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Edited by Hannibal Hamlin
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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
SHAKESPEARE AND RELIGION

Nothing in Shakespeare's England was as important as religion. Questions of faith informed everything from history and politics to love and family, work and play, good and evil, suffering and sacrifice, and ultimately life and death. Every one of Shakespeare's plays is rich in allusions to the Bible, church rites including baptism, communion, marriage, and burial, and a host of religious beliefs. This Companion provides an essential grounding in early modern religious history and culture and the ideas that Shakespeare returns to throughout his career. Chapters dedicated to close readings of individual plays or groups of plays span both the complex and variegated Christian beliefs explored in Shakespeare's work, as well as the treatment of Judaism, Islam, and classical paganism. Authored by an international team of eminent scholars and featuring an Afterword by Rowan Williams, this Companion is the most comprehensive and incisive guide to the topic that students will find.

Hannibal Hamlin is Professor of English at The Ohio State University. He is author of *The Bible in Shakespeare* (2013) and *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, 2014); and co-editor of *The King James Bible after 400 Years: Literary, Linguistic, and Cultural Influences* (Cambridge, 2010) and *The Sidney Psalter: The Psalms of Philip and Mary Sidney* (2009).

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.

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CONTENTS

	<i>List of Figures</i>	page vii
	<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
	<i>Preface</i>	xi
	<i>A Note on the Texts</i>	xv
	<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xvii
1	Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church THOMAS BETTERIDGE	I
2	Shakespeare: Biography and Belief ANDREW HADFIELD	18
3	The Renaissance Bible HANNIBAL HAMLIN	34
4	The Drama of the Liturgy DANIEL SWIFT	52
5	Popular Religion PHEBE JENSEN	67
6	Grace and Conversion HELEN SMITH	84
7	Love CLAIRE MCEACHERN	101
8	Sin and Evil ADRIAN STREETE	118

CONTENTS

9	Compassion, Affliction, and Patience GARY KUCHAR	134
10	Providence and Divine Right in the English Histories JEAN-CHRISTOPHE MAYER	151
11	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , Jews, and Christians M. LINDSAY KAPLAN	168
12	Religious and Political Impasses in <i>Measure for Measure</i> JENNIFER R. RUST	184
13	Remembering the Dead in <i>Hamlet</i> BRIAN CUMMINGS	200
14	<i>Othello</i> , Islam, and the Noble Moor: Spiritual Identity and the Performance of Blackness on the Early Modern Stage DANIEL VITKUS	218
15	Poetic Creation in an Apocalyptic Age: <i>King Lear</i> and the Making and the Unmaking of the World KRISTEN POOLE	234
16	Immortal Longings in Shakespeare's Rome ROBERT S. MIOLA	252
17	Sacred and Theatrical Miracles in the Romances TOM BISHOP	268
	Afterword: Finding the Remedy ROWAN WILLIAMS	285
	<i>Guide to Further Reading</i>	293
	<i>Index</i>	301

FIGURES

- | | | |
|------|---|--------|
| 1.1 | “A lively picture describing the weight and substance of God’s most blessed word against the doctrines and vanities of man’s traditions,” from John Foxe, <i>Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Special and Memorable, Happening in the Church</i> (London: John Day, 1583), vol. 1, 294. | page 2 |
| 7.1 | <i>The Bible, That Is to Say, All the Holy Scripture Contained in the Old and New Testament</i> [The “Matthew” Bible] (London: John Day, [1537]), part 1, fol. 245 ^v . | 103 |
| 15.1 | <i>The Holy Bible: Containing the Old Testament and the New</i> (London: R. Jugge, 1568), fol. 149 ^v (New Testament numbered separately). | 237 |

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-17259-3 — The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion
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[More Information](#)

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PREFACE

A *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion* will seem to some long overdue, since scholars have been writing on the topic for at least a couple of centuries. Those who still cling to the notion that, as the philosopher George Santayana put it, Shakespeare “is remarkable among the greater poets for being without a philosophy and without a religion” (“The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare,” 1896), will find this volume puzzling. Literary scholars, however, will recognize that a substantial component of Shakespeare studies for the past several decades has been devoted to exploring religious aspects of the plays and poems and the extent to which they reflect and engage with the religious culture of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Such scholarship is part of a larger “turn to religion” in early modern literary studies and in other periods as well.

One compelling reason for this scholarly turn is that many people living in twenty-first-century Europe and North America have experienced a similar reorientation in the world around them. With the rise of international and national conflicts based on religious differences, many people, including readers of early modern literature, have been forced to recognize that the world is not as secular as they may have formerly assumed. Of course, Americans have never really been very secular at all, if by “secular” one means unbelieving or nonreligious. Yet even in supposedly secular Great Britain, as evidenced by a 2017 British Social Attitudes survey, almost half the population describe themselves as religious, though most of these are no longer Church of England Christians. Worldwide, according to a recent Pew Research poll, the number of people who are not affiliated with a religion is still extremely small, and perhaps getting smaller. A “secular” society is not necessarily one without religion, though; it can also simply be one in which no official religion is imposed by the state. By this definition, Western nations are indeed secular, in that a citizen may choose freely to affiliate with any number of different religions, or with none at all.

PREFACE

Shakespeare's culture was secular in neither of these senses. Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was everywhere, all the time, not just confined to Sunday worship or the practice of the particularly pious. There was only one Church, governed by the monarch and her/his bishops (who sat in Parliament as Lords Spiritual), to which all citizens automatically belonged. Attendance at Sunday and holiday services was required by law, and persistent nonattendance was punished by fines or imprisonment. Jews had been banned for centuries, Muslims largely limited to ambassadorial visits, and the remaining Catholics concealed their faith or risked discrimination and persecution. But it would be a mistake to think of religious belief and practice as imposed upon an unwilling population by an oppressive church-state. Most people needed no encouragement to go to church, and sermons were one of the most popular public entertainments – as popular as the theater. Open-air sermons at Paul's Cross or St. Mary's Spital, which no one was required to attend, nevertheless attracted audiences of several thousand, including king, court, and commoners alike. Religion pervaded every aspect of life, from government to the family, the schoolroom to the public house, geography to medicine, history to husbandry. As a member of this society, Shakespeare was naturally interested in religious ideas, biblical characters and stories, church rites, and popular practices.

The following chapters offer a variety of perspectives on Shakespeare and religion. Chapters 1–6 introduce essential contexts for thinking about religion in Shakespeare's day, including the history of the Church, the Bible, the liturgies of the Book of Common Prayer, and popular religious culture. Shakespeare's own religious beliefs and practices are explored as well, as far as they can be, though this is not actually very far. (Arguments have been made for Shakespeare as Catholic, mainstream Protestant, Puritan, skeptic, even atheist, but the actual evidence is thin and subject to diverse interpretations.) Most of these contributors focus on how Shakespeare's works represent and explore aspects of religion, and how understanding early modern religion aids in our understanding of what we see onstage or read on the page. Indeed, without understanding these contexts, some passages in Shakespeare are unintelligible. Chapters 7–10 focus on key religious ideas like love, sin, compassion, and Providence, following their appearance in plays across Shakespeare's career. Chapters 11–17 begin with the plays themselves, individually or in useful groupings, and discuss their religious language, biblical allusions, or engagement with theological dilemmas, engaging not just with Christianity but Islam and Judaism as well. Inevitably, some of the same plays will be discussed in more than one chapter, but since the contexts and contributors vary, I believe this overlap

PREFACE

is a productive one. Nevertheless, all but three of Shakespeare's plays, and some of the poems, are addressed in this book, demonstrating how widely the religious context is imbedded in his work.

The contributors to this volume, it is perhaps worth saying, were not chosen because of any common religious beliefs. Some may consider themselves religious, some not. The only person of whose religion I am reasonably sure is Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. Of the rest, I have either a limited sense or no idea at all. They are also diverse in their scholarly and theoretical interests, which can only further enrich this collection. However, it seems reasonable to say that we all concur that "religion," whatever it is, however we conceive it, is important to Shakespeare's works and to those interested in better understanding them. I am grateful to all of these scholars for their labor and their patience as this volume took shape, and of course for their insightful and stimulating contributions. The original idea for this Cambridge Companion came from Sarah Stanton, and I thank her for inviting me to edit it, as I thank her successor, Emily Hockley, for seeing it through to publication.

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All references to the Bible, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007, with spelling modernized.

All references to the Book of Common Prayer are from *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings, Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, with spelling modernized.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BCP	Book of Common Prayer
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
KJV	King James Version (or Authorized Version) of the Bible

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