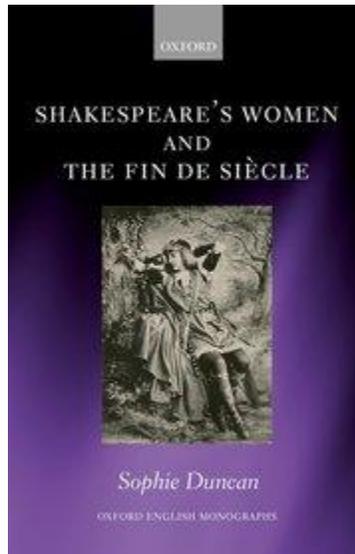


ISSUE 13.3 (WINTER 2017)



**Renegotiating the Women who Performed Shakespeare**

[\*Shakespeare's Women and the Fin De Siècle\*](#). Sophie Duncan. Oxford: OUP, 2016. 234 pp.

Reviewed by [Anjna Chouhan](#), Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

<1>Sophie Duncan's book is an engaging and thoroughly illuminating study of iconic women — Lillie Langtry, Ellen Terry, Madge Kendal and Mrs Patrick Campbell — performing Shakespeare in the Victorian *fin de siècle*. What Shakespeare's women, in particular, afforded these actresses in terms of artistic, intellectual and even societal liberty is, ultimately, what forms the basis of Duncan's discussion. The book seamlessly engages with late Victorian theatre, discourses of the *fin de siècle*, performance history and women on stage as well as contemporary scholarship.

<2>Throughout the book, Duncan turns up alarming paradoxes about late Victorian attitudes towards female performers. The most striking paradox is what Duncan calls the 'surrogate performer' ( 139) who is as at once an embodiment of a long-dead actress's performance of an iconic heroine, and simultaneously an innovator and contemporary celebrity. This is especially palpable in Chapter Four when Duncan discusses Terry's portrayal of Imogen in *Cymbeline*, which was plagued by audience and critic comparisons to Sarah Siddons's legendary performance of the same character in 1787. Duncan rather humorously observes that none of those commenting ever actually saw Siddons in the role.

<3>Another fascinating point of contention that *Shakespeare's Women and the Fin de Siècle* turns up is the reality of a salaried actress living financially independently, yet not autonomous enough to be free of social censure. Duncan makes the interesting revelation that Kendal sought to navigate through this conundrum through careful structuring of her autobiography (*Dame Madge Kendal*, 1933). For example, early in her study, Duncan notes that Kendal quotes a letter written to her by Georg Bernard Shaw that refers to her late husband as 'her leading man.' Duncan observes that Kendal interjects her own statement here: 'he was never my leading man [...] I was always his leading lady' (24). Exploring the agency afforded to actresses like Kendal in narrating their own lives and, by extension, legacies, makes this a useful addition to scholarship on women in theatre, especially nineteenth century Shakespeare.

<4>Chapter One revisits well-mined territory: the cross-dressing Rosalinds of Kendal and Langtry in *As You Like It*. While they were innovative and, by implication, troubling, they were somehow settling: wives in real life, therefore sexually appealing within appropriate societal boundaries. It is here that Duncan draws attention to the rivalry and public assumptions made about and between Kendal and Langtry. One was a normalised, respectable wife while the other was an adulteress – sexually available. Engaging with late nineteenth and early twentieth century discussions about sexuality, Duncan alludes to Langtry's having inspired conversations about drag, cross-dressing and queering. But it was these women's negotiations of their public images, and by extension audience reception, that secured their individual successes. As in the works of Tracy Davies (*Actresses as Working Women: Their social Identity in Victorian Culture*, London: Routledge, 1991) and Gail Marshall (*Actresses on the Victorian Stage*, Cambridge: CUP, 1998), Duncan's book notes how Shakespeare's women afforded actresses a degree of artistic autonomy, and she goes further to claim that these performers sought out their own intellectual and even cultural autonomy.

<5>A recurring theme of the book is that just as the *fin de siècle* was destabilising societal expectations of virtuous, compliant women, Shakespearean productions were tellingly comforting, the polite and loyal Imogen being a notable example. Readers might find themselves tickled by Terry's reference to Imogen as 'Lady Baby' (p 134), brilliantly contextualised and brought to light by Duncan's excavation of the actress's promptbooks and notes. Chapter Two, tellingly titled 'Bad Women, Good Wives' re-evaluates and problematizes scholars' assumptions about Terry's own attitude towards her performance of Lady Macbeth. Duncan makes the argument that 'the sources for Terry's Lady Macbeth reveal the fascinating nexus of critical gulfs and congruencies between Terry's stated intentions and reception in the role' (70). The careful reading of Terry's own promptbook turns up some significant findings, largely that Terry seemed to be resisting the idea of 'feminine horror' and moving towards 'self-control' (71). This self-control is echoed in John Singer Sargent's iconic portrait of Terry's Lady Macbeth (1889), and Duncan seems to suggest that Sargent – knowingly or otherwise – replaced the great Henry Irving and, by extension Macbeth, as the centre of Shakespeare's story. No longer was Terry the beautiful subordinate to her boss and co-star Irving, as was claimed by numerous reviewers and often asserted by scholarship, but in that portrait and with that role, she carved out an interpretive space of her own: 'Terry's interpretation intervened in the contemporary dialogue between theatrical innovation and traditionalist bias.' (74).

<6>Picking up this theme, Chapter Four shifts attention to one of Irving's lesser-known productions: *Cymbeline*. Duncan debunks contemporary scholarship and discussions about Terry's artistic inferiority to Irving within the company's dynamic, citing her detailed notes to Irving, as well as her specific instructions to company members, and – revealingly – her role as director in the rehearsal room. In a move highly conducive to the further study of performance history, Duncan has painstakingly examined the promptbook for this production, noting the division of labour and hand between Irving and Terry. In addition, Duncan overturns assumptions long held by theatre historians about Shaw's influence on Terry's performance of Imogen, the rejected wife of the rather wet young hero, Posthumous. Terry emerges from Duncan's study of Imogen as a theatrical creative and manager with as much credit and input as her celebrity male co-star.

<7>One of the delights of this book is Duncan's study and deconstruction of language. Her ability to mine and unpack seemingly simple lines from correspondence and reviews etc. is masterful and leads to some insightful encounters and readings. Drawing on unpublished letters to Clement Scott, by way of instance, Duncan reveals how Terry's prime concern was to claim Lady Macbeth as a woman: part of a tribe that is above or even outside the critical comprehension of men. This puts Terry's own interpretation at odds with the public – who were focused on her as a contradiction of womanliness. Thus, Duncan's work becomes a valuable contribution to performance history and, specifically, Terry studies.

<8>Duncan uses the aesthetic movement's obsession with beauty as an interesting point of contention between valid female characterisation, and the basic urge to look at a beautiful woman. How can a woman be virtuous, murderous, ambitious, sexual and beautiful? Those things not only failed to be reconciled in the late Victorian imagination, they also undermined the actress as the embodiment of a Shakespearian heroine. Duncan quotes a review from *The Star*, in which Terry's Lady Macbeth is referred to as being 'pungent with the *odeur de femme*' (80). This confusion was compounded by the fact that newspapers were talking about *Macbeth* and the Whitechapel murders together. The gruesome murders in London and the fascination with secret killings outraged and yet fascinated audiences, and Duncan carefully unpacks the implications of projecting these anxieties onto the iconic figure of a murderess. In fact, one of the major innovations of this book is its engagement with world outside theatre, from the Whitechapel murders and discussions about mental health, to aestheticism and the Gothic genre.

<9>From a societal perspective Terry seems to make Mrs Patrick Campbell look like some kind of sexual harridan. Chapter Three centres itself around Campbell, the great *fin de siècle* New Woman of the stage. Duncan pulls Campbell out of discourses hedging her into the fallen woman category, and reconstructs her biography as one deeply coloured by her Shakespearian roles. The sexual, gender-fluid comparative freedom of Rosalind and the girliness of Juliet, calculatedly counteracted the eponymous New Woman in Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893). Campbell tantalisingly blurred the line between her private and stage personae, especially with connections between her own psychological health and her depiction of Ophelia. Duncan argues that it was she – not Terry – who provoked 'significant critical debate

within the theatrical mainstream, and the first acknowledged as destabilising the prevailing paradigm of sympathetic, pretty madness'(123). Performance history will be richer for Duncan's insight here.

<10>Chapter Five is unique in that it focuses on characters rather than the performers of those roles. Helena from *All's Well That Ends Well* and Cleopatra, the latter of which takes the reader into the lesser trod field of Shakespeare and pornography - which Duncan rightly claims 'is a neglected critical subfield; regrettably so, given that both Shakespeare performance and pornography articulate cultural fantasies and fears regarding sexuality'(193). This provides a neat springboard to the Edwardian era, wherein Duncan explores the immediate legacy of the *fin de siècle* female Shakespearian performer, notably as a means of bestowing a license upon women going into the new century to act, direct, manage, study, critique and even, eventually, vote.

<11>If aspects of the previous chapters delve into delightful speculation, the Epilogue functions as a reality check. Drawing on contemporary theatre, the technological advancement of live screenings and, ultimately, the portrayal of current female actors in the media, Duncan notes that the very same cultural and societal contradictions faced by *fin de siècle* women actors are echoed and re-rehearsed in our own theatrical climate of star cross-media performers. Mentioning Terry, Campbell and Langtry in the same breath as Judi Dench, Maggie Smith and Harriet Walter is a striking comment on female stardom built on the foundations of Shakespeare's women. Ultimately, Duncan's book is an energetic and greatly illuminating study of everything that orbited the world of Shakespeare's women and theatre within the discourse and context of the *fin de siècle*. Duncan brilliantly handles the domestic and theatrical roles of performing women, all the time balancing these opposing realms against the commercial, moral and social expectations thrust upon the women of theatre. Her attention to detail in the reconstruction of performances and their reception is commendable, and while impeccably learned, Duncan's narrative style is accessible, engaging and a meaningful contribution to both theatre history and Victorian Shakespeare Studies.