

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). xii+308pp. ISBN 9781474427456.

Domenico Lovascio
Università degli Studi di Genova, Italy
lovascio.domenico@gmail.com

‘I want to look at Shakespeare’s Roman plays ... as if Shakespeare were a historian. Why does Rome change from Republic to Empire? What in fact does Shakespeare think happened? How does he explain what I call here “the fall of the Roman Republic?”’ (p. 11). These are the core questions Patrick Gray seeks to answer in his fine monograph *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War*, which finds the reasons behind Rome’s decline to be for Shakespeare eminently moral, psychological and philosophical rather than primarily political. In Shakespeare, contends Gray, ‘individuals choose between competing moral paradigms, and that choice then manifests itself in their ad hoc responses to whatever political dilemmas they may happen to encounter’ (p. 116); thus, Shakespeare’s view of history is somehow akin to that of Sallust or Cicero, with the ‘closest analogue’ being St Augustine (p. 117). Inevitably, Gray focuses on *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, with recurring references to *Coriolanus* as a term of a triangular comparison. Building on previous work by Gordon Braden, Paul Cantor, Coppélia Kahn and Wayne Rebhorn, Gray dexterously moves from St Augustine to Louis Althusser, from St Paul to Friedrich Nietzsche, from Cicero to Edward Gibbon, from Sallust to Justus Lipsius, from Guillaume Du Vair to Sigmund Freud, from Michel de Montaigne to Jacques Lacan, from Niccolò Machiavelli to Shadi Bartsch. At all times, Gray exhibits a keen awareness of and a productive engagement with prior scholarship and never avoids critical confrontation; in fact, he locates his study very accurately within the larger scholarly debate, which he confidently enters with a strong philosophical/psychological bent.

The book is made up of an introduction, two parts — devoted respectively to *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* — and a conclusion. Each part is divided into two chapters and a conclusion, with a perfect structural balance, which is tremendously beneficial to Gray's presentation of his material, as are his careful signposting and helpful mid-chapter summaries. Given the complexity of Gray's study on several different levels, it is not easy to provide an effective summary of it in the limited space of a review. At any rate, an element deserving special praise is that the main argument is very clearly spelled out up front: as Gray elucidates, 'The central claim of this study is that Shakespeare is deeply sceptical of neoclassical as well as classical glorification of the kind of personal autonomy Seneca describes as "constancy". Shakespeare sees this pursuit of individual invulnerability, not only as a defining feature of Roman culture, but also as the most fundamental cause of the fall of the Roman Republic' (p. 1).

In general terms, Gray believes Shakespeare portrays the fall of the Roman republic 'not as a by-product of economic, social or political dysfunction, but instead as a consequence first and foremost of patrician misconceptions about human nature', insofar as Roman noblemen seem to be able to conceptualize only two ways to reach *imperium*, namely 'either objective rule over others or a retreat from public affairs altogether, in order to focus instead on subjective self-control over their own experience' (p. 8). Gray suggests that 'Shakespeare sees both of these expressions of *libido dominandi* as doomed to tragic failure', because neither way can enable his Roman characters to 'escape the essential vulnerability of the human condition' (p. 8), in spite of their persistent efforts to do so. In order more precisely to dissect Shakespeare's theory of selfhood, Gray resorts to 'the theological concept of "passibility", meaning, susceptibility to being acted-upon, as the defining difference between the human and the divine' (p. 8). For Shakespeare, Gray remarks, impassibility — a term derived from Stoicism — is the prerogative of God alone, so that Shakespeare's perspective seems to be closer to Christianity than to Neostoicism, in that he sees the individual as 'embedded from birth in a web of obligations and liabilities which can never be escaped altogether, even in death' (p. 9). In this sense, Shakespeare's conception of ancient Rome emerges as somehow close to St Augustine's assessment that its decline depended on the absence of Christianity. Besides, Shakespeare appears to view self-sufficiency not simply as misguided for the individual, but even as pernicious for society, since it 'precludes the power-sharing necessary for stable, peaceful coexistence' (p. 20).

Over the two parts of the book that follow Gray proceeds to demonstrate his central claim. In Chapter 1, "'A beast without a heart": *Pietas* and Pity in *Julius Caesar*', Gray points out that 'Shakespeare depicts Brutus as torn between two opposed visions of heroism: Stoic and proto-Christian' (p. 50). More precisely, Brutus fails to attain the

status of the Stoic ego ideal of the *sapiens* because of his inability to remain indifferent to the fall of the Roman republic as well as to suppress his concern for other people. His kindness and pity, which to a Stoic would be signs of weakness in ‘entail[ing] a loss of self-control’ (p. 50), become admirable only when assessed within a Christian framework. By looking at Brutus from this angle, Gray manages to shed new light on the double announcement of Portia’s death to Brutus; as he puts it, ‘Brutus’ ostensible lack of curiosity here is not a printer’s accident, but forms part of Brutus’ own deliberate deception of his officers’; in other words, Shakespeare seems to use the double announcement ‘to show that the “form” of the Stoic sage is at best a fiction’ (p. 65). More broadly, Gray remarks that in *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare highlights that pity is ‘an ineradicable component of our human nature’ and that, even though Stoicism would advocate its suppression, it can never make it disappear; in fact, the play repeatedly shows that, when suppressed, passionate feelings ‘may even be exacerbated’ or disastrously ‘break out in places where they do not properly belong’ (p. 88).

Chapter 2, “‘The northern star’’: Constancy and Passibility in *Julius Caesar*’, concentrates on ‘Shakespeare’s Romans’ patent discomfort with femininity’, which Gray views not merely ‘as an effect of Roman patriarchy’, but as a result of ‘a more fundamental idealisation of impassibility’ by men (p. 98), which in turn provokes a pervasive anxiety about human vulnerability. Having ‘the wrong ideal in mind, one that leaves no room for pity or concession’ (p. 115), Shakespeare’s Romans ‘dissociate themselves from the feminine, seen as private and passive’, and not only because women seem weak; ‘worse, women make them aware of disconcerting weaknesses in themselves’ (p. 117). Unable to accept the harsh reality of their own fragility, Shakespeare’s Roman noblemen ‘take refuge in various psychological mechanisms of denial’ (p. 119). In this chapter, Gray’s reading of the moments leading to Caesar’s assassination are particularly ingenious (pp. 127–31), and while stating that Caesar fears being vulnerable is not exactly new insight, Gray’s argument is subtle and persuasive enough to provide refreshing evidence that ‘the relative dearth of female characters in the play represents the way in which empathy in Roman culture as a whole tends to be repressed or, figuratively speaking, kept off-stage’ (p. 137).

In the ‘Conclusion to Part I: Shakespeare’s Passion Play’, Gray interestingly suggests that ‘the most likely source for the distinctive strain of foolhardy, comic braggadocio in Shakespeare’s characterisation of Julius Caesar ... is neither Seneca’s Hercules nor the Caesar of the Gospels, but instead the stage tyrants of medieval cycle plays, including figures such as Herod, Lucifer and Antichrist, as well as Augustus Caesar’ (p. 162–3). That *Julius Caesar* features numerous oblique references to Jesus Christ is now a critical commonplace, but Gray goes one step further by claiming that the play ‘maps the story of Caesar’s assassination on to the framework of Christ’s Passion in order to

emphasise telling points of incongruity' (p. 162), so that the two stories become polar opposites, 'at once similar and diametrically opposed' (p. 155). Especially concentrating on the Towneley play 'Caesar Augustus' and the Chester Whitsun cycle 'Octavian the Emperor', Gray argues that 'Shakespeare's Julius Caesar strongly resembles the Towneley Augustus' and that like him, Shakespeare's Caesar 'is a failed pretender to Godhead, a wilfully oblivious *alazón*' (p. 169). As a result, Gray contends, Shakespeare's depiction of Julius Caesar ends up foregrounding the contrast between divine power and human vulnerability, a gulf that can only be 'reconciled in the person of Christ' (p. 170).

Part II of the book opens with Chapter 3, "'The high Roman fashion": Suicide and Stoicism in *Antony and Cleopatra*'. Here, Gray focuses on 'a different and more subtle aspect of human vulnerability: our sensitivity to shame' (p. 177), in order to explore Antony's and Cleopatra's suicides. What makes this chapter particularly compelling is the parallel Gray draws between Cleopatra and Brutus. A particularly nuanced and accurate examination of the differences between the accounts in Plutarch, North and Shakespeare leads Gray convincingly to argue that 'Brutus is deeply attracted to the idea of an escape from politics into the privacy of his own "mind"', where he thinks 'he can be more completely in control. What he discovers, however, is that he cannot entirely give up his desire for public approbation', because he realizes that exposure 'to the scorn of the masses would be more than he believes that he can endure' (p. 192). In this sense, Cleopatra looks just like Brutus. As it happens, 'Egyptian pastimes such as drinking, fishing and billiards represent, like Brutus' Stoicism, Cleopatra's attempts to escape awareness of a world outside her own control, retreating instead to a more private, subjective space in which she can be absolute *domina*' (p. 187). Accordingly, Cleopatra's suicide turns out to be consistent with Stoicism 'because, like Stoicism, it represents a wilful dissociation from reality' (pp. 184–5). Put differently, suicide is just the most extreme way of retreating into a world of dreamy obliviousness out of the reach of that external reality Antony and Cleopatra 'tend to dismiss or ignore, with tragic consequences' (p. 197). The two lovers' final catastrophe seems to suggest that 'Shakespeare sees individual human recognition of the truth, including, especially, the truth about the self, as something that is worked out in the context of relationships with other human beings' (p. 207), who can either help us accept reality or foolishly shelter us from it when we find it unpleasant, as exemplified by Antony and Cleopatra's validation of each other's delusions of godlikeness in their dangerous *folie à deux*. Yet, Shakespeare seems to imply that 'Objective reality exists, independent even of humanity itself' (p. 207). Towards the end of the chapter, Gray's ingenious reading of scene 4.4 (in which Eros and Cleopatra help Antony armour up for battle) as foreshadowing 'the more abstract truth that love does not, in the end, prove as apt a

defence from external reality as lovers themselves might wish' (p. 214) is particularly impressive.

Chapter 4, "'A spacious mirror": Interpellation and the Other in *Antony and Cleopatra*' introduces the notion of interpellation with a view to emphasising that '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' (p. 221). Thus, Gray uses the idea of interpellation differently from Althusser, who 'imagines an impersonal force, "ideology", doing to individuals' what 'Shakespeare sees individuals incessantly doing to each other' (p. 246). Gray deploys the concept of interpellation to discuss Cleopatra's urgency to avoid being carried in triumph. If the Romans' vulnerability to shame is to be seen as another instance of human passibility, then 'To be led in triumph is public exposure of powerlessness at its most extreme' (p. 242). Cleopatra proves to be able to eschew such shame by resorting to what Gray describes as 'audience management', as opposed to 'event management' (p. 244) — i.e. 'to limit exposure to the other to a carefully selected, sympathetic audience' as opposed to striving 'to change the external world' (p. 250). By looking at Cleopatra's actions in this light, Gray identifies another similarity between her behaviour and Stoicism, insofar as the grandiose spectacle of Cleopatra's suicide in the isolation of the monument, surrounded by very few people, 'recalls, in a sense, the death of Socrates, or of Seneca himself: the philosopher facing death on the company of a few select disciples' (p. 252). The scene may consequently be read not so much as exposing Cleopatra's hypocrisy, 'but rather ... Stoicism itself' as 'a species of "hypocrisy"', in that 'The Stoic is just as histrionic as the Egyptian queen; he just happens to be playing a different role, for a different audience' (p. 253). In this chapter, Gray also puts forward 'the so-called *Magna moralia*, a treatise once thought to have been written by Aristotle' (p. 226) as a source for Shakespeare's surprising anticipation of 'the conclusions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Continental philosophy' (p. 226) regarding the relation between self and other. While Gray's suggestion is not entirely convincing, he does make a strong case for it.

In the 'Conclusion to Part II: The Last Interpellation', Gray again references Christianity, thereby creating a commendable symmetry with the conclusion to Part I. This time, Gray argues that all the actions of Antony and Cleopatra indirectly have to reckon with the judgement of the Christian God. Indeed, by means of several oblique allusions to Scripture and by emphasising 'the gap between his characters' idealised imagination of what they will encounter and Christian beliefs about their more likely fate' (p. 263), the play seems to make clear that while 'Antony and Cleopatra are able to forestall Octavian's planned interpellation ... , there may be nonetheless another, more final interpellation, of a more mysterious outcome, that they cannot so easily escape' (p.

268). This inevitably affects the audience's perception of their suicides. The final 'Conclusion: Between Humanism and Antihumanism' feels more like a coda than an actual conclusion and may perhaps have been left out with no considerable harm.

Amid the abundance of brilliant insights and discussions, however, a handful of Gray's claims seem less persuasive than others. This is the case, for example, of his conclusion that 'The tradesmen who introduce [*Julius Caesar*] ... prove not insensible to the tribunes' censure' (p. 81), when we in fact have no idea whether they are *really* moved or not by Marullus' speech: Flavius' commentary on the people vanishing 'tongue-tied in their guiltiness' is not necessarily reliable, as a number of productions of the play make evident by plausibly having the people leave the stage unconvinced and sneering. In addition, the author might be over-interpreting the potential polysemy of the noun 'matter' in Flavius' remark about the Lupercalia, 'it is no matter' (p. 122), nor does it seem to me to emerge as unquestioningly as the author implies that 'Calpurnia's sterility ... represents her husband's, Caesar's, barren faculty of mercy' (p. 137). Besides, William Alexander's *Julius Caesar* was first published in 1607 and not in '1604' (p. 150). Moreover, some philosophical digressions might have been slightly reduced.

These, however, are only minor flaws in an otherwise solid, informed and fascinating study, which strikes the perfect balance between high-quality, complex scholarship on the one hand and accessibility and reader-friendliness on the other. At the crossroads between Early Modern Studies, Philosophy, Ancient History and Classics, Patrick Gray's *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War* proves to be a compellingly written volume that will appeal to readers ranging from experienced scholars to undergraduate students. Gray's penetrating eye for textual analysis, his vast and versatile erudition and his extreme sensitivity for the depths of the complexity of the human mind result in gripping new insights into two plays that, it turns out, we did not know as well as we thought.