REVIEWS 1517

Richard C. McCoy. Faith in Shakespeare.

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What, in Shakespeare's world, does it mean to believe? His plays incessantly call upon us as audience to "awake" our "faith," as Paulina says in *The Winter's Tale*. Awake our faith, but faith in what? In the power of theatrical illusion? Or in the transcendental ideas that are embodied in that theatrical presentation? Or both? McCoy argues eloquently for both, for a faith that derives its extraordinary power by the interplay of illusion and substance that is conveyed through Shakespeare's extraordinary poetic power and his mastery of the art of dramatic performance. His brief and wonderfully readable book, in the rich tradition of Alvin Kernan (*The Playwright as Magician*), celebrates and illuminates why it is that Shakespeare's plays continue to fascinate readers eager to understand how those plays work their magic through a medium that revels in contrivance and trompe l'oeil.

McCoy's deft strategy is to focus in turn on four plays that deal explicitly with this theatrical miracle, thereby offering the reader a series of inherently persuasive readings of those plays while at the same time constructing an overall argument that continually gains force by cumulative demonstration. *The Comedy of Errors* is an early instance of Shakespeare's delight in inviting us to "wander in illusions" (4.3.39), so that we as audience are by no means immune from "the play's unsettling confusion" (43). The chapter on *As You Like It* centers on Rosalind's skill as manipulator of illusion as the boy actor assumes a woman's role taking upon herself the identity of a young man. Many critics have seen the play as overly contrived in its ending, with the sudden conversions of Oliver and Duke Frederick

from villainy to generous forbearance and love. McCoy argues successfully that the audacity of Rosalind's playacting is deliberate precisely so that we may be instructed to "Believe, then, if you please, that I can do strange things" (5.3.95). The issue in *Othello* is to ask how faith in love can be so "heartbreakingly unrewarded" in this play, as in Shakespeare's other romantic tragedies, and yet survive triumphantly through the power of theatrical performance in Desdemona's and Emilia's "fierce resistance to repression and mystification" (106). Shakespeare's other plays of course become part of the discourse, but the focus on one play as the center of each chapter provides a graceful clarity.

The Winter's Tale provides an effective coda for a study of the recovery of faith that is at once wondrous and improbable. Leontes's loss of faith in his splendid wife Hermione is irrational and inexplicable to all who sadly observe his mad self-destructive behavior. No less improbably, Shakespeare misleads us into understanding that Hermione dies as a result of the cruelty inflicted on her; she appears in a dream to a courtier as a wraith, shrieking and dissolving into air. Paulina's report under oath that Hermione is dead seems true beyond doubt. And yet, at the play's end, Hermione comes back to life from what appears to be a lifeless statue in Paulina's custody. Has Paulina really been harboring the queen over a whole generation of time until the repentant king can at last recover what he believes he has lost forever, or does a statue come to life? In the theater, as McCoy argues, the coming to life depends on the persuasiveness of the performance: the young male actor portraying Hermione must make us believe that Hermione lives and is rejoined to her husband. It is, as observers on stage repeatedly insist, a "miracle" — a miracle of theatrical performance. The idea is rich with suggestions about the end of a dramatist's career in the theater, and certainly resonates with the stories of recovery of faith for Alonso and others in The Tempest. It is this combination of belief and illusion that McCoy illuminates for us so persuasively.

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