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Eros in Shakespeare

Abstract

This brief essay is a translation of the introduction to the volume *L'Eros in Shakespeare*, edited by Alessandro Serpieri and Keir Elam in 1988. In discussing the role of the passions in Shakespeare's plays and poetry, it brings together considerations from semiotics, psychoanalysis, drama theory and early modern English history. These approaches are all pertinent to the analysis of the multi-perspective and performative language of Shakespeare's plays. The essay also surveys the four Shakespeare conferences held in Taormina, under the direction of Alessandro Serpieri, between 1984 and 1987.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; passions; semiotics; psychoanalysis; early modern English history

This brief essay is a translation of the introduction to the volume *L'Eros in Shakespeare*, edited by Alessandro Serpieri and Keir Elam in 1988.¹ The volume in question presents the proceedings of a conference held the previous year in Taormina. It seemed to me appropriate to translate this essay on its thirtieth anniversary, as part of the celebration of Sandro's life and work. This choice was also encouraged by a recent article by Armando Massarenti in the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, published on the occasion of the fourth centenary celebrations of Shakespeare. Massarenti's reflections on Shakespeare's "lessons of love and power" are prompted by his re-reading of what he calls "a precious and now unfindable little book", which he deems "a highly useful re-discovery, in this period of the 400th anniversary celebrations of the Bard". Massarenti writes,

Serpieri and Elam underline the extraordinary modernity of [Shakespeare's] conception of Eros, which 'is tested against Plato, Ovid and Petrarch' only to find new, fruitful itineraries. In Shakespeare, 'Eros runs everywhere... it is quest, game, play, performance, fiction, deception, disgust, formless spectre', and not infrequently, as shown by the passionate plots that move Shakespearean heroes, 'it can give rise to unprecedented violence and frustration, because the investment of desire can always be deformed into the most secret and disturbing psychic spectres...' . . . Whether in the joyful dy-

¹ See Serpieri and Elam 1988. The volume includes papers by Giorgio Melchiori, Jaqueline Rose, Agostino Lombardo, Barbara Arnett Melchiori, Giuseppe Galigani, Terry Eagleton, Silvano Sabbadini, Franco Marengo, Fernando Ferrara, Sergio Bonanzinga, and Maurizio Grande.

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namics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or in the intricate machinations of a Iago or a Pandarus, Eros runs everywhere and, if it runs, it often runs in circles.

This translation endeavours to make the 'rediscovered' introduction available, thirty years on, to a new and wider readership. It is clearly an essay of its time, especially in its primarily semiological discourse, but at the same time it addresses a theme – that of the passions in Shakespeare – that has certainly not lost any of its fascination, and that probably deserves closer analysis than it has received, in the meantime, in the critical literature. Above all, the essay reflects some of Sandro's abiding critical and cultural interests, from semiotics to psychoanalysis, from drama theory to intellectual history, all of which converge in the analysis of the multi-level and performative language of Shakespeare's plays.

The 1980s Taormina Arte conferences to which this introductory essay refers were a significant part of Sandro's broader cultural engagement with Shakespeare's plays and their translation and performance. We organized the first conference, in 1984, to accompany Gabriele Lavia's celebrated staging, in the vast Greek theatre, of *Hamlet* in Sandro's own excellent translation (Shakespeare 1982). Tom Stoppard was guest of honour of both the performance and the conference. The 1985 meeting offered, among other presentations, the then ongoing and unpublished University of Florence research project, led by Sandro, on Shakespeare's dramatization of his historiographical sources. The following year the theme of "Staging Shakespeare" brought together international artists of the calibre of Krzysztof Zanussi, Leo De Berardinis, and Enrico Baj, as well as leading Shakespearian scholars, and was marked by Declan Donnellan's highly innovative Cheek-by-Jowl production of *Twelfth Night*. The final conference, to which this essay refers, again accompanied the performance of a Serpieri translation at the Greek theatre, in this case Lavia's production of *Macbeth* (Shakespeare 1996). These events, at once scholarly and performative, underline Alessandro Serpieri's unique combination of critical, theoretical and translational skills, and his multi-perspective commitment to understanding and presenting Shakespearian drama and poetry on page and stage.²

KE

Introduction

This volume presents the proceedings of the fourth conference on Shakespeare, organized and hosted in Taormina in August 1987, within the framework of the annual Theatre Festival. The conference in question concluded at least the initial phase of the summer meetings dedicated by Taormina Arte to Shakespearian dra-

² I wish to thank Alessandro Serpieri's heirs, Chiara, Simone, Nicola, and Marco Serpieri, for permission to translate and publish this essay.

ma. It might be apt, therefore, to recall briefly the topics of the previous three meetings, and offer a summary of the overall conference debates and their central themes.

The first conference, held in 1984, was dedicated to the topic of “the nostalgia of being” (Serpieri 1985), a nostalgia that can be discerned in works of the great dramatist, as in other European artists of the time: nostalgia for a model of the world founded on a powerful symbolic and transcendental system that had sanctioned, for centuries, a general and shared cohesion of meaning. In post-Copernican civilization, marked by the first clear signs of the ‘new science’, knowledge tended towards relativism, towards the perspectival – and therefore variable – vision of subjects and events, and towards the multiplication of routes of signification and of communicative pacts. Of all this, Shakespeare was certainly one of the most acute and troubled interpreters, committed to seeking out and representing the new and more problematic relations of man with the world, but attracted, at the same time, to the earlier model of meaning that was undergoing such an epochal crisis.

The second conference, held in 1985, had a more technical theme, but no less relevant in terms of the construction of meaning: the compositional work of the dramatist in adapting his narrative sources, in particular the historical chronicles (Hall, Holinshed) and Plutarch’s *Lives*. This dramaturgic work consisted in the transformation, adaptation and transcodification of ‘histories’, appropriated with modes of theatrical representation that were unprecedentedly varied, and commensurate with the problematics of a new, already modern consciousness.³

The third meeting, which took place in 1986, was centred on the theme “Staging Shakespeare”, and thus on the work of twentieth-century actors and theatre artists, in relation to the possible modes of appropriation of a dramaturgical era – the early modern period – with which all the participants agreed it was necessary to come to terms (Serpieri and Elam 1986).

This brings us to the most recent summer meeting (1987), dedicated to the theme that has provided the title of this volume: “Eros in Shakespeare”. This theme is connected in a certain sense to the topic of the first conference, addressing from a different angle of vision the question of Shakespeare’s ‘modernity’. If, in discussing the “nostalgia of being”, the main point of view had been of a cognitive and epistemological order, here, in the discourse on Eros, the privileged point of view was naturally that of the emotions – the passions – running throughout Shakespeare’s work. It is a field no less new and mobile, varied and unpredictable, than the cognitive and rational field. Shakespeare’s new tragedy, new comedy and new lyrical poetry are the result of a highly intense relationship with a period of vertiginous transformation, and therefore with a particularly acute and problemat-

³ The central session of the second conference was dedicated to the ambitious research project, entitled “In Shakespeare’s workshop: from the sources to the plays”, carried out by a group of University of Florence researchers under the direction of Alessandro Serpieri. The results of this project were later published in four volumes (Serpieri, Bernini, Celli, Cenni, Corti, Elam, Mochi, Payne, and Quadri 1988). The same publisher, Pratiche, likewise published the proceedings of the Taormina conferences, including the present volume.

ic sense of history, as well as with the uncertain status of time itself, in which human affairs are conducted and defined in an increasingly precarious fashion. What emerges in this relationship, in Shakespeare as in his great contemporaries (from Lope de Vega to Cervantes to Donne), is a modern sense of Eros and, complementarily, a modern sense of death. We are now quite beyond the Petrarchan tradition, even if the themes and modules of that tradition continue to exert their influence. The experience of Eros is now presented in the most varied registers, along unexplored and dynamic dramatic trajectories, in a continuous restructuring of the relations and emotions invested in it.

Dominant in this discourse is the word/concept 'desire': an 'infinite desire' according to the most ancient tradition, from the 'distant love' of the Provençals to the varied modulations of the Sicilian and *Dolce stil novo* schools, and thus of Petrarch and of all the Petrarchists. But this 'infinity' is now relocated within an extraordinary form of mobility that shatters the canonical Petrarchan *mesa in forma* with its underlying narrative involving the lover and the distant or missing woman, and with its predominantly nominal-adjectival discursive structure (acutely explored by the critical genius of Contini). Desire becomes modern in all senses, because it is no longer codified in 'a' typical situation, investigated with reference to variations on the theme, but is refracted through multiple possibilities and perspectives: it draws on tradition, or rather traditions, and at the same time invents new routes and new targets. In Shakespeare, but also in his other great contemporaries, desire is tested against Plato and Ovid and Petrarch, without any overt or even implicit hierarchy, and, confronting these paradigms, finds unknown and disturbing new itineraries.

It could not be otherwise, since, as Greimas suggests, "every society traces the contents of its own particular pathemic configuration, which – interpreted as a grid for connotative social reading – has among other tasks that of facilitating inter-subjective and social communication" (1983: 14). If this is true in general, in Shakespeare and in his era the dissemination of Eros through the prismatic mirrors of the great epistemic crisis, and of the new cognitive relativism, allows us to glimpse that 'excess' and 'insaturability' that determine the whole development of the modern. Desire, like knowledge, is losing its 'ontological' object, its codified reference.

Eros 'runs' everywhere, in traditional and transgressive relationships, in surprising situations, in registers and modules of multiple stylistic, rhetorical, parodic and slang inventiveness. The constraints of the puritans are countered by a tumultuous conceptual and expressive wantonness; and ideal love is conjugated alongside the parody of love, or together with the inexhaustible discovery of the obscene. Amorous play can reach new heights, just as it can give rise to unprecedented violence and frustration, because the investment of desire can always be deformed into the most secret and disturbing psychic spectres: of death, of jealousy, of nausea towards carnal experience, first pursued as a mirage and then perceived as extreme degradation (see, for example, Sonnet 129).

Desire has no boundaries, as we read in *Venus and Adonis* ("The sea hath bounds, but deep desire hath none", l. 389),⁴ and again in *Troilus and Cressida* ("the

⁴ All references are to Shakespeare (1986).

desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit", 3.2.79-80). It is 'false' or 'foul', as can be discerned in the numerous lexicalizations scattered in the comedies no less than in the tragedies; it can turn into its opposite, death ("I desperate now approve / Desire is death", Sonnet 147, ll. 7-8); and above all it never reaches its target in full (as can be seen for example in *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.6.8-19, or in the incipit to *Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1-15, where, affirms Duke Orsino, love must be understood as fantastic, insatiable, multiple and restless, because its final object is only itself or its own reflection: "So full of shapes is fancy / That it is alone is high fantastical", 14-15).

Desire, therefore, is everything in Shakespeare. It is spiritual attraction towards the Neoplatonic archetype (as in the sonnets of immortality), quest, game, play, performance, fiction, deception, disgust, formless spectre. Its workings are an extraordinary field of investigation for addressing the passions on a historical, theoretical or hermeneutic level. This is not surprising, because the theatre, which is the main point of reference here, lives by the passions, represents the passions and arouses the passions, both as an elective site of enunciation and as an imitation of life, and therefore, as the privileged territory of the great pathemic modes that manifest themselves along the axis of the 'will': namely, seduction and temptation. These are modes of manipulation, as Greimas observes, that pass through the speech act, and that live by language (always both a means and an end, within artistic fiction), like the other two types of manipulation: that unfolding along the axis of power (threat or provocation) and that manifested along the axis of knowledge (to make known or to make people believe, see Greimas 1983: 119). Such passionate modes, of course, take on particular significance within the narrative and performative fabric of the drama.

Let us consider more closely the three above-mentioned levels of investigation of the passions in Shakespeare: the historical, the theoretical and the hermeneutic. On a historical level, his drama discloses the forms of expression of the first truly modern sensibility, within the cultural and intertextual context of his era, and sketches out the features of a new Eros in relation to the transformed social, urban and commercial transactions of the time. The English Reformation had led, on the one hand, to a supposed consensus, and thus to an apparent control of the passions, but, on the other hand, with its repressive influence – not only political-religious but also psycho-ethical – it had given rise to extraordinary degrees of verbal vulgarity and, more secretly, to novel forms of passionate obliquity, Freudian negation and morbid projection: on the one hand, therefore, foul language, on the other the puritan phantasmization of desire, of which *Othello* is one of the most paradigmatic and powerful examples.

On a theoretical level, Shakespearean drama offers highly significant material, both for a psychoanalysis of the passions (not by chance Freud, Jones, and Lacan drew on his plays in enucleating their analytical models), and for a semiotics of the passions, such as that of Greimas, intent on studying the passions as an implementation of actantial structures, in the awareness that passion is never unilateral, and cannot be simplistically anchored to the subject, but always interacts with networks of relations within the very pathemic possibilities of the era in which it is manifested and textualized. A semiotics of the passions must of necessity be, at

one and the same time, a historical, rhetorical and psychoanalytic investigation.

Finally, in hermeneutic practice, Shakespeare's works can also be read along the great new emotional trajectories – and in the subtlest of pathemic traces – supporting, moving and disturbing both thought, concept and image. Today it might be highly profitable to work on Shakespeare's drama in search of the 'signs' and 'systems' of the passions, thereby returning, in a certain sense, to Aristotle: the great, original system of emotions lying behind all theatrical codes. A similar return can also represent, at the same time, an analogous recuperation of Elizabethan, and more generally Renaissance, theoretical reflection, which often took the form of an authentic psycho-semiology of the passions, as, for example, in Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* (1601) a 'scientific' investigation of the psychic and behavioural mechanisms of human relations. We progressively lost track of such approaches, and have only recently rediscovered them, bringing to light again the extraordinary modernity of their theoretical structure and of their empirical research, albeit within the specific episteme of the age.

The papers presented in this volume explore, in far greater depth than we could attempt in this brief opening discourse, virtually all the points that we have summarily expounded here, and undoubtedly represent a significant overall contribution to the study not only of Eros in Shakespeare, but also of the whole vast and complex range of the passions, investigated in their historicity, in their rhetoric and in their textual complexity.

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