

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



R. Chris Hassel, Jr, *Shakespeare's Religious Language: A Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). xxiv+455 pp. ISBN 978 1 4725 7726 9.

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Shakespeare's Religious Language marks a signal contribution to the Arden Shakespeare Dictionary Series. As stated in the Series Editor's Preface, the Arden Shakespeare Dictionaries 'offer readers a self-contained body of information on the topic under discussion, its occurrence and significance in Shakespeare's works, and its contemporary meanings' (p. xi). Given the vastness, slipperiness and sheer complexity of Hassel's topic, the task of compiling this dictionary was no mean feat. With over 400 pages of entries and over 1,000 entry-words, this dictionary offers students of Shakespeare a rich resource on 'the Bard's plays and poems as well as a host of texts that shaped Elizabethan and Jacobean religious culture and, moreover, impacted Shakespeare's religious language. Included amongst these texts are Lancelot Andrewes's and John Donne's sermons, the *Book of Common Prayer*, Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, the writing of the Lancashire-born recusant Laurence Vaux and, of course, the Bible (or Bibles): William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament, the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible. One of the strengths of this dictionary, therefore, is its willingness to ground definitions and terms within the context of early modern English religious discourse, dialogue and debate.

There has been much discussion of late concerning Shakespeare's confessional identity. Hassel refrains from entering this arena: 'various readers have tried to argue Shakespeare's faith as well as his position on Reformation controversies [...] most readers [...] still reserve judgement on just what and how Shakespeare believed' (p. xxi). Instead, Hassel puts his critical energy into the ideas disseminated and the language spoken by

both Catholic and Protestant theologians in the early modern period. The majority of the entries (excepting brief ones) have a tripartite structure: demarcated by (A), (B) and (C). Section (A) supplies basic information on the entry-word, including definitions; (B) provides a guided tour of select citations from Shakespeare's works wherein the entry-word appears; (C) points the reader to critical sources, early modern primary sources and/or contemporary secondary sources. So, for example, the 'merit' entry opens with a theological account of merit (opposing it to grace), then turns to a host of instances in Shakespeare ('religious tensions', for example, 'between Jew and Christian rather than Catholic and Protestant' in *The Merchant of Venice* are explored), and concludes with references to Aquinas, Andrewes and Donne as well as relevant secondary sources. As the merit entry attests, the foregrounding of ideas and language embedded in play-texts and primary sources, as opposed to the views of a maybe Protestant, maybe Catholic playwright, provides a much more fruitful and nuanced account of Shakespeare's religious language.

In the introduction, Hassel notes that 'England just before and after Shakespeare's birth in 1564 experienced a jarring series of re-formations' (p. xix). The dynamic concept of 're-formations'— as opposed to a historically inaccurate notion of a shift from Catholicism to Protestantism — captures nicely the twists and turns that England's church and godly subjects witnessed under the Tudors. Moreover, the concept of 're-formations' allows for an approach to and understanding of Elizabethan and Jacobean religious language alert to residual, dominant and emergent denotations and connotations within the context of 'the actual separation of the one Western Church into many' (p. 273). Interested to learn what Hassel has to say about the Reformation, I turned to the 'Reform, Reformed, Reformation' entry. The (A) section covers writers (Luther, Calvin) and theological issues (salvation by faith or grace as opposed to merit; access to scripture; questions concerning intermediaries, etc.). The lengthy (C) section includes primary (Andrewes, Donne, Rowley, Foxe) and secondary sources (Hamilton, Healy, McMullan, Shuger). The (B) section, however, appears to have suffered an unkind cut at the production stage, for the truncated middle section, consisting of just two sentences, includes a sentence that makes no sense syntactically: 'Shakespeare never refers directly to this important religious movement by that indifferently'" (HAM 3.2.36-8)'. Material has mistakenly been omitted here, unfortunately.

There certainly is more to this dictionary than theological terms. 'Thirty-three individual saints and saints' days are', Hassel notes, 'mentioned in Shakespeare' (p. xxi): thus, we

find entries for Saint Albons, All-Hallowmass, All Souls', Saint Crispin, Saint Davy and a lengthy and informative entry for Saint George. Oddly, the Saint Davy entry refers initially to the patron saint of Wales as 'Welsh' but then speaks of a 'Welch victory' and terms Fluellen a 'Welchman'. Whilst the speech prefix for Fluellen in the 1623 Folio's 'four captains scene' is 'Welch', 'Welch' and 'Welchman' seem out of place. The same entry lists 'Jamy' as the character who in act 5, scene 1 of *Henry V* asks Fluellen why he wears a leek; of course, the English captain Gower asks this question, not the Scottish captain Jamy (whose presence in the Folio version of the play is restricted to the 'four captains scene'). 'More churches than taverns are graced by their names' (p. xxi) in Shakespeare, we are told, and a host of entries on cathedrals and cathedral cities in the plays are present, including Canterbury, Exeter, Shrewsbury and Winchester. Some entries may come as a surprise: Egypt, fool's head, memory, pelican, revenge — but these entries are pleasant surprises for the inquisitive reader. The 'barbarian' entry is not out of place, for, as Hassel notes, the term 'refers to the non-Christian alien' (p. 29), and the example he provides is Iago's 'erring barbarian'. Othello, the Moor of Venice may be an alien in Venice (an alien general of the Venetian army!), but he is, although was not born, Christian. In many ways Shylock is more of a 'barbarian' than Othello, for he better fits the 'non-Christian alien' bill; however, Shylock is never referred to as a barbarian, although, as the 'Jew' entry attests, he is called a slew of other names. Hassel was wise to include entries on Infidels, Jew, Pagan, Saracens, Turk, etc., for a collective religious identity in the early modern period owed much to a burgeoning sense of national identity that was forged in opposition to other nations, cultures and religions.

To get a sense of just how this dictionary can serve the student of Shakespeare, consider the example of act 1, scene 5 of *Hamlet*, specifically the Ghost's account of his death:

Thus was I sleeping by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched,
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,
No reckoning made but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head. (1.5.74–9)

These lines mark a fine example of Shakespeare's religious language, for the Ghost gives voice to a peculiarly Catholic discourse of the last rites of the dying. But he does so in an obscure language; indeed, the line that would most trouble a contemporary reader is

‘Unhouseled, disappointed, unanel’d’: two of these words are unfamiliar and the one familiar one would, likely, be misread. Hassel notes that ‘disappointed’ means ‘spiritually unfurnished, unprepared’, and he glosses the Ghost’s sudden death as ‘spiritual catastrophe’ (p. 99): precisely because he was denied the Eucharist as well as extreme unction. For the student wishing to unpack the complexities of this scene — especially the grim consequences of the Ghost’s impoverished spiritual state at the time of his death — a number of entries could be consulted: for instance, account, disappointed, ghost, imperfections, prison-house, purgatory, purged, reckoning, sin, tormenting, unanel’d, unhous’d. Severally and together these entries paint a rich picture of the theological matrix underpinning the Ghost’s speech.

This handsome dictionary’s formatting facilitates easy navigation: headwords are given in alphabetical order and, for ease of detection, in upper-case bold. Cross-referenced words are given in lower-case bold (the ‘unction’ entry, for instance, refers the reader to ‘unanel’d’). Over thirty pages of primary and secondary sources are provided in the bibliography. A general index is supplemented by an Index of Shakespeare’s Works, which lists individual plays along with a list of entry-words discussed in relation to the play. With entries ranging from ‘abbess’ to ‘zeal’, this thorough and thoroughly engaging dictionary promises to enlighten anyone keen on exploring the topic of Shakespeare’s religious language.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016).