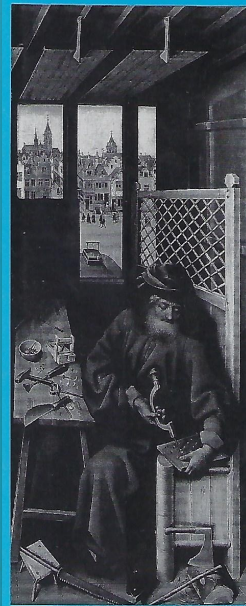


# Shakespeare's

## Christian Dimension

AN  
ANTHOLOGY  
OF  
COMMENTARY

EDITED BY



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### PREFACE

Commentary on Christian dimensions in Shakespeare has been accumulating over the years. Beginning in the nineteenth century with a noticing of his biblical allusions and of passages reminiscent of Bible themes, it has deepened to include attention to his echoings of liturgical language and theological concepts. Increasingly, the relation of his plays to medieval mystery and morality drama has been probed and illustrated, and also his indebtedness to the world-views of Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, Dante, and Erasmus. Observations on these matters, along with interpretations of Shakespeare's works in the light of Christian lore, have been substantive enough to warrant now a scholarly overview for public attention. A bringing together of pertinent excerpts from the commentary of the last fifty years can provide, especially if the selections are read in conjunction with each other, an impressive challenge to reappraise the Christian roots of Shakespeare's art.

The present anthology reprints ninety-two pieces of commentary on twenty-six of the plays. In addition, it provides a supplementary bibliography of more than two hundred fifty further items. These features taken together make it a useful research manual, especially if readers consult its Index. Yet it is not exhaustive in its coverage; it is simply a sifting out of what seems to me chiefly valuable. My guiding purpose has been to provide both for scholars and for the general reader a reliable sampling of the influence of Shakespeare's Christian heritage on the shaping of his plays.

The collection can be a timely resource for today's college teachers, I believe, since it focuses attention on a perspective quite different from various of the modern ones nowadays widely used—for instance, the "cultural materialism" which proceeds to question whether Shakespeare's art is "for all time" as Ben Jonson supposed. Our students, I think, deserve the option of an alternative to such an approach. Let the present volume serve this classroom need, so that informed debate may be possible.

My title "Christian Dimension" is intended to indicate that more than local color is involved when Shakespeare puts biblical allusions or echoes into the speech of persons in his plays. Such references point us often to paradigms by which the action can be evaluated. For even when a speaker misapplies Scripture, his distortion exposes a blind spot in his character. A biblical norm, so to speak, puts him under judgment. Drama has, underneath its value of entertainment, a logic of design that gives it a core of parable—so Sidney insisted in his Elizabethan defense of poetry. Thus the reader is challenged to be a seeker of wisdom such as Ecclesiasticus 39 describes: "He will be conversant with dark parables" and "travel through

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strange countries." Jesus used parables to challenge in auditors their capacity to distinguish between good and evil. May not Shakespeare's stories have a similar purpose, evident in the shape they give to the paths of human felicity or folly?

A well known New Testament parable tells of a sower whose seed produced a proper harvest only when it met with good soil. Shakespeare undoubtedly knew this parable, and it is likely that he understood its four kinds of soil as representing the diverse kinds of listener response his own plays would receive. In any case the response of auditors over the centuries, both to the Bible and to Shakespeare, has varied in accord with each reader's capacities of heart and mind. Often the capacity has been shallow. But a kind of good-soil responsiveness to the seminal potential of Shakespeare's artwork seems to me evident in the commentaries the present anthology contains. At least their attention to biblical themes and patterns, it can be said, offers us eyes for seeing and ears for hearing dimensions of meaning which usually go unrecognized by other schools of criticism. Patrick Murray could remark in his *The Shakespearean Scene* (1969) that "the volume of distinctly Christian ideas, implied or expressed in Shakespeare's work as a whole, has not yet received anything like its due share of attention." Toward remedying this situation I have prepared the present book.

I am indebted and grateful to many publishers and authors for their permissions to reprint the excerpts here assembled. All the essays have been abridged, and many of their footnotes (sometimes all) have been eliminated. I have had to prune severely in order to present essential insights from a large array of commentators. Their fuller texts should be looked into by painstaking readers. I have not tried to standardize the line references to Shakespeare, which here are always those of each essayist to his chosen text.

Finally, let me record that I have received invaluable help from my wife Marian and from my daughter Anna and her husband John Kolts, to each of whom I feel a deep gratitude.

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