

Daniel Swift. *Shakespeare's Common Prayers: The Book of Common Prayer and the Elizabethan Age*.

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The last dozen or so years have seen an encouraging and long-overdue surge in interest among literary scholars in the Book of Common Prayer, a central text of early modern England that has not received nearly the attention it deserves. Full-length studies by Ramie Targoff (Chicago, 2001) and myself (Cambridge, 2007)

are now joined by Daniel Swift's new book, which is a subtle study of a "sequence of collisions" between Shakespeare and the liturgy, and argues that "the Book of Common Prayer is his great forgotten source" (26).

Swift knows how to set an effective scene, and the book opens with the Hampton Court Conference and its squabblings over Puritan objections to the liturgy. It is a scene that he will return to repeatedly to illuminate specific points of controversy, but he opens the book with it also because of the tantalizing convergence of Shakespeare and liturgical controversy right around Christmas 1603: in the same building, breathing the same air. While Swift eventually acknowledges that this convergence is a "coincidence," it also serves as a "bountiful symbol" of Shakespeare's (and Elizabethan culture's) highly attuned immersion in liturgy, which "mattered more than any other written text of its age precisely because it was where and how the age defined itself" (25, 23). This is an admirably eloquent premise that foreshadows both the strengths and weaknesses of *Shakespeare's Common Prayers*.

The book goes on to discern and discuss echoes and implications of liturgical conflict in the plays. Two chapters assert the relevance of matrimony in plays of the early 1590s, *Othello*, and some later problem plays; given the explicit centrality of marriage in these plays, the convergence is not astounding, but Swift's treatment of it is thoughtful and illuminating. Another pair of chapters pursues Eucharistic and funereal dimensions of *Hamlet* (where Swift both draws on and critiques the unavoidable work of Greenblatt) and *Macbeth*; here the argument is at times a bit forced, but at others deeply insightful. He sticks with *Macbeth* for a last pair of chapters on baptism, and here the book is at its best, interweaving the sacrament and play with exorcism, witchcraft, language, community, royal and liturgical power, sin, signs, history, and criticism to build a reading of exhilarating nuance and depth.

These are real strengths, of real value, but *Shakespeare's Common Prayers* is not without problems. The most pervasive and worrisome of these is its frequent failure to persuasively connect claims and evidence, and its corresponding inclination to content itself with suggestive eloquence and juxtaposition in ways that sometimes do not treat the texts well. In the second chapter, for instance, Swift directs our attention to the regicide-bound Macbeth's lines: "Thou sure and firm-set earth, / Hear not my steps, which way they walk" (2.1.56–57). Swift fastens onto the words "way" and "walk," adduces a number of biblical passages and other religious works in which they coincide, and reminds us that this convergence occurs in Psalm 128, which appears in the BCP's form for matrimony. This is fine, but he goes on to say that Macbeth's phrase is "deliberate, heavily specific . . . now we know the phrase, we should know too its connotation, its simple spiritual teaching: we must be aware of the proper behavior of a Christian within marriage" (57). To take the proximity of these two exceedingly common words as "specifically" indicating Macbeth's primary concern with marriage at this point is deeply unconvincing, especially when we learn that this phrase did not even exist in the play until Rowe's 1709 edition emended a possibly defective line from the seventeenth-century Folios — but Swift, undaunted, proceeds with his argument. While he acknowledges that he is trying to "trace the bounces of an echo," and that perhaps "Macbeth is not *really* invoking

the marriage rite” (56, 57), he has of course been suggesting at length that in some important sense he is. This pattern of allusive suggestion (often framed in too-strong terms like *specific* and *precisely*) followed by semidisavowal recurs throughout the book — he does both in a single paragraph on page 122 — and looked at from one angle it may indicate a laudable consciousness of the difficulty of what he is trying to do. Looked at more skeptically, it might be taken as indicative of not just the difficulty but the tenuousness of parts of Swift’s reading and argument.

This is the central problem of *Shakespeare’s Common Prayers*, and there are any number of moments at which one might find reason to quibble with specific claims. But in many ways, this is an admirable book that attempts, with considerable success, to do something very difficult and important. It is provocative, thoughtful, challenging, frequently insightful, for the most part beautifully written, and well worth reading and thinking about.

TIMOTHY ROSENDALE
Southern Methodist University