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Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies

Cohen, Paula Marantz, *Of Human Kindness: What Shakespeare Teaches Us about Empathy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2021, 159 pp.

Cohen's *Of Human Kindness*: *What Shakespeare Teaches Us about Empathy* is not an easy book to assess. One could say that its strong points are in some way also its more questionable ones. A scholar and a university professor, Cohen admits to having reached Shakespeare only later in her teaching career and bases many of her observations on the varying reactions of her students, and indeed her own, through an approach to the texts which is limited to a close reading of the plays without considering traditional or recent critical methodologies. It rather stresses what we may term personal opinions; opinions always founded on and substantiated by a careful analysis of what is being read.

The main contention is that reading Shakespeare's plays today helps us to come to a deeper understanding about how we feel for the Other and promotes a sense of empathy in us – "empathy" being the key word in this book – directed at issues such as race, gender, class and age. In other words, it makes us 'better people', it unlocks our sense of compassion as, the author claims, has happened to her. The justification for drawing attention to empathy is provided in the introduction in which Cohen maintains that catharsis, the term used by Aristotle to denote the outpouring of emotion which the audience should feel at the end of a great tragedy, is an "emotional release [which] can be isolating and self-indulgent, a way of avoiding responsibility for others' sufferings" (p. 3). Empathetic emotion, instead, can make us more complacent of who we are, more able to function smoothly and efficiently in the world; it is

disruptive, humanizing and a potentially instrumental variation on catharsis because it involves feelings beyond the Self, feelings for the Other. This is the path undertaken by the author who sees *The Merchant of Venice* as the real turning point of Shakespeare's awareness of empathetic emotion, a play, in her view, from which all his monumental figures derive.

We are taken through several plays, in chronological order, including the most well-known – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* – and shown how there is a growing sense of arousing empathy even in those characters who, apparently, behave in reprehensible ways – Shylock, Iago, Edmund, to mention just a few. The approach, I repeat, is pure close reading which to the author is the only method for 'truly understanding' the plays; she actually claims that seeing them performed on stage may distort their 'true meaning'. There is no doubt, as other reviewers have remarked, that the book is invitingly readable and provides a refreshing – if a little naive – approach, unloaded with complex critical theories which at times divert from the text, and brings us back to a straightforward reading of the words on the page. There are no critical references and footnotes, except in passing, which makes for an easy and pleasurable read. It is also useful, since at times one forgets that reading a Shakespearean text with students and attempting to relate it to their everyday lives is a productive way to lead younger students towards an understanding which we could call more genuine, and that highbrow critical theory may, at times, hinder and distract from the text itself. It is nevertheless true that it must be clear to students that an early modern audience would respond differently to how students of the twenty-first century may react, and that to assume authorial intention, especially in the case of Shakespeare, is always dangerous.

That Antonio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, is marginalized because of his latent homosexuality must take cultural and historical elements into consideration, as must the assumption that Shylock induces the audience to feel empathy simply because he is mistreated. That Shakespeare meant us to see it this way must be established in a larger context of the antisemitic atmosphere of the age. The book proposes a progression in Shakespeare's concern with empathy and sees earlier simpler characters develop into more

complex ones in the later plays; this is well documented by Cohen, but again it is only a possible, if plausible, assumption. Is Falstaff truly a precursor of Lear, as the author claims, simply because he is old? There is no mention of sources, textual problems, but rather a leading thread which concentrates on what seems to be a preconceived idea – an idea which is fascinating and holds, but that modern scholarship may object to.

However, Cohen's hypotheses manage to trace the growth of characters. She claims, for instance, that there could not have been an Othello if there hadn't been a Shylock before him, a view which has been expressed before but is here put forward simply as a result, as the author states, of the impact a fresh reading of Shakespearean texts has had on her and her students. The emphasis, which is an interesting one from a pedagogical point of view, is on the different reactions students have had in the last twenty years as colleges have become more multicultural and multiracial. I believe the book reflects teaching methods which are popular in the United States – and a little less in countries such as Italy – where students are asked to give their "gut reaction" to classics of all kinds rather than being "lumbered" with endless critical material which they may feel too distant from the text they are studying and from themselves. This is a system that has its advantages and that we may have something to learn from, but which, in my view, cannot stand alone. A class of beginners in Shakespeare studies may benefit from an approach such as this but would eventually have to enlarge their perspectives with support material including the study of the cultural-historical context in which the plays were written, the sources of the plays, the issues of collaboration, textual problems and so on.

Having said this, even Shakespearean scholars will enjoy the journey Cohen takes us through. The presumed moral development of Shakespeare's imagination and his ability to generate empathy for the 'villains' – though this last point had received much critical attention even before this book, even if the word empathy may not have been used – is exposed consistently and attractively. It is in this sense that the strength of this study – readability, coherence, preciseness, a leading thread – contains its limitations – a certain naiveté, the lack of critical references, no mention of previous scholars or schools of thought. In Cohen's view, the empathic

approach to the Other is Shakespeare's major lesson today. Through this kind of reading, we learn "to recognize our own divided nature and embrace the human condition in which we all share" (p. 5).

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Long Live the Past: Italian Guides to Shakespeare's Masterpieces

Coronato, Rocco, *Shakespeare: Guida ad Amleto*, Rome, Carocci, 2021, 132 pp.
Tosi, Laura, *Shakespeare: Guida a Macbeth*, Rome, Carocci, 2021, 128 pp.
Coronato, Rocco, *Shakespeare: Guida alla Tempesta*, Rome, Carocci, 2022, 132 pp.
Petrina, Alessandra, *Shakespeare: Guida ad Otello*, Rome, Carocci, 2022, 124 pp.

Against the long-lasting tradition of British guides to Shakespeare's plays for beginners the new Italian series "William Shakespeare: I capolavori", edited by Rocco Coronato, stands out as a distinctively Italian contribution to the field of Shakespeare primers. Unlike its British counterparts, the series, which at the time of writing includes four volumes published by Carocci over the last two years, is not specifically meant for students. Rather, it more generally addresses "Italian readers willing to appreciate the best of Shakespeare with the help of some critical tools": an uncompromising presentation which leaves one clueless as to the underlying assumptions of the whole enterprise and its unspoken notion of masterpiece. The present review also sets out to trace at least some of these unstated premises.

A consummate and prolific early modern and Shakespearean scholar, Rocco Coronato, whose *Leggere Shakespeare* (Carocci, 2017) works as a prequel to the series, has put his own skills to the service of this enterprise by authoring two volumes (*Hamlet*, 2021, and *The Tempest*, 2022) and trusting such distinguished colleagues as Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina with the task of writing respectively on *Macbeth* (2021) and *Othello* (2022). Indeed, a hardly contentious selection of "masterpieces" with tragedies playing the lion's part, as in established rankings of Shakespeare's plays.

Though inevitably diverse, and uneven in their performance, all the volumes share the conventional layout of introductions to British/American editions of Shakespeare's plays featuring a standard set of chapters on date, sources, plot, settings, characters, style and themes, in addition to a final, substantial unit which details the history of the play's criticism, lists major musical, film and TV versions, and concludes with an index of allusions to the play throughout the media. While occasionally skewed in favour of past centuries to the detriment of more recent contributions, overviews of extant criticism in each last chapter are all the more welcome given the authors' shared and mostly old historicist ground. Taken as the whole, the series presumably endeavours to dig into the pastness of Shakespeare's past, with scanty concessions to the present, and no allowance for presentist temptations. At their best, these guides actually pore over the tapestry of early modern history and untangle its classical and mythological yarns to show how Shakespeare spins his masterpieces out of such wealth of material. No longer relegated in the background, Shakespeare's historical and cultural milieu is brought to the fore and magnified as the actual nourishment of the plays he wrote: a vital sap readers are encouraged to take in from the start in order to tackle Shakespeare with a critical mind.

Predictably, the volumes' set pattern shuns in-depth readings and hinders systematic insight into texts in favour of sweeping remarks on prevailing styles and registers which leave little room to textual examples. As a result, the mobility of Shakespeare's language, i.e. its uncanny ability to foresee the ideological fault lines of times to come, remains unattended. In the same spirit, diverse critical approaches are largely ignored, except for due mentions either in the text or in end chapters. The authors have understandably enforced their own readings on highly complex plays: little space is left for arguments in defence of their own occasionally idiosyncratic statements on highly debated issues with a somewhat disquieting leave-it-or-take-it effect. Particularly in the case of *Othello*, that is regrettable. One would expect, for instance, Petrina to corroborate her own bold argument that Desdemona's vindication of Othello's innocence on her deathbed should be taken

as the mark of Christian catharsis in what most critics would see as Shakespeare's quintessentially nihilistic or sceptical play.

Ultimately, of course, the benefits of the densely instructive material set out in these guides can't be underestimated. With their striking display of erudition, Coronato' contributions on *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, for instance, offer an awe-inspiring mass of data on major and minor aspects of early modern philosophy, history and science, as well as on the vast field of Renaissance rhetoric. What they outline is a complex backdrop of knowledge against which the plays are aptly measured. The very themes Coronato singles out are traced back to their coeval meanings in the fields of philosophy, theology or medicine, a range of senses which turns out to be extraordinarily pliable to Shakespeare's innovative undertaking. Sound proofs of how far and deep early modern culture may be said to feed Shakespeare's masterly craft, and brimming with scholarly references through accounts of criticism and extensive bibliographies, Coronato's guides will appeal to discriminating scholars, while possibly discouraging larger and more naive audiences.

In what resembles a pleasurable talk about *Othello* addressed to Italian undergraduates, Alessandra Petrina treads instead rather more linear paths. In her smooth progression across the play – a bibliography-based account mostly on the model of a user-friendly discussion of each character's motivations, feelings and contradictions – Petrina apparently surrenders her learning as a language historian for the sake of popularization. At times, her commitment to simplification entails unfortunate plunges into indefiniteness, as when Othello's transition from hyperbolic style to fragmented speech is generically described as a fall from "beautiful" or "splendid" language to an "ugly" one, whatever "beautiful" or "ugly" might have meant in Shakespeare's time.

Laura Tosi's reading of *Macbeth* stands somehow apart for its balanced treatment of the play, firmly situated in the past, and yet resonating in the present through the occasional acknowledgement – and knowledgeable use – of contemporary critical approaches such as gender criticism and psychoanalysis. Tosi's sharp highlights on the interweaving of history, culture and language do nimbly away with the strictures of set chapters: they shed light onto the

power of the play's densely metaphorical language which often eludes interpretive closure. In her reluctance to issue final interpretations, let alone value judgements, Tosi takes pain to enlist alternative critical views whenever she ventures into personal suggestions, thus paving the path to a discerning, fully contextualized reading of *Macbeth*: a tragedy of power and evil nourished by its own history and yet casting a lurid light on our present.

Despite the predictable shortcomings of uneven contributions, the historicist thrust of the new series needs to be praised for breaking new ground in the field of Italian Shakespeare studies, traditionally alien to refined popularization. It does so by boldly vindicating the rewards of a rigorous inquiry into the history Shakespeare belonged to, against the current drift into actualizations, rewritings and 'presentist' approaches, including – in fact – the outlandish and extreme implications of cancel culture. No matter how appealing to general audiences, this is a mainstream trend the series firmly swims against, gripped by the legitimate fear that the oblivion of Shakespeare's past may well erase awareness of its distance from our present.

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Del Sapio Garbero, Maria, *Shakespeare's Ruins and Myth of Rome*, Anglo-Italian Renaissance Studies, London-New York, Routledge, 2022, 404 pp.

Del Sapio has dealt for years with Shakespeare's Roman plays, which she studied from various points of view. This book is devoted to the reappropriation of Roman ruins, central in the Renaissance, on Shakespeare's part; his meditation on the "memory of Rome" is shown by Del Sapio as fruitfully ambivalent, 'double', thriving on both its splendour as the ancient core of the Empire and the reality of its "dismembered body" (p. 17) after centuries of oblivion and in the evidence of ruin.

In the words of Renaissance authors Del Sapio has deeply studied, such as Poggio Bracciolini or Antonio Loschi (and later, among others, Flavio Biondo and Vasari), Rome is seen as "a skeletal

and fragmented 'mighty giant'" that had to be "re-written into existence" thanks to the finding of ancient texts that had been lost and then unearthed and studied together with the physical monuments of past splendours.

The Renaissance reappropriation of Rome is "Orphic" (p. 334) in its unearthing of the lost body of the Empire, a signifier of power and impermanence at the same time.

England's origins were of course linked to the myth of Rome, "which imperially encapsulated the Trojan-Greek legacy" (p. 73); on the one hand – according to Camden's *Britannia* – England was recognized as a "mixture of ethnicities and languages", from Saxon violence to the melting pot of various invasions of barbarian populations; on the other hand, the myth of its foundation by Aeneas' descendant Brutus, first reported by Geoffrey of Monmouth and surviving – though discussed – through the ages, linked England to Troy, and to the Rome which from Troy descended.

The six Shakespearean Roman works (the "Plutarchan" plays – *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra* – the early poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, and the plays later subsumed under the Roman label, *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline*) are studied with the tools of archaeological analysis and reappropriation and with the heuristic probe of anatomy, a science which was widely practiced in the sixteenth-early seventeenth century. The spectrality of the idea of Rome is underscored, following Derrida and Greenblatt, together with Shakespeare's "early concern for Rome's […] parable of glory and ruin" (p. 64).

Besides, Shakespeare's interest in the memory of Rome is inscribed in his concern with English history, since the first Roman plays are contemporary with the historical plays celebrating the English monarchy and the Tudor dynasty; common solutions in the language hint at the presence of shared themes and concepts.

The first Shakespearean Roman play to be written was *Titus Andronicus*. Del Sapio underlines how Shakespeare chose to address the myth of Rome "starting not from its imperial splendour but from the […] desacralizing end of its decay" (p. 72).

Actually, no Shakespearean Roman play deals with triumphant imperial splendour. *Titus Andronicus* is already situated in a time of crisis, with its protagonist divided between the conflicting urges of

virtus and revenge of his own family, his many sons killed in battle and his daughter raped and maimed. In *Julius Caesar*, which problematizes the transformation of Republican Rome into Empire, the superhuman image of Caesar is undermined from within: deaf, prone to the falling sickness, the colossus striding the world is in fact fragile and incapable of grasping his own weaknesses. *Coriolanus* focuses on a Rome divided by the strife between patricians and plebeians, and shows how the failings of the eponymous hero prepare his downfall. *Antony and Cleopatra* highlights the moment of deep crisis due to Marc Antony's challenge to Octave and Rome. *Cymbeline* harks back to ancient Britannia, which is fighting with Rome and refusing to pay tributes. *The Rape of Lucrece*, based on the intensely private anguish of the ravished protagonist, is the only work which points at a positive political outcome, with the chasing of the Tarquins from Rome, but this theme is relegated to the prologue and the last few lines, leaving the personal nightmare of Lucrece's rape and suicide at the centre of the poem.

After a long, scholarly introduction, where the tenets of the book are explored and framed with the tools I mentioned, the chapters follow according to the chronological order of their composition, with the only exception of *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is postponed to the end of the book, after *Cymbeline*: convincingly, Del Sapio claims that the play represents Shakespeare's farewell to the triumphant memory of Rome.

The first draft of the chapter on *Titus Andronicus*, as the first footnote reminds us, dates back to the conference "Shakespeare 2016: Memoria di Roma", held in Rome to celebrate the fourth centenary of Shakespeare's death. The chapter is fruitfully linked to the introduction. A discussion of Du Bellay's sonnet on Rome, which Shakespeare probably knew, shows some of the core concepts of the paradox explored by early modern artists in Europe. Its monumental status at the centre of a huge Empire is contrasted with its "fleetingness" (in Du Bellay's words), and with the impermanence that erased its memory and wrecked its monuments, up to the time when archaeologists started excavating them more than a millennium later.

This controversial play, long dispraised by critics up to few decades ago, is shown to be central to Shakespeare's vision of Rome,

and is considered "a kind of *manifesto* of how [Shakespeare] intends to deal with inheritance and memory" (p. 122). Here, Del Sapio argues, tragedy seems to be impossible, undermined by parody and grotesque. Del Sapio defines it a *Trauerspiel*, the baroque drama as theorized by Benjamin. Its characters fail in the attempt to keep a heroic stance; madness and tragic laughter are the response to the unspeakable horror they are subjected to.

An interesting idea in the chapter is the forfeiture of Titus' quality as a storyteller in the course of the play. The loss of his hand – which could not save his sons' life, and is disturbingly linked to misunderstanding and failure – prevents him to 'act' (the Ciceronian *actio*) as the skilled orator he was: in the past, his narration was an agent of memory which linked present and past generations. In the new times, and with the frightful events performed in the play, this has become impossible.

The second chapter is devoted to *The Rape of Lucrece*. Shakespeare wrote the long poem in 1594, immediately after *Venus and Adonis*, when theatres were closed because of the plague. The focal points underlined by the essay are Lucrece's reappropriation of her own fate, with the decision to dispose of her tortured body, and the long ekphrastic meditation on Hecuba. The ruins of Troy – the "Ur-ruin" destroyed by the violence of the enemy – teach Lucrece how to mourn 'in a new way'; Del Sapio has shown elsewhere how the Trojan inheritance is fundamental in the excavation of the past, and also how the figure of Hecuba becomes the objective correlative of the ruinous history in *The Rape*, *Titus Andronicus*, and, of course, *Hamlet*.

In her essay on *Coriolanus*, Del Sapio chooses the interesting and only apparently minor point of the protagonist's failure to reward an act of kindness on the part of a Volscian soldier. Her quotation in the title, "My memory is tired", refers to the fact that Coriolanus typically cannot remember the name of the Volscian who used him kindly, and – after obtaining from his captors the promise of treating him well – cannot complete the grateful motion because he cannot identify him. The episode, absent in Shakespeare's sources (where Coriolanus' creditor is a wealthy, prominent citizen), is meaningful, Del Sapio argues, in that it indicates Coriolanus' failure in participating in the social interactions of gratitude and

reciprocation. The "war-machine" is found to be lacking in the saving graces of shared values.

In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius is discussed as the rational, anatomizing intellectual, who tries to bring back the body of Caesar to its "correct measure", against the mythologizing thrust of Marc Antony's eloquence. A key point in the essay is the relevance of Cicero's *De Oratore* in Marc Antony's speech on the body of Caesar. Skilled in dwelling on the emotions of his audience and swaying them, as a good orator is supposed to do, Marc Antony can play all the gamut of rhetoric to achieve his aims, with a surprising adherence to Cicero's theorizing.

In the complex chapter on *Cymbeline*, Del Sapio convincingly argues that the pseudo-historical attitude of the romance – which transposes the final conquest of Britain from Claudius (41-54 AD) to Augustus (27 BC-14 AD) and reverses the victory of the Roman army into a defeat – serves the purpose of a final confrontation between Rome's heritage and the new British identity. At the end of the play the Roman eagle moves eastward in a fulfilment of the *translatio imperii*, and the two kingly figures, the Roman emperor and Cymbeline, appear as sovereigns of equal standing.

Cymbeline is set within a sequence of performances of identity, from Posthumus' painful struggles with his obscure history to the affirmation of Britannia as a self-contained entity – inviolable in its geographical position, "the sceptred-isle" already mythicized by John of Gaunt in *Richard II*. Despite its romantic mood, the late play highlights the final transference of cultural authority, "fashioning [the] counter myth" (p. 269) of a Britain that manages to make peace with its Roman past.

The acceptance of the "male-ordered dynasty" (p. 277) which removes Innogen from her role of heiress to the throne, transforming her – thanks to the Soothsayer's pseudo-etymology of *mollis aer/mulier* – into the partner of a protagonist instead of a protagonist herself, is seen by Del Sapio as a possible double final: one complying with the taste of the general public, whereas 'the wiser sort' were expected to doubt the simple happiness of the ending.

The chapter on *Cymbeline* merges with the final one on *Antony and Cleopatra*, as the analysis of *Julius Caesar* continued into the one

on *Cymbeline*, linking the two plays with the mythicization of Caesar. The chapter opens with a first pregnant meditation on Innogen's sleeping chamber, where the chaste protagonist has surprisingly treasured images from the eastern world: rich tapestries (including one representing Cleopatra "and her Roman", as the villain Iachimo puts it) feeding her imagination with a longing for skies away from Britannia, for new sights and new worlds. Though Innogen's travelling is enforced, and her peregrinations only undertaken to save her own life from Posthumus' jealous wrath, before folding back on her role of faithful wife, she gives words to an anxiety of experience which reveals her to be something definitely more complex than the modest, sorrowful victim of a less careful perusal.

Pointing at some key ideas in the essay on *Antony and Cleopatra*, we can deduce what follows. The two lovers' idiolect continually expresses their anxiety to transcend limits, "overflowing the measure": the key to their stance, and therefore their language, is hyperbole and excess. On the other hand, "transgressing boundaries" is proved by Del Sapio to be typically Roman (pp. 304ff). The interesting analysis of the language of the play, based on excess, hyperbole, and chiasms, seems to point at a "blurring" of polarities (p. 293), where the two worlds mingle in a fruitful ambiguity.

The idea of Rome is not limited to its 'political' representative in the play, young Caesar, "the master of measure" (p. 328), who stands for a Rome "without portents": it encompasses and feeds on the contrast between the two Roman rivals. Octave is in tune with the movement of history; the two lovers' "belatedness", their awareness that their time is past, transforms Antony into a ruin of himself (a broken statue, a 'man of steel' melting into water), and Cleopatra into his poet, his memorializing author. Here the metatheatrical role of the poet is not assigned to the Roman lieutenant, as in Agostino Lombardo's *Ritratto di Enobarbo* (Pisa, Nistri-Lischi, 1971), but to the captive and defeated queen. In her vivid, desperately triumphant "dream-like blason" (p. 311), Cleopatra actively mythicizes her lover, transforming him into a colossus ("bestrid[ing] the ocean" as Caesar "strid[ed] the world" in Cassius' words), who attains the level of a demi-god. "Ruins are met

with rebirth [through] an explosion of poetry" (p. 332); death and glory coexist, as they have done throughout the Roman plays.

Del Sapio convincingly interprets the lovers' story as Shakespeare's last celebration of the Roman ruins, endowed with their multiple meanings – fascination, longing, and regret.

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Fusini, Nadia, *Maestre d'amore. Giulietta, Ofelia, Desdemona e le altre*, Turin, Einaudi, 2021, 207 pp.

This study merges two essential features of the author's rich body of literary critical studies: on the one hand Shakespeare, to whom she has dedicated *La passione dell'origine* (1981), *Vivere nella tempesta* (2016) and the enchanting *Di vita si muore* (2010) – perhaps her most engaging book, a journey through the theatre of passions in Shakespeare's major tragedies; on the other hand, the feminist issues she has reflected upon over the years, particularly in her numerous writings on Virginia Woolf.

As the title suggests, this is a book about Love. The author herself provides the reader with precise coordinates to follow, starting from "la donna è l'ora della verità per un uomo" (woman is the hour of truth for a man). To Love conceived as fusion and to woman as the guardian of a secret, unknown to the rest of humanity, Plato dedicated his *Symposium*, in which, through the words of Aristophanes, we understand how man longs for recognition in order to somehow restore a state of wholeness, thus completing himself. This idea, which modern psychology calls fusionality, is taken up by Fusini in her fascinating introduction to the Italian translation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which she evokes the powerful idea of an arithmetic of love according to which 1+1 would make 1. In this triumphant fusion of Eros, the symbiotic metamorphosis whereby each lover is, in fact, the other stands clear. In this book, Shakespeare's female protagonists are the guides of a journey through Love, whose phenomenology, dynamics and inner logic they underpin.

From this perspective, *Maestre d'amore* begins with an analysis of the union between Romeo and Juliet, which Fusini poignantly reads

as a lost opportunity, "atto mancato". The star-crossed lovers reach death through a mocking game of the Wheel of Fortune, but they do not come to him together, missing one another until the end. The same dynamics underlie the union of Desdemona and Othello, whose fusion is impossible in the flesh and instead occurs only in Iago's mind. Fusini argues that *Othello* is not a tragedy of sexual desire since Desdemona falls in love with Othello's mind, with his language, which she devours with insatiable ears; and Othello, for his part, declares that he loves her with intellectual love, despite the various hints at Desdemona's fairness, in keeping with the Greek idea of *kalokagathia*. Merging with the other as Other, on the other hand, is on the verge of being realised in *Antony and Cleopatra*. However, according to Fusini, no Shakespearean lovers act in full reciprocity. Never do the bodies of the two mature lovers – eroticised, corruptible and finite, yet moving towards each other with a dizzying leap into the sublime – manage to form a united whole, thus pointing to the play's (failed) encounter between East and West, Rome and Alexandria, Love and Power. Such love with blurred boundaries, mixing and confusing the male and the female gender, can only be consummated in the sphere of the imagination.

Love in tragedy is, as might be expected, different from Love in comedy, to which the second part of *Maestre d'amore* is devoted. It begins with Love mingling first with dream and then with metamorphosis, in a clever game of reworking classical and folkloric sources; Fusini invites us to reflect on the notion of source and on Shakespeare's ingenuity, who cannot help 'undoing' what he is constructing through the source. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we witness a visionary love that transforms vulgar incidents into sublime ecstasies. In this play, the lovers find their true love, in a movement that resembles a dance.

Particularly noteworthy is Fusini's reference to the subtle and intricate theme of marriage – which is somehow supposed to lead the lover's wanderings to a happy ending. In *All's Well That Ends Well* – whose title tautologically promises the end of the plot – the focus is on a marriage that is, however, not based on prevarication but on reciprocity. Helena is endowed with a self-will that characterises her wanderings throughout the story, to the point of true obstinacy in the face of a constant struggle to obtain what she

wants for herself whatever it takes. It is she who leads the dance of passions. Marriage, the "nuptial catastrophe", is also at the heart of *Measure for Measure*, which tragically resolves the tangled story of Angelo's contamination against the backdrop of a two-faced Vienna which mirrors London, as cities always do in Shakespeare's plays.

And yet *Maestre d'amore*, like *Di vita si muore*, is something other than Love and Life and the magic that underlies Love and Life. A distinguished scholar of Shakespeare and early modern English culture, Fusini makes a case for a decidedly modern Shakespeare, also with regard to the female characters he created. In line with this argument she also highlights a number of relevant cultural issues about boy actors, cross-dressing and, above all, the fruitful relationship between theatre and life.

Finally, in the book's "Valediction", the author explains that if *Di vita si muore* was about dying of life, in *Maestre d'amore* Eros triumphs over Thanatos.

Maestre d'amore is a demanding book, which entails more than one reading; but readers acquainted with Nadia Fusini's sophisticated critical language are surely prepared for the challenge.

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Lovascio, Domenico, ed., *Antony and Cleopatra: A Critical Reader*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2020, 306 pp.

This welcome addition to the "Arden Early Modern Drama Guides" series, edited by Domenico Lovascio, and re-issued in paperback in 2021, once again takes up Shakespeare's Roman theme, which the editor has fruitfully followed in other explorations of early modern drama, from *Un nome, mille volti. Giulio Cesare nel teatro della prima età moderna* (Carocci, 2015) to the edited collection *Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (De Gruyter, 2020), and his latest effort, *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics* (Manchester University Press, 2022).

Drawing on his enduring engagement with the persistence and significance of Rome – the city, the culture, the myth – in the early modern English world, Lovascio sets out to take a fresh look at *Antony and Cleopatra* by partially giving in to "the temptation to

view *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607-07) as a sequel to *Julius Caesar* (1599)" (p. 1). Since other parts of the book are devoted to the necessary critical survey that this kind of guide is designed to provide, Lovascio shifts his attention to take an anamorphic view of the play, from the vantage point of the absence/presence of Julius Caesar, a constant comparison and source of influence anxiety for Antony. The result is a lively introduction in which Caesar is a relentless, ghostly presence, evoked by different characters in the play as a paragon of Romanness, but also of manliness, and, of course, we would add today, of the very idea of masculinity; leaving Antony with no other part than to portray simple, frail humanness. Lovascio only hints at the fact that the true heir of Roman values in this play is in fact Cleopatra ("Antony is never as great as Caesar – and, possibly, as Cleopatra", p. 6), a point often emphasized, and also persuasively argued in a 2017 issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare* entirely devoted to the play, edited by Rosy Colombo, which I would encourage any reader interested in *Antony and Cleopatra* to access (https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/memoria_di_shakespeare/issue/view/1230). Yet, by acknowledging the presence of the phantom of Caesar in the couple's dynamic (p. 9), these introductory pages set the stage for further explorations that the contributors to the volume pick up from different angles.

As is customary for the Arden Early Modern Drama Guides, after the introduction the volume sets out to reconstruct different aspects of the play's reception in sections named "The Critical Backstory", "Performance History", and "The State of the Art". Daniel Cadman's survey of critical responses to *Antony and Cleopatra* looks at early reflection on the play from the seventeenth century to the Victorian era, and then moves on to more in-depth discussion of twentieth-century criticism (divided in two stages, 1900-79, 1980-99). This choice makes the reader aware of a significant increase "in both the volume and range of readings of *Antony and Cleopatra*" (p. 40) in the last two decades of the past millennium, when considerations of gender and race began to be explored with illuminating results, culminating in Janet Adelman and Coppélia Kahn's seminal work on the play. The post-2000 critical survey is later carried on by Lovascio in the section devoted to the state of the art, but, before that, readers are treated to Maddalena Pennacchia's

fascinating interpretation of the performance history of the play as a sort of early coming-to-terms with "celebrity bio-drama". Shakespeare's treatment of Plutarch is read in terms of adaptation, and a parallel is drawn with today's celebrity culture, which enjoys "see[ing] celebrities in their 'undress', […] go[ing] beyond their public personae and peep[ing] into their private lives in search of 'unpublished' details" (p. 57). Thus framed, the stage history of the play is recounted, from the lack of evidence of stagings before the Restoration, to Dryden's experiment in domestication, to Garrick's revival of the play to the twentieth-century 'Neo-Elizabethan Revolution' and, finally, Shakespeare's Globe. Drawing on her expertise on intermediality, Pennacchia closes with a section on screen adaptations and twenty-first-century intermedial performances, allowing us to gauge the enduring presence of the play in the years closest to us. In chronological continuity, Lovascio then picks up the critical survey left at the year 1999, delving into critical contributions from 2000 to 2016. Rather than simply following a timeline, Lovascio interestingly groups his discussions around some defining concepts (Sources; Death; Passions; *Antony and Cleopatra* and its predecessors; Race, empire, and commerce; Politics; Ethics, gender, hermeneutics and genre; Messengers; Food; Apocalypse). The choice is perhaps slightly heterogenous for a compact chapter, but it does offer a broad, inclusive, and highly knowledgeable account of the issues current critical practice has most focused upon. Taken together, these first three chapters are an essential read for anyone wishing to approach the play with a sense of its historical depth and afterlife.

The 'New Directions' section comprises four chapters which investigate different critical problems, in an effort to carry the discussion further. In "After Decorum: Self-Performance and Political Liminality in *Antony and Cleopatra*", Curtis Perry tackles the "problem of consistent self-performance in a time of political transition" (p. 113). The insight that "the Rome of *Antony and Cleopatra* seems more like an idea than a place" (p. 121) helps us re-read the "conditions of Roman performativity" (p. 130) that inform the entire play and especially its final movement. In "Determined Things: The Historical Reconstruction of Character in *Antony and Cleopatra*", John E. Curran Jr. shows how Shakespeare's play puts a

particular twist on the idea that character and fate are intertwined, arguing that the characters' commitment to their performance of self "boils performance down" to action and reaction (p. 135). The reading allows Cleopatra to be reassessed as "a consistent opponent of Fortune" (p. 150), the only character to effectively determine her fate "in accordance with her own choice" (p. 154). Julia Griffin returns to a markedly textual focus, showing how certain of the most powerful of Shakespeare's scenes based on North's Plutarch were actually misleading translations or inventions. Her chapter ("Creative Misreadings and Memorial Constructions: The North Face of Alexandria") is refreshing in its attention to what happens to language in translation and to the linguistic construction of dramatic moments. Finally, Sarah Olive ("The Passion of Cleopatra: Her Sexuality, Suffering and Resurrections in *The Mummy* and *Ramses the Damned*") turns to the issue of rewriting, looking at two novels by Anne Rice (1989) and Rice and her son Christopher (2017), which explore Cleopatra narratives by blending "notions from literary criticism and scholarship […] to tackle pejorative representations of Cleopatra" (p. 198). The volume closes with a pedagogical chapter, "Resources for Teaching and Studying *Antony and Cleopatra*", by Paul Innes, in which critical responses are assessed as resources for students approaching the play. Some of the online sources are reviewed in a cursory fashion (for example the journal articles section, YouTube, etc.), but the chapter is intended more as a map than as a comprehensive survey, which would have taken up far too much space.

It is no accident that the recent, monumental effort of one of the scholars who has most contributed to the study of Shakespeare and Rome, Maria Del Sapio Garbero, ends its meditation on Shakespeare's use of the ruins and the myth of Rome – a book also reviewed in the present issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare* – with this play, in which Cleopatra, queen of desire, is entrusted with the task "of helping [Shakespeare] take his leave from Rome" (*Shakespeare's Ruins and Myth of Rome*, London-New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 334), a leave-taking that is itself nurtured with desire, and longing. Mixing themes of 'memory and desire' as they do, the essays in Lovascio's fine collection make for informative and pleasurable reading, which, as we know, is itself a fundamental classical value;

together, they provide a multi-faceted picture which begins to explain our enduring fascination with *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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