David Williamson's anxieties about feminism have been for a long time manifest in his plays, but it is true to say, I think, that they have become more insistent and urgent since Brilliant Lies and more openly debated, often in Shavian ways in his plays, and in essays. He cannot, however, be said to share Shaw’s generosity to the New Woman of the late twentieth century, despite Williamson’s close familiarity with her. Williamson occupies a curious position among our public intellectuals in being, unwittingly, the most finished example we have of a postfeminist anti-feminist (to label him a misogynist is perhaps to go too far), able to make conservative comedy of manners out of the phenomenon of the feminist woman, and at the same time alert and responsive to the pain of the male who is forced to make radical adaptations to new and continuing negotiations of gendered identity.

Williamson's Dead White Males, which I admire in a qualified way — for its theatricality, its skilful non-naturalistic intertwining of arguments and parallel plots and even for its analysis of gender issues as they relate to men — addresses many issues simultaneously. While I do not wish to suggest that feminism is his main target in this play, I want to here mount a case against Williamson's treatment of academic feminism's engagement with Shakespeare. My project here is to critique the play's version of feminists' accounts of Shakespeare, and paradoxically attempt to make a case that it represents an example of a postfeminist discourse, albeit (and from the point of view of this feminist) a regressive, and ill-informed one. Furthermore, I contest its accuracy by focussing on the ways in which gender considerations have been foregrounded in literary critical discourses for several decades, and in Australia at least, have found expression in the work of directors whom Williamson considers to be his friends and peers.

Williamson's representation of the gender debate has not moved as subtly as practitioners around him (in theatrical, academic and even pop-culture manifestations) and, even in 1995, the feminism he depicted both in his representation of Shakespearean criticism and theatrical practice is more regressive and time-locked into essentialist positions than he is cognizant of. He seems unaware that the argument has moved forward, impelled by queer and performativity theorists of the ilk of Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, and by significant advances in understanding of pre-modern sexual identity courtesy of new historicists and psychoanalytically informed gender studies, from specifically feminist analyses and into a more exciting postfeminist concern with gender studies. A playwright may, of course, choose to not engage with the theorists, or to engage adversarially with them as Williamson does with poststructuralism, but I find it disconcerting that a major contemporary playwright whose subject is postmodernist engagements with Shakespeare is unaware of the extent of feminism-influenced productions of Shakespeare by leading Australian theatre directors which have become common if not normative since the second half of the eighties.

Williamson's Dead White Males came to Melbourne prepackaged as a critique of poststructuralist theory as it is taught in Australia's Departments of Literature and Cultural Studies. Keith Windschuttle in his article for the Higher Education Supplement of the Australian on 15 March 1995 (as a form of pre-publicity for the Sydney opening, and subsequently reproduced for the Currency edition of the play) describes this ‘so-called “paradigm shift”’ in language which proudly upholds an older tradition of liberal humanism, not to say patriarchal liberal humanism:
From Swain's mouth streams forth all the theoretician dogma that today's BA students are required to accept as gospel: there are no absolute truths; there is no fixed human nature; what we think of as reality is only an artifice; there are as many realities as there are ideologies or discourses which construct them; words don't simply mirror reality, they manufacture it.

Windschuttle's theoretical scepticism is evident in his 'so-called' and 'purported', and in his implication that students are brainwashed by their poststructuralist teachers, but he at least has the grace to represent the premises of poststructuralism (in forty-three words) with a degree of objectivity. While he does not quarrel with these premises, he uses the language of poststructuralism parodically and in the form of mild caricature, and retreats into facile arguments about Shakespeare's universalism and into essentialist gender rhetoric. When he deals more specifically with the play's anti-feminist agendas, the tone is palpably triumphalist:

The funniest scene of the play comes from its assault on the pretensions of academic feminism. The Parisian theorist Helene Cixious [sic, three times in both the newspaper and Currency Press versions] has claimed women need a new language if they are to break out of an irretrievably male framework of thought. Williamson presents one female student attempting to pass her literary theory course through a hilarious Cixious [sic] inspired attempt to subvert the dominant phallocentric discourse. … For my money this is Williamson's most powerful play yet and also his most courageous. He is attacking a number of large sacred cows including some, such as academic feminism, which are still revered by many among his long-faithful audience [presumably feminists]. Moreover, he is sticking his neck out and inviting the critics he is savaging to retaliate from the safety of their tenured chairs and lectureships.

At one stage in the play, Shakespeare tells the audience that he laid down his quill before he turned fifty and spent the last years of his life in deep melancholy. Williamson's fans will be glad that he has not followed this example. Dead White Males shows that, more than ever, he has the ability to identify important social and cultural issues and to say things about them that are both spot on and long overdue.

Ignoring Windschuttle's tone and its thinly veiled derogatory asides (why is it that feminists so often attract the derogatory 'sacred cow' appellation from Australian male academics?), one has to admit the accuracy of the claim that Williamson has a knack for identifying culturally topical and 'hot' issues, and maintains a fearlessness in pursuing them. This article served as pre-publicity for the play's premiere in Sydney, and the Melbourne Theatre Company certainly marketed the play strongly for tertiary consumption when the season opened in Melbourne, organising a discussion night with the author to which, among others, 'theory-heads' and students were invited and in which forum they politely and firmly made their case. On that occasion, the disarmingly urbane playwright enjoyed much vocal but often non-verbal audience support, notably from men but also from some women.

The first Currency edition of Williamson's play comes similarly freighted with an anti-poststructuralist manifesto by the playwright, and with an interview given by Terence Hawkes. This had appeared originally in the form of an article in the Guardian on 13 October 1994, and triggered a controversy in the London Review of Books. It was subsequently republished, presumably as a further tool in the media hype (though it masqueraded as a feature) in the Sydney Morning Herald of 21 March 1995. I would argue that Williamson misrepresents Hawkes's position in this interview as believing that 'Shakespeare was a “black hole” into which we fed our own needs and desires and that his eminence in literature was not because of any special genius, but was due to the fact that his writings served conservative interests'.

Hawkes's case is not as reductive as Williamson's formulation of it would suggest: his main concern is to refute the notion of genius as transcendental signifier and as an essentialising category which obscures the fact that Shakespeare has been 'used' (his word) and valued by culture selectively over time. While Hawkes is reluctant to allow historicism its full play, he is conscious of the culturally constructivist uses to which Shakespeare has been put, and to which he claims he can continue to be put. He certainly does not retreat from teaching or performing Shakespeare. Furthermore, he does not argue a politically innocent death-of-the-author case, a posture in which Wood, Hawkes's interviewer, seems keen to confine him. Curiously
too, in a brief section on ‘Feminism’ which he wrote for the *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, Hawkes reveals himself to be aware of the difference between essentialist and politically-driven poststructuralist feminist readings of Shakespeare in ways that Williamson is not, and is explicit about having been persuaded of their ‘power’, their radically transformative nature and their uses in an ‘occluded’ but important Elizabethan/Jacobean debate about gender, and their continuing currency in the contemporary debate.8

The central character in *Dead White Males*, Angela, is represented as a neophyte convert from liberal humanism to poststructuralism, and from this position she mounts readings of the *Shrew* and *As You Like It* in which she argues Shakespeare's complicity with patriarchal ideology and his profound conservatism. What is striking about her arguments are that they are closed ones which pre-empt other readings; she even anticipates a possible objection to her monistic reading by herself labelling it (and readings like it) ‘humourless’: a stereotypic label often applied by those hostile to feminism, and especially damaging in the hands of a writer who is using comic discourses. Furthermore, Angela seems quite unable to come to grips with what exercises most female actors who play the roles of Katerina and Rosalind: the question of choice that the roles present, and especially how the silences are to be played.9 Her adversary, Melissa (‘Just call me Bimbo brain,’ [p.33]), is depicted as a frivolous unreconstructed pre-feminist who defines herself solely in relation to men, and one who also has an expedient (and sexualised) attitude to grades. Ironically, Williamson has this character mount a reading, to some extent out of character, of the *Shrew* (pp.30–33) which, while not the kind of feminist reading which would satisfy the most politically correct feminist, does have the virtue of resisting some of the common patriarchal constructions of the text. Melissa's reading of the *Shrew* is a liberal feminist one: it accords Kate spirit and independence, and acknowledges the patriarchal constraints within which she operates. Williamson certainly reveals a knowledge, albeit a superficial understanding, of feminist readings of the *Shrew*, but his play deprives such readings. The assumption the playwright and the characters seem to make is that these plays are susceptible of a single and simplistic reading. The back-cover photograph of the Currency edition of *Dead White Males* is eloquent in this regard, suggesting that Angela can be gentled, seduced by the Bard to return to her original pre-feminist liberal humanist position. The photo is triangulated, with Shakespeare occupying the dominant corner; she sits at his feet between his knees; her hands create a vaguely meditative pose and rest on his feet, while he caresses her head with his left hand and reassuringly rests his right hand on her right shoulder. A semiotic of submission and protectiveness is replicated in the heterosexual ideology Williamson advances in the plot he labels the play's ‘real’ concern (p.viii). This plot deals with the revelation of Col's sufferings in the role of husband and provider.

Although Williamson does not take on board poststructuralist feminism in any deep way (other than to deride its language), and does not begin to tackle what I see as the central question of poststructuralist feminism (the endemic nature of essentialist thinking), what the playwright does do well is to expose gender issues as they relate to men in the period after feminism has begun to be effective in undermining the foundations of patriarchy. The pain of reconfiguring masculinity in a post-feminist era is his subject. He does this, though, at the risk of a fair quotient of sentimentality and crude nationalism, especially in the key scene where Angela hears the story, previously muted, of Col's financial support of his ‘mate’s’ family following his injury at work (pp.56–58). The profoundly conservative nature of Williamson's brand of comedy of manners is highlighted. He mobilises a range of stereotypic Australian male behaviours in highly sentimental ways, ones that are guaranteed to evoke glib, automatic responses in an Australian audience. Mateship ideology and the Anzac myth are intertwined in the play's advocacy of pre-marriage male rituals of sport and the pub, and linked narratively with Col's war-service:

*My life was tremendous, right up to the time I married your Grandmother. Cricket, football, billiards, dances, mates, motorbikes, the odd beer and a dead easy job — working for the council. Paradise. Then along comes this pretty little bit of fluff, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, just wanted to please my every whim — hah, what a sucker I was. Suddenly I'm married, but before I even get to find out what a tough little nut your Grandma really is, along comes the Second World War. So of course a bloke does the right thing and finds himself facing the invincible Imperial Japanese Army on the Kokoda trail. Now I'm not going to tell you what I went through up there, because I can hardly bear thinking about it even
Williamson makes a case for men to recognise male grief generated by the straight-jackets constructed for them by smart women who pretend to be otherwise. It is likely to be especially powerful to those who recognise that codes which regulate how men may express their emotions are disabling for men, and based in essentialist myth-making about men's and women's differentiated codifications of emotional expression. However, one could also, I think, read Williamson's text as regressive in the sense that, by updating the old stereotypes of masculinity, it covertly maintains the status quo. What is silenced in the play is the implied insult to the wife's intelligence and compassion that the husband's secrecy, and the maintenance of it, entails. However admirable loyalty to a mate might be, the family adversely affected by that friendship might, in a less hierarchal family structure, deserve to know and be consulted about such a significant economic matter.

The appeal to male (and even female?) sympathy is reinforced by a subsequent scene in which the actor playing the misunderstood Col transmogrifies into Lear lamenting the loss of Cordelia, but this is a temporary deviation from an essentialist norm which is argued by the play's ideological central consciousness, Shakespeare:

> Of course there is a human nature, and that of man and woman surely differs [...] Man is a prancing cockerel. Arrogant, proud, like Petruchio [...] Every man who is not Petruchio doth wish he was, and every woman who is a Shrew doth wish she was not [...] Two natures as divers as man and woman cannot be forced identical. (He holds up one of the feminist books.) 'Tis in this present putrid project that misery is spawned (p.81).

Although I have represented this dialogue as more sexist (in both directions) than it is by suppressing Angela's feminist resistances (to the effect that Angela's father is hen-pecked), the terms of the discourse are changed mid-stream in order to end the scene; the argument is deflected from its gender concerns into liberal humanist ones:

> The lust for power is not ‘constructed’ [by gendered conditioning]! It is a demon all men are born with … but that demon in [women] is not so relentless. And are we not all born with the demons love, grief, guilt, anger, fear, scorn, loyalty, and hate! (p.82)

At this crucial point in the argument, which one might read in pro-feminist terms, the issue of gendered power is occluded, and attention focussed on Col's pitiable neness. The naturalistic dialogue strategically ends, and the scene metamorphoses into the final scene of King Lear. Col, the grandfather, who in the naturalistic discourse might at this point in the action lament his own lost opportunities with his granddaughter, non-naturally transmogrifies into Lear weeping for Cordelia. The theatrical boldness of this transformation conceals an ideological sleight-of-hand. Apart from the strategem of avoiding a naturalistic resolution of the scene's ideological debates, what is achieved in the emotional economy is a refocussing on misunderstood male grief, a discounting of the constructivist arguments of Angela, and implicitly a demonising of those women who fail to understand such men as Col and Lear. Further, human nature is constructed by ‘Shakespeare’ as an overarching category which elides gender difference via the metaphor of a demon which in its male incarnation merely shouts ‘power’ with more vehemence than its female counterpart. Williamson's stage-world offers some resistance to this ideological construct: the fact that not all men (Martin Judd and Steve, Angela's friend and sparring partner, are cases in point) are power-hungry is lost sight of in the ideological press of the argument.

The younger generations, represented by Martin Judd and Steve, are represented as more accommodating of the new woman, but still not as fully reconciled to the legitimacy of a poststructuralist critique of essentialism. Williamson makes a token gesture towards such a position in the debate between Angela and Steve over chicks' and guys' movies in Act I (pp.24-6). Indeed, Steve identifies the kind of movie which might be acceptable to a feminist (which depict women as ‘Capable, courageous, calm, coping, resourceful, heroic, fantastic’). In doing so, Williamson implicitly and obliquely critiques the ideological thrust of such a movie and its separatist imperatives. In outlining his motives, Steve, like Col and Martin, is represented as victim, as unjustly embattled, as victim of forces he wants to accommodate but struggles ineffectually against:
... I don't want to insult women, be unfair to women, patronise women, use women, or inhibit women, but every time I open my mouth I seem to do all five! I just want to know how to behave, because someday, believe it or not I would like to live with a woman, maybe even — gasp — marry a woman. (p.25)

The logic of this is that feminism is depicted by Williamson as constituting an affront to life itself. Angela's brittle, defensive brush-off, which enacts an anti-romantic 'resolution' to the scene, can, of course, be read as confirmation of Steve's lament. What is sidestepped in this scene, though, is the crucial matter of men's and women's socialisation, which is flagged in the discussion of the naturalisation of radically different discourses of 'chicks' and 'guys' movies. Williamson has incorporated elements of the feminist argument, which suggests that he understands the issues, but his satire is not of the Shavian variety which would foreground ideas and explore the dialectic at that level. Rather, and typically, the issues are allowed to lapse into the discourses made familiar by soap opera, although Williamson's dialogue is sharper and funnier:

STEVE: … Why are you trying to push me onto Melissa? Every time I look at her she's got half a dozen guys around her that look as if they've been genetically engineered.

ANGELA: So you are asking me because you can't get her?

Martin's characterisation as a non-stereotypical male, one who failed to learn culturally-sanctioned male performances and who in adulthood rejects the performances of gender required by 'Male corporate culture' (p.67) and works as the 'home-maker', might have offered opportunities for exploring non-essentialist masculinities. Instead, the choices he makes are derided by his macho father (who presumably might have been expected to socialise him), by his wife who sees him as an unacceptable 'wimp' (p.64) and by his daughter who registers not his desire for a child but his construal of her as 'burdensome' (p.65). He himself describes accepting money from his wife as 'demeaning' (p.66). Most significantly, he names himself a 'failure' and his postures are those of a victim. Subversive gender performances like Martin's and Steve's are in this play judged by the standards of pre-feminist orthodoxy. What the audience is offered in the characterisation of Martin and in other characters' responses to him is an inversion of sexism, rather than the radical enquiry into its systemic preconditions at times promised by the play's dialogue. 11

So, while Williamson's play claims to be coming to grips with poststructuralism (its Currency Press version is even equipped with a reading list, whether provided by Williamson or the publisher is not clear, which includes some key feminist texts12), its engagement is at the level of a somewhat unbalanced dialectic rather than resolution. The play certainly reveals the playwright's superficial familiarity with some of the key assumptions of feminist and deconstructive theory, but also his rejection of it. A symptom of this is the caricature of Cixous's theory applied to the work of the 'so far unpublished Geraldton feminist lesbian writer of ethnic Egyptian origin' (p.78), whose feminist multicultural project is the invention of a new female language in which males may be abused:


It would perhaps have been smarter of Williamson to have chosen a genuine text which incorporates serious experiments with écriture féminine, a project which has asked for several decades serious questions about women's imbrication in male-biased language and philosophical structures.

Although the explicit target of this gibberish is Cixous, the unstated target is probably much closer to home, the experimental Polish-Australian poet, Ania Walwicz, whose chief project has been the taking up of marginality as a migrant writer. A secondary concern has been ‘female identity formation in one phase of feminism’. 13 What is probably being parodied in Williamson's play are Walwicz's often-anthologised prose-poems. 'Australia' and 'Wogs', in which, in speech/writing acts which perform multiculturalism, she explores cultural identity/fluidity in a mode that is both adversarial and broadly good humoured, and self-
consciously reflexive. ‘Australia’ challenges the complacency and superficialities of the dominant culture in the name/voice of the culturally uprooted immigrant:


‘Wogs’, which I think of as a companion-piece, takes up a very different voice, that of the unreconstructed dominant-culture bigot:

... they're not us they're them they're them they are else what you don't know what they think they got their own ways they stick together you don't know what they're up to you never know with them you just don't know with them no we didn't ask them to come here they come and they come there is enough people here already now they crowd us wogs they give me winter colds they take my jobs they use them they're up to they never know with them they go away they take us they rip us off landlords they rise rent they use them they work too hard ....

The case against postmodern pluralism and poststructuralist feminism is not well-served by Williamson’s quite illegitimate co-option of a set of discourses designed to serve very different agendas from those to which he puts them.

Another worrying distortion is Williamson's ignorance of, or decision to efface, both the sheer quantity and quality of academic feminism's investment in Shakespearean literary criticism in the last two and a half decades. Philip Kolin's annotated bibliography of feminist criticism of Shakespeare covers only fourteen years, from 1975–1988, but it lists a staggering 439 substantial works (monographs, articles, extended treatments in sections of books) concerned with gender in Shakespeare. Not all the texts listed are pro-feminist and they traverse a range of feminisms, but all enter a wide-ranging debate, taking issue with the representation of desire, role-playing, and the complex ideologies of Elizabethan and Jacobean culture on marriage, sex, and gender. To become aware of the lineaments of this debate is to become clear about the fact that in its crudest formulation the wrong question, the one posed by Williamson, is sometimes asked, e.g., ‘Was Shakespeare a feminist, or wasn't he?’ To ask such a question is not only anachronistic but it is to assume that gender difference was more securely codified in Shakespeare's lifetime and at any subsequent period than it is for us, and that Shakespeare's subjectivity was single, fixed and immutable. Williamson's transpositions of the gender debate into twentieth-century Australia is valuable for its acute satiric registration of the pain for men of the uncertainties of gender role destabilisation, but in representing women as the source and aggravators of that pain, he does the debate a disservice by oversimplifying the issues.

On-going research that I have been doing on six productions of Shakespeare directed by Roger Hodgman for the Melbourne Theatre Company over the last decade leads me further to question Williamson's liberal humanist assumptions about Shakespeare being ‘timeless’, ‘universal’ and somehow above and beyond the gender ideologies contested in his own time or in ours. My case-studies, for which I interviewed the directors (male), an assistant-director (a woman), designers (mostly male, but with one female costume designer) and actors (both male and female), suggests that both female and male practitioners have quite consciously used the plays as sites for contesting and interrogating the reproduction of essentialist sexualities. While it is clear from this study is that, although male and female practitioners have very different investments in gender negotiations and engage in the debate from a number of different gender positions and gendered subjectivities, nevertheless, almost to a person the fifteen theatre persons interviewed so far have been responsive to the frisson of enacting gender debates on the stage. Most were aware of the centrality of gender considerations to contemporary cultural debates, and many, both male and female, actively sought to read the plays in the light of contemporary feminism as they understood it. None of them assumed, as Williamson's characters tend to do, that particular plays were susceptible to fixed, closed or unitary readings, or that gender issues were able to be apotheosised into a supra-gender humanism.
Williamson's acuity as a social analyst is unquestionable and he too knows the frisson of the gender debate, though his ideological investment in it is a divisive and regressive one, and one which is under-informed about theoretical debates with which he professes to be familiar. However, his articulation of his particular version of the backlash against feminism has the merit of documenting a variety of androcentric inflections of the debate at a particular moment in the history of heterosexuality in Australian culture, albeit at the expense of the new 1990s' woman of third-wave feminism.

1 I use this term not to suggest that feminism is a spent force, but rather to situate Williamson in a gender politics which post-dates feminism and is radically altered by it. This essay attempts a post-constructivist analysis, locating itself theoretically and politically in the tradition articulated by e.g. Jeanie Forte, ‘Women’s Performance Art; Feminism and Postmodernity’, Sue-Ellen Case, ed., Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990); Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, Sue-Ellen Case, ed., Performing Feminisms, pp.270–282; Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’ (New York: Routledge, 1993); Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994); and Elin Diamond, ed., Performance and Cultural Politics (New York: Routledge, 1996). This politics aims to be attentive to how both masculinity and femininity are constructed and performed, and the possibility of performances which deliberately interrogate and subvert traditional stereotypes of gendered behaviour. In this paper I am especially interested in Williamson's representation of the impact of feminism on the codes which govern men's interactions with women.


3 This is unlike what typically has occurred in Royal Shakespeare Company productions where gender has been divisive issue between male and female theatre practitioners, especially actors and directors (see e.g. Carol Rutter, Clamorous Voices, Shakespeare’s Women Today, ed. Faith Evans (London: Women's Press, 1988); and Penny Gay, As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women (London: Routledge, 1994). Williamson also seems unaware of several projects by contemporary playwrights to rework Shakespearean plays in postmodern feminist-influenced ways (see e.g. Ann-Marie MacDonald, Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) (Toronto: Coach House, 1990).


5 Windschuttle is the author of The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists (Sydney: Macleay, 1994).

6 The discussion between James Wood and Terence Hawkes was sparked by a symposium on the rise of theory in the Times Literary Supplement of 15 July 1994.

7 Williamson, Dead White Males, p.xviii.


9 Rutter, pp.xi, 1–25.

10 Martin is represented (in Col’s words) as one of those men women think they ‘can bully the Christ out of us and we’ve just got to sit here and take it’, as ‘too weak’, as one who from childhood could not defend himself (pp.54–5).

11 This is evident too in the representation of Sarah Judd whose motives for succeeding at work are simply revenge on male colleagues and the pursuit of power. Williamson might have raised the stakes somewhat by having her engaged in more socially useful work than launching washing powders; work of which she might feel proud (as Col does of his work).


17 The transcripts on which this research is based are collected under the title, ‘Natural but not Naturalistic: Productions of Shakespeare at the Melbourne Theatre Company 1984–1993, being Transcripts of Interviews with Theatre Practitioners conducted by Frances Devlin-Glass’, and are held in the Performing Arts Museum, Melbourne.