

Christopher Baker. *Religion in the Age of Shakespeare*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007. xiv + 244 pp. \$75.00. Review by Byron Nelson, West Virginia University. Review by BYRON NELSON, WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY.

Although few would dispute the pervasiveness of Christian ideas in Shakespeare's works, there is far less agreement about the exact nature of Shakespeare's Christian faith. Elizabeth's moderate Protestantism was reasonably well established by the time of Shakespeare's birth, and he was perhaps lucky not to have experienced firsthand the religious upheavals of Henry VIII and the radical shifts under Edward and Mary. Whether he contentedly conformed to the Church of England, labored to restore the Catholic faith or sailed indifferently by the religious controversies of his day may never be firmly established, but Shakespeare responded powerfully to the ethical lessons of the Gospels and understood the aesthetic appeal of Christianity.

In his book, Christopher Baker surveys a wide range of religious topics which extend well beyond Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Although it is commendably ambitious, the book is too diffuse. Its major parts are incompatible: beginning in the first part with a history of Christianity, it surveys the Reformation and (much more briefly) the Catholic Reformation in the second. The third chapter, on religion in Shakespeare's works, offers a survey of the religious ideas in each of the plays and poems. The fourth chapter (with a nod to William James) demonstrates "some varieties of religious experience in modern stage and film productions of four tragedies" (96). There is a fifth chapter on scholarship and criticism and a generous set of primary documents, from Wyclif and early English Bible translations to Donne's "Good Friday 1613."

Baker moves towards a thesis but increasingly blurs his point. At first he states that "Shakespeare's religious world was forged on the anvil of Reformation" (54), but this seems to imply that he leaned toward the evangelical side. He then suggests that "What we do find in his plays is a religious awareness, largely Christian but not uncritically so, and without any exclusive allegiance to a specific denomination or sect" (58). Shortly after, he offers a third possibility: "It is perhaps

more accurate to say that he had 'no single theology' but instead a range of theologies through which to portray a variety of human response to the divine" (60), but this seems to reject the possibility that Shakespeare had no "theologies" at all; one could simply say that Shakespeare allowed his characters to express a remarkable range of religious ideas.

One has to wonder, also, who the intended audience for this book was. The opening sentence states that "This book offers the student and the general reader an overview" of the religious contexts of the plays. But both the student and the general reader may wonder at the inclusion of so much data on the Christian church in the early period, late antiquity and the Middle Ages. How helpful are the careful distinctions among the Gnostics, Arians and Marcionites, if Shakespeare doesn't dwell on the fine points of orthodoxy or heresy in his plays? The student is actually most likely to skip to the middle chapter, which offers commentary on the religious ideas in each of the plays; but even here the student would have to proceed with caution. Baker states drily that Hamlet is "perhaps not Shakespeare's most emotionally powerful tragedy" (80), but such a judgment will puzzle a good number of that play's enthusiasts. In his discussion of the romances. Baker underplays the dramatic power of Pericles' vision when, having recognized the long-lost Marina, the emotionally conflicted Pericles claims to hear the music of the spheres and then enjoys a vision of Diana, a sequence which Baker reverses. Similarly, his plot summary for the final act of *Winter's Tale* blandly flattens the careful ambiguity of one of Shakespeare's most powerful moments: "In the final act, all gather to view Paulina's statue of the dead Hermione, who suddenly revives" (86). Shakespeare may simply have kept Hermione hidden in Paulina's closet for fourteen years, but surely he wants the audience to consider out the possibility that Hermione has been raised from the dead, like Lazarus or Jairus' daughter.

The chapter on the film versions of four of the tragedies seems the most problematic. There is discussion of Orson Welles' problematic *Macbeth*; the *King Lear*s of Kozintsev and Peter Brook; and Baz Luhrmann's popular recent *Romeo + Juliet* (1995). The fourth tragedy, Hamlet, is represented not by any of the film versions but by John Caird's stage version for the National Theatre in London (2000). The

Soviet-era Kozintsev and Welles in Hollywood are not notably sensitive to Christian elements, and Luhrmann's treatment of Catholic imagery is not exactly subtle. The final chapter engages such critics who are alert to religious ideas as G. Wilson Knight and Roland Frye, and Baker properly responds to the issues raised by Stephen J. Greenblatt in *Hamlet and Purgatory*. But elsewhere in the book Baker misstates some crucial facts (Savonarola was burnt, not hanged; Erasmus was associated with Cambridge, not Oxford), and he cites approvingly the work of A. G. Dickens, whose partisan treatment of Protestantism has now largely been derided as naive and simplistic. Worse, he fails to engage at length the most recent scholarship on the persistence of Catholic faith in Shakespeare's age, as in the work of Eamon Duffy and Richard Wilson. The collection of primary documents may well be helpful to students, but a number of the choices are readily available elsewhere. Surely the space devoted to reprinting the Bower of Bliss episode from Book II of *The Faerie Queene* could have been given to key texts that are harder to find in literary anthologies, such as Hugh Latimer's *Sermon of the Plough*. Also, a caveat about the cover illustration: the well-known painting of the interior of the Temple of Lyon is fine, but surely an English illustration would have been more to the point. This book is an interesting grab-bag, but one has to wonder how useful the student or the general reader will actually find it.

Rebecca Ard Boone. *War, Domination, and the Monarchy of France: Claude de Seyssel and the Language of Politics in the Renaissance*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007, xvi + 196 pp. \$99.00. Review by PAUL COHEN, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO.

The traditional view of Claude de Seyssel (c. 1450-1520) sees him as one among many Renaissance men of letters who pledged their learning and pen to the praise and service of the French crown. His translations into French of classical texts are held up as evidence of his humanist credentials, his *Histoire singulière du roy Louis XII* as an example of the learned literature of royal praise inspired by the increasingly powerful and assertive French monarchy, and his political treatise *La Grant Monarchie de France* as an important early contribution