

Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion. David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, eds.

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Turning from the recent wave of biographical scholarship proposing to identify Shakespeare's confessional identity, this volume takes up the problem of the poet's elusive religiosity with essays that explore the problem from a less committed angle. After a strong introduction exploring how Shakespearean texts give expression to a wide variety of religious views, the volume is divided into two parts, the first on broad questions of Shakespeare's religious context, and the second, much larger, on the representation of religion in the plays.

The first part starts with David Bevington's survey of the development of English drama as it transitions from medieval to Reformation forms. Citing a somewhat neglected archive of Calvinist drama, Bevington shows that Puritan antitheatricity is a late Elizabethan phenomenon, and it is this theatrical antagonism rather than differences in theology that seem largely responsible for the anti-Puritanism in Shakespeare's plays. Two superb contextual essays by historians follow. Peter Marshall concentrates his analysis of religious difference on archival records, such as the letters of justices of the peace concerning embattled English Catholics. Illuminating a level of conversation largely unrepresented in the print record, Marshall considers the persistence of Catholic ideas in the social fabric of Elizabethan England. Felicity Heal's essay on experiencing religion in London focuses on the varieties of belief represented in sermons. Starting with the elusive question of how and where Shakespeare might have been a parishioner while in London, Heal explores the kinds of Protestantism preached in the metropolis, ranging from the Calvinist congregations of English Puritans and "Strangers," such as Shakespeare's Huguenot neighbors, to the emergent Arminianism of Lancelot Andrewes and others.

The second part of the volume opens with an erudite reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Alison Shell that explores the play's recurrent use of the palinode, the literary mode of turning and repentance that originates in Stesichorus's ancient apology to Helen. A specious version of this in E.K.'s notes to Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* had Stesichorus preferring Himera (Hermia) to Helen (Helena). Building on this connection, Shell places Shakespeare's play in an allusive dialogue with the first palinode that is inflected by tensions resulting from the Reformation's supposed correction of the Catholic worship of idols. Moving to religious uses of history, Beatrice Groves's chapter reads *King John* in the context of post-Armada plays that used the Roman siege of Jerusalem as an admonition of what might happen to Protestant England should religious dissent be allowed to thrive. Groves rethinks the Protestant nationalist reading of *King John*, arguing that the play "actively critiques the bombast of nationalistic propaganda in the figure of the Bastard" (97). Peter Lake's meditation on *Julius Caesar* considers the non-Christian Roman past against the play's Christian

present, and sees the play as staging republican ideology and then testing it to the breaking point by subjecting it “to a religious, indeed, a Christian critique” (111). The argument draws particular strength from the frequent prodigies, prophecies, and portentous events, which Lake argues would have been “identified as the operation of providence” (125). Adrian Streete’s essay on *Measure for Measure* similarly considers Christian thinking in relation to the classical tradition, in this case the Epicureanism of Lucretius. For Streete, Shakespeare pits “the claims of Lucretian and Protestant philosophies against each other, using this opposition as a source of dramatic, ideological, and philosophical contention” (132–33). One of the unintended and yet considerably illuminating threads of connection among these disparate essays is the way in which Shakespeare refigures ancient ideas in a Christian framework.

At David Loewenstein’s essay on Shakespeare’s agnosticism in *King Lear*, the volume seems to take a new, more philosophical direction. Here the question of Shakespeare and religion focuses much less on the historical tensions between Catholics, Puritans, and English Churchgoers, and instead on something even more fundamental — the tensions between religion and its absence. In Loewenstein’s reading, *Lear* is a “radical play flaunting the very idea of providentialism and the belief in an interventionist deity who responds to human misery, chaos, injustice, and savagery” (160). Ewan Fernie offers a richly digressive and occasionally profound inquiry into the role of the demonic in Reformation thought (invoking Luther’s memorable charge, “sin bravely!”). This view of the demonic shaped Marlowe’s Faustus and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Michael Witmore’s essay illustrates a fascinating relationship between the genres of biblical and Renaissance wisdom literature, showing how the tendency toward the proverbial corresponds with the role of the lottery, as in the caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, each enclosing a bit of sententiousness. Witmore draws connections between this dramatization of wisdom by lottery and the Elizabethan practices of bibliomancy and public lottery, and finally turns to the implications of this for *King Lear*. Ranging widely from the Jacobean context, Richard McCoy moves to Coleridge’s readings of Shakespearean drama to argue that the awakening of “faith” required in the unveiling of the statue of Hermione, while it relies on Reformation ideas, is ultimately an artistic sensibility that “requires our imaginative participation and willing suspension of disbelief in an illusion” (230).

Two readings of *Henry VIII* conclude the collection’s essays on particular texts. In a reading that insightfully draws from the Psalter and the Book of Common Prayer, Paul Stevens argues that the play had “something of the force of liturgy, an act of praise emerging out of the flux of English history in which members of the audience might cease to be individuals and be brought together in a godly unity” (241). Michael Davies works brilliantly with historical sources behind the central question of the play, whether Henry’s “prick” of “conscience” is the sincere experience of a “God-fearing man and proto-Protestant monarch,” or the loins orientation of a “nascent tyrant and philandering crook” (262). The final essay, by Matthew Dimmock, considers Shakespeare’s non-Christian religions — “Shakespeare’s Judaism” and “Shakespeare’s Islam” — comparing Shakespeare’s treatment with the broader dramatic and cultural

context (though, as Dimmock notes, there was no “Islam” for early English readers, only “Mohometanism”).

Brian Cummings’s eloquent afterword looks back at the rise of the secular Shakespeare in the “origin of the study of English as a discipline,” a perspective largely maintained through the New Historicists’ “aggressively Nietzschean rejection of the lure of theology” (301). Now, “Shakespeare has gone from being secular to being postsecular almost without catching a breath” (304). Full of gems, this collection provides a highly productive juxtaposition of historical and literary scholarship.

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