Review Essay

Religion in Early Modern England: Two Recent Commentaries

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It seems 2005 was a banner year for exciting “revisionist” studies of Shakespeare’s England. Along with Stephen Greenblatt’s *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, James Shapiro’s *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, Clare Asquith’s *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*, and Peter Milward, S. J.’s, *Shakespeare the Papist*, there is Arthur F. Marotti’s compelling and immensely readable *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England*. While the first four deal with the troubled history surrounding Shakespeare and speculate about how the Bard was shaped by his culture, Marotti’s text departs from this focus. He specifically chooses *not* to examine the canonical literature of the time in order to focus instead on the literature of religious controversy, in particular how the printing press affected the Reformation in...
England. (Perhaps given the severe censorship imposed by Elizabeth’s government, how print “effected” the Reformation might be more accurate.)

Marotti examines how opposing factions (Catholic and Anti-Catholic) used the printed word in an attempt to influence their respective audiences and characterize the times. As his book shows, the fact that the law privileged the Protestant voice made the establishment of the long-running “Tudor Myth” more than predictable. In the wake of the sharp discussion provoked by Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars*, Edwin Jones’s *The English Nation: The Great Myth*, and Michael Wood’s BBC docudrama *In Search of Shakespeare*, Marotti’s objective, dispassionate approach only adds to the importance of his study.

Marotti pays homage to Greenblatt’s hand in unveiling the truth about Elizabethan history (see *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*), noting that the brutality of the times is now so obvious that it scarcely needs further comment; yet as we see in Tom Betteridge’s book (discussed later in this review), many still fail to acknowledge the facts. Marotti says in his “Preface,” “For too long historians ceded such tasks [regarding discussions of Catholic suffering] to confessionally apologetic Catholic scholars; and the master narrative of English literary history has had little space for Catholic writing” (3). In a book whose lead sentence in Chapter One begins with the powerful claim: “ENGLISH NATIONALISM RESTS ON A FOUNDATION OF ANTI-CATHOLICISM,” the reader knows this will be no ordinary study about Renaissance England and beyond. Furthermore, what I found most significant about Marotti’s work is his contention that religion and politics were inextricably linked, something many modern scholars still fail either to notice or privilege. In his “Afterword” Marotti writes that because:

…processes of secularization have continued to change British and American culture since at least the late seventeenth century, religious language has diminished in usefulness and importance as a discourse in which all psychological, social, and political conflicts could be expressed… As my study makes clear, religious history is an integral part of cultural history, especially for an era in which people interpreted the world through religious understanding and used religious language to define most areas of individual experience and social intercourse. Since large political and social issues manifested themselves in situations of religious conflict and crisis as well as in the sectarian religious discourses, what might initially seem to us odd textual remains