

Joseph Loewenstein and Michael Witmore eds., *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. xi + 317, ISBN: 978-1-107-02661-2

Readers of this volume would do well to begin with Brian Cummings' 'Afterword,' that helpfully historicizes the study of Shakespeare and religion. The latest wave of scholarship is part of an ongoing effort to define Shakespeare's relation to a secular worldview that supposedly superseded a religious one. Recent attempts by theologians and philosophers to problematize this so-called secularization thesis and to rethink the place of religion in the contemporary west have inspired Shakespeareans to look with new eyes at works which shaped and were shaped by a complex religious landscape.

The three chapters in Part One: 'Revisiting Religious Contexts in Shakespeare's England,' argue that that landscape was contested and variegated. Peter Marshall reminds us how Shakespeare's contemporaries lived through a period of unprecedented religious transformation in which England changed 'from a nation reformed in name and law, to one that had become deeply culturally Protestant, or at least viscerally anti-Catholic' (p. 44). Despite the hardening of confessional identities and the state's efforts to enforce religious orthodoxy, surprisingly open debate about religion was part of the fabric of everyday life, in alehouses, family gatherings, and other sites of sociability. Religious life was nowhere more varied and heated than in the metropolis. Felicity Heal surveys the remarkable range of options in London by delineating the different spaces in which religion was experienced, from parish pew, Paul's Cross, the stranger churches, prisons, foreign embassies, and secret conventicles.

The contributors to this volume agree with Heal that Shakespeare's plays are not vehicles for Protestant propaganda, but nor do they shy away from sensitive religious questions. For David Bevington, Shakespeare reveals 'his vast powers of sympathy and understanding' in his gentle mockery of kill-joy Puritans and his 'generous and forbearing' treatment of Catholics (pp. 39, 36). Richard McCoy argues that Shakespeare was most interested in a poetic faith that required the audience's imaginative participation and suspension of disbelief. Unlike the absolute demands made by religious faith, poetic faith proves 'more congenial, tolerant, and humane' (p. 224). Alison Shell argues that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare weaves classical myth and folklore to explore fears of religious wandering and apostasy, but in a way that is archly ironic, rather than doctrinaire.

*King John* and *Henry VIII*, plays, and reigns, much concerned with England's relationship to Rome, are the subject of three essays. Beatrice Groves extends recent reappraisals of *King John* by suggesting that in the character of the Bastard, Shakespeare championed the principle of

independence of mind and resisted the state's equation of dissent with political disloyalty. As Paul Stevens and Michael Davies show, *Henry VIII* is the play that promises to reveal the most about Shakespeare's attitude toward the Reformation and its consequences. Davies uses Henry's 'conscience' or conversion speech in 2.4 to examine the meaning of 'truth' in a play whose subtitle is 'all is true.' What the play reaches for, he argues, is neither a Protestant nor Catholic 'truth,' but a more transcendent "'Truth" beyond history' (p. 278). Ultimately, the play asks us to abandon unanswerable questions about historical truth — is Henry dissembling or being honest about his 'conscience'? — for faith in a 'sacred reality.' Paul Stevens finds in the play an equally comforting vision. For him, the play enacts a version of the liturgy from Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer at moments when once proud and powerful figures like Buckingham and Wolsey are reconciled to their fate and their enemies. Through these liturgically-inflected acts of humility, grace, and unity the play celebrates, 'not militant or apocalyptic radicalism,' but a form of 'proto-Anglican'-ism in which the individual surrenders to a power more meaningful and universal than the self (p. 250).

In contrast to these sanguine readings of *Henry VIII*, Ewan Fernie finds a 'terrible affirmation of . . . demonic negativity' in *Macbeth* where 'Shakespeare powerfully dramatizes the terrible risk involved in the new Protestant spirituality' (p. 189). Fernie sees *Macbeth* as a laboratory in which Shakespeare tests Luther's theology of grace—a theology that asks humans to 'sin bravely,' abandoning themselves to depravity before, hopefully, being rescued by God. However, the Macbeths find a perverse transcendence in their crimes; grace fails to materialize and Luther's mechanism of redemption is short-circuited (p. 181).

Other plays set in times and places far removed from Shakespeare's England are shown to explore religio-political questions of great urgency to early audiences. Peter Lake sees *Julius Caesar* as a critique of the republican, or neo-Roman, political theory, that animated Tacitean history writing and the self-fashioning of men like the Earl of Essex during the Elizabethan fin-de-siècle. Lake argues that Shakespeare intends his audience to see that Brutus and Cassius fail, not because their political ideology is misguided, but because they misapply it. They ignore the prophecies and portents that their ideology cannot account for, and that Elizabethans would recognize as the workings of providence. Moreover, the play warns those who, like Brutus and Cassius, support a republican solution to England's succession crisis to beware applying 'values and expectations culled from a republican and pagan Roman past too directly to a monarchical and Christian present' (p. 129).

David Lowenstein argues that Ancient Britain provides the setting for Shakespeare's most shocking interrogation of religious faith. He confirms W. R. Elton's thesis in *King Lear and the Gods* that the play invites its audience to imagine a godless universe. Lowenstein is

surely right to point out that the atheism or agnosticism *Lear* might provoke, 'may tell us little about Shakespeare's own personal religious beliefs,' but instead reflects the power of theatre to engage obliquely the culture's deepest fears and fantasies. Michael Witmore's chapter also uses *King Lear* to explore Shakespeare's relationship to an early modern 'wisdom culture' grounded in scripture and encapsulated in early modern proverbs. Connecting wisdom practices to lotteries and divination, Witmore finds in *Lear* a failure of the resources of wisdom to help characters negotiate the terrifying contingency of life.

*King Lear* bears the imprint of Shakespeare's wide reading in a range of unorthodox pagan and humanist writers like Lucretius and Montaigne. Lucretius's epicurean philosophy also surfaces in *Measure for Measure* according to Adrian Streete. Streete explores the strange crosscurrents in the play of epicureanism and Calvinism, especially as they relate to 'natural law, religion, and sex.' The libertine Lucio and the deputy Angelo embody the conflicting impulses of Epicurus and Calvin, and the opposition between free-will and predestination, sexual indulgence and self-restraint. Shakespeare, Streete argues, 'reclaim[s] Lucretius as a deeply ethical thinker, one whose philosophy offers a potent challenge to a dominant Calvinistic conception of natural law, and who celebrates, rather than condemns, human sexuality' (p.154).

Finally, Matthew Dimmock reminds us that religion meant not only Christianity but also Judaism and Islam. In fact, Shakespeare's many offhand references to these Christian 'others,' along with his fuller treatment of them in *Merchant* and *Othello*, emerged from an 'English stage... crowded with non-Christian figures' (283). Dimmock claims that Shakespeare's engagement with 'infidels' is best understood as a response to previous stage representations rather than a serious attempt to understand non-Christian religions as coherent belief systems. Ultimately, the presence of Judaism or Islam in the plays only serves to illuminate aspects of the dominant Christian culture. Overall, this collection makes a valuable and often provocative contribution to what continues to be a lively corner of Shakespearean scholarship.

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Feike Dietz, Adam Morton, Lien Roggen, Els Stronks and Marc Van Vaecke eds., *Illustrated Religious Texts in the North of Europe, 1500-1800*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, pp. xviii + 282, ISBN: 97814094675

Behind the rather unexciting title of this book lies a fascinating collection which addresses some important debates about the Reformation. Eleven