

Fall 2013

Review of "Shakespeare's Common Prayers: The Book of Common Prayer and the Elizabethan Age," by Daniel Swift. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

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THE

Volume XLIV, No. 3

Fall 2013

# SIXTEENTH CENTURY JOURNAL

*The Journal of Early Modern Studies*



0361-0160(201323)44:3;1-8

# Shakespeare's Common Prayers: The Book of Common Prayer and the Elizabethan

Age. Daniel Swift.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 289 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-983856-1.

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The book is the published version of Daniel Swift's doctoral dissertation. The author divides the book into three main sections: two chapters that focus upon the Book of Common Prayer liturgy of Matrimony; two chapters on Holy Communion; and two chapters on Baptism. Swift introduces the book with two chapters that discuss the Hampton Court conference of 1603–4 and the evolution of the Book of Common Prayer from its inception up through the early seventeenth century. He concludes with a chapter that discusses the evolution of the prayer book from the mid-seventeenth century up to the present day. The author provides endnotes, an index, and a bibliographic essay. This last element discusses his sources in narrative form, organized by thematic categories—"Shakespeare's Life," "The Book of Common Prayer," "The English Church and Religious History," "The Theater and the Sacraments," and "The Plays."

Swift sets the stage in the prologue with a discussion of the Hampton Court conference that occurred over the winter of 1603–4. This event brought James I, William Shakespeare (and the Kings' Men), leading prelates of the Anglican Church, and disaffected clergymen together at Hampton Court during the festive Christmas/Epiphany season. The disaffected clergymen had presented James I with the Millenary Petition earlier in 1603, and one of their requests was a revision of the prayer book. They were troubled by the vagueness of the theological language in the Book of Common Prayer, and so they pressed for more literal specificity. The author underscores the importance of this event by reminding the reader that the Book of Common Prayer was the "devotional centerpiece" (23) of Jacobean England, and any revisions had enormous political and spiritual repercussions. Swift also rightly asserts that the Book of Common Prayer—and the theological battles that flared up around its language—has been neglected by Shakespearean (and Elizabethan) scholars as a source of interpretation. In the body of the book the author meticulously illuminates Shakespeare's use of the language of the prayer book in his dramas.

The chapters devoted to Matrimony contain very detailed analysis of the presence of prayer book language and ideas in Shakespeare's dramas—a wonderful example of solid, basic research. Swift develops an argument that tracks Shakespeare's evolving attitudes over time about marriage from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, through *Measure for Measure*, to *Othello*, and in doing so he makes an astute observation about "problem plays" like *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Swift argues that contemporary scholars who wrestle with these dramas lack an understanding of the central problem—theological language. Shakespeare, he asserts, is cynically mocking a solemn rite (matrimony) by sapping the emotional value out of it. This represents a good example of Swift's fresh insight into Shakespeare that comes from his careful study of the Book of Common Prayer as an interpretive source. His analysis is all the more satisfying because he avoids wading into the swamp of scholarly conjecture about Shakespeare's personal life (recusant tendencies, marital turmoil, grief at the loss of his son, etc.).

The chapters related to Holy Communion delve into Shakespeare's referencing of the Book of Common Prayer in his midcareer masterpieces. Swift pursues the theological controversies stirred by prayer book language about commemoration of the dead that exists

within the rite of Holy Communion, and this line of investigation also folds in discussion of the Burial Rite. The author notes how *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* dramatize the tensions between the figurative and literal understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead in early seventeenth-century society. Swift concludes that through these dramas Shakespeare manifests a more mature theological perspective than he seemed to hold earlier in his career. Shakespeare was now acknowledging the many contradictions and inconsistencies of belief in his society that the Book of Common Prayer was attempting to accommodate with its vague language.

In the third section of the book, Swift analyzes the liturgy of Baptism. He provides an excellent analysis of *Macbeth's* language, dramatic conflict, and characters. The author cogently explains how this drama metaphorically presents the theological debates between Puritans and Church of England apologists. As in the discussion about Holy Communion, this analysis—centered on Baptism—maps out the literal versus figurative tension between these two groups of worshipers. He then discusses how the dramatic action in *Macbeth* reflects this conflict. Swift observes that many scenes or passages in *Macbeth* are usually cut in modern productions because theatrical directors can see no dramatic purpose served by them. The conversation about kingship between Malcolm and Macduff in act 4 represents the most notable example. Swift connects the relevance of these theatrical “problem scenes” to the contemporary controversies about the Book of Common Prayer.

*Shakespeare's Common Prayers* offers a masterful analysis of the Book of Common Prayer's evolution that stands on its own as superb scholarship. Swift shows his scholarly peers how to apply this knowledge to Elizabethan and Jacobean literature that can yield fuller, richer interpretations of the period.

