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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England
by Dennis E Taylor and David N Beauregard

Review by: Christopher Baker

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Dennis E. Taylor and David N. Beauregard, eds. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*.

Studies in Religion and Literature 6. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. 451 pp. index. \$65 (cl), \$28 (pbk). ISBN: 0-8232-2283-7 (cl), 0-8232-2284-5 (pbk).

Since the publication of Roy Battenhouse's *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary* (1994), scholars have tended to view that dimension as often from the perspective of the dramatist's Elizabethan milieu as from a more strictly biblical or doctrinal vantage, as is the case with most of the essays Battenhouse collected. The influence of New Historicism, though it has not swept all other approaches before it, is certainly a factor in this trend, as is the recent critical interest in the Roman Catholic background of Shakespeare's family. These concerns emerge in such current studies as *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, edited by Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay, and Richard Wilson (2003); Jeffrey Knapp's *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theatre in Renaissance England* (2002); and Maurice Hunt's *Shakespeare's Religious Allusiveness: Its Play and Toleration* (2004). The volume under review takes its place among these studies with a strong contribution of sixteen essays addressing ten different plays, variously gauging the relative influences of Protestant and Catholic factors.

For Katherine Goodland, the ritualized mourning of the women in *Richard III* figures the lost communal funeral rites of the Middle Ages and thus the demise of a socially unifying religious practice closely scrutinized by later reformers. Jean-Christophe Meyer triangulates Robert Parson's *Conference about the Next Succession to the Crown of England* (1594) with *Richard II* and Essex's rebellion, stressing that topical allusions in the play must be read with a knowledge of the highly nuanced ways in which Protestant and Catholic controversialists labeled each other. The gradual emergence of a politically stable England in the Lancastrian trilogy is, for Timothy Rosendale, the record of an emerging *sacramental* understanding of kingship, in which the symbols of state can be variously interpreted by members of the body politic, replacing a medieval Catholic *sacral* definition, which posited these forms as having a fixed signification. Nevertheless, Gary D. Hamilton sees a potential Catholic presence in the Henriad, asserting that Henry's rejection of Oldcastle-Falstaff would have been seen as a repudiation of the "diseased Elizabethan Protestantism that had fragmented the country" (153).

In the first of four essays on the comedies, Richard Dutton argues that *The Comedy of Errors* is closely informed by Lucian's *The Calumny of Apelles*, a work read in the Renaissance as a discussion of heresy, casting the play's contrast between Syracuse and Ephesus as a reflection of tensions between Protestants and Catholics. *Love's Labour's Lost*, according to Clare Asquith, topically alludes to the impact of the Oath of Supremacy at Oxford University, and Regina Buccola sees Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as an exemplar of Catholicism through his knowledge of fairy-lore. John Klause presents extensive parallels to show that *The Merchant of Venice* drew heavily from the writings of Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell, rendering the play a conflict between Shylock "the vengeful Protestant" (208) and a "Southwell-like Antonio" (209).

Five essays on the tragedies center on *Hamlet* and *Othello*. For John Freeman, the ambiguous spiritual identity of Hamlet's ghost (purgatorial soul or demon?) figures the furtive double lives endured by Elizabethan recusants such as, likely, Shakespeare's own father. Jennifer Rust's highly theorized discussion contends that Hamlet's melancholy allegorizes a mood thought to typify Lutheran reformers, while R. Chris Hassel finds the prince's behavior more characteristic of the language and perfectionism of English Puritans. The language of Puritan reform likewise appears in *Othello*, according to Richard Mallette, especially in Iago's manipulation of homiletic styles. For Paula McQuade, however, the play reveals Shakespeare's use of Catholic casuistry to explore honesty in marriage and "wifely subordination" (430).

Among the so-called "problem plays," *Measure for Measure* contains, in David Beauregard's view, approving views of Franciscan monastic life which challenge recent readings of Shakespeare as a skeptical secularist. Maurice Hunt's discussion of Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* argues that she "represents the problematical complication of merit occasioned by the Reformation revaluation of the term in its debate with Catholicism" (336). Lisa Hopkins sees in this play a satiric representation of the historically recent "French wars of religion and their complex interrelationships with questions of marriage and procreation" (372).

This generous collection fruitfully extends the discussion of Shakespeare's religious context.

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