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Book Review: Pamela Allen Brown. *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.

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Notes

1 For a review of recent titles, see James E. Sanders, 'Creating the Early Atlantic World', *Renaissance Quarterly* 56 (2003): 139–49.
2 See for example, Frederic W. Gleach, *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures* (Lincoln, 1997); and Helen C. Rountree, ed *Powhatan Foreign Relations, 1500–1722* (Charlottesville, 1993).
3 The following titles provide excellent introductions to the field: Peter A. Coclanis, '*Drang Nach Osten*: Bernard Bailyn, the World-Island, and the Idea of Atlantic History', *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002): 169–82; Bernard Bailyn, 'The Idea of Atlantic History', Harvard University: International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, 1500–1800, Working Paper No. 96-01, 1996; Daniel W. Howe, *American History in an Atlantic Context* (Oxford, 1993).

Pamela Allen Brown. *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. Pp xi, 263.

In *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England,* Pamela Allen Brown places the witty, insubordinate roles frequently ascribed to women in jesting culture in dialogue with representations of women in conduct books, anti-feminist satire, and plays in England from the Tudor period to the Restoration. Moving fluidly between social rituals (such as skimmington rides and charivari) and cultural manifestations of lived experience in ballads and plays, Brown argues that jesting culture has been wrongly overlooked by previous scholars searching for clues about early modern women's lives. Brown offers a cogent argument for the evidence recorded jests provide about female resistance to the various prescriptions and proscriptions intended to govern their behavior, and compiles wonderfully revealing anecdotes about obstreperous early modern women who elected to play the shrew rather than the sheep.

Brown has conducted exhaustive archival research at Harvard as well as at the Huntington and British Libraries. Anyone interested in jest literature, regardless of the aim of their study, would be well served by the extensive

bibliography that concludes the work, which is conveniently divided into primary and secondary materials. The bibliography is wide-ranging in part because of the 'deliberately broad' nature of Brown's definition of jesting literature, including 'any verbal, gestural, or dramatic form that could be used to spur laughter or ridicule' (3). Brown is judicious about letting the women of the jests speak for themselves, quoting generously from the abundant primary documents she has consulted. In addition to careful readings of these fascinating textual artifacts, Brown also offers intriguing analyses of woodcuts from *The Roxburghe Ballads* and the title pages of satirical pamphlets such as *Westward for Smelts, or the Waterman's Fare of Mad-Merry Western Wenches*.

The book begins with a substantial introduction that establishes the parameters of the study as well as its niche in early modern scholarship. Brown notes there the often chasmic divide that separates literary scholars' and historians' approaches to and perceptions of popular culture. It is unlikely that this book will do anything to reconcile the conflicting approaches, predicated, in Brown's assessment, on varying understandings of the 'popular'. According to Brown, many historians still follow Peter Burke's division of the great and little traditions, which accords women no place in the transition of popular culture into elite literary forms. Literary scholars are, in Brown's conception of things, more willing to consider the influence that women might have exerted over 'elite' cultural forms both as transmitters of narrative material and as audience members whose tastes had to be taken into account. The frequency with which locutions such as 'may well have,' '[i]t seems entirely possible that' and 'might have' occur in this book points to one of the central differences between the business of historians and literary scholars: the former deal more in matters of fact, and the latter more in matters of interpretation. While many of Brown's interpretations are powerfully persuasive, they lack the firm basis in fact that is required of historical analyses. Perhaps Brown's work will help early modern historians unearth more fruitful trails of evidence about early modern women's lives but, until that evidence is thoroughly mined we will have to remain in the speculative realm to which Brown rightly consigns herself.

In each chapter Brown begins by describing communal practices in which she argues for greater female participation than has heretofore been acknowledged. She then moves to popular cultural examples of representations of women fulfilling these functions. So, for example, the first chapter begins by establishing the juridical role that women played in early modern neighborhoods, policing matters of morality and reputation. The illustration provided for this is the Mistresses Ford and Page's witty exposé of Falstaff's lechery in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In the second chapter, Brown

argues that Mistress Quickly's devolution over the course of the Henriad from bawdy bar-wench to guardian of Falstaff's deathbed is a misleadingly wan representation of women's role in alehouse culture. Pointing to more vigorous cultural images of women holding their own in both drinking and jesting competitions (such as popular tales of Mother Bunch and Long Meg of Westminster), Brown maintains that women played a vital role in what she characterizes as 'neighborhood theatre.'

This attention to neighborhood theatre is continued in the third chapter, which explores the many jests and jigs associated with early modern cuckoldry. Pointing out that early modern tales of cuckoldry are almost unique in their vilification of women, Brown contends that the bitter invective against male inadequacies couched in jests dealing with socio-cultural responses to sexual indiscretions, such as the potentially libelous 'horn fair,' actually gave women the upper hand. The role that women played in monitoring domestic violence is the subject of the fourth chapter. Here, Brown marshals a great deal of textual evidence that women shamed abusive men publicly in order to curtail violence against their wives. The centerpiece of the chapter is a comparative reading of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and John Fletcher's response, *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*.

In the fifth chapter – the final one concerned with women's role as arbiters of community conduct – Brown examines two pamphlets in which women are depicted as masterminding lucrative gullings: *A Quest of Enquirie by Women to Know, Whether the Tripe-Wife Were Trimmed by Doll, Yea or No* and *The Brideling, Sadling, and Ryding of a Rich Churl in Hampshire*. The popularity of these scandalous tales and the public debate that they likely engendered carries over into the final chapter's consideration of the popular debate over the medieval figure of Griselda. Brown notes that for every writer who held up Griselda as a model of wifely obedience, by the early modern period there were numerous others who construed her – and any man who would choose such a woman for his mate – as a fool. Furthermore, Brown contends that the tradition of regarding Griselda as a less than ideal wife can be traced to Chaucer's rendition of the tale.

Better a Shrew Than a Sheep is an absorbing and amusing book that reads very quickly. Clearly inspired by her subjects, Brown writes with a verve that borders on sass at times – a virtue in a work devoted to early modern outlets for female defiance. Brown is generous in her praise of the many predecessors who have influenced her work – most particularly Jean Howard, Linda Woodbridge, Gail Paster and Frances Dolan – but their presence here is appropriately muted. The footnotes, while copious, are not intrusive, although

at times they presented information that this reader, at least, found substantive enough to warrant inclusion in the main text. This is a book that will serve equally well in the library and the classroom, and which will necessarily factor in analyses of early modern popular culture for some time to come. While it may be the case that women's place in jesting culture has been overlooked up to this point, this book will assuredly persuade many other scholars to follow the evidentiary trail that Brown has blazed here.

Regina Buccola

Diana Brydon and Irena R. Makaryk (eds). *Shakespeare in Canada: 'A World Elsewhere'?* Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2002. Pp xii, 490.

This excellent collection makes a valuable contribution to theatre history in Canada. In the introduction, Irena Makaryk chronicles the history of Shakespeare productions in Canada from the early days, beginning with productions by eighteenth-century garrison troupes and gentry-elite amateurs, and continuing through the Theatre Royal, established in 1870 'by the First Ontario Rifles in Winnipeg at the rear of a store' (10), the Queen's Arctic Theatre, the first permanent theatre in Montreal, in an upper-storey warehouse (11–12), and finally the Stratford Festival. Karen Bamford, in a piece rich with archival research, traces the history of the Shakespeare Society of Toronto, 1928–69, affiliated with the political elite and committed to England and empire, which mounted a number of full productions. (The Society 'expired in 1969, shortly after Trudeau's Liberal government committed Canada to a bilingual and multi-ethnic future' [83].) Marta Straznicky discusses Shakespeare on CBC radio, 1947–55, a series which brought Shakespeare to the many Canadians with no access to live theatre, and broadcast the entire cycle of English history plays in 1953–4. Several essays discuss the seminal influence of the Massey Commission (1949–51) in sparking the quest for a national theatre. Though the 'Massey Report's vehemence concerning the classics' hindered efforts to foster Canadian playwriting (Margaret Groome 117), there is no doubt that Vincent Massey was a staunch supporter of Canadian theatre and a believer in theatre's social power (see Makaryk 22).