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Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary

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Book Reviews Comptes rendus

Roy Battenhouse, ed. *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. Pp. xiv, 520.

Before receiving *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* for review, the last writing I had seen by Roy Battenhouse was "Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises" in *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* (3, 3, 1993-1994). Apparently written in response to an editor's request, the essay recounts the origins and reprises the main arguments of Battenhouse's half-century of scholarship on the tragedies of Marlowe and Shakespeare; with some elaboration to accommodate the inclusion of history and comedy, it would have made a fine introduction to this, his final book. While it probably would not have convinced readers who reject or belittle efforts to present Shakespeare's meaning as based on orthodox Christian concepts, it could well have engendered respect for the learning and logical thought processes that lay behind Battenhouse's conclusions. As much cannot be said for this book's "Introduction: An Overview of Christian Interpretation." In fact, it puts the worst foot forward.

Battenhouse's "Introduction: An Overview of Christian Interpretation" attempts a frontal assault on scholarly skepticism that Shakespeare's personal beliefs are recoverable from the textual evidence available and, more broadly, that his beliefs and didactic intentions, even if recoverable, are relevant to the effect of his works on readers. The effort, however, is handicapped by Battenhouse's assumptions 1) that he has convincingly pinpointed the significant watersheds in the flow of critical fashion on this subject; and 2) that the biblical echoes he hears are objectively present in the plays and also carry similar thematic resonances to all careful readers (those he characterizes as "good soil," readers who receive Shakespeare's plays as the responsive listeners to Jesus' parables received the seed of truth and bore fruit (pp. xii, 14). The unfortunate result is initial disappointment in a volume whose contents (selections from his own work and that of many others — work spanning 50 years) cumulatively support his thesis that a "Christian dimension" has indeed been discovered in an

impressive number of Shakespeare's plays. A more consistently convincing book would have resulted from dropping this introductory "overview" entirely.

Battenhouse's introductory survey of the evolving trends in criticism and interpretation on the subject of Shakespeare's religion and biblical and moral content too facetiously attributes the appearance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies of Shakespeare's use of the Bible to the English translation (1846) of Hermann Ulrici's *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*. The latter, Battenhouse says, by championing Shakespeare as a Christian moralist, "replaced the wild genius presumed by eighteenth-century critics [and established an] altered context," encouraging English writers to look for Christian, specifically biblical, principles in the Bard (p. 2). Writers mentioned include Thomas Eaton (1857), Charles Wordsworth (1864), James Brown (using the pseudonym J. B. Selkirk, 1872), and the American William Burgess (1903); but while such writers concentrated in a systematic way on biblical phrases and images and their Christian implications in the plays, since they drew upon the work of generations of editorial annotators, they were hardly blazing new trails. Again, Battenhouse clearly implies that his 1946 essay in *P.M.L.A.* presenting the action of *Measure for Measure* as an analogue to the Christian doctrine of Atonement inspired the analysis and criticism based on "biblical typology as an understructure of Shakespeare's art" (p. 9) of such scholars as Barbara Lewalski, J. A. Bryant, and R. G. Hunter, but the family resemblance is faint.

Furthermore, when Battenhouse portrays his 1969 argument in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (that "a baptized Aristotelianism" governs Shakespeare's tragic art) as having provided a "leaven of insight" that has since enlarged into whole loaves of the work of Arthur C. Kirsch and Frances Pearce, one may be forgiven for seeing more coincidence in the parallels than direct lineage. One may even suspect that the illustration, "St. Joseph Making a Mousetrap," facing the opening page of "An Overview of Christian Interpretation" hints that the critical world has beat a path to Battenhouse's door because he built, or discovered, a better framework for catching Shakespeare's meaning! (Actually, the allusion is to Battenhouse's use of Peter Lombard's [following Augustine's] "mousetrap" metaphor for the Atonement as a means to interpret Hamlet's play-within-the-play [p. 403], and "Shakespearean Tragedy" [p. 240]).

Most serious pause is given even the sympathetic reader, however, when Battenhouse cites examples of biblical premises which undergird and shape Shakespeare's dramatic art. Starting with Paul's typological reading of Israel's exodus through the Red Sea as baptism (I Corinthians 10:2) and abstracting its theme as the truth that "every tempest-moment in human experience can either drown or baptize, either wreck or educate" (p. 11), Battenhouse proceeds to apply the Christian doctrine of baptism, understood typologically, to the interpretation of *King Lear*, *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other plays. Spouting hurricanes drown Lear in madness but point forward, even beyond the play's action, to his purgation and resurrection, "raised out of that grave by a Cordelia who foreshadows Christ's role"

(p. 11); Richard's cry for a horse recalls the victory song of Moses and Miriam on the eastern shore of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:21) and indicates that Richard is damned by God like the Egyptians (my inference, since the connections are unclear); Hermia's words, "True lovers have ever been crossed," evoke the Red Sea crossing, and by the end of the play, the lovers, their eyes freed by a corrective ointment, "have had a crossover experience, a kind of sacramental transformation" (p. 13). And so on. The pity is that not only in the works of others here anthologized — e.g. Roland Frye, Barbara Lewalski, Tom Driver — but in Battenhouse's own works biblical echoes, Christian ideas, and dramatic speech and action are shown so much more convincingly to be thematically connected than in this introduction.

Yet the reader is reminded in reading this same introduction that Roy Battenhouse never flagged in his lifelong determination to guide students and others into an awareness of how Shakespeare's plays can help "human beings learn through crisis-experience the reality of a divinely reasonable love and its higher moral law," thus serving at the close of our century "both a timely need and a timeless value" (p. 14), and the reminder spurs admiration for the man's tenacity. More persuasively than most who have sought to connect the moral and religious convictions of writers with the effects of their literary art, Battenhouse taught in articles, lectures, and books throughout a 50-year plus career the message of this final book: "a true appreciation of Shakespeare requires an allowing of habits of art and thought which Elizabethans inherited from Christian tradition" (p. 17). *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* constitutes an appropriate summary sounding of a recurring *motif* of his work; it is especially revealing of Battenhouse that he chose largely to let others present what he saw as his message with their own emphases and in their own words and that he did so in a collection of stellar commentary which, while it spans over 50 years, contains much from the last decade of his long life.

The commentary proper begins with such "key assessments" (each followed by a bibliography) as Robert Speaight's "Christianity in Shakespeare," J. A. Bryant's "Typology in Shakespeare," M. D. H. Parker's "Nature and Grace in the Romances," and Battenhouse's own "Shakespeare's Augustinian Artistry." Following these assessments, the main body of commentary is organized generically (like the First Folio) into discussions of comedies, histories, and tragedies. The number of selections discussing each play included range from one (*Richard II* and *Henry V*) to seven (*Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*); four commentaries per play appear frequently (*Measure for Measure*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *Winter's Tale*, *Henry VI*, *Richard III*) and five less so (*The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*); there are six discussions of one play (*All's Well*). The twelve remaining plays are omitted. Although commentaries related to Christian dimensions are in print on several of the omitted plays, they apparently did not lend themselves easily to Battenhouse's central purpose (and neither do a few commentaries on plays that are included — e.g., Roland Frye on *Macbeth*, Emrys Jones on *Henry VI*, John Cox on *All's Well* — though they clearly demonstrate that the patristic and medieval backgrounds contribute to dramatic effect). Battenhouse

declares that he chose from among writers who exhibit “a kind of good-soil responsiveness to the seminal potential of Shakespeare’s artwork” (p. xii) those who could best appeal “within today’s culture [to] ‘good soil’ [readers] capable of bringing forth a harvest” (p. 14). By implication, the collection is constructed around such a theme as “human experience can either drown or baptize” (p. 11), but not all scholars who see biblical or theological dimensions in Shakespeare are concerned that their insights serve a distinctively Christian sacramental purpose.

But having said that, I must hasten to add that given such an organizing principle, the quantity and quality of writings brought together are amazing, even to one, like me, who is sympathetic to the undertaking. There are 92 pieces of commentary on 26 of the plays, and, according to my count, 50 writers provide one entry each, 16 provide two, and two writers (including Battenhouse) supply more than two entries. Although serious readers will wish to use the book’s bibliographical helps to place these edited commentaries in their proper contexts before drawing conclusions, great care appears to have been taken to avoid distorting a writer’s meaning in the digesting process. Had there been world enough and time, the book could have been strengthened not only by omitting most of the introduction but also by the addition of a representative selection of commentary by some of those critics who question the validity of a Christian interpretation of Shakespeare. For instance, objections by David Bevington, Roland Frye, and T. F. Wharton are briefly mentioned only to be dismissed (except for Frye, who is included, though, I have suggested, somewhat uncomfortably). Perhaps it should be acknowledged that there are those who recognize the moral and religious dimension in Shakespeare as including Christian mystery (of course, given his audience) without necessarily excluding other religious or even non-religious visions of transcendent value. Still, with the calmly judicious choices of scholars like Barbara Lewalski, Joseph Wittreich, Eleanor Prosser, Diane McColley, and Robert G. Hunter raised in the affirmative, the reader need not beware; there is God’s plenty here to whet the appetite for broader reading.

Supplementary bibliographies include over 250 items, making *Shakespeare’s Christian Dimension* a useful research manual for readers who consult its index. One is not likely to read the book straight through, but it is a fascinating collection to browse in. Handsomely produced with attractive illustrations preceding each of its five major parts, the volume is a worthy memorial to an exemplary life.

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