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Shakespeare and Republican Rome

Gray (P.) *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic. Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War*. Pp. xii + 308. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. Cased, ISBN: 978-1-4744-2745-6.

G.'s volume marshals an impressive array of supporting philosophical material in defining a sense of selfhood in Shakespeare's Roman protagonists. He concentrates on *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* because those plays sit at the juncture of the fall of the Roman Republic and the emergence of the Augustan imperial state; he also often reflects on *Coriolanus* because of its interest in the beginnings of the Republic. The book's subtitle is salutary, laying out the main grounds of the analysis; the central concern is not so much with institutions of the Roman state or the history of the shift from Republic to Principate, but rather how Shakespeare's imagination works with questions of selfhood via Stoicism. The latter requires an engagement with Neo-Stoicism in its various Renaissance forms, and G. elaborates not only upon this but on a wide historical range of philosophical and theological works on the self, from Classical texts right through to modernity and beyond.

This is a well-organised book, with an overall introduction and conclusion enclosing a two-part structure. Part 1 is on *Julius Caesar*, and Part 2 concerns *Antony and Cleopatra*; each is composed of two chapters and a conclusion. This symmetrical approach helps to ground what can be a high-level reading of philosophical texts in themselves, as well as how they can be applied to Shakespeare's plays.

The introduction, 'Shakespeare and the Vulnerable Self', provides a literary review of the material the book will encompass. G. sets out his position and indicates the purposes of the succeeding chapters; clarity of organisation helps with navigating the various philosophical positions he introduces. The range of reading is immediately apparent, and G. takes the time to explain why he accepts, rejects or modulates these works in relation to his central concern with Shakespeare and selfhood.

The first chapter on *Julius Caesar* sets up the parameters for the discussion of the plays themselves. G. moves between the ways that Caesar and Brutus both enact their sense of selfhood, with Caesar attempting to attain a position of absolutist sovereignty over everything including himself, and Brutus being caught in the dilemma of the Stoic who needs to take political action. There is a sophisticated discussion of the problems raised by Stoic and Neo-Stoic assumptions about the self in action. This provides the immediate context for the second chapter on this play, which focuses upon what G. terms 'passibility', a term he takes from Augustinian theology. He is very careful to explain exactly what he means here: the Roman aspiration to a form of unassailable extreme power. In practice, of course, this is impossible, and G. sees the moral aspects of this yearning towards absolutism as the main reason for the fall of the Republic. Unbridled competitiveness among the Roman elite destroys the city's social framework. Caesar tries to become 'impassible', and his self-delusion about his own constancy precipitates the tragedy: 'For Shakespeare, the tragedy of Romans such as Caesar and Brutus is that they are emulating the wrong kind of ideal self, a fantasy of impossible autonomy akin to the various concepts of the divine found in classical philosophy' (p.

110). For G., accordingly, Shakespeare knows exactly what he is doing when he updates Roman historical material for Renaissance consumption; the playwright engages with the moral issues raised by the Roman drive to supremacy.

The chapters on *Antony and Cleopatra* also work within the framework of 'passibility', albeit with a different emphasis. This part of the book turns to the importance of shame to the play's protagonists or rather the absolute necessity of avoiding being publicly shamed. G. sees the selfhood produced by this situation in the play as analogous to the contemporary anxieties of an aristocracy in crisis. Here he is following P.A. Cantor's formulation of a fundamental difference between these two plays, defined by the political fault lines provided by Roman history. Both critics focus on the options open to the individual protagonists within such a context. G. concentrates on Cleopatra, especially in the first chapter of this section, with special focus upon her choice of suicide and the meanings then generated for the play. The second chapter on this play works out the implications for the self, which G. sees as a startlingly modern sense of the individual as located within a web of social networks for such a relatively early writer as Shakespeare. The operating mechanism for the protagonists in this context is the need to avoid being defined shamefully by the gaze of others: 'Instead, for Shakespeare, judgements possess a kind of power over the other. To judge other people, if they know about that judgement, is to alter their perception of themselves, unless they are able to muster some sort of psychological resistance. Even that resistance, moreover, may be broken down. By being led in triumph, for example, or defeated in open battle, people can be forced to change the way they see themselves' (p. 221). For G., this explains why the two main characters kill themselves; they struggle under an imperative not to become objects of other people's spectacles, as well as denying the conqueror. Here the exposition moves on to this play's peculiar fascination with the performative, rooted in a sense of the individual's perception of how they will be received by history. In turn, this leads on logically enough to the conclusion to this part of the book, 'The Last Interpellation', which discusses how a Renaissance audience might understand the play's use of Christian symbology.

The conclusion to the volume reinforces the foregrounded concern with selfhood. G. acknowledges and then questions the work of E. Levinas, finishing with a restatement of Shakespeare's subtle awareness of the need for a self that negotiates a space for itself in relation to others. This is the book's central thesis, and it has to be read as part of a line of philosophical reasoning about Shakespeare. Although he has some issues with Cantor's deployment of Nietzsche, especially in his most recent book on Shakespeare's Rome, G. nevertheless situates himself within Cantor's line of inquiry in his two books on Shakespeare and Rome (*Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* [2nd edition, 2017] and *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: the Twilight of the Ancient World* [2017]). Similar philosophical work has been published on Shakespeare's second tetralogy, such as L.H. Craig, *The Philosopher's English King: Shakespeare's Henriad as Political Philosophy* (2015), and all three writers consistently emphasise the centrality of the self. Of course, this is as it should be for philosophical writing; like the others, G. does not engage directly with Aristotle's *Poetics*, nor does he involve himself in questions of tragic form or performance theory. Such an alternative line of enquiry could lead to a major dilemma for this kind of writing: as Classicists are well aware,

Aristotle relegates character to a minor role in his discussion of the elements of tragedy in Book 6 of the *Poetics*. Also, a great deal of critical energy has been expended on the social and ritual functions of tragedy in the English Renaissance, and it could easily be argued that the exigencies of performance change radically over time. Much of this work has been underpinned by philosophical questioning of another kind, springing more from a Hegelian view of tragedy as socially constructed. Hegel is of course one of the many figures G. discusses, but his own argument in this book is much more indebted to elements of the Western philosophical tradition that are more centrally concerned with autonomous selfhood and being. Ultimately, it explains why this volume is a philosophical analysis first and foremost.

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