

Calvin University

Calvin Digital Commons

---

University Faculty Publications

University Faculty Scholarship

---

12-1-2019

## Introduction to “religions in shakespeare’s writings

David V. Urban

*Calvin University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin\\_facultypubs](https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin_facultypubs)

---

### Recommended Citation

Urban, David V., "Introduction to “religions in shakespeare’s writings" (2019). *University Faculty Publications*. 180.

[https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin\\_facultypubs/180](https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/calvin_facultypubs/180)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Faculty Scholarship at Calvin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Calvin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dbm9@calvin.edu](mailto:dbm9@calvin.edu).

Editorial

## Introduction to “Religions in Shakespeare’s Writings”

David V. Urban

Department of English, Calvin University, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA; [dvu2@calvin.edu](mailto:dvu2@calvin.edu)

Received: 28 November 2019; Accepted: 29 November 2019; Published: 2 December 2019



This special issue of *Religions* on “Religions in Shakespeare’s Writings” invited contributors to explore the gamut of religious issues and characterizations throughout Shakespeare’s writings. The issue’s call for papers welcomed a variety of perspectives while emphasizing that the resultant volume would not try to present a Shakespeare whose particular religious beliefs can definitely be known or are displayed in a unified manner throughout his canon. Because this volume benefits from John Cox’s expert essay on “Shakespeare and Religion” (Cox 2018), and because each essay has its own abstract, I will not here attempt a survey of the field of Shakespeare and religion, nor will I summarize the essays that follow. Rather, this brief Introduction will identify and discuss important themes that emerge within this special issue, recognizing that these themes, which developed organically through the individual authors’ work and not by explicit editorial instruction, display themselves in various essays herein but by no means in all of them.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this collection is its elucidation of not simply the various manifestations of religions that appear in Shakespeare’s writings, but, indeed, the tensions between these religions within Shakespeare’s creative depictions. For example, the tensions between ancient pagan religion and Christianity are explored in a number of essays. Grace Tiffany identifies the turn from devotion to the Roman goddess Diana to a commitment to self-sacrificial marriage in *The Winter’s Tale* as an embrace of Protestant Christianity. Tiffany’s emphasis on tensions between religions is also evident in her argument that, in Shakespeare, devotion to Diana supports a Protestant marriage ideal rather than a Catholic ideal of celibacy. She shows that, in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles*, Diana herself is transformed from patroness of virgins to Christian matron, offering scripture-based advice on how to be a companionate wife (Tiffany 2018). Benedict Whalen observes the conflict in *The Rape of Lucrece* between, on one hand, Tarquin’s embrace of “Love and Fortune” as his “gods” in a way that justifies his sexual assault, and, on the other hand, the poem’s allusion to 1 Corinthians 3.16–17, in which St. Paul warns against the violation of “the temple of God,” which includes the bodies and souls of all Christians (Whalen 2019). Also discussing *The Rape of Lucrece*, Feisal Mohamed notes the tension between the depiction of female virginity in Roman civic religion and the heavenly reward for chaste obedience—in spite of any forced violation—offered through Christianity (Mohamed 2019). David Urban explores the tension between the pagan spiritual control that Prospero exercises throughout *The Tempest* and the Christian Providence that transcends Prospero’s problematic efforts, a Providence whose workings ultimately precipitate Prospero’s renunciation of such dubious control (Urban 2019). And Emily Stelzer details at length the history of *King Lear* criticism, observing throughout the significance of Shakespeare’s often befuddling blending of pagan and Christian elements throughout the play (Stelzer 2019).

Various other kinds of tensions between religions in Shakespeare are also explored in this special issue. For example, contrary to the position offered by Tiffany (2018) regarding *The Winter’s Tale*, John Curran asserts that Shakespeare, as he does in *Hamlet*, displays in *Macbeth* sympathy with “Catholic ways of seeing” (Curran 2018, p. 1), something evident in the spiritual complexities demonstrated in those dramas, offering a rubric superior to that offered by Protestantism. In an innovative reading of *Hamlet*, Benjamin Lockerd argues that the dualism articulated in some of Hamlet’s speeches

reflects beliefs in keeping with the Albigenian heresy of the late medieval period, a heresy in tension with more orthodox Christian pronouncements elsewhere in the play (Lockerd 2019). In what is perhaps the collection's most daring essay, Bryan Adams Hampton, amid discussion of the colorful history of scholars and devotees of the Bard seeking to determine Shakespeare's beliefs, observes the tension between the "religion of Shakespeare" and the "religion of Shakespeare" (Hampton 2019, p. 12). Debra Johanyak discusses the far-reaching implications of the perhaps ubiquitous tension between Christianity and Islam throughout *Othello* (Johanyak 2019). And Cyndia Susan Clegg, in an essay exploring matters of the afterlife in no fewer than eleven plays, examines the tensions that exist amid Shakespeare's varied presentations of Islam, Roman religion, Christianity, and Judaism (Clegg 2019).

But tension is not the only interface between the religions represented in this collection. In the case of (Lupton 2019), it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that Julia Reinhard Lupton's innovative application of Black natural law to *The Tempest* serves to synthesize elements of various religious perspectives. Similarly, in (Smith 2018b), Matthew Smith argues "that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare uses law to synthesize certain aspects of religious experience from divergent corners" (Smith 2018b, p. 1)—including Catholic, Calvinist, Puritan, and agnostic perspectives.

Another significant theme within this collection concerns the political ramifications of religious matters. Although such ramifications are evident on some level in each contribution, they can be seen most explicitly in three essays. In (Besteman 2019), Bethany Besteman argues that *Measure for Measure* "presents a Reformed theo-political sensibility, not in order to criticize Calvinism, but to reveal limitations in dominant political theories" (Besteman 2019, p. 1). In (Mohamed 2019), Feisal Mohamed explores manifestations of Roman religion and Christianity in *The Rape of Lucrece* to demonstrate how "the resources of both" religions offer Lucrece "an aura of purity accentuating the profanity of the political" (Mohamed 2019, p. 3). Read from a perspective that pays proper attention to such manifestations of religion, Shakespeare's poem "reflects late Elizabethan skepticism on sacred kingship and fears of self-seeking factions awaiting to seize power after the death of the heirless queen" (Mohamed 2019, p. 3). And in (Skwire 2018), Sarah Skwire addresses her newly discovered allusion in *Richard III* to the stolen blessing of Genesis 27 as a vehicle by which to elucidate matters concerning not only Richard's relationship with Margaret, but also the succession crisis of the late Elizabethan era.

Skwire's discussion of Genesis 27's relevance to *Richard III* and Shakespeare's historical milieu is indicative of this collection's attention to the biblical texts' enduring relevance to Shakespeare's writings, a phenomenon amply attested to in scholarly works such as (Shaheen 1999; Marx 2000; Hamlin 2013; Fulton and Poole 2018). Two other essays in our collection—(Urban 2019; Stelzer 2019)—are largely based on heretofore unexplored biblical allusions within Shakespeare's plays, with Urban using Psalm 23 as a rubric by which to understand Alonso's and Prospero's respective journeys of redemptive progress in *The Tempest*, and with Stelzer using Luke 17:21 to elucidate the meaning of Lear's dying words. Other essays also make significant use of the Bible. Tiffany (2018) discusses the importance in *The Winter's Tale* of verses concerning marriage and celibacy, and holiness and grace. Smith (2018b) emphasizes the relevance in *Measure for Measure* of various parables of Jesus, also observing how the Mosaic law, as presented in Leviticus 24 and understood in Romans 4, pertains to the play's complex presentation of justice and mercy. Similarly, but from its own distinct perspective, Besteman (2019) emphasizes how, in the same play, matters of law, punishment, and mercy are illuminated by Romans 6:7–8, 7:19, 7:23, and 9:18. Lockerd (2019) notes how Hamlet's allusions to matters of sexual fruitfulness, the Godlike nature of humanity, the resurrection of the body, and God's sovereignty over life and death, as expressed, respectively, in Genesis 1:28, Psalm 8:4–6, 1 Corinthians 15:52, and Matthew 10:29, help illustrate the tension Lockerd sees between Hamlet's Albigenian and more orthodox Christian rhetoric. Whalen (2019), in addition to its aforementioned use of 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, also emphasizes, amid discussion of sin's harm to the community in *Hamlet* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, St. Paul's presentation in Romans 12 of the body of Christ and Jesus's prayer in John 17:21–23 for unity among believers. Clegg (2019) utilizes Moses's discussion in Numbers 30:1–2 of sacred vows to explain Shylock's "oath in heaven" in *The Merchant of Venice*'s court scene. Mohamed (2019) calls attention to *The Rape of Lucrece*'s

reference to the imagery of Christ's pierced side's shed blood, an image that, paradoxically, shows the possibility of a ravished woman's redemption through Christ even as it reminds readers of Lucrece's spiritual "remove from Christ's sinlessness" (Mohamed 2019, p. 8). And Johanyak (2019) observes how the "honor killing" principle of Sharia law finds parallels in Leviticus 20, a matter which further complicates the tension between Islam and Christianity that manifests itself so horrifically in Othello's killing of Desdemona.

A final theme is evident in a number of this collection's essays: that Shakespeare's various writings demonstrate a Christian grounding. This notion is particularly significant in light of various publications in the past decade that take a more skeptical view of Shakespeare and Christianity, a view that resists the idea that a positive understanding of Christianity is somehow foundational to Shakespeare's works (see for example, Shell 2010; Jackson and Marotti 2011; Sterrett 2012; McCoy 2013; Kastan 2014; Loewenstein and Witmore 2015). Within our present collection, (Tiffany 2018; Curran 2018; Lockerd 2019; Besteman 2019; Whalen 2019; Urban 2019; Stelzer 2019) each explicitly affirm or strongly suggest that such Christian grounding is evident in the works they analyze. Such essays are broadly in keeping with the earlier analyses offered in (Hunt 2004; Batson 2006; Cox 2007; Beauregard 2008), each of which asserts Shakespeare's plays' grounding in Protestant, Catholic, or "mere" Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In the present decade, such an understanding of Shakespeare's writings has been forcefully affirmed in (Maillet 2016), while other scholars have demonstrated Shakespeare's deep engagement of Christian practices and theology in discussions of forgiveness (Beckwith 2011), freedom (Cummings 2013), embodiment (Zysk 2017), belief (McEachern 2018), and theatricality (Smith 2018a). The Christian "grounding" of Shakespeare's plays, as discussed in these works, is not only theological, but occurs on physical, aesthetic, and phenomenological levels as well.

In closing, I should note that, because the essays in this special issue were published sequentially, authors whose essays were published later often made use of those published earlier, a practice that allows various essays to converse with each other briefly but fruitfully. The consequent interaction between these essays is an attractive feature of what is, we hope, a valuable contribution to the complex and multifaceted field of Shakespeare and religion.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** Thanks to Calvin University, whose Calvin Research Fellowship course release greatly benefitted my writing of this Introduction. Thanks also to the various contributors to this special issue, many of whom read an earlier version of this piece and offered concrete suggestions for its improvement.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Batson, Beatrice, ed. 2006. *Shakespeare and Christianity: The Protestant and Catholic Poetics of "Julius Caesar," "Macbeth," and "Hamlet"*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Beauregard, David N. 2008. *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark: Delaware University Press.
- Beckwith, Sarah. 2011. *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Besteman, Bethany C. 2019. Bondage of the Will: The Limitations of Political Theology in *Measure for Measure*. *Religions* 10: 28. [CrossRef]
- Clegg, Cyndia Susan. 2019. The Undiscovered Countries: Shakespeare and the Afterlife. *Religions* 10: 174. [CrossRef]
- Cox, John D. 2006. Was Shakespeare a Christian, and If So, What Kind of Christian Was He? *Christianity and Literature* 55: 539–66. [CrossRef]
- Cox, John D. 2007. *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Cox, John. 2018. Shakespeare and Religion. *Religions* 9: 343. [CrossRef]

<sup>1</sup> A very helpful analysis of this controversy as it manifested itself in the first decade of the present century and earlier is offered by Cox (2006).

- Cummings, Brian. 2013. *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity and Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Curran, John E., Jr. 2018. That Suggestion: Catholic Casuistry, Complexity, and Macbeth. *Religions* 9: 315. [CrossRef]
- Fulton, Thomas, and Kristen Poole, eds. 2018. *The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage: Cultures of Interpretation in Reformation England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hamlin, Hannibal. 2013. *The Bible in Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hampton, Bryan Adams. 2019. "I Knew Him, Horatio": Shakespeare's Beliefs, Early Textual Editing, and Nineteenth-Century Phrenology. *Religions* 10: 236. [CrossRef]
- Hunt, Maurice. 2004. *Shakespeare's Religious Allusiveness: Its Play and Tolerance*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Jackson, Ken, and Arthur Marotti, eds. 2011. *Shakespeare and Religion*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Johanyak, Debra. 2019. Shifting Religious Identities and Sharia in *Othello*. *Religions* 10: 587. [CrossRef]
- Kastan, David Scott. 2014. *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lockerd, Benjamin. 2019. Hamlet the Heretic: The Prince's Albigenian Rhetoric. *Religions* 10: 19. [CrossRef]
- Loewenstein, David, and Michael Witmore, eds. 2015. *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lupton, Julia Reinhard. 2019. *The Tempest and Black Natural Law*. *Religions* 10: 91. [CrossRef]
- Maillet, Greg. 2016. *Learning to See the Theological Vision of Shakespeare's "King Lear"*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Marx, Steven. 2000. *Shakespeare and the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCoy, Richard. 2013. *Faith in Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McEachern, Claire. 2018. *Believing in Shakespeare: Studies in Longing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mohamed, Feisal. 2019. Raison d'état, Religion, and the Body in *The Rape of Lucrece*. *Religions* 10: 426. [CrossRef]
- Shaheen, Naseeb. 1999. *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark: University of Delaware.
- Shell, Alison. 2010. *Shakespeare and Religion*. London: Methuen Drama.
- Skwire, Sarah. 2018. Curse, Interrupted: *Richard III*, Jacob and Esau, and the Elizabethan Succession Crisis. *Religions* 9: 331. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Matthew J. 2018a. *Performance and Reading in Early Modern England: Stage, Cathedral, Wagon, Street*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Smith, Matthew J. 2018b. "At War 'Twixt Will and Will Not": On Shakespeare's Idea of Religious Experience in *Measure for Measure*. *Religions* 9: 419. [CrossRef]
- Stelzer, Emily E. 2019. Lear, Luke 17, and Looking for the Kingdom Within. *Religions* 10: 456. [CrossRef]
- Sterrett, Joseph. 2012. *The Unheard Prayer: Religious Toleration in Shakespeare's Drama*. Leiden: Brill.
- Tiffany, Grace. 2018. Paganism and Reform in Shakespeare's Plays. *Religions* 9: 214. [CrossRef]
- Urban, David V. 2019. Prospero, the Divine Shepherd, and Providence: Psalm 23 as a Rubric for Alonso's Redemptive Progress, and the Providential Workings of Prospero's Spiritual Restoration in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *Religions* 10: 448. [CrossRef]
- Whalen, Benedict J. 2019. "For One's Offence Why Should so Many Fall"? Hecuba and the Problems of Conscience in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*. *Religions* 10: 38. [CrossRef]
- Zysk, Jay. 2017. *Shadow and Substance: Eucharistic Controversy and English Drama Across the Reformation Divide*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

