

is it true that the voices of the colonized and the construction of colonial power do not put us in a state of unease? Does the appropriation of the gestures and language of one social class or group by another for the purposes of domination and control not touch on our own deeply felt anxieties? To my mind, Greenblatt's formulation might be qualified and modified by juxtaposing it to a famous comment which Walter Benjamin made in his "Theses on History." "To articulate the past historically....," Benjamin writes, "means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (255). Thus our own anxieties, our own moments of danger, may condition the ways in which we negotiate our readings of past texts. Still, no one who reads *Shakespearean Negotiations* can fail to be challenged, provoked and delighted by Greenblatt's interpretations. It is an immensely rewarding book about a theatre which compels, and will continue to compel, our attention.

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The Dynamics of Power: A Review of Heather Dubrow's *Captive Victors*

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Heather Dubrow's study of Shakespeare's narrative poems and sonnets, *Captive Victors*, presents the characters in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* and the speaker of the sonnets as "captive victors," at once victorious and victimized.¹ As the title suggests, Dubrow is among those scholars who recently have been investigating the dynamics of power in English Renaissance literature, but *Captive Victors* is less concerned with the coercive authority of political and social institutions than with love and language as exercises in domination, and less interested in efforts to subvert authority and to contain subversion than in the ambiguities of power and vulnerability within personal relationships and the individual psyche. In *Captive Victors*, Venus emerges not primarily as a lusty sensualist nor as a symbolic representation of eros, but as a subtle characterization of a woman who associates love with control and mastery. The speaker of the sonnets appears not as the generous, large-souled, and painfully honest lover that C.L. Barber described some thirty years ago, but as a figure for the 90's: a man preoccupied with power, deceiving and deceived. Just as Dubrow demonstrates how characters use language to dominate others, she also shows how they are entrapped by their own deceptive rhetoric. In the sonnets, the speaker flatters his young friend who is "fond on praise" (84:14) and morally compromises himself by his evasion and duplicity. In her efforts to seduce Adonis, Venus renames the world around her, trying to transform reality to suit her purposes, and is caught in the house of mirrors she has built, unable to see accurately either Adonis or the consequences of her own actions.

Entrapment by the language that empowers is as evident in victims as in aggressors. Adonis' aphoristic truisms protect him from Venus' attacks, but they also demonstrate his foolish reliance on conventional pieties in a world of random violence. Similarly, Lucrece's sententious generalizations are both assertions of value and self-worth and a symptom of dangerous belief in

1 Dubrow, Heather. *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1987.

absolute truths in a complexly ambiguous world. Indeed, the lines between villain and victim and between power and impotence are disturbingly blurred. A significant part of Dubrow's thesis is her argument that in these poems "it is neither one state nor the other but rather the ambiguous threshold between them that interests Shakespeare most" (263). Thus in overpowering Lucrece, Tarquin proves "A captive victor that hath lost in gain" (1 730), and conversely Lucrece's suicide is both heroic assertion of power and its ultimate loss.

By tracing the intertwining of the urge for power with the urge for love, Dubrow supports her broader thesis that critics have underestimated the psychological acuteness and aesthetic sophistication of Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry, and she adopts a variety of critical strategies to show that these poems provide "a subtle exploration of human emotion, a coherent analysis of human character" (18). Rhetorical analysis is the critical tool that she turns to most frequently and employs most deftly. For example, she finds in *Venus*' naming and renaming of the material world not simply an assertion of power and a propensity for self-deception, but more particularly a confounding of the maternal and the sexual and an attempt to translate the material into the spiritual. Other characteristic linguistic gestures, the goddess of love's metonymic projection of herself onto the natural world and especially her preference for conditional syntax, reveal multiple facets of a subtly realized character with both individuating complexity and resonance of broad patterns of human behaviour.

As well as showing how linguistic gestures constitute idiolects for individual characters, Dubrow demonstrates that rhetorical motifs can characterize a whole society. The tensions of syneciosis, the dominant figure in *The Rape of Lucrece*, express not only Tarquin's situation as a "captive victor," but also the competitiveness that is the primary characteristic of the society as a whole and the contradictions within the culture: the clashes between family bonds and militarism; and between emphasis on public, communal life and individual isolation in Shakespeare's Rome. In addition to using rhetorical patterns to manifest psychological patterns, these poems also explore aesthetic issues through psychological ones. For example, *Venus*' manipulative use of the pathetic fallacy problematizes the literary convention itself. Similarly in the sonnets, while various forms of paradox express the speaker's moral and emotional uncertainties and ambivalences, his psychological problems parallel Shakespeare's formal ones. The unconventionally indeterminate final couplets of some sonnets and the disturbingly simplistic ones of others express the speaker's fearful and indecisive temperament and his frantic attempts to resolve his internal conflicts. By doing so, they brilliantly solve the formal problems of closure, especially acute in the Shakespearean sonnet form. Such rhetorical strategies

as ironia, paradiastole, oxymoron, and equivocation, through which the speaker undercuts praise with blame and blame with praise, mirror simultaneously his emotional and moral dilemmas and the problematical relation of praise to flattery facing Shakespeare and any writer of encomiastic poetry within a patronage system.

Thus, by examining recurrent rhetorical figures, Dubrow demonstrates that Shakespeare's narrative and lyric poetry uses rhetorical patterns to explore complex psychological, moral, and aesthetic issues. Her approach, however, is not limited to rhetorical analysis. In addition to Renaissance rhetorical theory, she draws on speech act theory, sociological and psychological studies of rape victims, contemporary anthropology, and reader response theory. Particularly useful, as we would expect from Heather Dubrow, are her accounts of Shakespeare's transformations of generic conventions: her comparisons of *Venus* and *Adonis* with *epyllia* by Marlowe and Marston, her placement of *The Rape of Lucrece* in the tradition of complaint literature and in the context of Renaissance historiography, and her discussion of the sonnets' reinterpretation of the unconventional mistress tradition, problematizing the conventions of both Petrarchism and anti-Petrarchism.

While Dubrow's unabashed interest in the representation of human character suggests that she is not balancing painfully on the cutting edge of theoretical discourse, she is participating in the current critical dialogue about language and the representation of power and sexual politics in Renaissance texts. She values Shakespeare's poetry for its insight into recurrent patterns of human behaviour, as well as for its subtly nuanced individual characters; she teaches us, however, not to look for eternal truths, but to consider the duplicities of language and the dangers of self-deception. Tarquin's military imagery, for example, focuses attention on the destructive impulses embedded in the traditional language of love and illuminates not only his own character, but also the link between aggression and sexuality in "men like him" (122) and in rape today.

Dubrow discusses the moral resonance of these texts in terms of the ethical implications of readers' responses. Often her emphasis is on the poetry's disabling of easy judgments or consoling certainties. For example, if linguistic structures present *Venus* as self-centered and manipulative, they also show her as tender and frankly sexual, thus evoking in readers both distrust and admiration. Lucrece's suicide, at once a histrionic and irrational gesture and a decisive, courageous expression of self-respect, evokes a similarly divided response of judgment and sympathy. And Brutus, Lucrece's avenger, is ambiguously heroic and manipulative, patriotic and personally ambitious. The moral significance in each case resides not in didactic truisms, but in our gradual discovery of the inadequacy of narrow

perceptions and partial interpretations. Formal structures demand the same interpretative process. In the sonnets, the couplets "embody both the all-too-human desire to seek finality and certainty and the all-too-human difficulties of doing so. Hence they trouble us — and teach us — more through what they do (or fail to do) than through what they say" (225).

Readers will quarrel with some of Dubrow's judgments, both what she says and what she doesn't say. Her emphasis on Lucrece's narrowness of vision and melodramatic emotiveness may seem too close to the practice of blaming the victim. The discussion of the sonnets will strike some readers as perversely neglectful of their powerful articulation of love as a liberating experience. Sonnets 29 and 30, for example, where the spontaneous thought of the loved friend can suddenly free the speaker from futile self-absorption and self-pity, receive little attention. For a book on narrative poetry, *Captive Victors* has little to say about narrative strategies: the ambiguities of cause and effect or the frustration and satisfaction of readers' expectations. At times, the very wealth of information — about sources and analogues, theological and social contexts, and topics ranging from the conventions of the set speech to the differences between shame cultures and guilt cultures — tends to obscure the argument about the relationship between love and power. Still, all this material is useful, and Dubrow's presentation is judicious. Certainly her analysis of the relations between rhetorical and psychological patterns in Shakespeare's nondramatic poetry is penetrating and challenging, and her thesis that these poems are more psychologically acute and artistically controlled than generally acknowledged is trenchantly argued and wholly convincing.

A major virtue of *Captive Victors* is Dubrow's own mastery of the arts of language. Her lucid, relaxed prose is frequently enlivened with wit, as when she draws our attention to how Venus suppresses "the net result ... of her involvement with Mars" (31) or when she claims to be "surprised by syneciosis" (259). She argues her case clearly and forcefully while engaging in generous-spirited but frank dialogue with other scholars. She illuminates her points by comparisons with Shakespeare's dramatic works and by apt illustrations drawn from sources as diverse as *The Canterbury Tales*, novels by Thomas Hardy, and German expressionist painting. If the scope of her discussion sometimes requires recrossing familiar ground, posted by a scattering of phrases like "as we have seen" and "as we have observed," she also displays a talent for aphoristic point. Tarquin's appropriation of moral saws, she points out, demonstrates that "sententiousness is the last refuge of a scoundrel" (119). "A culture," she observes, "like an individual, must know its past in order to know itself" (151).

In short, *Captive Victors* deftly combines detailed formal analysis with insights from contemporary critical theory and with traditional humanistic scholarship. It gives pleasure itself and is the cause of pleasure when we return to the poems it discusses.

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