Review Essay

Almanack, Testament, Stage: Representations of the Sacred in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America

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If we deal with the subject of religion in the courses we teach on nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature or history, the topics we likely cover are, in Victorian Britain, Catholic Emancipation, the Oxford Movement, and the Darwinian threat to belief; and, in antebellum America, the Second Great Awakening, the impact of radical Protestantism and Evangelicalism on both reform movements and women's roles, and Transcendentalism and communitarianism. Richard Foulkes, Phyllis Cole, and Sue Zemka, however, explore less familiar territory, domains generally outside religious institutions. They thereby provide new understandings of spirit and word, and reveal unusual venues for their transmission. Cole and Zemka are generally drawn to religious radicals, visionaries, and eccentrics such as John Ward (a one-time follower of Joanna Southcott who saw himself as the Messiah and thought all Scriptures fulfilled in him, even more perfectly than in Christ, because he had experienced the full cycle of guilt
and redemption). Zemka considers him a more exemplary figure than Coleridge for the nineteenth century. Foulkes, to be sure, does focus on the established Church of England. But he links it to the theater, which the pious long considered the gateway to perdition. In his sometimes topsy-turvy world, a bishop strides the stage, preaching to actors, and an actor impersonates in turn a devil and a bishop (the saintly Becket).

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Foulkes’s argument in *Church and Stage in Victorian England* is that the Anglican church moved from opposition to accommodation (and even appropriation) of the theater over the course of the nineteenth century. He is interested in the often surprising ways that the ideas of the few affected the many, and (like John Stuart Mill) he singles out Bentham and Coleridge as the two poles of British thought. Bentham recognized the value of amusements (though he thought the game of push-pin had more social utility than plays), and the Benthamite position on free trade was used to end the monopoly of the patent theaters, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, in 1843. Coleridge took the opposite stance, insisting that the establishment (or “clerisy”) should have an active role in shaping culture. He was also an influential critic of Shakespeare, helping to create a bard for the Victorian age (who was duly celebrated at the Stratford Tercentenary), and advocating the psychological analysis of characters – something that, as Foulkes shows, had its apogee in the actor Henry Irving’s performances in the 1870s-90s. The key figure in the book, though, is neither Bentham nor Coleridge but the poet’s Broad Church follower, F. D. Maurice. While somewhat dubious about the theater, Maurice nonetheless promoted it in his roles as editor, religious writer, and educator (especially the latter, since he taught Shakespeare at King’s College, London, and made English literature central to the curriculum of Queen’s College and the Working Men’s College, both of which he helped found).

Other important forces in the transformation of attitudes include the “theatricality” of the clergy and the increasing respectability of the acting profession. Indeed, interested as he is in Shakespeare and the stage during the period, Foulkes focuses on the peculiar appeal of the theater to Victorian youths destined for the church, as well as the marked performance abilities of many who accepted a call. John Henry Newman, for example, was a “leading man” in Oxford, his understated and reverent delivery thrilling his congregations. Other clerics, for whom the pulpit was not enough, began to schedule public readings of dramatic literature, an