

## A Comment on Roy Battenhouse's "Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises"

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Professor Battenhouse's summary of the premises on which he has based his criticism of Shakespeare and his account of how he came to articulate those premises raise questions about the theory and practice of the kind of criticism which may be broadly called "Christian." Harold Bloom's attack on "outside" approaches (including Marxist, New Historicist, etc.) in his recent book, *The Western Canon*, further highlights the problems involved.

From a theoretical point of view it might be questioned whether this approach should be taken at all since Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a theologian. When Battenhouse describes the tragic dilemma of *Romeo and Juliet* as the "inevitable result of sin plucking on sin in a series of defective actions, by which human beings diminish their natural goodness" (237), he will have on his side few besides Lily B. Campbell, to whom Shakespeare's tragic heroes were slaves of passion and therefore deserved to be tragically (meaning morally) punished. To those of us who agree with Sidney "that moving is of a higher degree than teaching," *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the foremost examples of this highest possible impact of poetry, "For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (5.3.309-20). Professor Battenhouse comments that the Friar "overlooks his duty to cultivate grace to prevent rude will from becoming predominant" (234), but the Friar's motives are good; they are meant to "To turn your households' rancor to pure love" (2.3.92), and, indeed, the Friar's motive is realized for there is "a glooming peace" at the play's end. If forced to discuss *Romeo and Juliet*

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\*Reference: Roy Battenhouse, "Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 226-42.

from a perspective of "Christian" moralism, I would say the play is theologically muddled, for good comes from the suspect loves and deaths of the young lovers. But, to counter what seems to me a one-sided argument with a simplification, I really think we are supposed to sympathize with the overwhelmingly beautiful love-poetry—and with the two young lovers—and to lament with Juliet that "heaven should practice stratagem / Upon so soft a subject as myself" (3.5.209-10). The "star-crossed" lovers motif in the play acts against seeing them as morally responsible sinners, and there is no focus on the "sin" of suicide, but rather references to "true Romeo" (5.3.259) and "heaven" finding means to kill the Capulet-Montague joys with love (5.3.293). At any rate, imposing a paradigm of Christian morality on this play raises more problems than it solves. As those Marlowe critics implicitly criticized at the beginning of Battenhouse's article, I would continue to "rely on Romantic premises" because *Romeo and Juliet* seems irreducibly "romantic." As for Marlowe, "Romantic" or "Christian" premises seem to war with each other in such a play as *Dr. Faustus*. I have never had a class that did not react to the beauty of the famous speech on Helen even though the destructive aspects of Helen's influence are clearly in the speech.

Even if one were to grant a Christian approach as being relevant, one might want to argue with a Christian approach applied in so doctrinaire a manner. Professor Battenhouse applies Augustine, Dante, and Aquinas (as opposed to Calvin) to Shakespeare's plays, and says Shakespeare is more like the former. Calvin preaches a "God who punishes," who enacts "double predestination" and he scants "God's activity in redeeming mankind" (227, 228) whereas Shakespeare is interested in a more complex idea of individuals and in "Christianity's distinctive answer to the problem of human sin"—a "ransoming of sinners" (232). I would submit that Lancelot Andrewes (who did *not* agree with Calvinistic double predestination according to Battenhouse) and Richard Hooker, for instance, would be the appropriate theologians to read for an understanding of Christianity in Shakespeare. The ransoming of sinners by grace is an idea not neglected by such Elizabethan Protestants as Spenser ("In heavenly mercies hast thou not a part" exclaims Una, reproaching the Red Cross Knight for his despair—*Faerie Queene* 1.9.53).

It is known that Shakespeare used Hooker for his great description of the "Great Chain of Being" in *Troilus and Cressida* (1.2.75-137), why not for the tracing of the beginning of evil to the neglecting of eternal good for some lesser good? (Whitaker 208). Hooker, and Andrewes, and Spenser, for that matter, would be more believable sources for Shakespeare than Augustine, Dante, and Aquinas. That said, there seems to be in some of Shakespeare's plays the working out of a Christian idea of sin and of redemption, but one should wait for the text to indicate whether such an idea is in operation. Battenhouse's account of *Measure for Measure* seems to fit the play.

The stress on repentance and forgiveness in *Lear* also seems to indicate a Christian sensibility (when Cordelia says, "O dear father / It is thy business that I go about"—4.4.23-24, the Christian allusion is inescapable). On the other hand, *Lear* is set in pre-Christian Britain; its end seems focused on "deep anguish" and whether that anguish is "analogous to the anguish of Christ's disciples when their saviour was crucified" (238) seems doubtful.

According to Professor Battenhouse, "all of Shakespeare's tragedies tell of the downfall of the hero through his inordinate love of some self-pleasing good" (238). I would be hard put to justify that—or any other generalization—for all of Shakespeare's tragedies. To make such a statement about *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, would be to impose some "better good" than Cleopatra for the hero—like *Romeo and Juliet*, this play seems based on "Romantic" rather than "Christian" premises. But Battenhouse does not discuss this premise with respect to *Antony*—he discusses *Hamlet*. One might be willing to go along with the idea that Hamlet has idealized his father, but it is hard to see Claudius as an exemplar of "human kindness," or driven "against his wishes" to plotting the murder of Hamlet (239). These comments read as if the critic has to vilify Hamlet and whitewash the other characters. The characters in *Hamlet* do exist in a Christian world; if truth be told, they are all sinful—as Hamlet himself would, so to speak, be the first to admit (indeed, he does admit it frequently). But to say "he lacks Christian hope" (240) seems to go against the text. After all, we have a Prince who explicitly rejects suicide because God has "fixed his canon 'gainst self slaughter" (1.2.131-32). So much for Hamlet at the play's beginning. And

against the wildness of Hamlet's words and actions in the body of the play, by the end he is saying "There's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11) and "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.219-20). Horatio's words on the dead Hamlet are explicitly Christian: "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (5.2.359-60). The iconography here is traditional for the soul dying in grace. If that were not enough, Hamlet is given a hero's burial. But Hamlet is a notoriously complex character. How do we place Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths or what Battenhouse calls the "shameful shouting match" with Laertes? The "Christian premises" that Professor Battenhouse applies so strictly do not seem to help that much when forced on to such intransigent texts as *Hamlet* or even the apparently simpler *Romeo and Juliet*.

Christianity was the religion in force when Shakespeare was writing. The official Christianity of Elizabethan England was Anglican—not the Christianity of Calvin, nor that of Augustine, Aquinas and Dante (although Hooker did make use of Augustine, as well as of Calvin). Not surprisingly, many of Shakespeare's plays use Christian allusions, and even seem predominantly Christian in theme. But it is a difficult and unrewarding approach to try to fit all the plays into a particular mold. Some, like *Macbeth*, fit fairly well; others, like *Romeo*, *Hamlet*, and *Lear* fit less well. Others, like *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Julius Caesar*, should not be bent into a Christian pattern. Shakespeare as an artist was attempting to dramatize exceedingly various stories in the most effective way possible. Different stories lent themselves to different themes, and not all the themes were Christian, nor were all the stories amenable to Christian presentation. To judge by Professor Battenhouse's article, the results of applying Christian premises to all of them are less than compelling. No single pattern can fit works which are in themselves so "rich and strange."

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