Review Essay

SORTING OUT CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT ELEMENTS IN SHAKESPEARE

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These four books address in different ways an important topic in current Shakespeare studies: how to sort out the Protestant and Catholic elements in his work, so as to determine Shakespeare’s response to the Reformation.

Jeffrey Knapp’s Shakespeare’s Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England addresses a longstanding controversy in Shakespeare studies: whether the Elizabethan theater itself represents a continuity with the Catholic past, or a Protestant discontinuity. Is late medieval religious drama re-expressed in the images and spectacle of Elizabethan theater, or has it been radically transformed into a self-conscious secular symbolism? The controversy often echoes the theological controversy over the eucharist, whether it is the real presence, or only symbolic, or something in between. In the past, this kind of discussion has been lamed by a simple binarism of Catholic sacramentalism (or idolatry)
and Protestant symbolism. Knapp’s book is more complex and more adequate to the situation.

Knapp comes after critics like Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt who have argued that Elizabethan theater filled the vacuum created by the destruction of the older Catholic rituals; plays provided substitute rituals (Montrose) or hollowed them out into theatrical versions (Greenblatt). These new historicists improved on earlier critics, who argued that Tudor drama had freed itself from homiletic purposes to become a purely secular dramatic spectacle (119). Knapp’s purpose is to show that theater was able to play the role of the older ritual drama but in a new Protestant form, with the theatrical profession itself being “a kind of ministry” and Renaissance plays being “received as contributions to the cause of true religion” (9). In Henry V, for example, “the Chorus’s Harry-like insistence on ‘imperfections’ that the audience must ‘piece out’ with their ‘thoughts’ recalls standard Protestant explications of the Lord’s Supper” (132).

Theater aligned itself “with one reformist Christian tradition in particular. This tradition was Erasmian, and its chief tenet was inclusiveness” (14). Puritan anti-theatricalists argued that the stage indulged the reprobate and promoted vice, but the pro-theatricalists countered that it was able to make an implicit religious appeal. “The enforced silence of the stage on doctrinal matters encouraged theater people to associate this accommodative teaching, as Erasmus had, with a doctrinal minimalism that further opened the church’s doors to the unlearned, while the exposure of theater people to puritan assault led them to bemoan, with Erasmus, the evils of sectarianism” (14-15). Thus, the theater represented an Erasmian ecumenicalism that contrasted with “the sectarians who were tearing the country apart” (16). It created new community and represented a company of “good fellows,” portraying a “misceline” (a coinage Knapp likes to use; see 28, 44) world. “The inclusivist goal may best be described as Erasmian, first, because Erasmus championed it, and second, because the label properly resists sectarian categorization” (28). Theater embodies the Pauline ideal of being all things to all men.

In the Enchiridion, Erasmus had argued that the essential doctrines of Christianity are contained in a few articles. Erasmianism presumably characterized Protestantism, as distinct from Puritanism. As Edwin Sandys put it, England “was the only Nation that took the right way of justifial Reformation,” insofar as it was motivated by “no humor of affecting contrariety, but a charitable endeavor rather of conformity with the Church of Rome, in whatsoever they thought not gainsaying to the express law of God” (quoted 42). According to the centrist Protestants,