Critical points

Much of Emma Rees’ recent review of my book Honour Killing in Shakespeare (Books, 24 October 2019) is about matters of tone and categorisation. She makes only one point about my readings of the plays, so I’ll reply mainly to that, although it involves just a small section of my book.

Discussing The Winter’s Tale, I quote a speech by a courtier of King Leontes and Queen Hermione, Antigonus, who doesn’t at first believe that Hermione is guilty of the adultery her husband means to burn her for. Antigonus says (2.1.144-S1):

Be she [Hermione] bonour-flawed [guilty of adultery], –
I have three daughters: the eldest is eleven,
The second and the third, nine and some five.
If this [the charge of adultery] prove true, they’ll pay for it. By mine honour,
I’ll geld them all; fourteen they shall not see,
To bring false generations [illegitimate children]; they are co-heirs;
And I had rather glib [castrate] myself than they
Should not produce fair issue [legitimate children].

This speech is clearly about female genital mutilation, which Antigonus means to inflict on his three girls if it ever emerges that Hermione is guilty. If she is, any woman could be. I discuss the property aspects of FGM: Antigonus has no son, and wants his estate to pass eventually to legitimate grandchildren. The safest way to achieve this, he thinks, would be by ensuring his daughters never have sex voluntarily (they’ll have no choice about having sex with their husbands, who’ll be chosen by Antigonus).

Later, in a far-off country where he’s been ordered to expose Hermione’s baby daughter to be eaten by wild animals, he comes (very easily) to believe Hermione is guilty. Logically, then, he should go home and arrange for the genital mutilation of his daughters. But Apollo destroys his ship, and Nature, by now enraged, sends in that well-known bear. Both

Civilisation and Nature condemn burning women, throwing away girl babies, FGM and the misogyny that leads to these horrors.

All this is new and might, I think, be interesting to some readers. Rees dismisses it as among my “inane” claims, my “desire to be relevant.” She says “it is surely not the case” that the speech is about FGM, but gives no reason for her opinion. I suggest she reads the speech. Once she’s done that, I invite her to explain what then she does think it’s about. Times Higher Education readers might like to offer their own opinions.

Rees seems to like categories. She complains that my book is not academic, mass market or politically activist, and she’s right, at least on her own understanding of these terms. My bibliography runs to only three pages because it includes only books named in or directly feeding into my own. I don’t download the Shakespeare section of the British Library catalogue in the hope of persuading my readers that I’ve read the lot. I don’t reference statements like “on average in the UK, two women a week are killed out of jealousy by would-be lovers or by their former partners or husbands.” Some things are too well known to need referencing.

Honour Killing in Shakespeare is not scholarly but critical, a close reading of the verse, something apparently outside Rees’ experience and little to her taste. I question exegesis through contextual social history, the “what they thought/did in those days” approach, as a means of understanding Shakespeare. When he alludes to FGM, I consider the hearing of that on other episodes in the play, I don’t find it necessary to embark on a global history of FGM.

With a rare touch of wit, Rees concludes that “Like Caliban, [the book] eschews easy categorisation.” I’ll take that as a compliment, while waiting her own explanation of Antigonus’ speech.

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