

Review

Shakespeare and Religion

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Abstract: Shakespeare’s personal religious affiliation is impossible to determine. Nearly all the books published about him in the last ten years eschew an earlier attempt to identify him as Catholic and focus, instead, on the plays, not the playwright. Some attention has been paid to Judaism and Islam, but Christianity is the overwhelming favorite. Nearly all of these books include a discussion of *Measure for Measure*, the only play Shakespeare wrote with a biblical title and a central concern with Christian ethics. Though there is some inevitable overlap, each writer approaches religion in the plays differently.

Keywords: Shakespeare; religion; dramatic characters; review; books published principally between 2008 and 2018

Though Queen Elizabeth’s government recognized only one true faith in Shakespeare’s England, four distinct religions are discernible in his plays and poems: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and the state religion of ancient Rome.¹ The first has received the greatest share of attention by far, and appropriately so, because it defined the world he lived in, and it was violently divided against itself, with his preference in the plays tending toward moderate Protestantism, which was the state religion of England in his day. What he knew about the other three religions was based largely on his reading. The number of Jews in England was very small during Shakespeare’s lifetime, but their concentration in London and their involvement in court entertainment suggest that he may have met some of them (Woods 1999, p. 49, n. 181). They bore little or no resemblance to the anti-Jewish stereotypes that inform Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, though these are much muted from Christopher Marlowe’s blatant treatment of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*—so much so that Shylock is increasingly seen as a sympathetic figure, rather than a threatening one.

Two important books have addressed this issue: James Shapiro’s *Shakespeare and the Jews*, published in 1996 and reissued with a new preface in 2006 (Shapiro 2006), and Janet Adelman’s *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in The Merchant of Venice* (Adelman 2008). In a spirited reading, densely informed by historical context, Adelman forefronts her own identity as a Jew and describes how she overcame her resistance to the play by recognizing how close its antagonists are to each other. The family relationships in *The Merchant of Venice* reflect the sibling relationship between the play’s two religions. The younger religion depends on the older one while simultaneously trying to deny the relationship by treating the Jew as “other”. Even after Jessica converts to Christianity, she is still regarded as an outsider—as a Jew and her father’s daughter. Adelman develops her argument over the course of four chapters, whose titles are descriptive: “Introduction: Strangers within Christianity”, “Leaving the Jew’s House: Father, Son, and Elder Brother”, “Her Father’s Blood: Conversion, Race, and Nation”, “Incising Antonio: The Jew Within”.

Islam is more peripheral to Shakespeare’s writing than Judaism, even though the Turks were a serious political threat to Europe throughout his lifetime. The report in *Othello*, that a storm has

¹ This essay updates and complements an earlier review essay I wrote on Shakespeare and Religion (Cox 2006, pp. 539–66).

“banged the Turks”, turning back a threatened invasion of Cyprus, clearly addresses contemporary fears of the threat from the Middle East, though the reference may also recall the Spanish Armada in 1588. As Jane Hwang Degenhardt makes clear in *Islamic Conversion and Christian Resistance on the Early Modern Stage*, the danger posed by Catholic Europe was easily conflated with the danger represented by the Islamic Turks (Degenhardt 2010, pp. 6–8, 23–24). In the play, the report of the Turks’ withdrawal reflects a reprieve in political reality, but the reprieve hardly matters, given the enormous scale of personal crisis that hangs in the air.

Two essays address the question of Shakespeare and Islam in helpful and informative ways. Cyndia Susan Clegg suggests that Shakespeare’s *Othello* may have been perceived as a Muslim convert to Christianity. She identifies several books on Moors and Turks that were readily available in English at the time *Othello* was written, and she notes the strong emphasis on “rigorous notions of justice and law in Islamic societies” (Clegg 2006, p. 3). These may help to explain *Othello*’s appeal to justice in his destruction of Desdemona, when he thinks she is unfaithful to him. The same points are made by Debra Johanyak in an essay that does not refer to Clegg’s, but that offers a close reading of *Othello*, based on the same argument made by Clegg—that Shakespeare’s Moor is a Muslim in origin. While “turning Turk” was a matter of opprobrium in Christian Europe, converting from Islam to Christianity was highly commendable, especially when the convert brought with him the military skills, experience, and qualities of leadership possessed by *Othello*.² At the same time, *Othello* reverts to Muslim values as they were understood in contemporary Europe, so in destroying his wife, because he thinks she has slept with Cassio, he “registers nascent English anxieties about cultural alterity and the looming threat of losing one’s identity to the Islamic Ottoman Empire” (Johanyak 2010, p. 81). He is, thus, caught between two cultures that are defined by related, but distinctive, religions: “If a puritanical (Christian) conception of human sexuality informs *Othello*’s marital relationship with Desdemona, his destructive distrust of her as a perceived adulteress that ensues then brings about retaliation that appears to have a basis in Islamic cultures as represented in various writings and plays of the period” (Johanyak 2010, pp. 84–85).

Degenhardt is the only scholar who has devoted a book to Shakespeare and Islam.³ Her chapter on *Othello* includes a discussion of *The Comedy of Errors*—an unusual conjunction of plays, as she acknowledges, but she explains that both “explore the Pauline ideal of a universal fellowship of faith, but simultaneously fall back on the tangible materiality of physical differences to stabilize identity against conversion” (Degenhardt 2010, p. 28).⁴ Even though critical commentary tends to assume that *Othello* is a convert from Islam, Degenhardt points out that “the play is explicitly ambiguous about its protagonist’s origins and refuses to associate him with any one religion or geography” (Degenhardt 2010, p. 57). Instead of religion, Degenhardt emphasizes the difference between *Othello*’s visible “otherness,” i.e., his skin color, and the invisible qualities that enable both *Othello*’s and Desdemona’s romance and its undoing: his baptism and her chastity. Adelman’s point about Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* also applies to *Othello*: Degenhardt comments that after his conversion to Christianity his difference from white Europeans still sets him apart from the society in which he seeks acceptance. Degenhardt helpfully describes the context of *Othello* in 1604, when it was likely composed, with regard to the debate in the English church about predestination, which “could be used to challenge universal Pauline grace and narrow the limits of eligibility for salvation” (Degenhardt 2010, p. 63)—a debate perhaps alluded to in the dialogue between Iago and the drunken Cassio on Cyprus. Desdemona exemplifies the faith that *Othello* cannot sustain, in that she continues to love him even after he strikes

² “Turk” was not a neutral term for Elizabethans, including Shakespeare. Johanyak notes that “At least sixteen—nearly half—of Shakespeare’s plays reference *Turks* (or variant terms)” (Johanyak 2010, p. 80), but it is worth adding that, among thirty-three uses of the word in Shakespeare’s plays, only two (referring to Turkish fabrics) are positive; all the rest register some degree of fear or threat, or both.

³ Three recent essays have also been published on this topic: Britton (2011), Clegg (2006), and Johanyak (2010).

⁴ For the argument concerning Pauline discourse in *Othello*, see Lupton (1997).

her and calls her “whore.” She thereby anticipates long-suffering female virtue that Shakespeare would celebrate later in *Cymbeline* (1608) and *The Winter’s Tale* (1609) and Dekker and Massinger later still in *The Virgin Martyr* (1620).

In short, religion was unavoidable, ineradicable and troublesome in Shakespeare’s England. Judaism and Islam were marginal and suspect, and the dominant religion was fraught, because Catholic powers on the continent were a constant threat to Elizabeth’s Protestant regime. Tension and uncertainty thus characterized the religious world into which Shakespeare was born in 1564. He was baptized by an English Protestant priest in Holy Trinity Church, the same village church where his older sister, Joan, had been baptized eight years earlier by an English Catholic priest. The difference between the two baptisms was not determined by his parents’ choice, but by the order of two complete strangers to his family. The strangers were half-sisters who ruled England successively in the mid-sixteenth century: Mary and Elizabeth Tudor. Mary was a faithful Catholic, who restored the English state church to Roman orthodoxy, after what she saw as years of Protestant apostasy under her father, Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) and her brother, Edward VI (r. 1547–1553). Joan Shakespeare had been born just before the end of Mary’s brief reign (1553–1558), but William was born under Elizabeth I, which made the difference in the way they were baptized. Though Elizabeth was also Henry VIII’s daughter, she was a Protestant because her mother, Anne Boleyn, had been a Protestant. This meant that during Elizabeth’s long reign (1558–1603), only Protestant priests were ordained in the English church, and that is why William Shakespeare was baptized as a Protestant in 1564.

Despite Elizabeth’s longevity and the stability of her reign, her government heavily suppressed Catholicism because active Catholic political resistance to the Protestant establishment persisted in England. Religious and political identity were virtually synonymous, making religious moderation and tolerance difficult, if not impossible. In 1570, the year Shakespeare turned six, Pope Pius V pronounced absolution in advance for anyone who assassinated Queen Elizabeth, thereby increasing her Protestant courtiers’ sense of threatened identity and constant vigilance. We have no record of how Shakespeare or his family reacted to these events but, at a time when religion was so troubled, it is natural to wonder about the playwright’s own religious identity. If he was Catholic, he was not prosecuted for worshipping with Catholics or proselytizing in their behalf, so he must have appeared to be part of the Protestant mainstream, no matter what he may have believed. His baptism by a Protestant priest says nothing about his or even his parents’ religious preference; it merely signals who had power in the kingdom, and how pervasive that power was. The law required regular attendance at the state church, and no other public worship was sanctioned, so one could be cited for failing to attend, and Shakespeare was never cited, but this does not prove he was a Protestant: he could have been a Catholic or an unbeliever who attended the Protestant state church because the law required him to.

The external facts of Shakespeare’s life thus combine with his own silence to make his religious identity difficult, if not impossible, to specify. No diaries, journals, letters, or comments by him, or remembered by others, have survived to help answer the question, though that absence has not prevented people from trying to answer it. The stakes for Catholics are particularly high, because of the prestige Shakespeare has acquired in the centuries following his death. If he can be shown to have been loyal to a persecuted religious minority in England, their suffering can be vindicated on a secular level, as well as a spiritual one. Father Peter Milward, a Jesuit missionary to Japan, dedicated much of his long life to arguing the case for a Catholic Shakespeare, and he was especially sensitive to the persecution of Jesuit missionaries in England in the 1580s. He saw their plight as the inspiration for Shakespeare’s depiction of the suffering of the outcast Edgar in *King Lear* (Milward 2005, p. 54; Milward 1973, pp. 217–18). As Milward’s example indicates, one can try to counter the difficulty of finding external evidence for Shakespeare’s religious identity by the way one interprets what Shakespeare wrote. The risk of circular argument is strong in this endeavor, with some scholars seemingly less aware of the risk than others (Asquith 2005; Wilson 2004). Perhaps, for that reason, the effort to establish

Shakespeare as a Catholic has declined in the last ten years, after a period of enthusiastic support for it in the early years of the twenty-first century (Ackroyd 2006; Greenblatt 2004).

The most recent effort is by David Beauregard OMV in *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare's Plays*. He is particularly interested in countering the argument that Shakespeare's plays are compatible with the official Elizabethan homilies, or sermons appointed to be read in churches. Alfred Hart first suggested that Shakespeare was indebted to the homilies in 1934, and Hart's argument was endorsed, in part, even by Milward in *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Milward 1973). Beauregard disagrees, refuting Hart's argument in his first chapter and in an appendix, and asserting not only that Shakespeare was not indebted to the homilies, but that he actually wrote in opposition to them, from a Catholic perspective.

Beauregard's first chapter summarizes Shakespeare's Catholic background, and usefully distinguishes a Catholic interpretation from either a Protestant or a secular interpretation of the plays. When it comes to *Measure for Measure*, Beauregard avoids the naïve allegorizing that mars the weakest Catholic commentary on Shakespeare. His intention is to interpret the play as pro-Catholic, which he does, first, by arguing that it neither demonizes nor demystifies Catholic clergy, as other contemporary English plays do. This is true, but it is like arguing that Shakespeare was pro-Jewish, because he does not demonize Shylock in the same way Marlowe demonizes Barabas. More accurately, Shakespeare generally does not demonize human beings on the basis of social identity—including religious identity—but only on the basis of moral character ("motiveless malignity," as Coleridge called it in the case of Iago). Aaron, the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, and Joan La Pucelle in *1 Henry VI*, are early collocations of race or national identity and demonic character, but Shakespeare did not repeat them.

Second, Beauregard construes Isabella positively from the outset, as a Catholic novice preparing successfully for the convent. He describes her response to Claudio's begging her to violate her chastity, in order to save his life, as a "brief show of anger" (Beauregard 2008, p. 65). Beauregard accurately describes Isabella's motive, but her anger is more than a "brief show": she calls Claudio a beast, doubts his legitimate birth, wishes for his death, and declares that she will pray a thousand prayers for him to die, but no word to save him. Her rejection of him thus reaches, momentarily, into the deepest recesses of her spiritual being. Critics who have described this reaction as wanting in charity would seem to be stating the obvious. They are not referring to her refusal to sleep with Angelo, as Beauregard avers (Beauregard 2008, p. 18) but to her literal dehumanization of her brother, which is surely not appropriate to one who is preparing for the convent. Later, when she begs the Duke to preserve Angelo's life, despite his belief that he raped her, her charity prevails over her repulsion, as she obeys the gospel command to forgive one's enemy. Her growth in charity would seem to be a more compelling way to understand her actions than her valuation of chastity as her primary virtue.

Most scholars have recently addressed the issue of Shakespeare and religion by recognizing that the plays are both Catholic and Protestant. This is the stated position of Beatrice Groves in an erudite and closely argued interpretation of six plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *King John 1 and 2*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *Measure for Measure*. The "texts" of Groves' title are the English Bible with commentaries inspired by it, and "traditions" are the vestiges of Catholic liturgy that were retained by the English Church, much to the dismay of reformers who continued to demand a wider separation between the New Faith and the Old. In keeping with this conception, Groves introduces her discussions of the plays with two historical chapters, one that considers the impact of the English Bible on the early modern stage, and a second that describes how Shakespeare's "incarnational esthetic" registers the impact of the mystery plays on secular drama.

Groves' chapter on *Measure for Measure* belongs to the former category. This play is the only one Shakespeare wrote with a biblical title, and it deals with problems in Christian ethics as the action unfolds, so it is hard to avoid for those who treat religion seriously in Shakespeare's plays, and it makes a useful touchstone for comparison of one treatment with another. Groves presents her argument in three stages, focusing first on the Duke, who describes his role in Godlike terms that have invited comparison with King James's ideas of divine right: "Both the Duke and James demonstrate their

power over life and death and in both cases it is implicitly suggested that such power is quasi-divine" (Groves 2007, p. 162). Groves agrees with most other critics of the play, however, that in spite of the Duke's Godlike aspirations, Shakespeare makes Vincentio humanly fallible, and she offers two more examples of possible biblical influence in *Measure for Measure* that are ironized to emphasize human weakness. One is the seeming resurrection of Claudio, staged by the Duke at the play's end, when Claudio enters wrapped in grave cloths, like the biblical Lazarus. Insofar as the episode suggests an implicit parallel between the Duke and Jesus, it works to the Duke's detriment in several ways that Groves enumerates (Groves 2007, p. 166). She also proposes that Lucio's discomforting of the Duke when the Duke is disguised as a friar may suggest Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Just as Satan expresses uncertainty about Christ's identity in order to persuade him to reveal it spectacularly, so Lucio/Lucifer goads the "friar". "Lucio's twisted biblical allusions, both to the raising of Lazarus and to the Incarnation, bring forward the true model of divine kingship which the Duke tries to emulate but cannot attain" (Groves 2007, p. 180).

Where Shakespeare's "incarnational esthetic" is concerned, Groves turns to Shakespeare's Henry V as prince and king. She argues that Hal's motive for modeling himself on Christ is not to improve his piety and ensure his salvation; rather, Hal determines to appear Christlike in order to improve his political effectiveness. Groves implicitly distinguishes her way of understanding him as a Christ figure from G. Wilson Knight's effort in the same vein by her identification of features that ironize the parallels (Knight 1967). She makes her case with three instances that have precedents in the mystery plays. Hal presents himself as a redeemer in his soliloquy in *1 Henry IV*, but what he purposes to redeem is not human souls, as Christ did, but the continuum of secular time: Hal says he has adopted a wastrel's style of living, in order to misdirect attention from himself as the heir apparent, so he will appear "more goodly and attract more eyes" in the long run, when he seems to repent and come to himself. Groves sees Hal as a secular Christ, again, when he defeats Hotspur at the end of *1 Henry IV*, given Hotspur's links with Lucifer in the mystery plays. Finally, Shakespeare reinforces Henry V's parallel with Christ in the mystery plays when the King prays by himself on the eve of Agincourt, sending his officers away, as Christ sends away his disciples before praying alone in Gethsemane in *The Agony in the Garden*. Groves summarizes: "Hal is an extremely successful king, but the illusion of divinity is part of his masterful manipulation of appearance, not the direct result of his Christian kingship" (Groves 2007, p. 153).

Whereas Groves devotes four chapters to six plays by Shakespeare, Christopher Baker treats all the plays in one chapter, using the other four chapters of his book to discuss historical background, the plays in performance, and a review of relevant criticism. This procedure makes it difficult for him to treat his subject in any depth: "background" means a breathless history of Christianity from the first century to the sixteenth in twenty pages. His chapter on Shakespeare's works is organized generically and chronologically, and offers little more than plot summaries. Baker includes a passing reference to Henry V's command that two psalms, *Te Deum* and *Non Nobis*, be sung after the victory at Agincourt (Baker 2008, p. 58), but Baker does not mention that this is an anachronistic detail in *Henry V*, because the two psalms were only one psalm in the Vulgate. Shakespeare thought of them as separate, because that is how they were printed in the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer. This would seem to be pertinent information in a book about religion in the age of Shakespeare. An anachronism on Baker's own part is his habitual use of "Anglican" to describe the English church in the sixteenth century. Though the term was known (the *OED*'s earliest instance is from 1598), it is more characteristic of the nineteenth century than the sixteenth.

Groves' comment about Shakespeare's "incarnational esthetic" is cited by Shell (2010, p. 2) in a remarkably learned, thematically organized challenge to the assumption that the plays are supportive of Christianity. On the contrary, Shell avers, her book "bears witness" to those who have found the plays "inimical to religious practice" (Shell 2010, p. 4). Her first two chapters thus focus, respectively, on opposition to the theater, per se, and on early Catholic critiques of Shakespeare, in particular. Anti-theatricalism is familiar from the work of Jonas Barish, in particular, (Barish 1981), and Shell

emphasizes that it was expressed by people of all backgrounds, not just radical Protestants. Her exposition of particular Catholic admonitions to Shakespeare himself is groundbreaking and singular.⁵ She is agnostic on the question of Shakespeare's denominational affiliation, but she makes it clear that Catholics were aware of his plays, and some were distressed by them. Most remarkable, she discovered a Catholic play from the late 1590s called *The History of Purgatory*, which she compares with Shakespeare's treatment of Purgatory in *Hamlet* (Shell 2010, pp. 106–19). Her point is that the *History* defends Catholic belief, while Shakespeare aestheticizes it: "What *Lear* does for Christianity, *Hamlet* does for Catholicism, artificially consigning it to another time, then bringing it back as a way of making his audience beautifully sad" (Shell 2010, p. 116).

The learning exhibited in Shell's book is both wide and deep, matching its attention to historical context and to particular plays. Shell cites *Measure for Measure* in support of her argument that Shakespeare shows a keen awareness of contemporary moral and religious issues without buttonholing his auditors (Shell 2010, pp. 164–74). For an audience that prizes esthetic distance, the result is not only agreeable, but admirable, yet it distinguishes Shakespeare's secular drama more clearly from its medieval predecessors than almost anything else. This play, "perhaps Shakespeare's richest venture into moralistic discourse" (Shell 2010, p. 167), scrupulously preserves its auditors' aloofness from the issues it addresses, so "the audience's voyeuristic role removes any element of reciprocity from the penitential process" (Shell 2010, p. 170). Shell cites an earlier drama, *Everyman*, for illustrative contrast (Shell 2010, pp. 170–71). Both plays emphasize a standard Christian assumption—that human beings are morally weak—but *Everyman* stages the assumption "for admonitory effect" (Shell 2010, p. 171), whereas *Measure for Measure* tips the balance heavily toward Horatian *dulce*. This way of preserving an audience, as it were, from moral suasion, is what makes Shakespeare, in Jonson's well-known phrase, not for an age but for all time yet, it is also, in Shell's view, what makes him most decidedly non-religious.

Shell offers one of the most original and groundbreaking books in this group of witnesses to keen current interest in Shakespeare and religion. The breadth of that interest is sampled in a collection of essays titled *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, edited by Kenneth Graham and Philip Collington, from papers read at a conference on Elizabethan theater sponsored by the University of Waterloo, Ontario, in June 2005 (Graham and Collington 2009). Two of the essays are not actually about Shakespeare. One, by Alexandra Johnston, is on William Cecil's role in the transition, from drama inspired by centuries of Catholic tradition to plays more compatible with Protestant assumptions. The other essay, by Mary Blackstone, deconstructs the Catholic/Protestant binary by examining three instances of it in late sixteenth-century England. Both are highly learned, and supply relevant context to Shakespeare's drama, but they are tangential to the book's stated subject.

The remaining essays in *Shakespeare and Religious Change* cover a variety of subjects, from Debora Shuger on the conflict between aristocratic and Christian values in *Richard II*, to Anthony Dawson on the secularity of Shakespeare's theater. Dawson's essay complements Shell's book in important ways. Both see Shakespeare as neither identifiably Catholic nor Protestant; both emphasize the secularity of his writing; both pay particular attention to *Measure for Measure*. But Dawson goes his own way. He cites *Hamlet* on God's concern about the fall of a sparrow and Bottom's paraphrase of St. Paul as examples of Shakespeare's aestheticizing of religion, but Dawson's prime example is not from Shakespeare; it is from Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*, performed at the Red Bull Theatre in 1620. Though the play appeals strongly to audience emotion in imagining a faithful Christian under Roman persecution, Dawson argues that the emotion it arouses is aestheticized: "religious associations and feelings are subsumed under, or transformed into, theatrical pleasure" (Dawson 2009, p. 254). Anthony Dawson's essay is in essential agreement with Alison Shell's argument in *Shakespeare and Religion*, but Shell's way of making the point gains by her contrast with medieval drama. Dawson does

⁵ *Shakespeare and Religion* draws on earlier work that Alison Shell published about the Catholic response to Shakespeare.

not address the question whether any theatrical display of religion in action could avoid evaporating faith in the rarified air of esthetic pleasure. Shell makes a credible argument that it can, and once, did.

A more recent collection of essays by Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti used the same title as Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion*, though with a distinguishing subtitle, *Early Modern and Postmodern Perspectives* (Jackson and Marotti 2011). The subtitle is a little misleading, since its two principal terms are not parallel with one another. No essay on Shakespeare and religion exists from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, which define “early modern” for Shakespeare. At the same time, postmodern strategies of interpretation can, and have, been applied to early modern texts, including Shakespeare’s, beginning perhaps with Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Greenblatt 1980). “Historical and postmodern” would seem to serve the purpose better though, admittedly, the phrase lacks the euphony of the existing subtitle. The co-editors published a useful and influential essay in 2004, “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies,” and the essays in their present collection are drawn from subsequent sessions on Shakespeare and religion at the Renaissance Society of America and the Shakespeare Association of America.

Measure for Measure is represented in their collection by James Knapp’s essay on penitential ethics in the play. The essay announces itself as decidedly postmodern, with a sentence like the following distinctly recalling the high tide of theory in the 1980s: “Thus for Marion the method of phenomenological reduction that serves Merleau-Ponty’s goal of eschewing dogmatic philosophical proscription becomes the method by which to avoid the pitfalls of traditional onto-theology” (Knapp 2011, p. 261). Knapp’s excursus on theory, however, is unnecessary, because it has no bearing on the substance of his essay, which is an engaging and perceptive historically informed close reading of the play, with helpful references to the psalms, the gospels, and Augustine. To be sure, Knapp’s conclusion is informed by postmodern irresolution, but the theory is implicit, and the essay’s opening excursus on “Religion, Phenomenology, Ethics” seems gratuitous.

Sarah Beckwith is also interested in penitential ethics, framed in a contrast between medieval religious drama and Shakespeare. Though this approach pays rich dividends thematically in *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, taking the sacrament of penance as a starting point faces the difficulty that penitence and forgiveness long preceded sacramental theology. They are a central feature of ancient Hebrew theology, strongly reinforced in the teaching of Jesus, and elaborated in the writing of St. Paul. The Protestant reformers thought they were recovering something older than medieval theology and, if they were, then Shakespeare would seem to be recovering it, as well. He showed an interest in forgiveness as early as *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and that interest continued in several more comedies and *King Lear*. Beckwith includes chapters on *Measure for Measure*, *Pericles* (where forgiveness does not influence the denouement), *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

The chapter on *Measure for Measure* deals with identity and community, in keeping with the focus of the book as a whole. Like almost every other critic of the play, Beckwith abhors the Duke. By disguising himself as a friar, “the Duke can procure the secrets of the soul so that they become fully available to the sovereign state” (Beckwith 2011, p. 73). His stated reason for hiding his preservation of Claudio from Isabella is “To make her heavenly comforts of despair, /When it is least expected” but, for Beckwith, his retention of this information is “sheer viciousness”, “drawn out [presumably by the playwright] to expose its inherent sadism” (Beckwith 2011, p. 74). The human costs of the way he governs “are in the terrible exposure and humiliation of his subjects” (Beckwith 2011, p. 75).⁶ To be sure, the Duke as matchmaker is a good deal less likeable than Rosalind in *As You Like It*, or even than Helena in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Still, he contributes substantially to the wellbeing of Julia and her newborn child by rescuing Claudio from the law, meets the needs and even the desires of Mariana by bringing Angelo to repentance, arranges permanent material support for Kate Keepdown by forcing

⁶ For what it is worth, David Beauregard, writing as a Catholic priest about *Measure for Measure*, is not offended by the Duke’s disguise as a friar: “The play presents the Duke counseling or confessing four characters, actions that are appropriate expressions of the play’s concern with the virtue of clemency” (Beauregard 2008, p. 69).

Lucio to marry her, and assists Isabella in moving from a self-absorbed and heartless valuation of her chastity to warmhearted charity for the man who mistakenly thinks he has raped her. The Duke's actions on behalf of women clearly distinguish him from Lucio, who exploits women ruthlessly, and the difference would seem to be important in evaluating the Duke.

The interest in Shakespeare and religion peaked in 2013–14 with the publication of no fewer than six books. Hannibal Hamlin's *The Bible in Shakespeare* is the first identifiably Protestant book on Shakespeare and religion, though Hamlin takes no stand on Shakespeare's religious identity. Hamlin refers to his study as "confessionally unbiased" (Hamlin 2013, p. 76), but Catholic historians, like Haigh (1993) and Duffy (1992), are conspicuous by their absence, and focusing on the Bible is, itself, a Protestant trait. Hamlin distinguishes his study, from those by Noble (1935) or Shaheen (1999), by his emphasis on allusion, which he describes as "any instance of a work that refers to, quotes, points to, echoes, evokes, or parallels an earlier work" (Hamlin 2013, p. 77). This definition explains the extraordinary density of Hamlin's study, whose erudition is seemingly boundless, though never heavy-handed. After three introductory chapters, dealing with the Bible in the Reformation, other critics of the Bible in Shakespeare, and the theory of allusion, Hamlin turns to the substance of his book: a chapter on Genesis 1–3, the Roman histories, Falstaff, and a chapter apiece on *Macbeth* and *Lear*. *Measure for Measure* is barely mentioned.

The chapter on Falstaff is particularly surprising and rewarding. Hamlin points out that Falstaff is the "master of diegetic allusion" (Hamlin 2013, p. 234), that is, allusions used as if the character were aware of using them. For an alcoholic old knight to be the conscious master of biblical allusion is, itself, a fine Shakespearean irony, as well as implicit evidence of Shakespeare's own familiarity with the Bible. In part, Falstaff's mastery is attributable to his origin as a stage Puritan (Hamlin 2013, p. 236), but a satiric contrast with the sober-sided Prince is an important part of his makeup. Hamlin observes that both the knight and the prince allude to the Bible, "but, whereas Falstaff is always primarily playful, Hal's play is deadly serious" (Hamlin 2013, p. 254). Most tellingly, Hamlin notes close parallels between Falstaff's biblical allusions and Shakespeare's in other plays: "in their contrastive and ironic use of biblical allusion, Falstaff and Shakespeare do have a striking amount in common" (Hamlin 2013, p. 270).

David Scott Kastan's witty title, *A Will to Believe*, suggests several possibilities: Shakespeare's credibility, the playwright's own willingness to believe (even if he did not quite get there), and the last will and testament he dictated that left many unanswered questions. Kastan agrees with Shell and Dawson: "Religion in the plays is a psychological and social reality that registers as form rather than a credal one that registers as belief" (Kastan 2014, p. 7), and he describes his procedure in four chapters after the introduction: "one on Shakespeare's own religion, one on his presentation of Catholics and Catholicism, one on Jews, Moors, and Turks in the two Venice plays, and a final chapter on Wittenberg's most famous dropout" (Kastan 2014, p. 11). In pursuing his aim, Kastan repeatedly finds *le mot juste* in an astonishing variety of obscure Tudor and Stuart texts that, in themselves, have no bearing on popular drama of the day.

Kastan approaches *Measure for Measure* as part of his consideration of how Shakespeare dealt with Catholicism or, to be more precise, how a devout Catholic dealt with Shakespeare. Kastan attends to the censorship of William Sankey, an English Jesuit who was exiled because of his faith to the English college at Valladolid, in Spain, where he expurgated a copy of the Second Folio of 1632, so it would be less offensive to Catholic seminarians. Sankey's expurgation included the whole of *Measure for Measure*, which he literally cut out of the volume, leaving only page stubs in the gutter margin. Based on the pattern of Sankey's selective censorship of other plays, Kastan infers two possible reasons for Sankey's apparent animus toward *Measure for Measure*: "the play's inescapable sexuality" (Kastan 2014, p. 66), and the Duke's extensive performance as a Catholic priest while in disguise.⁷ Kastan observes

⁷ Regarding this assumption, see the previous note.

that Shakespeare's putative Catholicism seems to have been invisible to a contemporary Catholic who read the Folio carefully, while "the play itself is neither assertively anti-Catholic nor pro-Protestant" (Kastan 2014, p. 71). Even in his most Christian play, Shakespeare is interested in religion as a means to an esthetic end, and he therefore appeals to the majority of his audience, for whom religion was not defined by the extremes but by "a more expansive field of piety and social connection" (Kastan 2014, p. 76).

Peter Iver Kaufman describes his subject succinctly in the title of his book: *Religion around Shakespeare*. He aims to describe "circumstance" (Kaufman 2013, p. 1), rather than try to discern the playwright's religion from the plays. Self-identified as a historical theologian, Kaufman begins with two chapters of background that "stay far from Shakespeare's plays, and try to repossess the religion around the realm" (Kaufman 2013, p. 3), beginning with the kingdom as a whole, then focusing more particularly on Shakespeare's known habitats—Stratford-upon-Avon and London. The succeeding three chapters treat the plays as evidence for contemporary "attitudes toward religious leadership (chapter 3), religious personality (chapter 4), and religious community (chapter 5)" (Kaufman 2013, p. 88). The strength of these chapters is Kaufman's ability to bring contemporary documents—often documents in manuscripts—into conjunction with the plays he analyzes.

The chapters treating the plays have two limitations. First, taking "the plays as evidence" does not mean, for Kaufman, surveying all the plays that might bear on the point at hand; rather, he considers one or two plays in each chapter—*King John* on religious leadership, *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* on religious personality, and *Coriolanus* on religious community. Since *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* both centrally feature troubled persons, the analysis is skewed toward religion as a personality disorder. Interpretation of *Hamlet* and *Angelo* needs to be balanced by considering personalities like Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*, or Prospero in *The Tempest*. Where *Coriolanus* is concerned, Kaufman finds a topical parallel to the imagined mob's demands in historical Puritan demands for lay involvement in parish decision-making at the time the play was first staged. This is an innovative way to understand the play, but an appeal for religious equality is a distant parallel to a hungry urban mob's demand for food and, even if the parallel is granted, Shakespeare's acknowledgment of the Puritans' cause would be an uncharacteristic gesture of religious favoritism on his part. In contrast, Kaufman helpfully analyzes *Angelo's* "soule wrack" in *Measure for Measure* (Kaufman 2013, pp. 145–51) as Shakespeare's unsympathetic imagining of contemporary puritanism. Second, insofar as the plays in question are evidence of any topical concern, it would point to one playwright's understanding, not to contemporary attitudes in general. Shakespeare is famously evenhanded, but he was not infinitely prescient. An urban demand for food and the Puritans' demand for greater inclusiveness in decision-making both anticipate later developments in civic engagement and even in democracy, but Shakespeare's treatment of the mob in *Coriolanus* is hardly sympathetic to participatory government.

David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore commissioned a collection of essays because they were interested in bringing historians and literary critics together, to write about Shakespeare and religion. The collection begins with three essays that consider context, one by a literary critic (David Bevington) and two by historians (Peter Marshall and Felicity Heal). These are followed by nine essays on particular plays, including Alison Shell on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Beatrice Groves on *King John*. Michael Witmore contributes an essay on "Shakespeare and Wisdom Literature", and Matthew Dimmock writes about Shakespeare and non-Christian religion, focusing mostly on *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*.

Adrian Strete's essay on *Measure for Measure* brings the play into conjunction for the first time with Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* by way of Calvin's *Institutes*. Strete is interested in possible overlap between Lucretius' moderate determinism ("moderate" because the possibility of atomic "swerve" in Lucretius' physical system is the origin of volitional freedom) and Calvin's doctrine of predestination. In *Measure for Measure*, Strete proposes, "Shakespeare shows [that] the Christian 'graine of mustard seede' is always potentially in danger of morphing into the Lucretian atomistic seed" (Strete 2015, p. 139). He focuses on the two scenes where *Angelo* attempts to sway *Isabella* to his fleshly purpose (2.2

and 2.4), taking each of the interlocutors as representative, in a sense, of Lucretian atomistic necessity and Pauline freedom, respectively. Act Two, Scene Four, in particular, “turns on the keen tension between a Christian and a materialist understanding of sex” (Strete 2015, p. 147). It is impossible to do justice to the complexity and insightfulness of this chapter in a brief summary; it is one of the most thought-provoking interpretations of *Measure for Measure* in this group of books.

Richard McCoy chose a snappy title for his book, as David Kastan did for his.⁸ *Faith in Shakespeare* would seem to refer to the religious content of the plays, but the title actually refers to the credibility that Shakespeare’s writing has earned over the course of four centuries—or, in McCoy’s own phrasing, “what it means to believe in Shakespeare’s plays” (McCoy 2013, p. ix). McCoy makes clear that the wordplay in his title is deliberate, and he acknowledges a past interest in Shakespeare and religion, but he reports that his focus has shifted: “I now see faith in Shakespeare as more theatrical and poetic than spiritual” (McCoy 2013, p. ix). So decisive is this shift for him that his book does not even mention *Measure for Measure*, the play that, more than any other, reflects Shakespeare’s awareness of Christian ethics and apparent interest in it. In short, McCoy firmly endorses the observation that other critics have made concerning Shakespeare and religion, i.e., that the playwright takes religion seriously, not as religion, but as art.

McCoy’s Arnoldian stance is most evident, perhaps, in his analysis of *The Winter’s Tale*, where Paulina tells Leontes, late in the play, “It is required / You do awake your faith”. McCoy emphasizes that the faith in question is merely esthetic: “For all their supernatural atmospherics, Shakespeare’s romances operate at a human and worldly level rather than attaining a transcendent plane” (McCoy 2013, p. 115). To be sure, the faith Leontes needs to awake is central to a relational drama—his faith in the wife he fatally mistrusted and his confidence in Paulina’s ability to effect a reconciliation that his repentance has made him long for, though he thought Hermione was dead. For the romance ending to work, this relationship needs to be repaired, so Leontes’ repentance is as important as Hermione’s willingness to forgive him. But, the key words in this comic ending are all borrowed from a religious context: “faith”, “repent”, “forgive”, and “reconciliation.” To insist that such words have merely esthetic denotations is to ignore the connotations that give the plot much of its vitality and emotional depth. As Howard Felperin pointed out long ago, the one who demands the awakening of Leontes’ faith is named “little Paul”, unavoidably alluding to the apostle of faith (Felperin 1972, p. 68). Without actually operating at a transcendent level, *The Winter’s Tale* deliberately borrows from that level in imagining human frailty and harmony. “Both transcendent and literal” would seem to describe this process better than McCoy’s claim that it is strictly literal.

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⁸ In fact, the two titles are parallel. The principal difference is that Kastan’s title glances at Shakespeare’s first name.

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