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Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage

Dr Mary Floyd-Wilson

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In this ground-breaking study, Mary Floyd-Wilson argues that the early modern English believed their affections and behavior were influenced by hidden sympathies and antipathies that coursed through the natural world. These forces not only produced emotional relationships but they were also levers by which ordinary people supposed they could manipulate nature and produce new knowledge. Indeed, it was the invisibility of nature's secrets-or occult qualities-that led to a privileging of experimentation, helping to displace a reliance on ancient theories. Floyd-Wilson demonstrates how Renaissance drama participates in natural philosophy's production of epistemological boundaries by staging stories that assess the knowledge-making authority of women healers and experimenters. Focusing on Twelfth Night, Arden of Faversham, A Warning for Fair Women, All's Well That Ends Well, The Changeling, and The Duchess of Malfi, Floyd-Wilson suggests that as experiential evidence gained scientific ground, women's presumed intimacy with nature's secrets was either diminished or demonized.

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