EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

David Anonby, *Shakespeare on Salvation: Crossing the Reformation Divide* (Pickwick Publications, 2024). xiii+292pp. ISBN 979-8-3852-0299-7; Hardcover 979-8-3852-0300-0; Ebook 979-8-3852-0301-7

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On the first page of *Shakespeare on Salvation: Crossing the Reformation Divide*, David Anonby makes an immediate if unconscious appeal to me personally. He cites Anthony Dawson, my late doctoral supervisor, on Claudius's efforts to repent in *Hamlet*. On nearly his last page, Anonby returns to Dawson's argument after examining Claudius's prayer in minute detail and comparing the two quarto texts over the course of an entire chapter. He concludes that *Hamlet* 'in its first and second quartos taken together, evinces flashes of Calvinism, proto-Arminianism, and Catholicism' (p. 256). Such ecumenism characterizes all the readings offered by *Shakespeare on Salvation*. As the subtitle indicates, Anonby argues that Shakespeare straddles 'the Reformation Divide,' drawing on a range of sometimes mortally opposed positions offered by his historical context. In his conclusion, Anonby makes explicit his own refusal 'to fall into the trap of identifying Shakespeare the man with any particular confessional position' (p. 254). This leaves Anonby's book refreshingly free of polemic, but also somewhat unclear in its own position.

Instead of mounting a tendentious biographical argument to the effect that Shakespeare was himself Calvinist, proto-Arminian or Catholic, Anonby shows how 'Shakespeare uses theology to think,' as Gary Kuchar explains in his foreword (p. xii). Anonby thereby provides a new critical lens through which to read Shakespeare, or rather a whole camera bag full of interchangeable lenses, each offering a different view. The five chapters of the book other than the Introduction and Conclusion offer readings of individual plays — *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet* (two chapters), *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear* — that are at once historically relevant and theologically engaged. Each deals with a different

soteriological problem. In Anonby's reading, for instance, *The Merchant of Venice* critiques justification by faith, while *Measure for Measure* shows the failure of Calvin's doctrine of vicarious atonement when applied to the ethical relationship between people.

I don't entirely agree with these readings, but there's always room for critical disagreement. Even if one or other of Anonby's readings could actually be wrong, however, he would nevertheless be right to engage with existential issues while grounding his criticism in both historical context and sophisticated conceptual frameworks. Anonby notes that *Hamlet*, 'Theologically speaking, [. . .] is not light reading' (p. 256), and neither is *Shakespeare on Salvation*. His bibliographies of primary and secondary works stretch across a combined nineteen pages of fine print. Anonby courageously grapples with theological heavy-weights such as Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas, Dietrich Bonnhoefer or Alister McGrath, but he's equally confident taking on literary critics including Stephen Greenblatt, Paul Cefalu, Richard Strier and Stanley Wells, not to mention both theological polemicists and playwrights from Shakespeare's own time. No doubt everyone will find something omitted — I would like to see what Anonby makes of Karl Barth, Stanley Cavell and James Shapiro — but Anonby shows an admirable command of theology, Shakespeare criticism and the history of ideas. Indeed, his scholarship is not only impressive but also useful. I found myself entering a number of Anonby's sources on *Measure for Measure* into my Zotero account. In *Shakespeare on Salvation*, Anonby has provided a guide not only to the soteriological controversies of Shakespeare's age, but also to theological criticism of Shakespeare.

Out of his triple engagement with the early modern stage, the history of ideas, and contemporary criticism, Anonby constructs his own form of reading. He concludes by sketching how it could be applied to another play, *The Winter's Tale*, with its pseudo-resurrection after Leontes' period of (implicitly Catholic) contrition (pp. 258-60). He also sketches quick readings of Christopher Marlowe's atheism, Ben Jonson's catholicism, and Thomas Middleton's double predestinarianism (pp. 260-4). I look forward to all these ideas being expanded, and also to seeing Anonby's approach applied to more plays by Shakespeare, or even to the long poems. I can't help but wonder, for instance, what he would make of the pagan Lucrece's efforts to redeem her shame by suicide, or Venus's final isolation after the death and metamorphosis of Adonis.

Though I found it refreshing to read a critic who avoids taking sides, I have to admit that I also found it mildly frustrating. Anonby seems, at times, too broad-minded to settle on a

clear thesis. He includes the words ‘Solus Christus’ as an epigraph after his acknowledgements, and admits to an ‘engagement with Reformation controversy over Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone,’ but adds that ‘I began on one side of the Reformation divide, moved over to the other side, and then moved back to my original position’ (p. 255). Given his own broad-mindedness, it is not surprising that Anonby finds in Shakespeare a congenially inconsistent soul.

Rather than presenting a range of theological positions in the plays, I think Anonby could go further, exploring not only how Shakespeare uses theology to think through issues in his historical context, but also how we in turn can use Shakespeare’s engagement with theology to think, in our own context. Anonby’s references to contemporary events — the al-Qaeda attacks of 9/11, for instance (p. 33) — seem like asides. He cites a conference paper by Holly Faith Nelson which argues that ‘The religious polarization in the early modern period is also a cautionary tale against the current political polarization in North America’ (p. 254), but this parallel between past and present is left unexplored. Anonby critiques the thesis — which he traces back to A. C. Bradley (p. 10) — that Shakespeare’s drama is thoroughly secular, but does not ask what a renewed interest in religious questions in the play can offer to our own secular or perhaps post-secular context. How do the struggles of Shakespeare’s characters intersect with our and our students’ own struggles for meaning in our and their lives? Do the characters’ struggles to find forgiveness remain models for our own relationships, if not with God then with each other? Shakespeare engaged with the soteriological debates of his time, not out of a shallow desire to appear politically relevant, but because they provide the means to think perennial and indeed existential questions. Just as Shakespeare used theology as a way to think, we can use Shakespeare’s theologically sophisticated plays to ask the sorts of questions which continue to torment us now, in our very different context.