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Renaissance et Réforme

Johnson, Toria. Pity and Identity in the Age of Shakespeare

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Toria Johnson's thoughtful and wide-ranging monograph explores the representation of pity in early modern literature, in relation to its broader cultural history from the classical period to the present day. Johnson argues that pity in the Renaissance was a fundamentally social emotion that "defin[ed] the boundaries of humanity and individual agency even as it also sometimes eroded them" (2). In this way, the book offers an implicit defence of pity against its various modern and premodern detractors. Aristotle considered pity to be "unstable and unreliable" (6), while Seneca worried about its capacity to permeate and weaken the pitier. This classical scepticism was carried over into the Renaissance, with neo-Stoic writers cautioning against pity's contagious and undesirable qualities. But, in contrast to these philosophical anxieties, early modern literature "largely suggests a more obvious indulgence in the emotion's seductive, penetrating appeal" (7). Johnson argues that this literary fascination with pity relates to the development of identity and selfhood in the period. Here she follows Nancy Selleck and others in presenting the early modern subject as a "self within a community" and "very much dependent on and defined by social interactions" (22). Johnson asserts that drama will be the focal genre for her study, and suggests (quite rightly) that Shakespeare's plays offer a particularly complex and ambivalent assessment of pity. Yet the primary reason given for this focus on drama is its "profound investment in visual displays of feeling" (24), which seems rather tangential to the book's primary interest in intersubjectivity. Moreover, this arguably undersells the scope of the project, which encompasses complaint poetry and Petrarchan verse as well as plays, and explores "pity's emergence as a secular concept in the literary and cultural works of early modern England" (27).

The first chapter examines Shakespeare's *King Lear* in relation to this secularization of pity. The English Reformation saw the loss of the church as official mediator in charitable exchanges, with the result that individuals could not necessarily rely on others for compassionate relief. Earlier morality plays such as *Everyman* and *Hickscorner* can be seen to reflect upon these anxieties, inasmuch as they present religious versions of pity and charity as more reliable

than their secular counterparts. Johnson argues that *Lear* resembles a morality play in its basic structure but is full of "compassionate misfirings" (63) as pity fails or is misdirected. Lear's desire for charity comes too late, while genuine acts of pity are "consistently and brutally punished" (71). Nevertheless, Johnson suggests that the play is not entirely pessimistic because it can be read as a lamentation for what has been lost. Chapter 2 takes us back to the 1590s with a discussion of texts that invoke or represent the story of Lucrece—including *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. While writers like John Day depicted female violation as a way of appealing to piteous male readers, Shakespearean figures such as Lavinia and Lucrece use "visual distress and pity as tools for communication and community" (82). Thus, Lucrece is not only a "visually and emotionally striking presence" but also "fully present in the poem as an active agent" (112). At the same time, however, Johnson shows how these powerful visual images within Shakespeare's poem are open to differing interpretations by characters and critics.

Chapter 3 considers the poetic exchanges between Sir George Rodney and Frances Howard as an unusual literary example of Petrarchanism. While the role of the piteous and dejected male poet in Petrarchan verse was highly conventional, and an expression of poetic or social ambition rather than genuine emotions, Rodney killed himself when he was rejected by Howard. Johnson thus argues that the commonplace view of Petrarchan dejection as a fictional pose "overlooks the possibility (and probability) of lyric poetry as an outlet for genuine sadness" (130). This is an intriguing argument, although it is complicated by the fact that, as Johnson points out, Rodney's poetic efforts are characterized by a lack of invention and originality. Indeed, this case study might be seen to affirm Touchstone's assertion that "the truest poetry is the most feigning." The chapter goes on to explore how Petrarchan situations are imported into plays such as *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Thracian Wonder*. These texts do not simply offer a critique of Petrarchanism but rather imagine "new ways in which pity might facilitate interpersonal connection" (152). The final chapter extends this interest in dramatic compassion with brief treatments of Shakespeare's plays—including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard III*, and (once again) *Titus Andronicus*—that use pity "as a way of theorising humanity" (167). The chapter culminates in a stimulating discussion of *The Tempest*, and how its characters variously exercise—or withhold—pity and compassion in their engagements with others.

Johnson's conclusion emphasizes that Frederick Nietzsche was mistaken in his characterization of the Renaissance as a strong age of emotional resilience. Rather, early modern subjectivity was "emotionally encumbered," and even when pity fails to appear "its absence is heavily discussed" (197). In this way, Johnson's book demonstrates the value of retelling the cultural history of pity, and asking why this emotion has garnered such anxiety and scepticism amongst commentators. In our own cultural moment, which tends to regard pity as hierarchical or condescending, we might do well to remember the original meaning of the term as "shared tenderness" (197). Some readers might query aspects of the organization and chronology of the book, and there is a tendency throughout to emphasize the "messiness" of pity as a concept, which arguably distracts from Johnson's central thesis. But this is an important study of pity and compassion in Renaissance England that offers a compelling argument for the restoration of emotional vulnerability as a vital part of the human experience.

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