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Alexander Leggatt

Shakespeare's Tragedies: Violation and Identity
£17.99 paperback
ISBN: 139780521608633

In the introduction to this book Alexander Leggatt lays his cards on the table by announcing that it will "involve a close reading of individual texts, rather against the current practice of reading plays as embedded in their culture and determined by it" (p. 1). Leggatt relegates the critics to endnotes (though he can't resist mentioning a few in the main text) and gives the spotlight to his own readings of the plays. He considers seven of Shakespeare's tragedies: Titus Andronicus, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth and from the first he builds upon the nature of violation and identity in the drama, constantly referring back to earlier points as each chapter progresses. Leggatt proves himself a remarkably sensitive and subtle guide, providing engaging, even surprising, comments which provoke the reader to think more carefully about Shakespeare's plays. For example in chapter 1 he invites us to consider characters' reading habits, noting that "While Chiron recalls reading Horace in school, implying he has read nothing since (IV.ii.22-23), the Andronici are a bookish family and Lavinia tells her story through a book . . . " (p. 22). Arguably, what we might term reader-response theory has been unfairly neglected of late and this study is a welcome addition to traditional literary criticism which refuses to engage with over-used, often meaningless, jargon. Even allowing for rumours of the imminent death of theory this is brave indeed and one wonders if the publisher and its readers' would have allowed Leggatt to produce such resolutely unfashionable a study if his reputation had not preceded him. Leggatt's reputation is well deserved and this is a fine book of straightforward criticism. For its clarity alone, it is invaluable to anyone interested in Shakespeare: undergraduates will find it endlessly informative (and what's more, they'll understand it) but established scholars will also discover significant gems.

Joan Fitzpatrick