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E. Fernie, Spiritual Shakespeares

Christopher P. Baker

Georgia Southern University, cbaker@georgiasouthern.edu

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Review

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Ewan Fernie, ed. *Spiritual Shakespeares*.

Accents on Shakespeare. London: Routledge, 2005. xxx + 242 pp. \$31. ISBN: 0-415-1967-6.

The secularism of cultural materialist approaches to literature and the obissance paid to socially constructed meaning by new historicists have recently been under critique by the religious turn in early modern studies. Theorists are willing to view the spiritual as more than a subset of sociology or political ideology and to recognize its importance within the postmodern concept of otherness. This volume contends that “a fresh consideration of spirituality might reinvigorate and strengthen politically progressive materialist criticism” (3) and offers ten commentaries from this vantage on seven plays and the sonnets.

The editor’s introduction usefully surveys the intersection of the spiritual — that which is “other” and “ultimate” (8) — with the views of Greenblatt, Derrida, and Žižek, emphasizing that such a meeting involves “agonistic intensity” and can be “existentially and ethically treacherous and exciting” (7). Such spirituality, prior to and beyond the categories of “conventional religion” (17), is often imbedded in the material facticity of experience as an indefinable, openended sense of potential — the tantalizing “more” in heaven and on earth to which Hamlet referred. John J. Joughin’s essay on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* finds such spirituality in Bottom’s dream, seeing in it the “paradoxical novelty of the apparitional as the vocation of the everyday” (133). Joughin also views Hermione’s resurrection in *The Winter’s Tale* as a comparable example of the visionary encountered within the mundane, adducing comments from Kierkegaard, Adorno, and Peter Brook, among others.

For Kiernan Ryan, the unpredictability of spirituality emerges in Helen’s ability to restore the King in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. His miracle cure occurs unexpectedly, “precisely at the point of utter despair, ‘Where hope is coldest’ and thus, inexplicably, at its most powerful” (32). Yet Shakespeare characteristically withholds dogmatic explanations for what has transpired, preferring the cure’s mystery to be its own warrant. The hidden face of divinity in this play is replaced for Prince Hal, in David Ruiters’s essay, by the faces of those whom he wishes to relate to and control. In Martin Buber’s terms, Hal fluctuates between an “I-Thou” relationship with Falstaff and Francis and an “I-It” attitude exploiting them for political gain. Following Emmanuel Levinas, Hal forfeits his proper “response to and responsibility for what is outside the self” (69).

Lowell Gallagher’s essay on *The Merchant of Venice* argues that Old Gobbo,

unlike Hal, does display the “spirit of the gift” (74) in his offer of doves to Shylock. Traversing the theories of Derrida, Marion, Levinas, and Badiou, Gallagher explores the spirituality of such a potently Christian symbol given to a Jew, especially from a giver who is marginalized in both society and the play. Recalling the *agapē* of Christ’s *kenōsis*, “The spirit of Gobbo’s gift is the impossible thought of unconditioned giving” (87). Gifts given in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* are overwhelmingly verbal; Philippa Berry sees this play’s spirituality in “the complicated relationship between textuality and different forms and temporal contexts of ‘salving’ or ‘healing’” (101). The echoes, puns, and lexical parallels of the play’s verbal exchanges offer a kind of redemption for its lovers.

Two essays focus on *Hamlet*, the play most fraught with spiritual conundrums. Examining the role of memory in the play, Richard Kearny presents a fourfold analysis of the play’s “holy and unholy ghosts” (157) from psychoanalytic, existential, deconstructive, and theological perspectives. The prince’s “cathartic remembering” culminates in an “epiphanic mourning” (184). Ewan Fernie offers a complex response to Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001), arguing that “[t]he existential dimension of [the play’s] immersion of divinity in the messy human element entails a more substantial human spirituality than either Greenblatt or Derrida describe” (202).

In the book’s only essay on the poetry, Lisa Freinkel contextualizes the presence of the erotic fetish in the Petrarchan lyric. The sonneteer, textually hoarding objects and bodily features of the beloved, idolatrously mistakes signs for things. Her discussion of Shakespeare’s sonnet 106 is provocative but rather overshadowed by the lengthy theoretical framework which precedes it. Jonathan Dollimore’s afterword succinctly outlines the presence of the Nietzschean demonic in *Macbeth*.

This volume offers advanced students a helpful survey of contemporary thinking about spiritual otherness in Shakespeare, while experienced readers will find in it provocative avenues for debate. The spirituality offered here is only distantly related, if at all, to more traditional religious categories such as doctrine, theology, and dogma. Rather, it is about Shakespeare’s problematized confrontation with the inexplicable, the miraculous, the numinous, those manifestations which could well take as their proof text Isaiah 45:15: “Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself.”

CHRISTOPHER BAKER

Armstrong Atlantic State University