Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness: Its Play and Tolerance


Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness draws from articles published between 1993 and 2003 and reflects the renewed interest in religious subjects expressed by scholars of early modern drama during this ten-year period. Readers have always been eager to understand Shakespeare’s religious proclivities, but only recently have they turned careful attention to the attitudes of individual plays, moving away from the question of whether his worldview was overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant. And although most of the pioneering scholars in the field of New Historicism chose to tackle the more secular aspects of literature’s engagement with popular culture, studies such as Huston Diehl’s Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage (1997), Michael O’Connell’s The Idolatrous Eye (2000), and Stephen Greenblatt’s Hamlet in Purgatory (2001) have proved that historicist practices can be fruitfully applied to the subject of religion. Professor Hunt places himself within this tradition, paying special attention to Greenblatt’s book, but his contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the subject of religion is relatively unique in that it does not prioritize carefully culled historical material over textual analysis. The book opts instead for detailed readings of the plays that focus, as its title suggests, on the play of words. Rejecting the notion that one overarching hypothesis can explain Shakespeare’s interest in Reformation-era theology, Hunt argues that each of the plays in his study negotiates a slightly different position vis-à-vis the confessional divide between Catholicism and Protestantism. Significantly, he finds elements of both faiths in all of the plays he considers, and if there is an underlying argument in the book about Shakespeare’s response to the Reformation and its aftermath it revolves around the word “tolerance.” Each chapter provides a reading of a Shakespearean play in light of this concept, but the middle three sections of the book are particularly attuned to the playwright’s search for a via media between the two poles of contemporary religious controversy.

Chapter Two, for instance, provides an extensive account of the concept of reformation in the second Henriad, arguing for a direct analogy between the personal and theological senses of the word. In addition to a thoughtful consideration of Falstaff as a man caught between two eras, the strongest aspect of this chapter is its close reading of the title character’s speeches in the second half of Henry V. Taken as a whole, the king’s words reflect both an “identifiably Reformation Protestant” attitude and an appreciation
for the necessity of Catholic miracles such as the one that saved the English troops at Agincourt (33). The king’s ability to reconcile these two competing world views, should, Hunt argues, serve as a model of toleration for the playgoers at the Globe. Although it is possible to take issue with this particular theory of audience response, Hunt’s reading of Hal’s transformation is very much in line with other significant critical studies including Jeffrey Knapp’s.

There are important shifts in Hunt’s discussion of “tolerance” throughout the book; each section engages more directly than the last with non-literary sources, moving closer to an interpretative model that takes into account the specific time and place in which the plays were produced. The first chapter, on The Two Gentlemen of Verona, relegates almost all references to contemporary sermons and polemics to its endnotes. This section serves as a kind of test case for the book, carefully mining textual examples for references to either Protestant or Catholic concepts. On the one hand, Hunt concludes, The Two Gentlemen of Verona espouses a distinct set of Protestant values, embodied in the “process of conversion and forgiveness” experienced by Proteus (12). On the other hand, the play is dominated by a Catholic aesthetic, associated primarily with discourses of courtly romance. Crucially, it is Shakespeare’s “artistry,” and not his political leanings, that is deemed tolerant in this text (13). The playwright simply chose the terms and metaphors that best served his purposes, rather than making an argument for the merits of one faith or another.

The rest of the book does not, however, belabor the importance of Shakespeare’s aesthetic choices. Instead, it moves from this relatively ahistorical reading of Shakespeare’s religious allusions to more nuanced discussions of Reformation-era theology. Perhaps Hunt’s most original reading is contained in his impressive third chapter, which suggests that the basis for denominational tolerance in All’s Well That Ends Well rests on Shakespeare’s reworking of that old chestnut, the bed trick. Both Protestants and Catholics, Hunt points out, would have been aware of the biblical tradition of swapping one partner for another in order to bring about an otherwise virtuous union. Hunt does not argue, however, that this play makes the same conciliatory moves described in the previous chapter. On the contrary, he asserts, the bed trick is the one thing in All’s Well That Ends Well that everyone could agree on; the concept of merit, a much trickier theological puzzle, is explored from two distinct perspectives, one favoring faith and the other good deeds, that are never entirely reconciled in the text.

Hunt’s argument for Shakespeare’s tendency toward tolerance is most fully explored in his fourth chapter on Twelfth Night and the theology of Richard Hooker. For Hunt, as for many modern readers, this Elizabethan clergyman embodies the quality of moderation associated with what we now call Anglicanism. Rather than attacking the new religion for retaining certain elements of Catholic practice, Hooker felt that clerics ought to be celebrating it as a peaceful solution to the deadly controversies that preceded it. Accordingly, Hunt and other scholars place Hooker in opposition to the strict Protestants who were advocating for a narrower definition of salvation. Informed by the idea of nature as a secondary agent of divine providence, Hunt sees Viola as the beneficiary of a Hookerian notion of divine grace, while Malvolio is the embodiment of rigid Puritanism, expecting God to intervene directly on his behalf. Although this chapter provides an erudite exposition of Malvolio’s character, its argument is less
complex than the previous one. One does not need Hooker, after all, to argue that Viola’s patient suffering is more attractive than Malvolio’s expectation of immediate reward. And although he acknowledges the long tradition of the stereotypical stage puritan, Hunt seems overly eager to link that figure to the proponents of Calvinism, almost none of whom would have self-identified as puritanical.

By contrast, Hunt’s final chapter provides a much more localized interpretation anchored in the events surrounding the 1604 Hampton Court conference, at which many “puritan” ministers sought “to persuade officials to make Calvinist double predestination more explicitly part of the creed of the Church of England” (98). Reading Othello within the context of the strict model of salvation promoted at Hampton Court, Hunt points out the unfortunate nature of Desdemona’s life (prescribed for her by a name meaning “ill fated”) and the pathetic quality of her death. This is not, Hunt reasons, a woman who draws comfort from the certainty that she is one of the elect, as evidenced by her frantic plea for one last prayer, one last minute of life. But if Desdemona, who has both merit and good deeds on her side, cannot be counted among the elect, what can we conclude about Calvinism? This question leads Hunt to argue, quite sensibly, that there is an implicit critique of a rigid notion of predestination in this play. Calvinist theories of salvation provide a convincing lens through which to view the very un-salvific nature of Desdemona’s death, but the chapter does have its weaknesses, including a dismissal of critical readings that focus on the character’s agency. Hunt asserts, for instance, that Desdemona need not have made her “shrill entreaty on Cassio’s behalf” in act 3, scene 3 because Othello has already granted her plea and would have remained calm if she had not continued to press the issue (106). The reader is also left wondering whether, as Hunt suggests, Othello actually provides a positive model of Hookerian providence as an alternative to Calvinist inflexibility. Overall, however, this chapter provides admirable support for the book’s thesis that religious concepts consistently interpenetrate Shakespeare’s otherwise secular plots.

Hunt’s detailed consideration of tolerance, informed by his work on Hooker and other contemporary commentators, is his most important contribution to ongoing debates about the drama’s engagement with religion, but his prose style is also noteworthy in and of itself. For one thing, Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness is refreshingly transparent in stating its claims about what the author calls Shakespeare’s “syncretistic” method of incorporating religious subject matter into his plays (ix). Each chapter opens with an explicit statement of its argument and the assumptions that underpin it, and each one tackles a distinct Reformation-era term such as “conversion” or “providence” as it pursues a holistic reading of a single play. Hunt increases this sense of transparency by directly addressing potential critics: after identifying a strongly Protestant attitude in Shakespeare’s depiction of Falstaff’s “need of reformation,” he remarks that “my reader might sensibly object” to this interpretation based on the fact that that few godly Protestants cared to be seen in the public theatres (22). This is an important moment both for Hunt and for other scholars who wish to make arguments about how playgoers reacted to scripts such as Shakespeare’s. Hunt solves the problem by pointing out that even less dogmatic Protestants would get the joke, but in this case the question is even more useful than the answer. Foucault has taught us that historical conclusions are slippery in and of themselves, but as Hunt admits, things get even messier when we attempt to theorize
about audience members’ reactions based on notoriously sparse documentary evidence.

On the whole, Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness is not particularly concerned with questions of performance. Hunt typically displays a positivist attitude toward the issue of whether or not we can understand and articulate the responses of contemporary spectators, even using the present tense at times, as when he asserts that “playgoers question [the outlaw’s] judgment” of Valentine’s outward appearance in The Two Gentlemen of Verona (9). Hunt does, however, qualify his work and that of other historicists when he concludes his discussion of the play’s “Catholic/Protestant artistry” by asking “[j]ust how significant are we to judge a stylistic phenomenon most likely not remarked in quick-paced performance but rather in the study?” (13). He answers this particular dilemma by reminding us that conversion is both a symbolic trope and a plot device, allowing us to see the ways in which thematic considerations are anchored in the structure of the drama itself. This is one of several moments in the book where Hunt’s attention to the overall design of the play, rather than to a single scene or line, truly pays off.

The second significant aspect of Hunt’s method is that he is genuinely interested in the work of other Shakespearean scholars, including but not limited to those writing on religious subjects. Going back as far as A.C. Bradley, Hunt’s endnotes trace the history of critical inquiry in detail, while his chapters are full of efficient summaries of ongoing debates. His explanation of the existing scholarship on the question of merit in All’s Well That Ends Well is particularly informative in this respect. At times his faithful consideration of the work of other readers prompts him to lend too much credence to those critics who believe that Shakespeare was either wholeheartedly Protestant or stubbornly Catholic. He opens his very subtle account of the religious elements in Two Gentlemen, for instance, by citing work that draws a rather crude analogy between the outlaws and the banished English recusant community. On the whole, however, Hunt’s careful attention to both his predecessors and his present colleagues makes his work a useful complement to other studies that tend to distance themselves from the tradition of literary analysis.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness is that it prompts as many questions as it answers about the business of doing New Historicism. One is left, wondering, for instance, whether there is any overarching significance to the dates of the plays Hunt has chosen to focus on, or to the order in which they appear: The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1593), I and 2 Henry IV (1596-97), Henry V (1599), All’s Well That Ends Well (1603), Twelfth Night (1601), and Othello (1604). These texts span most of Shakespeare’s career (apart from the late romances) and thus, at the very least, Hunt’s work demonstrates that religious themes continued to spark Shakespeare’s imagination even as he branched out into new genres and new playhouses. It is tempting to draw some further conclusions based on the marked difference between the treatment of the confessional divide in Two Gentlemen of Verona (chapter 1) and in Othello (chapter 5). To his credit, however, Professor Hunt largely avoids making sweeping generalizations about Shakespeare’s growing dissatisfaction with religious factionalism. Hunt’s reader is left with the sense that a Hookerian worldview can be used to illuminate Shakespeare’s own, but that this worldview was also impacted by specific events such as the Hampton Court conference, and by the playwright’s own artistic goals for any given play.
Of all the methodological issues raised by Hunt’s book, and by the scholarly work that precedes it, perhaps the most provocative is this: if a majority of Shakespeare’s audience wished for tolerance in their political lives, did they also expect tolerance in their plays? And what would that mean? Even when we manage to resist the temptation to speculate about Shakespeare himself, students and teachers of literature still want the texts themselves to take a stand. It feels natural, especially in the last thirty years or so, to assert that the plays are engaged with the environment that produced them, but we continue to wrestle with the problem of how to characterize the subtle and continually shifting nature of that engagement. Hunt acknowledges the challenge of making literature speak to history, and vice versa, and like many of us leans on existing historical research in attempting to tackle this challenge. Hunt has done an admirable job making sense of the progress that has been made on the topic of theatre and religion in the last ten years, and has successfully cleared the path for new studies, perhaps ones that will react against New Historicism trends by paying closer attention to wordplay and performance. As Hunt suggests, a successful consideration of early modern drama’s investment in religion will require an open-minded rethinking of the play scripts themselves. It will also require that we pay closer attention to non-literary texts, not just theological treatises but popular forms such as the sermon. If we ever are to understand the relationship between popular theatre and popular religion in Shakespeare’s day, we must follow the historians’ lead without shying away from the tricky work of decoding ideological content in a variety of textual forms.

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