the fact that Cassio’s friendship with Othello, which was not hypocritical, fostered the romantic love, as we are told in 3.3.70–73. But there is no need to go on, since it should be obvious that any demonstration that all the men here have the identical vices (in addition to their evasion of responsibility and incapacity for friendship, they are all supposed to be competitive, cowardly, foolish, jealous, passive, vain, swaggering, and murderous) would have to omit a number of uncooperative facts. The same can be said of Berger’s essay on *Macbeth* and Leverenz’s on *Hamlet*, which also discover a thematic similarity in every male.9 This kind of reading, however, is not limited to feminist thematists. In one common form of the older “theme and structure” studies, the critic set out to prove that all the characters in a play are basically alike as exemplars of the central theme—that each of them takes appearance for reality, or subordinates reason to passion, and so on. The difference is that this process of homogenizing was applied to the entire cast, while these feminists limit it to the men, but the effect on its victims is the same, for the homogenization is always down to the lowest common denominator encompassing that group of characters. Thus every male in *Othello* descends to the level of Iago, the thanes are all as bad as Macbeth, and the men in *Hamlet* become “mini-Claudii.” And this result can only be achieved by filtering out any facts that differentiate the characters and so contradict the critic’s theme.

This selectivity in the use of evidence is even more obvious in those essays that place all the tragedies under a single theme (which is really another form of homogenization, applied now to the tragic heroes rather than to the men in one play). Gohlke, it will be recalled, views the tragedies as one “vast commentary on the . . . destructiveness of the defensive posture” of “the masculine consciousness.” That posture, she says, involves “shared fictions on the part of the heroes about femininity [which they see as a weakness in themselves] and about their own vulnerability in relation to women” and leads to “a violence of response on the part of the hero against individual women, but more important, against the hero’s ultimately damaging perception of himself as womanish” (“I Wooded . . . .” 152, 159). But she only tries to demonstrate this pattern in five tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*—and even with them she has problems. While she shows that Hamlet, Lear, and Antony exhibit aspects of “the masculine consciousness” at times, she fails to establish any causal connection between that consciousness and their catastrophes, although such a connection is supposed to be essential to her pattern (“What Shakespeare’s tragedies portray is the anguish and destruction attendant on . . . [this] set of fictions”). Lear shows no sign of these feelings until his confrontation with Goneril and Regan some time after he made the fatal mistakes that bring about the tragedy, and it could be argued that Antony comes to grief because he does not act against Cleopatra as the pattern says he should.
Moreover, except on the verbal level, none of these three heroes engages in any “violence against women,” which is also supposed to be part of the pattern (156, 159, 161). (Gohlke says that Hamlet kills Ophelia [154], which is not true.) It seems, then, that only *Othello* and *Macbeth* fit “Shakespeare’s tragic paradigms,” as she calls them, and even *Macbeth* requires some stretching, which suggests that they are really Gohlke’s paradigms rather than his.

This kind of criticism may be unfair to Gohlke, who states that she is treating the plays as “metaphors,” and so is apparently not concerned with the actual causal sequence of the plots or the distinction between verbal and physical “violence”; but Judith Wilt’s argument that a single theme informs *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* seems to make a more literal claim. The theme is “the male world’s banishment of the female” (93), which, she asserts, precipitates these tragic actions, and her case rests on specific events in each play: Brutus’s ordering Portia to bed before he joins the conspirators (2.1) and Caesar’s denial of Calphurnia’s plea that he stay home (2.2); Hamlet’s attack on Ophelia in 3.1; Othello’s sending Desdemona away in 4.2; Lear’s renunciation of Cordelia in 1.1; and Lady Macbeth’s calling on the spirits to unsex her (1.5). But, once more, we can see a process of selection that passes over crucial facts contradicting the critic’s theme. There is no reason to believe that Brutus would have abandoned the conspiracy if he had confided in Portia in 2.1, for we learn in 2.4 that he has told her his plans and she has not dissuaded him; and while Caesar could have averted the assassination if he had listened to Calphurnia in 2.2, the same result would have ensued if he had heeded the male Soothsayer in 1.2 or read the letter of the male Artemidorus in 3.1. Hamlet’s “banishment” of Ophelia in 3.1 has no discernible effect on his later actions, and we find in 3.2 that he has apparently unbanished her again. In 1.1 Lear does not banish “the female”—he banishes one female and embraces two other females, who proceed to destroy him. And the application of the theme to *Macbeth* is only figurative; if we applied it literally, we would have to say that Macbeth’s banishing the female—Lady Macbeth and the witches—would have saved him (and the same could be said of Antony and Coriolanus, who fall outside Wilt’s purview). So we are left again with *Othello*, the only tragedy that actually bears out this thematic lesson of what happens to men when they do not listen to women.11

These critics also have another means at their disposal for accommodating Shakespeare’s facts to their themes: instead of selecting the facts to fit the theme, they can manipulate the theme to fit the facts (again, without necessarily meaning to deceive). This too is a standard strategy of the older thematists that reappears in their feminist successors. Undoubtedly, the worst offender is French, whose masculine and feminine “principles” undergo some strange metamorphoses. As Greene notes in her review of the book, “‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are defined so loosely and arbitrarily that their meanings slip about in response to the exigencies of the argument” (481). But French has to do more manipulating than the others because she is applying her theme to many more plays than they are. Examples of theme stretching can also be found in their readings, especially when the theme involves “patriarchy.” In Kahn’s essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, we saw, the term applies primarily to rule by the father (or head of the clan) but also includes manifestations of machismo by the young men, even when those actions are opposed by their patriarch; and in Noy’s book it seems to cover almost anything that interferes with “mutuality” between the sexes. Moreover, the critics can always make their thematic concepts of gender fit the facts of the play, because the facts are defined by the theme, rather than the reverse. Erickson provides a revealing example of this process in his chapter on *The Winter’s Tale*, where he asserts that Leontes’s “spontaneous outburst of jealousy” is “intrinsic to the male psyche” (*Patriarchal* 148). But no other man in the play ever shows a trace of jealousy, and all the men who comment on Leontes’s accusation of Hermione take her side, which is not what one would expect if his feelings also resided in their own psyches.12 Why then does not Erickson infer that the play presents their faith in Hermione as the intrinsically male attitude and Leontes’s jealousy as an aberration (as they themselves regard it)? Obviously, because he is not deriving his idea of what is “intrinsic to the male psyche” from the play but is imposing it on the play. That is what the older thematic critics did with their themes (which is why they always found that the plays were “saying” something that echoed their own beliefs), and the practice of these feminist thematists seems no less arbitrary. Indeed it is virtually forced on them by their approach: since they are dealing with tragic outcomes (Erickson is concerned with the near-
tragic movement in the first part of The Winter's Tale), and since, as we saw, they must explain this outcome in terms of their gender themes, then whatever causes the outcome (i.e., Leontes's jealousy) has to be defined as "masculine," which requires a lot of thematic flexibility.

Although there are other, less important features of their methodology that might also be discussed, I would like to turn now to the results of this approach to Shakespeare's tragedies, focusing on four areas of major concern: the characters, the final effect, the conception of tragedy, and the role of Shakespeare himself. Here I must emphasize that I can only speak of general tendencies, since in most of these areas we find a range of individual practice and some exceptions. There are no significant exceptions, I think, in the treatment of the female characters in these plays, where the results have been entirely positive. This group of critics has not only cleared up long-standing sexist misinterpretations of these characters (which was the main thrust of the early studies) but has given us many valuable insights, from a new perspective, into their personalities and especially their situations as women in male-dominated worlds. This is a very impressive achievement, and I do not dwell on it, only because it seems so obvious. Unfortunately, however, the same cannot be said of their treatment of the male characters, particularly the tragic heroes. Although Romeo and Antony are often exempted from the general curse and there are a few appreciative comments on the others, in most of these studies most of the heroes emerge as a sorry lot indeed, having lost virtually all their admirable qualities and even their individuality. This result is by no means unique to their approach. For some years now a number of critics of various persuasions have been busy attacking these characters (along with Henry v, Duke Vincentio, Prospero, and others), often claiming that an apparently sympathetic portrayal is undercut by a pervasive irony that renders them antipathetic. But these feminists have made their own contribution to this campaign against the protagonists, a contribution that seems to follow from their methodology. We saw that the thematic approach adopted by them treats the characters as exponents of a general theme (which means it will pass over their more particular traits) and that it tends to homogenize them down to the lowest moral level, so the protagonist, who is usually the most individualized and most admirable character, will suffer the greatest diminution on both counts.

Moreover, this general thematic pressure on the protagonist is increased considerably by the specific themes they use. Since most of those themes involve some form of gender opposition, their positive treatment of the female characters seems to require a negative treatment of the males. And since, as we noted, the masculine half of this thematic opposition must be responsible for the tragic catastrophe, it is usually loaded with deplorable traits, which are of necessity embodied in the hero. (The obvious exceptions are critics like Dash, Noy, and Kimbrough who blame the gender roles imposed on both men and women by "patriarchy," which allows them to be more generous to the heroes.) All too often, the result is what can only be called a sexist stereotyping of the protagonist. Indeed, the stereotyping in real-life prejudices may be seen as a kind of thematism, with the stereotype acting like the critic's theme as a lens that selects, or focuses on, any facts that confirm it and filters out any that do not. It would almost appear, then, that the general evolution of this body of criticism—again, with notable exceptions—has been from freeing Shakespeare's women of negative stereotypes to imposing such stereotypes on his men. That is very unfortunate, because there really is no necessary connection between these operations. If we do not view the tragedies as thematic "conflicts" of the two sexes, we find that our appreciation of one sex never depends on the depreciation of the other. On the contrary, it seems easy for us to respond positively to both—to sympathize with Ophelia and Hamlet, Othello and Desdemona, Cordelia and Lear.

This denigration of the tragic hero will of course influence the treatment of the tragic effect, to which I now turn, although I should first note that some of these critics virtually ignore it. This too may be seen as a result of thematism, which tends to minimize emotional involvement with the characters in its concentration on an intellectual grasp of the thematic lesson. But other critics do discuss the effect of the tragedies, and most of them do not find it very tragic. In their response to the ending there is usually little sense of compassion for the hero, which is not surprising when we consider their view of him. And there is even less sense of any resolution or catharsis. Here, for example, is French on Macbeth:

The play ends as it began, in a totally masculine world. . . . Although some balance is restored to the kingdom, there is no change in its value structure. What is restored
is the sacred inner circle, in which men are expected to re-
frain from applying the standards of the outer [i.e., femi-
nine] one; what is reasserted is moral schizophrenia.

(251)

And Leverenz on Hamlet:

The play ends in a mindless sequence of ritual male
duties, roles without meaning. . . . [Fortinbras], who in-
herits an irrevocably corrupted world, is the arrogant, stu-
pid, blundering finale to the theme of filial duty. . . .
The hawkish voices of blood, honor, and ambition inherit
the world of the fathers, with its false roles and false
proprieties.

(123–25)

And Neely on Othello:

The restoration of military order provides little satisfac-
tion here. . . . The conflict between the men and the
women has not been eliminated or resolved. . . . The
"tragic lodging of this bed" . . . signifies destruction
without catharsis, release without resolution. The pain
and division of the ending are unmitigated.

(Broken 135)

And Snow on the same scene:

The directions for Iago's torture reconstitute society in
terms of the same impotent dialectic of violence and
repression that caused its rupture. . . . We are left with
. . . [the state] blindly revealing in itself the evil it seeks
to . . . punish in its victim. There is neither transcen-
dence nor catharsis in Othello.

(385)

It is not difficult to understand why these critics
do not find any resolution in these endings, for this
is a direct consequence of their approach. Since the
basic issue (and cause) of the tragedy is defined in
terms of the thematic problem of gender, rather
than in terms of the protagonist's individual charac-
ter and situation, it is not and cannot be resolved
by his death. From these critics' point of view, at
the conclusion of the play nothing has really ended or
even changed—"patriarchy" has simply produced
another disaster and will go on producing more.
This also helps to explain why they do not find any
catharsis here, because that depends, in part, on our
"sense of an ending," our realization that the action
has run its course. But catharsis in Shake-
sperean tragedy involves other factors as well, I
believe, including some kind of restoration of or-
der and a renewal or enhancement of our positive
feelings for the hero, who usually achieves or learns
something at the end and regains his earlier noble
stature. Neither of these effects, however, can be
recognized by this group of critics. Because their
view of the hero before he enters the final scene is
usually very negative, he has no noble stature to re-
gain, and anything he achieves there (confronting
his enemies, revenging his father, executing justice
on himself) will not alter that view, since they regard
this as another example of his "machismo" and his
 evasion of the real issue. Their definition of that is-
 sue, moreover, makes it impossible for them to ac-
ccept any discovery on his part, for while many of
the heroes learn many things, they never seem to
learn what these critics insist is the thematic lesson
of the play—namely, that the concept of masculin-
ity itself is to blame for the tragedy.15 (Nor does
anyone else in the play ever learn it.) This concep-
tion of the theme also prevents them from accept-
ing any restoration of order at the end, because
what is being restored is always the same patriarchal
order that, according to them, was responsible for
all the calamities. Indeed, from their standpoint
such a restoration not only fails to resolve the prob-
lem of the play but actually exacerbates it, since, as
Berger says of the ending of Macbeth, "it will only
enable, by concealing, the ongoing dialectic of gen-
der conflict" (73). Thus in their lexicon "restora-
tion" becomes a dirty word; the solution is part of
the problem. Yet while it is easy to see why they find
these endings so untragic, it is much more difficult
to imagine the kind of ending that could give them
a satisfactory sense of resolution and catharsis. Pre-
sumably it would require a complete change in the
men's attitudes that would result in a dismantling
of "patriarchy" and the establishment of a new
order of gender equality and harmony. But that
does not sound very tragic either.

This problem leads me to the conception of the
tragic genre itself that emerges from these studies.
In most of them I did not find any real sense of the
genre as an important determinant of dramatic
form and effect. Like many other results of their ap-
proach, this can be partially explained as a tendency
of thematism in general. As we just noted, most
thematists are much more interested in the intellec-
tual theme they derive from a play than in its emo-
tional effect, which figures so prominently in our
recognition of genre. And they typically formulate
this theme as some universal proposition about life
that cannot be genre specific; in fact, it is seldom
possible to tell from their account of a play's cen-
tral theme whether they are dealing with a comedy
or a tragedy. But this general tendency of thematism
is strengthened, again, by the specific theme of gender relations adopted by these critics, since they usually regard it as the real subject of all the plays, and that must diminish the significance of any generic distinctions. Thus French can say that “the comedies and tragedies deal with identical material” (28), and Erickson in his review can complain that she is still too concerned with differentiating them, instead of “stress[ing] the ways in which the two forms converge” (195). Moreover, their commitment to this one theme leads some of the critics to compose a thematic biography for Shakespeare, wherein his entire career is seen as a sustained inquiry into the problem of gender, so that the genres he employed are merely stages of this enterprise, of no major importance in themselves.16

For at least two of these critics, this view of the canon leads to a further diminution of the tragic genre in particular. Gohlík, who says she is “reading the development” of Shakespeare’s portrayal of gender relations “from the comedies through the problem plays and the major tragedies,” speaks of “the failure of [Romeo and Juliet] to achieve the generic status of comedy” and of “interpret[ing] the tragedies . . . . as comedies gone wrong” (“‘I Woed . . . ’” 154, 152; “‘All That . . . ’” 175). And Neely approaches Othello from the “context” provided by “Shakespearean comedy, to which [it] shows pervasive and profound resemblances,” and concludes, in similar terms, that in it “the comic resolution . . . is aborted” (Broken 108–09, 135). But I suspect this treatment of tragedy as failed comedy depends less on the chronological place of those genres in the canon than on the thematic conception governing both. Since, according to these critics, Shakespeare is always grappling with the problem of gender, the comedies, which end in gender harmony, are often seen as his solution to the problem, the goal he is seeking, and therefore the tragedies come to represent a failure to solve this problem and achieve this goal. Moreover, the difference between the two genres is explained by the role of the women in the thematic gender conflict: when they are able to cure or at least restrain the men’s masculinity, the result is a comic resolution, and when the men will not let them do this, the result is tragedy, which makes it, again, a kind of failure. The idea has obvious affinities to the view of Wilt and Greene (and apparently Leverenz) that tragedy is what occurs when the men do not listen to the women. And this tendency to reduce tragedies to comedies manqués is reinforced by the description of the tragic effect in negative terms as a lack of resolution and of cathartic release, which does not sound like something a dramatist would aim for. Most of these critics, it appears, do not see Shakespeare deliberately setting out to write a tragedy, where the nature of the genre (its conventions, expectations, and appropriate pleasure) might determine the nature of the gender relations portrayed in the play, rather than the other way around. But, then, it is hard to believe that they see him deliberately setting out to write a comedy gone wrong.

This uncertainty about Shakespeare’s relation to the tragic genre raises the whole question of authorial intention, which I think is one of the greatest problems of this group of critics, although they seldom acknowledge it, for they all seem to assume that their interpretations correspond to his intended meaning.17 That is not what I expected when I began this inquiry, because I thought they would often find themselves in disagreement with a male author writing in such a male-dominated society. But I later realized that this situation does not arise in the tragedies, since “patriarchy” always comes to grief there, and so Shakespeare’s attitude toward gender would seem in accord with their own.

In some of the other genres, however, where a happy resolution is often accompanied by, or is even dependent on, the subordination of women, they run into difficulty and must either argue that the ending is ironic or else give up the intentionalist position.18

That position is inherent in thematism itself, because thematic critics (including these feminist thematists, as we saw) regularly claim that the play is “exploring” or “commenting on” the central theme, which implies a conscious purpose. An unintended exploration seems self-contradictory; to adapt E. D. Hirsch’s dictum on meaning, there can be no exploring without an explorer. All thematists therefore have the obligation of proving that the play really is intended to be about their theme. And this general obligation becomes even greater in these feminist readings, for they assert that each tragedy is meant to call into question some of the most basic beliefs in the fictional world it dramatizes and in the real world of its author, which ought to place a very heavy burden of proof on them. Plays of this sort have of course been written. An obvious example is Ghosts, and it is obvious because Ibsen takes some pains to let us know that he is criticizing the pieties of the play’s society (and his own) by subjecting them to intensive discussion, during which Os-
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Wald attacks them at length; by presenting a much more desirable alternative to them in Oswald's description of the idyllic bohemian life of Paris; by establishing explicit causal connections between them and all the unhappiness depicted in the play; by showing in his resolution that the world governed by them rewards the worst people and punishes the best; and by having Mrs. Alving converted to Oswald's view of them, when she learns the lesson that her son and the play are teaching. I am not suggesting that every play that criticizes its own world must include all these factors, but we would expect to find at least some of them present. We do find them in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, which is probably the best Jacobean example of this kind of play: the corrupt society depicted there is condemned at the outset by Antonio, who also gives us a possible alternative in his report on the reformed French court; it is made responsible for the misery of the sympathetic characters; it punishes the innocent duchess and her family while rewarding the flagrant adulteress Julia (though she is killed at the end); and its cruelty even brings about the conversion of Bosola, who finally takes the duchess's side against it. But do we encounter anything like this in Shakespeare's tragedies to support the claim that they are criticizing the gender assumptions of their worlds? There is no explicit attack on those assumptions, except for a few speeches of Emilia. There is no necessary connection between them and the tragic outcome—in fact we found that this outcome is usually regarded as an extraordinary deviation from the normal life of the play's world. There is no unjust distribution of rewards and punishments that they can be blamed for. There is no conversion leading to a rejection of them, because, as we saw earlier, nobody in these plays ever learns the lesson that these critics say is being taught there. And, except in *Antony and Cleopatra*, there is no suggestion of an alternative society with different assumptions that might serve as a basis for judging them. In view of this lack of evidence, then, it seems more reasonable to conclude that the tragedies are not criticizing their own gender assumptions but just assuming them, along with other conditions underlying the dramatized action, which is their real subject. This does not mean that we cannot criticize those assumptions; it only means that we should separate our activity from Shakespeare's.

There are signs that some of these critics are in fact moving in this direction, although they may not always be clear about it, for we can sometimes discern a nonintentionalist subtext within their intentionalist readings. It is apparent, as we noted, in their view of tragedy as failed comedy and in their account of the tragic effect, which can hardly have been what Shakespeare intended. It is more obvious in Greene's statement that "feminist critics may direct their attentions to freeing female characters from the stereotypes to which they have been confined by the critical tradition or from the biases and prejudices of authors themselves" ("Feminist and Marxist" 30). The first operation, presumably, seeks to recover the author's intended meaning by correcting previous misinterpretations of it, but the second implies a very different conception of the relation between critic and author. So does Wheeler's statement that "it has taken the energies of feminist criticism to dislodge [Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca] from the play's powerful rhetoric of both idealization and degradation" (209), for if we remember who is responsible for that rhetoric, then this operation too involves rescuing characters from their own creator. And that is apparently what Leininger is doing when she asserts that "Caliban is made to concur in the accusation" that he assaulted Miranda (289), as if the accusation were not true (although she later hedges by referring to "his real or imputed lust" (292)). These critics seem to be treating the plays as biased accounts of real people that they must set straight, which seems absurd; but I think the impulse behind their undertaking is sound, since they are trying to articulate their own views of the gender assumptions of the plays. They are treating those assumptions, that is, as assumptions, and so can distinguish their attitudes toward them from Shakespeare's (which is also what Erickson recommends). I would say that they are moving here in the right direction, toward a promising line of inquiry for feminist critics into the actual nature of the gender assumptions in these plays. It would mean holding in abeyance (temporarily, of course) their own attitudes toward gender, as well as their claim to be interpreting Shakespeare's intention, which required a transformation of the assumptions into the thematic subject he was exploring (to arrive at conclusions happily coinciding with their own), since in such an inquiry their attitudes and his intention would both be irrelevant. Above all, it would mean abandoning their preconceptions of what these assumptions will be. They might begin with one tragedy and try to determine what its gender assumptions really are by deriving them inductively from the play itself, and then pro-
ceed, again inductively, to see if they could derive valid generalizations about the assumptions of the tragedies as a genre. It is an inquiry for which they are uniquely suited, because their feminist perspective gives them the “distance” needed to recognize the assumptions. And it is one that would put the rest of us greatly in their debt.

As my final point I would like to pursue the question of preconceptions just referred to, by looking at the psychoanalytic theory that apparently underlies a number of these essays. It is not the theory of Freud, of course, but the revised feminist versions of Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, and others, which retain the Freudian faith that some basic childhood trauma is responsible for all our problems but locate that trauma in the child’s relation to the mother during the “pre-oedipal stage” of development. I am less concerned here with their account of that stage, however, than with the picture of the adult male psyche that has filtered down, perhaps in distorted form, to affect this body of criticism. The general idea seems to be that men, because of difficulties in their infantile experience with mothering (which is supposed to be very different from the experience of female infants), grow up with an unconscious but overpowering fear and hatred of femininity, both in women and in themselves, which they try to repress by certain defense mechanisms, including an obsessive need to idealize or degrade women and to control them. They are all, in short, unconscious misogynists. This is the conception of masculinity that presumably stands behind Gohlke’s assertion that the tragic heroes share a “defensive posture” resulting from feelings about “their own vulnerability in relation to women,” which leads to “violence against women” (“‘I Woed . . . ’”) 152, 161, 163; and Berger’s that all the Scots thanes suffer from a “pathologically protective machismo” based on “the male fear of feminine contamination” and “fear of impotency and vulnerability to women” (68, 71, 76); and Erickson’s that the “spontaneous outburst of jealousy” in Leontes is “intrinsic to the male psyche” (Patriarchal 148); and Snow’s that Othello kills Desdemona because of the “pathological male animus toward sexuality” and “underlying male fear” of “thraldom to the demands of an unsatisfiable sexual appetite in woman” (388, 407), which are triggered off in him by the consummation of his marriage. We can presume that such assertions come from this “feminist” conception of masculinity that these critics bring to the plays, since they cannot come from the plays themselves. For this conception does not fit any of the tragic heroes (or any of the thanes). It is true that four of them—Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Antony—express some of these misogynist feelings at certain times, but always in situations of crisis and always in response to what they view as a very serious provocation by a woman. Not one of them, in his usual or characteristic state of mind, could be termed a misogynist; in fact, Shakespeare shows us that in this state each is (or was) capable of forming a loving relationship with a woman, and this applies to the other tragic heroes as well.21 The imposition of this conception, therefore, radically distorts their characters. It also eliminates their individuality, since they all turn out to have the same stereotypical male sickness. And it debases them to a level beyond the reach of tragic sympathy. We saw that this is a tendency more or less inherent in the approach of these critics, but this conception of masculinity further contributes to it.

It also affects the treatment of female characters, for one of its corollaries seems to be that, while men grow up sick, women grow up healthy—that is, without unconscious fears or hatreds. (I am speaking not of the theory itself but only of its deployment by these critics.) Sometimes this results in what can only be called an idealization of the female, which may seem strange since feminists are so opposed to it, but apparently it is acceptable if couched in the language of modern psychology. Berger, for example, regards Lady Macduff as the sole representative of “saneness” and “authentic humanity” (71) in a sea of male pathology (Lady Macbeth is disqualified because of her “mimetic desire to join the manly ranks,” and the witches are “scapegoats of the masculine imagination” [72, 74]). And Snow almost grows lyrical in his praise of Desdemona for her “erotic vitality,” freedom from “Oedipal guilt,” and similar virtues (406–07). She seems flawless, and he gets very angry at her mistreatment by Robert Dickes, an orthodox Freudian, who finds in her a “castrative” need to “dominate Othello in terms of phallic rivalry” (287, 293).22 Snow insists that “the reality of [her] behavior” does not support this diagnosis (405), which is true; but it is equally true that the reality of Othello’s behavior does not support Snow’s own account of a “pathological male animus” and “underlying male fear.” Snow, in other words, condemns Dickes for doing to Desdemona what he does to Othello, since they are both imposing on the
character an unconscious (and of course unsavory) motivation that is dictated by their own preconceptions. But apparently Desdemona (and Lady Macduff) cannot have an unconscious like the men, which may be a new form of sexual discrimination.

I think we would also have to say, finally, that this “feminist” conception of masculinity is just as much a distortion of real life as it is of the tragedies. In both areas it contains an element of truth, for some men, like some tragic heroes, do have those misogynist feelings at some times (some, of course, have them all the time). While it is very important to recognize this phenomenon, to elevate it into a universal definition of the gender is absurd, as may be seen if we try to apply the statements quoted above. If Erickson’s statement were true, then most men would walk around suffering spontaneous outbursts of jealousy. If Snow’s were true, most wedding nights would terminate in uxoricide. Indeed, if any of them were true, half of the human race would be pathological. Why then do some of these critics accept this conception of masculinity and employ it? They cannot be convinced by the evidence offered for it, since there is none. The explanation must be that they want to believe it. And they want to, apparently, because it neatly turns the tables on the Freudian theory of “penis envy” by making female development the norm and male development abnormal. One can easily understand their dislike of Freud’s theory, for in it, as Gohlke says, “femininity itself is defined as the condition of lack” (“I Woed . . . ” 162). She is right, but the theory she sponsors does the same thing to masculinity, by defining it as a malady. Surely the only sensible course is to abandon both these theories, along with the fruitless search for a single basic cause of gender difference and all its problems, and give our support to a scientific study of the complex factors in human development, which would investigate the similarities as well as the differences between women and men, based on evidence that compelled the assent of all rational people, regardless of their gender or ideology.

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Notes

1 For an account of the first phase see Neely, “Feminist” 6–7, and for some examples, see the essays of Garner on Desdemona, Fitz on Cleopatra, and Smith on Gertrude; this phase is also a major concern of Dash’s book.
2 See, e.g., Neely, “Feminist” 4–9; Bamber, ch. 1: Jardine 1–6; McLuskie 88–92; and the reviews of French’s book by Erickson and Greene.
3 Probably the two most important studies excluded for this reason are Bamber, Comic Women, Tragic Men, and Belsey, The Subject of Tragedy.
4 See, e.g., Neely, Broken 107–08; French 242.
5 Similarly, both Dash and Greene (“This . . . ”) argue that the sufferings of Othello and Desdemona are caused by the conventional sex roles imposed on them by society (see their statements of the theme quoted above). This is also Dreh’s thesis, although she only deals with Desdemona, whose “tragic fate stems from slavish conformity . . . to the traditional norm for feminine behavior,” showing that “Shakespeare repudiates this norm defined by ‘patriarchal expectations’” (93, 76, 92).
6 A number of the critics comment on this; see especially Park’s witty account of the fates of Portia, Beatrice, and Rosalind.
7 Note the language of patriarchy: “What, good man boy? . . . you’ll be the man? . . . You are a saucy boy” (1.577–83). Kahn never deals with this episode and only refers to it once indirectly (95).
8 Erickson quotes this response in a note but says it “is too slender a thread” to exonerate Macduff from “the general pattern of distorted masculinity,” shown in “his excessive violence in decapitating Macbeth” (Patriarchal 192). Kimbrough, however, regards it as “one of those great Shakespearean moments” because it points to “androgynty,” which is Shakespeare’s solution (and his own) to the thematic “war between gender concepts” (176, 178). But he never mentions Macduff’s decapitation of Macbeth, which is not very androgyitous.
9 Like Berger and Neely, Leverenz works very hard to score points against all the men. He tells us that Hamlet Senior’s “peacetime behavior seems to have been primarily sleeping on the job” (because of the Ghost’s reference to naps) and that the former king was “more like Claudius than the Ghost can dare admit”; that when Laertes says to Ophelia, “Do not sleep, / But let me hear from you” (1.3.3–4), he means that “the body’s natural desire to sleep must yield to the role of always-attentive sister”; and that even the gravediggers are “mini-Clauduses” (117, 118, 122).
10 It would take quite a bit of stretching, for instance, to connect the killing of Lady Macduff, which is Macbeth’s only “violence against women,” with any feeling he has about “vulnerability in relation to women.”
11 Cf. Greene’s comment on this play: “In the comedies and romances, and in Antony and Cleopatra, women make themselves heard, but part of what is tragic about the tragic world here is that they do not . . . [Emilia] is a woman capable of challenging male prerogatives and assumptions, who might be able to bring about a comic resolution” (“This . . . ” 29). Leverenz, whose essay inspired Wilt’s, avoids her difficulty with
Ophelia by inventing a woman within Hamlet whom he should listen to but does not, so that his tragedy exemplifies this same thematic lesson.

13 In her survey of the approach, Neely criticizes the tendency of some feminists "to employ what might be called reverse sexism, attacking and stereotyping male characters" ("Feminist" 4; see also 7).

14 Noy is unusual in acknowledging some embarrassment about this: "There is so much sympathy with Lear at the end that it seems cold to turn from feeling with him to any further analysis of the play in terms of sex-role behavior, but it is worth noting that part of the effect of the play is to impress on us the suffering created by these behavior patterns [imposed by patriarchy] and then to show us how inadequate they are" (162). She, Dash, and Kimmel can pity the hero because their themes, we saw, do not require an attack on him. But for McLuskie, who is not in this group (see n. 20), any pity for Lear is a temptation that feminists must resist, since it "endorses" the play's "patriarchal" ideology (100, 102).

15 According to Erickson, e.g., in their last scenes Othello exhibits a "powerful need for self-deception," Lear a "continuing self-evasion," and Malcolm's thanes an "escapist belief in an entirely masculine social order"; and Hamlet's "disturbed attitude toward female sexuality is neither squarely faced nor transformed and resolved." Antony is the honorable exception because he finally "rejects the definition of masculinity" entailed in his soldier identity (Patriarchal 100, 115, 122, 78, 140).

16 See Noy 200–01; French 71; and Erickson, Patriarchal 116, 171–72. Similarly, some of the older thematists viewed Shakespeare's development as a continuous exploration of the one central theme they found in all his plays.

17 The only apparent exception I noted is Gohike, who begins by stating that she is "abandon[ing] a strictly intentionalist position"; yet she later says the tragedies "may be viewed as one vast commentary" on male attitudes, which they "examine" with "acute attention" ("'I Woed . . . .' " 150, 161, 163). One of the few discussions of the problem among this group of critics is in the essay on the "author-function" by Erickson; he argues that we must distinguish our attitude toward the treatment of gender in a play from Shakespeare's (as he does in his book, 36–37, 169–70, 182), but he does not address the prior question of how we know this treatment of gender is Shakespeare's subject.

18 For some examples, see Kahn on The Taming of the Shrew (114–17), Reifer on Measure for Measure (167–69), and Leininger on The Tempest (291–92).

19 Perhaps Wheeler might claim that Shakespeare deliberately misled his audience in order to test or educate them. This was a standard rationale of the older ironic readings, which reappears in Berger and Snow.

20 This is the line taken by Jardine, Belsey, McLuskie, and a few other feminist critics, most of them British and associated with "cultural materialism." They are not thematic (which is why I have excluded them) and so avoid some of the problems discussed here.

21 See Bamber's perceptive discussion of this point (14–16). Hamlet does not begin the play in this "normal" state, because of Gertrude's remarriage, but before that he was courting Ophelia. The only real exception is Timon, but he is seldom cited by these critics, perhaps because his misanthropy is so much stronger than his misogyny.

22 Dicks's "Desdemona: An Innocent Victim?" appeared in American Imago; but we do not need to read it to find the answer to his question, for in the articles of that journal no one is ever innocent, except the authors of the articles. (The same issue includes "Desdemona's Guilt" by Stephen Reid.) French, similarly, claims that Desdemona is "shown a near-ideal" since she "has no sexual guilt," is "whole," etc. (215–16).

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