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978-1-107-07193-3 - Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics

Edited by Patrick Gray and John D. Cox

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SHAKESPEARE AND RENAISSANCE ETHICS

Written by a distinguished international team of contributors, this volume explores Shakespeare's vivid depictions of moral deliberation and individual choice in light of Renaissance debates about ethics. Examining the intellectual context of Shakespeare's plays, the essays illuminate Shakespeare's engagement with the most pressing moral questions of his time, considering the competing claims of politics, Christian ethics and classical moral philosophy, as well as new perspectives on controversial topics such as conscience, prayer, revenge and suicide. Looking at Shakespeare's responses to emerging schools of thought such as Calvinism and Epicureanism, and assessing comparisons between Shakespeare and his French contemporary Montaigne, the collection addresses questions such as: when does laughter become cruel? How does style reflect moral perspective? Does shame lead to self-awareness? This book is of great interest to scholars and students of Shakespeare studies, Renaissance studies and the history of ethics.

PATRICK GRAY is Lecturer in Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature in the Department of English Studies at Durham University. He has taught Shakespeare, classics and comparative literature at Deep Springs College, Providence College and the United States Military Academy at West Point. His research interests include shame, guilt, the ethics of recognition (*Anerkennung*) and the reception of the classics in the Renaissance.

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Preface

This book originated in a conference that Patrick organized at Yale University in the fall of 2010. The conference had the same title as the book, and it originally included three plenary speakers, anticipating the book's three sections: Gordon Braden on Shakespeare and classical ethics, John D. Cox on Shakespeare and Christian ethics, and Lars Engle on Shakespeare and the ethical thinking of Montaigne. A paper by Brett Foster on realism in Shakespeare's love poetry became the focus of a fourth plenary session. An open invitation for shorter essays resulted in the delivery of thirty papers in concurrent sessions over the course of the conference's three days. Conversation was lively, inspiring, and informative.

We acknowledge gratefully the assistance of the Yale Elizabethan Club, which provided initial funding; the Dean's Fund for Student-Organized Symposia at Yale University, which provided matching funds; and the Department of Renaissance Studies at Yale in making the conference possible, as well as the support of Yale's Department of English. We would especially like to thank David Scott Kastan, Lawrence Manley, Catherine Nicholson, and David Quint, who served as respondents for the plenary sessions. We would also like to thank the other graduate students in Renaissance Studies who served on the initial planning committee for the symposium: Martin Devecka, Alexia Ferracuti, Michael Komorowski, James Ross Macdonald, Claudia Rammelt, and Courtney Erin Thomas.

Shortly after the conference, Patrick invited John to join him in editing a collection of essays based on the same idea as the conference. Two of the four plenary speakers were able to offer their papers for the collection, as did one presenter from the concurrent sessions, Leah Whittington. We commissioned all the other essays specifically for this book. We explained the book's title and focus to the contributors, who each wrote an essay for a particular section of the book, carrying on a lively conversation with us about their work. David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore read the typescript for Cambridge University Press, offering helpful suggestions for improvement,

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from which we benefited in revising the introduction and in requesting contributors to revise their essays. We are grateful to them and also to Sarah Stanton, Drama Editor for Cambridge University Press, for her encouragement, keen listening, and constructive suggestions. Hazel Harris's indefatigable work as copy editor offered strong support in the finishing stages.

We would like to thank Robert S. Miola for organizing a seminar on the same topic as our book, and with the same title, at the 2012 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Boston. Several contributors to this volume presented papers in the seminar: Indira Ghose, Will Hamlin, Bob Miola himself, and both of us. Lars Engle was also part of the seminar, and, though he was unable to attend the conference because of a family emergency, he supplied helpful responses to papers by Will Hamlin and Patrick Gray. The conversation at the seminar was animated, useful, and encouraging.

We chose Rubens's *The Death of Seneca* to adorn the cover of our book for several reasons. It is contemporary with Shakespeare, to begin with. Its subject is the stoic death of an influential classical philosopher, who died in conscious imitation of Socrates, the fountainhead of classical philosophy; both were judicially executed, based on false charges. Rubens chose the subject in response to the increasing popularity of Neo-Stoicism in the late sixteenth century – a movement of which Shakespeare was well aware. "Philosophy" for him nearly always means a generalized Stoicism, whether or not he was familiar with the assumptions and arguments of particular Stoic philosophers.

Rubens painted this Roman Stoic philosopher in deliberate imitation of Christian iconography. The philosopher's loincloth and uplifted eyes, the soldiers looking on, the figure kneeling at the dying man's feet: all are reminiscent of common features in depictions of Christ's crucifixion. Medieval legend held that Seneca had been converted to Christianity by St. Paul, and the official order for his death seemed to excuse his suicide, which was otherwise morally unacceptable to all Christian thinkers in the Renaissance. The painting therefore represents the same combination of classical and Christian influences that we see at work in Shakespeare's ethical thinking. Stoicism was also important for Montaigne, the influence of whose ethical thought is the third central concern in this collection of essays.

We are glad to dedicate this book to our respective wives, Elizabeth Baldwin Gray and Karen A. Cox. The four of us spent a pleasant evening over dinner together at the Carnegie Abbey Club in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, in the summer of 2011. A lot has happened in all four of our lives since the Yale conference in the fall of 2010, and we are grateful for our wives' support, encouragement, and companionship through it all.