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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ LITERARY CRITICISM

The Heart of His Mystery: Shakespeare and the Catholic Faith in England under Elizabeth and James

John Waterfield
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John Waterfield admits to two enduring passions: the works of Shakespeare and the Catholic faith. In his view, a close reading of the former reveals a corresponding adherence to the latter. Shakespeare, he contends, "is no less a Catholic poet than Dante, and like Dante's, his works are completely informed by a deep faith in the goodness and mercy of God."

The few biographical details extant, Waterfield writes, could support this reading. He also finds clues within the plays themselves, which, he points out, feature none of the bawdy priests and lascivious nuns popular with some of his contemporaries. Shakespeare used religious imagery generously, sometimes in ways that suggest fidelity to the "old religion."

Waterfield's style is felicitous and erudite, and his frame of reference broad, but the devil is in the details, of which there are far too many. His line-by-line analysis of every work penned by the Bard (as well as some whose attribution is debated) weakens his argument by reducing it, all too often, to absurdity.

"The threefold repetition of 'fair, kind and true' obviously suggest the Trinity: the beloved is actually being equated with the Trinitarian godhead," he writes of Sonnet 120, though repetition is hardly an unusual poetic device, and the equivalence of a triad of adjectives with the Christian triune God doesn't seem all that obvious.

The plot of *Titus Andronicus*, often called the most violent play in the canon, is, he asserts, "designed to reflect the plight of the Catholic community, and the play's violence is an expression of their impotent rage." Female victims "suggest the silent suffering of the Catholic community in Reformation England." Parents lamenting the death of a child are all stand-ins for the suffering of the Virgin; any oath is a veiled reference to the Oath of Supremacy.

Waterfield holds a doctorate in English from the University of Oxford. He suggests, usefully, that the common assessment of Shakespeare as a shill for the government is wide of the mark, but his own reading of the poet's work as codified messages to fellow crypto-Catholics seems equally narrow.

Allegory was a common practice of the period, employed liberally, the author reminds readers, by Donne and Spencer, and he includes the caveat that "the allegorical reading is not offered as 'the truest meaning of Shakespeare's plays.'" But it's the only one he offers in his exhaustive deconstruction of the complete works.

The Heart of His Mystery is far too encyclopedic for its proposed subject. Waterfield, who describes himself as a lifelong student of Shakespeare, has written a Shakespearean omnibus. Nothing that strikes him as in any way related to his subject escapes mention-including rather jarring, offhand references to similar plot lines or imagery from writers as disparate as George Eliot, William Golding, Thomas Hardy, and even the songstress Joni Mitchell. Brevity, the Bard reflected, is the soul of wit. A better argument might have been made in a more concise book.
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