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**Bianca Del Villano, *Using the Devil with Courtesy. Shakespeare and the Language of (Im)Politeness*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018, pp. 196**

Abstract

This review of Bianca Del Villano's *Using the Devil with Courtesy. Shakespeare and the Language of (Im)Politeness* highlights the interdisciplinary approach used in the volume, so that the pragmatic research at its basis is enlivened with a vast series of theoretical perspectives. The detailed study of im(politeness) phenomena goes hand in hand with the Author's cultural awareness of the deep changes in early modern English society, thus shedding new light onto the interpersonal relationships revealed by dramatic dialogue both in *Hamlet* and in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the two plays chosen as case studies.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; politeness theories; historical pragmatics; interdisciplinarity; *Hamlet*; *The Taming of the Shrew*

When commenting on the Shakespearean phrase from *Twelfth Night* used in the title of Del Villano's volume, Keir Elam observes that Feste, the speaker, "makes fun of the politeness and gentility that are so central to the play's concerns" (Shakespeare 2008: n. 33 to 4.2.33). Feste is mock-exorcising Malvolio in the famous dark-room scene of this play and, feigning to be speaking to the devil himself to whom Malvolio has allegedly fallen prey, claims to be "one of those gentle ones that will use the devil with courtesy". The original Shakespearean text and its editorial comment encapsulate the two main keywords of this study: "politeness" in its contemporary meaning, and "courtesy" with its early modern semantics, connected to the transformation of courts and courtiers between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Two words (and two concepts) that Del Villano analyses in depth from both the pragmalinguistic and the cultural side of their meaning and usage. It is clear, then, that the investigation carried out by the Author involves Shakespeare studies, pragmatics and in particular politeness theories, semantics, and cultural studies. The interdisciplinarity of the approach is, therefore, evident as early as the title itself and becomes more and more manifest along the four chapters into which the book is divided.

The first chapter offers a well outlined panorama of politeness studies, showing their use in defining interpersonal and social relationships. Politeness theo-

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ries, from their onset in the early 1970s in the wake of John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) implemented with Erving Goffman's definition of "face" and Paul Grice's "cooperative principle", were applied to natural conversation and, generally speaking, to speech. But soon it became evident that other linguistic territories could be explored with these tools, especially when dealing with the language of the past, i.e. with those times when audio technological recording was impossible. This resulted in drama becoming a privileged research field to study, both synchronically and diachronically, the features of conversational interactions. Of course researchers have always been well aware that plays are fictional constructs and that playwrights build up their dramatic situations 'artificially' so to speak, and make their characters move in a pre-defined context. Nevertheless (and possibly just because of that), this does not prevent the application of pragmatics tools to drama, given that all the aspects necessary to analyse conversation are there: there are speakers involved in dialogues and there is a context. Del Villano, grounding her research on a multitude of studies from Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson's seminal *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena* (1978) and the same authors' revised version of their study in 1987 to the most recent developments of the idea of (im)politeness offered by Jonathan Culpeper's *Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offence* (2011), delves through a vast background of theoretical positions in order to detect the most suitable research paths for her exploration of *Hamlet* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, the two Shakespeare plays chosen as case studies.

Before investigating the plays in chapters 3 and 4, however, the Author devotes chapter 2 to the historicisation of our contemporary concept of politeness. Here she approaches not only the linguistic problem of exploring early modern forms and strategies of (im)polite conversational behaviour, but also the context of Elizabethan and early Jacobean society with its religious, political and cultural turmoils. In this way Del Villano explores the intriguing phenomenon of social mobility inside which the "culture of courtesy" was an essential pass to promotion, also foregrounding a "new sense of the Self" and the concept of subjectivity connected to its Reformation origins (16). The *facework* (in the Goffmanian sense) necessary to create and preserve speakers' social image results at the centre of the Author's analytical concerns. In this perspective the plays selected as case studies present a multifaceted range of (im)politeness strategies, from the court(esy) language in *Hamlet*, to the lower classes' speech in *The Shrew*, where gender issues are also focused through the powerful highlighting of a female subject.

Although for her detailed study of the two Shakespeare plays Del Villano has deftly made use of the whole apparatus of historical pragmatics, the categories mostly employed derive from Brown and Levinson's research of politeness strategies and from Culpeper's later focus on impoliteness. To these she also adds specific works devoted to Shakespeare plays, such as Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's "Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies" (1989). Well equipped with these and other tools, she copes with the complexities of the two plays in so scrupulous a way as to be able to add many insights to the traditional readings of *Hamlet* and of *The Shrew*.

Courtesy in *Hamlet* is investigated as "a performative social practice that

formed part of the fabric of the English monarchy and State in the aftermath of the War of the Roses" (73), rising from "one's position in the discursive structure – a structure that obviously reflected class hierarchy" (74). The value of the interdisciplinary approach employed by Del Villano is evident from these historical notes (constantly in the Author's mind and text), complemented by a skillful resort to politeness studies. In my opinion, one of the major results of the Author's analysis of *Hamlet* is the application not only of the category of affection (as introduced by Brown and Gilman 1989) in order to disentangle the intricacies of courtly discourse between Hamlet and Claudius, but also of the "reflexivity courtesy" variable, i.e. a positive politeness strategy used by "people of high rank": "the more polite a lord, the more powerful he appeared to those around him" (96). The most strategic dialogues in the tragedy are focused by Del Villano in particular when Hamlet dissembles his words under the mask of folly (for example when the Prince talks to Rosencrantz and to Osric so as to reveal their hypocrisy, but also when he dialogues with the Gravediggers and arrives at admitting to his own discursive defeat). Hamlet's frequent recourse to off-record strategies and to mock politeness is underlined as distinctive of his speaking, while his counterfeited madness allows him "to exploit off-recordness strategically to offend others or to defend himself" (122).

The relations of power, which play a great role in *Hamlet* because of the tragedy's courtly context, are examined from a different standpoint in *The Shrew*, where the context is given by a 'middle-class' patriarchal family and by gender relationships. After summarising the traditional position of shrews in early modern patriarchal society when such derisive and dangerous forms of scolding as 'carting' and 'ducking' were adopted, Del Villano proceeds to the analysis of some dialogues in the play from its very beginning, i.e. from the Induction. Actually, here the playwright seems to experiment contrasting class positions (and therefore contrasting politeness strategies) in the relationship between Sly the tinker and the Lord, as a prelude to the stronger discrepancies of the gendered exchanges between Petruccio and Katherine in the play. Furthermore, the Lord's long speech to his servant (Ind. 1. 104-22) contains in a nutshell the picture of the ideal wife and of the behaviour such a woman must have to show her whole obedience to her husband: "the speech offers a description of the proper behaviour of wives, characterised by humility, courtesy and 'low tongue'" (147). It is not difficult to project, by contrast, this portrait of the ideal wife onto Katherine's subsequent ways of dealing with the other characters in the play. While Hamlet's pragmatic strategies are mainly labelled as indirect and off-record, those of the protagonist in *The Shrew* are read as direct, on record and ready to offend the addressee. This is why Del Villano interprets Katherine's speeches as due to willful impoliteness. However, since Petruccio is "a direct and bald speaker" himself (158), their dialogic struggles often result in "flyting", i.e. a competitive ritual game of insults (see 161), seasoned with mock politeness.

What contemporary gender studies like the least, i.e. Katherine's final speech signalling her acceptance of the traditional patriarchal hierarchy, is also readable, according to the Author's study, as mock politeness, joking on Petruccio's positive face (169): "Politeness has emerged as a 'dress' that Petruccio forces on her

but which she eventually appropriates by performing it as a self-defensive-strategy. In the end, she plays the obedient wife.” (170). One might say that Petruccio’s efforts to impose a new identity on Katherine (his renaming her ‘Kate’ witnesses to this) results in her strong defence of her own inner identity through a clever use of all linguistic strategies at her disposal, from excessive face-threatening acts to excessive (and therefore imitative) gestures of polite deference.

As a whole, on the one hand Del Villano’s research shows how an integrated theoretical and methodological apparatus is always able to offer fresh insights even about such a widely studied subject as Shakespeare plays. On the other, while revealing new results as far as the chosen plays are concerned, it highlights the potentialities of Historical Pragmatics to shed new light into early modern language and its social, power and gender interconnections. And it also invites further research.

### Works Cited

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