

Unhae Park Langis. *Passion, Prudence, and Virtue in Shakespearean Drama*. Continuum Shakespeare Studies. London: Continuum, 2011. 180 pp. \$110. ISBN: 978-1-4411-8801-4.

This book outlines the ethicized model of psychology that shaped early modern thinking about the passions, and reads *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* in that light. Langis notes that Aristotle's ideal of the mean demanded a prudential tempering (rather than eliminating) of one's motivating passions, as well as a careful moderating of one's actions, and she argues that this "marshaling of affect" as well as "action" (28) was central to a Shakespearean theater, the primary concern of which was to present "nuanced and complex dramatizations of the Aristotelian concept of virtuous action" (16). Langis's further claim is that, notwithstanding the period's usual gender expectations, Shakespeare depicts bold females as better able to realize this ethical ideal than their male counterparts, who were overly preoccupied with guarding their own "socio-political . . . prerogatives" (22). Read within this framework, the Antony of *Antony and Cleopatra* waivers between the "incompatible goods of love and eros, on the one hand, and honor and heroics, on the other hand" (101), failing to commit himself to a single, decisive course of action that would prudently reconcile these two orders of desire. Only at isolated moments in act 4 — for example, when Cleopatra arms him — does Antony bring the languages of martial and amorous greatness into dynamic equilibrium; otherwise, he oscillates fitfully between these twin poles of affect, finding stability in neither. Cleopatra, by contrast, is said to demonstrate her "steady focus on the complete life" throughout (112), emphatically so in her suicide, which integrates the infinite variety of "Egyptian beauty, carnality, and oneness with nature" and the heroism of "Roman firmness of purpose" (118), but also in earlier episodes when, by playing the skilful actor, she tailors outward shows of passion to the prudential exigencies of the moment. Similarly, Langis's Coriolanus manifests the immoderate hypervirtue "inherent in the conception of Roman virtue" (122), an ethic that habitually descends into pride and scorn and that lacks any human love. But, while Volumnia matches this excess with her "hypermasculinity" (134), Langis again finds in another female character a contrary "model of virtuous moderation." Virgilia defends the domestic space over which she has charge against her mother-in-law's imperiousness, whilst also "supporting her husband's martial and civil endeavors bravely and passionately" (135).

Langis's book compares with Lily Campbell's *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (1930). Both works find in Renaissance drama exemplary tales of passion taken to excess. The interleaving of excursuses into early modern moral psychology with interpretations of the plays is, however, less integrated here than in Campbell's study or in more recent works by, say, Gail Kern Paster or Joshua Scodel. The reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, does not lean very strongly on the details of Langis's earlier description of contemporary moral philosophizing, except insofar as it invokes the concept of prudence. Both for that

reason and because the Christian dimension of Renaissance ethics is marginalized here, the book's historicist claims are less compelling than they might be. Perhaps the more important question that this work provokes, though, is how one should conceive of the relationship between Shakespearean drama and ethics. The chapter on *Othello* raises this question acutely. Langis is refreshingly critical of Desdemona, proposing that Aristotelian-minded audiences would have judged both her and the Moor, in being "Bound by idealized projections" of one another, to be each incapable of confronting the other "flexibly and sympathetically as a human being" (54). On this view, audiences saw in *Othello* a play that convicted both characters for their hypervirtue; a play, too, that gestured towards a prudential path not taken, a moral solution to the plot not realized. But was this really how Shakespeare's contemporaries responded to the multivocal medium of early modern tragedy? Were plays seen as tacitly vindicating moral truisms, as Langis implies; or did they function, rather, to question the very adequacy of early modern ethical language, exposing the redundancy of moral certainties in face of intractable human emotions? Those who favor the latter view will question the didactic assumptions on which Langis's readings rest.

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