

**Catholic-Protestant Controversy and the Shakespearean Stage:
The Play of Polemic**

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Abstract

Shakespeare's career in the theatre coincides with the ascendancy of Catholic-Protestant polemic, a body of writing that exerted a deep and pervasive influence on literate life in early modern England. Eroding a secularizing bias within the academy, the much heralded turn to religion in the discipline has already covered ample ground in repositioning Shakespeare in relation to the religious cultures of his age. But if such criticism is no longer the preserve of *parti pris* commentators, Shakespeare's plays have yet to be fully explored through the particular breed of antagonistic writing that emerged during the Reformation and eventually contributed to the period's self-styling as the "scribbling age."

Placing drama within this neglected field of enquiry, I reveal the importance the modes and preoccupations of such controversial writing had for the evolving shape and content of Shakespeare's art. The four plays considered here illuminate the subtlety and sophistication with which Catholic-Protestant polemic permeates the theatre; but they also demonstrate that theatre could in turn permeate polemic, hijacking and radically altering its concerns or critiquing its values and assumptions as a practice. *King John*, *1 Henry IV*, *Hamlet*, and *Henry VIII* are all marked by cultures of religious scribbling, but in strikingly different ways. By charting changes to these configurations across such a chronology, we can grasp how the plays loosely move from a tentative, experimental approach to polemic to a greater assuredness in its repudiation, developments with important implications for piecing together Shakespeare's development as a reader and writer.

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