



Brightest Heaven of Invention: A Christian Guide to Six Shakespeare Plays

Peter J. Leithart

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Shakespeare was, as Caesar says of Cassius, "a great observer," able to see and depict patterns of events and character. He understood how politics is shaped by the clash of men with various colorings of self-interest and idealism, how violence breeds violence, how fragile human beings create masks and disguises for protection, how schemers do the same for advancement, how love can grow out of hate and hate out of love.

Dare anyone say that these insights are irrelevant to living in the real world? For many in an older generation, the Bible and the Collected Shakespeare were the two indispensable books, and thus their sense of life and history was shaped by the best and best-told stories. And they were the wiser for it.

Literature abstracts from the complex events of life (just as we all do in everyday life) and can reveal patterns that are like the patterns of events in the real world. Studying literature can give us sensitivity to those patterns. This sensitivity to the rhythm of life is closely connected with what the Bible calls wisdom.

Brightest Heaven of Invention: A Christian Guide to Six Shakespeare Plays Details

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Author : Peter J. Leithart

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Child_of_Aslan says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. It gave me a better understanding of Shakespeare's work, as well as a greater love for the plays themselves. Though, I must confess, it didn't inspire in me a deeper love of writing essays, the penning of which I have never much enjoyed. Even so, whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of writing essays, this book was worth reading. :)

Josh says

Some chapters I spent a ton of time with, some I flew through. I look forward to returning to it again and again as the need/opportunity arises. An invaluable resource for anyone studying and/or teaching Shakespeare's works.

Terri says

For some teachers, the reading of Shakespeare may be daunting enough let alone trying to figure out the intricacies of the story AND find some good questions to ask. It's all here in this one fantastic book.

Leithart covers six plays in this book and divides those plays into manageable lessons for a classroom setting taking about a month to cover each:

Henry V

Julius Caesar

Hamlet

Macbeth

The Taming of the Shrew

Much Ado About Nothing

The introduction is worth the price of the book, definitely read it! He tells you how to sensibly manage reading Shakespeare with a class:

- (1) Monday: read the appropriate scene(s).
- (2) Tuesday: read the commentary guide.
- (3) Wednesday: answer Review Questions.
- (4) Thursday and Friday: answer Thought Questions

This book singlehandedly turned me and my children into knowledgeable and devoted students of Shakespeare!

Susannah says

Brightest Heaven of Invention illuminates Christian themes in several of Shakespeare's most famous dramas. The Bard was a realist when it comes to the human condition, thus his portrayals of human frailty and nobility do accord with the Biblical explanation for them, though in a couple of instances I thought Leithart stretched a bit too far. While the themes of fall and/or redemption are common in literature, drawing comparisons with Eden, Adam, Eve, and the serpent becomes repetitive after a while. I found his insights helpful, though. For instance, the question of Shakespeare's view of Henry V's claim to France (was Henry behaving as a mirror of all Christian kings? and what does it mean to "mirror" something?) will certainly send me back to the play with new eyes. I have to admit, I always gave that play the "Kenneth Branagh" reading.

In the overview on Hamlet, Leithart points out, "According to the Bible, God's mind and ways are impossible for man to understand completely. Since man is made in the image of this God, men and women have profound depths that we will never fully grasp. We not only can never completely know God; we can never completely know ourselves, never completely unravel our tangled motives and desires, never fathom the depth of our own sin. Today, many believe that science will eventually explain everything, including human behavior and thought. In an age dominated by this scientific idolatry, Hamlet is a healthy reminder that people are not machines, that there is a mysterious complexity to human nature."

This book will be especially helpful to those who wish to do a home-study on Shakespeare. It is designed to fulfill a complete literature course, and the author even suggests a study schedule to govern the student's week. He covers two historical plays (Julius Caesar, Henry V), two tragedies (Hamlet, Macbeth), and two comedies (The Taming of the Shrew, Much Ado About Nothing). The review and thought questions closing each section will be an aid in leading student discussion, and Leithart further suggests intriguing topics for papers. He also reviews video versions of each play. I read this book in preparation for tutoring a Classical Conversations Challenge III seminar, and look forward to thoughtful class discussions using Leithart's questions as a starting point.

Jacob Aitken says

To ward off criticisms, Leithart is not saying that Shakespeare wrote Christian allegories. Nor is he speculating upon Shakespeare's own personal piety. Rather, he is highlighting themes in Shakespeare that are only really possible within the broadly Christian culture and civilization in which he worked.

His tragedies show the reality of sin's power and the roads through which his tragic heroes realize this horror (Macbeth, Hamlet). His comedies are appropriately hilarious and usually (always?) end in weddings. One cannot help but see the gospel in the comedies. Petrucchio verbally creates (John 1; Genesis 1:1) a new reality which approaches--extra nos--Kate and invites her in. Hero undergoes a death and resurrection and it is the foolish of the world (Dogberry, 1 Cor. 1:18ff) who shame the wise.

Leithart's analysis of Henry V (The Mirror of all Christian Kings) shows that Shakespeare anticipated the best of postmodernism by four hundred years.

Douglas Wilson says

Very good.

Kenny Williams says

Decent Book, I would recommend it for Middle/High School use. It doesn't get into great detail, and is more of a walk through of the plays. If you want a Christian reading of Shakespeare, I would recommend reading Leithart's articles. He has a bunch of short articles online that give that perspective better than reading this entire book.

Paula says

Leithart's book was written for high school level English Literature classes, and probably would have particular interest for home schooling families. However, as a university graduate with a degree in English Literature, I learned quite a few things from this book that had never been discussed in my Shakespeare class in college. I purchased this book after finding much of interest in Leithart's book on Dante's Divine Comedy. I was hoping to get some new insights from this book, as I had from that. I was not disappointed. This is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in Shakespeare's plays, and in how his faith influenced Shakespeare's writings.

Steve Hemmeke says

On my year-long journey through the works of Shakespeare this year, Peter Leithart's guide, *Brightest Heaven of Invention*, has helped me immensely.

Shakespeare is often difficult to understand, and there is more symbolism going on than I pick up on. Leithart points some of it out in a way accessible to most readers. Much of the symbolism is biblically oriented as well (usually intended by Shakespeare, I believe). Macbeth's ambition is like Saul's. Benedick is converted from scorn to love and his wedding shows us the consummation of all things at the end of time. Leithart is well read on the Bible and the classics, so that his analysis of Shakespeare has a uniquely Christian orientation that avoids shallow moralism.

Leithart takes six of the best plays, lays out 5 lessons for each play, and supplies questions for review and discussion after each lesson. This format is ideal for a high school course, but it also worked for me for a small book club discussion group.

If you've ever wondered where to start in reading Shakespeare, this book is perfect for you.

D. Ryan says

A great book. I especially appreciated Leithart's insight into Taming of the Shrew.

Davis says

A fantastic guide for the study and appreciation of the greatest literary artist of all time. The guides are not written intellectually like essays, nor are they SparkNotes-caliber summaries. They provide rich insight and fascinating interpretations from a Christian worldview while always keeping in mind Shakespeare's ideas, not his own. Are the Christian parallels sometimes forced? Yes, especially in Much Ado About Nothing. But overall, it helps the average reader understand the "points" of the great masterpieces without being a substitute for reading them, which counts as a successful literary guide to me.

Tracy Krauss says

For anyone wondering how Shakespeare can fit into a Christian Worldview, this book is a gem. Not only did it open my eyes to the true genius of Shakespeare (as if i didn't know that already) but I found many practical ways to use this book when teaching it to others.

Andy Dollahite says

A great companion to six of Shakespeare's plays: History (Julius Caesar & Henry V), Tragedy (Hamlet & Macbeth), and Comedy (Much Ado about Nothing & Taming of the Shrew).

Melinda says

This is an other study guide from Peter Leithart, this one on six of Shakespeare's plays. Leithart picks "Henry V" and "Julius Caesar" for the historical plays, "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" for the tragedies, and "The Taming of the Shrew" and "Much Ado About Nothing" for the comedies.

What is most worthwhile from this book are the lists of movies / theater productions of the various plays to watch. It is best to experience a Shakespeare play not by simply reading it flat, but seeing it acted. However each actor plays characters differently, so it is worthwhile to watch Richard Burton play "Hamlet", then to watch Sir Lawrence Olivier play "Hamlet" and compare the two. Or add Mel Gibson's "Hamlet" and then compare the three. Who plays Hamlet as totally mad, who plays him as sane but faking madness, who plays him as on the edge?

Each of the plays listed gives a synopsis of the play, then elements to look for as you read and watch the play. While I do not agree with all of Leithart's assessments (I think he has Henry V wrong), this book overall is an excellent way to step into Shakespeare!

Sara says

I would put this as a 2.5 star book if I had the option. I find it informative, with well formulated thoughts on the plays he discussed in this book. Although I didn't agree with all the points he made, it is very handy to read along with the Shakespeare plays it includes. My main reason for giving it a 2.5 rating would be his discussion on purgatory in the section on Hamlet. Being a Catholic, I could immediately tell his whole argument on the Ghost of 'King Hamlet' being an imposter because the place he describes seems more like hell than purgatory or heaven was faulty. Up until then all of Leithart's points seemed well developed and researched. I would like to make clear that purgatory is not a happy care-free 'waiting zone' to get into Heaven. It is indeed very much like hell. The Bible makes the comparison of God being the potter and we his clay. Before a piece of pottery can be complete it must go into the kiln for a period of time. So it is with purgatory. Before a soul can enter heaven it must be made complete and purified in order to enter the holy place of Heaven. So yes, purgatory is very much like hell. The very important difference, however, is when you are in Hell you have no hope. When you are in purgatory you have hope of entering heaven.
