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Raspa, Anthony. Shakespeare the Renaissance Humanist: Moral Philosophy and His Plays

Mark Albert Johnston

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Raspa, Anthony.

Shakespeare the Renaissance Humanist: Moral Philosophy and His Plays.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. ix, 195. ISBN 978-1-137-58111-2 (hardcover) US\$95.

Arguing that moral philosophy was the practical everyday expression of Christian humanism—the fusion of humanism’s constitutive elements and shifting phases out of medievalism and into what we call modernism—Anthony Raspa’s *Shakespeare the Renaissance Humanist* proposes to corroborate Shakespeare’s ethical engagement with humanism by identifying various critical terms central to Renaissance moral philosophy as active agents at work in his plays. By turns, Raspa interrogates Shakespeare’s treatments of metaphysics as political, sociological, and philosophical concerns in *King John* and *Hamlet* (chapter 2); wisdom as an aspirational ideal in *King Lear* (chapter 3); the human mind’s capacity for imagination and reason in *Macbeth* (chapter 4); the roles of spiritual beauty and the affections in *Romeo and Juliet* (chapter 5); and reason’s negotiating between matter and spirit while partaking of both in *The Tempest* (chapter 6).

In his first chapter, Raspa usefully disambiguates moral theology, which focuses on eternity vis-à-vis man’s immortality, from moral philosophy, which confronts the Christian humanist with the ethics of mortality. Critiquing the trend in new historicism and cultural materialism to analyze Shakespeare the thinker outside his cultural and theatrical context—a trend he associates with renaming the Renaissance the early modern period—Raspa contends that moral philosophy’s impact on Shakespearean drama might be gauged by observing the limitations the playwright places on evil, whose power is bounded by the strength that humans afford it. Attributing the birth of Renaissance humanism to the convergence of four currents of thought—the rediscovery of ancient texts; the idealization of reason as the soul’s speculative faculty for perceiving God through creation; man’s possession of an immortal soul as a philosophical principle; and religious faith as a logical response to this philosophical conclusion—Raspa concludes by discussing religious conviction in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, reading Titus’s inherited belief in ancient myth and Aaron’s rational atheism as foils to Lucius’s belief in oaths and myths tempered by questioning and uncertainty—a belief system characteristic of the Renaissance humanist.

The remainder of the book attempts to recuperate the significance of various terms held dear by Renaissance moral philosophers in order to heighten the reader's sensitivity to those concepts when they transpire in the plays. Chapter 2 begins by considering three common early modern senses of "form"—the first referring to all beings, the second to humanity as a species, and the third to the human individual—a term that acquires political resonance in Shakespeare's *King John* by being deployed in contrast with the term "commodity." Raspa proceeds by discussing how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* counterpoints the concept of "soul" to "dust" in its attempts to come to terms with the paradox of existing simultaneously in time and in eternity, of being both sentient soul and material flesh, prone to dissolution. Ultimately, Raspa argues that Shakespeare's adoption of the language of practical metaphysics conveys the idea that the immortality of the characters invests the state with meaning; that everything political in the dimension of time is dust bound on the one hand but also imbued with purpose on the other. Focusing in his third chapter on the centrality of the concepts of wisdom, sight, and nature to the development of Lear and Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Raspa asserts that a nuanced understanding of the vocabulary of Renaissance metaphysics can revolutionize our understanding of the drama. The assertion falls somewhat short here, in part because the terms whose connotations he explicates have long received critical attention for their profoundly figurative resonances in the play. To argue, as Raspa does in the following chapter, that Macbeth's hamartia is his overactive imagination rather than his ambition does more to broaden our understanding of the role played by imagination in Renaissance moral philosophy, as both the mind's mirror for sensory experience and as fancy or fantasy, than it does to unsettle received interpretations of Shakespeare's tragedy or its central protagonist. The fifth chapter's discussion of the playwright's engagement with the concepts of beauty and misfortune in *Romeo and Juliet* seems relatively inconsequential, posed as a hypothetical question bearing on the proposed guilt or innocence of the central couple—whether the tragedy owes more to unhappy coincidence or to some fatal flaw. The final chapter enjoys comparative success reading *The Tempest*'s Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero respectively as body, spirit, and reason. While its insights and observations throughout are indubitably astute, the book's overall impact is dulled somewhat by its weak signposting and diffuse argumentation, compounded by its offering neither a formal introduction nor any conclusion. Ultimately, Raspa successfully sensitizes the reader to the language of moral

philosophy and its measured deployment in the bard's drama, even if he never quite manages to convince us of Shakespeare the Renaissance Humanist's ethical intent.

MARK ALBERT JOHNSTON

University of Windsor

Straparola, Giovan Francesco.

The Pleasant Nights. Ed. and trans. Suzanne Magnanini.

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 40 / Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 481. Toronto: Iter Academic Press / Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015. Pp. xx, 501. ISBN 978-0-86698-536-9 (paperback) US\$49.95.

Suzanne Magnanini's new translation and edition of Giovan Francesco Straparola da Caravaggio's *Piacevoli Notti* (vol. 1, 1550 / vol. 2, 1553) is a welcome addition to the resources and scholarship in English on the works of Straparola, as well as on the early European fairy tale and the transnational novella tradition. Based on Donato Pirovano's recent Italian edition (Rome, Salerno Editrice, 2002), the volume importantly places Straparola's text—the first framed European story collection to include a substantial number of magical tales—within the context of discourses on early modern gender and authorship.

The Pleasant Nights stages a Decameronian storytelling gathering under the leadership of Lucrezia (Sforza) Gonzaga, daughter of Ottaviano Maria Sforza, at their villa on the Venetian island of Murano. The seventy-three stories include sixteen fairy tales, the latter all told by young women, alongside novellas of various kinds. A sampling: a rapist, confused by God, attacks pots and pans instead of his intended target (2.3); Crazy Pietro spares the life of a talking tuna fish, who then helps him magically impregnate a princess, saves her reputation, and finally makes him into a good spouse (3.1); a princess without a dowry, but educated in arms and letters, lives an adventurous life as a young man until a king marries her (4.1); a dying man leaves his notary's and his confessor's souls to hell, along with his own (10.4); a cat who is a fairy helps a young man make his fortune (11.1); and a nun experiences swelling and pain until an operation