

**Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion's Slaves* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013).
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R e v i e w

Passions in the early modern period were scrutinised to ensure they fell into the narrow range of acceptable emotional behaviour. Reason was expected to moderate emotional expression in order to differentiate humans from unchristian beasts. As Bridget Escolme points out, early-modern thinking indicated that anger was viewed as potentially murderous; laughter could lead to madness and inappropriate behaviour; love led to love-melancholy, while ungoverned grief could lead to melancholic insanity.

Escolme's aim is to explore the cultural politics of emotion in Shakespeare's plays and in early-modern drama generally, attempting to historicise its reproduction on the modern stage. She suggests that the theatre is a rich site for mining social and political significances, as it was a place where audiences went to watch emotional excesses, later considering if an extreme was deemed unnecessary. Modern reactions to early-modern drama promote discussion of how modern Anglo-audiences interact with and regulate emotion.

Utilising cultural materialism, Escolme discusses both the policing and validation of emotions on the early-modern stage. She makes the valuable point that her book is not about

audiences in the early modern period per se but it inevitably speculates about them, because it explores the ideas that may have been circulating among them and the kinds of responses that plays suggest were expected from them. (xxxiv)

The book contains throughout a reasoned argument about the kinds of responses early-modern audiences may have been expected to make, but at no stage is this analysis prescriptive.

After a thorough introduction, Chapter One discusses anger and its representations. Escolme focuses on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, an ideal choice as, while emotional connections exist between the characters, the overriding motivator of action is Coriolanus' anger. She notes that the tension was motivated by a passion which many classical and early-modern sources condemned as inappropriate in excess. The negativity surrounding anger arose from ideas that it was a socially constructed passion, thus having far-reaching consequences. Escolme is also able to offer alternative influences on the Shakespearean text due to her close attention to contextual sources. Escolme notes the difficulty modern actors and audiences may have when dealing with *Coriolanus*. One production, for instance, retained a meta-reference to the movement or motions of early-modern passions, as it was 'anger that seemed to move him across the stage' (27). Analysing two modern productions, she notes that one advocated emotional repressions and insecurities as the root of *Coriolanus*' anger, while the other favoured a socially constructed anger, more relatable to an early-modern audience. She emphasises the value of juxtaposing the original text and the 'modern' stage, as when this is done it becomes clearer 'how anger might be staged as both used by and in excess of the cultures that approve or disapprove, legitimate or warn against it' (53).

Chapter two considers the position of laughter, while observing that it is not always possible to determine why or what a culture might find humorous, or what they may find excessive, tasteless or cruel. Escolme focuses on investigating dramatic moments that suggest excessive or cruel laughter, challenging the assumption that communities of laughers were always created at the expense of another. Her research indicates that the idea of laughter is inextricably intertwined with perceptions and conceptions of madness. Chapter three delves into the world of love, ambiguous for the contrast between the ideal of the holy, chaste and still woman, and the worldly and hot Cleopatra. Sexual love becomes an excessive passion that undoes gendered conventions of constancy, balance and restraint. Love

becomes constructed both as a passion and a disease. Chapter four engages in a critical discussion of what constitutes immoderate grief in the early-modern period, considering religious and social constraints. Escolme develops a model where the theatrical expression of grief is excessive rather than purgative. She interprets grief as an outward show of inner movement or turmoil, which 'releases the passions from the boundaries of the body, or the flat map of the elegist, and into the world, to be caught, enjoyed, continued, rather than purged by others.' (179) Grief becomes movement only when it changes its physical nature and becomes anger, as anger and love produce movement while grief causes a subversive stasis.

Overall, the book is a compelling read. Escolme argues that the ways current popular and theatrical cultures define excess can distort our understanding of early modern drama and theatre. She suggests that permitting these extremes onto the contemporary stage might free both actors and audiences from the assumption that to engage with the drama of the past, its characters must be like us. Escolme provides an imaginative and profitable nexus between theatre studies and the history of emotions, benefitting scholars from both fields. It offers a springboard for others to continue exploring the connection between early-modern and modern expressions of emotion through an exposition of its excesses. Escolme herself wishes the work of politicising emotion to continue, both in the field of historical theatrical culture and in the modern world of drama and its reception.

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