



Walter, Melissa Emerson. The Italian Novella and Shakespeare's Comic Heroines

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Walter, Melissa Emerson.

The Italian Novella and Shakespeare's Comic Heroines.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 279. ISBN 978-1-4875-0364-2 (hardcover) \$67.

This thoroughly researched book is both a critical assessment of the connection between the Italian novella and Shakespeare's comedy and an analysis of Shakespeare's creation of the female comic character. Through numerous examples, Walter demonstrates that the most prevalent "conventional conceits" (3) of the Italian novella also appear in the dramatic narratives of the Shakespearean comedy. The term "conventional conceits" is a helpful alternative to the concept of intertext, because it captures more accurately the traffic of small units and signs of meaning between the novella and the comedy. The book also introduces another useful term, "frame tales" (6), which refers to the tales from the novella and from other textual and non-textual sources that are the grounds of Shakespeare's comedy. The new critical and theoretical vocabulary offered in this book adds to recent critical discussion of the nature of such terms as source, invention (the development of a topic), influence, and imitation in early modern literary studies.

Expanding on the familiar observation that the plots of many of Shakespeare's comedies derived from the plots of the Italian novella, Walter argues that, in addition to the familiar works by Giovanni Boccaccio, William Painter, Barnabe Riche, Matteo Bandello, Marguerite de Navarre, and George Whetstone, other texts and visual sources provide material for the study of conventional conceits and frame tales in the theatrical dramatization of the comedies. Walter also shows that the fictional correlatives to the "delimited space of the stage" (6) can be traced back to the spaces of storytelling in the novella. In both the novella and the comedies, tales are told in a publicly displayed space. Walter analyzes "spatial motifs" (7), understood to mean private spaces in which women's comedic lives unfold in manifold ways in political and private communities within Shakespeare's comedies. Taken together, these terms provide a "figural framework" (7) for Walter's interpretation, which is expanded in seven chapters full of compelling analyses of aesthetic patterns, spatial motifs, and conventional conceits, including objects like beds, trunks, and caskets. The introduction ends with a useful short section, "A Map of the Book," which provides a brief overview of individual chapters.

The book covers a range of Shakespeare's Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Cymbeline*. The first chapter focuses on the early comedies. It explores how female characters shape their language of "norms and values," especially in opposition to the "silencing discourses of chastity" (27) and within the closed spaces of the novella and the comedy, in which the gendered tension is represented. The second chapter relates the well-known casket scene from *The Merchant of Venice* to the tales about the erotic commodification of objects—chests, tubs, trunks—in the novella from the *Decameron*. The trunk motif is developed further in chapter 3, which explores *Twelfth Night*. Walter interprets the trunk as a stage signifier connected to the theatricality of enclosed spaces in the play, by relating the trunk to numerous references to it in the non-literary context—shipwreck narratives, for instance—illustrating how the trunk functions as a material conventional conceit in Shakespeare's comedy. The fourth chapter examines jealousy as a narrative motif derived from Boccaccio and dramatized in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Given the paucity of new critical studies on this comedy, it is welcoming to read a chapter on this play, a chapter that focuses on the themes of jealousy, household, and domesticity. The story of Promos and Cassandra from Whetstone's *Heptameron* is examined as the frame for the stage narrative of rape in chapter 5, devoted to *Measure for Measure*. The subject of the sixth chapter is *All's Well That Ends Well*, and the critical focus is on the analysis of feminist discourse and claims made by women in this play and on exploring the models of women's ways of "narrating [...] discussing [...] and pursuing their desires" (113) in the *Decameron*. The author is especially good at tracing the theatricalization of Boccaccio's narrative strategies. The final analytical chapter is concerned with *Cymbeline*, a late romance that lends itself ideally to Walter's argument: this play ties together the comedy's indebtedness to the novella, with a critical focus on material objects signifying closed spaces, and intertwines several stories of the ravishment of women. The author promotes the idea that the more Shakespeare interacted with the novella, the more proto-feminist his works became.

This book covers several literary-historical and theoretical areas: medieval and Renaissance Italian literature, early modern English drama and fiction, early modern English translations of the Continental novella,

contemporary object theory, and early modern visual culture. The book is a welcome addition to scholarship about the interrelationship between drama and fiction; this link was more obvious to early modern readers and spectators than it is to us, and it therefore deserves far more critical scrutiny than it is typically afforded by modern scholarship. This book is a major contribution in the direction of such research. It also makes a significant contribution to scholarship on Shakespeare's comedies, on which there has not recently been a major monograph. The publisher must be commended for the high quality of the book's production.

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