Review of Eve Rachele Sanders Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England

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Eve Rachele Sanders
Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England
£35.00 hardback

Now that girls are out-performing boys in Britain's schools, this timely book reminds us that efforts used to be made to ensure that the reverse was true. While humanists emphasised the value of literacy, they advocated sex specific methods of reading and writing in order to create an ideal male or female subject. Although gendered reading and writing was used to reinforce conformity there is also evidence that it provoked resistance. In a book that will appeal to anyone interested in the process by which subjectivity is gendered, Sanders considers a range of texts--conduct manuals and educational treatises as well as drama, poetry, and autobiographical writing by women-- which illustrate the humanist agenda and deviations from their proscriptions. Close readings of plays by Shakespeare (Love's Labours Lost, Hamlet and Richard 3) show how characters under pressure to conform to humanist models of gendered behaviour either resist the sex-specific models imposed upon them or use their knowledge of writing to manipulate others. The male reader was encouraged to imitate writers and characters of heroic texts, but women were expected to emulate a passive female ideal. In the case of Cleopatra, the traditional association of chastity and virtue was disrupted by Mary Sidney in Antonius, her translation of Robert Garnier's French play. The anxiety aroused by Sidney's translation led to male-authored drama, such as Samuel Daniel's Tragedy of Cleopatra, which sought to re-establish Cleopatra as a negative female example and Octavia as a female ideal. Thomas Dekker's Whore of Babylon suggests that fears about female power were centred on a woman's ability to write. Sanders's analysis of the powerful writings of Mary Sidney, Grace Mildmay, and Anne Clifford shows that misogynists had good reason to fear the confidence, strength and resistance evident in women's writing.

Joan Fitzpatrick