

Raphael Falco. *Charismatic Authority in Early Modern English Tragedy*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. 243p.

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In *Charismatic Authority in Early Modern English Tragedy*, Raphael Falco reminds us that tragedy “tends to record the failure of many kinds of human enterprise” (1), not merely the failure of the protagonist. He asks us to consider the dissolution of the charismatic group as a major component of the tragic experience in selected early modern English tragedies by Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Milton.

The interrelationship between the group and the leader is “a systemic mutual-ity” (3) which, when destroyed, “routinizes” the revolutionary compulsion that brought it into being, a process which “compromises the original disruptive action, ultimately destroying the uniqueness . . . of the bearer [tragic figure]” (18). Tragedy “requires the rejection of the status quo, the breakdown of social order” (22), but ironically such disorder codifies itself into a new social order that disavows the charismatic figure that brought the new order into being.

Once he establishes the terms and parameters for his study, Falco examines several of the forms charisma takes in early modern English tragedy. Marlowe’s protagonist in the two parts of *Tamburlaine the Great* portrays “pure charisma”; Cleopatra in several of her Elizabethan manifestations exemplifies “erotic” charisma; and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* represents “restored” charisma in the rehabilitation of the fallen protagonist as a messianic figure.

Falco’s arguments are extremely compelling in his chapter on Shakespeare’s Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke, which depicts competing charismas. Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) uses personal and physical (“pure”) charisma to overcome Richard’s “lineage” and “office” charisma — Richard’s “dynastic” charisma which gathers its authority from tradition but which in Shakespeare’s play cannot be sustained in the physical presence of Richard’s “natural body” as distinguished from his political incarnation as the “body politic.” Richard’s personality is not enough to keep a charismatic group intact while Bolingbroke’s rebellion is rising. Yet, ironically, Bolingbroke claims the crown on his lineage and blood-ties to Edward III, thus laying the seed of the later Percy rebellion once his personal charisma becomes “routinized” by the demands of office. Such an interpretation of *Richard II* strikes, I believe, at the very heart of the play.

His arguments seem less successful in his chapter, “Individuation as Disintegration: Hamlet and Othello.” Although intriguing, his claims that Hamlet’s time in Wittenberg reflects early and sustained opposition to the authority of King

Hamlet and that Yorick functions as a “surrogate father figure” (107) need more evidence to support his conclusion that Hamlet’s delay in fulfilling the ghost’s demands arises from his resistance to his father’s authority. In addition, Falco’s discussion of the Venetian army’s group dissolution upon the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, in which Othello “endanger[s] his honor for the sake of his wife” (134), could examine more effectively some of the cultural factors, such as the issues of race and social status, that underscore the group jealousy (and may primarily inform Iago’s jealousies and actions) apart from (but exacerbated by) Othello’s action of marriage.

On balance, Falco’s discourse offers compelling, generally overlooked insights into the structures, purposes, and tensions in early modern English tragedies. His discussion illuminates the subject and provides helpful analysis and arguments. Whether his conclusions meet general consensus is less important, I think, than the opportunity he provides in the book to open a fruitful avenue of inquiry. As he puts it, “I would be particularly pleased if group formation and group dissolution, so crucial in understanding leadership, came to be seen as integral to our experience of tragedy” (206). ✱