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Miller, Nichole E. Violence and Grace: Exceptional Life between Shakespeare and Modernity

Mark Fortier

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Miller, Nicole E.

Correction: Miller, Nichole E.*Violence and Grace: Exceptional Life between Shakespeare and Modernity.*

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014. Pp. x, 245. ISBN 978-0-8101-3014-2 (hardcover) US\$79.95.

Nicole Miller's *Violence and Grace* sets a handful of plays by Shakespeare as well as a few works by his contemporaries (Marlowe's *Edward II* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*) in dialogue with a wide range of twentieth-century political thinkers to explore violence inflicted on those targeted for reasons of gender and sexuality. The book's ultimate goal is to bring humanities scholarship into active political engagement with contemporary issues of gender-based violence.

Many will no doubt come to this book primarily for its readings of early modern dramatic literature. Miller's interpretive skills are sophisticated and meticulous and her readings are engaging and often convincing. Her focus on political philosophy allows her to bring fresh ideas and ways of seeing to often-glossed works—as when she brings notions of “bare life” and the body in pain to her analysis of the way Katherine suffers in *The Taming of the Shrew*. What interests me in Miller's book, however, is not so much its specific acts of literary criticism as its more general project; she offers a striking example of a genre of highly intellectualized and erudite humanities scholarship such as perhaps would seem more characteristic of a period from the recent past: the heyday of theoretically-inflected work.

Miller engages, sometimes extensively, with a truly impressive array of politico-theological thinkers from the twentieth century and earlier: Agamben, Arendt, Aristotle, Badiou, Bataille, Benjamin, Butler, Cicero, Derrida, Freud, Frye, Hegel, Heidegger, Kantorowicz, Levinas, Marx, Mauss, Nietzsche, St. Paul, Schmitt, Weber, Weil—to name only the most prominent. Anyone lamenting the waning of the theoretical turn in literary criticism might take succour and pleasure from this book.

Like much theoretically-informed criticism, Miller's work is dense sometimes to the point of opacity. She embraces a difficult and gnarled prose style which sometimes, I suspect, is not really susceptible to straightforward explanation. Moreover, she errs, especially in her footnotes, on the side of pursuing ideas somewhat further than seems immediately relevant, at the expense of a more focused and streamlined argument.

One problem that has perennially haunted highly theoretical discourse—see, for instance, the longstanding attacks on Derrida—is the sense that its intellectual insularity defeats any possibility of its making a contribution to political action and efficacy. Certainly, especially in Derrida, there is a necessary questioning of the relation between critique and action; integrity calls for the constant raising of this question. There has been, however, aside from directly political and activist thinkers such as Marx, a suspicion that dense works of philosophy and theory are not easily recruited in direct political struggle. Miller, as heir to this philosophical and theoretical tradition, appears to be profoundly sensitive to this critique and eager to engage with it. In this regard, Miller's focus on contemporary oppression of gender and sexual difference as a place where her theoretically-informed readings might contribute to political activism moves her work in a direction not broached by many of her twentieth-century intellectual sources. Unfortunately, her attempts to wrench theory into the service of current sociopolitical activism are not entirely convincing or satisfactory. Miller's failure in this regard is partly due to tackling a problem that has flummoxed many before her. Her overly-impacted analytical style, moreover, like a very heavy meal, does not easily contribute to a desire to take to the street. Her book ends with a rather vague and deflating attempt to push humanities scholarship into political activism. She cites Alcibiades interpreting Timon's "last words" at the conclusion of *Timon of Athens*, and his promise to begin the task of righting the disorder in the state. "Alcibiades' task is also our own," Miller writes: "Let our drums strike"—not just in reading, writing, thinking, teaching, but in acting" (186). For Miller, Alcibiades's act of interpreting Timon's last words is "a start" in the movement from words to action, and opens the possibility of moving from reading and thinking to political engagement. As plans of action go, however, this one remains extremely vague. One is left with the sense that the desire for movement from humanities scholarship to political activism haunts Miller's book as underdeveloped, frustrated, unfulfilled, and lacking a real sense of how to get there from here.

I see in Miller's book, therefore, a very interesting example, for better and for worse, of highly theorized analysis such as was, perhaps, characteristic of the late twentieth-century, updated and put in the service of an engagement with highly contemporary sociopolitical struggles.