Religion and Drama in Early Modern England (review)

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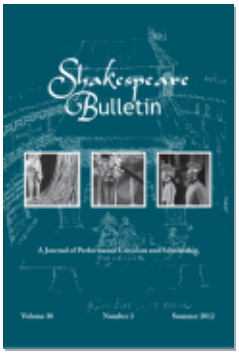

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Book Review

Religion and Drama in Early Modern England. Ed. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson. Burlington: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. xiii + 281. $104.95.

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This volume seeks to redress the limitations of much recent work on religion and the early modern stage that depends on a binary conflict between Catholic and Protestant doctrine, interpretive habits, and modes of dramatization. Such work, the editors rightly argue, limits what can be said about theatre's engagement with early modern religion, Christian and non-Christian. More importantly, they observe, scholarship on religion and the stage has tended to focus somewhat simplistically on religious allusions without "grappling with the multiple sensory dimensions of theatrical representation" (10). By contrast, this collection of essay aims to think in both more concrete and more abstract terms about the dialogue between religion and drama by considering the material realities of early modern theatrical production as well as a broader "semiotics of theatrical meaning" (7). In opening up previously unexplored avenues to critical consideration, the essays in the volume look to "expose a mutually constitutive relationship between various theatrical and extra-theatrical discourses, arguing both for the autonomy of the theatrical medium and for a multi-directional exchange between theater and culture" (10).

The volume is organized into three sections. The first, Theatrical Materiality and Religious Effects, "demonstrates why considerations of performance and materiality are so important for rethinking the drama's treatment of religious subjects" (13). The opening chapter by Holly Crawford Pickett, "The Idolatrous Nose: Incense on the Early Modern Stage," considers how the olfactory experience of early modern drama may have shaped the audience's relationship to stage action. Focused on Jonson's *Sejanus* and Middleton's *Women Beware Women,* the essay is interested mainly in incense, which Pickett links not only to the idolatrous potential in Catholic and pagan ritual but, more unexpectedly, to discourses of romantic love. By considering how sensory experience could inculcate an idolatrous worship of the beloved, Pickett posits a vocabulary for representing ritual on the early modern stage that is shared by both verboten religious practice and its secular appropriations. Dennis Britton thinks not about theatrical smell but theatrical sight. In "Muslim Conversion and Circumcision as Theater," Britton examines the theatrical representation of conversions to Islam in Thomas Kyd's *Solyman and Perseda* and Robert Daborne's *A Christian Turned Turk* to argue that the stage's dependence on costume to represent religious conversion necessarily

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opens up discrepancies between outward appearance and religious conviction. The body marked through circumcision is ultimately inaccessible to the audience's gaze, and as these plays demonstrate, a ritually circumcised initiate to Islam may not have undergone true religious conversion. Central to Britton's claims, however, is a somewhat worn commonplace of early modern religious scholarship, "the impossibility of distinguishing real from performed religious identity" (85). The essay concludes, also too predictably, that this potential discrepancy makes these figures "dangerous" (84).

Jacqueline Wylde's chapter, "Singing a New Song in *The Shoemaker's Holiday*," makes a persuasive argument that The Second Three-Man's song, whose placement in the play has been much debated, makes most sequential and thematic sense at the very end. Wylde demonstrates that this placement most clearly articulates the nationalist, populist, royalist, and Protestant sentiments deployed by the song's meter, rhyme, and lyrics. She argues that the portrait of English identity that arises from this placement is further complicated by the song's inclusion of the character Lacy, whose Dutch alter-ego is assimilated into the play's conclusion not through the erasure of his otherness but through conversion from a potentially threatening foreign competitor to a productive English Protestant community member. The chapter thereby expresses the nuances of confessional and national identity by suggesting the complex status of the convert, whose previous national or religious identity is not erased but transformed through recognition of English Protestant superiority. Peter Berek likewise considers the dramatization of figures of religious and cultural difference. Berek's essay, "'Looking Jewish' on the Early Modern Stage" considers the function of prop noses in theatrical representations of Jews, concluding that the convention had less to do with actual Jews or with the dramatization of religious otherness than with stage comedy: "That the nose was funny seems to have been more important to audiences and acting companies than that the nose was a marker for Jewishness" (69). The laughter generated at the Jew's expense, however, is not devoid of political and cultural implications, for laughter is an expression of superiority and a way of managing discomfort. As Berek puts it, "Laughter helps tame the Jew" (68).

The book's second section, Intersections of Popular Theater and Religious Culture, "moves to a set of readings that examine the theater's appropriations of religious codes of meaning in relation to its development as a particular form of secular cultural production" (13). Its first two chapters think about how early modern audiences may have seen and understood especially unrealistic events on stage. Erika T. Lin's chapter, "Popular Worship and Visual Paradigms in *Love's Labor's Lost*," observes the significant differences between modern standards for believable stage visuals and those that must have organized early modern dramatic presentation and reception. In seeking to describe how early modern audiences would have processed patently unrealistic scenes, Lin argues that the Eucharist "trained [the audience] through years of observance" to accept fundamental discrepancies between what is and what appears to be (111). This claim problematically takes what is perhaps the limit case of religious perception—the Eucharist—as a de facto mode of early modern visual interpretation. Susannah

Brietz Monta's subsequent chapter, "'It is required you do awake your faith': Belief in Shakespeare's Theater," approaches the question of audience engagement with greater nuance by attending to the period's teachings on religious faith. Monta's survey of early modern concepts of faith demonstrates that they are invariably (and perhaps inevitably) inclusive of doubt, producing for the theatre "complex models of audience engagement [that] imagine dialectics [. . .] of imaginative allegiance and metatheatrical awareness" (127). Through its sensitive reading of the ambiguities inherent in faith and in *The Winter's Tale*, Monta makes a compelling claim that Paulina's injunction to awaken faith in the play's final scene depends on "a mix of belief and incredulity, faith and doubt, commitment and distance" (137).

The latter two chapters in the section turn from questions of audience experience to what Joseph L. Black productively describes as the "discursive exchange between the polemical and theatrical realms" (161). Black's engaging chapter on the influence of the Marprelate Controversy on theatrical representation describes an evolving critical turn toward an interest in "discursive rather than topical connections" (167). He suggests the fruitfulness of exploring how the self-consciously theatrical Martinist and anti-Martinist discourses of the late sixteenth century influence dramatic elements like persona, voice, and character type. Paul Whitfield White's chapter on the performance of Thomas Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* at the country house of Archbishop Whitgift considers the junction of religion and theatre in the country parishes. Both Nashe's play and its occasion were connected to the traditions of popular revelry that came under condemnation by the Puritans, but White suggests that such entertainments nonetheless participated in celebrating traditional spiritual values, albeit at times under the guise of satire.

The volume's third section, Beyond Allusion and Ideology, considers how "the theater actively worked to destabilize polemical debates and ideological affiliations" (15). Musa Gurnis-Farrell's essay, "Martyr Acts: Playing with Foxe's Martyrs on the Public Stage," focuses namely on Dekker and Webster's *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, which Gurnis-Farrell dates to 1602. The essay turns on the claim of an analogy between the impending death of Elizabeth and the violent vacillations of church and state after Henry VIII's death to argue that *Sir Thomas Wyatt* "speaks to the cultural moment of its production" rather than expressing straightforward Protestant providentialism (180). The essay's persuasiveness is compromised by its failure to support its pivotal claim that among the play's audience "there must [. . .] have been a tacit understanding that all confessional groups faced the possibility of religio-political disenfranchisement in the immediate future" (180). Even if evidence of such an understanding were available, "religio-political disenfranchisement" is a very different thing from the unprecedented bloody upheaval that characterized the years from Edward VI's death to the installation of Elizabeth.

The volume ends with a group of particularly thoughtful chapters. In "'The Juice of Egypt's Grape': Plutarch, Syncretism, and *Antony and Cleopatra*," Michael O'Connell analyzes a handful of biblical passages that echo peculiarly

in Shakespeare's pre-Christian play. O'Connell describes affiliations between Shakespeare's Cleopatra and the figure of Isis, arguing that by mobilizing a syncretic understanding of divinity gleaned from Plutarch, Shakespeare casts Cleopatra as "a kind of pagan or Egyptian saint of love" who is not incompatible with Christian notions of the sacred (204). O'Connell proposes that this model of Shakespearean syncretism might usefully be extended to describe the mélange of religious discourses in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, where we likewise find "a conception of the sacred that is not tied to a single expression" (202). Julia Reinhard Lupton's "Paul Shakespeare: Exegetical Exercises" is similarly concerned with interrogating categorical habits of thinking, enacting its own prescription that "we reread both Paul and Shakespeare outside the familiar polarities of faith/works, flesh/spirit, and free/slave that have regulated both pro- and anti-Pauline lines of thought for two millennia" (232). With her characteristic depth, Lupton first maps the limitations of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and typological readings of Paul that each in their way result in "needlessly setting on edge relations between Catholics and Protestants as well as between Christians and Jews" (217). She then turns to Agamben and Badiou for what she describes as "existential rather than confessional" modes of thinking with and through Paul (227). Considering Paul "in a framework other than sectarian" enables us to see how "Shakespeare calls us to the deeper claims of Pauline universalism" (227, 232). Finally, Anthony B. Dawson's coda, "Claudius at Prayer," advances our thinking about subjectivity in *Hamlet* by explicating the operations of shame in Claudius's prayer, Hamlet's voyeuristic observance of it, and our own embarrassment at the scene. "Shame was in integral part of prayerful performance," he writes, and "shame is linked inextricably to performativity in that it locates identity in the pose of the body and the expressions of the face" (247). This leads to his provocative conclusion that "the religious and the theatrical are brought together in and through the *experience* of shame" (247). For Dawson, religious phenomena are not merely represented on the stage but are in fact "native to the theatrical sphere" (247).

Any collection of this kind comprises contributions of varying quality. In a volume interested in the specific representational work that theatre does, a handful of essays that take up the admittedly thorny question of audience response are not sufficiently attentive to how the interpretive modes required by theatre may be different from religious hermeneutics, by definition exceptional. Monta's essay, however, stands as a model exploration of the sophisticated, multiple, and even contradictory epistemological modes by which audiences engaged the stage. The meticulous specificity of both her discussion of faith and her explication of *The Winter's Tale* demonstrates with what analytical precision this kind of argument must be made. Fortunately, Monta's contribution is among several here that advance the discussion of early modern drama and religion considerably. The editors are right in claiming that the volume does important work toward "re-theoriz[ing] what it means for the drama to engage with religious culture" (3).