

Was Shakespeare Chinese?

Being a literary, book-buying type, the Oxford University Press informs me by e-mail of its new publications in the field of literature. And next year is the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, so it was only to be expected that there would be an even large number of books published about him than usual.

I am mildly interested in Shakespearean criticism and have even written a little myself, always bearing in mind Hazlitt's famous remark in his essay *On the Ignorance of the Learned*:

If you want to know the force of human genius we should read

Shakespeare. If we want to see the insignificance of human learning

we may study his commentators.

I am not absolutely in agreement with Hazlitt, however, for there is a certain intellectual pleasure to be had in reading ingenious commentary that serves no useful purpose whatsoever. In its uselessness is its joy; for in an ideological age the exercise of intelligence to no purpose comes as a relief.

Alas, literary criticism, certainly in its academic form, is now the most ideological of all fields. Most criticism seems to be seen through the lens of class, race or sex: one would hardly be surprised to read a Marxist, racial or feminist

critique (dreadful word!) of Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visitors*. (Sic)

Therefore it did not altogether surprise me either to receive from the Oxford University Press the following electronic message:

Did you know that women account for less than 16% of all Shakespearean characters?

(Surely it should be fewer, not less, but let that pass. One does not like to be pedantic.)

I was shocked, really shocked. Surely in this day and age it is time to impose quotas on the sex of characters? (I did see a step in the right direction recently in a production of *Coriolanus*, in which one of the tribunes of the people was played as a woman.)

Now it seems to me that until Shakespeare is re-written to include more women his plays should not be taught in schools, banned from then in fact: and it is likely that if you measured the proportion of lines spoken by women in Shakespeare, the situation would be even worse. It is true that the impact factor (to adapt slightly a term used to measure the relative importance scientific journals) of certain female Shakespearean characters, such as Gertrude and Ophelia, Juliet, Desdemona, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth etc., is considerable, but it is numbers that count. Then, of course,

there are no Chinese characters in Shakespeare, despite being 16 per cent of the world's population. Please don't get me started...

First published in