

D. R. C. Marsh, *Passion Lends Them Power: A Study of Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*, Sydney University Press, 1976. \$12.50.

The "love tragedies" are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. After an introductory chapter on "The tragic strand in the comedies", and a discussion from the same standpoint of "The problem comedies and *Troilus and Cressida*", each of these three plays is given a chapter to itself, and the conclusion extends the scope to "The Romances". As the plays under scrutiny, as Professor Marsh observes, "span most of Shakespeare's creative life", the book has its own unity. It is refreshing that it has no special thesis to propound: this is the work of a man who submits his mind to the text, and seeks to discover its emphasis and its leadings.

One main strength of *Passion Lends Them Power* lies in its analysis of particular speeches and situations in the plays, especially by way of their language and tone. Romeo is at first a captive of the "attitudinising affectation of the courtly lover" (p. 53); changes come in the first meeting of the lovers, where although they are engaging in polite conversation in public, "yet the vivacity of both emerges from the skill and quickness of wit with which, inside this formal situation, they explore one another's feelings" (p. 59); the balcony scene then advances the relationship "from the stage of a meeting between virtual strangers to the intimacy of tone and the mutual trust of an established love" (p. 63). Professor Marsh's alertness to the nuances of language and to the tempo of a scene is equally acute in his discussion of the "formality" of Othello's public utterance or of Iago's persuasive arts.

While no one would be more resistant to critical formulas and generalizing comments than the author of this book, the reader of any book on Shakespearian tragedy will be concerned with the assumptions on which a critic proceeds. Professor Marsh commits himself to at least one general principle when he claims that Troilus, forced to recognize Cressida's infidelity, "is placed in a situation in which he might manage that painful progress to greater self-awareness that is, for me, the distinguishing mark of the tragic hero" (p. 40). The need to achieve this "greater self-awareness" exerts a certain pressure on the exposition. It is a test that Troilus fails: "he learns nothing about himself, and therefore, though we may pity him, we do not respect him, for he clings determinedly to that first illusion which has given life to all the other illusions, his view of himself" (p. 40). Romeo passes the test, for Professor Marsh sees *Romeo and Juliet* exhibiting love as "a maturing force" (p. 52), so that the lover of Rosaline and "the boy who lay blubbering on the floor of Friar Lawrence's cell" has at the end of the play become "a man who takes the decision for life or death with a mature sense of responsibility and certainty" (p. 51).

These judgements refer to elements that are certainly present in the plays. It is a matter of getting the emphasis right. Professor Marsh seems a little reluctant to let the characters be what they are. My feeling is that in both Troilus and Romeo, Shakespeare is presenting limited natures — although their limitations are of course very different. We are not urgently required to censure Troilus, who is not capable of any behaviour other than what we are shown — is a self-deceived character by definition cut off from our sympathy? A growing self-awareness in Romeo may be a fact of the play, yet it remains part of the tragedy of both lovers that they never seem

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fully to comprehend their predicament, so that the action bears out very sensitively the "star-crossed" nature of their love.

The chapter on *Othello* is the most impressive in the book. Professor Marsh confronts the problems that have beset the play since T. S. Eliot (in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca") claimed that Othello in his last great speech seemed to be "cheering himself up", and since Dr Leavis pursued the implications of this judgement in his *Scrutiny* article on "The Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero". "The real question", Professor Marsh stipulates, "is whether there is something uniquely corrupt in Othello himself, which Iago exposes" (p. 92), and he takes up the familiar objections that the Moor's account of his wooing reveals "a sort of emptiness or rhetorical flourish" which is "a sign of some basic flaw in Othello's character, a self-regarding quality which makes him unable to resist Iago's attack" (p. 95); that his response to the coarse images which Iago feeds to him betrays an inadequacy in his love for Desdemona; that the language of his jealousy shows him the captive of a "voluptuous sexuality" (in Dr Leavis' phrase) that becomes increasingly violent and vindictive.

The rebuttal is perceptively argued, whether in terms of the precariousness of Othello's position as an alien in Venetian society, or of the trust reposed in Iago:

The point apparently needs to be made repeatedly, that nobody in the play, not Othello, who has known him for years; not his wife Emilia; not his comrades in arms; not Roderigo, whom he dupes so outrageously and who knows of the plot against Othello, but seems convinced that at least Iago is honest with him; not even the gentle and sensitive Desdemona suspect for a moment that Iago is anything other than a bluntly spoken soldier, practical, reliable, *honest*. (p. 102)

or of the supposed "impurity" of Othello's love:

Those critics who see a radically flawed Othello, and who claim that any reading that allows him to regain his nobility is a romanticising one, are perhaps themselves guilty of basing their arguments on a highly romantic supposition, that intense love will admit of no doubt, and conversely that if doubt arises, then the love is not worthy of the name. It would be reassuring if this were so; common experience tends to show that it is not. (p. 111)

All this is eminently true, as is the rejoinder to the critics who are so nervous about Othello's "sexuality": "he loves her body and soul, her body and her soul; with his body and his soul" (p. 122). But can these therapies save the play? Dame Helen Gardner, in the British Academy lecture of 1955 to which Professor Marsh more than once refers, located the essential difficulty when she ascribed the modern reaction against *Othello* to a "distaste for the heroic". If any of Shakespeare's tragedies is in the heroic mode, that tragedy is *Othello*. The play may suffer less from a modern "distaste" for the heroic than from a modern unwillingness to take the heroic for granted. The nobility of Othello is a datum of the play, and never a proposition that the action labours to establish. Shakespeare feels no obligation to *prove* that Othello is noble; it is simply assumed that he is so. The problem is that in the action of the play, the Moor seems like an Homeric character set down in a world of Italianate intrigue, where though someone as adaptable as Iago may thrive, a man of Othello's stature is perilously like a dinosaur left over from some

previous age. As the rhetoric that is appropriate to an heroic figure keeps calling attention to the disparity between the man and his circumstances, the conception of Othello as Iago's dupe becomes even more inescapable. Professor Marsh's defence is eloquent, but chasms in cultural history are supremely difficult to bridge.

*Passion Lends Them Power* is a thoughtful book, with something fresh to say on most of the issues it raises. It is a welcome addition to a crowded field.

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