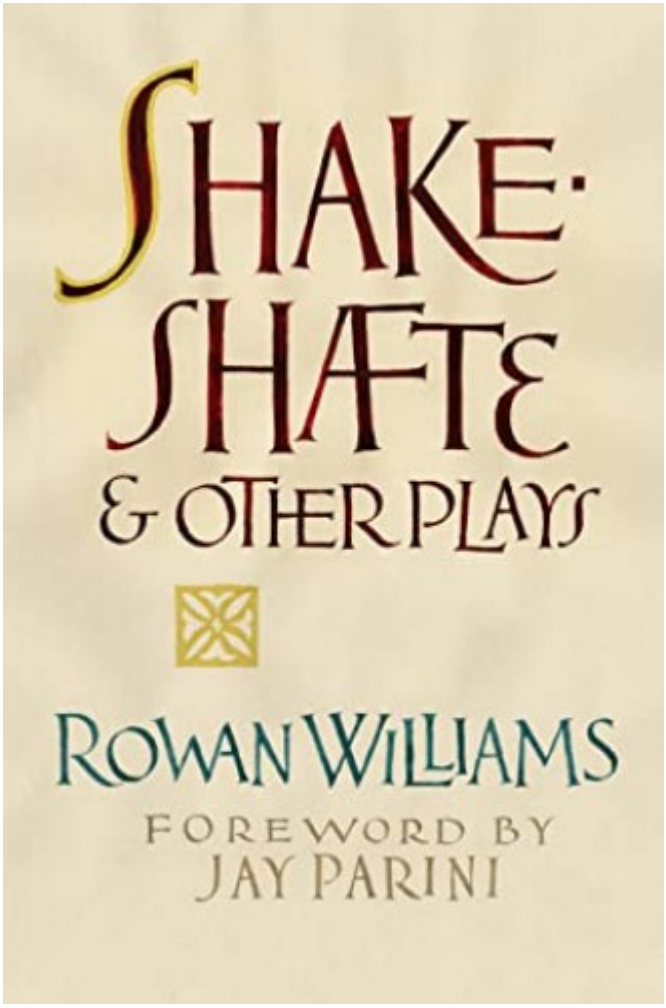
Rowan Williams weaves theological reflection and poetry into drama

Shakeshafte and Other Plays explores the messiness of language and meaning.

by Brian Volck in the May 18, 2022 issue

In Review



Shakeshafte and Other Plays

By Rowan Williams
Slant Books
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Rowan Williams, theologian, poet, and former archbishop of Canterbury, knows from experience the limits of language in a flawed and fallen world. In his ten years as primus inter pares in the Anglican Communion, he struggled to keep fractious elements of a fraying ecclesial body in conversation. In his 2013 Gifford Lectures, later published as *The Edge of Words*, Williams described language as "indeterminate, incomplete, embodied . . . and interwoven with a silence," concluding that our words are forever "'in the wake' of meaning, rather than owning and controlling it."

Williams, who reportedly speaks or reads 11 languages, writes perceptively about the messiness of words, meaning, vocation, and commitment in *Shakeshafte and Other Plays*, a slim but substantive volume that weds his command of theological reflection and poetry in yet another genre: drama. Through dialogue ranging in diction from earthy to sublime, Williams's characters embody what another Welsh poet and priest, R. S. Thomas, called, "the voices / of all those waiting at life's / window," each searching for purpose in troubled times.

In *Shakeshafte*, Williams draws on intriguing, if slender, historical evidence to imagine an episode in the life of William Shakespeare. Alexander Hoghton, a recusant Catholic landowner in Elizabethan-era Lancashire, included a bequest in his will to a certain William Shakeshafte, who appears to have provided "entertainments" while living in the wealthy man's household. Further evidence suggests that Edmund Campion, a Catholic convert and Jesuit missionary traveling incognito to elude agents of the Tudor state, visited Hoghton's residence shortly before his capture and brutal execution. Williams combines these evocative hints with rumors that a young Shakespeare worked as a tutor for a Catholic family in Lancashire and speculates on what Shakespeare—whom Williams believes harbored Catholic sympathies—and Campion would have said to each other had they met.

During the years when harboring a Catholic priest was a treasonous offense and one's own family members might spy for the crown, voicing one's inner thoughts could be deadly. In a climactic and furtive encounter, Campion advises Will to "test the spirits" in search of God's harmonious truth, with the understanding that "some voices are going to be out of tune for ever." "Leave them," Campion says, and "don't seek them out. They'll soften your heart in all the wrong ways and you'll forget that there's a truth at all."

“But what if they’re—shut out of the harmony because no- one’s let them be heard?” Will replies. “What if the only way to . . . this harmony you talk about is like letting God bring it about when every human spirit has its voice? . . . And for that to happen, you’ve got to listen to the ones that are—like you said—‘out of tune’?”

Having achieved mutual understanding if not agreement, Campion and Will soon go their separate ways—the priest to his martyrdom and the young man from Stratford to an as yet inchoate vocation that will let all the voices he hears speak some aspect of the truth, however pungent the dissonances.

The book’s second play, *The Flat Roof of the World*, features the Welsh-English artist, engraver, and poet David Jones as he struggles to find meaning in his World War I experiences, particularly the bloody action at Mametz Wood in which Jones was severely wounded. It was also during the war that Jones first considered converting to Catholicism after stumbling upon a mass celebrated in a barn near the front. Williams has Jones describe his response to this rustic liturgy: “It’s just that they were all doing something, all right, yes, making something. Only not a something to use for something else, just a something, a pattern where all the lights light up and the whole thing—breathes, or whatever. That’s what I want to do, I thought.”

After the war, Jones, suffering from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, formally entered the Roman Catholic Church and grew increasingly involved with a community of Catholic artisans led by Eric Gill. Williams’s play explores Jones’s attempts to balance his faith commitments, his artistic ambitions, and his tentative attempts at human intimacy. Engaged to Gill’s daughter, Petra, for three years, until she broke it off to marry another, Jones later confesses to a friend, “I’m just scared all the time, you know? Scared of everything out there and even more scared of everything in here (*touches head*), scared there isn’t a way of holding it all together.”

Through crisp dialogue, Williams unearths the foundations of Jones’s unique fusion of Christian and Welsh tradition with the shifting and fragmentary vision of high modernism. Like young Will Shakeshafte, Jones hears a cacophony of voices in his search for truth and sees a kaleidoscope of images in his quest for beauty. Early in the play, he says, “You look at something and then you see something else showing through or creeping in at the edge; you get one thing down and it shouts out for another. . . . No reason ever to finish, really.” And like the mature William

Shakespeare, Jones ultimately finds inexhaustible richness in a broken world where he is

> always listening. The silence under the gunfire. The breathing body under the soil. The roots where everything knots itself together . . . while the blood runs away and it all rushes through the veins like in a dream when you've got flu and you know it's turning round one axle and that, that's what you've got to want.

The collection's final play, *Lazarus*, is a brief meditation in three voices on the 11th chapter of John's Gospel. One of the unnamed voices recalls an elusive sense of unity amid a palpable fragmentation: "'I am the Life,' he said. . . . When he wept . . . something stripped the covers away and what's left is the life. Whatever's alive underneath it all. And you stand there, streaming with the darkness pouring over you, and he says, 'I'm what's left. You may go away, I won't.'" It's a fitting conclusion to a volume in which differing voices struggle to approximate a wholeness that language can never fully comprehend.