Review Essays

Exploring the Critical Turn to Religion in Early Modern Drama Studies

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The three books reviewed here present an interesting cross-section of contemporary literary criticism on the relation between religion and Early Modern Drama. In the case of two of these titles, despite the (at times) dense jargon of depersonalized New Historicism, a grand humanist agenda yet emerges from their authors’ treatment of history and culture as they impinge upon imaginative aesthetic art—here specifically, the art of the theater—and imaginative aesthetic art as it impinges upon history and culture. We are always at all times in our aesthetic works of the imagination telling the human story—our story, bound up in our history and beliefs, in the products of contemporary
culture to which we are tied in time. The marvel and gift lies in how the greatest of these works reach a universality that is beyond our cultural limitations, thereby revealing our human selves to ourselves. As the third, more “essentialist” critic reviewed here argues, our enjoyment of Shakespeare’s plays and their “magic” comes of an active “poetic faith” in our human capacity for intellectual, imaginative, and emotional engagement in the phenomenon of the drama, the aesthetic embodiment of human life. This is a pleasure as available and as meaningful to us today as it was for audiences attending the theater so many centuries ago.

The findings in Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson’s Religion and Drama in Early Modern England exemplify the rich interchange between culture and dramatic art. In this anthology of New Historicist writings, the individual authors are preoccupied in their essays with the intricate details of how Early Modern Theater responds to and influences culture in ways that go beyond any simple representation of or allusion to religious ideas or positions in terms of doctrine or practice. The tumultuous years of ongoing change as England laboriously, agonizingly, and often violently moved from Catholicism to Protestantism provided a rich seed-bed out of which drama could grow. The authors who write here explore the intricate relationship between religion and its representation in the theater by examining the “traces” of theatrical productions. They not only address the material conditions of performance, such as “stage effects,” the movement of actors’ bodies onstage, and the “interplay between actor and audience,” but also broaden this materiality to include “the variety of signifiers” available to the Early Modern Theater through its rich inheritance from Medieval Catholic drama, as well as the complex positions people took on religion outside the theater (4, 5). The editors state that as a result, the essays they include in their volume “collectively ... 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). Dramatic art, thus, is shown to have enormous significance, aesthetically and culturally. If the reader can make it through the specialized “discourse” of the new historicists—is “indifferentism” a clearer, more precise, or more beautiful word than “indifference”?—he or she will be rewarded by insights into the religious conflicts and controversies of the time and their complicated representation in the developing medium of Early Modern Theater. Two examples from the twelve essays in this anthology represent the volume as a whole.

In “Popular Worship and Visual Paradigms in Love’s Labor’s Lost,” Erika T. Lin takes up the “overlap between religious and theatrical modes of perception,”