Madhavi Menon. *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60670-8; xi + 195 pp. US$85.00.

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Madhavi Menon (Associate Professor of Literature, American University) is the author of *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (UToronto Press, 2004), and the editor of *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Duke UP, 2010). Her second monograph, *Unhistorical Shakespeare* is an ambitious, theoretically sophisticated work about the study of desire. Like recent works from "presentist" scholars such as Hugh Grady, Terence Hawkes, and Evelyn Gajowski, Menon seeks to challenge the historicist methods that dominate early modern studies. Her ultimate goal is to queer the idea of history itself by promoting a fluid, open model of temporality, which she calls "homohistory." As such, the book is more significant as a work of methodological inquiry than a study of Shakespeare; her individual readings of Shakespearean texts are often insightful, but her approach to the study of history is what scholars will find both useful and problematic.

Menon's introductory "Argument" is, in its scope, the most comprehensive part of the book and thus will be of the greatest scholarly interest. It is also likely to be the most controversial because of the claims Menon makes about the faults of "heterohistory," her term for the primary mode of historical scholarship on sexuality. She argues that most studies of early modern sexuality assume a paradigm of difference between past and present and offers as a spokesperson for this model David Scott Kastan's *Shakespeare after Theory* (Routledge, 1999). Menon highlights Kastan's stance that the study of the past must begin

with the assumption of difference between then and now and that scholars should avoid the "narcissistic" search for elements of the present in Shakespeare. In other words, Kastan believes that to see Shakespeare as our contemporary is to project ourselves onto the past, committing the dreaded sin of anachronism.

But according to Menon, this hetero-temporal paradigm fixes lines of difference in accord with chronology: heterohistorians assume the present to be transparent, solidified, and complete, while in contrast the past is viewed as the scene of fluid desire, transient identities, and deviant pleasures. Here Menon seems to be weighing in on the debate in queer and LGBT studies between models of alterity and continuity, arguing that historicist methodologies by default assume that modern sexual "identities" are absolutely different from early modern "desires." The problem, she claims, is that by assuming a distinction between fixed sexual identities in the present and polymorphous sexual desires and acts in the past, heterohistorians (gay and straight alike) reproduce a heteronormative (and thus homophobic) narrative of development and marginalize the complexities of desire in the present by shunting them to the past. Menon faults heterohistory for ignoring the complex desires that undermine modern distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual and for only seeing sexuality as a fluid continuum when looking at the past.

In response to the distortions introduced by heterohistoricism, Menon promotes the concept of "homohistory." The homohistorian does not reject the idea of history; rather, she withholds judgments about similarity and difference, opening herself to modes of investigation that defy traditional chronologies and put unexpected texts into dialogue in ways that a strictly temporal analysis would not allow. And rather than taking an identarian

stance wherein modern sexual subjects possess recognizable and fixed desires, the homohistorian acknowledges the incoherence of desire in the present just as the heterohistorian locates it in the past. Menon says that homohistory is not a method; one may think of it instead as a counter-method, a perspective that deconstructs the founding assumptions of the way we "do" history. As an intervention in the debate between alterity and continuity, Menon seeks to offer a third way that refuses to make *a priori* assumptions about the relationship between past and present, thus confronting desire in all its fluidity at all times.

Perhaps because I am sympathetic both to the demands of historicism as well as to the need for a critical evaluation of our methodological assumptions, I wondered, at times, if Menon were arguing against a straw-man: do the current historicist methodologies truly *require* such a false dichotomy between past and present? Surely part of the goal of historical study is not to fix difference between past and present but, through the discovery of seeming distinctions, to uncover the contradictions and complexities in the present moment to which we have become blinded? While Menon's analysis of historicism's potential mistakes is thoughtful and provocative, her presentation of it is perhaps unnecessarily polemical. The assumptions she lays at the feet of heterohistorians are not, it seems to me, unavoidable problems of all historical study but pitfalls that scholars can avoid by careful examination of their assumptions. In other words, I agree that a rigid insistence that the past is completely alien from the modern world is problematic, but the mere acknowledgement that one should accept, even expect, difference in historical study is not the same thing.

This points to what I think is the main fault of Menon's work. She criticizes heterohistory because its "paradigm of difference only reinforces the belief that difference is what marks a 'proper' sexuality" (14). Yet she is intent throughout the text to assert the difference of her project from what has come before, an irony that results in terminological confusion and at times forecloses on potentially insightful collaboration. Menon seems not to intend to simply replace a focus on difference with one on similitude, but to promote a study of history that is flexible and fluid in constructing a relationship between past and present. Her terminology, however, is restrictive, "homohistory" being a prime example: by her own definition, it is not just the study of sameness in the way that she asserts heterohistory is the study of difference, but by adopting oppositional language she risks obscuring the subtleties of her theoretical insights and making her argument appear to be simply the reverse of heterohistoricism. And again, heterohistoricism is not, I think, identical to historicism itself; to elide the difference between the two is to unfairly undermine an important mode of scholarship and accuse its practitioners of unthinking bias.

Some of the individual studies in her book are more successful than others at avoiding such problems. In each of five chapters, Menon marshals an eclectic collection of texts – theoretical, popular, and Shakespearean – to identify the contradictions, unstated anachronisms, and heteronormative biases of heterohistory's foundational components: teleology, facts, citation, origins, and authenticity. I found chapter 4, on origins and originality, to be the most convincing. In it, Menon reads *Titus Andronicus* as a text that argues against the primacy of sources. The play wears its classical lineage on its sleeve, yet, as she points out, the references that appear to provide the framework within which both

characters and audience can make sense of the play prove inadequate, even irrelevant. In a play on Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," Menon argues that Shakespeare's "suspicion of causal certainty" (111) queers the directionality of inspiration. For example, Ovid's story of Philomela "marks the textual and physical parameters within which we must read Lavinia," yet it "never tells us anything about desire itself. . . . Shakespeare's repetition of Ovid turns out to be in excess of its origin" (96, 101-102). As an argument about historicist methods, Menon makes the case that a text's sources do not always provide a useful interpretive framework: a text may not only rebel against its apparent "origins" but sever itself completely from them. She provokes us to think about how heterohistorical analysis may desire for a too neat temporal progression that reduces textual intercourse to a one-way street.

Other chapters offer useful insights as well, each appropriating Shakespeare as a theorist intent on challenging heterohistory. Chapter 2, on facts in *Cymbeline*, is particularly incisive in uncovering the epistemological privilege granted to the fact: a unit of meaning taken for granted as "true," the fact creates the very framework that gives it meaning. The final chapter on authenticity and the popular film *Shakespeare in Love* also points out the heterohistorical biases present in some scholarly responses to the film. According to Menon, Shakespeareans criticized the film for its lack of "authenticity" in presenting Shakespeare as unproblematically heterosexual, but, she argues, the film problematizes "hetero sex by linking it to the flexibility of homo texts" (128). That is, the heterosexual romance at the heart of the narrative is marked by misrecognition and is ultimately unreproductive, and it is fundamentally implicated in historical anachronism, the muddling

of historical and textual facts, and other chronological and historical "lies." She says that although the Shakespeare of the film is heterosexual, he is not heteronormative.

On the other hand, I thought her third chapter, on citation, was the most problematic because of its partisan logic. The chapter has many strong points, including an insightful analysis of the distinction between citation and quotation and a brilliant reading of the ambiguity of names and naming in *Much Ado About Nothing*. But the connections between these two parts are obscured as her critique of citation slides without comment into one on the concept of naming altogether. Citation may be a form of naming, but names do not always equate to citations. In addition, her reading of citation/quotation is one-sided; she argues that "citation always needs [quote] marks to mark the quotation as a hygienic unit whose constitutive anachronism and inappropriate desires are glossed over by its citational apparatus" (79). Yet quote marks also can foreground anachronism by making visible something taken out of its time. As much as they may enable the setting off of an original authority from which teleological progression has derived, citations and quotations also can enable the sorts of transhistorical "constellations" and conversations that she says are an essential part of homohistory. In other words, Menon claims that the quote mark embodies a certain meaning in itself, rather than challenging the way the apparatus is used to either contain or free desire. By constructing an ontological distinction between the heterohistorical citation and the homohistorical insistence on "not naming our sources" (93), Menon obfuscates what seems to be the main goal of the chapter: finding a way out of the debate over "proper" sexual terminology by confronting desire's resistance to being named.

Additionally, the endgame of her analysis is at times unclear. For example, the Bollywood films she examines in chapter 3 as examples of homohistorical anti-citation are not the most interesting objects of study, at least in my opinion, and I question what lasting import her argument here will have for Shakespeare studies. A more significant example of the obscurity of Menon's theories comes in the first chapter, where she reads *Venus and Adonis* as a text against teleology. According to her summary, heterohistoricist scholars read the narrative's avoidance of sexual consummation as either a) a sign of Shakespeare's still developing skills (thus a stop on the teleological path towards becoming "the Bard"), or b) a sign of the difference between the fluid perversity of early modern *desire* and the fixed productivity of modern *sexuality*. Menon's reading recuperates the poem as a challenge to the teleological assumption of sex as the only "successful" end to erotic desire: the poem is neither an example of young Will's untutored pen nor a remnant of an alien past but a sophisticated, transhistorical theory of sexuality. Her reading is sophisticated and provocative, but her criticism of other scholarship on the poem because it "fails to fail" is mystifying (49). She suggests that homohistory provides an "alternative to teleology . . . the study of failure" (50), yet one does not escape a teleological framework by studying failure. The concept of failure necessarily implies that of success, and if we conceive of, even valorize, an "end" as a failure, there must be one that is a "success." Instead of deconstructing teleology and moving beyond concepts like success and failure, Menon adopts an anti-teleological stance that remains within the heterohistorical model.

Despite these problems, for the most part Menon brings together diverse sources quite effectively, and she uncovers provocative theoretical implications in Shakespeare's

works. Menon's novel approach to history merits attention not only from those interested in the study of desire and sexuality but also from all scholars interested in "the past." This is not because she overthrows historicism as a method or because it offers us a new model of early modern sexuality; if such were her intentions, I think she does neither. Rather, readers who can get past Menon's sometimes polemical tone will find a call to methodological self-examination that, despite overreaching in its claims, can be a useful reminder of the need for thoughtful evaluation of scholarly assumptions. While many will disagree, perhaps vehemently, with Menon's assertions, I think that articulating such disagreements is a productive exercise.