Connotations
Vol. 5.1 (1995/96)

Towards an Understanding of Christianity in Shakespeare: In Memory of Roy Battenhouse*

PETER MILWARD

All scholars working in the field of Shakespearean criticism, whether Christian or otherwise, have suffered a grievous loss in the departure of Roy Battenhouse from our midst—though he remains with us as well through his memory as through his many writings, not least his *opus magnum* on *Shakespearean Tragedy*.[1] It is, therefore, appropriate that two of the "comments" in the latest issue of *Connotations* (4.3) should arise out of his own distinguished contribution on the above-mentioned subject in a previous issue (3.3). It is, moreover, out of the first of those "comments," that by Cecile Williamson Cary, that this contribution of mine takes its rise—and in particular the fascinating question she raises as to "the appropriate theologians to read for an understanding of Shakespeare" (247).

Whereas Roy Battenhouse opts for "Augustine, Dante, and Aquinas (as opposed to Calvin)" (Cary 247) and Roland Frye for Luther, Calvin and Hooker in his misguided *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine*,[2] Cary herself proposes "Hooker, and Andrewes, and Spenser, for that matter" as being "more believable sources" (248). Her somewhat feeble explanation for this proposal is that "Christianity was the religion in force when Shakespeare was writing," and that "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)" (249).

---

*Reference: Roy Battenhouse, "Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 226-42; Cecile Williamson Cary, "A Comment on Roy Battenhouse's 'Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises,'" *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 246-50.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debbattenhouse00303.htm>
Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate by the Connotations Society is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Well, if we are looking for "the official Christianity of Elizabethan England," Hooker comes a little late in the day to be accepted as its authorized exponent, considering that his books of *Laws* were only published in the mid-1590s and they only came to prevail as the theology of Anglicanism in the following century. Virgil Whitaker, in his *Shakespeare's Use of Learning*,[3] makes out a fair case for some influence from Hooker's *Laws*[4] on Shakespeare's later plays; but it is not an altogether convincing one. In any case, the spheres in which the dramatist and the theologian moved, were far apart from each other. As for the theological content of the *Laws*, Hooker expresses his indebtedness not only to Augustine but also to Calvin (whose theology he respected more than his theory and practice of Church government); and he even admits to the further influence of the mediaeval scholastics, whom he actually names, Aquinas and Scotus—for which he was severely taken to task by the Puritan authors of *A Christian Letter* (1599).[5] Thus we may say that, if only through Hooker, Shakespeare may well have had access to Aquinas.

Still, if Hooker comes a little late, surely we have the Elizabethan *Homilies*,[6] which go back to the early years of the reign, and to which Shakespeare must have been inured from his boyhood, even to the limits of his endurance—to judge from Rosalind's comments on Orlando's "tedious homily of love" (*As You Like It* 3.2.164-65). And then there are the voluminous writings of John Jewel against the Papist champion Thomas Harding,[7] and of John Whitgift (who went on to commission Hooker's *Laws*) against the Puritan leader Thomas Cartwright.[8] As for Anglican "orthodoxy" during all this period, in so far as there was such a thing, apart from the mixed doctrine of the *Homilies*, it was clearly Calvinist at least at the two universities of Oxford (where the Puritan leader at the later Hampton Court Conference, John Reynolds,[9] held sway) and Cambridge (which was even more under the sway of the Puritan William Whitaker).[10] This "orthodoxy" was above all formulated, by Whitaker and Whitgift, in the notorious *Lambeth Articles* of 1595;[11] but these remained a dead letter thanks to the Queen's unwillingness to impose such high theological doctrines on the consciences of her subjects.

This all, however, rests on the questionable assumption that Shakespeare himself accepted "the official Christianity of Elizabethan England"—just as the whole argument of Roland Frye in his above-mentioned book is vitiated by his (never proved) assumption that Shakespeare was both familiar with the teaching of Luther, Calvin and Hooker on the liberation of drama and literature from the dominion of theology and amenable to it. True, Luther does have some impact on the mind of the young Hamlet, in so far as he comes from the newly founded (1502) university of Wittenberg[12] and is evidently haunted by a conviction of sin; but Calvin's impact hardly extends further than that of escaping what Benedick calls "a predestinate scratched face" (*Much Ado* 1.1.141-42), not to mention Cassio's drunken comments on souls that "must be saved" and others that "must not be saved" (*Othello* 2.3.107-08).

On the whole, Luther in Wittenberg and Calvin in Geneva, both within the early half of the sixteenth century, seem all too remote from Shakespeare in London towards the end of that century; and as a practising dramatist, Shakespeare must have been more concerned—as his plays everywhere indicate—with more contemporary, if not ephemeral, matters. So if we will but focus our attention a little more sharply on the London of the early 1590s, when we first hear of Shakespeare's presence there, we immediately come upon two very popular exponents of Christian theology whose writings leave us in little doubt of their impact on the mind and even the sympathies of the dramatist—though they are all too widely disregarded by Shakespeare scholars. On the one hand, there are the *Sermons* of the preacher hailed by Thomas Nash as the "silver-tongued Smith," who died in 1591 at the height of his career, and whose sermons were published in one volume two years later.[13] In them one may find innumerable parallels of imagery, phraseology and thought with the subsequent plays of Shakespeare. On the other hand, there is the even more popular *Book of Resolution,* emanating from the pen of the Jesuit Robert Persons and hailed with no less enthusiasm by the same Thomas Nash.[14] It may have been the work of a Jesuit, who would hardly have been acceptable to the Anglican authorities; but his Papist "poison" had been judiciously removed in a pirated version of his book by Edmund Bunny and in this

form it had provided highly "vendable copy" to its printers from 1584 onwards. In it, too, one may find no fewer parallels of imagery, phraseology and thought than in the *Sermons* of Henry Smith.

In the case of Shakespeare's plays, however, one cannot rest merely with such contemporary influences. Or rather, one has to realise that for him and most of his audience the Bible and St Augustine were hardly less contemporary than Robert Persons or Henry Smith or Richard Hooker. For one thing, so much of what we may call "theology" in Shakespeare comes to him straight from the Bible, as well the Old as the New Testament. (Not a few scholars go astray in requiring overt Christian allusions before they will allow of any Christian "theology" in a play, forgetting that the Book of Job is none the less Christian for being in the Old Testament, and that *Hamlet*, for instance, is charged with allusion to that book.)[15] For another, the secondary influence of St Augustine is incalculable, extending as it did all through the Middle Ages, and received as it was on either side of "the Great Divide" between the Catholics and the Protestants, who both published whole books claiming him as their own.[16] So Roy Battenhouse was perfectly justified in insisting on an Augustinian approach to the "theology" in Shakespeare's plays. Insofar as Shakespeare even as a dramatist ventures upon theological territory, as in the soliloquy of Claudius in *Hamlet* (3.3.36-72), he can hardly help being Augustinian.[17]

Finally, there is one more theological "source" I would like to commend to the attention of Cecile Cary; and that is the no less popular (than any of the above-mentioned writings) *Imitation of Christ*. All I would ask of her at this stage, or of any other interested reader, is a simple glance at the *Short Title Catalogue* under the entry "Thomas A Kempis," and there she will discover so many editions and so many translations by both Catholic and Protestant translators continuing all through the period when Shakespeare was writing his plays in London.[18] To judge from what Whitaker (following the eighteenth-century Richard Farmer) calls "Shakespeare's use of learning,"[19] one may well imagine the dramatist haunting the many bookshops in the vicinity of Paul's Churchyard,[20] if only in quest for new material for his plays; and at every hand's turn he must have come upon copies of this Christian classic, of which we may find echoes as well in the opening

soliloquy of Friar Laurence (in *Romeo and Juliet* 2.3.1-30) as in the opening speech of the exiled Duke in Arden (in *As You Like It* 2.1.1-17).

Then, by way of postscript, I would like to add a word of warning: against the use of such loaded terms as "forcing" or "imposing" a Christian reading on Shakespeare's plays, as if such a meaning is no less an "outside" approach than that imposed by Marxists or New Historicists. Shakespeare, after all, knew nothing of Marxism or New Historicism, or Freudianism or Feminism, or any other such fashionable ideologies; but he had deeply imbibed Christianity from childhood onwards, whatever may have been his particular affiliation in his days as a dramatist. It may well be possible for modern scholars to impose their favourite ideologies on Shakespeare's plays, as on almost any other literary work, not excluding the Bible; but when it comes to a Christian meaning in those plays, it is more likely to be what a scholar finds in them—even with regard to such apparent minutiae as Inge Leimberg finds in her other comment on Roy Battenhouse, concerning the Scarus episode in *Antony and Cleopatra* (*Connotations* 4.3: 251-65).

Tokyo Junshin Women's College

NOTES

[1]*Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and its Christian Premises* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969); with my review article, "Theology in Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Studies* (Tokyo) 9 (1970-71). Cf. Battenhouse's recent anthology of *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).

[2]*Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963); with my review article, "Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine," *Shakespeare Studies* (Tokyo) 4 (1965-66).

[3]*Shakespeare's Use of Learning: An Inquiry into the Growth of his Mind and Art* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1953) especially ch. 9 on *Troilus and Cressida*: "Whether Shakespeare was indebted to the *Ecclesiastical Polity* for details is, however, unimportant," but "Shakespeare's first systematic statement of this whole complex of ideas so obviously comes straight from Hooker" (207).

[4]Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity** was first published in four books in 1593, with the fifth book following in 1597. The remaining three of the original eight books were not published till 1666. The relevant book for Shakespeare's plays is Book 1. Cf. my chapter on "Smith and Hooker" in *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973; republished Chicago: Loyola UP, 1985) 134-43.

[5]The anonymous *Christian Letter of Certain English Protestants* came out in direct response to Hooker in 1599: it was chiefly attributed to the Puritan leader, Thomas Cartwright. Cf. my *Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age* (London: Scolar P, 1977) 104-07.

[6]*Certain Sermons or Homilies* was published in two volumes: Vol. 1 in 1547 under the care of Archbishop Cranmer, with more of a Catholic tone; and Vol. 2 in 1563 under the care of Archbishop Parker, with a more obvious Protestant tone.

[7]The first "great controversy" of Elizabeth's reign was provoked by two publications of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury: his "Challenge Sermon" of 1560, printed in the same year, and his *Apology . . . in Defence of the Church of England,** printed in 1562, with a Latin version in the same year. Both were answered by Thomas Harding from his exile in Louvain, the former with his *Answer** of 1565, and the latter with his *Confutation** of the same year. The whole controversy involved some 60 printed books during that decade. Cf. my *Religious Controversies* 1-15.

[8]The controversy between John Whitgift, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge till 1577 (Archbishop of Canterbury from 1583), and Thomas Cartwright, Fellow of Trinity College till 1571, arose out of the Puritan *Admonition to the Parliament* of 1572, followed by *A Second Admonition* in the same year. This was attributed to Cartwright and attacked by Whitgift in his *Answer* of that year, followed by further controversy, as recorded in my *Religious Controversies* 29-32.

[9]John Reynolds, or Rainolds, was Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, from 1566, and President from 1598 till his death in 1607. He was the Puritan leader at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604. With him may be mentioned the other leading Puritan at Oxford, Laurance Humphrey, Regius Professor of Divinity from 1560 and President of Magdalen College from 1561 till his death in 1590.

[10]William Whitaker, Master of St John's College from 1586, and Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1580 till his death in 1595, was, after Cartwright, the leading champion and exponent of Calvinism in England. He engaged in Latin controversy at the highest academic level with the Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine in Rome. His lectures against Bellarmine were published posthumously in 1599-1600. Cf. *Religious Controversies* 154-55.

[11]The *Lambeth Articles* on predestination were drawn up (in Latin) by Whitaker and approved by Whitgift with the other Anglican bishops in 1595; but they remained unpublished till 1613.

[12]It is noteworthy that in one scene of *Hamlet* (1.2.113-19 and 164-68) the university of Wittenberg is mentioned no less than four times: twice with reference to Hamlet, and twice (by Hamlet) with reference to Horatio. Only whereas Horatio appears as more of a classical scholar, or humanist, Hamlet appears as a student of divinity, under the shadow of Luther.

[13]The *Sermons* of Henry Smith were published together posthumously in 1593, and Thomas Nash recalls his memory as "silver-tongued" in his *Pierce Penniless* of 1592. Cf. my chapter on "Smith and Hooker" in *Shakespeare's Religious Background* 126-33.

[14]Persons's book, commonly known as "The Book of Resolution," was originally entitled *The First Book of the Christian Exercise, appertaining to Resolution*, and published in 1582. When it was revised by Edmund Bunny in a Protestant sense and republished in 1584, Persons brought out a further edition in 1585, with the altered

title of *A Christian Directory*,* adding an indignant protest at Bunny's piracy. Yet thanks to Bunny the book became, according to its London printer, "one of the most vendible books ever issued in this country"; cf. *Religious Controversies* 73-75 and *Shakespeare's Religious Background* 45-48. It was praised both by Thomas Nash in his *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem** in 1593, and by Robert Greene in his book of *Repentance*, published with his *Groatsworth of Wit** in 1592 just before his death in that year.

[15]For the influence of Job, cf. *Shakespeare's Religious Background* 102-03; and in general, my chapter on "The Homiletic Tradition in *Hamlet*," *The Mediaeval Dimension in Shakespeare's Plays* (dedicated "For Roy") (New York: Edwin Mellen P, 1990) 58-73.

[16]A notable example of such a combined claim occurs (admittedly after Shakespeare's death) in the 1620s, with two books both entitled *Saint Austins Religion*, one by the Catholic John Brereley* in 1620, and the other by the Protestant William Crompton in 1624. Cf. my *Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age* (London: Scholar P, 1978) 200-01.

[17]Cf. Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy* 377-80: "The 'limed soul'of Claudius."

[18]*A Short Title Catalogue* by A. Pollard and G. Redgrave, under "Thomas A Kempis," listing five translations, by W. Atkinson* in 1503 (reprinted 6 times), R. Whitford in 1531? (reprinted 5 times), E. Hake in 1567 (reprinted twice), T. Rogers in 1580 (reprinted 13 times), F. B. (A. Hoskins?)* in 1613 (reprinted 5 times).

[19]Richard Farmer, *Essays on the Learning of Shakespeare*, first published in 1767, reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1966; but Whitaker pays no tribute to him in his *Shakespeare's Use of Learning*.

[20]For an account of Paul's Churchyard in Shakespeare's time, cf. T. F. Ordish, *Shakespeare's London* (London: Dent, 1897) 231-35.

* Facsimile reprints published by the Scolar Press.