

Agostos Dei: staging Catholicism and the
anti-sectarian aesthetic in early-Stuart
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THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

Agostos Dei: staging Catholicism and the anti-sectarian aesthetic in early-Stuart England

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Abstract

My dissertation, *Agostos Dei: Staging Catholicism and the Anti-Sectarian Aesthetic in Early-Stuart England*, traces over four chapters the emergence of a literary counter-aesthetic to the increasingly violent sectarianism of Post-Reformation England. I focus

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primarily on popular plays that dramatize the destabilizing effects of radical beliefs on a society, whether small town or royal court, culminating in blood and exile. I argue that the plays' destructive conflicts and redemptive moments suggest the potential worth of cross-sectarian belief and ritual. In doing so, John Fletcher's *The Faithfull Shepherdess* (1608), William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *Henry VIII* (1613), Dekker, Ford, and Rowley's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), and John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1629) participate in an aesthetic that rejects the disunity promoted by radical sectarians and revises the rhetoric of English Protestantism. Kings James and Charles promoted, ultimately unsuccessfully, a *via media* (middle way) for the Church of England, seeking reunification of divergent Christian sects. At the same time, these works used the theatre as a space of free play to consider the possibility of ecumenical success in fictionalized worlds removed from the clashing rhetoric of real kings and clergy.

My project responds to the revitalized return to religion in the scholarship of early modern England, which has included a renewed interest in the English Catholic experience and a reconsideration of the variety of believers within the nation, loosely grouped into categories like Puritans and High Church Anglicans. My work presents a correlative- and counter-narrative to these well-established readings. I consider the historical and literary analogues of the plays and the contemporary religiopolitical realities of the times of their staging. Rather than attempting to discover crypto-sectarian messages in the tales or intentions of the playwrights behind them, I argue that such categorizations can reduce and obscure the broader, ecumenical implications of these works. In speaking to a range of sectarian audiences, these playwrights exceed the limitations of clear affiliation to address a wider Christian possibility.

Keywords

early modern, ecumenicalism, England, King James I, Post-Reformation, theater

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