

# What Price Honour?

Reviewed by Ligneus

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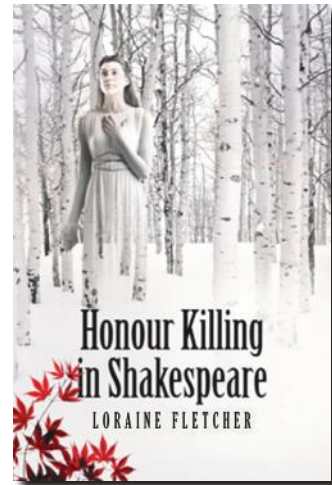
Honour Killing in Shakespeare. By Lorraine Fletcher. Greenwich Exchange, 2019. 350 pages (\$26.46 paperback).

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In *Honour Killing in Shakespeare*, Lorraine Fletcher opens our eyes to how many Shakespearean plots and plays are rooted in misogyny. “Attempted or successful honour killings form the plots of a surprising number of Shakespeare’s plays,” she announces in the first sentence of the introduction. Desdemona’s death in *Othello* at the hands of her husband comes immediately to mind, of course. Less obvious is Hero’s faked death in *Much Ado About Nothing*, which is an honour killing on a par with Othello’s murder of his wife, as far as Claudio and Don John are concerned.

“The honour killing in *Cymbeline* is in respect easier to define than in *Othello*: there’s no racism mixed up in the slanderer’s or the honour killer’s misogynies,” asserts Fletcher. In *Romeo and Juliet*, she, too, fakes her death to avoid being forced to marry Paris and suffer marital rape. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes believes Hermione, his loyal wife, committed adultery with his friend, so she must suffer. Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is condemned by her father, Aegeus, to marry Demetrius (the man she does not love) or die.

*Measure for Measure*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*... Fletcher dissects play after play and leaves no doubt that their author felt



compelled to visit and revisit the theme of female faithfulness. But do those plays reflect the playwright's misogyny? Or was he only showing us the misogynistic world he lived in? Fletcher admires the strong and capable women she sees in the plays and can't condemn their creator. She concludes: "Shakespeare wrote... to entertain.... [H]is plays are not reflections but indictments of misogyny, [which helped bring about] a slow shift towards enlightenment."

*Honour Killing in Shakespeare* is also a delight to read. Here is what she writes after spending most of a page meticulously and efficiently laying out the plots in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

For many readers, this summary will feel like taking a sledgehammer to a cobweb, reducing Shakespeare's greatest comedy to a Human Resources pamphlet about how to define gender discrimination and sexual assault on your company's day and night shift.... But it's only stripping it down to its bare bones that we can begin to see its geometrical elegance and how it works.

Fletcher then spends 24 pages explaining the play's geometrical elegance in words that do justice to the play.

Her approach to the other plays is equally as good. Her insights reflect a modern woman who is deeply read in the plays. This is not a Me-Too reaction to the Bard but a thoughtful addition to existing scholarship.

The question of who wrote the plays, of course, does not arise. But would her book have been different if she had been open to the possibility that someone else wrote the plays instead of William Shakspeare? After all, isn't the search for the true author founded on the belief that the understanding of the literature is enhanced by knowing who the author was? The dissatisfaction caused by being told the son of a glover from Stratford-upon-Avon is the author has driven many people to look elsewhere for the actual author. This search is ongoing, but it seems that we are in the process of confirming that the true author was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. Other candidates appear from time to time but lack any record of having been playwrights or poets or being able to write with the genius shown by the Bard.

One might think that the authorship question should not intrude into a review of a book on misogyny in the plays attributed to Shakespeare, but its

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absence takes away from an otherwise excellent work. Looking over Fletcher's shoulder as she sifts through the plays, I was reminded of how many times I have been reading something written by a Shakespearean scholar and realized that a vital link had been missed because the scholar was steeped in the belief that William Shakspeare wrote the plays. Listen to C.S. Lewis puzzle over the first few sonnets, before finally concluding: "What man in the whole world, except a father or potential father-in-law, cares whether any other man gets married" (*English Literature in the 16th Century—Excluding Drama*, 503–04). Professor Lewis was exasperated because he knew he could not follow his logic and consider whether William Shakspeare could be the father of the Earl of Southampton. On the other hand, had Professor Lewis been open to the possibility that the Earl of Oxford was the author of the plays and sonnets, and that some believe Oxford was the father of the Earl of Southampton, sonnets urging Southampton to marry would suddenly not seem so far-fetched.

Similarly, Fletcher's readings of the plays may have been altered if she knew that the Earl of Oxford's wife had cheated on him while he was in Italy, and that he was talked out of leaving her because he was told he had *unknowingly* slept with her the night before he left? If Fletcher began to consider that Oxford might be the author of the plays, wouldn't she have been interested in mining Oxford's life to try to find out where the author found the women in his plays? Where did he get Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*? Was it Anne Vavasour? Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*: was he thinking of Ann Cecil? Ann again when he wrote Ophelia into *Hamlet*? Did he know a Portia? A Desdemona? A Lady Macbeth?

The excellence of Fletcher's book only whets the appetite for a second edition that will incorporate the Earl of Oxford into our understanding of the women and plots in the plays. But even without the authorship question shaping Fletcher's arguments, *Honour Killing in Shakespeare* is a worthwhile addition to any library. Fletcher may not recognize that *All's Well That Ends Well* is about Oxford being forced to marry someone beneath him, or wonder how Shakespeare could have escaped punishment for writing *Venus and Adonis*, but, even without addressing the links between the Earl of Oxford and the plays, Fletcher has written an engaging book well worth its price for what it discloses of the misogyny that does indeed drive many a plot in the plays some people still attribute to William Shakspeare of Stratford-on-Avon.

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