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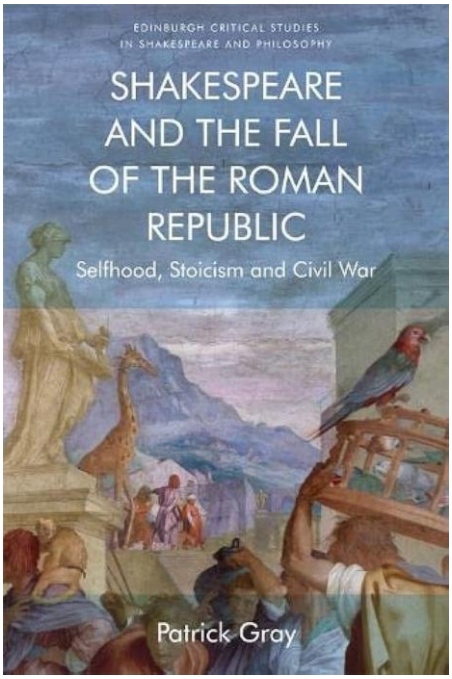
BOOKS

Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020 (paperback edition), 320 p.



What cause does Shakespeare attribute to the fall of the Roman Republic? In his book, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War*, Patrick Gray provides a thought-provoking answer. In his analysis of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* (and tangentially on *Coriolanus* as well), Gray advances a daring and illuminating hypothesis. He demonstrates that, for Shakespeare, the Romans' Stoic denial of "passibility" (8) and their inability to exhibit Christian pity and empathy constitute their chief fatal flaws, which set their tragedy into motion. Thus, the researcher sets the illusory figure of the isolated, self-sufficient Stoic against Shakespeare's Christian understanding of the self as inevitably vulnerable, and against the assumption that authentic selfhood can only be attained within a community.

The study is prefaced by an introduction on "Shakespeare and the Vulnerable Self", in which the author theorizes the philosophical and theological notion of the vulnerable or passible self, borrowed from Timothy Reiss (32). This concept diverges from the Senecan ideals of "constancy" (6) and total self-control, which formed the Roman heroic and individual ideal. Gray argues that the Romans' desire to dominate others and themselves – their *libido dominandi* for Augustine or "the will to power" for Nietzsche (3) – along with the absence of Christian values, is what brings the Roman Republic to ruin. In his analysis, he appeals to a vast philosophical corpus, which incorporates various

schools of thought, from Stoicism, Epicureanism and Neoplatonicism all the way to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and twentieth-century thinkers, like Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricœur, Mikhail Bakhtin and Hannah Arendt, to name just a few. Even if the plethora of references can sometimes puzzle the reader, the great advantage of such a methodology is that it does not reduce Shakespeare to a mere popular historian or to a political theorist, but it recognises that the dramatist's universality lies in his capacity to question and explore the paradoxes of the human condition. Such an approach is comprehensive, showing that Shakespeare truly is an artist "for all time", capable of encompassing both ancient and post-modern sensibilities, both Stoic and Christian; a playwright capable of situating himself "Between Humanism and Antihumanism", as Gray put it (271). Furthermore, it is refreshing to see that the author does not follow a single strand of literary theory (which would pose a number of ideological constraints). Instead, he has a bird's-eye-view of Shakespeare's artistry, surveying various theoretical approaches to the two plays and sparking insightful debates with past scholarship in a highly liberating and original manner.

The book is divided into two parts. The first one is dedicated to *Julius Caesar*. It considers Brutus as torn between the Stoic ideal of self, impenetrable and always alone, and the Christian faculty of empathy. In the first chapter of this part, the researcher capitalizes on the Freudian concept of "ego ideal" as represented by the divinity (51). He shows that the Stoic ideal of selfhood denies a divine ideal and wrongfully deifies man, making him void of feelings of communion with others. In the next section of this chapter, Patrick Gray looks at the tensions between Neostoicism and Christian pity. The Stoic refusal of pity as weakness is juxtaposed with Calvin's refutation of Stoicism on the basis that it does not recognise the virtue of empathy towards others (73). In his excellent close reading of Brutus and Antony's speeches at the death of Caesar, Gray shows that Antony's oration eclipses Brutus's because he appeals, in a Ciceronian fashion, to the passions: pity and empathy towards the murdered Caesar (84). By contrast, Brutus is unable even of grieving for the dead Portia. This self-repression, as Gray pertinently argues, highlights Brutus's resistance to perhaps the most profound form of Christian pity: mourning (64). The merit, as I see it, of this first chapter, is that it first considers the issue of pity theoretically, envisaging the lack thereof as a social malady, and then it exemplifies the perils of the pitiless Roman society through an incursion into a domestic episode of Brutus' private life.

The second chapter of Part I focuses on the friction between Stoic constancy and Christian passibility from a theological viewpoint. The author contrasts the Aristotelian theology of the "Unmoved Mover", a symbol of Stoic constancy (97), with the glorification of Christ crucified, inconceivable to Stoics. Gray bases his close reading of Caesar's self-proclaimed divinity on the tension between these two theological perceptions. He unveils Caesar's self-aggrandizing delusions, as the seemingly all-powerful leader turns out to be a mortal god. The chapter continues with an investigation of the relationship between femininity and pity. Gray persuasively argues that the peripheral position of women in Rome is not so much caused by patriarchal dominance and misogyny, as feminist critics tend to believe. On the contrary, the author shows that the Roman revulsion towards

feminine traits (pity, empathy and vulnerability in general) actually reveals a repression of those characteristics within the masculine self; such feelings are considered incongruent with the heroic view of "constant" masculinity (120), as Patrick Gray demonstrates. I particularly enjoyed this section on account of its nonconformist engagement with pre-existing theories, which gave rise to astute observations not just on gender, but on the human condition itself.

The second part of the book concentrates on *Antony and Cleopatra.* First, the author examines Antony as torn between Stoic philosophy and escapist "fancy" (178). Gray contrasts political realism and heroic duty with the indulgence of fantasy. Drawing on Christopher Gill's study of "'objective-participant' and 'subjective-individualist' concepts of selfhood" (181), Gray makes the point that Cleopatra's suicide does not follow "the high Roman fashion" (i.e. the precepts of the self-sufficient and self-controlling Stoic). On the contrary, it is a Romantic evasion of reality by means of fantasy, and her suicide is insightfully equated by the author with "the culmination of a progressive involution of the will to power" (185). Patrick Gray shows that the lovers act in the sphere of the imagination, and their "dissociation from the world" is achieved through suicide (193). The author also reads the lovers' retreat into a lifestyle of self-indulgence and hedonistic fantasies as a *folie à deux*, which sabotages their pursuit for absolute dominance and power (198).

The second part moves on to Chapter four, in which Patrick Gray takes up the relationship between the self and the other. He uses the notion of "interpellation" to signify how the self is inevitably affected by the moral judgement, by the censure of the self by others, which poses the question of the self's "vulnerability to shame" in his/her interaction with others (222). Gray reads suicide as the ultimate solution for evading community censure and shame, seen by the two lovers as self-deprecating and subjugating. Aside from other considerations on the nature of suicide, perhaps Gray's most captivating argument in this book is his Conclusion to Part II. Contending with previous scholarship on the metatheatrics of suicide in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the researcher shows that, far from avoiding moral scrutiny through suicide, the two lovers are actually interpellated by the highest judicial and moral instance: God. Combining metatheatricality and theology, Patrick Gray reads the lovers' suicide in connection with the Christian Doomsday, implied in Shakespeare's text (259). In a highly perceptive analysis, the author shows that God acts as a sort of audience that witnesses and judges Antony and Cleopatra's metatheatrical spectacle of suicide. Contrary to the Stoic ideal of total self-control, the academic makes the powerful statement that "God's interpellation, doomsday, is irresistible" (268). In his ground-breaking interpretation, God rightfully becomes the Great Observer, from whom there is no escape.

Overall, Patrick Gray's *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War* is a work of great erudition and insight. It provides far-reaching arguments which consolidate the idea that Shakespeare, even when he wrote about a pre-Christian, pagan past, inevitably engaged with a Christian subtext. Gray's study also shows that the Renaissance notion of subjectivity (which integrates early modern England's ancient inheritance into its Christian present) is far more nuanced than was previously thought. The

book is a wonderful resource for specialists and students alike, catering to the area of literary studies along with the field of Western philosophy. In its multi-perspective approach and inclination towards interdisciplinarity, Patrick Gray's book is a remarkable achievement, praiseworthy for its commitment to viewing Shakespeare's texts as repositories of a mode of thinking and feeling which resist the clear-cut demarcations of theory.

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