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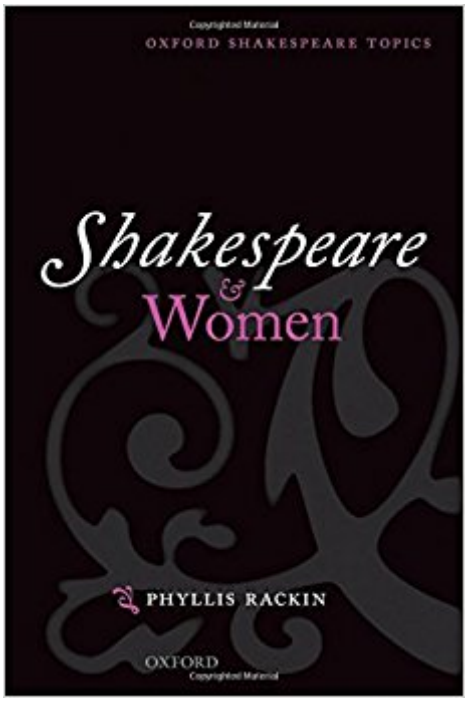
Shakespeare And Women (Oxford Shakespeare Topics)



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Synopsis

Shakespeare and Women situates Shakespeare’s female characters in multiple historical contexts, ranging from the early modern England in which they originated to the contemporary Western world in which our own encounters with them are staged. In so doing, this book seeks to challenge currently prevalent views of Shakespeare’s women-both the women he depicted in his plays and the women he encountered in the world he inhabited.Chapter 1, "A Usable History," analyses the implications and consequences of the emphasis on patriarchal power, male misogyny, and women’s oppression that has dominated recent feminist Shakespeare scholarship, while subsequent chapters propose alternative models for feminist analysis. Chapter 2, "The Place(s) of Women in Shakespeare’s World," emphasizes the frequently overlooked kinds of social, political, and economic agency exercised by the women Shakespeare would have known in both Stratford and London. Chapter 3, "Our Canon, Ourselves," addresses the implications of the modern popularity of plays such as The Taming of the Shrew which seem to endorse women’s subjugation, arguing that the plays--and the aspects of those plays--that we have chosen to emphasize tell us more about our own assumptions than about the beliefs that informed the responses of Shakespeare’s first audiences. Chapter 4, "Boys will be Girls," explores the consequences for women of the use of male actors to play women’s roles. Chapter 5, "The Lady’s Reeking Breath," turns to the sonnets, the texts that seem most resistant to feminist appropriation, to argue that Shakespeare’s rewriting of the idealized Petrarchan lady anticipates modern feminist critiques of the essential misogyny of the Petrarchan tradition. The final chapter, "Shakespeare’s Timeless Women," surveys the implication of Shakespeare’s female characters in the process of historical change, as they have been repeatedly updated to conform to changing conceptions of women’s nature and women’s social roles, serving in ever-changing guises as models of an unchanging, universal female nature.

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Customer Reviews

In Shakespeare and Women, Phyllis Rackin examines representations of women in historical contexts ranging from their introduction in the early modern English world to their staged presentations in the contemporary Western world. In the process Rackin challenges assumptions that currently influence efforts to understand Shakespeare's representations of women. The dominant view of women's history is that their achievements in medicine, government, economics, religion, law, and education constitute a triumph over the "dismal past." The reality, Rackin contends, is more complex. Although women in Western democracies can vote, they are not included in high elective offices. By contrast, in Shakespeare's time female monarchs ruled England and Scotland, but women were excluded from universities and the learned professions, they lost control of their property when they married, and were subject to beatings by their husbands. Nevertheless, aristocratic women managed great estates and held economic power comparable to that of modern CEO's, while women on lower social levels were active in trades that today are predominantly male. Rackin traces the connection between the popularity of Shakespeare's plays to the forces affecting the social and economic position of women. This connection is made forcefully in the contrasting shifts in popularity of The Taming of the Shrew and The Merry Wives of Windsor. Despite the lack of evidence that The Shrew was popular when it was first presented, recent scholarship has often been based on the assumption that the play presented contemporary beliefs regarding the place of women in marriage.

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