

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Ceri Sullivan, *Shakespeare and the Play Scripts of Private Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). pp.247+xiv. ISBN 978 0 1988 5731 0.

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Ceri Sullivan's *Shakespeare and the Play Scripts of Private Prayer* is an insightful exploration of the 'narrative and dramatic skill shown in early modern private prayers' (p. 2). In her examination of the 'explicitly *dramatic* approach to *private* prayer' (p. 16), Sullivan explores the guidance proffered by private prayer manuals throughout the early modern period. Through a comparison of Shakespeare's history plays and their source texts, Sullivan uncovers Shakespeare's prayerful adaptations. Delving deeper into Shakespeare's tetralogies, Sullivan explores the influence Early Modern prayer guides had on *Richard II*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, and *Henry VIII*. Structurally, the book is divided into four chapters, an introduction, and an afterword. Each chapter contains five sub-sections including an introductory segment that provides a clear summary of the ensuing argument, offering context and historiographical information.

The book begins by discussing the dramatic qualities of private prayer established in the prayer guides, advice texts and manuals published during the early modern period. Such texts encourage readers to think 'in terms of acting' by instructing pray-ers in how to approach God and 'keep the mind on the existence of an audience' (p. 3). Within such texts 'prayer is valued as a powerful agent of change as well as an expression of emotion' (p. 2). The techniques required to prepare and create successful prayer are clearly outlined in this section. Sullivan also uses this space to imbed her work within the context of current historiographical and literary research. In recent years there has been a number of published essay collections on religion, prayer and performance, particularly within the works of Shakespeare. With publications such as *Prayer and Performance in Early Modern English Literature*, edited by Joseph William Sterrett, and *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England*, edited by Jane Hwang Degenhardt

and Elizabeth Williamson, religion and Renaissance drama continue to remain a subject of critical interest.¹

The historiographical research of Judith Maltby, Timothy Rosendale and Lori Anne Ferrell assesses how The Book of Common Prayer engineered changes in ‘doctrine, discipline and devotion’ throughout England (p. 8). Similarly, Ramie Targoff and Daniel Swift discuss the influence of The Book of Common Prayer in shaping the devotional practices of early modern pray-ers. Sullivan illustrates that new technologies developed by literary critics and historians alike have furthered discussions surrounding private prayer, allowing writers such as Mary Patterson, Jessica Martin, Alec Ryrie and their collaborators to trace the ‘daily emotional experience of devotion’ and attempt to ‘discern what pray-ers did in fact believe and feel’ (p. 10). *Shakespeare and the Play Scripts of Private Prayer* expertly negotiates the current research on the historical significance of Protestant prayer and aims to ‘fill in the gaps’ by exploring the theatrical, creative and performative aspects of printed prayer guides (p. 19). Literary critics assessing the role of religion in Shakespeare tend ‘to focus on the tragedies and tragi-comedies’ with Joseph William Sterrett providing the most extensive exploration of private prayers. Sullivan suggests that he ‘turns away from the devotional and theological aspects, to read them in political terms as expressions of denominational tensions’ (p. 17). The assessment of historical and literary criticism establishes lines of enquiry that Sullivan endeavours to explore. Firstly, she acknowledges the scarcity of research that focuses specifically on religion in Shakespeare’s history plays. Secondly, ‘few critics deal in detail with the devotion, theology, and literary form taken by Protestant private prayer’ (p. 18).

After providing context and outlining the aims of her research, Sullivan’s second chapter explores the aspects of private prayer and the ‘practical training offered in praying independently’ (p. 21). In this chapter, she traces the process of private prayer as instructed by prayer manuals, namely, the possibilities of distraction; the creative process of prayer; creating the right environment and the consequences of getting it wrong. Although the advice texts insist that ‘everyone, even the most ignorant readers can and should learn to pray skilfully’, they cautioned readers on what can happen in practice (p. 32). They urged readers to pre-compose or script their prayers in advance, remember their audience while praying and review their performance both during and after prayer. Sullivan’s five sub-sections produce an argument that is clear and easy to

¹ Joseph William Sterrett, ed., *Prayer and Performance in Early Modern English Literature: Gesture, Word and Devotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson, eds, *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2016).

navigate; she offers helpful summaries throughout each chapter creating a thoughtful yet accessible argument.

The third chapter begins to apply the specific qualities of private prayer to Shakespeare's history plays. The chapter's introduction neatly summarises the key points of the chapter as it aims firstly to 'investigate the type of roles offered by the private prayer texts, and the way prayers were acted out as emotion scripts', and secondly to explore the 'what ifs' that 'structure' Henry VI's 'prayers' (p. 65). Each chapter follows a similar pattern in which Sullivan begins by selecting and discussing a common feature of early modern prayer manuals and concludes by examining how Shakespeare's history plays may reflect and reinterpret the guidance enclosed within such texts. Guide texts offered readers 'a range of roles to inhabit' (p. 67), thus cultivating a sense of duality and theatricality as individuals were encouraged to approach prayer from the perspective of another. Before delving into the prayers of Henry VI, Sullivan examines the source texts of *2 and 3 Henry VI* to locate the origins of prayer in Shakespeare's plays. She discusses Shakespeare's prayerful additions, arguing that they 'were made to appeal to an audience that was becoming more interested and knowledgeable about private prayer' (p. 89). The comparison of play and source texts draws attention to the importance of prayer in both the characterisation of Henry and the play's narrative. A long history of critical interpretation has defined Henry's character as pious, childlike, and naïve. For Sullivan, however, Henry is an expert in the new style of prayer. He constructs his own appeals to God, drawing out alternative possibilities in the process. The final section of the chapter discusses the 'what if' moments of Henry's prayers. Through the action of prayer, Henry invites other points of perspective and encourages the audience to explore alternative outcomes.

Chapter four begins by assessing the effectiveness of prayer in advice texts. Readers are 'counselled to pray as though God responds to their words but at the same time keep in mind that this is a fiction' (p. 108). As in the previous chapter, Sullivan examines the sources of *Richard III* and *Henry V* and discovers that, as in *2 and 3 Henry VI*, the 'prayers are largely not found in the source histories and are new to the folio or increased substantially from those in the quartos' (p. 120). In *Richard III*, Sullivan explores how the curses of characters, such as Margaret, Ann and Elizabeth, become prayers — not as a request for assistance, but a demand for retribution. The curses, turned prayers, prohibit dialogue from forming, as characters command God to act. As the play progresses, the curses become prophecies, particularly those of Margaret, who sets 'specific, measurable, achievable, and realistic targets' (p. 129). In *Richard III*, Sullivan argues that prayers move God and force him into action. Whilst characters command God to act in *Richard III* in *Henry V*, the king's prayers explicitly submit to

God's will. In declining ownership of both his actions and successes, Henry contradicts the advice provided by prayer manuals. The Elizabethan audience would be aware, as is Henry by the end of the prayer, that prayer does not merit a favourable response from God.

The fifth chapter discusses the 'attraction of praying with royalty' and the varying approaches of monarchic private prayer (p. 150). Although it is doubtful that Elizabeth penned her own prayers, 'the important point' is that the queen's subjects were convinced that she 'either wrote them herself or would accept them for her personal use' (p. 151). Sullivan suggests that Elizabeth's published prayers encouraged her subjects to pray with her and the use of 'the first-person pronoun' allowed readers to speak as though they were the queen, 'aligning themselves more closely with her objectives' (p. 152). Sullivan contrasts the printed prayers of Elizabeth with James's decision to decline the public access to his private devotions. Instead, the king published various treatises on the importance of prayer, instructed readers on how to pray, and published God's response to the king's private orisons. Whilst his texts counselled readers on the importance of prayer, they denied his subjects access to his private Godly meditations. The final two sections of the chapter explore the political dynamics of private prayer in *Henry VIII* and *Richard II*. In *Henry VIII*, Sullivan suggests that for all except the king, prayer is a form of court currency. The king's own prayers, however, are hidden and remain private. For Sullivan, Henry VIII's character is reminiscent of James and his decision to withhold his prayers from the public. By the end of the play divine discourse has been eliminated from 'the realm of court politics' (p. 179). Henry cements himself as a prophet, carrying out the divine will without fear of disproof. Sullivan states that, although *Richard II* is 'often interpreted in the context of the Elizabethan succession crisis', the prayers can 'instead be read as looking forward to how James combined the roles of prophet, poet and ruler' (p. 149). Prior to his abdication, the king displays a 'Jacobean' relationship with God, but by the play's end he has an 'Elizabethan understanding of sovereignty as an alienable office' (p. 179).

The Afterword reverses the argument of the previous chapters to assess whether audience members believed staged prayer to be 'real'. It begins by discussing the performance of reformed prayer and the part it played in the domestic performance culture. Sullivan comments on dramatic conventions of direct address and its potential to 'encourage sincere responses to staged prayer' (p. 193). She draws on points from each chapter to demonstrate how spectators may mirror responses to the performed prayers and may, in turn, 'draw upon the material they have watched' (p. 193). Sullivan transitions from early modern productions to discuss the implications of prayer in modern performances of Shakespeare's plays. Acts of devotion for the 'non-believing

spectators' may not evoke a prayerful response, but they may tempt audience members into disregarding or ignoring their significance (p. 196). Even the 'believing audience may feel irritated at being forced into an 'Amen' if their prayers cannot actually change the play' (p. 196). Performed prayers, particularly the creative and dramatic prayers encouraged by advice texts, can produce a 'hot dynamic' between actors and audience (p. 198).

On the whole, Sullivan successfully establishes her argument within the context of the current critical research. Stepping away from the emotive aspects of reformed prayer, her analysis of the advice texts offers an original perspective of private prayer. Although writers such as Joseph Sterrett, Alison Findlay and Brian Cummings have discussed the performative nature of Protestant prayer, paying particular attention to bodily actions as an indication of piety, Sullivan's insistence that her research 'fills in the gaps' is, on the whole, an accurate statement. *Shakespeare and the Play Scripts of Private Prayer* is a fascinating and thought-provoking addition to the research exploring Shakespeare and religion.

Amid the insightful assessments of Shakespeare's history plays, there are several less persuasive arguments made within the text. The concluding analysis of Richard III's soliloquy requires, in my opinion, further exploration. Whilst Sullivan offers an alternative interpretation of this speech, perceiving it as 'a sincere prayer answered' as Richard 'ventriloquises God's questions and answers' (p. 136), the section predominantly focuses on the curses-turned-prophecies of other characters and their expectations of God to fulfil their demands. The analysis of Richard's soliloquy as the introduction of God's voice speaking through Richard seems somewhat out of place within the context of the chapter. Sullivan's discussion of prayer within *Richard II* is another instance where the king's private speech is introduced at the end of the section as a closing argument and does not fully align with the argument developed within the chapter.

Overall, Sullivan presents a clear and engaging study of how Shakespeare engaged with and incorporated aspects of private prayer manuals into his history plays. *Shakespeare and the Play Scripts of Private Prayer* is a compelling addition to the research on religion, prayer and Shakespeare. The book is easy to follow, with a clearly structured argument that would attract undergraduate students and experienced scholars alike.