

# Shakespeare and Religion

Global Tapestry,  
Dramatic Perspectives

Edited by

**Margie Burns**

*University of Maryland, Baltimore County*

Series in Literary Studies



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# Introduction

Religion in the works of William Shakespeare is a rich subject. Shakespeare is the towering icon of English literature, especially of Renaissance English literature, and every Shakespeare play involves religion. In 38 Shakespearean plays without exception, from the earliest to the last, and notwithstanding differences in genre, setting, or historical period, religion is a feature of the dramatic universe. Obviously, the feature takes various forms—BCE or Christian, insular or global, accepted or ‘other’ from the perspective of contemporaneous Britain, and the range of forms itself registers the playwright’s stature like a high-water mark after some great flood. The papers in this edited collection explore aspects of religion in the plays by reinforcing analysis with strong historical documentation. While not every play could be included, nor the lyric poems, every dramatic genre is represented—comedy, tragedy, history, and the late romances. The chapters appear in order by chronology, beginning with *The Taming of the Shrew* and ending with *The Tempest*.

This book presents diverse but cohesive explorations of the wide range of religious traditions apparent in Shakespeare’s plays, from classical mythology to medieval and later Catholicism to Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and even Coptic Christianity. The remarkable diversity of the collection is methodological and ideological as well; while some analyses adopt a sharply critical perspective on organized religion and its politics, others focus on positive ethical and artistic aspects. Collectively, the approaches printed here are both inclusive and transnational, and the collection conveys some of the range and multi-valent reach of the world’s most famous playwright.

The foregoing is not to suggest that Shakespearean plays simply celebrate religion. On the contrary, the forms of religion in all their global and historical variety show an astounding versatility in the Shakespeare corpus. Commonalities and differences manifest in iconography, dialogue, and story, on a spectrum from worse than superficial to elevated beyond literal expression. Individual characters’ attributes, actions, and ethics may align, or not, in varying degrees with religious belief. Representations range from official to unofficial and, on other axes, from more communitarian to less, from lightweight to ponderous, ceremonial or not. While features of religion contribute color, texture, and drama throughout the corpus, the tone varies with the genre, and the uses change over time as the playwright’s profession and career evolve.

Thus, Jennifer Gilstrap and MiloRhys Teplin address two of the plays in which Shakespeare uses classical mythology and classical antiquity. As Gilstrap discusses,

*The Taming of the Shrew* involves two provocative elements besides the treatment of Kate—the Induction and the relocated wedding ceremony—and both relate to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The classical references to Ovid in the Induction metamorphose into the Kate-Petruchio plot, as the joke on Sly and Kate’s perhaps-joking transformations become metamorphoses. Importantly, *TS* differs from later Shakespearean comedies ending with Christian marriage as closure. The structure of *TS* resembles a selection of Ovidian tales, relegating the Christian nuanced nuptials of comedy to a supplementary event along the way.

In discussing *Troilus and Cressida*, written much later in Shakespeare’s career, MiloRhys Teplin approaches Shakespearean uses of classical antiquity very differently, as a “time-capsule view” showing how the playwright presented ancient Greece and Rome to Britons at this point in his writing life. Examining *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare’s version of the *Iliad*, yields a picture of how Shakespeare conveyed current ideas of the ancient world to his contemporaries. Through various characters, Shakespeare contrasts classical and Medieval Christian concepts of virtue and heroism, each unsuccessful or unworkable in the world of *TC*. By dispensing with the gods, he also de-mythologizes the Trojan War.

Drawing in depth upon specifically religious works among other sources, several contributors go beyond previous analyses of some of Shakespeare’s most famous plays. Writing on *Richard III*, Jay Zysk observes that the Greek root of the word *hypocrite* itself has theatrical connotations, and religious writings from the thirteenth century through the sixteenth century join explicitly religious concerns to theatrical pretension. In the early history of *Richard III*, in which King Richard’s theatrical brand of religious hypocrisy leads to political tyranny, Shakespeare stages hypocrisy according to this established connection between dissembling, theatrical performance, and feigned virtue. The tactical conjunction that informs an early modern understanding of hypocrisy also informs the play’s final punishment of its titular hypocrite, and the final sequence of counter-dissembling—the ghosts that visit Richard and the Richmond decoys who appear on the battlefield—leads to Richard’s death and the rise of the Tudor dynasty.

On *Merchant of Venice*, Michele Osherow tackles a key issue, Shylock’s forced conversion. Osherow strikingly considers *MV* in the context of early modern conversion literature, where an unexpected feature of the texts is a direct, steady critique of “false Christians” or “Christians in Name without the nature of it,” whose “Services are good for nothing as they be without the Spirit of Christ,” as George Fox wrote. Osherow argues that *MV* plays out on stage the anxieties, ambiguities, reproaches, and dangers displayed in the conversion genre. Therefore, the play’s original audiences were more attuned to the

condemnation of the Christians' behavior within the play than we are usually prepared to recognize. Deepening the resonances and elevating the action of *MV*, applying conversion texts exposes the behavior of "false Christians" to prompt self-examination and rehabilitation among professing Christians.

In Giacomo Ferrari's handling, philosophy in *Hamlet* opens out well beyond Horatio and Wittenberg into the postwar twentieth century. Moving back and forth through time between Walter Benjamin and Richard Hooker, Ferrari connects *Hamlet* and other plays with the philosophical concept of the "modern tragic." Using as groundwork twentieth-century theoretical writing by Benjamin, Carl Schmitt, and Peter Szondi, Ferrari argues that the plays he considers bring forth Shakespeare's awareness of the simultaneous necessity for and unfoundedness, arbitrariness, of political orders. For Ferrari, Shakespeare's modern tragic awareness originates from post-Reformation questioning of the traditional source of legitimacy of secular power—divine approval, guaranteed by the Roman Church—and uses a narrative of secularized Protestant actual righteousness exemplified in the seventeenth century by Hooker.

As discussed by Travis Knapp, scholars agree that *Winter's Tale* highlights central themes of repentance and redemption but less agree upon the meaning and form of that redemption in the play. While Catholic ritual and imagery have been identified in the play, questions arise as to whether Leontes's acts of penitence are Christian or secular, and while some see Christian penance amidst the pagan mythological background, they also disagree on whether Leontes's penance is sympathetic to Catholicism or wholly Protestant. Drawing on recent scholarship, Knapp discusses the competing theological theories of penance and satisfaction found in medieval and early modern Christianity. Shakespeare draws on the language of sacramental penance in portraying Leontes's sin, "saint-like sorrow," and apparent forgiveness, and in the confessor figures of Paulina and the "priestlike" Camillo. Thus, representations of religion in *WT* incorporate plural traditions found in English Christianity of the early seventeenth century, none to the exclusion of all others.

To discuss religion in Shakespeare exhaustively would make for an encyclopedia rather than a book, but discussion of religious representations would be incomplete without a look at *Othello*, as by contributors Kelsey Ridge and Annalise Benjamin. As Ridge analyzes *Othello*, the Venetians construct a binary reality where one is white or not, Christian or heathen. In Othello's Venice, to be non-Christian means that no matter how light one's skin, one can never be treated as white, and to be dark-skinned means that even baptism does not afford Christian social status. These binaries, which determine social acceptance, reflect the interconnectedness of religion and racial formation in the early modern period. However, similar binaries have carried over into scholarship on the play and its title character. Critics often treat Shakespeare's Othello as

either a black pagan or a brown Muslim, but this binary approach ignores the presence of the Coptic Christian Church and other North African Christian communities. Examining *Othello* in the historical context of North African Christianity illuminates new elements and complexities in Shakespeare's text. Drawing on early modern sources, Ridge examines the character of Othello against the background of the Coptic Church. This reading casts a different light on Othello's backstory, on discussions of his religious faith, and on his otherization as a Christian of color excluded by white Christians. A Coptic reading recognizes that a Christian Othello, despite his religion, is never fully accepted into the European Christian community.

In a different take on Othello as an outsider, Annalise Benjamin observes Islam apparent in *Othello*. Although the government of Queen Elizabeth recognized Protestantism with Catholic symbols as the only genuine religion in England, profound religious conflict and ambiguity persisted in the nation and transnationally. While the extent of Shakespeare's awareness of Muslim culture and his use of that information in composing *Othello* remain matters of debate, there have been breakthroughs in recent scholarship on Islam in Shakespeare's plays. Benjamin argues that Islamic holy law, a set of rules for moral and legal behavior for Muslims based on the teachings of the Qur'an, is the ultimate source of inspiration as the dramatist shaped his portrayal of Othello, a converted Islamic man whose internal conflict between his Christian faith and his Islamic obligations leads to his demise.

According to Caroline Lion, *The Tempest* can be read in the context of Kabbalistic mystic theology. This interesting original take on the play shows how capacious Shakespeare's late work can be, presenting a spiritual vision that speaks beyond its immediate contexts. This study of Prospero through Jewish theological thought tracks Prospero's transformation from oppressor to *beinoni*, a term used for a human who has attained the in-between state between good and evil, a desirable state of being. While Prospero subjugates Caliban and insults and dehumanizes other characters, this article argues that he makes a resounding turn towards kindness or "tenderness" at the end of the play, a turn that is Shakespearean but to which Jewish theology is relevant. In allowing Prospero the agency of a *beinoni*, a generous allowance, we expand our vision and contribute to the healing of a greater community and the earth.

Finally, contributors find unity in disharmonies within the plays. Shandi Stevenson argues that the Christian doctrine of future judgment and restoration permeates Shakespeare's moral vision and the trajectory of his stories. Rather than fatalism or nihilism, the plays start from the biblical narrative of a world in which truth will one day be told, justice will one day be done, and repentance continues to offer hope. Focusing on *Much Ado About Nothing*, Stevenson sees the theme as undergirding and unifying the entire corpus of plays. In this



reading, all of Shakespeare's plays have "a characteristic approach to truth, justice, and repentance," a linear, teleological, moral, and eschatological view of the world that shapes plot, characterization, and language.

According to Camilo Peralta, *Macbeth* demonstrates that Shakespeare's stage has room for ghosts, devils, and witches alongside ordinary humans. The verisimilitude of these occult figures persuades the audience that such beings could exist, that the world is more interesting—and dangerous—than a narrowly materialistic outlook would admit. This awareness of evil partly reflects Medieval concepts of the universe not yet influenced by Newton or Darwin and only beginning to grapple with Descartes and Copernicus, but it also reflects Shakespeare's faith and its importance in his art. Far from being fanciful or whimsical, Shakespeare's ghosts, devils, and witches are grounded in traditions of English folklore, medieval superstition, and Christian theology. He employs them not only for shock value but to illustrate the real power of evil in the world, represented by terrifying supernatural agents of darkness, while reassuring the audience that a greater power subsumes them.

In my reading, the late dramatic romance *Cymbeline* has an overarching artistic unity despite its voluminous action, multiple subplots, and plethoric denouements in the last act. A premise of this chapter is that the unity is not only esthetic but iconographic; it aligns with the key offstage event, the beginning of the Christian era, chronicled as occurring during the British Cymbeline's reign. The overlapping of Roman and British histories signals a larger harmony, theological as well as artistic. Further reinforcing the suggested harmony, the play also subtly memorializes the new union of England and Scotland; details of language and imagery convey contemporaneous Jacobean references. The overall unity harbingered is enacted on every level—national, familial, and individual—working subtly through the characters' complex psychodramas.

The mere word "religion" is so loaded that to use it can magnetize misunderstanding, but this anthology neither boosts nor opposes religion across the board, nor do we canvass arguments about Shakespeare's individual affiliation. An underlying guideline is the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Like the principles in the real-world Bill of Rights, real-world religion can be used or abused, can heal or wound, can reconcile or provoke conflict, and can be applied with every conceivable degree of sincerity or self-interest. Topics addressed in this book include religion in the English history plays, some uses of pre-BCE antiquity, and the beliefs or unbelief of individual characters. In 38 plays and additional collaborations, Shakespeare faithfully reflected a staggering number of possibilities, their extensive dramatic potential mined with genius.

Aside from other theatrical uses for a playwright, religion is an obvious source of dramatic conflict, especially when it overlaps with geopolitics. In several plays—most famously, perhaps, in *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*—religious difference overlaps with ethnicity or nationality, as discussed in this volume. But as ably represented in these chapters, Shakespeare's handling of religious conflict is no more predictable than his handling of religion in general. While it is clear that Shakespeare wrote from a Christian perspective, it is equally clear that he recognized and acknowledged that religious belief includes difference, and he represented difference—with and without bloodshed—throughout his entire dramatic career.

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Margie Burns

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Chapter 1

**From Comedy to Classicism:**  
***Taming of the Shrew* as Early**  
**Modern *Metamorphoses***

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**Abstract**

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* involves two provocative elements besides Kate's treatment, the Induction and the relocated wedding ceremony. Kate's taming often overshadows both, generating vast discussion in feminism and gender studies, and the disconnect between the Induction and the Kate-Petruchio plot can leave readers at a loss. In fact, many adaptations and modern performances simply leave the Induction out. However, the Induction and the relocated ceremony provide space for the Ovidian overtures of the play. Shakespeare's reliance on a familiarity with Ovid makes *Taming* an early example of the poet's skill before his comic proficiency took a more distinct shape. The classical references in the Induction are obvious. Their connection to the Kate-Petruchio plot becomes clearer once we handle Sly's jest and Kate's ultimate transformation as similar changes to the powerless at the discretion of the unwieldy powerful, an overarching theme of the *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare positions the characters in settings reminiscent of Ovid. The play begins and ends with classical motifs, if we include the Induction as the beginning, and I would argue that the Induction is indispensable. This structure diverges from Shakespeare's other comedies, which conclude within a Christian context of going forth and multiplying. In *Taming*, though, Christian marriage neither is the comic ending nor guarantees a happy ending. The banished villain and reward for admirable characters are missing, too, taking *Taming* away from the world of moral justice and into Ovid's realm, where mortals' goodness has no bearing on their outcome. Shakespeare leaves Sly and Kate in their transformed states, suggesting artistic satisfaction with each metamorphosis more than a balance of moral scales. The comic closure that rights all wrongs and codifies desires within the sanctity of marriage is more apparent in Shakespeare's subsequent comedies. *Taming of the Shrew* resembles a selection of tales akin

to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, relegating the Christian nuanced nuptials of comedy to a supplementary event along the way.

**Keywords:** Gilstrap, *Taming of the Shrew*, classical references, Ovid, Induction, comic closure, gender studies, feminism, metamorphosis

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Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* involves two provocative elements besides Kate's treatment, the Induction and the relocated wedding ceremony. Kate's taming often overshadows both, generating vast discussion in feminism and gender studies, and the disconnect between the Induction and the Kate-Petruchio plot can leave readers at a loss. In fact, many adaptations and modern performances simply leave the Induction out. However, the Induction and the relocated ceremony provide space for the Ovidian overtures of the play. Shakespeare's reliance upon familiarity with Ovid makes *Taming* an early example of the poet's skill before his comic proficiency took a more distinct shape. The classical references in the Induction are obvious; their connection to the Kate-Petruchio plot becomes clearer once we handle Sly's jest and Kate's ultimate transformation as similar changes to the powerless at the discretion of the unwieldy powerful, an overarching theme of *Metamorphoses*.

In overview, Shakespeare positions the characters in settings reminiscent of Ovid. The play begins and ends with classical motifs, if we include the Induction as the beginning, and I would argue that it is indispensable. This structure diverges from Shakespeare's other comedies, which conclude within a Christian context of going forth and multiplying. In *Taming*, though, Christian marriage neither is the comic ending nor guarantees a happy ending. The banished villain and reward for admirable characters are missing, too, taking *Taming* away from the world of moral justice and into Ovid's realm, where mortals' goodness has no bearing on their outcome. Shakespeare leaves Sly and Kate in their transformed states, suggesting artistic satisfaction with each metamorphosis more than a balance of moral scales. The comic closure that rights all wrongs and codifies desires within the sanctity of marriage is more apparent in Shakespeare's subsequent comedies. *Taming of the Shrew* resembles a selection of tales akin to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, relegating the Christian nuanced nuptials of comedy to a supplementary event along the way.

The landscape of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a vast wilderness where nothing remains static. Gods and mortals alike experience constant change. Even the initial transformation of the universe from chaos to order lasts only briefly before Ovid hurls it directly back to war, mismanagement, and a creation spiraling out of control. The poem's ongoing momentum relies on constant reshaping and resistance to an ultimate resolution. Like *Metamorphoses*,

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* resists stasis. Classified as a comedy, the play promises a neat ending involving the banishment of a villain, the resolution of a conflict, and ultimate unification, usually sanctified by a Christian wedding ceremony. However, *Taming* denies audiences the expected comic structure. Shakespeare provides an Induction, to which he never returns, and demotes the wedding ceremony from the grand finale to a farcical event in the third act. The changing and changeable natures of the characters also lend to metamorphoses, more essential than the cross-dressing and disguises often incorporated into Shakespeare's later, more structurally recognizable comedies. Therefore, loosening *Taming's* strict commitment to comic structure and reconsidering or restructuring it as a segment of overlapping yet independent tales of change relieves the play of its comic shortcomings.

Of the dramatic classifications, *Taming* resembles comedy most in not being tragic or romantic. Jane Wells provides an overview of the comic tradition and traces the prescription back to C. L. Barber. Her description highlights comedy's responsibility to "pursue complications to the point of greatest disorder before restoring the world back to harmony, often in ways that are (or seem) magical" (Wells 66). Disguises, like transformations, function to bring about "a new order [that] is more promising than the world left behind, the one that necessitated the disguise to begin with" (Wells 66). Certainly, *Taming* presents situations that necessitate change of various sorts and attempts to provide a resolution to the conflicts which it presents, however unsatisfying they may be to contemporary readers. In this respect, the play does include these comic trappings.

Metamorphoses throughout the play recall Ovid's poem. Jeanne Addison Roberts notes, "Metamorphoses ought to be useful in comedy—a form committed by its very nature to the belief that people can change" (160). I agree with Roberts' argument that the Ovidian changes in *Shrew* lend to "the complexity of a play that is often thought to be lacking in subtlety" (160). Studies of the play's classical inspiration diminish the temptation to write off *Shrew* as a mere farce. Cyrus Hoy explores the differences between Ovid's and Shakespeare's metamorphoses, concluding that Ovid's characters change physically in contrast to Shakespeare's characters, who change emotionally or psychologically. Specifically for *Shrew*, Hoy clarifies that the reformed Kate is the "most flamboyant example" of "an alteration in a character's vision or temperament" (295). While Hoy acknowledges the depth of metamorphosis within *Shrew*, however, he does not explore the greater structural similarities between the play and Ovid's epic. Further, both Roberts and Hoy continue to treat *Shrew* strictly as comedy, albeit one that speaks to transformations.

The changes in Shakespeare's play do not resolve any social conflict in the fifth act, particularly if readers suspect Kate's final speech of irony. If this scene intends any distinct resolution, then "the questions which it raises about

dominance and submission” continually discomfort critics, whether they consider it a reference “to irony or to humor or, most prevalently, to history” (Zajko 33). Thus, traditional comic trappings fail and give way to open-ended potential, promising continued metamorphosis. Sly cannot remain in the lord’s chamber forever, nor can Kate remain the submissive wife throughout the marriage. Bianca, the once prized wife, turns into a paler replica of her older sister at the end. If these characters can change so quickly from one identity to another, then they can change or be changed back just as quickly, or change into something else. Whether or not the reversal or retransformation happens within the text, the suggested possibility remains. For Shakespeare, as with Ovid, resolution is slippery.

Resisting the typical structure of comedy, *Taming* has inspired considerable debate about the Induction’s purpose and the tensions surrounding Kate’s treatment in a text referred to as comedy. One response, more rewarding, is to shift *Taming* from conversations of comedy and approach it as a replicate of Ovidian classicism, if only in structure. No doubt, Ovidian references saturate the play. Merely drawing parallels between characters and scenes in *Metamorphoses* and those in *Taming* cannot accommodate the questions surrounding the play’s structure and content. However, treating the entire play as a selection of transformative tales akin to Ovid’s epic smooths the shift from the Induction to the Kate-Petruchio plot. Also, Petruchio’s treatment of Kate no longer requires a comic resolution but an anticipation that the once resistant wife will morph again. Therefore, *Taming* does not move from one disjointed world to the next but becomes a continuation of the same, greater world within which one tale morphs into the next. Just as Ovid’s epic is a collection of stories connected through its chaos, so is Shakespeare’s *Taming*, a dramatic culmination of chaotic events played out within a classical structure with comic awareness.

*Taming* is not the only example of Shakespeare’s experiment with generic fluidity. Jonathan Bate locates the poet’s “critique,” of the elegy within *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Proteus provides “what is effectively a love elegy in sonnet form” (66). Benedick expresses his indifference towards satire and epigrams in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Orlando professes his preference for odes over elegies in *As You Like It*, by suggesting that the latter be hung on brambles (Bate 67). Further, Bate points out that *The Comedy of Errors* is Shakespeare’s only comedy titled with a definitive genre, admitting the poet’s intentional adherence to established conventions and obedience to the classical unities. *The Tempest* respects the unity of time, but action and place vary (67-68). Shakespeare’s artistic ability rests not upon his imitation and conformity to clear structure but on his creative blending, bending, and reshaping of established conventions.

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