

Ewan Fernie 2002: *Shame in Shakespeare. Accents on Shakespeare*. London and New York: Routledge. 274 pp.

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The study of shame in Shakespeare (and in any other major English writer) is one of those topics that, for various reasons, have been neglected by most scholars in the English speaking world. Interestingly, many of the few works that have analysed it in English literature have focused on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and have done so in the wider context of Western thought and literary tradition, as if these topics (shame plus their aggregates, of which honour is the most obvious) were somehow alien to English studies proper. The reason may certainly have to do, at least in part, with the obvious need to incorporate into such studies an important intellectual classical background: Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius and, in general, most of the major Stoics; but also Humanists such as Valla, Vives, Ficino, Guevara or Erasmus; or old Germanic traditions on the life of fame, among others. In general, for these and other reasons, it is not easy to find works devoted to this topic and which focus exclusively on English literature. However, there certainly is a handful of penetrating books and articles which, more or less periodically, have analysed this issue together with the related concept 'honour' from different perspectives, and which, per force, have created a reduced canon of studies which anyone working in the field has to know. Thus, Edward M. Wilson's "*Othello, a Tragedy of Honour*" (1952), "Family Honour in the Plays of Shakespeare's Predecessors and Contemporaries" (1953), and "A Hispanist Looks at *Othello*" (republished in 1980); Charles L. Barber's *The Idea of Honour in the English Drama* (1957) and *The Theme of Honour's Tongue* (1985); Curtis B. Watson's *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honour* (1960); Paul N. Siegel's "Shakespeare and the Neo-Chivalric Cult of Honour" (1964); Stanley Cavell's "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*" (1969; republished in 1976, 1987, and 1999); Norman Council's *When Honour's at the Stake* (1973); Rodney Poisson's "The 'Calumniator Credited' and the Code of Honour in Shakespeare's *Othello*" (1976); or, more recently, John Alvis's *Shakespeare's Understanding of Honor* (1990). As these studies show, the only serious approach to shame and honour, in Shakespeare or elsewhere, would have to take into account, before the analysis of literary texts is attempted, the semasiological problems posed by these and other related concepts (honour, dishonour, honesty, reputation, shame, embarrassment, or guilt); then, the anthropological, sociological and even psychological implications of their role in a given community, and consequently the characteristics of that community; and finally the philosophical corpus sustaining, throughout history, their relevance and meaning (mainly, but not exclusively, and as I have suggested above, Stoicism and Neo-Stoicism, Christianity, and Humanism). Besides, in the long run honour and shame have a specific sociopolitical function, with which any study of their presence in a literary corpus has to deal. Ewan Fernie, a Lecturer in English at the Queen's University of Belfast at the time of the elaboration of this book, and currently Professor of English at University College in London, has attempted to fill in this gap relying on his experience as author of several articles on Renaissance literature and culture and on his solid knowledge of Shakespeare. Although, as we will see, lacking in various aspects (the analysis is theoretically too concise

and leaves some central questions untouched), *Shame in Shakespeare* is a valuable addition to this understudied field and consequently, regardless of its serious shortcomings, constitutes a felicitous event for English studies as a whole.

From the point of view of chapter division, *Shame in Shakespeare* proceeds in a very sensibly didactic way, the purpose of which may well be to make this unknown topic more accessible to an audience very likely not well versed on this issue. Thus, the “Introduction” functions as a very pertinent anthropological and sociological approach to shame, dealing in a very clear and succinct way with some of the most relevant theoretical problems of this subject, such as the relation of shame with death and dissolution; with identity and selfhood; and with status and the world, among others (1–12). I find particularly interesting and useful both Fernie’s psychological stance, which leads to an analysis of shame as “an alarm bell for psychological danger” (17); and also the references to the physicality of shame (9). Yet this succinctness falls too easily into underelaboration, as in the case of the too simplistic distinction between shame and embarrassment (13). This is most clearly perceived in Fernie’s somehow confusing account of the traditional distinction between shame and guilt: while it is true that—as Fernie claims—the sociological and anthropological work of Mead or Benedict (distinguishing between shame- and guilt-cultures as completely different communities) has been refuted by Peristiany, Pitt-Rivers or Cairns (among many others), it has not been so for exactly the reasons that Fernie argues; in fact, he reverses the evaluation of shame and guilt from being perceived as, respectively, external and internal perceptions of the self, to a notion of shame as pointing to the self and guilt to the non-self or the Other; it might have been more clarifying to explain how both, shame and guilt, inevitably appear inextricably linked, and then to apply this to some of the plays under consideration. The major deficit of this section, though, is the neglect of a necessary topic in any discussion on shame, namely “honour”; this means that the active dimension of the shame/honour aggregate is not accounted for, and thus the analyses of characters such as Othello or even Coriolanus can hardly be completely satisfactory (what are the bases of Othello’s self-confidence at the beginning of the play? what does Coriolanus really despise, and why?), while others such as those of Hotspur or Brutus are not even attempted.

In the following chapter, “Shame before Shakespeare,” Fernie makes a clarifying summary of the classical roots of shame, providing a series of readings of classical plays by Sophocles, Euripides and Seneca which will prove of relevance later in his analysis of some of Shakespeare’s plays. The author is able to distinguish carefully between classical and Christian shame, and his line of thought in these aspects is consistent and deep. However, his analysis of these plays is not too elaborated, and consequently does not get into many of the complexities of the notion of shame as it is used by these classical playwrights. Besides, there is no consistent reference to Aristotle’s *Ethics*, and none to Cicero’s *Officis*, arguably two repositories of Stoic thought with an enormous influence in classical and subsequent accounts of shame and honour.

Chapter 3, “Shame in the Renaissance,” introduces “shamelessness” as a typical Renaissance reaction to what Fernie has been calling “spiritual” shame: the one produced by an inner conviction of what is good and what is wrong from a Christian perspective. Represented by Marlowe’s drama, shamelessness is associated with Marlovian subversion and radical opposition to the system, yet it looks as if Fernie could have made more of this idea in his approach to some Shakespearean characters. Shamelessness, for example, is

most clearly perceived (in Marlowe, Shakespeare, or elsewhere) if associated with, or shown in conjunction with, un-Stoic attitudes, but Fernie does not attempt such an analysis. In fact, this chapter, the previous, and the next, "Shame in Shakespeare," surprisingly leave out any reference to Stoicism and Neo-stoicism as the philosophical backbone of shame and honour, as many of the most relevant texts on this issue point out; this omission, utterly unexplained, somehow damages the critical power of *Shame in Shakespeare*. One further example may suffice to illustrate this point: the chapter on *Coriolanus* almost literally describes many of the characteristics of the Stoic wise man (a creature indifferent to all external things, including wealth, love, fame or health, and absolutely self-sufficient) (209), and of the Aristotelian *megalopsychòs* (literally, the man great of soul, also indifferent to external opinion and with a hypertrophied sense of his worth) (213–14), but yet it makes no reference to them or to their meaning.

The specific and detailed analysis of the plays selected by Fernie, namely *Hamlet* (chapter 5), *Othello* (chapter 6), *King Lear* (chapter 7), and *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* (chapter 8), is, in general terms, correct. Fernie's readings of these plays provides them with new dimensions of meaning, and he consistently proves how his concern with shame is fully justified; in other words, Fernie's analysis allows for some new and fresh insights (not easy when dealing with Shakespearean drama) which are only possible when shame is taken into consideration. Thus, Iago's motives, Coriolanus's proud and apparently foolish obstinacy, or Hamlet's doubts, are discussed and interpreted in the context of their relation with shame. Especially noteworthy is that in all these analyses Fernie is concerned with the "redemptive power of shame" (172) in the plays, what constitutes a point of departure with the more traditional view of shame as a destructive force which annihilates the individuality of the characters.

Taken as a whole, Ewan Fernie's *Shame in Shakespeare* also offers some especially noteworthy illuminations. Obviously, the most challenging and valuable conclusion of this book is, as we have already suggested above, that "shame points the way beyond selfishness to relationship with the world outside the self" (228). Fernie convincingly argues that shame has in Shakespeare's tragedies an ultimately positive function, which is basically psychological and has to do with an awareness of one's own deficiencies, in ways that the shameless cannot experience. In this sense, equally revealing is his interpretation of the shameless (whom, as we said, he finds more clearly in Marlowe than in Shakespeare), a character that by defying shame "gain[s] the sense . . . of individual being" (62). Something similar had already been pointed out by Jonathan Dollimore in relation to the revengeful Stoic hero in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (Dollimore 1989: 35–36) yet it had not been previously suggested, to my knowledge, in connection with shame. By doing this, Fernie basically rejects many of the most widely accepted approaches to shame (and honour) as negative impulses that eventually threaten to destroy society by first hypertrophying and then disempowering the individual. In fact, Fernie goes as far as suggesting in shame a fully positive and restorative capacity by giving it, in a Jungian manner (although Jung himself is never mentioned), the role of functioning "as the revelation of a fundamental lack in human being" (5). However—he notes—this is not always the case with Shakespeare's heroes: certainly Hamlet or Othello benefit psychologically (or spiritually) from their shame in ways that Coriolanus or Antony do not know. On the issue of the public dimension of honour (the gaze of the others: "The early modern subject . . . is very much constructed in the eyes of others" [57]), although he accepts its importance Fernie, not so

convincingly now, somehow contradictorily maintains that “the public aspect of shame has been exaggerated” (12); and unfortunately it is never explained how to link this with his statement that the Renaissance is “a great age of display and spectacle” (57). Fernie also establishes a very pertinent distinction between worldly and spiritual shame (42–73), but it seems that it is not enough to account for the full complexity of this issue, especially if one wants—unlike Fernie—to incorporate into the discussion notions such as honour, reputation, or dishonour, and all those cases in which the neat opposition elaborated by the author is cancelled. Since Fernie ignores all these elements, more or less clear constituents of shame and honour, he does not perceive the need to face this problem. Finally, one can only regret that, although the author concedes that “shame is a Foucauldian resource of power” (74), the book never explores to what extent shame is a determining force in that respect; or, in other words, which (if any) is the social function of shame.

The bibliography is a very basic compendium of some of the most relevant works on the issue, and so there are several relatively important omissions, the most surprising of which, among the secondary sources, is the seminal work by Mervyn James “English Politics and the Concept of Honour, 1485–1642.” This brilliant essay, although the work of an historian, is not written from an exclusively historical perspective, and offers an indispensable account of the presence and function of shame and honour in some selected pieces of English literature (notably Sidney’s *Arcadia*), connecting this with the structure of feeling of the period. Besides, we must note the already mentioned absence of indispensable works by, among others, Alvis, Barber, Wilson, Poisson, and Council, and also of two unavoidable continental authorities on honour and shame such as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the Spanish anthropologist Julio Caro.¹ Among the primary sources, although we should not expect of a work of this size and scope a full analysis of all relevant documents about this topic, it is also true that the bibliography does leave out most of the essays which, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, determined what honour and shame were to mean; thus, apart from some inevitable references which the book includes somehow reluctantly and rarely quotes (like Roger Ashley’s *Of Honour*), Fernie does not mention at all such central Elizabethan and Jacobean studies of shame and honour as Raimon Lull’s *The Book of the Ordre of Chivalry*; Francis Markham’s *The Booke of Honour, or, Five Decades of Epistles of Honour*; Gervase Markham’s *Honor in his Perfection*; Thomas Milles’s *The Catalogue of Honor*; John Norden’s *The Mirror of Honor*; Lodowick Bryskett’s *Discourse of Civill Life*; William Baldwin’s *A Treatise of Morall Philosophie*; James Cleland’s *The Institution of a Young Nobleman*; Thomas Elyot’s *The Book Named the Governour*; Jacques Hurault’s *Politicke, Moral, and Martial Discourses*; Count Haniball Romei’s *The Courtier’s Academie*; William Segar’s *The Booke of Honor and Armes*; Antonio de Guevara’s *Diall of Princes*; or Montaigne’s *Essays* (especially the one devoted to honour). Certainly the book would have benefited from some of the perspectives elaborated by these titles, which would have helped to expand a view too restricted to just Ashley, Castiglione, Vives, La Primaudaye, Luiz, and Pocaterra (most of them only mentioned once in the entire book).

1. Probably the best works by both on the subject of honour from anthropological, sociological and literary points of view (Bourdieu’s study of honour in the Cabilia, and Caro’s analysis of honour, shame and literature) are collected in a seminal book edited in English by Peristiany (1967).

All in all, Ewan Fernie's *Shame in Shakespeare* is a recommendable introductory book on this topic, if only because it explores, as we have claimed, a neglected issue certainly in terms more useful for students than for the specialized reader. Although not a deep analysis of the origins and complex evolution of shame, of its relations with major epistemological trends, or of its public (social, political) function, it provides a valuable introductory interpretation of the role of shame in some Shakespearean plays and, from a clearly defined perspective (although unnecessarily reduced) throws some light on a still largely ignored area of Shakespearean (and English, for that matter) studies.

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