

## The Spenser Review



**Toria Johnson.** *Pity and Identity in the Age of Shakespeare.* Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2021. xiii + 225 pp. ISBN 978-1843845744. \$115.00 hardback.

By Scott Annett

In the opening act of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1601), the grieving prince finds himself being pulled aside by his father’s ghost for a quiet word. True to form, and despite his earlier bravado, Hamlet hesitates. “Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak, I’ll go no further.”<sup>1</sup> Picking up on his son’s nervousness, the ghost stops and demands Hamlet’s full attention.

Ghost. Mark me.  
Ham. I will.  
Ghost. My hour is almost come,  
When I to sulph’rous and tormenting flames  
Must render up myself.  
Ham. Alas, poor ghost.  
Ghost. Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing  
To what I shall unfold.  
(1.5.2–9)

The ghost is “Doom’d,” as he explains a few lines later, “to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away” (1.5.10–13). The very mention of the “sulph’rous and tormenting flames” (1.5.5) is enough to elicit an expression of emotion from Hamlet, but this expression is immediately rejected by the ghost, who desires not “Pity” but rather “serious hearing” (1.5.8).

The various ways in which Shakespeare’s audiences might have interpreted the ghost of Old Hamlet have long been discussed. Theologically speaking, the ghost is in conversation with a set of beliefs and practices that had been at the heart of European

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (London: Methuen Drama, 1998; repr. 2001), 1.5.1.

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Christianity since at least the thirteenth century, and which were explicitly problematized by what Toria Johnson calls “the English Reformations” (34). Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost is marked by three specific requests on the part of the deceased: to be given “serious hearing” (1.5.8), to be revenged, and to be remembered. The desire to be remembered is in keeping with the religious practices of medieval and early modern Europe in which it was customary to keep in mind, primarily through prayer, the souls of deceased family and friends. However, in Hamlet, remembrance is not intended to speed the purgatorial process or to ease the pain suffered during the “certain term” (1.5.14) in which the ghost must wait, but it is instead expected to act as a prompt for revenge once the conversation between father and son has concluded. Such a desire for vengeance befits the genre to which Shakespeare’s play aspires, and yet it also destabilizes the theological explanation for supernatural restlessness offered by the ghost: a member of Shakespeare’s audience might well wonder if outrage at the manner of his untimely death is not the real reason for the ghost’s nocturnal rambling, or indeed if a posthumous incitement to murder has recently been recorded amongst his “foul crimes” (1.5.16). Nevertheless, both the desire to be remembered and the desire to be revenged are predicated upon the ghost’s initial demands to be seen (“Mark me,” 1.5.1) and given “serious hearing” (1.5.8). The ghost emphatically rejects the kind of insufficient sentimentality of which Hamlet is instinctively guilty (“Alas, poor ghost,” 1.5.7), and which the ghost identifies as pity. In doing so, the ghost raises complex but fundamental questions regarding the attentiveness that might be expected of one human being when encountering the suffering of another. Moreover, this moment also poses a question about the possible limits of such interhuman responsiveness, for while it might be possible to keep in mind a deceased family member, it may not be possible, or theologically proper, to pity them.

In *Pity and Identity in the Age of Shakespeare*, Toria Johnson suggests that the capacity to pity becomes “a necessary part of being human” (28) in the early modern world. This argument reaches its conclusion in Chapter 4 (“Theorising Humanity Through Pity”), but it is substantially developed in Chapter 2 (“Violent Spectacle and Violent Feeling in Early Modern Lucrece Narratives”), in which a series of sophisticated readings of Shakespeare’s presentations of Lucrece and Lavinia complicate “the prevailing sense of the violated female as someone (and more often, something) to be looked at” (105). As Johnson argues, “Shakespeare’s emphasis on the

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capacity of the female gaze to foster emotional, pity-based connections gives Lucrece a significance beyond the political” (105). In other words, Shakespeare’s Lucrece is granted the capacity to look back, and in doing so, to demand a “serious hearing” (1.5.8). While the age of Shakespeare held an intense fascination for what Johnson calls “individual vulnerability” (28), in Shakespeare’s hands such vulnerability was inflected in novel and sophisticated ways. Johnson observes that the “notion of the pitiable female’s gaze is new, distinct from the passive visual properties of other early modern Lucreces” (110). For Shakespeare, Lucrece becomes a “pitiable subject” (113), which is to say, an individual capable of experiencing trauma and then demanding an appropriate emotional response; in Johnson’s view, both Lucrece and Lavinia “signal a new capacity to form interpersonal, emotional connections” (115), if not to heal the injuries that they have suffered then at least to insist upon those injuries being fully recognized.

Such recognition suggests tantalizing possibilities for thinking about the ways in which Shakespeare acknowledges and then navigates trauma. For instance, in the final moments of *The Tempest* (1611), when Prospero once again renders himself vulnerable (“my charms are all o’erthrown, / And what strength I have’s mine own,” Epilogue 1–2), the audience is encouraged to scrutinize the old magician and then respond mercifully:

[...] my ending is despair,  
Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would pardoned be,  
Let your indulgence set me free.  
(Epilogue 15–20)<sup>2</sup>

Once again, Shakespeare playfully engages with theologically charged language: the old world in which relief might be accessed through prayer and indulgence has not disappeared entirely, although the possibility of release is now doubled with the pleasure an audience might express in putting hands together in applause at the conclusion of a play. Prospero’s “crimes” (Epilogue 19) are to be understood within the context of the suffering that he has endured, while Shakespeare’s audience is encouraged to respond with their own lives in mind: “As you from crimes would

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<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (London: Methuen Drama, 1998; repr. 2001).

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pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free” (Epilogue 19–20). From this perspective, the full resolution offered by *The Tempest* does not take place when Prospero finishes orchestrating the intricacies of the plot, nor when he renders himself vulnerable once more in abandoning his magic and pledging to return home, but instead only when that human vulnerability is scrutinized, acknowledged, and appreciated by the audience, whose applause carries across from the world of the play into the lives of all those present in the theatre.

Johnson emphasizes “literature’s capacity both to depict emotive subjects and to provoke emotion in readers and spectators” (23), before going on to argue that in Shakespeare’s hands such provocations are intended to foster “a more positive community building element” (30) than was the case in the writing of some of his contemporaries, and specifically, that of John Day. Again, with *The Tempest* in mind, the attention demanded by Prospero at the end of the play, followed by the expression of emotion on the part of the audience in the final applause, could be understood to restore the shared humanity of all the participants within the theatrical community. Moreover, Johnson believes that it is this “capacity” that allows literature to contribute to the development of a “history of emotional selfhood” (28). There are numerous reasons for approaching such a project with care, not least the fact that conceptions of both emotion and selfhood may well have shifted since Lavinia first appeared on Shakespeare’s stage. Indeed, in the examples given above from *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, there is ample evidence of Shakespeare’s own awareness of such chronological drift. However, Johnson addresses these concerns in Chapter 1 (“‘My Name Is Pity’: Mediated Emotion and *King Lear*”), then goes on to make a compelling case for the fact that the nature of our responses, and the language we use to describe such responses, are recurrently at the forefront of questions posed by early modern texts, with Shakespeare’s work being particular but not unique.

The study of history always involves the delicate analysis of continuities and ruptures, while attendant to such analysis is the risk of oversimplification and presumption. To that end, we might keep in mind Henry V’s warning to his old friend, Sir Jack Falstaff, in the final moments of *Henry IV, Part 2* (1598): “Presume not that I am the thing I was.”<sup>3</sup> Johnson is certainly willing to emphasize the messiness and plurality of history, drawing attention to the impact of the “Reformations,” which she

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<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2, The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (London: Methuen Drama, 1998; repr. 2001), 5.4.56.

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argues “must be understood not just in religious, political, or social terms, but in affective terms as well” (34). Awareness of such historical complexity necessitates dexterity when acknowledging what Johnson calls “inheritances” (35). *King Lear*, she argues, is “saturated with a number of emotional and dramatic inheritances” and is “a deeply nostalgic piece that draws on the structures and impulses of medieval morality drama to reflect the consequences of the emotional restructuring that happened in the wake of the English Reformations” (35). In other words, there are conceptual, structural, and emotional ghosts to be encountered in Shakespeare’s writing (perhaps in all literary writing), and, yet, when examining such encounters it is important to be conscious of the “restructuring” (35) that has taken place since those ghosts last drew breath.

From the outset of her book, Johnson is keen to argue for “early modern England” as a “watershed moment in pity’s broader history,” but a single “watershed” moment sits ill at ease with the kind of messy plurality just described (28). More specifically, the notion of “secular pity” (28), mentioned at the outset of Johnson’s book, requires more detailed development: there are certainly ways in which early modern drama can be reticent when it comes to addressing theological questions, but neither the example from *Hamlet*, nor that taken from *The Tempest*, are entirely secular, if that term is intended to suggest a definitive separation from religious practice. Nevertheless, Johnson is alert to the ways in which space might be cleared by writers looking to move away from “inheritances,” (35) and she demonstrates this in her discussion of genre, and specifically the turn away from a conventional Petrarchan “pity appeal,” which she claims is “transplanted and repurposed on the early modern stage” (31).

This thought develops in Chapter 3 (“Dramatic Reworkings of Poetic Pity”), which begins with a fascinating reading of the “real-life exchange between Sir George Rodney and Frances Howard,” which Johnson describes as a “rich and multi-faceted story that ends, tragically, with a rejected love suit and Rodney’s death by suicide” (117). For Johnson, “Rodney’s story is desperately sad, an account of a tragically collapsed boundary between poetic speaker and emotional subject” (119). In other words, Rodney’s failure is primarily literary. In developing this insight, Johnson asks: “[D]oes early modern pity have specific generic identities? Is lyric pity a different prospect to dramatic pity? I believe it is, and that the Rodney case helps to clarify a genre-based attempt to distinguish forms of literary pity” (119). Johnson’s

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attentiveness to genre, and the distinction she makes between “lyric pity” and “dramatic pity” (119) is important as it allows her to place specific emphasis on drama in early modern England, which in turn allows her to delineate the extent to which representations of suffering, and responses to such suffering, were of recurrent and increasingly sophisticated interest to the writers of Shakespeare’s age. Here, Johnson is keen to emphasize that Shakespeare should be placed within a “specific theatrical community,” one in which the pity appeal of the Petrarchan tradition required “tearing down” to clear space:

By setting aside one kind of pity and one way of articulating emotional subjectivity as the ‘property’ of another genre, vital space was created for imagining new ways in which pity might facilitate interpersonal connections, and how this emotion might newly situate the individual subject in their community.  
(152)

In her conclusion, Johnson suggests that the “intimate relationship between pity and identity” might feel “historically distant,” before explaining that our understanding of pity has drifted far from the “tenderness,” “the goodness,” and the “kindness embedded in its Latin root *pietas*” (197). That Latin root, of course, found its fullest expression in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and its handling was of significant interest to both Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer, which perhaps goes to show that the kind of “setting aside” or space clearing that might be observed in early modern writing can also be detected in the work of authors prior to Johnson’s “watershed moment” (28). Indeed, Chaucer was certainly aware of the Petrarchan ‘pity appeal’ when writing in the late fourteenth century (see, for instance, “The Complaint unto Pity”), but in his conclusion to *The Clerk’s Tale*, he offers a far more complex example of the role pity might play in forming community. As we see, Chaucer’s Clerk explicitly identifies “Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete” as the man from whom he learned the story he is about to tell, in which the Marquis Walter repeatedly tests his wife Griselda, even going so far as to pretend to kill their children.<sup>4</sup> Upon being reunited with her children, at the end of the tale, Griselda collapses:

When she this herde, aswowne doun she falleth  
For pitous joye, and after hire swownynge  
She bothe hire yonge children to hire calleth,  
And in hire armes, pitously wepynge,  
Embraceth hem, and tenderly kissynge

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, “Clerk’s Tale,” *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987; repr. 2008), Prologue, 31.

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Ful lyk a mooder, with hire salte teeres  
She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres.  
(1079–85)

Griselda looks upon her children with “pitous joye” (1080), and this adjective reverberates with increasing intensity throughout the text. She is the embodiment of maternal love and attends to her children fully, “ful lyk a mooder” (1084), which calls to mind the Virgin Mary’s attention to Christ’s body following the crucifixion. Such is the intensity of her devotion that she becomes “pitous” (1080) herself; her “wepyng” (1082) triggers an outpouring of emotion in “every wight” nearby (1109): “O many a teere on many a pitous face / Doun ran of them that stoden hire bisyde” (1104–5). Griselda becomes a “pitiabie subject” (113), and as Johnson writes of Lavinia and Lucrece, she manages to “form interpersonal, emotional connections” (115) with those nearby, thus anticipating the kind of dynamic subjectivity identified by Johnson’s work. Griselda’s expression of emotion and the intensity of the attention that she pays to her children draws her onlookers in, confronting them with the suffering that she has endured and demanding that her full human identity be acknowledged through pity.

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