Shakespearean Secularizations:
Endangering Beliefs on the Early Modern Stage

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Abstract

This dissertation sets out to offer a renewed perspective on the participation of Shakespeare's theatre in the secularization of early modern England. It engages with current theories of secularization, in which the pluralization of beliefs is recognized as fuelling secularizing processes, as opposed to longstanding subtraction theories of secularization, which have mistakenly charted a comprehensive decline of belief. While this study acknowledges the historical reality of Shakespeare's involvement in the secularization of the religious landscape of early modernity, it also resists the common reception of his plays as prescient anticipations of much later secularisms. I argue that these retroactive secularist interpretations of the plays have tended to elide the profoundly conflicted responses to secularization in Shakespeare's drama. This dissertation's historical investigation of tolerance, demonism, blasphemy, and love in the plays reveals that while Shakespeare's dramas do often convey an implicit recognition of the possible opportunities that secularization presented, they also represent it as a development that could render humans vulnerable to social and to supernatural harm.

The introductory chapter provides an overview of current secularization theory, focusing particularly on Charles Taylor, the most influential proponent of recent developments in our understanding of secularizing processes. In cooperation with other theorists, Taylor has reanimated the idea of secularization by reconceiving of it as an unpredictable and dynamic process, largely driven by the pluralization of beliefs over time. I take up this hypothesis by demonstrating its potential for analyzing tolerance in several of Shakespeare's comedies, as well

as more generally as a means of furthering critical debate on Shakespeare and religion. Chapter one is devoted to Shakespeare's theatricalization in *Othello* of the idea that the devil could make use of the discordant processes of the Reformation, as well as of the innovations of humanism, both pluralizing engines of secularization in the period, in order to infiltrate weakened spiritual communities. Chapter two investigates Shakespeare's response in *Macbeth* to legislation that prohibited blasphemous swearing in public entertainments. Shakespeare appears to have been inspired by the new bill to write *Macbeth* in a way that superficially complied with the law, but which nonetheless engaged profoundly with the dispersion of the post-Reformation idea of blasphemy into a secularizing plurality of beliefs, a fragmentation that is enacted in the play with an ambiguous mixture of approval and disapproval. In the final chapter, I consider how in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare recuperates the radicalism of the Franciscan Order's societal and poetic ideals of relational and spiritual love in ways that initially appear to support, but which then ultimately subvert, English Protestantism's tentative investment in matrimonial love as the principal means by which the fraying bonds of the religious and the secular dimensions of Reformed society might be restored. Instead of celebrating a unified representation of Catholic or of Protestant aspirations for marriage, the play concludes by evoking a secularizing plurality of options for belief in matrimony, an impetus which has contributed to the currently widespread, albeit variously experienced, belief in wedded love as the cornerstone of the modern social imaginary.

Résumé

Cette thèse propose une perspective renouvelée sur la participation du

théâtre de Shakespeare dans la sécularisation de l'Angleterre pendant la

Renaissance. Elle utilise les théories actuelles de la sécularisation, selon lesquelles

la pluralisation des croyances est reconnue pour avoir alimenté les processus de

sécularisation, contrairement aux théories dites « de soustraction » qui attribuent

ceux-ci à une diminution globale de la croyance religieuse. Bien que cette étude

reconnaisse la réalité historique de l'implication de Shakespeare dans la

sécularisation du climat religieux de la Renaissance, elle résiste également à l'idée

populaire que ses pièces anticipaient de façon presciente la laïcité moderne. Je

soutiens que ces interprétations rétroactives des pièces de Shakespeare ont eu

tendance à élider les réponses en conflit à la sécularisation contenu dans le drame

de Shakespeare. Cette enquête historique de la tolérance, du démonisme, de

blasphème, et d'amour dans les pièces de Shakespeare révèle que ses drames

véhiculaient non seulement la reconnaissance implicite des opportunités que la

sécularisation présentait, mais aussi d'un développement capable de rendre les

humains plus vulnérables à l'endommagement social et surnaturel.

Le chapitre d'introduction fournit une vue d'ensemble de la théorie de la

sécularisation actuelle, en se concentrant particulièrement sur Charles Taylor, le

partisan le plus influent des développements récents dans notre compréhension

des processus de sécularisation. Avec d'autres théoriciens, Taylor a ravivé l'idée

de sécularisation en la présentant comme un processus imprévisible et dynamique,

conduit principalement par la pluralisation des croyances au fil du temps.

J'applique cette hypothèse en démontrant son potentiel pour l'analyse de la

tolérance dans plusieurs comédies de Shakespeare, ainsi que plus généralement comme un moyen de faire progresser le débat critique sur Shakespeare et la religion. Le premier chapitre est consacré à *Othello* où Shakespeare théâtralise l'idée que le diable peut faire usage des processus discordants de la réforme protestante, ainsi que des innovations de l'humanisme, deux instigateurs de la pluralisation séculaire durant cette période, afin d'infiltrer une communauté spirituelle affaiblie. Le deuxième chapitre étudie la réponse de Shakespeare dans *Macbeth* à la législation interdisant le langage blasphématoire dans les spectacles publics. Ici, Shakespeare décrie le nouveau projet de loi en écrivant d'une manière conforme seulement en apparence à la loi, mais qui en réalité promulgue une dispersion de l'idée post-réforme du blasphème en une pluralité séculaire de croyances, une fragmentation qui est jouée dans la pièce par le biais d'un mélange ambigu d'approbation et de désapprobation. Dans le dernier chapitre, je considère comment, dans *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare s'appuie sur le radicalisme des idéaux sociaux et poétiques de l'ordre Franciscain, particulièrement ceux concernant l'amour relationnel et spirituel, d'une manière qui apparait initialement à le soutenir, mais qui finalement s'insurge contre l'investissement du protestantisme anglais dans l'amour matrimonial comme principal moyen de restauration des dimensions religieuses et séculaires de la société réformée. Au lieu de célébrer une représentation unifiée des aspirations catholiques ou protestantes du mariage, la pièce se termine en évoquant une pluralité d'options pour séculariser la croyance dans le mariage, un élan qui a contribué à faire aujourd'hui de l'amour conjugal, sous toutes ses formes, une fondation de l'imaginaire social moderne.

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Introduction: Theories of Secularization and Shakespeare's Drama

Early modernity has been characterized as an era of amplified religious struggle, yet it also has been regarded as a period of greatly increased secularity. These tendencies might appear to be contradictory, especially from the perspective of many longstanding theories of secularization, which mistakenly assert that the secular gradually evacuates and eventually replaces the religious. Yet in light of developments in our understanding of secularizing processes, a more detailed overview of which I will turn to later in this introduction, there is no contradiction in the simultaneity of these historical trends. In recent studies, emphasis has shifted to affirming that the more intensive the religious debate, the more the pluralization of belief, the more accelerated the rate of secularization becomes, as more people are exposed to an increasing range of belief options, including varieties of religious spirituality, as well as an array of more or less exclusive humanisms. The equation of pluralization with secularization may be observed in Shakespeare's England, where there appeared along a widening spectrum of belief orientations relative to the infinite and the eternal, a variety of innovative manifestations of religiosity and of humanism. Reactions to this secularizing diversification of beliefs in the period ranged from enthusiasm, to apprehension, to outright fear. On the one hand, it was possible to embrace eagerly and with renewed curiosity a post-Reformation climate of plural beliefs about the human, the natural, and the supernatural. On the other hand, this atmosphere of social and spiritual disunity could be a terrifying prospect for people in search of a coherently unified strategy for repelling the devil and for

drawing nearer to God. This dissertation's investigation of tolerance, demonism, blasphemy, and love in Shakespeare's plays reveals that while his dramas do often convey an implicit recognition of the possible opportunities that secularization presented, they also represent it as a development that could render humans vulnerable to social and to supernatural harm.

Before turning to several prominently secularizing scenes in Shakespeare's comedies, I will consider briefly the *Essays* of Francis Bacon, many of which reflect meaningfully upon secularization in the English Renaissance. Four of them in particular, "Of Unity in Religion," "Of Atheism," "Of Superstition," and "On Vicissitude of Things," illustrate a range of optimistic and pessimistic attitudes toward the secularizing proliferation of beliefs that transformed England and Europe in the wake of the Reformation. According to certain modern secularist perspectives, it may be tempting to see Bacon, the luminous rationalist and skeptical empiricist, as working to abandon religious thought in favour of secular thinking, but his writing does not do this. Bacon's participation in the secularization of his time is instead much more responsive to the pluralization of beliefs as secularization thesis. Bacon expresses a complicated mixture of reactions to the secularizing pluralization of interrelated religious and secular beliefs in early modernity, at times yearning for a return to shared religious agreement, and at other times revelling in the expansion of beliefs in which his own thoughts were so energetically involved.

In "Of Unity of Religion," he initially extols the social and the spiritual benefits of religious concord: "Religion being the chief band of human society, it is a happy thing when itself is well contained within the true band of unity" (67).

He thus asserts the importance of religious agreement against the backdrop of divisiveness that had defined the spirituality of Europe throughout his lifetime. He then admits nostalgia for an ancient past in which he presumes society was more religiously monolithic, remarking that the "quarrels and divisions about religion were evils unknown to the heathen" (67). He goes on to observe that his "God hath this attribute, that he is a jealous God, and therefore his worship and religion will endure no mixture nor partner" (67). Pluralization of beliefs is perilous. Unity of belief is beneficial. It "is certain," Bacon goes on to write, "that heresies and schisms are of all others the greatest scandals . . . . So that nothing doth so much keep men out of the church, and drive men out of the church, as breach of unity" (67). He then cites Paul's position in 1 Corinthians 14:23, on divisiveness in the early church: "If an heathen come in and hear you speak with several tongues, will he not say that you are mad?" (67). Bacon also adduces Rabelais, the "master of scoffing," who in his depiction of the "dance of heretics," scorns the multiplicity of religious beliefs that prevailed during the Reformation (67). As Bacon describes it, "every sect of them hath a diverse posture or cringe by themselves, which cannot but move derision in worldlings and depraved politics, who are apt to contemn holy things" (67). At least early in his essay, fractured religious belief encourages the ridicule of the ungodly and is to be harshly condemned.

Yet despite all of this apparent conviction about the virtues of religious unity expressed at the start of his essay, Bacon gradually acknowledges that it may not be an attainable ideal in the splintered world of beliefs he inhabits. There are also dangers in trying to turn back. He advises, for instance, that one should be

careful not to compromise too little or too much in order to achieve unity of belief: "Concerning the bounds of unity, the true placing of them importeth exceedingly" (67-68). On the one hand, for "certain zelants all speech of pacification is odious . . . . Peace is not the matter, but following and party" (68). On the other hand, certain "lukewarm persons think they may accommodate points of religion by middle ways, and taking part of both, and witty reconcilements, as if they would make an arbitrement between God and man" (68). According to Bacon, both of "these extremes are to be avoided" (68). He wants to stake out a space of religious harmony in his own time, but not at the expense of what he deems to be the most accurate religious beliefs.

Bacon thus exerts himself to craft a model in which a flexible religious unity might be possible, one in which certain divergent beliefs are accommodated, but in which the integrity of divine truth is maintained. He argues, for instance, that all would be well if only "the points fundamental and of substance in religion were truly discerned and distinguished from points not merely of faith, but of opinion, order, or good intention" (68). He counsels in one direction that when "the matter of the point controverted is too small and light, not worth the heat and strife about it, kindled only by contradiction," it should be left alone. In the other direction he states that "when the matter of the point controverted is great, but it is driven to an over-great subtlety and obscurity, so that it becometh a thing rather ingenious than substantial," it too should be left to rest (69). This appeal to a shared identification of adiaphorous religious beliefs sounds like a reasonable solution, but where the ornaments of belief ended, and where the foundations of belief began, was itself a matter of controversy not only between Catholics and

Protestants, but also often between Catholics and Catholics, as well as Protestants and Protestants. In the face of these obstacles, a return to religious unity begins to seem in Bacon's essay like an unattainable fantasy.

The more he works to affirm the importance of religious unity, the more he comes to recognize the impediments to it. Religious unity is laudable, but it is nonetheless prone to "false peaces or unities: the one, when the peace is grounded but upon an implicit ignorance (for all colours will agree in the dark); the other, when it is pieced up upon a direct admission of contraries in fundamental points" (69). In exasperation, Bacon turns to God as the only possible arbiter of incommensurable beliefs: "And if it come so to pass in that distance of judgement which is between man and man, shall we not think that God above, that knows the heart, doth not discern that frail men in some of their contradictions intend the same thing, and accepteth of both?" (69). Bacon's desire to recover absolute religious unity is subject not only to God's silence on this question, but is throughout his essay beset by numerous qualifications and exceptions.

Bacon sets out to retrieve a world of perfect religious agreement, in which tolerating other beliefs would be unnecessary, but by the end of the essay he is forced by the apparent irreversibility of early modern religious pluralization to fashion instead a version of secularizing tolerance.[1] The harmonious conditions of belief he imagines would approximate a state of religious unity in terms of many

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[1] For an excellent account of tolerance in early modernity see Benjamin J. Kaplan's *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe*. On toleration of difference in Shakespeare, see B. J. Sokol's *Shakespeare and Tolerance*. Sokol devotes some of his analysis to religious toleration, but he focuses primarily on gender, nationality, race, and humour.

desirable social effects including peace, but instead of one belief holding sway, multiple beliefs would be tenable within a certain prescribed range. We should not, however, make the mistake of equating this with the broad religious protections enshrined in various human rights legislation around the world today. Bacon remains deeply apprehensive about the toleration of alternative beliefs, particularly "in cases of overt scandal, blasphemy, or intermixture of practice against the state," when it is according to him permissible "to force consciences" by means of violence (69). He also worries that "when atheists and profane persons do hear of so many discordant and contrary opinions in religion; it doth avert them from the church and maketh them to sit down in the chair of scorners" (67). In his "On Atheism," he thus remarks that one of the causes of "atheism" is "divisions in religion, if they be many, for any one main division addeth zeal to both sides, but many divisions introduce atheism" (110). In "Of Superstition," he cautions in a related way that it "were better to have no opinion of God at all than such an opinion as is unworthy of him: for the one is unbelief, the other is contumely; and certainly superstition is the reproach of the Deity" (111). Yet in between the extremes of atheistic skepticism and superstitious credulity, both of which he rejects, Bacon eventually settles upon a kind of secularizing tolerance of plural beliefs as the best solution.

The final sentence of his essay "On Religious Unity" certainly points in that direction. Bacon cites a "notable observation of a wise Father," whose name has not been identified by later editors. He quotes this source as contending "that those which held and persuaded pressure of consciences, were commonly interested therein themselves for their own ends" (70). Perhaps using this

authoritatively paternalistic invented ethos as a way of shielding his own critique of religious hegemony, Bacon punctuates his conflicted essay with a secularizing declaration of resistance against spiritual narrowness. He further emphasizes this conclusion at the very end of his book of essays, in his "Of Vicissitude of Things," in which he proposes to employ moderation when dealing with "vicissitude of sects and religions," the "greatest vicissitude of things amongst men," which "rule in men's minds most" (230). He seeks to "speak therefore of the causes of new sects, and to give some counsel concerning them, as far as the weakness of human judgement can give stay to so great revolutions" (230). Bacon describes how when

> the religion formerly received is rent by discords, and when the holiness of the professors of religion is decayed and full of scandal, and withal the times be stupid, ignorant, and barbarous, you may [not] doubt the springing up of a new sect, if then also there should arise any extravagant and strange spirit to make himself author thereof. (230)

Pluralization in this sense is undesirable, for it is the result of degraded religiosity, intellectual dimness, and charismatic demagoguery. That said, the reaction to the possibility of sectarian innovations should be to prevent corruption and to cultivate inclusiveness: "Surely there is no better way to stop the rising of new sects and schisms than to reform abuses; to compound the smaller differences; to proceed mildly and not with sanguinary persecutions; and rather to take off the principal authors by winning and advancing them than to enrage them by violence and bitterness" (230). Bacon's reaction to the pluralization of beliefs thereby

settles once again into an invitation to tolerance. He eventually concludes this essay, which comes at the very end of his book of essays, by claiming that "it is not good to look too long upon these turning wheels of vicissitude, lest we become giddy" (233). The essay's very last sentence then suggests that his genre of writing is not in any case the appropriate medium for these ideas, as "for the philology of them, that is but a circle of tales, and therefore not fit for this writing" (233). Bacon thus concludes his book by implying that we look elsewhere, to stories, in order to learn more about the revolutionary conversions of belief he has laboured to define.

I will turn now to a pair of important secularizing scenes in Shakespeare's plays, each of which may appear to call for interpretations based on an assumption of gradual Western secularist disengagement from religion, but which instead reveal much more of value about Shakespearean secularization when the pluralization of beliefs they represent and promote is examined instead. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Lafeu informs the audience that the King of France has been cured of his illness, but instead of Lafeu doing so by concentrating on the king's physical recovery, he does so by gesturing expansively toward the outer ranges of what it was possible to believe about the transcendent in the period. He walks onstage, speaking these words:

> They say that miracles are past, and we have our philosophical
> persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and
> causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing

ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit

ourselves to an unknown fear. (2.3.1-6)[2]

At one end of the belief continuum posited in this statement, "philosophical

persons" have made common and understandable otherworldly mysteries. They

have, moreover, done so even to the extent that God's "causeless" primacy is

overmastered by them, as though the divine first cause is not really the prime

impetus of all, but is instead itself explainable as deriving from some other,

identifiable, prior cause. At the other end of the continuum there is absolute,

terrifying, unknowability. In between these we may imagine other belief

orientations in relation to transcendence in the period, ranging from atheism, to

heresy, to the murky middle of religious unorthodoxies and orthodoxies,

unconventionalities and conventionalities, to adiaphorous spirituality, to

agnosticism, to blissful, uneasy, frightened, or despairing abandonment of the self

to complete ontological uncertainty.

Lafeu's communication of the king's healing reverberates with all of these

possibilities, as does much of the play as a whole. In one sense, Helena's

successful administration of a physiological remedy to the king is utterly

mundane. She learned from her physician father about a potion, his "only

darling," which has been particularly efficacious for curing the type of

"malignant" disease that afflicts the king (2.1.107, 111). Helena convinces the

French monarch to try it and it works. In quite a different sense, there is a

tendency in the play to view the sovereign's return to health as the result of a

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[2] Unless otherwise noted, all references to Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

divine intervention, one that is only mediated through Helena. In order to persuade the hesitant king, who protests that he does not want to "prostitute" his "past-cure malady / To empirics," Helena frames what she offers as a transference of divinity: "Dear sir, to my endeavours give consent; / Of heaven, not me, make an experiment" (2.1.121-22, 153-54). She states that "it is presumption in us when / The help of heaven we count the act of men" (2.1.151-52). After hearing from Lafeu that the king has been cured, Parolles says "'tis the rarest argument of wonder that hath / shot out in our latter times" (2.3.7-8). Bertram concurs, "And so 'tis" (2.3.9). For Lafeu, that the "learned and authentic fellows" had proclaimed the king "incurable" seemed to be the final word, until Helena restored him to health, "showing of a heavenly effect in an earthly actor" (2.3.12, 14, 24). Parolles and Lafeu collaborate to attribute wickedness to anyone who would believe otherwise. Parolles begins the thought, "he's of a most / facinerious spirit that will not acknowledge it to be the—," "Very hand of heaven," Lafeu concludes for him (2.3.29-31). Lafeu next emphasizes that "great power, great / transcendence" is at work and that beyond specifically the king's "recov'ry," all should be "Generally thankful" (2.3.34-35). The king's body as sacral body politic does not belong to him alone, but is instead a manifestation of the state. His sickness was the state's illness, his recovery the nation's as well.

In between these two extreme ways of understanding the king's resurgence of health, between the purely physiological and the manifestly divine, are many other degrees of belief that more or less combine these two seemingly incompatible points of view—and which are especially tangled with each other in the cluster of beliefs situated at the very centre of the continuum I am describing.

Elsewhere in the play, using words that anticipate her ministrations to the king,

for example, Helena gives a speech in which she explains the heartsickness that

Bertram has caused her to feel, which she is dedicated to curing by herself, but not

completely without the help of heaven:

> Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
>
> Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
>
> Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
>
> Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. (1.2.216-19)

The remedies we seek are in ourselves, not in heaven, she at first seems to say

according to a subtraction account of secularization, in which the religious and the

secular are erroneously imagined to be distinct and opposite, with the secular

gradually supplanting the religious. Her words, however, cannot entirely discard

the religious. She blends an apparent exclusion of transcendent belief with a belief

perspective deeply beholden to the transcendent. The limitless "sky" provides

"free scope," only impeding those who obstruct themselves. Heaven helps,

especially those who help themselves.

The remainder of Helena's speech mingles self-determining and divinely-

determining modes of belief. Her yearning for Bertram is couched in language

suggestive of the theological debate between justification by merit or by faith:

"who ever strove / To show her merit, that did miss her love?" (1.2.226-27). The

answer to this question is unspecified, but surely many had demonstrated amorous

merit, who were then either rewarded or who went unrewarded in their pursuit of

love. Helena appears to earn what she achieves in the play, yet her

accomplishments are also repeatedly described as the work of God. The most

accurate reading, it would seem, rests simultaneously in both interpretations at once.

According to the subtraction theory, these possibilities should be mutually exclusive, with secular agency eventually triumphing over religious determinism. But this model is unsuited to defining the representation of secularization in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Helena is not being cynical when she describes her complicated spirituality. Although she may appear to do so from a modern secularist point of view, she does not, for instance, merely use religion as a means to worldly ends when convincing the king to accept her assistance. Helena is instead characterized throughout the play by her thoughtful spiritual adherence to a far more complex range of beliefs than that held by the other characters in the play, who are generally inclined to more uncomplicated declarations of religious belief. Helena is also, however, unlike the "philosophical persons" to whom Lafeu refers, who verge on attempting to explain away divine causation. As opposed to those who occupy the very narrow spans near those outer limits of the early modern belief-spectrum between extreme skepticism and unquestioning faith, Helena's capaciousness as a believer, one whose thoughts range widely across this plural belief continuum, makes her the most dazzlingly secularizing character in the play. In the midst of her awareness of the beliefs of others, her ability not to lose faith in them, herself, or in God, characterizes her powerfully tolerant charismatic personhood. The plurality of beliefs she espouses across the continuum's span empowers her in the theatrical context she inhabits, for it imbues her with the capacity to charm characters and playgoers from a wide variety of belief orientations. She is thus a force of secularizing inclusiveness,

inviting everyone she encounters into her own functionally positive apprehension of the multitude of beliefs relative to the infinite and the eternal. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, however, comedic optimism is not always the principle reaction to secularization in Shakespeare's dramas, many of which, particularly the tragedies, see secularizing pluralization as perilous to society and to the individual soul.

The approach I have employed here in relation to a few of the secularizing speeches in *All's Well That Ends Well* is productive of meanings that would be unavailable if one attempted to examine them according to a subtraction of religious belief model of secularization, in which secularity must be seen to be on the way to predominance over religiosity. It would be interpretively unrewarding to hunt for evidence in the play that the secular has replaced or is on its way to replacing the religious. To imagine Shakespeare's dramas as prescient declarations of secularist modernity would be a projection, not a discovery.

Subtraction of religion questions about the secularizations represented in the plays are thus inadequate for understanding the historical meaning of secularization in Shakespeare's plays. It makes much more historiographical sense to examine how the quality and the quantity of the pluralization of beliefs they promote were secularizing in their own time. Reconsidering secularization in Shakespeare's plays according to this new theoretical principle will thus require a fresh set of questions about his drama's theatricalization of the religious and the secular, of the sacred and the profane, of enchantment and disenchantment, of credulity and skepticism. What is the process by which prominently secularizing representations in the dramas call forth a multiplicity of beliefs, thus participating

in the cultural shift away from more dogmatic religious unity toward a condition of secularizing disunity, in which a plurality of orientations toward or away from the transcendent cohabit the same times and spaces? Why were these secularizations received by some as socially and spiritually beneficial, while for others they were viewed as a source of profound concern? Why are the plays so successful at representing so many different versions of these reactions? These questions are far more productive of meaningful answers than those that ponder the extent to which the religious has been superseded by the secular, as though in early modernity the religious and the secular could have been fully distinct categories in the way that they have come to be imagined by many in the world today.

As a case in point, one that indeed appears to work against my proposition, consider what Theseus says in response to Hippolyta's comment on the lovers' "strange" description of their experience in the woods and transformation of affections in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.1). "I never may believe / These antique fables," he says, "nor these fairy toys" (5.1.2-3). Theseus appears to relegate to the distant past and to the world of fiction what Hippolyta terms "all the story of the night told over" (5.1.24). He seems to ground all of reality in a principally secular present, a move which seems to be fully amenable with modern subtraction theories of secularization, but to frame his language in that way one would have to ignore the poetic and the historical contexts in which his words are spoken.

According to these contextualizations, his words are instead secularizing because they draw attention to a plurality of beliefs. Theseus, for example, calls

the lovers' narration of events "More strange than true," thus separating the truth, not from untruth, but rather sequestering it from the "strange," the estranging, the foreign, the alien, the unacquainted, the unversed, the reluctant, the outside, the adventitious, the external, the removed, the distant, the different, the unfamiliar, the unknown, the unusual, the abnormal, the queer, the exceptional, the uncomplying, the wondrous, and the other (5.1.2) ("strange").[3] This panoply of numinous strangeness is what Theseus "never may believe" (5.1.2). His skeptical stance, worded as it is, does not exclude the possibility of something strange beyond the horizon of his capacity to believe. Rather than restricting belief, his speech implicitly enjoins its hearers to speculate on what may lie beyond the threshold of what counts as truth. "Lovers and madmen have such seething brains," he goes on to say, they "apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends" (5.1.4-6). In the subtraction theory sense, what these lovers and madmen see are merely "fantasies," nothing more (5.1.5). In the pluralization of belief sense of secularization, however, their "shaping fantasies" really do "apprehend" viable possibilities for orientation toward the ineffable strangeness of the beyond, "more than cool reason," just one belief position among many, "ever comprehends" (5.1.5, 6). Their "seething brains" are like boiling cauldrons that behave as portals to the beyond (5.1.4).

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[3] In Ken Jackson and Arthur S. Marotti's *Shakespeare and Religion: Early Modern and Postmodern Perspectives*, they resort to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida in order to conceptualize the estranged otherness of that which is beyond being: "Derrida came to recognize the connection between his philosophy and a whole set of religious discourses, including those in the wide-ranging tradition of negative theology. . . . Like Shakespeare, Derrida is interested in religion stripped of religion, a 'religion without religion,' that presses for a sustained attention to otherness, to non-Being, to that which cannot be thought—in short, the impossible" (6).

Theseus also associates the lover and the madman with the poet. Although his superficial intent is to belittle the poetic process, his words nonetheless capture the expansiveness of creative thought:

> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
>
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
>
> And as imagination bodies forth
>
> The forms of things unknown (5.1.12-15)

According to Theseus, "the poet's pen / Turns them to shapes and gives to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name" (5.1.15-17). The infinitely strange is thus rendered locally accessible through artistic representations and Theseus, despite his allegiance to "cool reason," becomes himself, in the course of his figuratively-charged speech, an unwilling poet of the unknown.

Theseus, moreover, berates those who would seek to establish the causation of emotions like joy and fear:

> Such tricks hath strong imagination,
>
> That if it would but apprehend some joy,
>
> It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
>
> Or in the night, imagining some fear,
>
> How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear! (5.1.18-22)

If he could force others into perceiving the world in his way, he would limit all thoughts that seek to know the origin of emotions. As an Athenian rationalist, Theseus is ill-equipped to ponder feelings, the sources of which are empirically unverifiable. The hearers of this speech are, nonetheless, led to wonder at who the

initial "bringer" of these emotions, whom Theseus wants to banish from thought, might be.

On the surface of his speech at least, Theseus locks himself into a belief-position that admits nothing but the obvious, thus ignoring so much of the supernaturalism that occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His references to happiness and to fright as stand-alone emotional phenomena, which derive from no cause, are inadequate. Hippolyta responds to this insufficiency by referencing the lovers' shared version of the transformatively frightening, yet ultimately joyous events that occurred in the forest:

> But all the story of the night told over,
>
> And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
>
> More witnesseth than fancy's images
>
> And grows to something of great constancy;
>
> But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-27)

Of course, from a narrow secularist perspective, this evidence does not prove Theseus' skepticism false. For the lovers' stories, relying as they do upon the intervention of fairies, are according to that view of secularization less real than Theseus' practical certainty about, for example, what has caused the lovers' sleeping forms to appear before him: "No doubt they rose up early to observe / The rite of May; and hearing our intent, / Came here in grace of our solemnity" (4.1.132-34). From a rigidly secularist perspective, Theseus is more realistically evolved because he inhabits a proto-modern world of skeptical rationalism. The other characters are in comparison far less representative of reality, for they are more implicated in the imaginary fairy-world than Theseus.

Yet we are informed during the conversation between Titania and Oberon that Theseus has also been subject to their direct influence, although the extent of his awareness of it is unclear. According to Oberon, Theseus is beloved of Titania, "I know thy love to Theseus" (76). Furthermore, she has manipulated various cruel encounters he has had with women, including his rape and abandonment of them:

> Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night
>
> From Perigenia, whom he ravished?
>
> And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
>
> With Ariadne and Antiopa? (2.1.77-80)

Despite Theseus' self-proclaimed skepticism, his beliefs are problematized by the broader dramatic context of his identity, in which there is no escaping the influence the fairies have had on him. He may not know it, but the fairy queen has played a role in his life. Titania and Oberon's dialogue even leaves open the possibility that Theseus has knowingly had dalliances with her. Immediately, for example, after Oberon's question about Titania's meddling in Theseus' relations with women, she denies the accusations and then possibly defines the terms of her encounters with Theseus more precisely. "These are the forgeries of jealousy," she says, but then goes on to imply that Oberon has interfered repeatedly in the "sport" she has had, in descending order of obvious likelihood, with her fellow fairies, with Oberon, or with Theseus (2.1.81, 87):

> And never, since the middle summer's spring,
>
> Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
>
> By paved fountain or by rushy brook,

> Or in the beached margent of the sea,
>
> . . . .
>
> But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport. (2.1.82-87)

Strictly speaking, what her "our" refers to is indeterminate, but given that these words come in the very next lines after her denial of interference in Theseus' erotic misbehaviours, it is possible that like Bottom later in the play, Theseus may have become a participant with the fairy queen in the pastoral "sport" she describes. Theseus is, after all, the one who refers to the wedding night at the end of the play as "fairy time" (5.1.364). If Theseus is included in Titania's "our," it would mean that he knows far more than he lets on in his skeptical speech to Hippolyta. His psyche would thus hold a simultaneity of multiple beliefs and motives, which would make him, in the pluralization sense, a manipulatively secularizing character. He becomes a ruler who thinks tolerance of supernatural beliefs is dangerous, both because he is the ruler of philosophical Athens, but also because of his Amazonian bride, whose mythological otherness he needs to tame. Theseus knows that the full plurality of beliefs deployed in the play are indeed tenable, but he puts them to use in ways that are pragmatically beneficial for himself as a performatively skeptical denier of powers that exceed his own. The fairies, in any case, affect his life, whether he acknowledges them or not. Either way, what his character may signify as a stand-in for the Elizabethan religious elite, who wanted to quash enduring folk-belief in fairies and other forms of

pagan superstition, is not as straightforwardly readable as it may at first appear to be from a modern secularist perspective.[4]

The blunt subtraction of belief account of secularization that would seem to elevate Theseus as a proto-modern-secularist above the other, fairy-benighted characters, is reductive. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and likewise in *All's Well That Ends Well*, moments that would appear to call strongly for subtraction readings of secularization are actually much more productive of historical and dramatic meanings when engaged with according to the pluralization of beliefs model of secularization. This becomes metatheatrically apparent when considering that Hippolyta's speculation about the lovers' retelling of their stories may involve the playgoers as well, whose "minds" are "transfigured so together" and "More witnesseth than fancy's images," growing as they do to "something of great constancy" (5.1.24-26). What was staged for the Elizabethan audience of this play was a secularizing drama that simultaneously encouraged both belief in superstitious paganism in one direction, and extreme skepticism in the other direction, so that the beliefs the play sustained are neither credulous nor skeptical alone, but also everything in between, "howsoever, strange and admirable" (5.1.27).

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[4] For more on the complex relationship of elite politics to popular lore see Marjorie Swann's "The Politics of Fairylore in Early Modern English Literature."

Charles Taylor has been the most influential scholar of recent developments in the field of secularization theory.[5] His revisionary account refutes the traditional subtraction stories of secularization, master narratives in which religious beliefs are shown to be steadily erased from field after field of human activity, so that eventually only the secular remains.[6] In cooperation with a growing number of other theorists, Taylor has aimed to challenge this reductive view.[7] Although these scholars come from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, sociology, and religious studies, they all agree that the idea of secularization should not be taken for granted as a uniform, universal, and inevitable process, but should instead be understood as a variegated, particular, and contingent activity. Rescuing it from the stale, whiggishly teleological topic it had become, their collective efforts have reanimated the discussion of secularization by reconceiving of it as an unpredictable and dynamic process.

They have proposed the development of a model that will facilitate the observation of the variety of ways in which secularization occurs in different

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[5] For his most significant work on the topic see *A Secular Age, Dilemmas and Connections,* and "Western Secularity."

[6] Fore more details on this central tenet of Taylor's theorization see *A Secular Age*, pages 26, 27, 157, 253, 255, 264, 267, 268, 270, 273, 291, 573, 575, 577, 578, 579, 590, 595, and especially 572 and 826.

[7] Noteworthy exponents include R. Scott Appleby, Talal Asad, Rajeev Bhargava, Craig Calhoun, José Casanova, Jürgen Habermas, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Mark Juergensmeyer, Peter J. Katzenstein, Dermot A. Lane, Cecelia Lynch, Richard Madsen, David Martin, Vincent P. Pecora, Alfred Stepan, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, Peter Van Der Veer, and Rob Warner.

times throughout history and in different places around the world. They are not

only interested in how and why secularization effects change, but also in how and

why secularizing processes themselves mutate over time and in different places.

They reject the narrow focus of longstanding secularization theories, which

adduce the separation of church and state, the transfer of church lands, and the

decline in rates of church attendance, as in themselves conclusive evidence of the

gradual and unavoidable disappearance of religion from the world. The official

secularity of certain public institutions and property, the diminishment of

traditional religious rituals, and even the practice of militant atheism are not

adequate indicators of a comprehensive retreat of religious beliefs of the

proportions described and anticipated in traditional accounts of secularization.

While they do not deny that these micro-secularizations occur, they aim to

problematize their relevance to the processes of secularization at macro-historical

levels.

Canvassing a broader range of times, places, and human experiences,

Taylor endeavours to investigate "the conditions of belief" in which secularization

occurs at different moments in history, as well as the ways in which and the

reasons for which those conditions become altered over time (*A Secular Age* 3).

He works to build conceptual bridges between the particular conditions of belief

in the past and those in the present:

> the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a
>
> society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God,
>
> to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one
>
> human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I

would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly

some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty

just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith

(at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer

axiomatic. There are alternatives. (*A Secular Age* 3)

According to Taylor, secularization does not entail the erasure of religion, but

instead a pluralization of alternatives relative to the transcendent, which coexist

alongside one another, in a condition of neutral or respectful mutual awareness.

Secularization is thus a process of consistent reassessment, not a static condition

of being in which an ideal of secularity has been achieved, or is just about to be

achieved. Secularization has been active at different moments in history and in

different places around the world, but it is not an inevitable accomplishment of

civilization. The current rate of secularizing pluralization of beliefs, and peaceful

appreciation of the beliefs of others, is quite high in certain parts of the globe, yet

much less so in others.

Another feature of Taylor's model is that elements of the experience of

secularization differ across times and places, so that secularizations in early

modern England will be different in many respects from the secularizations

currently underway in Canada, in the United States, in Turkey, or in Egypt. The

pluralization of beliefs is a significant feature of secularization, but the relative

interactions of those beliefs will not be identical in different locales, but will

instead assume distinct identities that match their own contexts. This does not

mean that secularization is a universally occurring phenomenon, which invariably

springs up in disparate cultures. For although it has become a global

preoccupation, Taylor posits that secularization was originally an idiosyncratically Western phenomenon, which arose out of specifically Latin Christian religious conditions.[8]

In order to transport his readers to that context, Taylor invites us to alienate ourselves from what has become the common definition of the secular, a presentist understanding of the term that inhibits our ability to see the secular for what it was in the past. He reminds us that the modern conceptualization of the secular, in addition to its cognate terms (secularization, secularism, secularist, secularity), may be traced back to the early days of Latin Christendom, when the secular was imagined as a kind of worldly religiousness (*A Secular Age* 54-55).[9] Following upon the Platonic distinction between ideal and non-ideal forms, Saint Augustine's differentiation of the City of God from the City of Man posited two related orders of existence, one eternal, the other secular. A fundamental difference between secularity as it is conceived of now and as it was understood originally is that modern Western secularism tends to signify a marginalization of the divine, while during late antiquity, as well as during the medieval and early modern periods, the secular was still affiliated very intimately with the religious, particularly insofar as the concept emerged from a long tradition of Christian

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[8] As José Casanova has observed, there are many forms of secularist belief and secularizations underway around the world, but these proliferations are the result of colonial or cooperative exposure to an ideological pattern that has been formed by a particularly European historical experience ("The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms"). When adopted in non-Western contexts, secularism is always adapted, further contributing to how, like the broader process of secularization, secularism today is difficult to define because it is always on the move. It is, consequently, often helpful to think of modern secularisms instead of a single monolithic secularism, or even of secularizations instead of secularization.

[9] See also Taylor's "Western Secularity."

reflection on the religious accommodation of secular life. During these eras, it made sense that the religious and the secular were closely related spheres of human activity under God. The religious were invested with more direct access to the *aeternum* and the lay faithful were more grounded in the *saeculum*. The eternal could be self-sufficient, but the secular relied entirely upon the eternal for being and for guidance.[10] Contrasting the difference between that frame of reference and our own, Taylor asks: "How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naïvely within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone's construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option?" (*A Secular Age* 14). In other words, how over time did the secular become disembedded from the religious and secularism become a socially viable option for many as a stance relative to the infinite and the eternal?

According to Taylor, the Hildebrandine Reforms of the eleventh century and then the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 were significant indicators of the formation of a climate in which at first the clergy and then the masses were expected to conform to elite standards of religious practice (*A Secular Age* 242-43, 265, 786). These early medieval reforms laid the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation, when a variety of new religious construals generated new forms of secularity. Protestant leaders encouraged laypeople to become better than

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[10] In some ways, this is still the case, since the ideology of secularism requires the idea of religion. A culture may be religious without requiring a secular dimension, but secularism always requires the category of the religious against which to define itself.

the religious, although there were many different opinions on how that was to be achieved (*A Secular Age* 77, 81-82). Among other initiatives, the Counter-Reformation responded with its own version of spiritual expansion and improvement. One measure that stands out is its bolstering of the Catholic ecclesiastical ranks with the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits were sent into Protestant territories and to the New World, where they laboured to release souls from the dangers of perceived spiritual error. As reforming and counter-reforming authorities zealously sought to outdo one another's efforts to transform all Christians into ideal religious subjects, options for making sense of the transcendent pluralized and competed in accelerated and intensified ways throughout the late Renaissance. For some, this divisiveness resulted in absolute devotion to one Christian option in opposition to the others. For many others, the proliferation of antagonistic points of view meant that no single denomination could rest uncontested as the undisputed purveyor of the sacred. An increase in religious possibilities meant that each system of belief depended upon an implied rejection of other forms of beliefs. The Reformation's atmosphere of spiritual discord had the capacity to diminish the ability of some to commit unreservedly and uncontentiously to any single version of Christian faith.

The renegotiation of the places of various religious and secular commitments during the Reformation, although not generally categorized in the period as secularization per se, nonetheless drove a secularizing process by pluralizing alternative options for transcendent belief and spiritual flourishing, as well as for other beliefs founded on radical skepticism, such as exclusive humanism and even atheism. In a special issue of *Representations* on early

modern secularism, Victoria Kahn cites Donald Kelley's work on humanist

philology as providing an important analysis of the historiographical

consciousness of the Renaissance, in particular Lorenzo Valla's famous "exposure

of the forgery of the so-called 'Donation of Constantine'" by means of linguistic

and historical analysis (4). Valla also used humanist methods of inquiry to treat

"the text of the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the New Testament, as a

historical document" (4). Although Kahn relies implicitly upon a subtraction

model in her overall discussion of secularism in the period, she notes with regard

to Valla, that despite the skeptical nature of his scholarship, he "always protested

his religious orthodoxy" (4). When presented with such apparent inconsistencies,

it is perhaps tempting to assume that fear of reprisal motivated Valla's avowals of

faith. We should not, however, conclude that he and his fellow humanists were

atheists. Atheism in early modern society was not widespread, but was generally

understood as a kind of spiritual aberration. This is not to say that there were no

atheists, but rather that as an orientation toward the infinite and the eternal, it had

very little purchase in the social mainstream of the early modern period.[11]

In the eighteenth century, the transcendent became for many, in particular

the well-educated, a reality that had existed since the inception of creation as fully

disengaged from the worldly. God had designed the world, but left it to humans to

navigate. Taylor describes this anthropocentric shift as initiating a program of

reform focussed on second causes. In this impersonal order, "God relates to us

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[11] For a cogent introduction to the history of atheism see *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, edited by Michael Martin. See also *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, edited by Michael Hunter and David Wooton.

primarily by establishing a certain order of things, whose moral shape we can easily grasp, if we are not misled by false and superstitious notions" (*A Secular Age* 221). The Deist version of God as a non-intervening entity, who had placed humans in a rationally complete natural world, contributed to a reordering of society that prioritized self-discipline, scientific rationalism, and the economics of mutual benefit. The comprehensive revision of church historiography was another prominent feature of the transformation of beliefs in the period, for God's revealed presence in the world was relegated exclusively to the biblical past. The predominance of these construals did not, however, cast away the reality or the authority of the infinite and the eternal. The motions listed above laid a practical explanatory "grid" over all of the immanent world, but the duty to obey the precepts of divine reason is what sustained the Deist project of rationalizing the human understanding of the created world (*A Secular Age* 275, 221). Of course, despite the rise of these elite rationalist hypotheses, belief in enchantment persisted to varying degrees across all demographic groups. Alongside these persistent beliefs, the intellectual elite worked to recover the "idea of a true, original natural religion, which has been obscured by accretions and corruptions, and which must now be laid clear again" (*A Secular Age* 221). So what may appear from certain modern vantages to have been the purely secular accomplishments of that era were actually motivated by the religious impetus to make the world live up to the divine potential instantiated at the moment of creation. Deism was not only a begetter of new forms of religious doubt, which it certainly was for many, particularly among the better educated, but it was also a

progenitor of a multitude of new pathways for beliefs that sought to apprehend the transcendent through the immanent.

Over the course of more recent centuries, Taylor says these options for belief have pluralized exponentially:

> The multiple critiques levelled at orthodox religion, Deism, and the new humanism, and their cross-polemics, end up generating a number of new positions, including modes of unbelief which have broken out of the humanism of freedom and mutual benefit (e.g., Nietzsche and his followers)—and lots else besides. So that our present predicament offers a gamut of possible positions which extend way beyond the options available in the late eighteenth century. It's as though the original duality, the positing of a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps beyond. This phase extends up to the present. (*A Secular Age* 299)

Taylor's understanding of what constitutes our secular age does not align with theories of religious subtraction, although it does include them as options for belief, such as those, for example, currently proposed by the New Atheists.[12]

Taylor concentrates on how the choices for belief have become practically innumerable and that this is the primary ontic feature of the secular age in which we live today. Coming to the topic of secularism with this renewed theorization of

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[12] The most vocal proponents of the New Atheism are Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the recently deceased Christopher Hitchens.

its historical constructedness and the cultural contingencies that have informed it, Taylor is currently endeavouring to promote secularism as an epistemological regime more concerned with freedom of conscience, equality of beliefs, and open dialogue, than with abandoning religion or with awaiting its eventual demise. While more explicitly aware of the idea of secularization than people in earlier eras, Taylor argues that many moderns have their own ideological blind spot, and falsely assume that there is such a thing as absolute secularity evacuated of all religious content, that this state has been largely achieved, and that it marks the natural, inevitable, and final outcome for civilized humanity.

This view of secularization is insufficient for many reasons, but it is especially so when applied to our understanding of history and to Shakespeare. It is a perception that has contributed to the habit of projecting modern secularism far into the past, onto admired figures such as Shakespeare, who are anachronistically made over into triumphantly secularist proto-moderns. The impulse to reanimate Shakespeare as a secular contemporary is an old one. The reception and adaptation of his texts as quasi-scientific confirmations of universal truths on a variety of topics, including human character, nationhood, and knowledge gave rise to his enshrinement as a secular genius of the human condition in the eighteenth century (Dobson; Sabor and Yachnin). His status as national poet and expositor of human nature was bolstered in the nineteenth century by the promotion of his writing as a secular alternative to the Bible (DeCook; Laporte). His plays' reputation during the British colonial era as repositories of English humanistic rationalism is evidenced by their use as a tool of imperialist education in India (Bhatia). Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The*

Invention of the Human stands as a popular version of how to read Shakespeare as the author of a modern, human-focused subjectivity. Even in most productions today, both in theatres and in movies, it is arguable that the specifically Christian religious thought and feeling that would have animated, perhaps often emphatically, the earliest performances of the plays are now generally avoided, either by gutting theistically problematic lines from the play, by deemphasizing in performance the religious dimension of their meaning, or by deploying them in a setting that substitutes the original transcendent context for a non-denominationally modern orientation toward the infinite and the eternal.

Among the New Atheists, one can find high praise for Shakespeare's presumed secularity. Alongside Charles Darwin and Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins lists Shakespeare as a "hero" of his (Dawkins *Bigthink*). Christopher Hitchens saw Shakespeare's writing as having arisen out of England's transformation of itself into a "serious country" after its rejection of Roman Catholicism, his implication being that England became less religious as a result of the Reformation, thus encouraging the ascendance of Shakespeare's triumphantly secular art (147). Sam Harris views Shakespeare's "words of wisdom and consolation and beauty" as fully compatible with extreme atheism (35).

In a vein that is connected with these narrow readings of Shakespeare, Eric S. Mallin's *Godless Shakespeare* begins by recounting a drive to a dinner party with Stephen Greenblatt, who is reported as disallowing the idea of an atheist Shakespeare by asking: "But doesn't every gesture of unbelief articulate itself within the frame of a sectarian structure that determined it?" (2). Mallin attempts to overcome this sensible objection by a number of means, most notably by

claiming Shakespeare's ideological exceptionality in his own time (3). Mallin's book is structured as a series of semi-poetic meditations on various characters, each of whom he positions in either hell, purgatory, or heaven. According to his atheistic logic, however, heaven is inhabited by irreligious types such as Aaron, Macbeth, and Cleopatra, while hell is populated by Friar Laurence, Isabella, and other pious characters. Mallin thus ironically becomes the presiding deity in his own book, determining according to atheistic values which characters have deserved paradise and which have earned damnation. In doing so, however, he makes apparent the difficulty of imagining what atheism might have meant in Shakespeare's time. His reading is firmly presentist. That this volume is part of a series entitled *Shakespeare Now!*, and that its editors are professors at distinguished universities, indicates that he is not alone in his desire to make Shakespeare adhere to an extremely modern secularist position.

In addition to offering an alternative to these overly irreligious outlooks on Shakespeare, my argument on Shakespearean secularization is intended to contribute another perspective to the debates that have developed over the past several decades on religion in Shakespeare studies. What follows is a brief chronological survey of some of the major developments in the study of Shakespeare and religion, one which leads up to the current critical consensus, which has established that beyond merely Catholicism and Protestantism, a greater multiplicity of beliefs in the period must be considered. I then propose that a productive way of interpreting these proliferations is to view them as having generated secularizing conditions of a certain magnitude in early modern society

at large, and of a certain range of previously unconsidered possible

representations in Shakespeare's plays.

Initiating the most influential line of thought on the topic, Stephen

Greenblatt claimed several decades ago that the theatre emptied out the religious

by demonstrating the theatricality of religion and that this process meant "a

drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular" (*Shakespearean* 126).[13] Soon

thereafter, Louis Montrose contributed to this early New Historicist assessment of

religion in decline by casting the theatre as a compensatory place for lost religious

experience, where playgoers encountered very often in the precise locations of

suppressed religious institutions a theatrical "substitute for the metaphysical aid of

the medieval church" (30-31). Offering a corrective to these views of religion as

abandoned and replaced, Debora Shuger has argued repeatedly and persuasively

that no consideration of the period can ignore the tremendous extent to which

religion saturated every aspect of the culture, even the political (Shuger). Other

debates have centered on whether or not Shakespeare's personal and artistic

sympathies were primarily Catholic or Protestant. Richard Dutton, Alison

Findlay, Richard Wilson, and others have promoted the idea of a recusant

Shakespeare with ties to powerful Catholic land-owning families in Lancaster.

Advocating for the notion that Shakespeare's drama engages more actively with

Reformation ideals, Huston Diehl locates in the plays evidence of complicated

Protestant thought. For example, she links Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* to

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[13] Of course, in more recent work, specifically *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt has acknowledged the abiding importance of religion in the composition and reception of Shakespeare's drama.

Reformed commentaries on the historical Paul. In an important essay, Anthony

Dawson explicitly rejects many of these readings as unsatisfactory, describing

Shakespeare's theatre instead as a thoroughly secular institution that assimilates

religious language into a "dominantly aesthetic and affective domain, so that

complex and abstract" religious considerations are "suspended" and thus

secularized (89). My view of the early modern theatre draws upon the idea that it

was a commercially secular and secularizing institution, and that one must not

overestimate the significance of the plays' religious content, but I nonetheless will

maintain that Dawson inadequately historicizes the play's theatricalization of the

secularizations in process beyond and within the theatre's walls. Moreover, while

Dawson argues for a view of theatrical "Secular Performance" (83) in the period

as generally indifferent to serious religious deliberation, I intend to characterize

Shakespeare's representation of early modern secularization as much more

profoundly conditioned by the religious preoccupations of the time.[14]

A recurrent idea in many of the most recent studies is that Shakespeare

drew upon a vast plurality of contemporaneously vital religious beliefs to craft his

plays, but this scholarship does not as I do work toward understanding that

multiplicity as the engine of secularization in the period. These latest

examinations of Shakespeare and religion have clearly established that

Catholicism and Protestantism are only two very general categories of religious

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[14] Dawson's opinion elsewhere puts more emphasis on the importance of religion than he does in this essay, particularly in *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England*, in which among other religious topics, he provides an illuminating analysis of the potential importance of eucharistic controversies for understanding the participatory interaction of actors and audiences at the theatre.

belief in the period. In *Shakespeare's Tribe*, Jeffrey Knapp notes that "there was

no single religion suffusing Renaissance England . . . but rather many religions

from which to choose: not simply Catholicism or Protestantism, for the Christian

believer, but also kinds of Catholicism and kinds of Protestantism" (10). Denis

Taylor remarks that despite "the widespread acceptance of the importance of

Shakespeare's Catholic background on both his mother's and his father's side,"

the discussion should be moved "'to the next level,' to a point where we can more

maturely estimate the presence of Catholic, Protestant, and secular strands in

Shakespeare" (24). Likewise, Maurice Hunt "challenges those analyses of

Shakespeare's plays that find Protestant elements consistently and always (or

almost always) undercutting Catholic motifs, or that . . . find the playwright

repeatedly endorsing Catholic doctrine and customs" (ix). He claims to discover

instead "the surprising extent of Shakespeare's amalgamation of Protestant and

Catholic motifs and ideas in single images, concepts and characterizations," thus

emphasizing the malleability of beliefs in the period, as well as the notion that

beliefs may be joined together in ways that initiate new trajectories of belief (ix).

In the place of New Historicism's Marxist-materialist view of religion as a "socio-

political institution that legitimates its power by staking an exclusive claim to a

transcendent, indefinable, and wholly illusory authority," Dan Breen has called

for "a sustained critical discussion of religious belief" as a "varied, complex, and

culturally fundamental experience" (237). In her insightful book, *Supernatural*

Environments in Shakespeare's England, Kristen Poole explores the various

spatial beliefs that collided with one another as a result of the Protestant

Reformation's destabilization of what had been relatively settled cosmologies.

She thus shares in the general consensus among critics today that there were a whole host of potential arrangements of beliefs available for adoption and combination by individuals and communities in the period and that Shakespeare, regardless of his personal beliefs, appropriated, recombined, and deployed many of them in his plays. These critics do not emphasize, however, as I intend to do, the connection between the development of multiple beliefs and Shakespeare's participation in the secularization of the period.

The multiplicity of beliefs in the period is the central topic in *Representing Religious Pluralization in Early Modern Europe*, a book in which secularization is also inadequately related to that phenomenon. The volume itself is multitudinously diverse, including work on Thomas More, William Tyndale, Purgatory, Martyrdom, Protestant creeds, Austrian religious freedom, German biconfessional territories, pictorial representation, paratexts, German merry tales, Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell, William Byrd, and Shakespeare. The book's main purpose is not to examine secularization as such, but the topic does emerge occasionally in some sections of it. In Jeffrey Knapp's contribution to the volume, an essay on Shakespeare's emulation of the medieval Corpus Christi cycles in the history plays, he is compelled to describe how pluralization raises important questions about the idea of secularization in the period. After recounting the plurality of religious impulses that animate Falstaff's character and the description of his death, Knapp critiques scholarship from the 1980s and 90s that would characterize that multiplicity as secularizing (in the subtraction of religion sense):

> Because they treat the Reformation and the consequent dispersion
> of Christianity into a multitude of sects as a process of

secularization rather than of religious pluralization, secularizing

critics such as Barber fail to see how Falstaff's role as a satirist of

puritan cant *avant la lettre* opens a possible space of religious

moderation, rather than atheism, for Shakespeare to occupy. (167)

Knapp is correct to say that the plurality of beliefs that constitute Falstaff's

simultaneously authentic and hypocritical penitence cannot be entirely secular and

devoid of religion, but are instead religiously moderating. What Knapp is not in a

position to detect, however, (because he follows the scholars he critiques in

assuming a construal of secularization as religious subtraction) is that

pluralization is the primary engine of the secularizing processes of early

modernity. Falstaff is a secularizing figure, not because his hypocrisy was

necessarily interpreted as atheistic, which it may have been by a few very

marginal individuals in Shakespeare's England, but rather because the plurality of

beliefs embodied in Falstaff's characterization invited theatregoers of all spiritual

denominations and degrees of skepticism to reflect on possibilities for alternative

orientations toward or away from the transcendent.

By imagining the experience of early modern playgoers reacting to the

ghost in *Hamlet*, Paul Yachnin has reconstructed what it may have been like for

those playgoing individuals to be called upon at the theatre to consider the beliefs

of fellow audience members:

the scene makes us aware that we are a group that includes people

of all social and religious kinds whose feelings and thoughts at this

moment might be like or very different from ours. The

performance, which includes the responses of the playgoers, is

> making public what we could call an affective-critical debate about
> religious difference and generational guilt in a dramatic, fictional
> register. (216)

The theatre is thus a place that could generate moments of intense sensitization to the beliefs of others. Yachnin enumerates several of the vectors for belief that may have been evoked by the ghost scene:

> Those of us that are recusant Catholics, who have had to hide our
> faith from the authorities and the harsh punishments they wield,
> might be gratified by the evident Catholicism of the represented
> cosmos, the fact that this world at any rate has room for a place
> like Purgatory. Some of the Protestant majority in the playhouse
> might respond in particularly vexed ways to the spectacle of a
> purgatorial ghost laying a burden of revenge on his son, a young
> man who has just returned from his studies at what we might
> suppose is Martin Luther's university. Does the figure of the
> grievously wronged ghost perhaps awaken our guilty remembrance
> of our own fathers? Or perhaps justify our refusal of guilt? After
> all, what kind of spirit undergoing Christian purgation would
> revisit the sublunary world seeking bloody revenge? It must be that
> the devil works in the trappings of papist ritual and remembrance,
> just as we have been warned by anti-Catholic preachers. (216)

This is not an exhaustive list, nor could it be, for the questions it identifies point to a multiplicity of potential answers, each of which in turn raise new questions, and so on. An effect of these pluralizations is that they produce doubt about the

explanatory adequacy of any single orientation in relation to the transcendent.

When the ghost appears to Hamlet in his mother's chamber, only he can see it. Or

rather, only he and the audience can see it. Gertrude urgently questions Hamlet,

and implicitly the audience, about what it is he is gazing at: "Alas, how is't with

you, / That you do bend your eye on vacancy / And with th' incorporeal air do

hold discourse?"; "Whereon do you look?"; "To whom do you speak this?"

(3.4.116-18, 124, 131). Hamlet does not reply with a firm answer, but with open

questions: "Do you see nothing there?"; "Nor did you nothing hear?" (3.4.132,

134). Like Hamlet, the assembled playgoers can see and hear the ghost, and as

Hamlet is, they are called upon in this moment to pass judgement on the extent to

which it is really there. They are put into a state of mind that is similar to the one

called for by the play's opening words: "Who's there?" (1.1.1). Who is out there?

According to a certain logic, this is not a difficult question to answer. The

audience is who is out there. The actors are on the stage. The ghost is present as a

fiction, but not in reality.

Yet these easy answers are complicated by the supernatural backdrop of

early modern life. According to certain forms of antitheatrical polemic, to which I

will return in my chapter on *Othello*, the theatre's fictions were in reality catalysts

for demonic incursion. The stage ghost could be interpreted as a particularly apt

vehicle for transmitting devilish corruption to the natural world. The ghost's very

theatrical fictionality is what makes it a potently and perilously real mediator of

supernatural malevolence. The poison that Claudius poured into his brother's ear

is analogous with how the ghost, in recounting that vile act to Hamlet, also spills

malicious theatrical language into the audience members' ears.

Putting our consideration of the playgoers' perspective to the side for a moment, and concentrating on the experience of the characters within the play, could the ghost in this instance be merely a figment of Hamlet's addled mind? Other characters have seen the ghost, but they do not converse with it as Hamlet does. Is it possible that the talking ghost has been nothing more than an evocation of Hamlet's madness? That the ghost's reality within the play is partially substantiated by Francisco, Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio, means that it would be difficult to discount its existence, but there are still ways to read its presence skeptically. The ghost could be a shared hallucination, a trick of the eyes in the night. Gertrude's reply to Hamlet that she sees nothing, "Nothing at all," when he sees his spectral father, may appear to confirm a skeptical reading of the ghost's appearance in the chamber, but her completion of that thought, "yet all that is I see," works in the other direction (3.4.133). The queen's emendation of the first part of her line emphasizes the potential transcendent connotation of the word "nothing." We are reminded of the theological principal that nothing can become anything *ex nihilo*. A further related layer of meaning here is available insofar as "nothing" could also refer to female genitalia. Men had a something, while women, a "nothing." That this line of thought is proffered by Hamlet's mother, out of whose "nothing" his entire being emerged, adds to the interpretive perplexity of the scene's reiteration of the word "nothing." The repetition of "nothing" in these contexts asserts ironically that there is no such thing as "nothing" in the early modern cosmos. So the ghost must be something. Its early modern theatrical phenomenology cannot merely be an empty, secularist's fiction. But instead of stating conclusively what that might be, *Hamlet* withholds

judgement, beckoning instead theatregoers to imagine together a potentially infinite variety of possibilities for what it could be, thus instatiating powerfully secularizing conditions of belief in which the beliefs of others were to be considered. This secularization may have been received in either optimistic or pessimistic ways.

The ghost scenes in *Hamlet* orchestrate a plurality of beliefs about the transcendent, which in turn invite the playgoers further to pluralize beliefs in their own minds through a process of mutually speculating about the beliefs of others. Yachnin interprets pluralizations such as these as constitutive of theatrical public-making, but does not claim that they are necessarily secularizing:

> it allows all of us to take part in the production of a public performance about social, political, and religious matters. Tellingly, the scene is designed not to foster straightforward rational-critical debate about theological controversies or recent religious history; instead it encourages emotional and intellectual investment on the part of the playgoers. We are able to take our place in a theatrical public by virtue of our ability to respond to the play in ways conditioned by our private personhood and our own cognitive and emotional dimensions, as well as on the strength of our capacity to attend to the responses of others and what might be their very different interpretations of and responses to the play. (216)

These pluralizations are, however, in Taylor's sense, secularizing, because they cultivate a spiritual atmosphere in which possibilities for apprehending the

transcendent do not vanish without a trace as a result of being challenged by the suggestion of other beliefs, but are instead, depending on context, modified, weakened, intensified, limited, or expanded.

Yachnin's explanation of how Shakespeare's early modern theatrical publicity encouraged forms of affective and intellectual engagement, but not the rational-critical debates characteristic of later social imaginaries, facilitates the conceptualization and application of Taylor's secularization thesis in a way that supports my own reading of Shakespeare's vexed representations of secularization in the plays. In a way that is similar to how small-scale public-making was active throughout the early modern period, yet not automatically discernable from the perspective of a modern subjectivity immersed in a post-Enlightenment understanding of the idea of publicity, secularization in the early modern period has not been easy to assess with precision, because of the bias of modern secularist assumptions. In a manner similar to how early modern publics are not identical to the post-Enlightenment idea of the public, early modern secularizations are not identical to post-Enlightenment secularist ideals.

Early modern secularization was drastically different from what it is today. As opposed to modern secularism, early modern secularization did not, in the main, include the emptying of the cosmos of all divinity. Unlike today's secular theatre, the secularizing potential of Shakespeare's theatre remained suffused with the basic precepts of Christian faith: the existence of God, of Satan, and of the soul. These religious fundamentals are not represented as being at serious risk of disappearance in Shakespeare's drama or in early modern society at large, although they were being contested and reinterpreted from an expanding variety

of competitive and cooperative belief-perspectives. It is, therefore, next to impossible to prove that Shakespeare was a completely unbelieving secular proto-modern, victoriously extolling in the plays the merits of atheistic secularism. He does not celebrate the emergence of a new secular order. It would also be difficult to argue that Shakespeare was an undecided agnostic, unsure of the existence of God and the supernatural. There is also little evidence to indicate that he was an unyielding religious dogmatic, intent upon promoting one Christian denomination or doctrine at the expense of others.

A more productive way of engaging with the religious dimension of his plays is to view them as communicating a vexed relationship toward the social and spiritual effects of secularization in Shakespeare's own time. His theatre was a place of extraordinary social and artistic novelty, which drew upon and contributed to the discursive liveliness of the secularizing pluralities of beliefs that swirled throughout Europe in the period. Shakespeare's plays theatricalized both the possible opportunities as well as the potential spiritual perils of the secularizations that were an unintended consequence of the reforming and counter-reforming drives to perfect religious life for all in the period. His drama participated in secularizing processes fuelled in large measure by these religious controversies. The Reformation's zeal for religious progress and renewal inadvertently promoted a radically secularizing fragmentation of Christianity's overall coherence, a pluralization and relativization of beliefs that Shakespeare's plays dramatized onstage in an assortment of ways, with a diversity of secularizing belief-effects. Those who attended the theatre were caught up in one of the most intensely resonant sites of secularization in the culture of the time.

Shakespeare's drama exhibits an alternately, and more often than not simultaneously or very rapidly alternating, positive and negative awareness of the theatre's complicity in the elaboration of secularizing processes. This is not to say that Shakespeare was aware of his orchestration of pluralization as secularization per se, but rather that it makes scholarly sense for us to designate the pluralization of beliefs fostered by his plays as secularization. Accounts of Shakespearean secularization that seek to demonstrate that he worked to subtract utterly the religious from the secular and that this proto-secularism had tremendously advantageous epistemological consequences for Shakespeare and his contemporaries are unfounded. As Taylor and others have noted, the secularization of post-Reformation Europe was a profoundly religious experience.[15]

Rather than unreservedly exalting the emergence of a new secular order, Shakespeare's plays theatricalized both the opportunities presented by secularization as well as the possible spiritual dangers of secularization. In certain instances, the secularizing pluralizations are available primarily through a close reading of the play's language. In others, such as in Yachnin's appraisal of the ghost scenes, the secularizing pluralizations also depend very much upon reconstructing audience response. Both of these cases are exemplary of how in most of Shakespeare's drama there are either simultaneously or rapidly alternating optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of secularization available. As opposed to *All's Well That Ends Well* which generally represents secularization as a

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[15] See also, for instance, C. John Sommerville's *The Secularization of Early Modern England*.

beneficial social and spiritual development, neither *Henry IV* and *V*, nor *Hamlet*,

nor even *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, appear to come out as strongly in favour

of secularization, since the vacillating reactions to the beliefs they contain are

presented as socially and spiritually unsatisfactory. This dissertation will focus on

several charged strands of secularization in the plays, in which both positive and

negative interpretations of secularizing processes compete intensely for

predominance in the intellects, the emotions, and the souls of Shakespeare's early

modern theatrical public.

Chapter one, "Demonic Ventriloquism and Venetian Skepticism in

Othello," is devoted to Shakespeare's theatricalization of the idea that the devil

could make use of the discordant processes of the Reformation, as well as of the

innovations of humanism, both pluralizing engines of secularization in the period,

in order to infiltrate weakened spiritual communities. *Othello* enacts a

sophisticated adaptation of the discourse of ventriloquism (the etymology of

which means to speak from the abdomen) at a moment in its history before it

became primarily secularized in the popular imagination, several centuries before

the term became, as it is now, overwhelmingly associated with ventriloquial

puppetry, when it was still closely associated with widespread belief in the vexed

cultural phenomenon of demonic possession. This chapter addresses *Othello*'s

representation of the contested supernatural status of demonic ventriloquism as set

against the skeptical backdrop of civic humanism in Venice. Current in the

English consciousness of the period was the idea that the social implementation of

the studia humanitatis in Italian city-states had weakened the spiritual well-being

of their inhabitants. Venice's overt adherence to humanist values was understood

by many English travelers and diplomats as rendering it religiously apathetic. Signs of consequent vulnerability are apparent in *Othello*, where Venice is cast as an intensively skeptical community that has imperiled itself as a result of lax vigilance against the possibility of supernatural threat.

In chapter two, "Blasphemous *Macbeth*," I investigate Shakespeare's response in the play to legislation that had prohibited blasphemous swearing in public entertainments. Shakespeare appears to have been inspired by the new bill to write a play that superficially complied with the law, but which nonetheless engaged profoundly with the dispersion of the post-Reformation idea of blasphemy into a secularizing plurality of beliefs, a fragmentation that is enacted in the play with an ambiguous mixture of approval and disapproval.

Finally, in the third chapter, "Franciscan Poetics and the Reformation of Love in *Romeo and Juliet*," I consider how Shakespeare recuperates the transgressive radicalism of the Franciscan Order's societal and poetic ideals of relational and spiritual love in ways that initially appear to support, but which then ultimately subvert, English Protestantism's tentative investment in true married love as the principal means by which the fraying bonds of the religious and the secular dimensions of Reformed society were to be restored. Instead of celebrating a unified representation of Catholic or of Protestant aspirations for marriage, the play concludes by evoking a secularizing plurality of options for matrimonial belief, an impetus which has contributed to the currently widespread, albeit variously experienced, belief in wedded love as the foundational societal unit of the modern social imaginary.

Chapter One: Demonic Ventriloquism and Venetian Skepticism in *Othello*

  Iago frequently places his deceitful speech into the mouths of other

characters, possessing their voices and transmitting through them a supernaturally

inflected vocabulary of degradation and fear. Critics have often described the

control Iago wields over the speech of others as specifically ventriloquial.[16] Of

course, to propose that the current practice of ventriloquism was literally an

element of Iago's early modern characterization would be anachronistic. He does

not ventriloquially animate the inanimate. Yet the general sense shared by many

that there is a meaningful connection to be made between Iago and modern

ventriloquists is a proposition worth exploring in more detail, particularly from

within the context of the long history of ventriloquism. *Othello* enacts a

sophisticated adaptation of the discourse of ventriloquism (the etymology of

which means to speak from the abdomen) at a moment in its history before it

became generally disenchanted in the popular imagination, several centuries

before the term became, as it is now, overwhelmingly associated with

ventriloquial puppetry, when it was still closely associated with widespread belief

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[16] E.A.J. Honigmann notes in his edition of the play that the command Iago exerts
upon Othello's language is eventually so complete that he becomes in Iago's hands a
"ventriloquist's dummy" (239). For John Gronbeck-Tedesco, it is the handkerchief that
becomes a catalyst for Iago's ventriloquial projection: "Iago speaks for and with the
handkerchief, like a ventriloquist" (267). It "is not easy," Lynne Magnusson remarks, "to
determine whether Iago's 'base' voice . . . is that which is most 'natural' to him, the
dominant note of his linguistic habitus, or just one of many ventriloquized voices he is so
adept at appropriating" (174). And commenting upon one of Othello's frequent
reiterations of Iago's language, Michael Neill states in a note late in his edition of the
play that "Othello once again ventriloquizes Iago's language" (382). The invocation of
ventriloquism in each instance is figurative. In none of these texts is ventriloquism
identified as evidence of a demonic element to Iago's agency.

in the vexed cultural phenomenon of demonic possession. This chapter will also address *Othello*'s representation of the contested supernatural status of demonic ventriloquism as set against the skeptical backdrop of civic humanism in Venice. Current in the English consciousness of the period was the idea that the social implementation of the *studia humanitatis* in Italian city-states had weakened the spiritual constitution of their inhabitants. Venice's overt adherence to humanist values was understood by many English travelers and diplomats as rendering it religiously apathetic. Signs of consequent vulnerability are apparent in *Othello*, where Venice is cast as an intensively skeptical community that has imperiled itself as a result of lax vigilance against the possibility of supernatural threat.

Demonic Possession, Ventriloquism, and History

The most influential pre-modern manifestation of ventriloquism, which the Greeks called engastrimism (*gaster* for belly and *mythos* for speech), may be traced back to the prophetic activity associated with the oracle at Delphi. In his *Contra Celsum*, Origen sought to refute the Delphic claim to divinely inspired authority and promoted the idea that pagan belief in the ancient tradition of oracular prophecy was tantamount to demon worship, for according to him the prophetesses' ecstatic vocalizations were "caused by certain evil daemons and spirits hostile to the human race" (397). The connections he established between soothsaying, demonic inspiration, and grotesquely displaced voices were transmitted to medieval and early modern writers through this text and through *On the Engastrimyth*, his treatise on the witch in Samuel 1:28. As a result of Origen's perceived authority on the relationship between possession and

utterance, the voices that were hurled forth from the demonically wracked bodies of the possessed were for centuries labeled engastrimythic or, in its Latinized form, ventriloquial.[17]

Late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English disputes on possession saw Catholic, Puritan, and Anglican theories on demonic voice and exorcism face off against each other in an atmosphere of profound antipathy. Jesuits, priests, ministers, curates, bishops, archbishops and lay participants sought to assert their own versions of how the devil advanced the cause of supernatural evil in the human world. In 1585 and 1586, Catholic priests led by the Jesuit William Weston performed exorcisms at Denham and the Puritan John Darrell conducted exorcisms from 1596 to 1597 in a variety of English towns. Anglican authorities, alarmed at their potential loss of control over an important spiritual question, imprisoned both Weston and Darrell for staging fraudulent exorcisms.[18] In a series of pamphlets, the Church of England denied altogether the possibility that one could be dispossessed, for they asserted that it was impossible for an actual bodily possession to occur in the first place. Samuel Harsnett was commissioned by the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, to refute all claims of exorcism. Harsnett's treatise, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a withering condemnation of what he identified as staged Catholic exorcisms at Denham, is the most famous document to emerge from the controversy. Harsnett

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[17] For more on the history of ventriloquism, see Steven Connor's groundbreaking study, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*.

[18] For more details about these events see Marion Gibson's *Possession, Puritanism and Print*.

and other skeptical Anglican authorities such as John Deacon and John Walker also pursued a pamphlet war with Darrell, who managed to disseminate a series of long responses to his opponents while imprisoned. Working from the position of official conformist policy, Harsnett, Deacon, and Walker attempted to disenchant Darrell's exorcisms by insisting that demonic possession did not really exist, that the age of miracles ended after the apostolic era, and that the vocal effects achieved by so-called demoniacs were actually produced through ventriloquial fraud. The longstanding emphasis on ventriloquism as an unnatural manifestation of demonic guile was thus increasingly transferred to the realm of natural human deceit.

Throughout this period, the government's representatives methodically reclassified demonic possession and its usual symptoms, including ventriloquial effects, as fraudulent. In an effort to delegitimize the charisma of exorcists, Harsnett, Deacon, and Walker alleged that demoniacs could not really be possessed by otherworldly voices. Such deceivers merely affected supernatural vocal projection through practice and those who claimed to be exorcists were accused of coaching the demoniacs to ventriloquize a phony multiplicity of voices. Many of those apprehended by the religious authorities were thus accused of being obsessed with, though not possessed by, the devil. But while the Anglican establishment did not believe that demons could intrude into and speak through the demoniacs' bodies, there nonetheless remained those like Darrell, Weston, and their respective followers who believed with passionate conviction that people could in reality be invaded and inhabited by demons and their voices.

That Shakespeare was aware of the exorcism debates that raged during his lifetime is almost certain. The mock exorcisms that are performed in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, in addition to the allusion to exorcism in *All's Well That Ends Well*, as well as the over eighty passages from Harsnett's *Declaration* traced by Kenneth Muir in *King Lear*, all indicate that Shakespeare was familiar with his culture's attitudes toward the potential reality and unreality of demonic possession and dispossession (203-07). Relatively less research, however, has been published linking the early modern phenomenon of demonic possession and dispossession to *Othello*.[19]

Ventriloquial Demonism and Venetian Skepticism

The most significant impediment to what I will argue is Iago's demonically possessive and ventriloquially deployed effort to malign Othello is the atmosphere of skeptical humanism that sustains the foreign general's elite position in Venice. The emphasis we hear placed by the Senate on reason and openness evokes the city's reputation throughout the period as an important site of the social implementation of the *studia humanitatis*, the New Learning. During the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, Venice was counted among the major Italian city-states praised by European commentators as centers of humanist-inspired political independence and intellectual freedom. Although

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[19] See David Kaula's "Othello Possessed: Notes on Shakespeare's Use of Magic and Witchcraft"; F. W. Brownlow's "Samuel Harsnett and the Meaning of Othello's 'Suffocating Streams'"; Hilaire Kallendorf's *Exorcism and Its Texts: Subjectivity in Early Modern Literature of England and Spain*. More generally, of course, Iago's satanic influence on Othello has been a critical commonplace since at least Bernard Spivack's *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*.

some chroniclers were critical of what they identified as Venice's religious

degeneracy and trade in sex, they more frequently praised the city for its political,

juridical, mercantile, military, and colonial accomplishments. The reputation of

Venice as an autonomous, rational, stable, tolerant, urbane, and prosperous

bastion of liberal humanist praxis was rendered all the more impressive by its

geographical position in the midst of a Mediterranean context dominated by the

twin juggernauts of Rome's Catholicism and the Ottoman Turk.[20]

The ideals of humanism were held to be more actualized in the practices of

the political classes, professional circles, and public institutions of the republican

Italian city-states like Florence and Venice than elsewhere in Europe, including

England. While humanism had had intellectual currency in English scholarly and

diplomatic circles for hundreds of years before *Othello* was written, it had

acquired much less practical traction by the time of the reign of James I than it

had in the Republic of Venice. The radical idea of granting a Moor an official

military role would have been unfathomable for Shakespeare's public. For them,

the exercise of such command was a sacred charge granted by a divinely

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[20] See Geoffrey Fenton's translation of Francesco Guicciardini's Italian text, which contains frequent references to Venice, *The Historie of Guicciardin Conteining the Warres of Italie and Other Parts*; see also Justus Lipsius, *A Direction for Travailers*, edited and translated by Sir John Stradling, especially C4v, D1r-D1v; see Philippe de Commines, *The Historie of Philip de Commines Knight, Lord of Argenton*, translator Thomas Danett, particularly 268-367; Giovanni Botero's *Relationi Universali* is likewise significant, especially 339-361; see also Botero's *The Worlde*, 94-98. Also see Gasparo Contarini, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice,* as translated by Lewis Lewkenor. For more direct English assessments of Venice see Sir Richard Guylford, *The Pylgrymage of Sir Richardson Guylforde to the Holy Land*, specifically 7-15, 46, 65, 73, 78-83, 90; William Thomas, *The Historie of Italie*, 73-113; George Abbot, *A Briefe Description of the Whole World*, A4v-B1v; Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes*; and Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities Hastily Gobled Up in Five Moneths Travells*, 301-428.

appointed sovereign to individuals chosen from among the nation's most valued subjects. For Venetians, on the other hand, placing an outsider at the head of the military was viewed as a sensible way of keeping power at arm's length from any individual citizen. As Lewkenor reports, "The Cittizens . . . of Venice . . . deprived of the honors belonging to warres . . . are contented to transferre them over to Straungers" (*The Commonwealth* S2v).

But for all the liberalizing developments that Venice bestowed upon itself by promoting perhaps the most rapidly secularizing version of humanism in Europe, it was also condemned by many as a place of irreligious permissiveness. The character of humanism I am attributing to Venice and the other Italian city-states may at first seem difficult to square with the northern Christian humanism of the sixteenth century as promulgated by Erasmus and More. But that religiously oriented humanism, which blended classical scholarship with biblical and patristic theory, was principally a later subset of the earlier Italian humanist movement.[21] Specifically Christian humanism was not at all dominant in Italian humanism, an intellectual and political mode more concerned with the glorification of the pagan values of the peninsula's best ancestors, the ancient Romans, than in integrating those values with Christianity. Northern Christian humanism is at some distance from what Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have conceptualized as specifically Italian humanist thought. *Othello*'s rendition of a Venetian humanism that marginalizes religiosity should be understood as an imaginative reflection of the skepticism that inhered in civic

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[21] See Paul Oskar Kristeller's essay on "Humanism" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*.

Italian humanism and not the religious preoccupations that characterized the geographically closer northern Christian humanism.

Despite the benefits that Venice enjoyed by adhering to humanist ideals, those same values were also often interpreted as encouraging a licentious and promiscuous secularity that rendered the state prone to vice. The fluctuation between extreme attitudes toward Venice may be detected in Coryat's remarks on the city's infamous sex-trade:

> A most ungodly thing without doubt that there should be a
> toleration of such licentious wantons in so glorious, so potent, so
> renowned a City. For methinks that the Venetians should be daily
> afraid lest their winking at such uncleanness should be an occasion
> to draw down upon them God's curses and vengeance from
> heaven. (402)

The perceived Venetian tendency to privilege liberal exchange in many forms over the Christian duty to discourage false religions left them vulnerable to spiritual pollution. England's ambassador to the city, Sir Henry Wottton, wrote in a letter to James I that Venice is "a Signory that with long neutrality of State is at length (as it seemeth) almost slipped into a neutrality of religion" (Smith I.317). By not adhering to a strict enough religious ideology, one that judged all activity in its territory as either good or evil, and instead adopting a more relativistic sociopolitical approach that emphasized plurality, sophistication, even-handedness, and economic expediency over absolute and uncompromising Christian godliness, this classically ideal *civitas* was perceived at times to have jeopardized its collective soul.

Othello's fictional Venetians are likewise represented as skeptical to a fault. They are blind to the potential supernatural harm that Iago embodies, even once they uncover his crimes at the end of the play. This is not to say that those loyal to Venice in *Othello* have purposefully allied themselves with an agent of satanic darkness, but rather that the skeptical qualities of humanism are shown to be so firmly established in Venice that the city cannot effectively counter the possible intrusion of otherworldly evil into its community. It is also noteworthy that while the Turk is the preeminent enemy of Venice, the Venetians do not seem to take note of the religious resonance of this struggle. Venetian piety is corroded by doubtful habits of thought that have left it incapable of warding off spiritual assault.

In the early modern English context of the play's performance, this high degree of skepticism in Venice may also function as a substitute for certain elements of England's official demonological policy. Skepticism in *Othello*'s Venice may be read as an amplified version of the more conservatively expressed principles of authoritative anti-exorcist teaching dispensed by the Church of England's presses at the turn of the century. The play, however, does not give voice to that perspective alone. Instead, it complicates the meaning of Venice by using the city as a sounding board against which it orchestrates both the English government's skeptical disavowal of the possibility of demonic possession and ventriloquism along with the outlawed beliefs in demonic possession and ventriloquism as expressed by Catholics and radical Protestants. One result of this demonological heteroglossia is that *Othello* supports none of the solutions to possession offered by the various demonological camps. It certainly does not hold

out exorcism, Catholic or Puritan, as a solution to the possession that grips Othello. Nor does it endorse orthodox English Protestantism's smug dismissal of most demoniacs as imposters.

In fact, the play highlights many of the weaknesses in the English state's increasingly skeptical model of governance over supernatural matters. While Anglican authority generally denied the possibility of demonic entrance into and exorcism from the human body, it certainly could not discount the existence of the devil or of his demons' power to affect humanity. The devil remained for these makers of national religious orthodoxy a participant in the demoniacs' and exorcists' fraudulent stagings of demonic possession and dispossession. To discover the sham was still, very strictly speaking, to discover the devil's work—but this type of diagnosis is much more difficult to communicate to the faithful than a clear-cut exorcism. A doubtful English Church simply could not advocate with the same clarity as the exorcists what to expect if demonic visitations occurred, nor could it explain in a popularly accessible way which cures were mandated once such disturbances were suspected.

The inadequacy of this program of state-sanctioned doubt toward supernatural infestation is exhibited in the scene in which the Senate demonstrates its indifference to Brabantio's frantic call to uncover the "practices of cunning hell" that he believes explain Desdemona's seemingly unnatural elopement with Othello (1.3.103).[22] Brabantio's encounter with the Duke may be read as an early modern collision between superstitious agitation and self-satisfied skepticism.

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[22] Quotations from *Othello* are taken from Michael Neill's Oxford edition.

Brabantio is first apprised of Desdemona's marriage to Othello by a voice from the darkness below his window. Iago ventriloquizes words through Roderigo's identity[23] and in that manner deploys against the father a series of startling images, unleashing into his mind a Renaissance arsenal of preternatural and bestial horror: "you have lost half your soul: / Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.87-89).[24] Significantly ironic here is that it is in the process of alleging to Brabantio that his daughter is being illegitimately possessed by a diabolically black ram that Iago comes to possess, through the person of Roderigo, Brabantio and the voice he carries with him to the Venetian senate. When Brabantio goes before the Duke and exclaims against Othello, he uses the language of supernatural panic he has acquired from Iago. He demands that the Senate expose the "practices of cunning hell" that have polluted his daughter (1.3.103).

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[23] Iago's possession of Roderigo is established in the opening speech of the play, in which Roderigo says that Iago "hast had" his "purse", "as if the strings" of it belonged to Iago (1.1.2-3). The implication is that Iago has had intimate and invasive access to Roderigo's personhood, or at least to his purse, the source of his money. The purse is also like a displaced scrotum, particularly when cinched at the top and when hanging from the waist. Iago has symbolic control over Roderigo's monetary and sexual functions. He is able to possess Roderigo and to deplete him of his wealth by exploiting his lust for Desdemona. Iago also later speaks to Roderigo in terms that echo an episode from the demonological and possessive writing of the period. The famous incantatory reiteration, "put money in thy purse," which Iago directs multiple times at Roderigo in a single speech, is reminiscent of Harsnett's *Declaration* when he describes Robert Dibdale's communication with the devil who repeatedly cried "in his devils roaring voice that *he came thither for* Money, Money" (214).

[24] The general civic alarm that Iago raises through Roderigo's voice is similar to the type of distress reported in George More's account of the effect ventriloquized demonic cries could have upon a local populous: "the strangnes of these voyces, that the uttering and framing of them, exceeded all cunning invention, or the skill of anie counterfaite imitation, and the effect also so fearfull, that it was both terrible and troublesome to the whole Countrie, and wrought a wonderfull astonishment in all that heard it" (44).

Iago is physically present but silent during the meeting, allowing Brabantio to do his talking for him. The desire of characters to hear voices substituted for the voices of others permeates the scene. In an attempt to advise Brabantio, the Duke says, "Let me speak like yourself" and later in the scene Othello asks that Desdemona's petition to accompany him to Cyprus be assented to, and be spoken as though with the Duke's own voice, "Let her have your voice" (1.3.198, 258). In each case, the authority of the Duke's voice is invoked, but the requests may also serve as cues to the ventriloquial displacements that have shaped Brabantio's accusations. Iago's quietly mysterious presence serves as a visual reminder that neither Brabantio's nor the Duke's interpretation of events takes any account of Iago's oblique contribution to their talk.

The Duke listens to Brabantio, but fearing a Turkish invasion requiring Othello's military skill, swayed by the newlyweds' eloquent testimony, and benefiting from the rational pragmatism for which Venice was renowned, he is resistant to the supernaturally charged discourse Iago has transmitted through Brabantio. The father's words are declared by the Duke to be nothing more than "thin habits and poor likelihoods" (1.3.109). The Duke also frames his perception of the baseless quality of Brabantio's imputations by calling them "modern seeming" (1.3.110). This categorization of superstitious credulousness as "modern" may sound peculiar to post-eighteenth-century audiences accustomed to thinking of "modern" as analogous with enlightened reason. The Duke, however, employs "modern" to distinguish between the glorious past of the Ancients and the time that extended from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to his present. He implies that this later "modern" period promoted many of the superstitious

beliefs to which Brabantio clings, but which the Duke, the official figurehead of a skeptical humanist republican Venice, rejects.

The Iago-Roderigo-Brabantio voice is compelled to retreat. Skeptical rationalism appears to have prevailed. From our own modern point of view, the Duke may seem to have dealt effectively with Brabantio's worries, but from the standpoint of many of the playgoers caught up in a culture in which demonism and its symptoms were still vigorously debated, the Duke's refusal to take seriously the father's religiously minded complaints likely highlighted for them the profound susceptibility of Venice to Iago's potentially demonic machinations. Although in one sense the Council is right to dismiss the bogus allegations brought against Othello by the Iago-Roderigo-Brabantio voice, its hasty dismissal of them may also signal the hazards of skepticism in a still deeply religious culture. The Duke's unwillingness to investigate to the supernatural bottom of Brabantio's disordered speech leaves Iago free throughout the rest of the play to ventriloquize his demonized voice without restraint.

Iago's Othello

Iago's words pierce others through the ear, the bodily opening through which, according to demonological writings, devils could make direct incursions. Framing matters in terms of the early modern belief in the materiality of voice, Iago declares that he intends "[a]fter some time to abuse Othello's ears" (1.3.384)

and that he will "pour . . . pestilence into his ear" (2.3.341).[25] Indeed, Othello eventually becomes so preoccupied with Iago's pestilential words that he begins to beg for them, as though they have been withheld as opposed to communicated to him: "I prithee speak to me as to thy thinkings, / As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts / The worst of words" (3.3.135-37); "Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago, / If thou but think'st him wronged and mak'st his ear / A stranger to thy thoughts" (3.3.146-48).[26]

The plunging of Iago's malignant consciousness into Othello's being reaches perhaps its most profound depth when they kneel together, pledging oaths to one another. Othello drops down first, using language that calls for his being to be filled to the brim with hellish attributes:

> Arise, black Vengeance from thy hollow hell,
>
> Yield up, O Love, thy crown and hearted throne
>
> To tyrannous Hate. Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
>
> For 'tis of aspics' tongues. (3.3.446-49)

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[25] For more on the materiality of voice in the period see Gina Bloom's *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England*. See also Wes Folkerth's *The Sound of Shakespeare*, in which he provides a reading of the aural dynamics at work in *Othello* that is complementary with my own: "a sense of destabilization and uncertainty marks the play, which is crowded with acoustic disturbances, tempestuous noises and decentring words which catch characters off guard and throw them off balance" (109).

[26] Shakespeare may also have had aurally demonic transmissibility in mind a decade earlier, when writing the character of another Moor, Aaron, in *Titus Andronicus*. At the end of the play, in response to Lucius' referral to him as an "accursed devil," (5.3.5) Aaron says: "Some devil whisper curses in mine ear, / And prompt me, that my tongue may utter forth / The venomous malice of my swelling heart!" (5.3.11-13). Aaron's demonized characterization is in certain respects not only a prelude to Othello, but also to Iago.

Iago's response to this is that Othello should be "content" (3.3.450), or calm, but the word also implies the sort of content that is contained.[27] Earlier in the play, what filled Othello with content was Desdemona. "It gives me wonder great as my content / To see you here before me," he says to her (2.1.178); then again later: "My soul hath her content so absolute" (2.1.186); he "cannot speak enough of this content" (2.1.191). Yet Iago wants Othello to be nothing but the passive recipient of the virulent content that *he* pours into him. By the end of the play, Othello's earlier *content*ment with Desdemona has been hijacked, increased, and perverted by Iago's ventriloquial possession of him. As Othello prepares to kill Desdemona, he complains that he has become too overabundantly full to hold back from performing the murderousness Iago has perpetuated in his self, what he calls "the strong conception / That I do groan withal" (5.2.57-58). That Iago places something in people that possesses them and then works to damage them from the inside out is also stressed near the end of the play when Lodovico calls him a "viper" (5.2.283), a species of snake that was thought to kill its mother by eating its way out at birth.[28] Iago's ventriloquially possessive tongue is like the poisonous aspics' tongues that Othello affirms have filled him with grim linguistic matter. By this moment in the play, Othello is more fully burdened with Iago's language than he has been at any point so far, but there is no exorcism available.

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[27] The play's interest in content is further evidenced by the word's frequency, for it occurs approximately twelve times in *Othello*, far more than in any of Shakespeare's other plays.

[28] See the riddle in *Pericles*: "I am no viper, yet I feed / On mother's flesh which did me breed" (1.1.107-8).

Othello implicitly rejects any such possibility. The word "exsuffilate" (3.3.185), which turns up in Othello's language in this scene and which Neill identifies in his edition of the play as "a much debated crux," may be accurately explained by linking it to the early modern discourse of exorcism (293). When Othello says, "Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsuffilate and blown surmises" (3.3.183-85), he invokes the following definition of the word exsufflation: "The action of blowing, performed by the priest upon a child or grown person at baptism, by way of exorcising the devil, or by the person baptized in token of renouncing the devil" (*OED*). A relevant instance of this usage appears in Reginald Scot: "The right order of exorcisme . . . requireth that exsufflation . . . be doone toward the west" (318). In the very instant that Othello most requires exorcistic exsufflation, however, he renounces it, using the word instead to mean a kind of useless windiness: "exsuffilate and blown surmises" (3.3.185). Likewise, later in the scene, instead of blowing out of himself Iago's foul influence, he chooses to blow away his love: "All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven—'tis gone!" (3.3.446).[29]

The oath scene also enacts a common etymological reading of the word exorcism, one that had currency among those who were at pains to discredit the ritual altogether. As D. P. Walker explains

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[29] For another reading of the connections between breath, possession, and exorcism see Brownlow. In his article on *Othello* and demonic possession, he focuses on Othello's invocation of "suffocating streams" (3.2.389). He links the phrase to a ritual described in Harsnett's *Declaration* in which the demoniac is commanded to inhale fumes from brimstone and poisonous plants.

exorcists were particularly vulnerable to charges of magical

superstition because it was so easy to draw exact parallels . . .

between the magical conjuration of spirits good or bad and the

formulae of exorcism. The term *exorcize* comes from the Greek

ἐξορχιζω, a derivative of ὀρχος, meaning an oath, and is translated

into Latin as *adjuro* or *conjuro*. The exorcist expelling a devil, the

judge putting a witness on oath, the magician conjuring a spirit, are

all compelling someone to do something by invoking a higher

authority, usually God, who will enforce the command. That is to

say, "to exorcize" does not primarily mean "to cast out a devil,"

but "to put a devil on oath." (5-6)

It is ironic then that while Othello requires a legitimate exorcism, a putting to oath

of the demonic force that has gripped his soul, he is instead caught up in

deploying the word's related meaning, that of conjuring into himself the malign

domination of hell: "In the due reverence of a sacred vow, / I here engage my

words" (3.3.461-62). Othello's speech is fully given over to Iago's design.

Othello's place is now Iago's place. "Now art thou my lieutenant," he says to him,

to which Iago responds, "I am your own for ever" (3.3.478, 479), thereby making

explicit their juxtaposition of selves.[30] In the manner of demoniacs who ironically

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[30] Displacement in *Othello* has been assessed from a variety of critical angles. Julia Genster and Michael Neill have both written on the role of place in *Othello*. Iago's obsession with the idea of place, for instance, is motivated by Othello having made Cassio lieutenant, a *lieu tenant*, a place holder over Iago; see Genster's "Lieutenancy, Standing In, and *Othello*" and Neill's "Changing Places in *Othello*." Ben Saunders associates Iago's "verbal figures of purgation, evacuation, and oral/anal substitution and displacement" to "the civilizing process in Iago, an anal-retentive proto-racist poet

possess the demon lodged within them, Othello ritualistically draws into himself words from Iago that further the possession of his being. The rite of Christian exorcism is distorted into the ceremony of satanic conjuration.

The effect of Iago's vocal sway over Othello grows exponentially until eventually his insinuations send Othello into what Iago terms a "fit" (4.1.47), an alternatively convulsive and rigid bodily state, which Iago describes as "an epilepsy" (4.1.46),[31] and which the stage direction calls a trance. Othello's fitful collapse is also powerfully reminiscent of the attack suffered by the demoniacs of the period. Although stating matters skeptically, Scot vividly describes a similar fit during which ventriloquial effects are detected: "And if it be a subterrene diuell, [it] doth writhe and bow the possessed, and speaketh by him, using the spirit of the patient [as] his instrument" (356).

In 1596, at Burton-upon-Trent, Darrell was called in to cure Thomas Darling of the bodily and vocal contortions he was experiencing. After diagnosing him as possessed, Darrell monitored his condition and advised dispossession through fasting and prayer. What is reported in this case about the voices that emanated from Darling during his trances is worth comparing to Othello's speech

devoted to the terrible logic of the purge" (150, 176); see "Iago's Clyster: Purgation, Anality, and the Civilizing Process." At the level of individual words in the play, Stanley Cavell's famous remarks on the displacing and disconcerting effect of "hell and demon" as they stare "out of the names of Othello and Desdemona" are seminal (495); see *The Claim of Reason*. More recently, Patricia Parker's work on the resounding of words within other words in the plays suggests that *Othello* may contain nano-occurences of the intrusively possessive ventriloquial displacements I am tracing: "the 'strumpet' within 'The Moor! I know his trumpet'" and "'whore' within the 'pliant hour'" (4); see "Shakespeare's Sound Government: Sound Defects, Polyglot Sounds, and Sounding Out."

[31] For more on *Othello* and epilepsy see David George's "Night, Hell, and Epilepsy in *Othello*" and Stephanie Moss' "Transformation and Degeneration: The Paracelsan/Galenic Body in *Othello*."

as he succumbs to his own fit. First, the words "trance" and "fit" used in the play

appear frequently in the Darling account. In the forty-three page document, *The*

most wonderfull and true storie, the word "trance" is used thirty-four times and

the word "fit" occurs fifty times. And it is when Darling is described as being in

these forms of altered demonized consciousness that his mouth reverberates with

ventriloquized utterance:

> After a while he fell into a trance, and at length a small voice came
>
> from him saying; Brother Glassap, we cannot preuaile, his faith is
>
> so strong, and they fast and pray, and a Preacher prayeth as fast as
>
> they. After these words, he fell into a fit, and so into a trance, a
>
> voyce beeing heard fro[m] him (big & hollow) saying; Brother
>
> Radulphus, I wil goe vnto my master Belzebub, and he shall
>
> dubble their tungs. . . . Then prayed he againe, and (at the third
>
> word) was throwne into a fit and a Traunce: wherein a voyce was
>
> heard from him (hys mouth being wyde open, as still it was when
>
> these voyces were vttered) saying; Radulphus, Belzebub can doo
>
> no good, his head is stroken off with a word . . . . Then (beginning
>
> to pray againe) he fell into a Fitte and a Traunce: in the which one
>
> of the olde voyces was heard from him, saying; We cannot
>
> preuayle, let vs goe out of him, and enter into some of these heere.
>
> This voyce came twice, and it made the Standers by afrayde. Then
>
> (reading againe) hee fell into a Traunce: and the former voyce was
>
> heard from him, speaking verie hollowly (as both those vnnaturall
>
> voyces not vttered by hymselfe were). (34-37)

The erratic quality of Darling's debased ventriloquized speech is akin to the disintegration into gibbering incoherence of Othello's once beautiful language as he succumbs to his fit: "Pish! Noses, ears, and / lips! Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O, devil!" (4.1.39-40).[32]

Othello has just insisted that it "is not words that shakes me thus" (4.1.39), but in the moments leading up to his collapse, he has been imploring Iago for the very words that trigger his blackout:

> OTHELLO.   What hath he said?
>
> IAGO.   Faith, that he did—I know not what he did.
>
> OTHELLO. What? What?
>
> IAGO.   Lie.
>
> OTHELLO.   With her? (4.1.30-32)

Iago's deceitful language, his lies about Desdemona, completely occupy Othello. Once Cassio arrives on the scene, Iago tries to convince him that Othello suffers from a physiological ailment, and is having an epileptic seizure, but the final words Othello squeezes out as he falls to the ground, "O, devil," (4.1.40) make

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[32] That Iago's influence contributes to the gradual indecipherability of Othello's speech has long been a topic of critical interest. G. Wilson Knight was perhaps the first to grapple with the significance of this in the play:
> Othello, who usually luxuriates in deliberate and magnificent rhetoric, raves, falls in a trance. . . . This is the Iago-spirit, the Iago-medicine, at work, like an acid eating into bright metal. This is the primary fact of Othello and therefore of the play: something of solid beauty is undermined, wedged open so that it exposes an extreme ugliness. (103)

More recently, in her dissertation on epilepsy in *Othello*, Moss links Othello's collapse and deteriorated speech to Mary Glover's 1602 case of hysterical epilepsy and suspected possession, but she does not connect *Othello* to the Darling case. My reading of the vocal dynamics at work in the play has points in common with these analyses, but pushes in a different direction.

available the supernaturally oriented and culturally plausible reality that Iago's language has possessed Othello in the manner of a devil possessing his demoniac.

Another similarity between the documents on possession and Othello's depraved language late in the play is the diction of animality that is so frequent in both. Darling is reported to cry out like a bear and to have had a mouse scurry out of his mouth. In Laon, in 1566, Jean Boulaese records the animal noises that erupted from Nicole Obry during an attempted exorcism:

> Outre plus en telle deformit, & grosseur, la Demoniacle faisoient en s'agitant vne merueilleusement horrible voix. En laquelle ensemblement et distinctement (comme trois doigts abassaint les marches, ouureroient le vent . . . trois tuyaux d'Orgues ensemblement sonans) estoient ouyz, le cry ou grongement d'un gros porceau, l'abboy d'un gros chien, & le muslement d'un gros taureau eschauff. Lequel cry triforme, a est, fort bien entendu & remarqu, aux premiers iours: Et depuis de chien et taureau: Et aux derniers le taureau seulement.[33] (181)

In another English record of possession and dispossession, the student of divinity John Swan reports that in 1602 the demoniac Mary Glover was heard during her attacks to ventriloquize animal noises: "barke . . . (like a hoarce dogge that

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[33] Also, as she became deformed, and grew, the demoniac made as she writhed a fantastically horrible voice. In the which together and distinctly (like three fingers pressing down on the keys, releasing the wind . . . into three organ pipes which sounded together) was heard, the cry or the grumbling of a pig, the barking of a large dog, and the ardent bellowing of a big bull. The which tri-form cry was heard and remarked upon in the first days: And since then the dog and the bull: And finally only the bull. (my translation)

barkes)" and to reproduce the "hissing of a violent . . . Henne that hath the

Squacke," while others, Swan explains, "compareth it to the loathsome noyse that

a Catt maketh forcing to cast her gorge" (*A True and Briefe* 42). Othello's

language is debased in similar bestial ways shortly after his trance. For example,

when greeting Lodovico, an important envoy from Venice, Othello unaccountably

ends the conversation by exclaiming "Goats and monkeys!" (4.1.255). Only once

we realize that this is a ventriloquized echo from Iago's earlier description of

Desdemona and Cassio together, "prime as goats, as hot as monkeys," does

Othello's bestial utterance make sense (3.3.405). Iago's possessive control of

Othello's speech has become so thorough that he has slipped into blurting out the

names of animals in the manner of demoniacs whose language has become

bestial.

Demonism and the Staging of Blackness

In 1601, the Queen proclaimed an edict licensing the Dutch captain Casper

van Senden to apprehend and to transport away from English soil the "Negars and

blackamoors" who, both enslaved and free, had come to England in a variety of

capacities as domestic servants, captives, linguists, and sailors (Hall 194): "the

said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her

majesty's realms" (221).[34] Although Elizabeth's need to reimburse van Senden for

his repatriation of English prisoners from Spain gave her a convenient opportunity

to rid her island of this unwanted foreign population, several of her stated reasons

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[34] See also Emily C. Bartels, "Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I."

for the expulsion of the African population from England are expressed more broadly as matters of urgent economic and religious interest:

> the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negars and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which covet the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel. (222)

Elizabeth expresses the presence of this dark-skinned population in her realm as an economically wasteful and religiously dangerous occupation of the English body politic. As evidenced by the parenthetical aside, "as she is informed," the message to her subjects is calibrated so as not to reveal any close personal contamination of the Queen's immediate person with this uninvited and unwelcome foreign group.[35] The Queen's knowledge of their presence in the realm comes to her second-hand and she means to expel them from England before they intrude any closer to the political centre. To use a religious metaphor, what Elizabeth seems to want here is an easy exorcism of black people from her country, a heathen group whom she declares put too much of a strain on the nation's economic and spiritual vitality.

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[35] This, despite Elizabeth's direct and longstanding investment in the slave trade going back to the 1570s.

This way of thinking about black people as agents of infection and possession is strewn throughout the literature on possession from the period. Part of the reason for this is that the symbolic association between the blackness of supernaturally evil beings and the dark complexion of Moors was indelible at the time. Even someone as sceptical as Scot describes how "a damned soul may and doth take the shape of a black Moor" (535). Similar descriptive connections abound in the demonological writing of the sixteenth century. In one of his early pamphlets, Darrell recounts his dispossession of Elizabeth Hardman in Lancanshire, whom he describes as being delivered of "a foule big blacke man" (*A True Narration* 13). And when Harsnett interviews a suspected exorcised demoniac, Sara Williams, he claims that she has come to deny her previous avowal that while in the grip of possession she saw "a blacke man standing at the doore and beckning at her to come away" and that she also retracts a former statement that "a blacke man should perswade her to breake her necke downe a paire of staires, and another time to cut her owne throat with a knife" (341, 342). In addition to these examples, George More, an advocate for and witness of several of Darrell's exorcisms, explains that the demoniac Margaret Byron "was for the space of a whole day and a night grievouslie molested & sore frighted with a terrible vision which appeared unto her lying in bedde . . . like a fowle black dwarfe, . . . black broad handes, & blacke cloven feete" (29). These anthropomorphically black entities are surely described in contexts that are intended to evoke the blackness of demonic apparitions, but it is also vital to recognize how with regard to Margaret Byron, More, like Scot, makes the connection between otherworldly dark beings and dark-skinned peoples of the

earth explicit: "spirits appeared to her: 5 of them very black, fowler then blackmores, marveylous uglie to beholde" (34). To be assaulted by beings supernatural, demonic, humanoid, and black is similar to being confronted with the foreignness of Moors.

One episode narrated by More resonates in particularly striking ways with the bedchamber scenes in *Othello*. He recounts in great detail how for Byron it was

> usual also with the spirit to come unto her in the night in the likeness of a blacke man . . . which tooke her just as she was going to bed, & would be sure to picke her backwarde: and shee being recovered and got into her bed, it would come and sit upon the toppe of her head, holding his 4 fingers upon her forehead very heavie, holding her very strait, that she could not see nor stirre. (32)

The setting for exorcistic confrontation with demoniacs and their demons was the bedroom. This particular account of a demonic black man aggressively haunting a young white woman as she prepares for bed, and then violently pinning down her head once she is in bed, conjures to mind the time leading up and including the nighttime murder of Desdemona in her bedchamber, certainly the play's most visually arresting scene. Black Othello hovering over and then attacking Desdemona in her bed could have alluded for many playgoers to the black demons that possessed demoniacs in their beds.

When taken together, the material that associates black men with terrifying demons appears to indicate that white Iago's demonic possession of black Othello

inverts the early modern English expectation that by dint of his blackness it is Othello who should be the primary agent of supernatural possession in a play so concerned with the wider social reality and metaphorical implications of that phenomenon. But in casting Iago and not Othello as the foremost malevolent presence in the play, Shakespeare reflects in theatrical terms the sort of secularizing political attitude that could allow in Venice for the appointment of a dark-skinned foreigner to the most prestigious military command in the city. The same secularizing conditions that would theoretically allow for that event in Venice could also transform the theatrical significance of blackface in a play like *Othello*. A man painted black in a play at the Globe need no longer be (as he was a single theatrical generation earlier in regional mystery plays[36]) an agent of blackest evil. Likewise, a Moor entrusted with the martial duties of a humanist city-state such as Venice was not automatically construed as a threat merely because his skin was the same shade as that of demons or of the city's enemies. But what happened in both the world of drama in which *Othello* was performed, as well as in the historical Venice that is represented in the play, is that the old religious fears one might expect to vanish in the midst of secularizing theatrical and political motions are not entirely eliminated, but are instead often manifested in new, more insidious ways.

At the Globe, the easiness with which the Moor Othello occupied secularizing theatrical and, within the play, secularizing military and marital roles,

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[36] At least one victim of possession in the period was described in terms of his resemblance to a stage-devil. In 1573, Edward Nyndge reported seeing a demoniac who was "monstrouslye transformed . . . muche lyke the picture of the Devil in a playe" (*A book*).

likely made his character a locus of complicated religious thoughts and feelings

for a playgoing culture accustomed to viewing blackface, indeed almost all

blackness, as a signifier of supernatural evil.[37] But Othello's initial

characterization in the play resists these fears. The stereotypes are instead only

slowly manifested in Othello once Iago's infectious and pernicious ventriloquial

influence takes hold of him. It is also worth noting that the more socially accepted

Othello's marriage to Desdemona and his leadership of the military become in the

play, the more Iago takes advantage of those secularizing achievements in order to

invade the consciousness of his victims. Iago gradually makes Othello into the

harmfully violent invader his complexion dictates he should be in this culture.

To put this more straightforwardly, no matter how good black is initially

presented as being in the play, there is a certain early modern cultural perspective

within which the devil finds a way to make black evil, even in the midst of

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[37] My argument here is based upon the opinion of critics who have ascribed to
Othello's blackness an automatically demonized theatrical status. See, for instance, Julie
Hankey who employs evidence from other plays of the period to support this view:

> The point about blackness on the stage was moral and religious rather
> than racial and geographical. Black was the colour of the devil. Aaron
> and Eleazar are villains and their colour proclaims them so. The fact that
> there are white villains as well does not detract from the force of
> blackness as a symbol. It is the embarrassing advertisement for the evil
> which in white men lies concealed: "Ye white lim'd walls" says Aaron to
> Chiron and Demetrius, "ye alehouse painted signs! / Coal-black is better
> than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue." And in itself it
> gave a certain frisson. Although as Eleazar says "the whitest faces have
> the blackest souls" and although "black faces may have hearts as white as
> snow", still Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* could say of the undevilish
> Prince of Morocco: "if he have the condition of a saint, and the
> complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me.
> (14)

It makes sense, therefore, to ascribe at least some of the signification of Othello's dark
skin to the blackness of devils on the medieval stage and in the broader cultural
imaginary.

powerfully secularizing conditions. Jacobean culture's religious fears about blackness are eventually confirmed in the play, albeit in much more insidious ways than in previous theatrical generations. Othello will be made to kill Desdemona, not because dark skin is no longer necessarily in itself a sign of evil, but because longstanding religious fears about the nature of blackness, misgivings that have been ostensibly pushed to the margins by the processes of secularization, are still culturally present enough to demand validation. Secularization does not in this early context eliminate the fear of demonic evil—it only steers traditional religious apprehension (about, for example, the signification of black skin) through more perfidious channels, and it is through Iago's characterization that those complicated religious feelings are cryptically expressed in *Othello*. Iago's possessively ventriloquial actions confirm that the demonic can manifest itself in the midst of an intensively secularizing Venetian context, either as literally or metaphorically diabolical, even in a play that dramatizes perhaps the most thorough-going of Renaissance secularizations imaginable—the promotion of a Moor to the position of general in Venice and his subsequent marriage to a white gentlewoman. The Venice imagined in the play, a city at the leading edge of pluralizing secularization, may attempt to believe that dark-skinned Othello is a good soul, but the devil, even after the advent of humanism and the de-emphasis of much belief in supernatural influence among the elite, still finds a way to demonize him.

Iago's Cassio

While Iago's ultimate goal may be to ensnare Othello's "soul and body" (5.2.300), he also enlists others by possessively harnessing their voices to his cause. Michael Cassio is an important component of this tactic. Iago plots to initiate through him a "parallel course" (2.3.334), one in which Cassio, "Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune, / And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor" (2.3.339-40). Of course, Desdemona's petitions on Cassio's behalf end up sounding to Othello's ears like the supplications of a lover for her beloved. Iago relays his voice through Cassio and Desdemona, so that eventually almost every tainted word they say to Othello contributes to the malicious injury Iago more directly inflicts on him at other moments in the play.

Iago first attempts to obtain control over Cassio's voice by engaging him in an inappropriately eroticized conversation about Desdemona: she is "sport / for Jove" (2.3.16-17). When the lieutenant refuses to parrot Iago's debased assessment of Desdemona's worth, Iago proceeds to make Cassio more amenable to his words by using against him his greatest "infirmity," his "weakness" for drink (2.3.37, 38). Cassio is cajoled by Iago into drinking, is led into a brawl by Iago's gull Roderigo, and is as a result stripped of his lieutenancy by Othello. Iago's ability to use wine to put what he calls "our Cassio in some action / That may offend the isle" (2.3.56-57), all the while arranging Roderigo's actions in whispered asides, exemplifies the flexibility, diversity, and indirection of Iago's appropriative verbal assaults on others.

Cassio's particular susceptibility to Iago's possessive claims upon him is anticipated by the herald's proclamation at the beginning of the scene that "All offices are open" (2.2.8). This pronouncement implies levity in two senses, not

only that official duties have been temporarily suspended, but also that Cassio's personal integrity as office holder is about to be relaxed. That Iago identifies Cassio as being "loose of soul" also contributes to the characterization of Cassio as prone to supernatural violation (3.3.418). Soon thereafter Iago uses wine further to weaken Cassio and to facilitate his possession of him. Cassio himself describes the process using words from the contemporary discourse of demonic possession, attributing to drink the devilishly pernicious influence Iago pours into him: "O, thou invisible spirit of wine, if / thou has no name to be known by, let us call thee devil!" (2.3.271-72). Cassio describes his drunkeness as a ventriloquial and diabolical possession: "Drunk, and speak parrot" (2.3.269); "O God, that men / should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their / brains" (2.3.278-80); "It hath pleased the devil drunkenness to give place / to the devil wrath" (2.3.284-85); "O strange! Every / inordinate cup is unblessed, and the ingredient is a / devil" (2.3.294-96). In defense of the effects of wine Iago says to him, "Come, come, good wine is a good familiar creature," with the sense that the wine is like a witch's familiar (2.3.297). I will clarify the relationship between witchcraft and demonic possession later in the chapter.

The figurative mobility of Iago's possessive voice is evidenced later in the play when Cassio is once again made into the recipient of Iago's vocal trickery. Shortly after Othello has recovered from his collapse, Iago asks him to withdraw to a distance so that Othello may observe a staged conversation with Cassio, in which Cassio appears to admit to an affair with Desdemona. If Iago hopes to beguile Othello and Cassio into believing in the illusions he weaves for each of them, he must triangulate his voice with dazzling proficiency. His strategy is to

transmit through one character language he intends automatically to affect another. He filters through Cassio references to Bianca that come out of Cassio's mouth and enter Othello's ears sounding as though the former lieutenant is referring to Desdemona: "Ply Desdemona well, and you are sure on't: / *(Speaking lower)* Now, if this suit lay in Bianca's power, / How quickly should you speed!" (4.1.102-4). Iago deftly ventriloquizes his words through Cassio in order to amplify the credibility of the false language he feeds to his ultimate victim. It seems that nowhere else in Shakespeare's plays is there such a high density of vocal (mis)direction embedded in the script. Although the quarto and the first folio include no explicit cues, editors must indicate about nine reiterated vocal asides in order to shape the performative impact of Iago's and Cassio's transmuted words upon Othello. To set all of this in motion, Iago is described as "*Speaking lower*" when he first addresses Cassio. Thick vocal direction is also achieved through more implicit textual indicators. For instance, speaking in a superficially casual manner to Cassio, but with sinister intent to Othello, Iago says to both at once, "Do you hear Cassio?" (4.1.109). Othello's ear is thus repeatedly submitted to Iago's voice once it has been ventriloquially channeled and intensified through the conversation he stages with Cassio.

Iago once again involves Cassio as a central figure at the very end of the play, with Othello yet again made into a receptive listener. This scene, Iago's orchestration of the play's third and final nighttime riot, rivals in magnitude any of the other possessive and ventriloquial performances he gives in the play. Iago is virtually everywhere and so is his voice. Even when Othello hears Cassio cry out in pain after he is injured by Iago's puppet Roderigo, Othello traces the

utterance back to words Iago has spoken: "The voice of Cassio: Iago keeps his word" (5.1.28). Iago is the primary interlocutor throughout the scene, speaking to everyone, saturating their minds, relentlessly invading, motivating, and fashioning their thoughts and their actions with the performative adeptness of his preternaturally shrewd voice. It is through complicated vocal transactions such as these, in which Iago's voice grafts itself to the voices of Othello and others, that the play renders increasingly audible Iago's intricate ventriloquial dominion.

Othello's Desdemona

Another telling example of Othello's predicament is contained in a scene late in the play when Othello encounters Desdemona and almost automatically gives voice to the kind of perverse religious utterance that is a staple of Iago's speech. Locating in Desdemona's hand "a young and sweating devil . . . / That commonly rebels" (3.4.40-41), Othello prescribes for it an assortment of remedies from nonconformist Protestant and Catholic texts on demonic possession, a "sequester from liberty—fasting and prayer, / Much castigation, exercise devout" (3.4.38-39).[38] Fasting and prayer are the primary means of exorcism mandated in Darrell's writing and he relied on scripture to support his faith in their efficacy: "this kinde goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17:21). Darrell did not believe that he could cast devils out on command as Christ did, but rather that his

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[38] James L. Calderwood makes passing reference to the possessed status of Desdemona's hand, but his incidental treatment of the passage does not connect it to the details of the wider demonological controversies of the period (63).

prayers for exorcism would be heard by God who would then order the spirit to leave the demoniac's body.

Moreover, Othello's notion that a devil could be located in a specific part of the body was a claim made during Catholic exorcisms at Denham and became an object of hostile assault in Harsnett's *Declaration*. Harsnett devotes an entire chapter to satirizing the phenomenon: "*Of the secret of lodging and couching the devil in any part of the body that the Exorcist pleaseth*" (248). Harsnett emphasizes his perception of the fictional quality of the occurrence by associating it with the theatre: "Heere this act of lodging the devil had a *plaudite* in the midst of the play" (249). He then derisively lampoons the fraudulence of the interaction between a priest-exorcist and a woman possessed by composing an imagined dialogue:

> Pri: *I command thee to goe to the place appointed, and that thou doe not hurt her in thy going downe, nor make her sicke in body nor minde.*
>
> Wo: *Fie upon thee, hee is in my knee.*
>
> Pri: *I commaund thee to thy place appointed, thou damned fiend.*
>
> Wo: *Oh, hee is in my great toe.*
>
> Pri: *Goe to the place appointed, thou damned fiend.*
>
> Wo: *Oh, he is in my toe next to my little toe.*
>
> Pri: *Goe to the place appointed, thou damned fiend.*
>
> Wo: *Oh fie upon him, he is in the toe next the great toe.*
>
> Pri: *I commaund thee to goe into the dead of her nayle.* (249)

Here and elsewhere in the text, Harsnett's frequent attribution of exclamatory

"Ohs" to women possessed has the effect of eroticizing their encounters with

exorcists. Harsnett comments on how the priest commands the devil to "lodge in a

homely place, of which you shal heare hereafter if it be not too foule" (249). He

also lingers over the salacious image of the priest's hands as they probe a female

demoniac's body in search of the devil's precise anatomical location:

> to bring the same holy hands piping hote from the Altar to the
>
> chayre where *Sara* sate at Masse, to seize with the same hands
>
> upon her toe, slip them up along her legge, her knee, her thigh, and
>
> so along all parts of her body till you came neere her neck, and by
>
> the way with the same holy hands to handle, pinch, and gripe
>
> where the devil in his blacke modesty did forbeare, till you made
>
> her crie *oh*? And then you to crie *O, that* oh *is the devill?* (261)

Harsnett intimates here that the priests' groping after the devil's placement in the

women's bodies reveals what is actually their lurid desire for physical contact

with these women. The female demoniac's individual body parts come to stand in

for her genital region, which in turn is not possessed by a demon, but by a devilish

priest's desire. The devil the priest seeks is not anywhere in the woman, but is

instead to be found in himself. From an exorcist priest's point of view, however,

Harsnett's tract would suggest that Harsnett himself is the one who is bent upon

perversely eroticizing the sacred ritual of exorcism.

Othello performs an elaborately refracted version of this religious conflict.

He seeks in Desdemona's hand, a "moist," "Hot, hot and moist" (3.4.34, 37)

grossly displaced and sinfully adulterous genitalia, in which seemingly lodges the

devil that he does not know is actually in himself—the demon that has been

lodged in his person in the form of Iago's possessive language. The last

invocation in Othello's list of admonishments to Desdemona, his call to "exercise

devout," a strict adherence to devotional observances, may also be heard as

exorcise devout, for exercise and exorcise were orthographically exchangeable in

the period. Othello's focus on Desdemona's hand as the site of an illegitimate

possession requiring exorcism demonstrates above all, however, his own

possessed status. But from the perspective of Othello's contaminated being, his

allusion to Desdemona's hand's need for exorcism has nothing directly to do with

himself, and instead refers to his perception that it has been sexually possessed by

Cassio.[39]

We should recall, of course, that Desdemona's hand was touched by

Cassio earlier in the play. Othello was not present, but Iago looked on with glee,

declaring in an aside that he would eventually use this courtly gesture to his

advantage. But when did Iago communicate to Othello a twisted version of

Cassio's courteous encounter with Desdemona's hand? Nowhere in the text does

Iago reconstruct the scene for Othello, nor does he at any point draw Othello's

attention to her hands. We are left to conclude that either Othello's attribution of a

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[39] Desdemona, of course, is presented in the drama as an ideal wife, the very opposite of a woman possessed by the devil. After Othello accuses her of being "that cunning whore of Venice," she tells Iago and Emilia about the false charge, but can hardly bring herself to repeat the word "whore": "Am I that name, Iago?" (4.2.118). She is thus characterized in a manner that stands in complete opposition to the demoniacs Harsnett investigates, souls who can "hardly be brought to pronounce these [holy] words, *Ave Maria, the mother of GOD,* and most hardly *the Catholique Church*" (222). Unlike them, Desdemona demonstrates her purity and freedom from direct demonic influence by resisting the utterance of a word she believes to be morally repugnant.

demonically and sexually possessed status to Desdemona's hand is arbitrary or Othello has become not only figuratively, but also literally possessed by Iago, and that he has begun automatically to ventriloquize his demon's hostile agenda in the manner of an authentically inspirited demoniac.

The Secularization of the Demonic

The possibility that Iago is literally demonic would have been far more plausible in the play's original context than it is today. From our modern vantage, *Othello* does not appear to be particularly concerned with the supernatural. It is not a play like Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus.* Costumed demons do not roam the stage. For the audiences of modernity, Iago does not necessarily appear to be imbued with preternatural relevance. He and the other characters are situated in the orbit of Venice, arguably the most religiously liberal political entity of the time. Yet *Othello* also places the skeptical atmosphere of Venice under threat by the supernatural attributes of Iago's demonic language and it makes a significant number of distinct allusions to the possession controversies of the period. There is no overarching secular perch in the play from which to explain away the matters of spiritual concern it puts into circulation. There is instead a theological tension, a low level religious frequency that suffuses *Othello*, one that becomes detectable to us when we are as receptive to it as were its first audiences.

From within the context of much early modern religious belief, Iago's ambiguously demonized personhood makes available a variety of literal demonic permutations: Iago is a demon in human form; Iago is a demoniac; Iago is a

demon-summoning witch;[40] Iago is a possessed demon-summoning witch.[41] The

point that should be made here is not that Iago literally embodies any single one

of these demonic platforms from which to possess others. Nor, conversely, would

it be adequate to argue that Iago's demonism is without exception merely

figurative. Instead, *Othello*'s entanglement with one of the most contentious

religious debates of the period should challenge us to think beyond any

ideological modality that would posit Iago's presence in the play as definitively

supernatural or natural.

A productive way of engaging with this indeterminacy is to use it to

attempt to recover a more thorough understanding of the original playgoers'

varied reception of demonism in the play. This may be achieved by imagining a

theoretical continuum representative of a range of possible beliefs toward the

demonic in *Othello*. The play appeals to all of these potentialities simultaneously,

rejecting the sufficiency of any single one of them in isolation from the rest, in the

process creating secularizing conditions of experience and observation. At either

end of this vast and expanding Renaissance spectrum rested extreme hypotheses

for and against close demonological proximity to humans.

For the believers at the continuum's hypervigilant extremity, an inherently

demonic Iago actually channels supernatural evil, but there is little possibility of

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[40] Historians have tended to gender witches as female, but Lara Apps and Andrew Gow have found that witches were much more frequently male than has been previously thought. See *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*.

[41] D. P. Walker cites several instances of this relatively infrequent occurrence, "in 1584 at Mons" and "in 1591 at Louviers" (10).

summoning the heavenly forces of good as an antidote to his otherworldly

inspired malevolence. Even if the citizenry of Venice were to be alerted to the

hellish reality of Iago's dark powers by some priestly Catholic or radical

Protestant outlier, this liberal humanist community would not readily believe. And

at any rate, once the play is considered by its English audience through the lens of

Anglicanism's disavowal of the possibility of exorcism, there is no one with the

legal religious authority to restrain the harm Iago seeks to inflict.

In a metatheatrical sense, those at this end of the continuum could also be

inclined to label not only Iago's, but all staged utterances as devilish. According

to antitheatricalist invective, commercial plays were the devil's mouthpiece.

Stephen Gosson claimed that theatrical voices were materially invasive,

controlling, and devilish. The hazards of listening at plays are illustrated in his

Plays confuted in fiue actions, with particular emphasis placed upon the

diabolically sweet, yet nevertheless poisonous quality of the poetic language

matter that entered the audience's ears: "Because the sweete numbers of Poetrie

flowing in verse, do wonderfully tickle the hearers eares, the deuill hath tyed this

to most of our playes, ... that the poyson creeping on secretly without griefe

chookes vs at last, and hurleth vs downe in a dead sleepe" (72-73). Gosson makes

a similar point in the *Schoole of Abuse*, where he claims that the sense of hearing

admits into the body more harm than the senses of taste, scent, and sight:

> There set they abroche straunge consortes of melody, to tickle the
>
> eare, costly apparel, to flatter the sight; effeminate gesture, to
>
> rauish the sence; and wanton speache, to whet desire too inordinate
>
> lust. Therefore of both barrelles, I iudge Cookes and Painters the

better hearing, for the one extendeth his arte no farther then to the

tongue, palate, and nose, the other to the eye; and both are ended in

outwarde sense, which is common too vs with bruite beasts. But

these by the priuie entries of the eare, slip downe into the hart, and

with gunshotte of affection gaule the minde, where reason and

vertue should rule the roste. (14-15)

Gosson's argument, that the players' borrowed words enter the playgoers' ears,

and then through a violent physical operation endanger the hearer's spiritual

health, is akin to the exorcists' belief in the vocal materiality of demonic

intrusion.[42] In both cases, the hearer's exposure to diabolical language is the cause

of supernatural contamination. The theatre itself was for Gosson and other

extreme believers a gateway for the devil's possessively bewitching voice.[43]

At the continuum's very skeptical end, Iago is an almost totally

disenchanted character, whose largely hollowed-out supernatural language

nonetheless would have spoken to the still partially credulous core of early

modernity's incompletely doubtful codes of belief—vestigial insecurities that

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[42] For another version of this fear, see John Greene's *Refutation of the Apologie for Actors*, in which he relates an instance of possession at the theatre in "the times of the primitive Church":

> a Christian woman went into the Theatre to behold the plaies. She entred in well and sound, but she returned and came forth possessed of the Divell. Whereupon certain Godly brethren demanded Sathan how he durst be so bold, as to enter into her a Christian. Whereto he answered, that *hee found her in his owne house*, and therefore took possession of her as his owne. (42)

[43] Belief in the materiality of words could also, however, work against the devil. Faith in the beneficial effects of listening to sermons, for example, was widespread. For more on sermons and the perversion of preacher speech in *Othello* see Richard Mallette's "Blasphemous Preacher: Iago and the Reformation."

clung stubbornly to the minds of even the most skeptical voices of the period:[44]

What if we are at times in the grip of supernatural darkness and do not even know

it because we have abandoned too many religious principles and adopted too

many skeptical tendencies? We may not believe in the immediacy of the

supernatural, but there is always some small cause for spiritual concern since the

devil is an undeniable, although very distant, presence in the cosmos. Scot's

beliefs as articulated in *The Discouerie of Witchcraft* are compatible with this

high degree of early modern skepticism. At this end of the spectrum, playgoers

would still have remained inclined thus, at least in the furthest recesses of their

beliefs, to accept the spiritual reality of the devil as fact.

So, at the skeptical end of the continuum, there is room for what amounts

to a very small degree of demonological concern, but Iago is not directly

supernatural and his ventriloquism works as a trope in the play, a sign of his

strategically deployed figurative possession of Othello's mind. At the other end,

where Iago is surely demonic, his ventriloquism is literally a transmitter of

supernatural contagion. It is important to note that in either case something

devastating is at work and that the vicious qualities of Iago's language inevitably

stick to the interiority of those who listen to him.

We should also recognize that neither of the continuum's outer limits may

alone fully account for the religious sophistication and variety of the original

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[44] This I would argue included atheists, whose atheism we should not mistake for the atheism of today. Because of their religio-cultural context, early modern atheists would have been subject to doubts about their unbelief that would have been far more taxing than those of the millions of atheists who support one another's opinions today. Early modern atheism was far less sure of itself than modern atheism.

playgoers' receptions of *Othello*'s demonized drama. The majority of their beliefs

would cluster somewhere closer to the murkily paradoxical center. Within that

range, Iago's damaging ventriloquial demonism could be both entirely real and

completely fake. Deacon and Walker, for their part, claimed that so-called

demoniacs' vocalizations were absolutely counterfeit, while at the same time also

positively devilish:

> the Diuell . . . being alwaies desirous to worke (among the deare
>
> children of God) the greatest disturbance that may be, and finding
>
> withall some such lewd disposed person as is naturally enclined to
>
> all manner of knaueries) he taketh the oportunitie of so fit a
>
> subiect, and worketh so cunningly vpon the corruption of that lewd
>
> persons nature, as the partie himselfe is easily brought to beleeue,
>
> and to beare others also in hand, that he is (in deede and in truth)
>
> essentially possessed of Satan. (237-38)

Deacon and Walker did not believe in physical demonic possession and

dispossession, yet they nevertheless described those involved in the exorcists'

hoaxes as "(in deede and in truth) essentially possessed" by satanic influence.

Every wicked intent remained for them, at bottom, diabolically produced. To

make fictitious claims about the devil's manipulation of oneself remained a

complex sign of supernatural corruption.

    Othello's representation of demonism, ventriloquism, and humanist

Venetian skepticism grants us access to an especially volatile moment in the

history of Western skepticism and spirituality. The spread of early modern

secularization in Europe included an increase in the application of extreme forms

of skepticism, as well as new ways of relating to God. It also shaped fresh

passages for devilish incursion. By calling into question the merits of the Venetian

attitude of doubtfulness toward the potential supernatural threat embodied in Iago,

Othello stages the idea that the skeptical innovations of Italian civic humanism, as

well as the fragmentation of approaches to the demonic in England, could expose

these communities to supernatural harm. The processes of secularization could

thus have been construed as fuelling the devil's undiminished efforts to ruin

humanity. The reality of satanic participation in human affairs could not yet be

readily dismissed, but in the midst of new beliefs, it was sent to increasingly

deeper, multiple, and indirect levels of infiltration.

Chapter Two: Blasphemous *Macbeth*

> In elder time an ancient custom was,
> To sweare in waighty matters by the Masse.
> But when the Masse went down (as old men note)
> They sware then, by the crosse of this same grote.
> And when the Crosse was likewise held in scorne,
> Then by their faith, the common oth was sworn:
> Last, hauing sworne awaie all faith and troth,
> Only God dam'n them is their common oth.
>   Thus custom kept decorum by gradation,
>   That losing Masse, Crosse, Faith, they find damnation.
>   "Against Swearing" Sir John Harrington (1560-1612)

In the same year as *Macbeth*'s first performance, Jacobean law-makers

produced the *Act to Restrain Abuses of Players,* a bill that aimed to eliminate

blasphemous profanities from the mouths of all stage-actors.[45] The adoption of

this measure in 1606 against blasphemous forms of expression in public

entertainments redefined the parameters of acceptable speech at the theatre.

Before the statute, each of Shakespeare's plays contains dozens of oaths or

references to oaths. Few of these are enacted in the sense of the formal oath as a

binding and sacred commitment. The vast majority are false oaths spoken

jestingly or in anger. Despite their seeming triviality, these oaths nonetheless

impiously invoked divine witness and were thus open to accusations of

blasphemy. In *Macbeth*, his first play written with the new law in mind, there are

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[45] Most editions date *Macbeth* to 1606. Topical references to the Gunpowder plot as well as to Henry Garnet's equivocating testimony and execution indicate that it was likely written in the first half of the year, before then being performed for the first time at court during a visit from the King of Denmark, sometime between July 17th and August 11th. The *Act to Restrain Abuses of Players* was passed by the Commons on April 5th. It was then heard twice in the Lords, on April 29th and May 1st, before finally receiving royal assent on May 27th. On the act itself, see Hugh Gazzard's "*An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players*." See also Gary Taylor's "'Swounds Revisited: Theatrical, Editorial, and Literary Expurgation" in *Shakespeare Reshaped 1606-1623*.

no occurrences of explicit oaths.[46] Yet there is evidence in *Macbeth* to indicate

that Shakespeare took the bill's facile outlawing of sacrilegious language in plays

as a kind of provocation. For while there is no evidence of language that openly

contravened the new proclamation, there is a significant amount of objective talk

about false swearing in the play and implicit allusions to blasphemy are

abundant.[47] Instead of accommodating this fresh legal constraint on playmaking

by merely subtracting objectionable words from his characters' vocabularies,

Shakespeare appears in *Macbeth* to have been spurred by the prohibition to write

a play that finds ways to convey much more about the idea of blasphemy than the

oath-riddled plays he wrote before the statute. *Macbeth* does not overtly flout the

new law, but its interest in blasphemy nevertheless responds to the bill's core

prohibition against the blasphemous defamation of the sacred.[48] By employing

technically licit modes of communication, *Macbeth* thematizes the transformation

of blasphemy's meaning in early modern culture.

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[46] See Frances A. Shirley, *Swearing and Perjury in Shakespeare's Plays* (xiii, 126, 130). Shirley makes reference to Shakespeare diminishing the number of oaths in his plays in response to the statute, but does not single out *Macbeth* for extended analysis.

[47] There is not only a general lack of profanity in *Macbeth*. Jeffrey Knapp has observed that the tone of the characters' language in the play is exceptionally polite. He argues that the Scots' well-mannered speech in the play would have worked against the English expectation that the Scottish people were verbally uncouth and that this surprising refinement in their speech would likely have been pleasing to the new king (Knapp "Pains to Please").

[48] Shakespeare also appears to employ this strategy of functional avoidance of oaths in Sonnet 152. As David Schalwyk remarks, "Sonnet 152 is obsessively concerned with oaths and their ethical consequences. But it contains no oaths. It talks about them, replacing their performative force with a series of different 'passionate utterances'" (391).

What had been prior to the Reformation a relatively settled conceptualization of blasphemy as speaking calumnious or heretical words against God, became over the course of the sixteenth century a concept that was pulled in multiple directions.[49] State authorities codified blasphemy along two major trajectories. First, across Europe during the sixteenth century, attempts to regulate blasphemy as a verbal crime were on the increase. The growth of legal mechanisms with which to discipline the voices of blasphemously unruly subjects was particularly evident in Protestant territories.[50] England's narrowly legalistic 1606 bill condemning blasphemous utterance against the Godhead in public entertainments is one such instance. Secondly, theories of sacral monarchy sought to use the sin by emphatically associating blasphemy, in its most egregious forms an unforgiveable sin and the worst of all spiritual transgressions,[51] with treason, the worst of all political crimes. *Macbeth* represents these regulatory controls and political appropriations as incomplete ways of managing the increasing volatility of blasphemy's meaning in the period. Shakespeare challenges the sufficiency of these rigidly assertive strands of blasphemy by including them in *Macbeth*, but then also by incorporating into the play alongside these, a plurality of other meanings of blasphemy. The play thus orchestrates a much more complex account of the crisscrossing plurality of the sin's meanings than those provided in the

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[49] For the standard medieval view on blasphemy see Aquinas (*Summa* 2.2.13).

[50] See David Nash's *Blasphemy in the Christian World* (42-71).

[51] The precedent for this is established in the gospels: "the blasphemy against the holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men" (Matthew 12:31); "he that blasphemeth against the holy Ghost, shall never have forgiveness, but is culpable of eternal damnation" (Mark 3:29).

official 1606 act against theatrical blasphemy and in the association of treason with blasphemy.

According to a modern perspective that would want to imbue Shakespeare with prescient secularity, it may be tempting to think of his relativization of blasphemy in the play as an attempt to discredit once and for all the very possibility of blasphemy's existence. The secularization of blasphemy that occurs in *Macbeth* does not, however, go that far. Indeed, that blasphemy had become interpretable in the variety of ways represented in the play is part of what made the concept such a potent social and spiritual threat. The plurality of beliefs about blasphemy that are built into *Macbeth* does not contest the sufficiency of the versions of blasphemy proffered by the ruling elite, only in order then to posit that there was never any such thing as blasphemy. Instead, the multiplicity of blasphemies on display in *Macbeth* secularizes by drawing spectators from many walks of life into a potentially expanded contemplation of the varieties of blasphemous realities that were possible beyond the self-serving meanings promulgated by state authorities.

On the one hand, this secularizing theatrical orchestration of blasphemous possibilities may have been unsettling for some, particularly in the wake of the social and spiritual turmoil of the Reformation. The clearer prescriptions against blasphemy of the medieval past and of the Catholic Church were no longer as viable as they once were. The meaning of blasphemy had become manifold over the course of the sixteenth century. The theatre's pluralizing, relativizing, and secularizing potency could be a source of further spiritual upset for some in attendance, particularly for those searching for straightforward remedies or for

confirmation of solutions already arrived at. If there was theological certainty about blasphemy to be had, the theatre disturbed it, perhaps diminishing the feelings of spiritual vitality held by some in attendance. On the other hand, the play's refutation of the adequacy of authoritarian, static, two-dimensional definitions of blasphemy, in favor of dynamic, multi-dimensional encounters with multiple versions of the sin could be secularizing in more socially and spiritually invigorating ways. Making belief together at the theatre, an infamous locus of blasphemous potentiality, could nonetheless serve as a reassuring means not only of tolerating and reconsidering the thoughts of others on blasphemy, but also of learning to reconsider what for many Protestants may have seemed at times to have become the dead end of their own ineluctably blasphemous personhood.

Blasphemous Despair

Original sin was the first act of disobedience against God, a burdensome taint that marked all humans as sinful. According to several influential Protestant doctrines, humans were thus totally depraved, and while most would not burn as unforgivable blasphemous heretics on earth, most were doomed to burn in hell, unredeemed nonetheless. Simply not swearing was no guarantee that one was not a stain on creation, doomed to an everlasting afterlife of punishment. Postlapsarian humanity was an affront to God. Although the appropriate reaction to this compromised spiritual condition was supposed to be hope, it was possible to descend into blasphemous doubt and despair.

Calvin repeatedly confronts this predicament. In the *Institutes*, for example, he frequently enjoins the faithful not to despair: "What could they here

do but become dispirited and rush on despair, were they not, when afflicted, desolate, and half dead, comforted with the thought that they are regarded by God" (565). Calvin also labors against the intervention of the Church between the despairing soul and what some may have assumed to be an overly strict God. Will God, Calvin asks, "not rather listen to the tears and groans of his children, when supplicating for themselves (especially seeing he invites and exhorts us to do so), than to any advocacy of others to whom the timid have recourse, not without some semblance of despair, because they are distrustful of their father's mildness and clemency?" (553). To suspect that God is unforgiving is to descend into despair and error.

Despair and blasphemy are movingly conjoined in a text by Matteo Gribaldi, prefaced by Calvin, and translated into English in 1570 by Edward Aglionby, in which a successful Italian lawyer, Frauncis Spera, is shown to have lost all hope:

> [Prayer] auaileth me nothyng. [M]y sinne is to death . . . . All the power . . . is taken from me. For the Lord had [re]spect vnto Peter: but he hath no respect to mée. He was elect, and I am repro|te. . . . I will praie vnto GOD . . . and will quickely say whatsoeuer [you] will haue me to saie. But my heart is of hatred, cursing and blasphemie. I . . . feele that God is against mee . . . . [An]d as he spake thus, a flie came fliyng before his face: Lo (said he) nowe Belza|bub calleth mée to a feaste, ye shall per|ceiue mine ende to approache, to the ex|ample of many . . . . (20)

And then later in the meeting: "he did pro+test that his heart was quite from God and that he called hym not father with his heart, but rather curssed and blasphe+med him: and therfore he sayde· there was no cause why wee should labour any more in vaine, to comfort and bring him home againe" (37). Spera's words are unclear on where blasphemy ends and despair begins. He is caught in a loop in which he despairs because he blasphemes and blasphemes because he despairs.

The poem that serves as an epigraph to this chapter, John Harrington's "Against Swearing," surveys the recent history of swearing in English and concludes despairingly, with the seeming inescapability of "damnation." The final and most authentic tendency in the history of blasphemous expression, Harrington implies, is the damnable refusal to believe in the capability of God's grace to save humans from themselves. While this short poem may appear to delineate a secularizing trajectory bent upon the gradual subtraction of swearing as a sin, with swearing by the Catholic mass and cross becoming inefficacious after these symbols lost their traditional sacred value over the course of the sixteenth century, the poem is primarily geared to intensify religious sentiment. Entitled "Against Swearing" and not the Decline of Swearing, the poem is an admonishment of false swearing. Harrington identifies an escalation in the dangers of oath-making after the loss of the Catholic sanctity of mass and cross. He then points out that the post-Reformation habit of swearing by one's "faith" ironically incapacitates the very faith that might otherwise justify the Protestant swearer. All that is left after this is to swear by the actual name of God, specifically the damnation he metes out: "hauing sworne awaie all faith and troth, / Only God dam'n them is

their common oth." "Thus," Harrington writes, "custom kept decorum by gradation / That losing Masse, Crosse, Faith, they find damnation." In one sense, the poem advances a standard Reformed historiographical course, describing Catholic symbols as having become gradually unworthy even to be sworn by. The poem then moves on to more dire Protestant thinking on swearing as a failure of faith, attendant blasphemous despair, and subsequent damnation. No longer swearing in exasperation at God, but blaspheming because of what seems to be the intractable inescapability of one's own damnation. In another sense, Harrington's words also betray a nostalgia for England's ignorant Catholic past, when it still felt possible to swear by the alleged sanctity of the mass and the cross, in Protestant retrospect, swearing only by empty ritualistic symbols, so not really swearing at all. And yet, Harrington recognizes that there is no turning back. There is no unknowing the truth he has come to know as a Reformed subject.

The jaunty tone of the poem's initial lines are arrested at the end by the seemingly hopeless finality of the word "damnation." Intended in its Protestant sense, the word is evocative of the doctrines of total depravity, justification by faith alone, and double predestination, which had come to replace traditional Catholic ritualistically-performed and materially-focused means to salvation. The final line of the poem may be read as an utterance of post-Reformation despair—*because* we have lost mass, cross, and faith, we must now face damnation. The loss of faith in old redemptive sacral loci seems to have carried over in this poem into the possibility of a new way of losing faith, a loss of faith in the very Godhead's capacity to save. False swearing and despair are related blasphemies

because both imply God's insufficiency, either because one blasphemously doubts that God could retaliate against those whose false oaths dishonour him or because one blasphemously doubts God's power to redeem. That is how for Harrington, the old and the new forms of blasphemy keep "decorum by gradation," meaning that they decorously befit one another, each stage related to the last. The final step in this spiritual evolution from blasphemous swearing to blasphemous desperation is the recognition that for Protestants there is nothing really sacred to swear by except the will of God itself. This awareness is not secularizing in the subtraction sense, with belief in blasphemy being sloughed off. On the contrary, it indicates an intensification of concern about blasphemy. Not swearing is a relatively easy way to avoid blasphemy, but refraining from blasphemous despair, especially in the context of Protestant salvation theology, is a multifaceted, lifelong struggle. Despair is the most threatening form of blasphemy at the present time, Harrington concludes, because the sacral loci by which oaths were made in the past have been discredited, and there is nothing potent left to blasphemously cry out against except the very Godhead itself. In other words, blasphemously despairing belief in the likelihood of one's damnation could, in effect, be a sign of one's damnable reprobation. Instead of swearing somewhat benignly as in the past under Catholicism, with the possibility of confession and absolution, the danger now was that one could fall into a condition of blasphemous despair from which, like for Frauncis Spera, it would feel impossible to escape.

The point I want to make here is not that all Protestants at the turn of the century were gripped by this fear on a daily basis, but rather that it was another one of the ways in which blasphemy had to be reconsidered after the Reformation,

once the authority of the Catholic church on the topic was diminished and

Protestant leaders from Luther to Calvin, to local officials, to the monarchs of

Europe reconfigured it for their own theological and political purposes.

It is also one element of the gloomy spiritual environment in which

Macbeth is set. The swearing that the 1606 statute is concerned with does not

constitute the full reality of blasphemy, only part of it, Shakespeare seems to say

in the play. Nor does treason represent the complete meaning of blasphemy. Nor,

in a reformed spiritual world, is the Catholic definition of blasphemy, going back

to Aquinas, any longer adequate alone. *Macbeth* is a laboratory in which

Shakespeare experiments with blasphemy, reflecting upon its plural meanings in a

theatrical context that further pluralizes it, thus propelling its secularization. In

spite of the statute's prohibition, *Macbeth* provides an opportunity for playgoers

to observe a variety of forms of blasphemous expressiveness, to ponder it in the

company of fellow audience members, and to do so in an atmosphere of

interpretive flexibility. Instead of avoiding blasphemy completely as the new

statute commanded, or relating it exclusively to treason, or eliding its Catholic

definition entirely, or engaging solely with its complicated Protestant

manifestation as despair, or banishing the reality of it altogether, *Macbeth*

generated secularizing conditions of plural consideration on the topic by drawing

attention to all of the many dark corners it occupied in the culture of his time.[52]

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[52] While it engages with royal politics, my reading of *Macbeth* as a politically and theologically subversive play departs from Henry Paul's view in *The Royal Play of Macbeth* that Shakespeare wrote the play as an homage to the policies and to the personality of James I. Another study that advances that critical view is Leonard Tennenhouse's *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres*, in which he

Medieval, Early Modern, and Modern Perspectives on Blasphemy

What it means to swear informally in the twenty-first century differs in many respects from blasphemous swearing in the early modern period. While people are still called upon today to swear formally in many legal contexts, profligate swearing is generally divorced from its meaning as the blasphemous desecration of the ritual of oath-making. Swearing may now refer indiscriminately to any type of indecent language, be it obscene or sacrilegious. The words that currently are understood to be most taboo are oriented toward the scatological, the anatomical, and the sexual, so that the false swearing and oath-making in Shakespeare's plays, which derive their effectiveness from transgressing upon the sacred, do not usually draw our attention in the ways they did in the culture that produced the 1606 statute. The bill, after all, makes no attempt to restrict obscene bawdiness, only sacrilegious profanity.

Conversely, anglophone societies today do not universally consider swearing by God to be a dangerously blasphemous assault on the idea of divine honour. Verbal profanity is not commonly regarded as an odiously blasphemous crime against the Godhead. Nor is false swearing that goes unpunished thought to

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posits that *Macbeth* was a vehicle for celebrating the political ideals of the new king. According to Tennenhouse, Shakespeare "mystifies the notion of kingship, reinvigorates the signs and symbols associated with the exercise of legitimate power, and makes the theatre speak a more conservative ideology" (130). For other, similar interpretations, see Antonia Fraser's *Faith in Treason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot* and Alvin Kernan's *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright: Theatre in the Stuart Court, 1603-1613*. For a study that instead discovers in *Macbeth* radical ambiguity see Karin S. Coddon's "'Unreal Mockery:' Unreason and the Problem of Spectacle in *Macbeth*." See also Rebecca Lemon's "Sovereignty and Treason in *Macbeth*," a recapitulation of her astute political analysis of the ideological operations of treason in Shakespeare and other early modern writers from her book *Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England*.

subject the speaker's entire community to the threat of divine retribution. Traces of older attitudes to informal swearing still linger in English speaking countries, especially in current laws that censor in the media what is imagined as particularly foul language, but the laws that remain against people swearing within immediate earshot of others are almost never enforced. Laws pertaining to blasphemy have either been struck down or have faded into obsolescence.[53]

Across Europe during the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, informal swearing was condemned by Christian authorities as dangerously blasphemous.[54] Imprecations such as cursing and prophesizing were also deemed blasphemous, but they were considered so because they attributed to the devil and his minions powers that belonged properly to God, while profane oath-making was

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[53] Yet sometimes blasphemy still presents conceptual challenges. As Talal Asad remarks in an essay on the relationship of blasphemy to freedom of speech in the modern world, today's liberal democracies react strongly against accusations of blasphemy, while simultaneously maintaining certain strict limits on the freedom of expression of secular subjects. One relevant, albeit bizarre, example is the legal case of a central Florida strip club owner who in the 1990s circumvented legislation banning public nudity by having the women employed in his establishment perform the witch scenes from *Macbeth* as they stripped. Framed as protest-art, their performance used the presumed indisputability of Shakespeare's artistic value in order to shield the nude performers from the anti-nudity law. In 1999, the judge ruling on the matter concluded that while the county had the right to enact legislation against public nudity, the nakedness of the performers did not break the law because it fell under the category of artistic expression (Stolzenbach). It would appear that Shakespeare was not the last, then, to have used *Macbeth* as a way of avoiding the literal application of a law that prohibited a morally objectionable form of theatrical expression.

[54] My summary of the general history of blasphemy is indebted to a variety of more detailed accounts. See Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century*; Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*; Leonard W. Levy, *Treason Against God: A History of the Offense of Blasphemy* and *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense against the Sacred from Moses to Salman Rushdie*; David Lawton, *Blasphemy*; Francisca Loetz, *Dealings with God: From Blasphemers in Early Modern Zurich to a Cultural History of Religiousness*; David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World*; Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing*; and Gerd Schwerhoff, "Horror Crime or Bad Habit? Blasphemy in Premodern Europe, 1200-1650."

blasphemous because it invoked God's name with scornful intent. False oaths were also undesirable for the way they diminished the gravity and trustworthiness of formal sacred oaths. To swear falsely, even in jest or in anger, was to perjure oneself. If people could so casually and habitually impeach their integrity in day to day life, might they not also do so during an official proceeding that relied upon the veracity of testimony under oath?

These profanations were not understood as actually damaging to God, who must necessarily be eternal and invulnerable. They were more specifically defined as criminal attempts to defame him and those who worshipped him. Assaulting the honour of the divine in this manner was a de facto attack on the Christian community at large. Godly societies were honour-bound to demonstrate their ability to protect the deity's good name from denigration. When reported to officials, those whose language demeaned God were investigated. If the accused demonstrated contrition, the penalties were relatively mild. Depending on the location, these took the forms of fines, incarceration, and public humiliation. Repeat offenders could have their lips and tongues mutilated. In such cases, as long as there was no demonstrable intent to blaspheme, authorities did not threaten execution. In more severe cases, flagrant and persistent abusers, who were perceived as programmatically attacking God, were put to death as blasphemers. This included heretics and other marginal agitators whose dissenting religious opinions were labelled blasphemous. False swearing may thus be seen as one among many forms of interconnected blasphemous offenses. In its absolutely broadest sense, blasphemy was considered to be any crime of revolt against God.

As opposed to prayer, which reinforced the Christian subject's relationship with God through sanctioned channels, blasphemy was a perversion of communication with God, for by attempting to extort a divine response, it forcefully opened an unnatural chasm between the natural and the supernatural. On the one hand, blaspheming was a sign of extreme spiritual weakness, but on the other hand, blaspheming empowered the blasphemer to provoke the divine in a manner that tried to compel heavenly retribution. Godly communities sought to preempt divine response by punishing the offenders themselves. The very idea that God could be forced to respond is in part what made blasphemy such a powerful sin, for while God's honour is impervious, it remained a troubling thought that God's dignity could, for example, be impiously challenged through bloody oaths based upon the humiliations suffered by Christ at the end of his life. Blasphemy was the ultimate perversion and rebellion against the natural order. It also seems that the gap in nature that blasphemy produced could grant the devil freer access to the offending village, city, or nation. If the community did not work to heal the breach in nature with appropriate punishments, then God, so it was believed, would punish both the blasphemer and the enablers of the blasphemy.

From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, blasphemy was a sin investigated exclusively by the ecclesiastical courts in England, which had no legal right to execute the guilty. The execution of obstinately heretical blasphemers was only consented to by secular authorities in the 1401 statute, the *De Haeretico Comburendo*. In the wake of Lollardy, it gave the ecclesiastical courts license to apprehend and to judge those suspected of habitual and

unrepentant heretical blasphemy against the teachings of Rome. The law provided that those found guilty by Church prosecutors could be turned over to the sheriff and burned at the stake. So intent were Henry IV and Archbishop Arundel on enacting the new law that they burned the Lollard, William Sawtre, weeks before Parliament could officially pass the act. King and Bishop were eager to demonstrate their natural prerogative as God's most immediate representatives and defenders on earth. To blaspheme against the authority of the divine as articulated by them became legally punishable by death.

In the early sixteenth century, blasphemy came to be conceptualized in English law much more directly as a form of treason against the state. The Henrician Reformation positioned the king, as protector of church and state, at the frontline of the assault on blasphemous unorthodoxy in his realm. The 1401 act was repealed by Henry's government in 1534, along with other laws deemed to be too closely associated with the papacy, but Henry immediately replaced the *De Haeretico Comburendo* with his own law maintaining the authority of the state to burn heretical blasphemers. Under Henry VIII and subsequent English monarchs up to the Revolution, the High Ecclesiastical Commission and the Court of Star Chamber were responsible for prosecuting suspected attacks against the Church of England and its supreme head. Capital offenses were codified as including a variety of interrelated breaches of loyal conduct: sedition, treason, heresy, perjury, and blasphemy. During the period of his reign as head of the English church, Henry burned fifty-one people for these crimes; then Edward, fewer than ten; and then Mary, more than two-hundred-seventy. Blasphemy was used in many of these cases to refer to the stated beliefs of any who trespassed against nationally

sanctioned beliefs in God. Over the course of her long reign, Elizabeth I executed

only five adamantly unrepentant Arians and Anabaptists, but she generally

preferred to judge most forms of religious dissent as nonconformity, to be dealt

with using warnings and fines. Her reign marked a turning point in the history of

blasphemy in England, for she repealed the sweeping laws against blasphemous

heresy, thus leaving treason as the primary form of blasphemy in the realm.

James maintained this policy, even intensifying it, yet unlike Elizabeth,

who more implicitly asserted her divine rights, prerogatives, and powers, her

successor James welcomed opportunities to articulate explicitly the theological

dimension of his royal supremacy, accusing those who would question it of

blasphemy. His desire to fend off blasphemous attacks against his authority was at

times expressed so absolutely that he was perceived by some of his subjects as

blasphemously imagining himself as God's equal. James' attitude was developed

in a variety of texts authored by him during his reigns in Scotland and in England.

In a long speech delivered to Parliament at Whitehall, he likened himself to God:

> kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon
>
> God's throne, but even by God Himself they are called gods. . . .
>
> For if you will consider the attributes to God, you shall see how
>
> they agree in the person of a king. God hath power to create, or
>
> destroy, make, or unmake at His pleasure, to give life, or send
>
> death, to judge all, and to be judged nor accomptable to none; to
>
> raise low things, and to make high things low at His pleasure . . . .
>
> And the like power have kings; they make and unmake their
>
> subjects; they have power of raising, and casting down; of life, and

> of death; . . . . They have power to exalt low things, and abase high
>
> things, and make of their subjects like men at the chess, a pawn to
>
> take a bishop or a knight, and to cry up, or down any of their
>
> subjects . . . . (*The Works* 527)

After pursuing at length the various implications for his subjects of this personal

claim to divinity, James then identifies as seditious blasphemers those who might

oppose his version of kingship:

> I conclude then this point touching the power of kings, with this
>
> axiom of divinity, that as to dispute what God may do, is
>
> blasphemy, but *quid vult Deus*, that divines may lawfully, and do
>
> ordinarily dispute and discuss; for to dispute *a posse ad esse* is
>
> both against logic and divinity, so is it sedition in subjects, to
>
> dispute what a king may do in the height of his power. But just
>
> kings will ever be willing to declare what they will do, if they will
>
> not incur the curse of God. (*The Works* 529)

According to his reasoning, because he is like God, he is subject to blasphemous

attacks like God. James thus adopts a defensive posture toward potential

detractors. In doing so, however, he also betrays another blasphemous

vulnerability that his own absolutist positioning might entail. The problem for

James is that the more he asserted his divinity next to God, and like God his

susceptibility to blasphemous offense, the more he might appear to those critical

of his absolutism as a self-deifying blasphemer. Instead of addressing the

weakness of his position directly in this particular speech, he lashes out with an

accusation of blasphemy against those he imagines as threatening his assertion of divine authority.

In a letter about this speech to an English diplomatic envoy to the Netherlands, John More records the controversial potential of James' self-description as a god: "the most strictly religious could have wished that his Highness would have been more sparing in using the Name of God, and comparing the Deity with Princes' sovereignty" (Winwood 141). In another letter about James' speech, John Chamberlain cites the general disapproval of the lower house, who wished "that this speech might never come in print" (2:301). Not only in this speech, but also in James' other published claims of divine eminence, including those from his days in Scotland, he may be seen to back himself into arguably blasphemous politico-theological positions.

Blasphemy at the Limits of Sacral Monarchy

Protestant English monarchs had been on the defensive against Catholic accusations of spiritual misconduct since the reign of Henry VIII, when Pope Clement VII excommunicated Henry for his break with Rome. One of Henry's responses to this was the 1534 Treason Act, in which he attempted to shield himself from charges that may already have been levelled at him or that he expected would one day be directed at him:

> If any person or persons . . . do maliciously wish, will or desire by words or writing, or by craft imagine, invent, practice or attempt any bodily harm to be done or committed to the King's most royal person, the Queen's or their heirs apparent, or to deprive them or

> any of them of the dignity, title or name of their royal estates, or
>
> slanderously and maliciously publish and pronounce, by express
>
> writing or words, that the King our sovereign lord should be
>
> heretic, schismatic, tyrant, infidel or usurper of the crown, . . . then
>
> every such person and persons so offending . . . shall be adjudged
>
> traitors, and that every such offence . . . shall be reputed, accepted,
>
> and adjudged high treason, and the offenders therein . . . shall have
>
> and suffer such pains of death and other penalties, as is limited and
>
> accustomed in cases of high treason. (*Statutes*, vol. 3, 508)

The law stipulates that no one may diminish the "dignity" of the King or of his

family in words or in action. It then states more specifically that no one may

slander the King, in either speech or in writing, by pronouncing him a "heretic,

schismatic, tyrant, infidel or usurper of the crown." No one may blasphemously

injure the honour of the king by accusing him of having falsely presumed to speak

for God and on behalf of his subjects to God. According to his enemies, Henry

had presumptuously arrogated to himself what had for centuries been Papal

duties.

After Henry's death, the Lord Protector Somerset, taking exception it

seems to the stringent policing of thoughts that the law's wording proposed,

repealed the act in Edward's name as "very strait, sore, extreme and terrible,"

befitting the tempestuous political climate of Henry's reign, but not of the present

(*Statutes* vol. 4, 18). Then after the tumultuous reversals of Mary's Catholic reign,

Elizabeth became queen and was eventually herself excommunicated. Pius V's

Regnans in Excelsis labelled Elizabeth as a heretical usurper of the office of Saint

Peter:

> This very woman, having seized the crown and monstrously
>
> usurped the place of supreme head of the Church in all England to
>
> gather with the chief authority and jurisdiction belonging to it, has
>
> once again reduced this same kingdom—which had already been
>
> restored to the Catholic faith and to good fruits—to a miserable
>
> ruin. (Pius V).

Pius announces that he has no choice but to expel her from the Church: "we do

out of the fullness of our apostolic power declare the foresaid Elizabeth to be a

heretic and favourer of heretics, and her adherents in the matters aforesaid to have

incurred the sentence of excommunication and to be cut off from the unity of the

body of Christ" (Pius V). Pius rests his authority to do so upon the absolute

dominion God has granted him over Christendom:

> He that reigneth on high, to whom is given all power in heaven and
>
> earth, has committed one holy Catholic and apostolic Church,
>
> outside of which there is no salvation, to one alone upon earth,
>
> namely to Peter, the first of the apostles, and to Peter's successor,
>
> the pope of Rome, to be by him governed in fullness of power.
>
> Him alone He has made ruler over all peoples and kingdoms, to
>
> pull up, destroy, scatter, disperse, plant and build, so that he may
>
> preserve His faithful people . . . . (Pius V)

Elizabeth's supporters in England reacted swiftly, condemning the papal bull as

blasphemy. In *A confutation of the Popes bull*, Heinrich Bullinger accused Pius V

of being a blasphemous Antichrist for seeking with imperial intentions to assert
his absolute infallibility over Christendom. He inscribes the word blasphemy
across his forehead:

> The Pope imagineth new deuises in his brest, to the intent he may
> stablish his owne Empyre, he altereth lawes, he stablisheth his
> owne, he defileth, he filtheth, he spoyleth, he defraudeth, he
> killeth. That lost man whom men are wont to call Antichrist, in
> whose forehead is written a name of blasphemy, that is to wit, I am
> God, and I cannot erre, euen that lost soule I say sitteth in Gods
> temple and raigneth far and wide. (37)

Bullinger goes on to wonder at what cause Pius has to reprove so blasphemously a
Christian monarch. He states that God demanded that people should obey their
prince:

> But in the law of God, commaundeme~t is geuen that thou shalt
> not raile vppon the Gods, nor blaspheme the Prince of thy people.
> A man may sée that the Byshops of Rome make great ac|count of
> these thinges, when they raile vppon Princes o|penly. But what (I
> pray you) haue kinges committed whereby they should deserue to
> be ouerwhelmed with so many & so great reproches and with so
> foule raylinges? (38)

Bullinger then turns back to attacking the pope, "that dubbleshapped monster," for
brandishing both the temporal and spiritual swords, "all power both in heauen and
in earth," and "vppon the scarlet colored beast full of names of blasphemie" (44).
He is quick, however, to affirm that claiming for themselves worldly and

heavenly powers does not transform sovereign rulers into blasphemous monsters,

although in doing so he draws attention to the very conclusion he seeks to evade:

> But for a kyng or a Quéene to be called a head as well in spirituall
>
> as temporall matters within their owne Realme, it is no
>
> monstruousnesse at all, bycause the Lord hath so ordeined it, & in
>
> Gods word Princes be called the heades of the people, & so the
>
> thing can not be sayd to be done mo~struously agaynst nature,
>
> which is done according to Gods will & word. (44)

Bullinger's claims and anticipation of counterclaims highlights how the centuries

old competition between the papacy and the crowns of Europe had reached a

tipping point and that blasphemy had come to play a significant conceptual role in

the struggle. The enemies of the English throne had to be identified as

blasphemers, because early Protestant English rulers knew that millions of

Catholics, including some of their own subjects, imagined their words to be

blasphemous.[55]

---

[55] Shakespeare tackles this issue directly in *King John*, by having King Philip accuse the king of England of blasphemy for rejecting papal authority:

> KING JOHN. What earthy name to interrogatories
>
> Can task the free breath of a sacred king?
>
> Thou canst not, Cardinal, devise a name
>
> So slight, unworthy and ridiculous,
>
> To charge me to an answer, as the Pope.
>
> Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England
>
> Add thus much more, that no Italian priest
>
> Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;
>
> But as we, under God, are supreme head,
>
> So under Him that great supremacy,
>
> Where we do reign, we will alone uphold
>
> Without th' assistance of a mortal hand:
>
> So tell the Pope, all reverence set apart
>
> To him and his usurp'd authority.

Bullinger takes aim at the pope, branding him time and again as a blasphemer. In response to Pius V's implication that translated bibles were heretical, for instance, Bullinger describes him as a blasphemer, for to say so "is an horrible and blasphemous wickednes, and the greatest treason to God that may be" (50). Furthermore, he insists, the Queen is in perfect control of the written matter circulating in England: "Truely the Quéenes Maiestie hath prohibited all vngodly bokes to be dispersed, yea or read in hir realme, which are hereticall indéed, and repugnant to the sinceritie of our Christian religion. Neither may any man spread abroad any wicked or blasphemous booke or opinion in hir realme without punishment" (51). It would be wrong for blasphemous texts to be permitted, such as the papal bull in question. Elizabeth is a conscientious guardian of the honour of God. She is endowed with the rights and the ability to persecute blasphemers. "Moreouer it is certaine," Bullinger remarks, "that the Magistrate hath receiued power to strike blasphe|mers, whoremungers, murtherers, rebelles, and wicked persons with the sword. Now séeing that false teachers be blasphemers, and draw men away from the truth vnto ly|ing, and destroy them both body and soule: why should not the magistrate punish such?" Pius V is clearly implied as one of these false teachers.

KING PHILIP. Brother of England, you blaspheme in this. (3.1.147-61) Cardinal Pandulph then excommunicates King John: "by the lawful power that I have, / Thou shalt stand cursed and excommunicate" (3.1.173). It is worth nothing that in the same line that he excommunicates the king for his blasphemous rejection of Rome, the cardinal also himself blasphemes by declaring the King "cursed." God alone may curse, but the church's presumption to do so in his name is from the Protestant perspective blasphemous, and therefore compromises the cardinal's spiritual authority.

Ten years later, in *A viewe of a seditious bul sent into Englande*, John Jewel kept up the assault on the pope, also by designating the text a blasphemy:

> I read it, and weighed it throughly, and founde it to be a matter of greate blasphemie a|gainst God, and a practise to work much vnquietnesse, sedition, and treason a|gainste our blessed and prosperous go|uernment: For, it deposeth the Queens Maiestie (whome GOD long pre|serue) from hir royall seate, and tea|reth the Crowne from hir head: it dis|chargeth all vs hir naturall Subiectes from all due obedience: it armeth one side of vs against an other: it embolde|neth vs to burne, to spoile, to robbe, to kill, and to cutte one an others throate . . . . This is their Do|ctrine, thus they teache: so boldly dare they sette out their blasphemies against God. (3)

Jewel repeatedly calls the pope's arguments blasphemous: "Oh blasphemous spéech, and most iniurious to the glorious worke of our redemption" (31); "what is blasphemie, if this be not?" (31); "What profite com|meth of thy fasting, if thou eate nothing all the day long, and yet playest, and tri|flest, yea ofte times takest false Oathes, and blasphemest, and so doest spend the day?" (36); "I may say to Pope Pius, thou sonne of man howe long wilt thou blas|pheme the honour of God?" (69); "Whatsoeuer truth is brought vnto vs contrarie to the word of God, it is not truth but falsehoode, and errour: whatsoeuer honour done vnto God, disagréeth from the honor required by his worde, it is not honour vnto God, but blasphemie" (124). Like Bullinger, Jewel directs one of his most intense accusations of blasphemy at the pope's presumption to absolute, God-like, authority:

> Yet for his better credite, and to pre|uaile the more with vs, he saith
>
> well of him selfe, & magnifieth and aduaunceth his owne name,
>
> when he telleth vs, I am a Prince, I am aboue nations and
>
> king|domes: I excommunicate Kinges and Princes: I depriue them,
>
> and put them downe, and roote them vp: I haue autho|ritie ouer
>
> their Subiects, I discharge them of their othes, I curse them and
>
> giue them vp to the Diuel: I am like to the highest. (108)

Because he would release subjects from the oaths they made to their sovereign, Jewel holds Pius V accountable for the blasphemous perjuring that would result. Jewel also designates as blasphemous the Pope's representation of himself as like God, a charge to which absolutist monarchs would themselves become increasingly vulnerable in the coming decades.

Only the charge of blasphemy seems to be adequate for compassing the full extent of the Pope's spiritual crimes of self-aggrandizement:

> These are blasphemous, and a|bominable words, méete words for
>
> him that sent them: to who~ is giuen a mouth to speake great
>
> things, and blasphemies. And thus he imagineth all the worlde
>
> should fall downe before him with a Sa~|ctus. He imagineth he
>
> holdeth the Sunne and Moone in his handes, and can rule them as it
>
> pleaseth him: & thus he is fal|len into a pleasant phrensie: he
>
> dreameth of great matters, and with his owne breath he bloweth
>
> him selfe bigge like a bladder. (109)

What is not made very clear in either Jewel's or Bullinger's defences of the queen is what the essential difference is between a blasphemously absolutist papacy, on

the one hand, and, on the other hand, an absolutist sovereignty that adduces to

itself almost identical powers. That each of these camps thought that there were

glaring differences that justified their divinely ordained right to supremacy over

that of the other is substantiated in a multitude of documents from the period, as

well as in numerous critical studies.[56] What has been less explored is the role of

blasphemy as a politico-theological concept in the transition from papal spiritual

control to monarchical spiritual dominion.

It was in response to her excommunication that Elizabeth reinstated her

father's treason law, expanding it to address print, preaching, and ciphering, as

well as retaining the defensive wording formulated by her father's government

against imputations of heresy. No one could call her "an heretic, schismatic,

tyrant, infidel, or an usurper of the crown" (*Statutes* vol. 4, 526). Any such

denunciation would be deemed treasonous. The claims of absolute temporal and

spiritual authority made by the Protestant Tudors rendered them, however, like

Pius V and later James I, susceptible to being branded with labels reserved for

blasphemers: the heretic, the schismatic, the tyrant, the infidel, and the usurper.

Each of these identities was viewed as challenging the integrity of God.

Bullinger's and Jewel's defences of Elizabeth's honour are documents that use

blasphemy to re-mirror the heresy with which Elizabeth was charged by Pius V,

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[56] See Ernst H. Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, David Norbrook's *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*, Debora Shugar's *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England*, and Victoria Kahn's "Political Theology and Fiction in *The King's Two Bodies*."

but in doing so their language draws attention to the queen's own questionable claim to divine absolutism.

Upon his ascension to the English throne, James fashioned himself even more than Elizabeth as the wellspring of temporal and spiritual power in his kingdoms. Like his predecessors, he desired for his power to be absolute in the classically positive senses of the Latin *absolutus*: all-encompassing, complete, finished, clear, pure, unqualified, unconditional, unambiguous, independent, free, unrestricted, and perfect (*OED*).[57] There was a long tradition upholding this conception of divine sovereignty. The *Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* contains a representative summary of the precepts of absolutism in positive terms:

> all kings, queens and other governors are specially appointed by
>
> the ordinance of God. And as God himself, being of an infinite
>
> majesty, power and wisdom, ruleth and governeth all things . . . so
>
> hath he constituted, ordained and set earthly princes over particular
>
> kingdoms . . . that the princes themselves in authority, power,
>
> wisdom, providence and righteousness . . . should resemble his
>
> heavenly governance. (Bond 212)

---

[57] The word perfect, in the sense of absolute, appears four times in *Macbeth*, more than in any other play. Macbeth's usage of it here is exemplary of how yearning for the perfection of absolute power yields diminishing returns, leading eventually to a claustrophobic recognition of human limitation:
>
> Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect,
> Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
> As broad and general as the casing air:
> But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in
> To saucy doubts and fears. (3.4.21-25)

As we have heard, James agreed with this version of sacral kingship, but he was also aware of dissenting opinions. In *Basilicon Doron*, he explains to his son that "by your calling ye are mixed betwixt the ecclesiastical and civil estate: for a king is not *mere laicus*, as both the Papists and Anabaptists would have him, to the which error also the Puritans incline over-far" (*Political* 52). In clinging forcefully to the claims of divine absolutism, even in the politically and religiously contentious atmosphere of post-Reformation England, James set the stakes very high for himself, for either his sovereign rule was divinely sanctioned or it was not. James was either like God, or he was making a blasphemously false claim to be such. Monarchs were either justified entirely by heavenly will or exclusively by force of arms.[58]

The political theorist Sir Thomas Smith, in his *De republica Anglorum*, declared that the absolute power of kings "is verie daungerous, as well to him that doth use it, and much more to the people upon whom it is used: whereof the cause is the frailtie of mans nature, which (as *Plato* saith) cannot abide or beare long that absolute and uncontrowled authoritie, without swelling into too much pride and insolencie" (8:1). As opposed to the positive theorization of absolute kingship

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[58] Debora Shuger vividly presents these "two starkly different alternatives":

> On the one hand, there is a sort of government that resembles the monarch of heaven; in which the ruler sits upon God's throne and bears his sword; a *quasi semideus* and *quasi sacerdos*; like to God in justice, wisdom, righteousness, and authority . . . ; the mediator of divine benediction and beneficence to an entire people. On the other hand, there is the *latrocinia*, the government in which big thieves in furred robes execute poor men for stealing, while the beadle lashes the whore for faults of his own liking; whose laws regiment lesser fry for the benefit of their rulers; where office is not a divine gift but won and lost in the violent free play of *Machtswillen*. (*Political* 69)

expressed by James in *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, in *Basilikon Doron*, and in numerous speeches, Smith posits a view of absolutism in which princes must submit to human limitations, or else risk becoming false claimants to divinity, "not shepheardes as they ought to be, but rather . . . contemners of God" (8:1). Smith adduces tyrants from antiquity who were "like divils, and would yet be adored and accompted for Gods" (8:1). He then proceeds to explain how absolutism, although historically "at the first not evil, hath taken the signification and definition of the vice of the abusers, so that now both in Greeke, Latine, and English a tyrant is counted he, who is an evill king, and who hath no regard to the wealth of his people, but seeketh onely to magnifie himselfe and his, and to satisfie his vicious and cruell appetite, without respect of God" (8:1). By couching his anti-tyrannical polemic against the absolute power of kings in blasphemous terms, labelling tyrants as insulters of God, as devils aspiring to be Gods, and as ambitious without regard for God's pre-eminence, Smith implicitly challenges the centuries of gradual political appropriation of blasphemy by English monarchs who sought to define blasphemy as at its worst when treasonously directed at sovereign rulers. Instead of reinforcing the definition of blasphemy as a subject's rebellion against a monarch's perfect authority, Smith labels the absolutist sovereign's claim to limitless power as a politically tyrannical and spiritually blasphemous seizure of divine authority.

A widely circulated late sixteenth-century tract, Philippe Duplessis-

Mornay and Hubert Languet's *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*,[59] encourages subjects

to revolt against tyrannical rulers:

> There is everywhere a mutual and reciprocal obligation between
>
> prince and people . . . . Thus the people is conditionally obligated
>
> to the prince; but the prince is bound absolutely to the people . . . .
>
> Thus it is lawful either for all or at least for many of the officers of
>
> the kingdom to restrain a tyrant. Indeed, not only is it lawful, but
>
> their office makes it incumbent on them to such a degree that, if
>
> they have not done so, they cannot be excused in any way. (Brutus
>
> 158)

The ultimate test case in the *Vindiciae* rests on the question of whether or not it

would be necessary to rebel against a king who pressed his subjects into

committing blasphemy: "What, then, if a prince orders us to have truck with idols,

or to crucify Christ, or to abjure and curse God, or—in as much as we are able—

to drive Him from heaven? Is it not far more just that we should refuse to obey?"

(31). For the author, of course, the answer is clear. One should not blaspheme

against God, even if ordered to do so by a ruler:

> If God commands this, and the king the opposite, who would judge
>
> that man a rebel who denied obedience to the king against God? In
>
> short, if the king on the one hand and God on the other were to

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[59] The treatise was written under the pseudonym Stephanus Junius Brutus, the Celt, but George Garnett is relatively sure "that the most likely scenario is some form of close collaboration between Languet and Mornay" (Brutus lxxvi).

> summon us to do service, who would not decide that the king
>
> should be abandoned in order that we might fight for God? So not
>
> only are we not obliged to obey a king commanding something
>
> contrary to God's law, but also if we should obey, we would be
>
> rebels . . . . (Brutus 29-30)

The other part of the *Vindiciae*'s question about how to deal with blasphemous sovereigns is related to idolatry. Its authors admonish the readers not to idolize monarchs as Gods:

> we [do] not prostrate ourselves before Baal . . . . For we are bound
>
> to worship God for His own sake, but to honour a prince and love a
>
> neighbour on His account too. But indeed, if it be a crime to injure
>
> a neighbour, and it is deemed a grievous sin to attack a prince,
>
> what name shall we attribute to so great and atrocious a crime as
>
> assaulting the majesty of the supreme Lord of all?" (Brutus 31).

To idolize a ruler is tantamount to worshiping a false God.

As opposed to these arguments, Jean Bodin wrote in his *Six livres de la république* (1576) that it is a crime for "any subject individually, or all of them in general, to make an attempt on the honor or the life of the monarch, either by way of force or by way of law, even if he has committed all the misdeeds, impieties, and cruelties that one could mention" (115). James agreed: "I will not deny that an heretical Prince is a plague . . . but a breach made by one mischief must not be filled up with greater inconvenience: an error must not be shocked and shouldered with disloyalty, not heresie with perjurie, not impietie with sedition and armed rebellion against God" (*A Remonstrance* 235). Yet James was a king whose

claims to absolutism were received in a political context in which his words

could, according to one line of politico-theological reasoning, be understood as

veering toward blasphemous self-deification. Under those conditions, it would be

right to disobey one's sovereign. Or as the authors of the tract ask, is it not a

blasphemy against God to obey the commands of a blasphemous ruler?

Macbeth's Blasphemous Regicide

Macbeth captures both the pro-absolutist royalist and the anti-tyrannical

monarchomachic attitudes toward blasphemy. Macbeth at first blasphemes as a

rebellious subject who murders a king imbued with the divine aura of absolute

sovereignty and he then quickly becomes himself the blasphemously despotic

king that Smith, the authors of the *Vindiciae*, and other resistance theorists warned

against. Yet Macbeth begins the play by rebelling against King Duncan, who

unlike James, does not sound like a fierce proponent of the doctrine of absolute

kingship, relentlessly insistent on his divine right, but a king who instead plays the

role of the devoutly pious sovereign. There are historical examples of this type of

ruler in the early medieval period in which *Macbeth* is set. In addition to Edward

the Confessor, to whose court Malcolm flees, Saint Louis IX of France is another

medieval king renowned for leading a holy life. Like them, the personal sanctity

of Duncan is foregrounded in *Macbeth* as an intrinsic sign of his divinely anointed

legitimacy as sovereign. Duncan does not explicitly cultivate in his words or

actions the forms of absolutist sovereignty we have seen promulgated by the first

Stuart king of England. Shakespeare establishes the possibility of this type of

sovereign, before then demonstrating the unsustainability of that political fantasy

in the early modern world. As opposed to James, who must work hard to arouse in his subjects an attitude of sacred reverence toward himself, Duncan appears to be naturally endowed with an aura of sacred monarchy. The unquestioning reverence Duncan's subjects feel for him while he is alive, as well as the cataclysmic grief they suffer in the aftermath of his death, imbue Duncan with the radiance of authentic sacral kingship.

He wears his divinity with natural ease. Duncan is an idealized Christ-like king, whose murder is symbolically registered in the play as a horrendous blasphemy. Even Macbeth meditates upon how Duncan wears the crown with such humility and spotlessness that heaven itself must oppose the regicide he has planned:

<div style="text-align:center">Duncan</div>

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been

So clear in his great office, that his virtues

Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against

The deep damnation of his taking-off; (1.7.16-20)[60]

Shortly after making this observation, Macbeth informs his wife that he has changed his mind, that he cannot kill Duncan, and that he dares "do all that may become a man" but no more (1.7.48). Macbeth states his unwillingness to exceed human limits. He refuses to commit this offense against a divinely anointed sovereign.

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[60] Quotations from *Macbeth* are taken from William C. Carroll's Bedford St. Martin's edition.

Lady Macbeth responds to his wavering resolve by threatening him with emasculation: "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And, to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.48-50). The blasphemously treasonous overreaching required of Macbeth to murder Duncan is strangely transformed by her into an opportunity to bolster his manly virility. Masculinity does not appear to be an automatic by-product of blasphemously challenging divine authority, until one considers that blasphemy could be a cultural means for asserting the superiority of one's manhood over that of others. As Gerd Schwerhoff explains:

> calling upon God or insulting God was a weapon used within the framework of a theatrical presentation of one's own personality in order to attack potential adversaries in the context of very profane conflicts about honour. Blasphemy was often linked to other violent behaviour such as threats, insults, the drawing of knives, and physical violence. Together with the fact that blasphemers were predominately male, this proves that blasphemy was an integral part of a competitive masculine culture. (405)

Blasphemy was a means by which men could perform hyper-masculinity:

> the blasphemer demonstrated virility and strength when he treated the higher powers with disrespect or even profanity. He provoked and he challenged scornfully; he claimed superiority over his human antagonist and similarly over God. (406)

Lady Macbeth's challenge to Macbeth's masculinity makes sense within this context.[61] It is not otherwise easy to explain why she confronts her husband's temerity by proposing to him that by blasphemously murdering their royal guest, by all accounts a heavenly king, that Macbeth would then become more of a man. This scene is an instance in which the clear Tudor and Jacobean equation of blasphemy with treason is confounded by another version of blasphemy in the period, particularly since Macbeth's blasphemous male aggression makes him into a king.

So although the play may seem only to reinforce it, the Tudor and Jacobean appropriation of blasphemy for politico-theological purposes is often undermined in *Macbeth*. The play complicates the politically orthodox association of blasphemy with treason. The report of Duncan's murder is in keeping with the idea of treason as blasphemy, but by including this Christologically ensanguined blasphemous language, Shakespeare implicitly disobeys the statute against staged blasphemy. The scene thus theoretically blasphemes against royal authority.

The scenes in which Duncan's blood is emphasized evoke the profound Christological significance of blasphemy. These descriptions of his bleeding simultaneously make light of the bill against blasphemous swearing in theatrical entertainments and they also subvert James' claims to absolute divine power. That Duncan's murder is reported in language that conveys extreme sacrilege exemplifies, on the surface at least, the notion that treason had become the

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[61] By encouraging blasphemy, Lady Macbeth contravenes the Pauline commandment to wives in Titus 2:4-5, where they are given the duty of discouraging their husbands from blaspheming.

ultimate blasphemous offense. Duncan's bloodied corpse is depicted by Macduff as a doomsday portrait: "great doom's image!" (2.3.70). The regicide is interpreted by him as an event of cataclysmic proportions. Those assembled are beckoned to raise themselves as though from death, as they might at the end of time: "As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites / To countenance this horror!" (2.3.71-72). Similar responses to the imagined consequences of a successful Gunpowder Plot against James I are evident in a sermon by William Barlow: "obserue I pray you a cruell Ex|ecution, an inhumane crueltie, a brutish immani|tie, a diuelish brutishnes, & an Hyperbolicall, yea an hyperdiabolicall diuelishnes" (C2). The perpetrators are "Satanicall miscreants" (C2). The event itself, "A thing more mi|serable to the suruiuors the~ to them which were slaine" (D3). In the very location where the blast should have occurred, James delivered a speech to parliament in 1605, in which he attempted to instill in his audience a sense of the irreversible horror that would have followed the explosion. All, he says, would have been "comprehended vnder that fearful *Chaos*" (*His Maiesties* 70). Hell itself would have gaped wide and spewed destruction: "And so the earth as it were opened, should haue sent forth of the bottome of the *Stygian* lake such sulphured smoke, furious flames, and fearefull thunder, as should haue by their diabolicall *Domesday* destroyed and defaced, in the twinckling of an eye, not only our present liuing Princes and people," but also the heritage of the past, enshrined in the monuments of the present, "euen our insensible Monuments reserued for future ages" (*His Maiesties* 70). He describes the plot as a "monstrous and vnnaturall intended Tragedy" a "doomes-daye" and the conspirers a "hellish

societie" (*His Maiesties* 71, 93). No language, it seems, is too hyperbolic. No

crime could be more sinful. Political treason and spiritual blasphemy converge.

Macduff's announcement of Duncan's death also uses language that

metaphorically connects Macbeth's blasphemous assault on the king's mortal and

divine bodies to a blasphemous rending and pillaging of God's worldly abode:

> Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!
>
> Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
>
> The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence
>
> The life o' the building! (2.3.57-60)

The king's consecrated body has been robbed of life, the divine presence at the

core of God's temple cheaply pilfered by a thief in the night. The blasphemous

violation of the king's mortal breath and sacred function is compared to the idea

of a profaned religious sanctuary.

Duncan's murder is described using vibrant Christological allusion. His

assassination foreshadows judgement day in the way that Christ's crucifixion

presages the end of the world. Macduff proclaims Duncan's murder by borrowing

phenomena from the after-effects of Christ's death: "And behold, the veil of the

Temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom, and the earth did quake, and

the stones were cloven. / And the graves did open themselves, and many bodies of

the Saints, which slept, arose, / And came out of the graves" (Matthew 27:51-53).

Duncan's murder is replete with allusiveness to the execution of Christ.

According to scripture, Christ himself is blasphemed against in the lead-up to his

death: "And when they had blindfolded him, they smote him on the face, and

asked him, saying, Prophesy, who is it that smote thee? And many other things

blasphemously spake they against him" (Luke 22:64-65). Indeed, the entirety of Christ's passion, culminating in his crucifixion, was imagined for centuries as the worst blasphemy ever committed, hence the indelible association of Jews with blasphemy in the period. One of the witches alludes directly to this when she says "blaspheming Jew" (4.1.26).[62]

Even more tellingly, and as opposed to their usual invocation in plays as material by which to swear, wounds and blood are described reverentially, as though like Christ's injuries they may serve as conduits for the supernatural. The blood that issues from Duncan's blasphemously murdered corpse behaves very strangely. Macbeth describes Duncan's wounds as "gashed stabs" issuing "golden blood" that "looked like a breach in nature / For ruin's wasteful entrance" (2.3.104-06). The wording here is such that we cannot be perfectly sure if the perforations in his body are gateways out of which will flow devastation or if the gashes are portals that may potentially admit damage from the natural world into the realm of the supernatural. Even the daggers are "breeched" in the sense that they are sealed in blood, like someone wearing tight breeches, but the weapons are also homophonically breached by the blood, so that through contact with the wounds they too have become gaps in nature. Wherever there is the king's sacred blood, there is a metaphysical rift, perhaps most infamously on Lady Macbeth's

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[62] In the long incantation spoken just before Macbeth arrives to meet with the witches late in the play, one of them invokes the conventional association of Jews with blasphemy: "blaspheming Jew" (4.1.26). Jews were habitually held responsible for killing Christ. This is not, however, the only way of reading the line. The standard spelling of Jew in the early printed editions of Shakespeare's plays was Iew, which serves as a reminder that a clipped pronunciation of Jew could possibly sound like the pronoun you. This makes for the possibility that the blaspheming in the line is directed accusatorily toward the Christian audience, whose own sinfulness is the source of the theological imperative that demands Christ's execution.

hands, which she cannot wash enough. The uncertainty about which way these bloodied supernatural portals flow resonates with how Barlow's sermon treats the bloodied breach in nature that would have been created had the Gunpowder conspirators been successful:

> I doubt not, but if it had beene effected, that this whirling blast woulde haue beene vnto our sacred King, (so Religious in his profession, so innocent from wrong, so cleare in his conscience) as the Whirle-wind and fiery cha|riot of Elias, to haue carried vppe his soule to heauen, and that God in his mercy, woulde haue made this Deluge of Bloode, as *Baptismum sanguinis*, a Baptisme of Martyrdome, to haue washt away our sinners; and as a Holocaust, an whole burnt sacrifice, to propitiate his wrath for our Transgressions, yet as much as in this Fury it lay, he wold haue sent vs all to hell. (D4)

The explosion of royal blood would have rained down as a cleansing expiation of sin, both as a second Flood and as a second Passion, baptising humanity anew in an enormous sacrificial bloodbath. So while the occasion of James' assassination would have been blasphemous and cataclysmic, as was the crucifixion of the Son of God, the king's Christologically spilled blood would nonetheless have foiled the devilish perpetrators by serving a redemptive purpose. Yet Barlow also recognizes the furious rage of God that would have resulted from the blasphemous regicide. Salvation would not have been universal. What gets washed away by the blood are not sins in general, but "sinners" in particular, which could either include everyone, or the conspirators alone. God is generally

angry at "our Transgressions," in Barlow's scenario, yet willing to redeem because of the great sacrifice. What is not perfectly clear in this Protestant sermon is who precisely would be saved and who "washt away."

In a similar way to how that the bloodied daggers become by association with Duncan's blasphemous murder breaches in nature, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are indelibly tainted by his Christ-like blood, so that each of them become blasphemously gaping wounds in the firmament of nature. Lady Macbeth worries obsessively that she cannot wash the blood off her hands. The blood on Macbeth's hands is described by him as infinitely polluting. It could the "multitudinous seas incarnadine" (2.2.66). Even before the murder, Macbeth clutches at the image of a dagger hovering in the air, covered in "gouts of blood" (2.1.47). The blasphemous treason Macbeth envisages as he stares at the sharp instrument condemns nature "o'er the one half world" to seeming death and "wicked dreams abuse" his "curtained sleep" (2.1.51,50). Although attempting to conceal his sin, Macbeth relishes the final moments of earthly wholeness before he blasphemously rends the world apart: "Thou sure and firm-set earth, / Hear not my steps which way they walk, for fear / Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts" (2.1.57-59). This blasphemous ripping apart of nature itself may be traced back to the initial moment of Christian blasphemy, the blasphemous execution of Christ, the divine king of kings whose death precipitated the rending of the curtain in the temple and the splitting of stones. Duncan, a Christ-like king, the wounds and instruments of whose death are themselves imagined as opening rifts in nature, is likewise imagined as the victim of blasphemy. Under the pressure of these similitudes, many of the distinctions between Duncan and Christ

collapse, including the gap in time between Christ's crucifixion and the day of judgement, as well as the difference between biblical time and the time in which the play is set. The separation between Christ, Duncan, Henry VIII, his royal offspring, and James I—all of whom according to the theological development of absolute monarchy embodied divinity—also disintegrates.[63]

The sixteenth century is loaded with examples of this conflation of sovereigns with Christ. In 1534, during the *affaire des placards*, French Protestants posted anti-eucharistic posters across Paris, including one on the door to King Francis I's bedchamber. The text of the posters condemned the eucharistic mass as a blasphemy:

> J'invoque le ciel et la terre en témoignage de Vérité, contre cette
>
> pompeuse et orgueilleuse messe papale, par laquelle le monde (si
>
> Dieu bientôt n'y remédie) est et sera totalement ruiné, abîmé, perdu
>
> et désolé: quand en [elle] notre Seigneur est si outrageusement

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[63] According to Horatio in *Hamlet*, although the assassination of Julius Caesar antedates Christ's execution by several decades, his death nevertheless triggers typologically Christian fissuring of the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural:

> In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.
> As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
> Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
> Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
> Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.
> And even the like precurse of fear'd events,
> As harbingers preceding still the fates
> And prologue to the omen coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climature and countrymen. (1.1.113-125)

The Ghost of the treasonously slain king appears immediately after this speech.

blasphème et le peuple séduit et aveuglé, ce qu'on ne doit plus

souffrir ni endurer.[64] (Carbonnier-Burkard 21).

The Lord is blasphemously insulted by the mass and the world imperilled as a

result. The doctrine of transubstantiation demeans the dignity of Jesus, situating

him as it does in a mere wafer. The Catholic response to this disparagement of the

mass was to hold Corpus Christi processions in each Parisian parish, with the king

housed in the main procession under the eucharistic canopy. The eucharist and the

king were thus equated. To offend one was to offend the other. Treason and

blasphemy are implied, yet again, to be one and the same crime, particularly so in

the face of those who would challenge that equation as a blasphemous

presumption.

In *Alterations of the State: Sacred Kingship in the English Reformation*,

Richard C. McCoy demonstrates a similar "migration of the holy," although from

the Protestant Tudor and Stuart perspectives. He notes, for instance, that

"Elizabeth saw the host's elevation, once the sacred high point of the service, as a

form of Catholic idolatry and superstition, and she ordered the bishop who would

preside at her coronation not to raise it, immediately asserting her royal

supremacy" (58). Yet McCoy also observes that in "the heraldic drawings of her

coronation progress, the queen is carried in a canopied litter like the host—or

Christ himself—in a Corpus Christi procession" (59). Elizabeth's frequent

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[64] I call upon heaven and earth to witness this Truth, directed against this pompous
and arrogant papal mass, by which the world (if God does not soon cure it) is and will be
rendered totally ruined, spoiled, lost and desolate: when the Lord himself is so
outrageously blasphemed and the people seduced and blinded, we can no longer suffer
nor endure it. (my translation)

progresses through the countrysides of her realm were thus like extended processions of the body of Christ. Yet in housing the sacred in this way, the sovereign incarnations of Christ's immediate presence became particularly susceptible to blasphemous attack and to accusations of blasphemous self-deification.

Sworn in Blood: Blasphemy and the Body of Christ

One may also refer to the medieval *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, which survives in a single mid-sixteenth-century copy, to discover the sense of vulnerability that was ascribed to representations of the eucharist in the cultural memory of the time (Wogan-Browne 191). The play tells the story of a consecrated host that is purchased by a Jew who proceeds with his fellows to torture it and then to cook it in an oven, from which appears a bloodied Christ who asks woefully: "Why blaspheme yow me? Why do ye thus? / Why put yow me to a newe tormentry, / And I dyed for yow on the crosse?" (731-33). The miraculous transubstantiation of the eucharist back into Christ with "wondys all bloody," piteously extolling his tormentors to compassion him, has the effect in the narrative of converting the Jews, but the play's anti-Semitism is an excuse to remind its Christian audience not to re-enact the torture of Christ by sinning blasphemously in their day to day lives.

This conceptualization of blasphemy is particularly relevant to my reading of swearing and blasphemy in *Macbeth*, because the gruesome details of Christ's execution were the most frequently invoked for the purposes of blasphemous oath-making in the period. Calling God to witness an oath made in irritation or

fury was blasphemous, but invoking the blasphemously victimized Christ of the crucifixion to warrant a false oath was especially appalling. To swear by Christ's wounds was to crucify him again. Fifty-five years before the English *Act to Restrain Abuses*, the Scottish parliament of Queen Mary adopted an ordinance against the "blasphematioun of the name of God, sweirand in vane be his precious blude, body, passioun and woundis" (*The Acts of the Parliament of Scotland* II.485). In 1531, in *The Boke Named the Gouernour*, Thomas Elyot wrote against the re-mutiliation of Christ's body that results from blasphemous swearing:

> In dayly communication the matter savoureth nat, except it be as it were seasoned with horrible othes. As by the holy blode of Christe, his wounds which for our redemption he paynefully suffred, his glorious harte, as it were numbles chopped in pieces. Children (which abhorrethe me to remembre) do play with the armes and bones of Christe, as they were chery stones. (II.252)

In 1543, Thomas Becon published *An Invective Against Swearing*, in which he inveighed against those who blasphemously dismember

> holy me~+bers of his moost glorio{us} body: How common an oothe nowe dayes is Gods flesh, Gods bloud, Gods hart, Gods bodye, Gods woundes, Gods nayles, Gods sydes Goddes guttes, and all that euer maye be rehearsed of God? . . . . What parte of Christes moost blyssed body do these wycked & abho|minable swearers leaue vnre~t and vntorne? They are much worsse tha~ the Iewes, which cried . . . Awaye, awaye, to the gal|lowes wyth hym, crucifye hym, tor|ment hym, leaue not one part whole of hym. For

they only cryed vpo~ Py+late to haue hi~ crucifyed, but these
swearers them selues crucify hym, rent, and teare hym. The Iewes
cru+cifyed hym but once, and than theyr fury ceased, but these
wicked caytif|fes crucify him dayly with theyr vn+lawefull oothes,
neyther doth theyr malyce & cruelnes cease at ony tyme . . . . They
syn no lesse, whiche blaspheme Christ reygnyng in heauen, than
they, whiche crucify+ed hym walkyng on the earthe. (18)

In Roger Hutchinson's 1560 devotional tract, *Image of God*, he likewise attacks
those who call upon God's incarnated body to witness their oaths: "You swearers
and blasphemers which use to swear by God's heart, arms, nails, bowels, legs and
hands, learn what these things signify, and leave your abominable oaths" (20-21).

On the first page of the 1551 edition of Stephen Hawes' *The Conuercyon
of Swerers* there is a prefatory image of a bleeding Christ pierced by five wounds.
The poem admonishes the reader not to rend God's body with swearing: this
"lytell treatyse wofull to bewayle / The cruell swearers which do god assayle / On
every syde his swete body to tere" (4, 1501 edition). The poet goes on to adopt
Christ's pitiable voice, begging earthly rulers to restrain their subjects from
swearing by God's tortured body:

Beholde your seruantes how they do tere me

By cruell othes now upon euery syde

Aboute the worlde launcynge my woundes wyde

. . . .

Beholde my body with blody droppes endewed

> Within your realms nowe torne so piteously
>
> Towsed and tugged with othes cruelly
>
> Some my heed some myn armes and face
>
> Some my herte do all to rente and raze
>
>
> They newe agayne do hange me on the rode
>
> They tere my sydes and are nothynge dysmayde
>
> My woundes they open and deuoure my blode (6, 1501 edition)

On a subsequent page, above the words "Tere me nowe no more / My woundes are sore / Leve swerynge therefore" (8) there hovers an image of a gruesomely emaciated Christ, surrounded by the implements of Golgotha: a ladder, dice, a spear, a whip, a sponge on a long pole, nails, a hammer, and various other small tools.

The tradition of relating oaths to Christ's wounds serves to explain some of the Christological references used at the very beginning of *Macbeth*. Ironically, the play indirectly employs the moment of the crucifixion to circumvent the *Act to Restrain Abuses*. The captain who describes Macbeth's combat on the battlefield does so by alluding directly to the place of Christ's crucifixion: "Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorize another Golgotha, / I cannot tell" (1.2.39-42). At the very outset of *Macbeth*, the primordial religious image at the source of the oath-making banned by the *Act* is directly invoked. The work of memorialization that the captain identifies in Macbeth's "bloody execution" (1.2.18) of his enemies functions in one sense as a religious exercise, similar in some respects to the oral rehearsal of scripture and sermons that the godly

practiced at home on Sundays after attending services.[65] In another sense, however, the captain admits to witnessing Macbeth's battlefield exploits as an affective desire to memorialize Golgotha by soaking in hot blood, "to bathe in reeking wounds." He really "cannot tell" in which sense to remember what he has been commanded to report. The key is that, in either sense, the crucifixion is evoked without the evocation being, on the face of it, a contravention of the new statute against swearing.

Coming as it does from the mouth of a soldier, his restraint may have sounded peculiarly uncharacteristic. Many of the original playgoers would have been accustomed to the notoriously bold, foul, and incontinent verbal habits of soldiers returning from wars. In 1559, Johannes Ferrarius laments the blasphemous offensiveness that generally characterized the speech of English soldiers:

> Which in every light talke upon everie small occasion, do sweare
> continually not only by heven, but also by God him selfe, and the
> verie blessed woundes of our saviour Christ, . . . hereunto doe they
> coyne filthie talke, and gyve them selves to the devil . . . Which
> detestable blasphemie . . . [is] as a special fruite of warre. (136)

If Shakespeare had really wanted to distance himself from representing blasphemous oath-making in the first play he wrote after the *Act*, it would have been a poor strategy for him to stage very early in the play soldierly commentary

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[65] See Patrick Collinson's "Night Schools, Conventicles, and Churches: Continuities and Discontinuities in Early Protestant Ecclesiology."

after a military broil.[66] Had he felt imaginatively provoked by the statute,

however, and thus been interested in toeing the line drawn by the new law, then

including belligerent soldiers in an early scene would make sense. Blaspheming

as a solider was a conventional way to demonstrate aggressiveness and

fearlessness.

Duncan's words, which begin the scene, entertain such expectations,

before, however, immediately withdrawing them: "What bloody man is that," he

asks, as the bloodied messenger arrives (1.2.1). His use of the word bloody sounds

like an habitual asseveration, a punishable evocation of Christ's blood,

particularly if the solider has not quite appeared onstage yet, but the bloodiness is

quickly literalized by the captain's wounds, as well as the battlefield slaughter his

report conveys. When Duncan replies to the captain's story by telling him, so

"well thy words become thee as thy wounds," the audience is called upon

simultaneously to imagine the wounds as potential issuers of speech and the

mouth as an orifice capable of producing bloodied words. This conflation of

wounds and words is similar to how in swearing by Christ's injuries,

Shakespeare's contemporaries thought of themselves as re-enacting Christ's

wounds by placing those injuries in their own mouths. Also of Christly relevance

to these scenes is how, in the anti-blasphemy literature I have already cited,

Christ's gashes seem to plead on his behalf. Indeed, in Hawes' meditation, the

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[66] That Shakespeare was aware of the connection between soldiers and blasphemy is highlighted in *Measure for Measure*, in which Isabella comments on how high military status mitigates the extent to which soldierly swearing is interpreted as blasphemy: "That in the captain's but a choleric word, / Which in the soldier is flat blasphemy" (2.2.130-31).

wounds are mouths that hungrily attempt to swallow Christ's precious blood instead of blasphemously spilling it: "My woundes they open and deuoure my blode" (6).

While it may appear on the surface that all of this material lends support to the theorization of blasphemy as a primarily treasonous offense, the implicit comparison of the crucified Christ to a murdered king in *Macbeth* only temporarily confirms that association, before then discomposing it, since for a king to be like Christ is to surrender to a humiliating worldly defeat. For instance, the blasphemous execution of a king is what serves as the foundational moment of many a new king's reign. Over the decades, numerous critics have observed that Richard II is represented in Shakespeare's play about him as a complicated *alter Christus* who is killed to make way for an ambiguously legitimate new royal beginning. If the blasphemous crucifixion of Jesus is the inaugural moment of the Christian faith, then the Christologically rendered death of usurped monarchs should be triumphantly inaugural as well, but of course they are not for the supporters of the dead sovereign. Duncan's assassination is not redemptive. The spilling of regal blood is a spiritually blasphemous crime, yet it can paradoxically serve as the basis for a new royal dynasty. What counts as blasphemy is always being negotiated in these political transitions.

Macbeth uses the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as a template for conceptualizing the blasphemy committed against Duncan, in one sense seeming to condone what happens to the king as a worthy imitation of Christ, yet in another sense demonstrating that the blasphemy is of a different order than Christ's death, since the fallout from it is very different. The consequences of the

blasphemous crucifixion of God the Son and the blasphemous regicide of Duncan the King are congruent, but problematically so. Christ's death is the *felix culpa*, the happy sin that redeems original sin, the first rebellion against God. The commemoration of Christ's execution as re-enacted in Duncan's chamber in Macbeth's castle does not have the redemptive spiritual qualities of Christ's Passion, only the negative blasphemous repercussions thereof. Macbeth blasphemously kills a king, but then becomes in his place a tyrannical king, who according to certain expressions of Jacobean political theology should, nonetheless, not be revolted against, yet who according to certain resistance theorists, should be rebelled against because he is blasphemous. Macbeth is a blasphemous traitor who is rewarded with the crown, albeit temporarily, before he is then, according to James' logic that tyrants must be obeyed, himself blasphemously slain by Malcolm.

In pushing the equation of treason and blasphemy to these conceptual limits, Shakespeare confronts its insufficiencies, as well as simultaneously exposing the inadequacy of the superficial understanding of blasphemy implied in the statute against swearing in public entertainments. Blasphemous swearing does not occur in the play, but blasphemy is represented nonetheless, for the murder of a king is staged with bloodied Christological resonances. This substitution initially appears as an instance of Shakespeare outmaneuvering one official perspective on blasphemy in order to confirm his allegiance to the higher order political construal of blasphemy as treason. Yet, what happens instead is that both authoritative conceptualizations of blasphemy are detonated in *Macbeth*. These exploded meanings of blasphemy are scattered throughout the play, alongside a

plurality of other blasphemous meanings, which mingle together and give rise to a variety of secularizing questions.

Witchcraft and Blasphemy

The witches, who open the play, are also characterized as agents of blasphemy. Aside from Macbeth, who only does so once, the Second Witch is the only character in the play to swear "by" something (4.1.45). She comes close to uttering a literal oath: "By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes" (4.1.45-44). She does not swear *by* any explicitly irreverent reference to Christ's wounds, but perversely swears by the pinprick wound a witch self-inflicts in order to bleed drops of blood into her concoctions. Because of the assumption that they won their powers through pacts made with the devil, everything done by witches could be deemed blasphemous, but the witches in *Macbeth* are particularly insulting to God because of their prophecying.

Foretelling the future had for many decades before the first staging of *Macbeth* been deemed blasphemous, for it presumed the ability to harbour within oneself the capability of foreknowledge that belonged properly to God alone. The conclusion to the witch's oath above is, therefore, blasphemous, since it is predictive. Because the practice was thought to encourage sedition and rebellion, especially among radical Puritans and Familists, Queen Elizabeth issued proclamations against prophesying in the 1570s and 1580s.[67] Commenting on prophecy toward the end of the sixteenth century, John Harvey informs his

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[67] For more on this see Roger E. Moore's "Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Prophesying."

readers that it is "blasphemie, to presume into Gods office, or to vsurpe any his proprietie, who alone is singularly termed in Scripture as the only searcher" of future knowledge (128). Harvey refers to alleged prophets as "blasphemous heretiques" and "blasphemous villaines" who "blasphemously babbled" (12, 59, 93). When Macbeth first encounters the witches, he is inquisitive about their "prophetic greeting," but by the end of his final meeting with them, he has become so enthralled by their predictions that when they advise him to "Seek to know no more," he threatens them with a malediction: "I will be satisfied. Deny me this / And an eternal curse fall on you!" (1.3.78, 4.1.103-04). He tries to conjure out of them their blasphemously prophetic knowledge by swearing *by* whatever it is they profess and however it is they know what they know, even if they must raise up a mighty tempest to billow against churches:

> I conjure you, by that which you profess,
>
> Howe'er you come to know it, answer me:
>
> Though you untie the winds and let them fight
>
> Against the churches (4.1.50-53)

By this moment in the play, Macbeth has become totally implicated in the play's blasphemous workings. The blasphemous regicide he has committed has made the witches' earlier blasphemous prophecying about him come true.

Blasphemous Indirections

As we have seen, Macbeth's murder of Duncan is at the center of the drama's substitution of brief oaths with much more profound representations of blasphemy. After he has murdered Duncan, Macbeth enters, blankly asking his

wife if she heard what he did: "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?"

(2.2.15). If we read his question more closely, however, he does not really ask her

if she has heard anything, but more precisely, whether or not she has heard

nothing. Has she *not* heard a noise? Was what I have done to the king audible?

What follows is a peculiarly overdone exchange:

> LADY MACBETH. I heard the owl scream and the
>
> > [crickets cry.
>
> > Did not you speak?
>
> MACBETH. When?
>
> LADY MACBETH. Now.
>
> MACBETH. As I descended?
>
> LADY MACBETH. Ay. (2.2.16-21)

Macbeth has not sworn out loud, as prohibited by the statute against swearing in

plays, but he has blasphemed in murdering the Christ-like Duncan. The eerie

night sounds made by the owl and the cricket stand in as sonorous tokens of

Macbeth's silently blasphemous treason. Then it is Lady Macbeth's turn to ask if

Macbeth did *not* speak. Like Macbeth's initial question, it sounds as though she

wants to know if Macbeth has said something, but the negative valence of the

question emphasizes the idea that the killing produced no blasphemous words. In

killing Duncan, Macbeth has "descended" morally and committed a silently

blasphemous off-stage deed that ironically replaces the blusteringly vocal

theatrical oath-making prohibited by the statute.

Yet another example of this occurs when Malcolm and Donalbain awake

briefly in a room adjacent to the murder and "say their prayers" (2.2.28). Macbeth

claims that as he walked by he "could not say 'Amen'" (2.2.32). He wonders out loud to his wife "wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? / I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat" (2.2.35-37). Although he does not utter blasphemous oaths, Macbeth has committed a blasphemy of such a high magnitude that he cannot bring himself even to speak the word amen, the prayerful obverse of a false oath. The statute banned blasphemous oaths, aiming to silence those expressions in plays. Yet in the moments just described, the eerie silence and temporary aphasia may refer to Macbeth's blasphemous criminality.

One of Lady Macbeth's speeches is also remarkable for the way it avoids the specific language the bill prohibited. She insists that she would bash her child to death if she had "sworn" to do so, but that Macbeth, whom she claims has made an oath to kill Duncan, is too cowardly to follow through with what he has "sworn" to do (1.7.60). Macbeth does not refute this accusation. Nor, however, does he confirm it. Based upon what his wife has said, the audience cannot be sure if an oath has been made by Macbeth or not. If Macbeth has indeed sworn to kill Duncan, he has made the oath offstage. The playgoers are not made privy to his commitment. In Macbeth's letter to his wife he refers to the witches' prophecy, and after they have been reunited, he ends their conversation only by stating that they "will speak further" of the matter (1.6.67). There is no evidence of an oath, except for what we hear from Lady Macbeth, but there is also no reason to imagine that Macbeth has not made an oath offstage. This potential oath-making points to a loophole in the legislation against staged swearing. Macbeth's oath cannot be legally witnessed, so the play cagily works around the legislated expurgation of swearing from public drama by carefully implying other,

more controversial expressions of blasphemy. The result in this particular scene, and by extension in the play as a whole, is that the new act against the staging of blasphemous swearing is cast as an inadequate safeguard against the plurality of blasphemous meanings that circulated in early modern culture.

The play agrees with the Jacobean legislators who passed the *Act* that the deterioration of cultural sensitivity to blasphemy was a spiritual threat, but *Macbeth* offers a more complex account of the problem than the one provided by the new law, which only targets blasphemous oaths in public performance. Other attempts to legislate against false swearing in all public places had been quashed over the years. *Macbeth* conforms in a superficial way with the law's banning of oaths, yet it also craftily buries offstage Macbeth's shockingly blasphemous oath to kill a king. This circumvention does not of course diminish the play's representation of blasphemy, but instead amplifies it. The oath itself is concealed by strategic indirection, but the blasphemous ramifications of it nevertheless reverberate throughout the scene. In the same way that a ban on oath-making in plays does not solve the problem of blasphemy in Shakespeare's world, the elimination of oaths from the characters' vocabularies does not impede the accumulation of blasphemous material in *Macbeth*. Instead of reacting to the *Act* by writing a play in which he simply avoids conventionally blasphemous speech acts, Shakespeare uses his first opportunity to stage a play that experiments with the problematic variety of meanings that attached to blasphemy. The statute against oath-making is construed as an inadequate measure against blasphemy. The play appears to scoff at the notion that egregious blasphemy is contained in

the oaths at the theatre. Blasphemous oaths are removed from *Macbeth*, but they are replaced in a multitude of other ways that evoke blasphemy nonetheless.

Macbeth's Blasphemous Despair

Macbeth plummets to his spiritual nadir when Seyton delivers the news of Lady Macbeth's death: "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (5.5.16). The cries of the women who discovered her body still ringing in his ears, Macbeth gives an utterly despairing, blasphemous speech:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
>
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
>
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
>
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
>
> The way to dusty death. (5.5.19-23)

Each day of life is only a prelude to oblivion: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more" (5.5.24-26). Existence is nothing more than an empty performance, authored by an imbecile, and punctuated by an abrupt ending: "It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.26-28). Macbeth is engrossed by intransigent blasphemous despair. What confirms the blasphemy is that the idiot telling the story of the world in his speech is God. Of course, as the author of Macbeth's dramatic personhood, Shakespeare is also the idiot storyteller, which is how Shakespeare seems to get away with putting this potential blasphemy against God into his character's mouth. Yet despite Shakespeare's apparent self-abasement as author, there may be no way around the

blasphemy of the statement. Indeed, the more one tries to interpret it as non-blasphemous, the more it becomes blasphemous. If, for instance, Shakespeare is the idiot, and not God, then Shakespeare becomes the author of creation, and not God, which is a blasphemous proposition. If, conversely, God is the idiot, then Macbeth's statement is a clearly blasphemous disparagement of God. The damnable despair Macbeth expresses is a dramatized version of the despair Harrington evokes in his poetic meditation on the replacement of swearing as blasphemy with a loss of faith as blasphemy. Shakespeare demonstrates that transition, avoiding blasphemous oaths by deploying the ambiguity of blasphemous despair instead.

Punishing Blasphemy

Another manifestation of blasphemy in the play is apparent in Macbeth's final speech, in which he pointedly refuses to abase himself and kiss the earth: "I will not yield / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet" (5.8.28-29). This may appear to be an insignificant detail, but Macbeth's refusal to submit to the most typical punishment imposed upon blasphemers in early modern Euorpe, the *Erdkuss* or *Herdfall*, is worth considering. In her study of early modern blasphemers, Francisca Loetz describes the practice: "This punishment involved the delinquent 'falling to the earth,' i.e. kneeling, and kissing the ground" (59). Loetz specifies that all "citizens were given the right and duty to demand the set fine or the *Herdfall* from anyone using blasphemous language" (62). The *Herdfall* was generally performed in public and carried with it a significant loss of status for the blasphemer, as well as an opportunity for redemption: "Their social

prestige was severely diminished and their honour capital forfeited . . . . Executing

Herdfall meant . . . doing penance for dishonouring God" (100).[68] Macduff wants

for Macbeth to perform *Erdkuss* as reparation for the blasphemies he has

committed. He orders him to surrender and to be "the show and gaze o' the time"

(5.8.24). Macbeth refuses "to be baited with the rabble's curse," thus attributing to

them a blasphemous intention against his sovereignty, and is slain, his

blasphemies unredeemed (5.8.29).

Blasphemous Malcolm

Aside from the Third Witch's utterance of the word in relation to Jews, the

only other cognate of the word blasphemy that appears in the play is spoken when

Macduff responds to Malcolm's defamation of himself and of the Scottish crown:

O nation miserable,

With an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptered,

When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again,

Since that the truest issue of thy throne

By his own interdiction stands accurst

And does blaspheme his breed? (4.3.104-09)

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[68] Blasphemous forswearing and earth kissing are set side by side in *A Winter's Tale*:
I spake with him; who now
Has these poor men in question. Never saw I
Wretches so quake: they kneel, they kiss the earth;
Forswear themselves as often as they speak:
Bohemia stops his ears, and threatens them
With diverse deaths in death. (5.1.197-202)

Macduff's outburst is a response to Malcolm's test of his thane's loyalty and virtue. The scene begins with Macduff bemoaning the horrid blight that afflicts Scotland, his "downfall'n birthdom" (4.3.4). He describes the wrongs suffered there as blasphemously reaching up to "Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds / As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out / Like syllable of dolor" (4.3.6-8). The blasphemies perpetrated by Macbeth are affronts not only to Scotland, but to God, who is struck on the face and cries out in pain, as though also injured by Macbeth's calumny. As oaths were thought to be the product of hot tongues, so too does Macbeth's offensive identity become a blasphemy in Malcom's mouth, "a tyrant" whose "sole name blisters . . . tongues" (4.3.12). Macbeth's name becomes a blasphemous cynosure of his supernatural contriving, murderous criminality, and tyrannical usurpation.

Part of Malcolm's test of Macduff includes offering himself up as a captive to him, so that Macduff may hand him over to Macbeth, as "a weak, poor, innocent lamb / T'appease an angry god" (4.3.16-17). Macduff replies that he is "not treacherous," but Malcolm's offer nonetheless identifies him with Christ's sacrifice and thus evokes the Christologically sacral dimension of kingship. Further emphasizing this, Malcolm adds to Macduff's "Bleed, bleed, poor country" by emphasizing on a national scale other details of Christologically blasphemous corporeal suffering, describing how the Scottish body politic has been lacerated by Macbeth's blasphemies: "It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds" (4.3.33, 41-42). As a result of Macbeth's regicide and tyranny, Duncan's body and the Scottish nation have become extensions of the incarnated God's mutilated and blasphemed against body.

As opposed to Macbeth's characterization as an overbearing tyrant, Malcolm, at least initially in his exchange with Macduff, adopts a humble demeanour. He is not, however, as Christ-like as his father was before him. For instance, his suggestion that Macduff should hand him over to his enemy was only a test, which Macduff passes. Macduff is no Judas and Malcolm no Christ. After posing as an innocent lamb, it becomes apparent that Malcolm only feigns Christological humility, yet by forcefully attributing to himself the sins of lechery and greed, he communicates an unworthiness to rule. As for the "king-becoming graces," he affirms that he has "none" of them (4.3.92). He would instead "Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth" (4.3.101). This is the moment at which Macduff responds to Malcolm by accusing him of blasphemy against his royal line. Macduff identifies Malcolm's seeming characterization of himself as grossly lecherous, perniciously avaricious, and limitlessly egotistical as grounds for the accusation of blasphemy he levels against him. For attributing to himself these tyrannical "evils," Malcolm is perceived by Macduff as disgracefully abusing the sacred worth of the kings who came before him, including his "royal father" a "most sainted king" (4.3.113, 109-10). It is immediately after the speech in which Macduff impugns Malcolm with blasphemy that Malcolm informs him that he has passed the test. He has used deception to call forth from Macduff his belief in the sacredness of monarchy and the possibility that it may be blasphemed against.

Once Macduff demonstrates his ability to identify the correct threshold at which to make the accusation of blasphemy as treason, Malcolm ceases the test, but not before his lies have undermined his Christological status. Malcolm

quickly seeks to "unspeak" his "detraction" from himself (4.3.124). He

emphatically "abjure[s]" the "blames" he "laid upon himself" (4.3.125).[69]

Malcolm insists that his blasphemous bearing of false witness to Macduff began

and ended with himself: "My first false speaking / Was this upon myself"

(4.3.131-132). He additionally reassures Macduff that he has never

blasphemously perjured himself: "At no time broke my faith" (4.3.129). And yet,

in this same speech, he has just lied repeatedly to Macduff. Despite the apparent

virtue he claims for himself, Malcolm is not an innocent lamb. He has

manipulatively lied to Macduff, although he attempts to frame that dissimulation

as directed at himself: "My first false speaking / Was this upon myself."

Moreover, Malcolm technically blasphemes against God by way of a mock

devotion to Satan. Malcolm states that he is so trustworthy that he "would not

betray / The devil" (4.3.129-30). And yet, he refers to the opponent he will

overthrow as "Devilish Macbeth" (4.3.118). He thus blasphemes against his

avowal of loyalty to the devil by endeavouring to depose his worst scion,

Macbeth.

Throughout the scene, the meanings of blasphemy are rendered by

Malcolm as ambiguously as they are anywhere in the play. He feigns despair. He

plays fast and loose with what it means to forswear. He commits himself

hypothetically to the devil. He temporarily fractures the sacred image of

monarchy in ways that shock Macduff into accusing him of blasphemy. So despite

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[69] That Malcolm chooses the word "blame" is significant in the context of the play's overall representation of blasphemy, for the words blame and blaspheme have the same Latin root, *blasimare* (*OED*). Blasphemy against God is a rebellious laying of blame on God.

Malcolm's promise to establish legitimate sovereign rule in Scotland, he is clearly

not as pure a representative of sacral kingship as he pretends to be. I acknowledge

that it comes as no surprise that he is a practical strategist, a proponent of

Realpolitik, as ambitiously bent upon the attainment of power as his enemy, yet a

better political tactician than Macbeth. What is intriguing is that blasphemy is for

Malcolm just one of the many political thought-tools he uses to manufacture the

illusion of indisputable legitimacy that sustains his claim to the throne he must

wrest from Macbeth. His initial manipulation of blasphemy displays his mastery

of an important politico-theological concept, while his subsequent rejection of the

blasphemies he performed demonstrates his allegiance to divinity. And yet, even

once he has revealed his performance, he treats blasphemy lightly, as just one

component of his manipulative ruse.

The Secularization of Blasphemy

Toward the end of this tense exchange between Malcolm and Macduff, a

messenger interrupts them with the dire report of the slaughter of Macduff's wife

and son. For the audience, this is not news, for the exchange between Malcolm

and Macduff has come immediately after the killing of Macduff's family and

haunts their dialogue. In the moments before their death, mother and son discuss

the meaning of forswearing and treason, with implications that are then relatable

to Malcolm and Macduff's exploration of blasphemy. The mother and son's

conversation about false swearing and capital treason is bookended by two gentle

asseverations, not oaths, but expressions that were nonetheless frowned upon by

the godly for the way they were viewed as too casually invoking divinity. Lady

Macduff, commenting on her son's "wit," utters an "i' faith," and then, in response to his call for liars and swearers to execute those who would seek to punish them, she says, "God help thee" (4.2.43). Objectively, these phrases call God to witness in a frivolous manner, yet subjectively, when the words are spoken by a mother to her son, there does not appear to be anything blasphemous about them. Before the statute, Lady Macduff's invocations would likely best be described as inconsequential metrical filler, but coming as they do after the proclamation, in a play so concerned with developing an intricate account of blasphemy, they draw attention to the dialogue they frame.

While the adjurations themselves are mild, the talk that comes in between them is concerned directly with the relationship between blasphemy and treason, false calling to witness and treachery against the state. The mother explains to her son the early modern equation of blasphemy with treason by elucidating how swearing and lying are the defining characteristics of a traitor. In response to her son's question, "What is a traitor?", Lady Macduff replies that a traitor is "one that swears and lies" (4.2.48). Her son replies with a question: "And be all traitors that do so?" (4.2.49). Are all who forswear themselves traitors? Lady Macduff is certain: "Every one that does so is a traitor / And must be hanged" (4.2.50.51). Seeking further clarity, the boy asks: "And must they all be hanged that swear and lie?" (4.2.52). She answers affirmatively, "Every one" (4.2.53). The son then posits that since there are more liars and swearers than "honest men," they would be "fools" not to "beat" and "hang" those who would seek to execute them (4.2.55, 56, 57). In saying this, he points up the futility of the contemporary treatment of blasphemy as an exceptional sin, for in his estimation it is

everywhere. His mother has accused his own father of being a traitor to them, not for rebelling against Macbeth, but for leaving them behind. Ross attempts to justify Macduff's abandonment of his family, but in the end can only provide a cryptic assessment: "cruel are the times when we are traitors / And do not know ourselves" (4.2.18-19). The world has grown so politically and spiritually complicated, with the terms of allegiance to the crown and to heaven so frequently modified, that we can no longer be sure when we sinfully transgress, even in the worst ways possible. This is one of the dangerous spiritual effects of pluralization and secularization. As in the exchange between Macduff and Malcolm, an ambiguous mixture of confusion, despair, forswearing, and treason react together to produce an indeterminate variety of possible interpretations of blasphemy.

Macbeth provokes a variety of questions about the nature of blasphemy, in the process pluralizing potential beliefs about it. Eliminating oaths from plays is easy, Shakespeare seems to say in this first drama after the *Act to Restrain Abuses*, but doing so does not sufficiently address the problem of blasphemy's dispersion as a religious concept in the culture of the time. The English state's definition of blasphemy as a sin to be dealt with by targeting the petty utterance of oaths in stage plays is challenged and interrogated. As we have seen, the idea of blasphemy as egregious treason against the crown is also called into question. The authentic spiritual meaning of the worst of all sins is left imprecise, and in the absence of religious certainty, may potentially be everywhere.

Blasphemous utterance is unlike any other stage-talk. It may very well be the only type of speech that remains non-fictional onstage. All other forms of

speech may be understood as merely an empty fiction, but there appears to be no distinction between the reality of blaspheming on stage and blaspheming in the street. The potency of it may even be amplified onstage. The presumption of blasphemy's reality at the theatre is what justified the legislation against it. Shakespeare appears to react to this by using the power of blasphemy's theatrical reality to orchestrate a plurality of the sin's meanings, which complicates the transgression by opening it up to the interpretive scrutiny of playgoers. *Macbeth* seems to say, yes, the theatre is a possibly dangerous locus of blasphemous potential, but that does not mean that exposing blasphemy's ugliness for public consideration is in itself necessarily socially or spiritually damaging. On the contrary, doing so generates conditions in which more accurate thinking on blasphemy may be achieved.

If we think of the play as responding to the statute's specific targeting of the theatre as a site of blasphemous utterance, then it appears that *Macbeth* counters this accusation by providing a more complete spectrum of beliefs for blasphemy, at a time when the meaning of the sin was becoming increasingly diverse. The play appears to use the *Act* as a kind of inspiration, as a way of meaningfully grappling with the blasphemy that the new law trivially prohibits. Blasphemy in *Macbeth* points toward a spiritual reality that runs much deeper than the one signified in the bill against theatrical oath-making. If the *Act* oversimplifies the meaning of blasphemy by narrowly targeting oaths in public entertainments, then *Macbeth* is a highly sophisticated artistic response to it that seeks to enact the full range of meanings connected with the idea of blasphemy in the period. If the *Act* is an ineffective safeguard against blasphemy, then *Macbeth*

is a reminder of the spiritual dangers that may result from enabling society's defences against blasphemy to erode and to fragment. *Macbeth* also contains an implicit rejection of the assumption that the early modern theatre's expansive capacity to represent the world could be thwarted by such a simplistic law against particular speech acts. The play shrugs off the statute's overly literal and thinly superficial ban by figuratively weaving together a plurality of competing versions of the sin's profound meaning in the culture. This required the innovation of a multitude of artistic strategies capable of sustaining the heavy load of beliefs about blasphemy that circulated in the culture of the time. In conducting this pluralizing orchestration in *Macbeth*, however, Shakespeare's theatre was necessarily complicit in the secularization of blasphemy, because it generated interpretive possibilities for questioning many versions of the worst of all sins.

Chapter Three:

Franciscan Poetics and the Reformation of Love in *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare's familiarity with the Franciscan Order in particular, and with the mendicant orders in general, is not only well-established in *Romeo and Juliet,* but in many of his other plays as well.[70] There are allusions to friars in *The Taming of the Shrew, All's Well That Ends Well, Henry VI 1,* and *Henry VIII.* In addition to these references, the Duke of Gloucester mentions a Friar Penker in *Richard III*; in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Eglamour and Silvia meet at Friar Patrick's cell; in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Friar Francis salvages the marriage of Hero and Claudio; and in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare makes Franciscanism into a central preoccupation. Not only in that play is one of its main characters, Isabella, a novice of the Franciscan Order's female branch, the Poor Clares, but the Duke of Vienna disguises himself as a member of the Order of Friars Minor for most of the play. *Measure for Measure* blends Franciscanism with political strategy and erotic intrigue. Duke Vincentio apprises the local Franciscan prior, Friar Thomas, that his desire to assume a minorite identity is part of his stratagem to put himself in touch with the effects of his surrogate's

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[70] Aside from the frequency with which they appear in his drama, Shakespeare may be connected with friars in other ways. Jeffrey Knapp proposes that Shakespeare likely felt a vocational kinship with them, partly because he came to occupy spaces in London that had belonged to friars and that still bore their name: "From the 1570s, theatrical companies had in fact played in the 'liberty' once occupied by London's Black Friars; Shakespeare's company acquired Blackfriars property in 1596 and opened a playhouse there twelve years later (Shakespeare himself bought the Blackfriars gatehouse)" (*Shakespeare's Tribe* 53).

temporary rule in Vienna: "And to behold his sway, / I will, as 'twere a brother of your order, / Visit both prince and people" (1.3.43-45). He asks to be provided not only with a friar's garb, but also with the behavioural tendencies that would characterize a Franciscan: "Supply me with the habit and instruct me / How I may formally in person bear me / Like a true friar" (1.3.46-48). Isabella undertakes her calling as a Poor Clare with much more sincere intentions than the Duke.[71] In fact, she tells the convent's Mother, Francisca, that she wants an even "more strict restraint" than the "sisterhood" is able to offer (1.4.4, 5). It is only once Lucio informs her of her brother's troubles that she reluctantly decides to postpone her withdrawal from the world. Before leaving the convent, Isabella makes sure to give the "the Mother / Notice of [the] affair," (1.4.86-87) and at no moment in the play are we led to believe that she does not one day wish to return to "the votarists of Saint Clare" (1.4.5). The Duke, who has been masquerading under the alias Friar Lodowick, reveals himself at the end of the play and promptly arranges four marriages, including his own to Isabella, whose response to his proposal is mute silence. The Duke's impairment of Isabella's celibate calling is less malicious than Angelo's coercive ultimatum, that she either has sex with him or her brother dies, but Vincentio's request for her to marry him remains problematic. When Duke Vincentio instructs Isabella to accuse Angelo of what he has tried to do to her, he adds, "Trust not my holy order / If I pervert your course" (4.3.147-48). In one sense, "holy order" refers to how she should follow his instructions because

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[71] As Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber have noted, that Shakespeare intended something meaningful about holy orders in the play is also borne out by how he transforms Isabella from "the sister-by-blood of the sources into a woman who is both familial and spiritual sister" (198).

the Franciscan order, of which he is ironically a member, deserves her trust. In another, more ironic sense, he implies that his greatness as a divinely ordained ruler makes his sacral commands worthy of confidence. In yet an even more ironic register, however, his high-handed sacral order is not to be relied upon, for he does want to "pervert" Isabella's course to the Poor Clares by wedding her. The Duke's hybridization of his authority has caused him to impair the status of both temporal and spiritual power. In the process of divesting himself of worldly authority and investing himself with the Franciscan's sacral authority, he has adulterated the traditional prestige of both. By the end of the play, the Franciscans' reputation has thus been cheapened by the Duke's usurpation of their ethos. According to Lucio, the Duke makes for a "saucy, friar, / A very scurvy fellow" (5.1.135-36). On the other hand, he is arguably no more trustworthy as a ruler, for he "would have dark deeds darkly answer'd, he would / never bring them to light" (3.2.177-78). Of course, Lucio's "slanderous" estimations are not to be taken at face value, but the license he is afforded by the Duke's ploy, and the silent response to the ruler's commands at the end of the play, both indicate that Vincentio's muddling of the traditional sources of sacral authority, temporal and spiritual, has generated secularizing conditions of plural meaning, which call for unpredictable forms of audience engagement and recalibrations of belief (3.2.188).

First performed about a decade earlier, *Romeo and Juliet* is also implicated with Franciscanism, but its minorite, Friar Laurence, is more concerned with intervening in love and marriage than in transforming the politics of sacral kingship. My basic claim in this chapter is that there is a continuity between

Romeo and Juliet's representation of Franciscanism and its dramatization of ecstatic love, and that this association has a bearing on the secularization of matrimony enacted in the play. I argue that in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare recuperates the centuries-old radicalism of the Franciscan Order's societal and poetic ideals of relational and spiritual love in ways that initially appear to support, but which ultimately subvert, English Protestantism's tentative investment in true married love as the principal means by which the fraying bonds of the religious and the secular dimensions of Reformed society could be maintained. Instead of celebrating a unified representation of Catholic or of Protestant aspirations for marriage, *Romeo and Juliet* concludes by evoking a secularizing plurality of options for matrimonial belief, an impetus which has contributed to the currently widespread, albeit variously experienced, belief in wedded love as the cornerstone of the modern social imaginary.

Principally through the character of Friar Laurence, but in other ways as well, the play harnesses the poetic expressiveness and sociological ambitiousness of the theology of love advocated by Francis of Assisi and his spiritual descendents in their prayer-poems, scholarly treatises, literature of religious instruction, as well as in their influential political activism. The artistic formulation of love and marriage in *Romeo and Juliet* is in continuity with the erotic figurations of matrimonial love which were deployed in a variety of Franciscan texts that attempted to articulate the ineffability of divine love in human terms. Franciscanism is also transmitted through the redeployment and reprioritization in *Romeo and Juliet* of the strong Franciscan elements in Francesco Petrarch's love poetry. In a more political sense, early Franciscanism's

ecclesiastically disruptive call for revolutionary social transformation and transcendent unification through passionate abandonment to God's all-consuming love is echoed by Friar Laurence's hope that the union between Romeo and Juliet may result in a binding love not only for the couple, but for the society of Verona at large. Franciscanism's doctrine of love is thereby recuperated in the play as material germane to understanding and interrogating Protestant society's problematic idealization of wedded love.

Protestantism's reformulation of matrimony was imagined, at least in theory, as differing considerably from Catholic marriage insofar as marital union, freely chosen, between loving companions, became the ideal consecration of Christian life and the bedrock of social communion. On the one hand, the drama posits a Veronese society in which marital expectations are stereotypically Catholic. Juliet's planned espousal to Paris is arranged, enforced, and loveless. Early in the play, men's amorous views on women are expressed with hollowed-out Petrarchan conventionalism. Rosaline is the unattainable object of Romeo's sad affection and she rejects him to live in perpetual chastity. On the other hand, there is the idealized Protestant-style companionate intimacy of Romeo and Juliet, which is encouraged, managed, and initially communicated as socially imperative by way of Friar Laurence's proto-Protestant Franciscan glorification of the idea of matrimonial love. Yet the play simultaneously undermines this idealization by suggesting through the lovers' and the friar's doomed cooperation that transforming marriage into society's principle sacral locus and a reflection of passionately divine love is to demand more of matrimony than it can provide.

Shakespeare, the Mendicants and the Critics

Critical assessments of Shakespeare's friars have been divergent, with a wide variety of interpretations being directed at these characters, including, at times, indifference to their presence in his drama. Debora Shuger's insightful analysis of Jacobean sacral kingship in *Measure for Measure* is, for example, unconcerned with the friars who conspicuously populate that drama. She declares that the presence of the mendicants in the play is without any heuristic value whatsoever. Although the Duke disguises "himself as a friar," the "fact that no one objects . . . or even suggests that there could be an objection means that the issue does not, in this play, matter" (5). Such concerns, had they been significant "would have been scripted" (5). It is peculiar that Shuger lends so much importance to the script when the play's visual dimension is dominated by a Duke who spends almost the entire play in a friar's habit. As I indicated earlier, Franciscanism should be read as an essential component of that play. Many other critics tend to agree that the friars in Shakespeare are significant. Peter Milward maintains that Shakespeare's friars generally "speak with authority within the sphere of their religious vocation, and command the respect of the other characters" in the plays (73). For E. A. J. Honigmann, Shakespeare's treatment of the Franciscans is a sign of his Catholicism (*Shakespeare* 122). Conversely, David Salter avoids reading the friars as a way of detecting Shakespeare's personal religious affiliation. He sees the mendicants as quasi-pagan figures, who conjure nostalgic feelings in the plays, and whose detachment from the other characters mirrors Shakespeare's own artistic objectivity (73). Knapp holds a similar

opinion, identifying in Shakespeare's representation of them "a kind of professional camaraderie," albeit one that privileges players over friars as "sponsors" of the "communal reconciliation" he identifies as the theatre's spiritual mission (53). David N. Beauregard detects in the plays' enactment of Franciscanism a surprising even-handedness on Shakespeare's part. Remarking upon Franciscans in *Measure for Measure*, he concludes that "Shakespeare's purpose . . . was not to construct perfect exemplars of Franciscan religious life, or pure examples of sexual evil, but to render images of virtue and vice with some plausibility and verisimilitude" (63).

When writing directly about *Romeo and Juliet*'s Friar Laurence, critics have tended to have a narrower focus, generally apportioning degrees of blame to him for what happens to the lovers. Jill Kriegel posits that the friar is utterly at fault for the tragedy that befalls the couple: "His culpability, clearly owing to his embrace of natural magic, makes him a near-tragic hero, redeemed only by his repentance" (134). James C. Bryant also accuses the friar of conduct unbecoming his religious function, although he regards Laurence as fulfilling the role of the friar in medieval fabliaux and the Italian *commedia erudite*: "By understanding him in this way, Friar Laurence becomes in some significant ways the stereotype of the sly and meddlesome friar of the medieval literary tradition" (350). Dympna Callaghan, on the contrary, emphasizes that anti-fraternalism does not predominate in *Romeo and Juliet* in the way that it does in "Shakespeare's source," Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet,* itself ultimately based in Italian sources, in which "the Friar is much more the stereotype of corruption than he is in Shakespeare" ("Friars" 386). For Gerry Brenner, Friar Laurence causes harm

because he is politically motivated, "prompted by self-aggrandizing ambitions that are equal to, if not stronger than, those in Capulet and Prince Escalus" (48). Brenner worries that his argument "may seem farfetched and without even contextual defense" (48), but while he does not provide it, I will supply ample historical evidence to corroborate the idea that Franciscans could think of themselves as highly influential political figures, not only in the countryside, but also on the streets and in the courts of the foremost cities in the medieval and early modern periods.

Conceptualizing the social dimension of Friar Laurence's status as an early modern Franciscan is crucial to making sense of the meaning of his characterization in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as the other meanings of Franciscanism circulating in the play. I share with several of the above critics a desire to understand Friar Laurence, not as a literary type, who one way or another either perpetuates or rejects the conventional traditions of anti-fraternal representation, but instead as a character whose personal contradictions and habits of thought are of a piece with the much broader cultural signification of Franciscanism in the period.[72] There are a multitude of historical Franciscan realities that swirl around the representation of Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*. What appears to have been most neglected in the critical literature on the play is the fascinating extent to which *Romeo and Juliet* represents Franciscan

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[72] In her edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, Callaghan likewise endorses a flexible critical approach to understanding the significance of the friars: "What then was the spectrum of opinion on friars in Shakespeare's time? What were the ideological and religious positions available in relation to monasticism and especially toward the Franciscans?" ("Friars" 382).

culture from the perspective of an informed insider. Instead of coming to the

institution of Franciscanism as a judgemental outsider, the play at times adopts a

Franciscan outlook on the world instead. It is as though in writing Friar

Laurence's character, Shakespeare channelled an extensive cultural awareness of

Franciscanism, which spilled over into other aspects of the play. Shakespeare

mobilizes the social authority, the artistic innovations, and many of the spiritual

beliefs cultivated by the Order over the centuries in ways that animate his play's

expression of the Franciscans' most central theological tenet, ecstatic love.

The assumption that there was a natural association between friars and the

meaning of love was a common one throughout the medieval and early modern

periods. I want to make that connection evident again.[73] Without understanding,

for instance, the reputation of friars, who for centuries roamed across the

landscape of Christian Europe as emissaries of love (and in some cases,

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[73] My thick historical description of Franciscanism and love in the play will differ markedly from Paul A. Kottman's purposefully retroactive analysis of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which he claims that it "is as if Shakespeare presciently agreed with Hegel (and other modern philosophers) when he set the stakes as an intensely dramatic struggle for freedom and self-realization" (9). The universe in which Kottman sets Shakespeare is remarkably irreligious. He expresses, for instance, the evolution of the lovers' attitude toward death as immune to Christian influence: "To be clear, the lovers are not denying mortality as such, as in the Christian mystery, where God's love for the world is shown through Christ's victory over death and dying, or as in Dante's depiction of Beatrice, where amorous love leads to the vision of posthumous love, the *alta fantasia* of the beloved's immortality" (18). For Kottman, the "love affair is not the story of two individuals whose desire to be together is thwarted by 'a greater power than we can contradict'" (5.3.153; 6). Kottman implies throughout his reading that God is absent from the meaning of love and death in the tragedy. He thus sets aside any religious considerations in the drama, in order then to replace them with the idea of a philosophically Hegelian secular universality. While I admire the philosophical brilliance of certain aspects of Kottman's interpretation, I think that my own more historical investigation of *Romeo and Juliet* provides a necessary and complementary counterpoint. Shakespeare's contribution to the secularization of love in the modern world emerged from and retains many Christian habits of belief, including those imparted by Franciscanism.

apparently, also of lust), it is not entirely clear why at around the turn of the century, Francis Bacon punctuates the end of his essay "On Love" with a thoughtful reflection on friars: "There is in man's nature a secret inclination and motion towards love of others, which, if it be not spent upon some one or a few, doth naturally spread itself towards many, and maketh men become human and charitable; as it is seen sometime in friars" (89). Despite the fact that the mendicant orders had been expelled from England decades earlier in 1559, Bacon still adduces them (perhaps also unconsciously evoking his namesake, St. Francis) as remaining the best possible representatives of the most elevated love imaginable.

Overcoming Anti-Fraternalism

Many of the literary stereotypes of the friars that survive from the medieval and early modern periods of English history contain harshly critical assessments of Franciscan life. Modern literary scholarship has given too much weight to these representations, prejudicing readers in ways that obscure the historical meaning of friars in those eras. I will attempt to overcome that bias by examining the history of anti-fraternalism and in the process the more general history of Franciscanism, before returning specifically to the expertise of Franciscans on matters of love.

Anti-mendicant attacks in print and on stage were commonplace in early modern England. Taken alone, these sources suggest that friars were depraved, hypocritical, simoniacal, lecherous, greedy, and mischievous. Among the many examples of theatrical anti-fraternalism that circulated in sixteenth-century

England are several examples that stand out. In John Bale's *Kyng Johan*, Sedition personified disguises himself as a "graye fryer sumtyme with cutt shoes and a rope" (8). King John actively resists the entry of treasonous friars into his realm: "They have mad labor to inhabytt this same regyon: / They shall for my tyme not enter into domynyon. / We have to many of soch vayne lowghtes all redy" (61). Later in the century, in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Faustus commands Mephistopheles to leave and to transform his appearance: "Go, and return an old Franciscan friar: / That holy shape becomes a devil best" (1.3.25-26). In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta,* Ithamore asks Abigail about the friars' reputedly illicit contact with nuns: "have not / The nuns fine sport with the friars now and then?" (3.3.32-33). In George Peele's *The Old Wives Tale*, when a friar appears with a chine of beef and a pot of wine, Sacrapant labels him "a friar indefinite, and a knave infinite" (4.49). These are only a small sample of the many references to friars in early modern drama.

In light of these examples, it would be tempting to think that Shakespeare's post-Reformation England was exclusively and virulently anti-mendicant. Yet it is not clear that post-Reformation English society was relentlessly anti-fraternal, nor that the anti-fraternalism that did circulate was necessarily a by-product of the Reformation. In the first case, one would have to ignore Shakespeare's and Bacon's more positive representations of friars, as well as those of many other writers, including the playwright Robert Greene's. In the second case, one would have to overlook the fact that the tradition of literary anti-fraternalism antedated the Reformation by many centuries. Franciscans had been the target of harsh written attacks since the inception of their order in the early

thirteenth century, long before the advent of Protestantism. Because friars were neither secular clergy nor monks, they had from the very beginning been viewed by the other religious as usurping spiritual territory that did not belong to them. The first serious contestations occurred at the University of Paris, where the Franciscans quarrelled with the secular clergy throughout the 1240s and beyond. An important document to emerge from that dispute was William of St. Amour's *De periculis novissimorum temporum*. St. Amour strikes at what he labels as the Franciscans' wildly unorthodox apocalyptic speculations. For him, the world was certainly nearing doomsday, but the friars were not the privileged agents of God they claimed to be, but were instead the interlopers Paul writes about in II Timothy 3:1-10. According to Arnold Williams, the details of this flawed apocalyptic self-identification serve as the literary ground upon which the stereotypical charges levelled against friars were then built up in subsequent centuries: "the friars preach without a calling, . . . they cultivate friends in the world, especially among the rich and powerful, and . . . they captivate weak women whose consciences are burdened by sin" (501). Pope Alexander IV eventually ruled against St. Amour, and in favour of the Franciscans, condemning the tract to be burned, and its writer to be exiled. Throughout the rest of the Middle Ages, the Order of Friars Minor flourished in each strata of society, with its membership finding ways to play parts in every important social institution. Of course, the more influential the Order became, the more common the anti-fraternal attacks.

As the friars' numbers and standing increased, new generations of commentators followed St. Amour's precedent in defining them as dangerous

spiritual intruders. The next significant example of anti-fraternalism after St.

Amour is contained in Jean de Meung's section of the late thirteenth-century

Roman de la Rose, in which St. Amour's opinions are rehearsed (Williams 505).

In the 1350s, the former chancellor of Oxford and charismatic preacher, Richard

FitzRalph, charged the Franciscans with practicing only the most lucrative aspects

of pastoral care, confession and burial (Williams 503). The mendicants generally

defended themselves against these accusations by appealing to papal authority,

claiming that the pope was the ultimate priest, that he had bestowed upon the

Order these sacramental duties, and that they answered to him alone (Williams

504).

Despite, and perhaps because of the Popes' support of the Franciscans,

they often continued to be characterized with scorn in the literature of the middle

ages. By the time Chaucer was satirizing friars later in the fourteenth century,

inveighing against Franciscans had become a standard literary *topos*, one that

served as a way for writers to work through many of the pressing religious issues

of the day, very few of which belonged entirely to the friars alone. But because of

the exceptionally fluid role they had symbolically assumed in medieval literature,

they were often used by writers as vehicles for thinking through the meaning of a

variety of interrelated religious issues, including salvation theology, ecclesiastical

authority, property rights, lay education, and sexuality.

John Fleming remarks that the emphatic anti-fraternalism we find in these

texts is primarily literary and that friars themselves were contributors to the

tradition, especially when debating the criteria for mendicant perfection (*An

Introduction* 374). He argues that

it is doubtful that their circumstances differed greatly from those of

the other professional religious. Epidemic disease, which reduced

their numbers, considerably enriched them with testamentary

bequests, their hunger for which is a frequent theme in anti-

mendicant satire as it had already been in the polemical documents

of the poverty controversy within the Franciscan Order. (*An*

Introduction 375)

He goes on to observe that Chaucer's description of friars, while original in

presentation, was highly conventional in most respects, and was not likely the

product of immediate "empirical observation" of friars (*An Introduction* 375).

Fleming's assessment is convincing on these strictly intra-literary grounds, in

particular when he turns to the rhetorical complexity with which Chaucer imbues

his friar:

The 'sermon' preached by Friar John in the "Summoner's Tale" is

something of a masterpiece, for it at once demonstrates a

remarkable and effective literary skill and satirizes the preacher's

cloying literalism and self-serving 'glossing'. As several scholars

have pointed out, it would have been impossible for Chaucer to

have written the tale without a considerable appreciation of

mendicant learning. (*An Introduction* 375)

The status of Franciscanism is also rendered problematic in other late medieval

anti-fraternal writings. Lawrence Clopper, for instance, has argued in his

revisionist interpretation of John Langland's *Piers Plowman* that the text espouses

a reformist and not an abolitionist view of the minorites. In their recent collection,

Defenders and Critics of Franciscan Life, Michael F. Cusato and G. Geltner

contend that the

> dividing line between medieval defenders and critics of Franciscan
>
> life was often not as sharp or as clear, perhaps, as had been thought
>
> in the past. Certain critics were in fact great admirers of the friars;
>
> certain friars were not unaware of the failures and foibles of their
>
> brothers and of the frictions caused by their intrusion into
>
> ministerial fields traditionally reserved for clergy and bishops.
>
> (viii)

The complicated meaning of Franciscanism does not disappear after the

Reformation. Notable texts in English from the late medieval period that

participated in the literary tradition of anti-fraternalism and that survived into the

early modern period include *Jack Upland*, *Friar Daw's Reply*, *Upland Rejoinder*,

Pierce the Ploughman's Crede, *Piers Plowman*, and *The Canterbury Tales*.[74]

Despite the vast number of antifraternal texts that were produced in the

medieval and early modern periods, these account for only a small fraction of the

general intellectual and social significance of the Franciscan Order across

England and Europe before and after the Reformation. The best way to understand

the evidence of literary anti-fraternalism is to contextualize it against a much

broader historical canvas. In doing so it becomes apparent that the negative

commentary that the Franciscans attracted in fiction was a working through of the

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[74] For more on these see Penn R. Szittya's *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*.

peculiarly flexible social role played by friars in society at large. Because of their self-proclaimed marginality, Franciscans were relied upon for their dispassionate judgement, but mistrusted for their hesitation in choosing sides. Their itinerancy was viewed as both a sign of their devotion to spreading the word of God, but also as a means for individual members to evade being held responsible for a particular community. Living by alms was theoretically a way for the Franciscans to model Christ's poverty, but this eventually gave way to the acquisition of private property among the dominant branches of the Order, especially the urban Conventuals. Because they answered directly to the Pope, they were dissociated from local ecclesial and temporal hierarchies, yet this liberty afforded them a socially unique freedom of association with locals and a freedom of movement which was not generally permitted. They were not as constrained by the forms of local obligations that governed the lives of most people. Answering directly to the Pope meant that their relationships with almost everyone else in Christendom were theoretically horizontal, which provided them with many advantages, but which also made them suspect in the eyes' of those who viewed the international Order of Franciscans as, in effect, beholden to no one and to no place.

Franciscanism and the Protestant Reformation in England

The meaning of Franciscanism in post-Reformation England was especially fraught. The development of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century was arguably the most revolutionary spiritual movement to sweep across Europe until the Protestant Reformation. The evangelism at the source of the Franciscan way of life could be viewed as a proto-Protestant impetus. The

foundation of the Order in the lifetime of St. Francis of Assisi was based upon his

devotion to modeling the life of Christ in the gospels. His desire to strip away all

religious superfluity was a preliminary version of the much later calls for religious

austerity that animated the Protestant Reformation. In fact, many of the leading

sixteenth-century reformers had themselves been friars who felt that their spiritual

standards were not being met. When informed of the upheaval surrounding Martin

Luther's ideas, Pope Leo X declared that it amounted to nothing more than "a

quarrel among friars" (Rex 38). Other English members of the Order, such as

Jerome Barlow and William Roy, even followed William Tyndale to the

Continent in order to assist him (Rex 41).

As the Reformation took hold in England and the dissolution of the

monasteries was under way, a great many friars reinvented themselves as secular

clergy. The Franciscans of London sent a letter of submission to Thomas

Cromwell on the eve of their expulsion, describing their belief in the natural

affinity of Franciscanism with Protestantism:

> For as moche as we, the Warden and Freers of the howse of Saynt
>
> Francis in London, comenly callyd the Gray Freers[75] in London,
>
> doo profoundly consider that the perfeccion of Christian liuyng
>
> dothe not conciste in dome ceremonies, werng of a grey cootte,
>
> disgeasing our selffe aftyr straunge fassions, dokynge, nodyngs

---

[75] The Franciscans were the Grey Friars, as distinguished from the Black Friars, the Dominicans, and the White Friars, the Carmelites. Petruchio uses this epithet when he sings, "It was the friar of orders gray / As he forth walked on his way" in *The Taming of the Shrew* (4.1.145-146). In addition to being likely clothed in grey, the second word out of Friar Laurence's mouth in *Romeo and Juliet* is "gray" (2.3.1).

and bekynge, in gurdyng our selffes wythe a gurdle full of knots, and other like Papisticall ceremonyes, wherin we haue byn moost principally practised and misselyd in tymes past: but the very tru waye to please God, and to lieu a tru Christian man, wythe oute all ypocrasie and fayned dissimulacion, is sincerely declaryd vnto bs by owre Master Christe, his Euangelists and Apostles . . . . and not to follow hensforth the supersticious tradicions of ony foryncicall potentate or peere . . . . And wythe like mutuall assent and consent doo surrender and yelde vpe into the hands of the same, all owr saide howse of Saynt Francis comenly callyd the Grey Friers in London . . . . mooste humbly besechyng his mooste noble grace to dispose of vs and of the same, as best shall stoned wythe his mooste graciouse pleasure: and further freely to grant vnto euery on of vs his licens vndre wretyng and seall, to chaunge owr habites into secular fassion, and to receve such maner of livings as other secular Priestes comenly be preferryd vnto. (Kingsford 217-18)

It appears that many friars did manage to stay active as religious figures after their order was disbanded. The Franciscan wardens Robert Knollys and John Joseph were granted permission to shed their habits and to join Hugh Latimer's team of preachers in Worcester in the mid-1530s (Rex 46). Lewis Wager, a London friar, who left his brethren in 1536, followed John Bale's lead in writing doctrinally Protestant drama (White 80-87). The Franciscan friar Edward Large was investigated and punished in 1537 for going too far in preaching against religious traditions (Rex 47). The Exeter Franciscan, John Cardmaker, was allegedly

converted when hearing Latimer preach in 1537 (Rex 48). According to Richard

Rex, "Cardmaker went on to figure as one of the leading evangelical preachers in

Edwardine London, and gave his life for his beliefs in 1555" during Mary's reign

(Rex 48). Hugh Glasier, the warden of the Greenwich Franciscans before their

dispersal, was made a prebend at Canterbury Cathedral by Thomas Cranmer in

1542 (Rex 46). Measuring the import of friars to the English Reformation in terms

of sheer numbers, Rex observes that although "there were more friars than monks

among the early English Reformers . . . there were more monks than friars in

England" (52). Rex concludes that the

> ultimate triumph of the Reformation in England certainly had
>
> something to do with the early enthusiasm for Protestant doctrines
>
> among the friars, whose participation in the political process of the
>
> Reformation was especially valuable thanks to their influence
>
> among both gentry and people, and their ability to negotiate the
>
> emerging division between popular and elite culture. (59)

Rex refers generally in this essay to all friars and not just to Franciscans alone, but

he focuses primarily on the Franciscans, whom he labels, along with the

Dominicans, as the most important friars (54).

In addition to being recruited as promoters of the Reformation,

Franciscans were also visible in sixteenth-century England as agents of the

Counter-Reformation. Friars loyal to the Queen were present from the very

beginning of the controversy surrounding Henry VIII's planned annulment of his

marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The Order was stridently against Henry's

designs. Catherine's confessor and closest advisor was the Franciscan John

Forest, whom she had sent to her from Spain, and who was eventually executed in 1538 as a result of his allegiance to her (Steck 162). Above the place where he was burned were hung these words:

> And Forest the Friar,
>
> That obstinate liar,
>
> > That willfullie shall be dead,
>
> In his contumacie
>
> The gospel doth denie,
>
> > The King to be supreme head. (Steck 163)

Under Queen Mary, the Order experienced a brief resurgence, before once again becoming the target of Protestant assault under Elizabeth I, who banished them from the realm on June 12, 1559. Although many fled the country, some joined the ranks of the English church, while still others stayed on as the servants of Pope Sixtus V, himself a former Franciscan. Stripped of their friaries, the minorites reverted to a nomadic lifestyle in Reformed England, seeking shelter wherever possible. Inevitably, some were apprehended and imprisoned. In 1572, two years after her excommunication, Elizabeth had the Friar John Storrens executed for treason (Steck 201). In 1583, Friar Thomas Ackrick was imprisoned at Hull castle (Steck 200). The Franciscan Gregory Basset was pursued in Herefordshire around the same time, but was never captured (Steck 202).

Entirely unbiased accounts from the period are not available, but the sources that are extant, when taken together, relay something of what it was like to be a friar in Shakespeare's England. For instance, although he wrote from a pro-Franciscan perspective in the early seventeenth century, the Friar Richard

Mason records in his *Certamen Seraphicum Provinciae Angliae pro Sancta Dei Ecclesia* that an elderly Franciscan had been safeguarded in the household of Roger Lockwood in Leyland parish, Lancaster. This Friar John, the "Old Beggar," was so popular a figure in the community that the Earl of Derby successfully secured permission from Elizabeth for the old man to wear his habit in public. He died in 1590 (Steck 202). Another friar, William Stanney, pursued the Franciscans' mission in England throughout most of the 1590s, but was imprisoned in 1598. He appears to have been liberated at some point thereafter and to have written a manual for lay Franciscans early in the seventeenth century (Steck 203). Yet another Friar, John Godfrey, after receiving his training at a friary in Pontoise, France, and then in Rome, was sent by Pope Clement VIII to England in 1593. Wandering under the alias Godfrey Maurice, he stayed in London, and then the countryside, before being captured and imprisoned for two years beginning in 1596. During his incarceration he was named minister provincial of the English Franciscans. The authorities investigated his prior activities in order to develop a strong case against him. They discovered that he had said mass in the home of a woman named Jane Wiseman and had taken alms from a man named Robert Barnes. Both were imprisoned and Godfrey was executed in 1598 (Steck 206-08).

There is also evidence that late sixteenth-century English authorities were sensitive to the activities of Franciscans on the Continent. They appear to have viewed them as a serious threat. One particularly vivid example of anti-Franciscan propaganda from 1580 survives in a short poem, which is accompanied by a visually complex image of two old friars. They are depicted wearing the

traditional Franciscan habit, but with the pointed hoods and beards that identified them as representatives of the newest branch of the Franciscan Order, the Capuchins. In 1528, Friar Matteo da Bascio had been granted permission by Pope Clement VII to renew the spirit of Franciscanism by following as literally as possible the example of St. Francis. From the very earliest years of the establishment of the Order of Friars Minor there had been dissent between those who wanted to follow a strict interpretation of the testament of St. Francis and those who viewed involvement in worldly affairs as essential to fulfilling his missionary example. The Order eventually split into two branches in the late thirteenth century, the Observants and the Conventuals, with the former living a more literal version of Franciscan rule. Over time, however, they too compromised this literalism for the sake of survival and influence. The Capuchins reacted to this in the early sixteenth century by stating their desire to live in tiny communities, completely bereft of material goods, at first eremetically, but then within a few years in primitive houses, from whence they travelled to preach to the poor. By the 1570s they had spread from Italy to France and beyond. The Capuchins developed the reputation of being fiery preachers who employed sensational language in order to attract large crowds (Pearl 48).

The image of the Capuchins in the fragmentary English document that survives from the period conveys just enough for the pair to be recognizable as members of the new Order, but it also undermines their spiritual identity in several disparaging ways. One of the men holds a book, a conventional sign of evangelical commitment to the word of God, but the other carries a large bag of provisions over his shoulder, as well as a basket under his cloak, in which his

hand appears to be grubbing for food. The men are rotund, despite their

commitment to poverty. In addition to being well-fed, they wear sandals when

they are supposed to be barefooted Franciscans, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, when

Friar John goes "to find a barefoot brother out, / One of our order" (5.2.5-6).[76]

Also, instead of having three knots in the cord about their waists, which signify

for Franciscans' vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, the artist has

conspicuously and perversely given them four. The poem that accompanies the

image foregrounds other anxieties about the threat the new Franciscans

represented. That they had spread to Antwerp, on the very doorstep of England, is

a matter of concern. The verse that accompanies the image is also intent upon

slandering the reputation of friars as devotees of the Gospel and beacons of

wisdom:

> These newe freshe come Friars beig sprong vp of late,
>
> do nowe within Andwarpe keepe their abidinge:
>
> Seducinge much people to their damned estate,
>
> by their newe false founde doctrine the Gospel deridinge.
>
> Saying and affirminge, which is no newe false tidinge,
>
> that all such as doe the Popes doctrine dispise:
>
> As damned soules to hell muste be ridinge.
>
> For they do condemne them with their newe found lie,
>
> Whose wisedome is folly to God and his elect.
>
> But let Sathan worke all that he can deuise,

---

[76] Quotations from *Romeo and Juliet* are taken from Dympna Callaghan's Bedford St. Martin's edition.

God it is alone which the Gospel doeth protect. (*A Newe Secte*)

Along with the centuries of Catholic anti-fraternal literature I marshalled earlier,

this English Protestant agitprop against the new branch of Franciscans suggests

that the friars were viewed by their detractors at various stages of their early

history as social adversaries worthy of focused attack.

The blended identity of Franciscans as scholarly Biblical experts and

hands-on apostolic missionaries appears to have been at least partially responsible

for their Protestant opponents' concerns. Aside from the Jesuits, who were still a

relatively small group at the time, no other religious community could claim to be

fulfilling these simultaneously monastic and pastoral aspirations. We should thus

be wary of concluding that the content of literary and propagandistic anti-

fraternalism could straightforwardly reflect the popular standing of Franciscans in

the late sixteenth century, including the theatrical reception of Friar Laurence

during the earliest stagings of *Romeo and Juliet*. Modern productions of *Romeo*

and Juliet are in part to blame for this historical distortion. As Martha Tuck

Rozett has observed, they often represent Friar Laurence as a jovially comic

character, which leads them, I would add, not to take seriously enough the

historical importance of his social identity (156). In the first productions, while

his vocational signification may have been regarded with opprobrium by many

members of the Protestant audience, even they would likely have viewed the

friar's powerful sway in the drama's Italian setting as reflecting accurately upon

the Franciscans' political, social, and spiritual influence on most of the

Continent.[77]

The Franciscan Order may have been expelled from England in the

sixteenth century, but their contribution to the English literary imagination lived

on as an echo, long after they had departed England's shores, or, to use a modern

astronomical metaphor, like a dead star, the light of which still shines for many

years after the star itself has extinguished. In *The Cambridge History of Medieval*

English Literature, Fleming describes the early trajectory of Franciscan literature:

> The Franciscan Order . . . may be seen to have pursued a 'literary'
>
> apostolate, a ministry of song and story, from the time of its
>
> origins. Francis was himself the author of several . . . lyrics or
>
> *laude*, including the celebrated "Laudes Creaturarum." His
>
> medieval biographers . . . agree in presenting him as a colourful
>
> personality who brought to his evangelism a marked mimetic strain
>
> and histrionic impulse. Francis is supposed to have called his friars
>
> 'God's minstrels' . . . a formulation that suggests at once the friars'
>
> comparative familiarity with secular lyric tradition and their
>
> willingness to engage and compete with it. (351)

Later in this chapter, I will provide a fuller account of the literary production

Franciscans would have been remembered for in early modern England.

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[77] See, for example, the Franciscans' absolutely central role during the Reformation in France, see Megan C. Armstrong's *The Politics of Piety: Franciscan Preachers During the Wars of Religion, 1560-1600*.

Franciscan Learning and Lore in Medieval and Early Modern England

These transformations began very early in Franciscan history and were accelerated as the Franciscans increasingly associated themselves with the universities. This movement defied the anti-academicism of primitive Franciscanism (Fleming *Introduction* 5). Doubtful of the commensurability of scholarly pursuits and true poverty, Francis was a self-proclaimed *simplex et idiota*. Despite their founder's reservations, however, it soon became clear that the friars' calling as preachers required that they be educated. Franciscans eventually became the most eminent scholars of the Middle Ages. The most notable were Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Thomas of Celano, John Duns Scotus, Roger Bacon, Nicholas of Lyra, and William of Ockham.

The medieval Franciscan intellectual network was international, with important centres in Italy, Spain, and France. Perhaps the most illustrious Franciscan scholar of the medieval period, Roger Bacon, honoured as *doctor mirabilis*, was English. Stationed at Oxford throughout much of the thirteenth century, he remained famous for centuries after his death, and as I will demonstrate, also during the early modern period in England. Bacon was a polyglot whose experimental studies ranged widely. He investigated herbalism, philosophy, medicine, theology, linguistics, mathematics, optics, alchemy, engines, and astrology. Several texts by him and about him surfaced in sixteenth-century England, some in Latin, others in English. In a text that may be dated to the mid-sixteenth century, *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon*, the legendary friar is resurrected as a heroic mage. We learn that he "addicted himselfe to Learning" (1) at an early age, entertained the King and Queen with magical shows

(3), "saued a Gentleman that had giuen himselfe to the Deuill" (4), "made a Brasen head to speake, by the which hee would haue walled *England* about with Brasse" (6), used his "Mathematicall Glasses" to burn the state-house of a town that the King had been besieging (11), uses Solomon-like wisdom to resolve a legal quarrel among brothers (13), overcomes the German conjurer Vandermast by making a spirit carry him back to Germany (15), deceives an old usurer (16), uses a mirror to see anything done within fifty miles (1640 text), and eventually burns his magic books in order to turn exclusively to the study of divinity.

We can be reasonably sure that this text is based on a version that is pre-1590, since Robert Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, dated to the late 1580s, borrows liberally from those stories, especially for its magical subplots. In the play's main storyline, Friar Bacon is made by Prince Edward to intercede in several meddlesome ways with the burgeoning love between Earl Lacy and Margaret, the Maid of Fressingfield. The Prince sends Lacy to procure Margaret on his behalf, but Lacy falls in love with her himself. Friar Bacon allows Prince Edward to spy on all of this in his magical glass, before disrupting the wedding himself.

Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay is generally thought to have been performed in the late 1580s, so it is plausible that Shakespeare and certain members of the audiences for *Romeo and Juliet*, staged for the first time in the mid to late 1590s, may have been familiar with the representation of this other friar, an historical Franciscan brought to life on stage as a charismatic wizard. This is not the kind of Franciscan imagined by the Order's founder, yet the legend

of Friar Bacon possibly reflected and influenced attitudes toward Franciscanism among London playgoers toward the end of the sixteenth century.

In addition to sharing with Bacon horticultural expertise, Laurence also knows about gunpowder, a topic about which Bacon wrote extensively. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, Bacon was its presumed inventor (Power 671, 674). Laurence likens Romeo's violent passion to the explosiveness of the substance: "These violent delights have violent ends / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume" (2.6.9-11). He also compares Romeo's unstable wits to the volatility of gunpowder: "Like powder in a skilless soldier's flask / Is set afire by thine own ignorance" (3.3.132-33). Romeo picks up on this habitual usage of the metaphor by his Franciscan advisor later in the play, when he defines for the Apothecary the potency of the poison he seeks: "And that the trunk may be discharg'd of breath / As violently as hasty powder fir'd / Doth hurry from the fatal cannon's womb" (5.1.63-65). Shakespeare's characterization of Friar Laurence, as well as this metaphorical conceptualization of passionate love in the play as explosive, may have been influenced by the early modern reconstitution of Friar Bacon's identity as the inventor of gunpowder.

In addition to Greene's play, there is other evidence to suggest that Friar Laurence's characterization is bolstered by his association with the historical Friar Bacon. Several texts authored by the medieval friar-scholar circulated anew in sixteenth-century England. One of these is of particular interest when approaching Friar Laurence's self-definition as an avid collector of plant matter. Printed in 1550, one of the texts worth examining is advertised as a manual on extracting healing essences from plants: "*This boke doth create all of the beste waters*

artyfycialles and the vertues and properties of the same, moche profytable for the poore sycke, set forth, by syr Roger Becon Freere" (1). Accompanying these words on the first page of the edition is an image of a studious Franciscan surrounded by academic buildings, presumably Friar Bacon at Oxford. The book's preamble combines physical and spiritual goals. Bacon states that he has written his treatise out of "a godly dysposicion" to help "euery persone beynge diseased" so that each

> may the soner fynde remedy to be cured and heled of all bodely
>
> infyrmityes and syckenesses trustynge than that al those in this
>
> wyse recoueryng theyr helth shall purchase such force and strength
>
> spiritual that they shal daylye augmente theyr meryte and vertue to
>
> the laude & prayse of God, where thorowe at theyr departynge
>
> theyr soules may be excepte to be of the nombre of those yt shalbe
>
> saued. (2)

He wants to cure the sick, so that they may be healthy enough to praise God, so that when they die, they will find salvation. He goes on to describe the medicinal uses of rosemary, red roses, betayne, plantayne, lettuce, endive, fumitory, balme, elder, buglose, garlic, red sods, archangel, harte's tonge, chicory, parsley root, fennel, hyssop, sage, latyn inchium, malous, scabyoule, saxifrage, mint, radish, purselane, howselyke, bursa pastoris, and lilies. Friar Laurence's catalogue of organic matter in his opening speech is less detailed, but he is as intent as Bacon

upon harvesting a variety of plants in order to extract and concentrate each of their essences.[78]

Yet, as opposed to Bacon, who describes the specific health benefits of the waters derived from these plants with unwavering confidence, Laurence's speech on herbs stresses that the essence of plants may both harm and heal. He speaks of filling up his basket with "baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers" (2.3.8). The extractions from these plants are sucked as though from mother earth's "natural bosom," "Many for many virtues excellent, / None but for some, and yet all different" (2.3.12, 13-14). Near the end of the play, Laurence describes his concoction of a sleeping potion, a "distilling liquor," described for Juliet as an activity "so tutor'd by my art" (4.1.94, 5.3.243). What from a modern perspective may at first seem to be a strange adjunct to Franciscan identity, an obsession with herbs, ends up making important sense within the context of Friar Bacon's centuries-old reputation as an herbal authority. The idea that the bounty of nature may be put to a variety of uses is also voiced in *The Famous Historie of Friar Bacon*, in which Bacon is quoted as saying: "I likewise have found out the secrets of Trees, Plants, and Stones, with their severall uses" (42).[79] Laurence repeats this tenet of Franciscan natural philosophy: "None but for some, and yet all different. / O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies / In plants, herbs, stones, and their true

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[78] For more on the tradition of attributing to St. Francis wisdom about the created world see Roger D. Sorrell's *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment*.

[79] See also the 1597 book *The mirror of alchemy composed by the thrice-famous and learned fryer, Roger Bachon, sometimes fellow of Martin Colledge: and afterwards of Brasen-nose Colledge in Oxenforde. Also a most excellent and learned discourse of the admirable force and efficacie of art and nature*.

qualities" (2.3.14-16). In both passages nature is imagined by a Franciscan as a repository of mysterious substances that may be put to the service of humans.

Laurence then expands upon this idea in his monologue, transforming the many positive uses of nature the medieval Bacon observes into the idea that nature is at best an ambivalent ally in combating the frailties of the human body:

> nought so vile that on the earth doth live
>
> But to the earth some special good doth give;
>
> Nor aught so good but, strain'd from that fair use,
>
> Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse. (2.3.17-20)

Friar Laurence borrows from Franciscan lore, but problematizes the older material in order to reflect the pluralisation and relativization of beliefs about the physical and spiritual worlds that had transpired in the intervening years since Bacon's medieval Franciscanism.

As Bacon does when he synthesizes physical and spiritual healthfulness, Laurence too sees the organic as relatable to the soul, but instead of imagining all plants as beneficial and thus spiritually redemptive, Laurence articulates an indefinite construal of the purposes of natural substances. He labels them as both helpful and harmful, in a way that ends up metaphorically complicating the position of Protestant salvation theology on grace as opposed to will:

> Within the infant rind of this weak flower
>
> Poison hath residence and medicine power;
>
> For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part,
>
> Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
>
> Two such opposed kings encamp them still

In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will;

And where the worser is predominant,

Full soon the canker death eats up that plant. (2.3.23-30)

One way to read this speech is by answering its call to think through what is "In man as well as herbs" and what the relationship is between those and "grace and rude will". Grace could be likened to the odour that emanates from a flower and rude will to the act of eating the flower's "rind". Protestant redemption is thus defined as a passive absorption of a smell "that cheers each part," while Catholic wilfulness is conceptualized as a swallowing activeness "that stays all sense with the heart". There is possibly, therefore, no point in actively attempting to control one's health by orally imbibing medicine, since the passive olfactory reception of grace alone should be sufficient. Bacon's coherent idea that one may ingest the healthy effects of many beneficial plants in order to have a sound body that may also then, as he had put it centuries before, "daylye augmente . . . meryte and vertue," is not so clearly articulated in Laurence's natural philosophical observations.

Yet while it may seem as though Laurence communicates a perfectly orthodox Protestant take on the superiority of grace over will, Laurence undercuts the doctrine of grace several times in his speech. He refers to the power of "grace" as "mickle," which could signify as numerous and great, but which was also a word commonly associated with the devil. The *OED* cites the word with Satanic connotation in many texts before the late sixteenth century: "Ðis deuel is mikel wið wil & maȝt" (c1300); "I say sayde the skotyshman, the mokyl deuill, is this a bare head?" (1540); "Solyman, Tamerlan, nor yit the mekle Deill . . . was neuer sa

wickit" (1572); "The meikill deuill gang with ȝow" (1586). In stating that "mickle is the powerful grace that lies" in nature, Laurence implicitly expresses that divine grace is bedevillingly potent. Moreover, his thinking about grace and rude will being like two opposed kings facing off against each other on a battlefield is also troublesome, for while he states that where the "worser is predominant" the "canker death eats up," Laurence does not clearly specify which is worse, grace or will.

Laurence thus possibly sits on the fence between Catholic and Protestant understandings of salvation, between his Franciscanism as Catholic or proto-Protestant. This passage is a theological blueprint of Laurence's vexed beliefs as a Franciscan. His speech is evocative of a multiplicity of possible interpretations. On the one hand, he desires to be a simple and plainspoken Franciscan, modelled upon his founder. He says to Romeo, for instance, "Be plain, good son, and homely in thy drift. / Riddling confession finds but riddling shrift" (2.3.55-56). On the other hand, Laurence's theology is indeed puzzling, as when he equivocates that "Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, / And vice sometime by action dignified" (2.3.21-22). The choices he makes as the play develops are based in the soteriological and moral uncertainties developed in this speech, which blends a vertiginous plurality of competing possibilities. The question of where exactly Laurence's spiritual commitment lies will grow as an issue in the play, particularly as his interventions in Romeo and Juliet's passionate love and marriage become more pronounced.

Recovering Petrarch's Franciscanism in *Romeo and Juliet*

Another way that *Romeo and Juliet* participated in the pan-European Franciscan cultural network is discernable in the way it reinvigorated the Franciscan elements of Petrarchan convention, a poetic reemphasis, which in the lyricism of this play at least, partially rescued late sixteenth-century English Petrarchanism from the reputation it had acquired as a collection of stale poetic figurations. There is plenty of evidence indicating that Francesco Petrarch had regular contact with the intellectual and material life of the Franciscan order, and that he was profoundly inspired by them. In addition to sharing a first name with the saint, Petrarch claimed in his *De otio religioso* that for him, there was "no man more distinguished than Francis" (74, 80). Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle notes that Petrarch at times likened himself to a "mendicant," appropriating "to himself the epithet of St. Francis, *poverello*, while he graced his beloved with the epithet of St. Clare, *poverella*," the young woman who became established as Francis' feminine counterpart while he was still living and the founder of the Order of the Poor Clares (126). Boyle goes on to describe how Francis modelled for Petrarch a worshipful approach to creation that transcended the medieval tradition of *contemptus mundi*:

> Francis's perspective on creation inspired an influential theology
> of the personal experience of God, especially through affective
> meditation on the incarnation of the babe in the crèche and the man
> on the cross, but also through intellectual perception of his vestiges
> in the universe and his image impressed on natural human powers
> as transformed by grace. (126)

This attitude is also extended to Petrarch's idealization of Laura's beauty. In his *Secretum*, Petrarch has Augustinus accuse himself, Franciscus, of allowing Laura to distract him "from love of the Creator to love of one of the creatures" (63). Franciscus replies, however, that "loving her has increased my love of God" (63). For Augustinus this goes against "the right order of things," but Francis argues that he has not "loved her body more than her soul," for the "bloom of her youth has faded with the passage of time, but the beauty of her mind—which made me love her in the first place and afterwards continue to love—has increased" (63). As Boyle explains,

> the intensely affective piety that engendered nominalist
> reservations about the cognitive faculty also promoted an
> emotional, spontaneous Franciscan poetry that [Petrarch] could
> approve. An effusion celebrated the saint's memory: metrical
> biographies, liturgical sequences and anthems, lyrics of religious
> love, praises and songs, allegories and homilies in verse. (127)

Moreover, Petrarch tells us that he met Laura for the first time, of all places, in the church of St. Clare in Avignon, on April 6th, 1327 (Boyle 139, 142). As evidenced in *Measure for Measure*, a play in which the character Isabella struggles to enter the Order of St. Clare and Vincentio disguises himself as a friar, Shakespeare appears to be aware of the male and the female branches of Franciscanism.

That Francis and Clare strengthened their spiritual intimacy by staying at a physical remove from one another imparts to Petrarch's own remote adoration of Laura a different significance from the one that his separateness from her came to signify for later generations of Petrarchan imitators in England. The popular

reception and formal transformation of Petrarchism in early modern England

gradually stripped the genre of the Franciscan attributes that equated physical

remoteness with spiritual connectedness. Detachment from a cold and distant lady

may have enflamed the heart of the sixteenth-century English sonneteers, but that

did not mean that a close spiritual bond was formed between lover and beloved.[80]

The glorification of the beloved for the purpose of self-aggrandizement is at the

root of the late sixteenth-century critique of Petrarchism in England. Shakespeare

appears to have been keenly aware of the decline of this poetic mode, challenging

it through reinvention both in his sonnets and plays. Even the most sophisticated

English sonnets are generally uninterested in prioritizing the exploration of the

divine soul of the beloved. The strong Franciscan associations at work in

Petrarch's *rime sparse* are largely absent from Philip Sidney's sonnets, for

example, which are instead more intent upon enhancing the dazzling technical

effects of Petrarch's love poetry in his English context. I argue that the cultural

translation of Petrarchism was achieved at the expense of the Franciscan

spiritualism that suffuses the original Italian poems.

By the time that Mercutio is mocking Romeo for his immersion in

Petrarchan eroticism on the late sixteenth-century stage, the English sonnets

inspired by Petrarch had lost much of their cultural standing. Punning upon

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[80] Feminine spirituality, which had been a crucial aspect of Petrarch's adoration of Laura, had become superfluous to the Petrarchan equation in late sixteenth-century England. Orsino's Petrarchism in *Twelfth Night* exemplifies this self-interested practice. See Jami Ake, who demonstrates how "Orsino's particularly languid Petrarchanism is . . . fraught with its own (masculine) narcissistic desires and conventions that inscribe its social uses in solidifying male homosocial bonds" (389).

Romeo's name, Mercutio refers to his companion's emulation of Petrarch as something that leaves him alone and erotically spent, so that like a fish deprived of its roe, Romeo is deprived of his *ro* and is left with the solipsistic lament *me o*.

> Without his roe, like a dried herring. O flesh,
>
> flesh, how art thou fishified! Now is he for the num-
>
> bers that Petrarch flow'd in. Laura to his lady was a
>
> kitchen wench (marry, she had a better love to
>
> berhyme her . . . . (2.4.37-41)

Petrarch himself is not debased here, only Romeo's vapid replication of his poetic "numbers." In fact, Petrarch is alluded to by Mercutio as a much better lover than Romeo.

Petrarch's poetry is acknowledged as superior to the stale Petrarchisms mouthed by Romeo early in the play:

> Why, then, O brawling love! O loving hate!
>
> O any thing, of nothing first [create]!
>
> O heavy lightness! serious vanity!
>
> Misshapen chaos of well[-seeming] forms!
>
> Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
>
> Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is!
>
> This love feel I, that feel no love in this.
>
> Dost thou not laugh? (1.1.176-83)

Both Romeo and Petrarch may house their beloveds in rhymes, but Romeo is deficient because he does not, as Petrarch did, love spiritually, but only

superficially. Mercutio imagines that Romeo's infatuation with women is self-driven narcissism, an immature eroticism driven by an infection of melancholy.

Friar Laurence also accuses Romeo of self-delusion, questioning his sudden declaration of love for Juliet, a fascination that comes so soon on the heels of his obsession with Rosaline:

> Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here!
>
> Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear,
>
> So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies
>
> Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.
>
> Jesu Maria, what a deal of brine
>
> Hath wash'd thy sallow cheeks for Rosaline!
>
> How much salt water thrown away in waste,
>
> To season love, that of it doth not taste!
>
> The sun not yet thy sighs from heaven clears,
>
> Thy old groans ring yet in my ancient ears;
>
> Lo here upon thy cheek the stain doth sit
>
> Of an old tear that is not wash'd off yet (2.3.65-76)

Laurence reproves Romeo for his wavering by first invoking St. Francis. The friar accuses Romeo of merely following to the letter the standard conventions of love making, including sighs and groans, while remaining ignorant of the deeper meanings of love. Romeo has only a semi-literate awareness of the cultural tradition that his love rests upon and it shows: "O, she knew well / Thy love did read by rote that could not spell" (2.3.87-88). In another sense, Romeo's inability to spell implies an incapacity to enchant, as in *Henry VI 1*, when York says to

Joan: "Unchain your spirits now with spelling charms" (5.3.31). In yet another sense, Romeo is accused of profound cultural ignorance. He is a failed *cortegiano*. Although he cannot know that he is literally speaking English, his Petrarchism is figuratively Englished early in the play, for it has been reduced to a series of stale commonplaces, devoid of original Italian religious feeling. The Friar implicitly expresses the need to re-infuse that dead Petrarchism with the Franciscan spirituality that at first animated Petrarch's declarations of love. At this stage of the play, Romeo is unable to connect with one of the foundational inspirations of Petrarchanism, the Franciscan idealization of ineffable spiritual love as represented through erotic figuration. Friar Laurence seeks to rectify this. He follows up his recriminations of Romeo's amorous variability with a promise that his new love for Juliet will be put to the Christian service of Verona at large: "In one respect I'll thy assistant be; / For this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households' rancor to pure love" (2.3.90-93). Many crucial moments in the rest of the play are likewise concerned with reinvigorating dead English Petrarchanism with Petrarch's Franciscan spiritual idealism.

Inasmuch as standard Petrarchisms abound in *Romeo and Juliet*, they are presented critically in the contexts in which they occur, especially early in the play, before then gradually being imbued with the kind of radical Franciscan expressiveness that served as the spiritual foundation of Francesco Petrarch's poetry. When initially describing his love for Rosaline to Benvolio, Romeo uses stock comparisons and hyperboles from the sonnet tradition:

> Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs,
>
> Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes,

Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears.

What is it else? A madness most discreet,

A choking gall, and a preserving sweet. (1.1.190-94)

Romeo does not lack the technical vocabulary required to be a formal sonneteer, but he does struggle to enliven his language with spiritual vitality. He senses that his understanding of love is incomplete—"What is it else?"—and that furthermore his conception of it is stagnant, "A choking gall and a preserving sweet." If gall here is not only a reference to bile, but also an allusion to oak-gall, required in the manufacture of ink, then Romeo's eloquence is what is here throttled, both on the page as a writer, whom we have heard often "pens himself," and in his throat as a speaker whose words do not come as easily as he wants them to (1.1.138). As Sir Toby says to Sir Andrew in *Twelfth Night*, with erotic subtext, "Let / there be gall enough in thy ink" (3.2.48-49). Romeo's solitary amorousness is sweet to him, preserving him as it does, but it also locks him in an "artificial night," in the sense that he is kept in darkness, but also in the sense that he is possibly an ersatz knight, a Petrarchan love-warrior, or a fake chivalric figure imaginatively roaming through the literary fantasy world of courtly medieval romance, passionately devoted to an unattainable lady.

Particularly at the beginning of the play, Romeo employs vapid Petrarchisms to describe his attraction to Rosaline. He defines her as a hard, distant, and tyrannous woman:

she'll not be hit

With Cupid's arrow, she hath Dian's wit;

And in strong proof of chastity well arm'd,

From Love's weak childish bow she lives uncharm'd. (1.1.208-11)

In Romeo's estimation, she is a remote saint, simultaneously rejecting both worldly wealth and sexual procreation: "Nor ope her lap to saint-seducing gold / O, she is rich in beauty, only poor / That, when she dies, with beauty dies her store" (1.1.214-16). Furthermore, in response to Benvolio's question, "Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste?", Romeo replies that she "hath, and in that sparing makes huge waste" (1.1.217-18). It is not made clear whether or not Rosaline's celibacy is the result of a decision to become a nun, but implicit in Romeo's interpretation of her chastity is a critique of the vows that would remove her from his libidinal orbit:

> She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair,
>
> To merit bliss by making me despair.
>
> She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow
>
> Do I live dead that live to tell it now. (1.1.221-24)

According to Romeo's logic, because she is richly endowed with wisdom and beauty, Rosaline must not try to earn heavenly rewards by making herself erotically unavailable for reproduction on earth. On the one hand, this echoes the standard Protestant disapproval of celibacy. On the other hand, Rosaline is indeed wise, for she sees through to the spiritual vacancy at the core of Romeo's late English Petrarchanism. Before heading to the Capulet masque, Benvolio assures Romeo that compared to the beauties he will meet there, Rosaline "shall scant show well that now seems best" (1.2.99). Romeo replies that he will grudgingly attend, but believes that there is no "such sight to be shown" and that he will instead "rejoice in splendor of mine own," referring superficially to Rosaline's

imagined resplendence, but more significantly to his poetic celebration of the weak radiance of a solipsistic male love that has almost nothing to do with the female beloved (1.2.100-01).

Of course, by the end of the play, Romeo's understanding of love has been utterly transformed. He evolves from using "love's weak childish bow" on Rosaline to becoming in his relationship with Juliet the very model of love for hundreds of years of lovers in the Western world and beyond (1.1.211). Much of Romeo's alteration must be attributed to Friar Laurence's influence, whose interventions prompt Romeo's conversion, but there is also a more general diffusion of Franciscan idealism that makes its way into the language of Romeo, and of Juliet as well. Friar Laurence has been aware of Romeo's amorous shallowness, suggesting repeatedly that Romeo amend his flawed perspective on love.

Across medieval and early modern Catholic Europe, Franciscans regularly advised the social elite and served as their children's tutors. Romeo's father does not refer explicitly to the friar when concluding that Romeo needs counselling early in the play, but his inability to deal with Romeo's disordered psyche may be contrasted with the intimate advisory role Friar Laurence performs for Romeo. Referring to his son's condition, Montague states that "Black and portentous must this humour prove, / Unless good counsel may the cause remove" (1.1.141-42). When asked by Benvolio if he knows the cause, he replies "I neither know it, nor can learn of him" (144). Aside from Romeo's peers, who generally taunt him instead of listening to him, Romeo defers most often to Friar Laurence's opinions about love. Strange though it may seem, it is appropriate that Romeo makes

recourse to a Friar's advice about love, particularly once the influence of Franciscanism on Petrarch is taken into account. The following exchange is revealing:

> *Rom*. Thou chidst me oft for loving Rosaline.
>
> *Fri. L*. For doting, not for loving, pupil mine.
>
> *Rom*. And badst me bury love.
>
> *Fri. L*.   Not in a grave,
>
> To lay one in, another out to have. (2.3.81-84)

Laurence upbraids Romeo for his lack of constancy in love. Romeo playfully suggests that he has done precisely what Laurence counselled in redirecting his love toward Juliet and away from Rosaline. His love for Rosaline is now buried. Laurence corrects Romeo's literalism, explaining that there would have been nothing wrong with loving Rosaline, but that Romeo's foolish infatuation with her was not love. What is worse, Laurence suspects that Romeo has merely buried one erotic obsession in order to uncover another. In a powerfully and ominously figurative sense, the friar's words also anticipate how his radical Franciscan intervention will lead him later to entomb Juliet in order that she may be raised again, resurrected: "To lay one in, another out to have." I will return to this later in the chapter, but the friar is clearly willing to go to great lengths to communicate his own particular understanding of love to Romeo.

Romeo tends to respect the friar's teachings, although he initially expresses that receptivity in light-hearted ways, before later in the play desperately seeking the friar's advice: "Hence will I to my ghostly [sire's] close cell, / His help to crave, and my dear hap to tell" (2.2.188-89). Even when not in

the Friar's company, Romeo shows traces of having been subject to Laurence's Franciscan tutelage. In response, for instance, to Benvolio's sententious speech on how suffering may be cured with yet more pain, "Take thou some new infection to thy eye, / And the rank poison of the old will die," Romeo retorts flatly that for broken skin, such as that caused by Cupid's arrows, "plantain leaf is excellent," thereby invoking the herbal learning he may have picked up from Friar Laurence (1.2.49-50, 51). So at the very moment that Benvolio develops a medical metaphor for Romeo's psychology that would have him replicate his current erotic patterns, "Turn giddy, and be holp by backward turning," Romeo is put in mind of a natural Franciscan remedy for damaged skin, one that his spiritual mentor Friar Laurence might recommend (1.2.47).

Romeo also displays the influence that Friar Laurence has had on his poetic expressiveness by communicating his love for Rosaline and then for Juliet in explicitly religious terms, although superficially in the case of the former and more profoundly in the case of the latter. Before Romeo has met Juliet, Benvolio encourages him to compare Rosaline to other "admired beauties of Verona" (1.2.84). Romeo responds by swearing that his devotion to Rosaline is religious and that he should be burned alive as a heretic should he betray that love:

> When the devout religion of mine eye
>
> Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to [fires];
>
> And these, who often drown'd could never die,
>
> Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars!
>
> One fairer than my love? The all-seeing sun
>
> Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun. (1.2.88-93)

If Romeo's eyes turn away from Rosaline, their proper object of worship, they must be burned alive as heretics, whose guilt is plain and clear, or "transparent" as Romeo says. In addition to signifying in this relatively straightforward manner, however, the word "transparent" could also refer to something that emanates illumination, which has "the property of transmitting light, so as to render bodies lying beyond completely visible" (*OED*). To pair this meaning with what Romeo says about his own hypothetically burning heretical eyes is meaningful for several reasons.

First, according to the emission theory of vision in the period, eyes were able to see because they projected light that mingled with other light sources, so that the flamboyantly false eyes proposed by Romeo for himself as punishment for transparent falsehood might also be transparent in the sense of increasing the trueness of his vision. The standard punishment for heretics that Romeo proposes for himself should he transfer the "devout religion" of his eye to a new beloved is ironically prophetic. The reading becomes retrospectively accurate once the sincerity of Romeo and Juliet's love is fully established. Romeo unknowingly presages that he will forswear himself once he sees Juliet for the first time: "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (1.5.52-53). Juliet's brightness thus ignites heretical fires in Romeo's eyes: "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!" (1.5.44). And although he claims with regard to Rosaline that "The all-seeing sun / Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun," once Romeo has met Juliet, he displaces this appraisal by remarking simply that "Juliet is the sun" (2.2.3). Romeo's idea that abandoning Rosaline makes him into a heretic is only hyperbole, but his subsequent

deification of Juliet actually borders on heresy. Romeo does not hesitate to use Juliet as a surrogate for the sun, as a new source of light who can channel the sacred, thus bypassing the sun altogether. Romeo's equation of Juliet with the sun and with divinity is tantamount to heresy. Romeo goes beyond connecting with Juliet's spirit. He begins to idolize her in ways that should properly be reserved for God, thus going far beyond merely re-infusing Anglo-Petrarchan conventionality with Franciscan spiritual energies.

In addition to calling her the sun, Romeo also likens her eyes to other celestial lights, wondering what would happen if her eyes were exchanged with stars. What if

> Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
>
> Having some business, [do] entreat her eyes
>
> To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
>
> What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
>
> The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
>
> As daylight doth a lamp; her [eyes] in heaven
>
> Would through the airy region stream so bright
>
> That birds would sing and think it were not night. (2.2.15-22)

One of the effects of this exchange would be the disruption of the natural order. Birds would not be able to tell the night from the day. More importantly, Juliet's remaining facial features would still outshine the stars, presumably because she is the sun and her eyes only need to borrow some of her light to fulfill this imaginary celestial duty.

Juliet likewise deifies Romeo, imagining him as so many stars in the heavens:

> Give me my Romeo, and, when I shall die,
>
> Take him and cut him out in little stars,
>
> And he will make the face of heaven so fine
>
> That all the world will be in love with night
>
> And pay no worship to the garish sun. (3.2.21-25)

Because the verb to die could also mean to climax sexually, this speech may, of course, be read as containing erotic overtones. An orgasmic Juliet would not only observe Romeo exploding into a mystical celestial combination with the limitless night sky, but the light that would glow from those stars will challenge the sun as the ultimate sacred presence in the heavens. People would "worship" the new brightness of night, bedecked as it is in Juliet's vision with a scattering of incandescent bits of Romeo's former self. The prologue's "pair of star-cross'd lovers" are thus juxtaposed in ill-fated ways not only because of the overlapping of their respective stars, but because in cohabiting as they do the same sky in their mutually construed placement of each other in the celestial firmament, their combined brilliance defies the singular preeminent divinity of the sun (6).

There is other evidence strewn throughout the play to support the possibility that far from just being a beneficial Franciscan spiritual improvement of decaying Anglo-Petrarchan conventionality, the idealization of love between Romeo and Juliet could be a form of idolatry. Juliet asks Romeo to swear by his own "gracious self," which "is the god" of her "idolatry" (2.2.13,14). The confusion over the extent to which married love can act as a catalyst for divine

love is evident when Juliet attributes to her love of Romeo infinite qualities: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite" (2.2.133-35). When she says to Romeo that she desires to marry him, she alludes to the wealthy man who asks Christ what he needs to do to be admitted to paradise. He is told that he must donate all of his possessions to the poor and follow Christ:

> If that thy bent of love be honorable,
>
> Thy purpose marriage, send me word to-morrow,
>
> By one that I'll procure to come to thee,
>
> Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite,
>
> And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay,
>
> And follow thee my lord throughout the world. (2.2.142-47)

Romeo becomes for Juliet the culmination of her spiritual existence. When the Nurse attempts to report to Juliet that Tybalt is dead, Juliet mistakes her, thinks that she means Romeo has perished, and says, "Can heaven be so envious?" (3.2.39). There is a competition inherent in this statement, about whether absolute love belongs to heaven or to earth. Heaven sounds as though it is jealous of the potency of the couple's married earthly love, so it divides the lovers, keeping one of them in paradise. By the end of the play it appears that one is not enough for heaven. Both must die, their earthly love sublimated into an otherworldly spiritual ecstasy.

Romeo and Juliet begin to exceed Petrarch's spiritually Franciscan construal of love from the very first moment that they meet. Romeo's idolatrous estimation of Juliet is discernable when they speak to each other for the first time.

The joint sonnet they compose in their initial exchange of words makes Juliet into

an active spiritual participant, instead of into the feminine object of traditional

Petrarchan sonneteering. Juliet's participation is radical, but Romeo is the first to

speak. He establishes the metaphor that will serve as the vehicle for Juliet's

identity in this shared poem. She is to be contained in the poem as a "holy shrine"

(1.5.94). Romeo's initial move is poetically conventional insofar as he attempts to

locate Juliet in a sacred space, beyond the range of day to day experience. In this

moment, he has travelled to her as a pilgrim to a holy site. Juliet is positioned in a

hallowed location, more specifically as a religious work of art, most likely based

on what he says, a statue. She serves as the focus of Romeo's pilgrimage. Yet as

opposed to keeping her at an entirely inaccessible distance from himself, as

Petrarch does with Laura, Romeo has voyaged close enough to Juliet to take hold

of her hand, yet he does so by employing a religious frame of reference. He

claims that whatever "profane" contamination he introduces in the process can be

smoothed away by touching her even more intimately, with his lips, "two

blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss"

(1.5.93,95-96). Juliet completes his thought by explaining to Romeo that his hand

is not sinful, for it shows "mannerly devotion" to her hand, just as pilgrims' hands

are worshipful when they touch the hands of religious statuary, "palm to palm is

holy palmers' kiss" (1.5.98,100). From there, Romeo pursues the metaphor,

noting that saints have lips that may kiss, to which Juliet responds by claiming

that lips are for prayer, to which Romeo replies by indicating that lips may be

joined together as hands are in prayer, to which Juliet says that a statue of a saint

cannot move, but may grant prayers. Romeo then kisses her, his prayer thus

answered, stating with his next breath that the sin of his physical transgression upon Juliet's metaphorical sanctity was simultaneously absolved by the kiss. He ironically communes as a pilgrim with his saint by trespassing erotically upon the sanctity of the saint, Juliet.

Romeo's positioning of Juliet in this sonnet is informed by Franciscanism. Like Petrarch, who seems to have made Laura into a kind of Clare, Romeo may be seen to make Juliet into a version of Clare as well. In a certain very limited sense, it is possible that the parallels between the biographies of Clare and Juliet are significant, if only because they each in their own way resist the dominant patriarchal norms of female erotic containment. Clare, like Juliet, was instructed by her father to marry a wealthy young man when she was very young, only fifteen years old. Clare managed to delay the marriage, then one day heard Francis preach, and shortly thereafter, on a Palm Sunday, fled her home to become one of Francis' followers. That Juliet invokes Palm Sunday on the day she first falls for Romeo, by punning upon the palms of hands, which when joined "palm to palm" are "holy palmers' kiss," could associate her with Clare's flight from her family's authority on Palm Sunday. Like Clare, who on that particular day leaves her family commitments to devote herself to Francis, Juliet forsakes her family's plans for her and commits herself to a man not of her father's choosing.[81] As

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[81] Clare's spiritual devotion to Francis lasted the rest of her life. Because she was a woman, Francis placed Clare in a series of convents and churches, thus enclosing her, but also singling her out as having been chosen by God to lead the feminine branch of his order. She was named by him abbess of San Damiano, and then prioress, but was not allowed by Francis to observe the semi-itinerant model of Franciscan life that he encouraged among his male followers. Francis and Clare shared an extremely intimate soulful relationship, one mostly maintained through correspondence, although Clare tended personally to Francis at the very end of his life.

Petrarch fashioned himself as another Francis by imagining Laura as another

Clare, Romeo becomes an *alter Santa Francsicus* and Juliet an *alter Santa Clara*.

Romeo's conceptualization of Juliet in their shared sonnet, as a woman

anchored to a site of religious pilgrimage, is not conventionally Anglo-Petrarchan,

but is a retrieval of the partnership shared by Francis and Clare, in which Clare is

not entirely equal with him, but certainly has more agency than an Anglo-

Petrarchan lady. This historical spiritual relationship, imagined by Petrarch as a

template for himself and Laura, serves also as a different model for Romeo and

Juliet's love than the one found in late-Petrarchan English poetry. Although he

was subject to Anglo-Petrarchan habits before, Romeo rejects them once he meets

Juliet, resorting instead to a more Franciscan spiritual understanding of love, one

more in keeping with Petrarch's original poetic vision. Juliet is not cruel and

distant, but is instead receptive, accessible, and devoted, although, like Clare, her

mobility is limited, for she is both figuratively stationed as a site of religious

pilgrimage, and except for her visits to Friar Laurence, also literally enclosed

within the Capulet estate. The gender stratification that is so pronounced in

Anglo-Petrarchanism, in which the individuated value of the lady described is

generally unimportant, is largely departed from in Romeo and Juliet's sonnet.

They are much more like Francis and Clare than they are like the myriad late

Renaissance male sonneteers and their unattainable women.

The sonnets at the beginning of Act I and of Act II each convey the

potential inadequacy of traditional sonnet form. In the prologue at the beginning

of the play, the chorus narrates what is to come, before indicating that the sonnet

is not quite up to the task of doing so: "What here shall miss, our toil shall strive

to mend" (14). For the real story about these "lovers," the embodied

theatricalization that is to come, is what is required. In the chorus that begins Act

II, there is a clear distinction made between old love and new love (6). The old

love is defined by Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline, "old desire," and the new

love, "young affection," is connected to Juliet. Romeo may not "breathe such

vows as lovers use to swear" (1,2). Instead, "passion lends them power," thus

deploying what at the time was a religiously charged word, generally meant to

evoke the violent sufferings of Christ, but which in this case contributes to the

emerging cultural notion that love is somehow more intense when difficult and

painful (13). Something has changed in the amatory landscape of late sixteenth-

century England and the play communicates an awareness of that reality in a

variety of ways that implicate religion, including the Franciscan reaching after

ecstasy and its relevance to the post-Reformation's emergent secularizing

matrimonial ideals.

Friars, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Trajectory of Love in Western Europe

  The amatory transformations that *Romeo and Juliet* contains did not

appear out of nowhere, but were in continuity with the history of love in the West.

Denis De Rougemont has remarked that love was revolutionized by the

troubadours of southern France several centuries earlier, in the twelfth and

thirteenth centuries, at the same time that Francis and his first followers were also

roaming the countryside, extolling their burning love for God. Throughout the

thirteenth century, the "Franciscan mystics" shared "courtly terminology" with

the French troubadours (158). Saint Francis reputedly "delighted in French tales

of chivalry" (158). After beginning his ministry by stripping naked in the main square of Assisi, he "fled into the countryside declaiming verses in French in a loud voice" (158). De Rougement affirms that Francis, recalling "the French romances he had read, . . . made Poverty his 'Lady', and deemed it an honour to be her 'knight'. The Franciscan wandering knights spread over Italy as the troubadours had spread over the South of France. They were to be met with on the roads and in market places, and from village to castle" (158). De Rougemont goes on to contend more specifically that the

> poems of Jacopone da Todi—'God's jongleur'—the lauds of his imitators, the letters of Saint Catherine of Siena, the Book of the Blessed Angela di Foligno, and the many tales of the Fioretti, show that the rhetoric of the troubadours and of the courtly romances was the direct inspiration of the Franciscan poetic impulse, which in turn deeply influenced the mystical vocabulary of subsequent centuries. (158)

It seems then that over the course of the next four centuries, the exchanges between the traditions of courtly and mystical love intensified, with romance borrowing from mysticism and the mystics employing the erotic language of romance. The nature of married love was not, as it is now, at the center of these intensely poetic deliberations on the nature of love in its most extreme worldly and divine manifestations. After the Reformation, however, once love in marriage was made over into an idealized spiritual locus by Luther, Calvin, and others, the ready-made affiliations between courtly and divine love, which had developed

over hundreds of years, could be recuperated in a play like *Romeo and Juliet* in order to make sense of English Protestantism's aspirations for married love.

The history of Franciscan culture serves in *Romeo and Juliet* as one of the means by which married love is summoned as a religious ideal for Protestants. Franciscans were among the earliest producers of love poetry in England. Their poems frequently blurred the boundaries between erotic and spiritual love. In *The Early English Lyric & Franciscan Spirituality*, David L. Jeffrey makes a convincing case for the importance of the Franciscan influence on early vernacular poetry in England. He demonstrates "substantial connections between the theology and methodology of the Order of Friars Minor and the form and content of extant Middle English lyrics, and subsequently . . . show[s] ways in which an understanding of the nature of this connection can illuminate the style, content, and performance context of these poems" (9). He goes on to suggest "that any definitive history of this body of English poetry will need to fully engage the phenomenon of Franciscan spirituality, an influence which more than any other factor has decisively shaped early English lyric development" (9). Jeffrey, moreover, goes on to conclude that while "the character of the Franciscan approach is distinctive in its own time, it agrees remarkably with the stylistic directions of English lyric poetry for many generations after the early Franciscan poets had ceased to write" (9). It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to trace precisely how this influence worked its way down to Shakespeare's practice of late sixteenth-century playwriting, but Jeffrey's book describes in meticulous

detail how much of the vernacular poetry of medieval England contains many of the tropes employed by Franciscans to express the meaning of love.[82]

In his comprehensive study of European Franciscan textual history, Bert Roest offers a similar assessment of the importance of Franciscanism in medieval England. He claims that "the English Friars' output of both Latin and vernacular lyrical poetry" was "impressive" and that "on the whole was didactic and catechistic in nature" and could be "roughly be divided into 'laudario-type' poems (such as carols and other songs of praise and penitence), and lyrics of religious instruction connected with the preaching of the friars" (289). According to Roest, "both categories are represented with significant overlap in a large number of miscellaneous manuscripts, showing the fecundity of Franciscan initiatives in these matters" (290). He concludes that "an 'astonishing' four-fifths of the extant manuscripts containing English lyric poetry from 1225 to 1350 would have been of Franciscan provenance" (289-90).

One of the most important Franciscan poems Roest identifies in this period is the *Luue Ron*, composed by the friar Thomas of Hales from Worcestershire, for a group of female religious aristocrats. Sanctioned to preach by the University of Paris in the early thirteenth century, this friar-poet was stationed among the Franciscans in London. These mendicants were closely connected with the court of Henry III and by extension the group of female religious aristocrats for whom the poem appears to have been originally crafted. According to Roest, the poem

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[82] See also Fleming's "The Friars and Medieval English Literature."

hails Christ the saviour as the model of authentic and perfect

love. It contrasts the love of Christ with the famous fatal passions

of mythological figures, such as Paris and Helena and Tristan and

Isolde . . . . The earthy love of the latter is vain and precarious (and

depicted with an *ubi sunt* approach known from medieval death

poetry). . . . Christ, on the other hand, is the model of authentic

love that will not fade. (292)

The *Luue Ron*'s substitution of the love shared between legendary couples in

pagan stories for the love shared between Christ and the poem's audience

exemplifies the typical Franciscan metaphorical move of eroticizing spiritual

love.[83]

   Romeo and Juliet works in a similar way, but instead of diminishing the

value of eroticized human to human love in favour of a metaphorically eroticized

spiritual love of Christ, Shakespeare's play elevates erotic human to human love

by experimenting with the possibility of transferring the passionate limitlessness

of the Franciscan's metaphorically eroticized divine love back over into the realm

of a human love story. In other words, if heavenly spiritual love can be eroticized,

then worldly erotic love can be spiritualized. For its audience of female religious,

the *Luue Ron* was a call to an erotic spiritual communion with Christ, the primary

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   [83] While many critics have associated *Romeo and Juliet* with the *Liebestod*, the transgressive reaching after consummation of love in death, exemplified, for instance, in the story of Tristan and Isolde, I follow M. M. Mahood in resisting that overly schematic categorization of the play: "*Romeo and Juliet* appears the classic literary statement of the *Liebestod* myth . . . . Shakespeare's story conflicts, however, with the traditional myth at several points. Tragic love is always adulterous. Romeo and Juliet marry, and Juliet's agony of mind at the prospect of being married to Paris is in part a concern for her marriage vow" (58).

goal of which was nevertheless to reinforce their commitment to everlasting

chastity.[84] In the post-Reformation universe of Shakespeare's England, in which

celibacy was no longer held as an absolute spiritual ideal, and in which married

love was instead increasingly prioritized, *Romeo and Juliet* represents the erotic

and spiritual union between a loving husband and wife as Reformed society's

principal sacral locus.

Charitable Love, Amorous Love and the Protestant Ideal of Wedded Love

Printed in London in 1587, only a few years before *Romeo and Juliet* was

first staged, the mendicant philosophical treatise *The True Image of Christian*

Love is advertized on its cover as an "excellent, learned, and very comfortable

Treatise." Originally composed in Latin by a Dominican friar named Adrian

Savorine, it was first translated into English in 1537 by the Observant Franciscan

Richard Rikes. Although originally written by a Dominican friar, the treatise

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[84] Here is an excerpt, followed by Roest's transliteration:
> Mayde, if thu wilnest after leofmon
> ich techne enne treowe king.
> A swete, if thu inowe
> the gode thewes of thisse childe,
> he is feyr & bryht on hoewe,
> of glese chere, of mode mydle,
> of lufsum lost, of truste treowe,
> freo of teorte, of wisdom wilde,
> ne thurhte the neuer rewe,
> mythestu do the in his ylde.

"Maiden, if you long for a lover / Teach you of one who is a true king / Ah, sweet, if you but knew / the good strengths of this Lord / He is fair and bright of hue / of gladsome cheer, of manner mild / he is pleasing in love and worthy of trust / noble of heart and full of wisdom. / Never will you have to rue / if you put yourself under his protection" (293).

appears to have emerged from or to have agreed with the long history of

Franciscan meditations on the idea of discerning true from false love. That Rikes

is listed in the text as an Observant Franciscan as opposed to a Conventual

Franciscan adds to the proto-Protestant authenticity of his back to basics spiritual

identity. The importance placed in the period on translators as active participants

in the meaning of the translations they produced further establishes the English

version of the treatise as a distinct Franciscan work. What is striking about this

late sixteenth-century printed edition is not only that the production of it was

sanctioned by Protestant censors, but that it was commissioned by Anthony

Munday in his capacity as a Messenger of her Majesty's Chamber. In addition to

serving the Queen and the Privy Council at court in that capacity, Munday was

also a playwright and may even have collaborated with Shakespeare on the play

Sir Thomas More.[85] The provenance of the treatise is noteworthy within the

context of my argument: a friar's treatise on love, translated by an English

Franciscan earlier in the century, resurrected in print later in the century by an

Elizabethan dramatist, one who had just been assigned by the Queen to an

important official post at court, and dedicated to the Collector of her Majesty's

Customs in the port of London and Justice of the Peace for Middlesex, Richard

Young—one of whose duties it was to torture Catholics. It is possible that

Shakespeare may have come across the treatise, but the importance of the text lies

more in its value as a cultural artefact that reflects certain ways of thinking about

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[85] For more on this see Tracey Hill's *Anthony Munday and Civic Culture: History, power and representation in early modern London, 1580-1633*.

religious and amatory love in the period than in any direct influence it may have had on Shakespeare.

As I have argued, Franciscans were particularly attracted to marriage as a trope that could serve to express the soul's relationship with God.[86] This metaphorical convention is repeated throughout *The True Image of Christian Love*. One of the ways in which the treatise extols the marriage of the soul to divinity is by assigning the role of king to God, of daughter to the king to the Soul, and of the husband to the daughter to Christ:

> Ye be the daughter of y^ heauenly King, *espoused* to his déerely belooued sonne Christ Iesus . . . . O my daughter . . . forgette also thine owne people . . . . That is as much to say, as forsake thy naturall loue, thy worldlie loue. . . . And then the King my son shall couet thy beauty, and apparell thee with clothes of vertue . . . . He that hath called you from darknes into so great light of grace, and hath nowe taken you vnto his *spouses* . . . . The beholding of these . . . thinges, I think shoulde leaue some print of this heauenly Image in our soules: but much more in you who are his speciall and chosen *spouses*. (emphasis added, 42)

The would be spouses of Christ must first abdicate all worldly preoccupations in order to marry into the fullness of divine love.

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[86] For more on this, see Alessandro Vettori's *Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century*. As one of his central claims, Vettori affirms that Franciscan poetry conventionally and frequently deployed sophisticated evocations of "matrimonial consummation as the image of the otherwise inexpressible bond between human beings and God" (40).

As opposed to this, earthly matrimony is described with contempt in the treatise, as an obstacle to spiritual love. In one hundred twenty pages of exposition on the nature of true love, and with over two hundred seventy five occurrences of variations on the word love, there is not a single instance that celebrates human to human love in marriage, despite the fact that the treatise promises to cycle though all of the forms of love possible. Married love is not listed in the treatise as one of the five types of the "living image of love" defined by Saint Bernard, but is instead implicitly subsumed within the broad category of love for parents and kin:

> Saint Bernard speaketh in one of his Sermons shewing that there are fiue maner of Loues. The first is a reuerende and liuelie loue of parents and kinsfolkes. The seconde is the affecting loue of our neighbours, and they that dwell together. The thirde is rightwise loue, that we ought to haue to euery reasonable person. The fourth is violent loue of our enemies. The fift is holy and deuout loue of God aboue all. (58)

What diminishes the value of married love even more is its inclusion in the middle of a long list of passions that thwart the attainment of love:

> You must vnderstand, that there are certayne motions called passions, which verie . . . assault our soule, and bringeth our spirite into great disquietnes: . . . to nourish, rancor and mallice, to bee mindfull of any iniury, to be studious for auenging, to be gréeued with euill speaking, . . . backbyting, to grudge at complaintes, and to freate with chyding . . . . [T]o studdy for promotion, *to care for mariage*, to thirst for riches, to be gréedie of honour, and to gape

> after prayses . . . . [T]hese and such like so vexe and trouble the
>
> minde, that no loue or charity can harbour there. (emphasis added,
>
> 87)

To care for marriage does not imbue one with meaningful spiritual purpose, but is instead tantamount to lusting vainly after wealth, advancement, and fame.

Ironically, the printed edition of the treatise was intended primarily as a vehicle for Munday's self-interested promotion among the political elite of late sixteenth-century English society. In his dedicatory preface, he mobilizes the conventional language of subordination to authority. In addition to including the customary rhetoric of subservience one would expect to find, he also addresses the potentially troubling fact that this was a treatise written by friars:

> And one thing shall not bee amisse for your worship to marke, that
>
> this Booke being written by Friers, men of no smal reckoning
>
> among the Papists: yet how they write against their own idolatry,
>
> superstition and trumperie, & inueigh at the great follies and
>
> disorders among themselues, is to be noted, which was some cause
>
> why I published it at this instant, when men of that coat and
>
> cognisance, grow to so many wicked and rebellious attempts. (6-7)

In addition to holding the offices listed in the dedication, the dedicatee, Richard Young, was also a commissioner of torture and a fervid anti-Catholic (Hill 34). That Munday nonetheless felt it was appropriate to dedicate a Catholic mendicant treatise to such a prominent and fierce anti-Papist suggests that during the early years of the Reformation at least, friars could from later in the century be retrospectively labelled proto-Protestant. Although Munday admits that more

nearly contemporaneous friars were to be despised, friars from the past could be relied upon as trustworthy messengers of the true meaning of love.

Despite Munday's observation that the friars who wrote and translated the treatise had a great deal in common with Protestants, the portrayal of matrimonial love in the treatise is very much at odds with the Protestant idealization of married love. While it is one thing to say that Protestantism's re-consecration of marriage does not resemble the dismal representation of marriage in the treatise, it is another matter altogether to define with perfect clarity Protestantism's aspirations for marriage. The Reformation's social and spiritual glorification of marriage was not fully articulated in any single text, but was instead discernable in a variety of social practices in the period. *Romeo and Juliet* was part of a cultural revolution in attitudes toward married love, a transformation that is presented in the play as borrowing from the revolutionary theology of love first promulgated by the Franciscan Order, yet not identical to it. The love that is modelled in the play, while informed by Franciscan cultural precedent, is ultimately concerned with the elevation of married love as a major unifying force for Protestants, one which held out the promise of combining together the scattered forms of spiritual belief that proliferated during the Reformation, and which in large measure drove secularization in the period. Yet, like so many other sites of post-Reformation spiritual rearrangement, the reconceptualization of marriage did not immediately lead to a settled redefinition, but instead contributed to an increase in experimental attitudes toward matrimony itself, such as the one presented in *Romeo and Juliet*, proliferating as it does secularization, instead of arresting it in some clearly definable way. *Romeo and Juliet* participated in this cultural

reimagining of married love not by replicating every detail of the Franciscan theology of love. It instead exploited Franciscanism's ready-made conflation of married love and divine love in order to represent and to interrogate what was becoming of matrimony in Protestant society.

On the one hand, Franciscanisms' poetic celebration of marriage was intended to be a strictly figurative way of expressing the unity of humans with God. On the other hand, Protestantism's emergent veneration of marriage as society's potentially most crucial sacral locus was an increasingly literalized social reality. For the friars, married love was an important heuristic for understanding the Christian soul's relationship with God, whereas marriage between man and woman in Protestant England was intended much more literally to house and to facilitate the Christian soul's association with divinity. In the former case, celibacy is privileged as the conduit for matrimonial unity with God. In the latter case, earthly married love is exalted as the catalyst for union with God, but at the time *Romeo and Juliet* was first being performed, it was an aspiration that had multiple ways of being believed in.

Initially at least, Protestant marriage filled the vacuum left behind by the abandonment of clerical celibacy. In the thirty-nine Articles of 1571, in the section on "Of the Marriage of Priests," it is stipulated that "Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, are not commanded by God's Law, either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage: therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other Christian men, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve better to godliness" (Church 20). Marriage became the new apotheosis of spiritual life. In "Of the State of Matrimony," from *The second tome of homilees*

(1571), marriage is described as the spiritual crucible within which each generation of Christians are formed:

> it is also ordeyned, that the church of God & his kingdom might by this kinde of lyfe be conserued and enlarged, not only in that God geueth children by his blessing, but also in that they be brought vp by ye parents godly, in the knowledge of Gods word, that thus the knowledge of God and true religion myght be deliuered by succession from one to another, that finally many might enioye that euerlasting immortalitie. (Jewel 476)

The estate of matrimony would now be largely responsible for the soteriological preparation of Christian souls. Marriage was also imbued with a variety of other spiritual advantages for the couple:

> Wherefore, forasmuch as Matri|monie serueth as well to auoyde sinne & offence, as to encrease the kingdom of God: you, as al o|ther which enter yt state, must acknowledge this benefite of God, with pure & thankeful mindes, for that he hath so ruled our heartes, that ye fo|lowe not the example of the wicked worlde, who set their delyght in filthynesse of sinne, where both of you stande in the feare of God, and ab|horre all filthynesse. (Jewel 476-77)

So not only does marriage expand God's dominion on earth quantitatively, but it also sustains married couples in a condition of qualitatively superior moral purity, even more so than celibacy.

There is a considerable amount of modern scholarship on the renegotiation of the idea of post-Reformation conjugal love in England. Lawrence Stone's *The*

Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800 still after three decades offers the most robust historical account of this transformation. Stone argues for a clear change in emphasis from the medieval Catholic glorification of chastity to the Reformation celebration of marriage:

> The medieval Catholic ideal of chastity, as a legal obligation for priests, monks and nuns and as an ideal for all members of the community to aspire to, was replaced by the ideal of conjugal affection. The married state now became the ethical norm for the virtuous Christian . . . . The great Puritan preacher William Perkins now described marriage as "a state in itself far more excellent than the condition of single life"—a clear contrast to the contemporary Catholic view of Cardinal Bellarmine that "marriage is a thing humane, virginity is angelical"—in other words that it is no more than an unfortunate necessity to cope with human frailty. This sanctification of marriage—"holy matrimony"—was a constant theme of Protestant sermons of the sixteenth century, which were directed to all classes in the society, and is to be found in both Puritan and Anglican moral theology of the early seventeenth century from William Gouge to Jeremy Taylor. (136)

Stone's hypothesis has attracted a great amount of critical attention. In her book on love and sexuality in English Renaissance drama, Mary Beth Rose lists many of the objections to Stone's work that accumulated in the intervening years since his book first appeared. She notes that medievalists have been correct to challenge many of Stone's findings as too focussed on elite spirituality, particularly during

the middle ages. They contend that celibacy was not necessarily valorized by the majority of medieval men and women, but was instead a clerical preoccupation. These detractors also claim that many of the innovations that Stone attributes to Protestantism were not really new after all, but had been in circulation for centuries (3).

Rose does not, however, perceive these counterarguments as absolute obstructions to thinking about the differences between medieval and early modern attitudes toward marriage in the way generally proposed by Stone:

> What I am primarily interested in are dominant modes of conceptualization and the representation of belief. Most germane to my analysis are the facts that no matter how men and women in the Middle Ages may have felt or acted, and despite (perhaps along with) the complex construction of eros, dominant medieval homiletic and theological formulations officially idealized asceticism and celibacy as the most prestigious forms of sexual behavior; and Protestant sexual discourse explicitly and repeatedly abjured the idealization and replaced it with the glorification of marriage. (3)

While neither Stone's historical account, nor Rose's defence of his thesis, are concerned with *Romeo and Juliet* or with Franciscanism, my argument

nonetheless overlaps with their shared conviction that attitudes toward marriage were undergoing significant theoretical recalibrations.[87]

The scope of this spiritual reorientation was far reaching, for it involved not only reconstituting marriage as the basis for an ordered society, but also establishing it as a principal bulwark against the devil's supernatural aggression. The homily on matrimony is clear about this:

> For that is surelye the sin|guler gyft of God, where the common example of the worlde declareth how the deuill hath their heartes bound and entangled in dyuers snares, so that they in their wyuelesse state runne into open abhominations . . . . Whereupon do your best endeuour, that after this sorte ye vse your matrimonie, and so shall ye be armed on euerye syde. Ye haue escaped the snares of the deuyll . . . . Ye haue the quietnesse of conscience by this institution of matrimonie ordeyned by God. Therefore vse oft prayer to hym, that he woulde be present by you, that he woulde continue concorde and charitie betwixt you. (Jewel 477, 494)

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[87] For more on these developments see Elizabeth Abbott's *A History of Marriage*; Ann Jennalie Cook's *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and his Society*; Stephanie Coontz's *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*; Lisa Hopkins' *The Shakespearean Marriage*, Ralph Houlbrooke's *English Family Life, 1576-1716*; Jane Goody's *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*; Conor McCarthy's *Marriage in Medieval England*; Alan Macfarlane's *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840*; Michael McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity*; Rosemary O'Day's *The Family and Family Relationships, 1500-1900*; Belinda Roberts Peters' *Marriage in Seventeenth-Century English Political Thought*; and B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol's *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage*.

The last sentence of this prescription, on how to use marriage as a defence against Satan, while asserted confidently, nonetheless highlights one of problems with matrimony's newly prestigious spiritual standing.

The "charitie" that this passage encourages married partners to have for one another is *caritas*, the form of Christian love that had for centuries been conceived of as the divine love which it was one's duty to share with all Christians. It was not a spiritual feeling singled out as requiring particular cultivation within marriage. This is not to say that the homily on matrimony, by promoting charity between spouses, intended to circumscribe it exclusively within marriage, yet the notion that it should be emphasized as a feeling shared in a special way by spouses was not prevalent before the Reformation. For example, while *The True Image of Christian Love* is conventionally adamant about the pre-eminence of *caritas*, at no point does it imagine charity as focalized through the institution of marriage. Indeed, to privilege the love one has for a single person above the love all of humanity owes to God is wrong:

> the perfect loue of God abydeth not the coupling with any other loue: the perfect loue of God knoweth no affection to kindred: it knoweth no difference betwéene poore and rich: it knoweth not what meaneth thine and mine, it can not distinguish a foe from a fréende. For he that truely and perfectly loueth God, must loue God alone, nothing beside God, nor wyth God: but loue all indifferently in God, and for God. (82)

The love modelled by Romeo and Juliet, while it eventually precludes the other members of their community, is to some extent in keeping with the idea that God

is love, for after all, they describe their experience of one another as evocative of divinity. Yet the more they come to love each other, the more the circumstances generated by that love in turn diminish their capacity to be lovingly charitable toward their families, friends, and perhaps most significantly, their enemies. Included in the precepts of *caritas* articulated in *The True Image of Christian Love*, is the golden "rule of charity towarde our neighbour . . . . Thou shalt loue thy neighbour as thy selfe . . . . Thy freend as thy selfe, thyne enemye as thy freend . . . . [A]nd to hate and be sorrye for their hurt and hinderance" (102). The idea of loving one's enemy does not prevail in *Romeo and Juliet*. The Capulets and the Montagues hate each other. Charitable love has been unsuccessful. Married love temporarily appears to offer an alternative to this enmity. Friar Laurence is hopeful that the young lovers' marriage will put a stop to the feuding. The wedding, however, founded as it is on love alone, is enacted in isolation from the community's broader concerns. When antagonized by Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, Romeo attempts to respond with words of love:

> Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee
>
> Doth much excuse the appertaining rage
>
> To such a greeting. Villain am I none;
>
> Therefore farewell, I see thou knowest me not. (3.1.62-65)

The married love he attempts to extend to Tybalt is rejected, in large part because he cannot effectively communicate the meaning of the identity he has come to possess as a result of his matrimonial love of Juliet. Romeo does not make explicit recourse to *caritas*, for that would not require any reason for love beyond the fact that Tybalt is Romeo's enemy. Romeo's justification is based on the sanctity of

the love he shares with Juliet, but because of the theological presumption that the

quality of that love is selfish, it must remain a secret from their families. Romeo,

therefore, struggles to explain to Tybalt the nature of his married love as

something that should somehow resolve their mutual hatred:

> I do protest I never injuried thee,
>
> But love thee better than thou canst devise,
>
> Till thou shalt know the reason of my love,
>
> And so, good Capulet—which name I tender
>
> As dearly as my own—be satisfied. (3.1.68-72)

Tybalt is not appeased by this riddling answer. Moreover, while it may seem as

though Romeo could simply diffuse the conflict by informing Tybalt of his

marriage to Juliet, there is no reason to believe that this knowledge would not

enrage Tybalt even more. The problem in this moment is that Romeo and Tybalt

do not possess the highly developed conceptual vocabulary that would be required

for Romeo to explain to Tybalt why it is that his Protestant-style married love to

Juliet should serve as the basis for heightened social and spiritual concord

between them and in Verona at large.

By focalizing their capacity for love principally through one another,

Romeo and Juliet contravene the traditional Catholic teachings, contained in the

mendicant *The True Image of Christian Love*, about the dangers of amorous

exclusivity, "for in true loue is no diuersitie, or exception of persons" (68). It is in

the moments when the play promotes married love as a central locus for accessing

the sacred that it is most fully mired in the conflicted theology of the Protestant

matrimonial imperative, which sought paradoxically to value indiscriminate

charitable love alongside the discriminations of an exclusive form of love. *Romeo and Juliet* may be viewed as initially working hard to reconcile these tensions, before then eventually succumbing to their fundamental irreconcilability. The incommensurability I am indicating here is what causes the play's representation of love to collapse upon itself, but the energy generated by that implosion, by the end of the play fuels an explosion outward of a secularizing variety of possibilities for belief in wedded love that still resound in today's world.

Exceeding Franciscan Love

The play temporarily entertains the possibility that the proto-Protestant Franciscan construal of spiritual marriage may serve as a template for synthesizing *caritas* and Reformed matrimonial love, but by the end of *Romeo and Juliet* that optimism is drastically undermined. Friar Laurence's characterization is an important means by which this development is managed. The friar embodies a retrospectively proto-Protestant Franciscan construal of married love, one that initially appears to lend spiritual credibility to the Reformationists' idealization of matrimonial love. Early in the play, Friar Laurence temporarily views Romeo's love for Juliet and desire to marry her as a spiritual opportunity for all of Verona. To that end, he promises Romeo his help: "In one respect I'll thy assistant be; / For this alliance may so happy prove, / To turn your households' rancour to pure love" (2.3.90-92). What constitutes the purity of the love he envisages is unclear, but it seems to be that marriage will be the crucial ingredient. The desired consequence of the wedding will be charitable love between former enemies. Friar Laurence's abode provides the setting for

Romeo and Juliet's espousal. Laurence's perspective on their wedding is auspicious, but his words also betray a premonition of trouble to come: "So smile the heavens upon this holy act, / That after-hours with sorrow chide us not!" (2.6.1-2). Romeo and Juliet are wedded, but the hoped-for outcome is not produced. Instead, in a haze of vengeance, Romeo ends up slaying Tybalt for having killed Mercutio, which occurs because of the newlywed's soft-hearted interference in the fight. Marriage is not presented as the solution to the lack of divine charity in the world. In the friar's words to Romeo: "Affliction is enamour'd of thy parts, / And thou art wedded to calamity" (3.3.3). The consequences of the glorification of marriage are dire. Romeo has been married to Protestantism's doomed aspirations for marriage. Faced with this, Friar Laurence resorts to several other, less radical Franciscan coping strategies, less relatable to his Order's original emphasis on revolutionary ecstatic love.

He encourages Romeo to think of his exile from Verona as an opportunity for gaining perspective: "Here from Verona art thou banished. / Be patient, for the world is broad and wide" (3.3.15-16). Franciscans had for centuries valued a man's taking leave of the world as a way of gaining insight. Francis had done just this, leaving his family in Assisi and retreating into the countryside, thus also keeping a distance between himself and Clare. "I'll give thee armour," Friar Laurence says to Romeo, "Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy, / To comfort thee, though thou art banished" (3.3.54-55). Romeo tells him to "Hang up philosophy!" (3.3.57). He realizes now that the friar cannot understand what he is experiencing: "Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel" (3.3.64). So far, as long as Laurence has operated within the Protestant celebration of marriage, Romeo has

trusted his counsel. But now, after observing the friar's backslide into privileging a Catholic subtraction from the world, Romeo's confidence in his mentor has been eroded: "There is no world without Verona walls, / But purgatory, torture, hell itself" (3.3.17-18). For Romeo, "heaven is here, / Where Juliet lives" (3.3.29-30).

As is the case with Romeo, for Juliet, being separated from her spouse is a spiritual nightmare:

> My husband is on earth, my faith in heaven;
>
> How shall that faith return again to earth,
>
> Unless that husband send it me from heaven
>
> By leaving earth? (3.5.205-08).

Juliet cannot seem to maintain a coherent selfhood. She feels spiritually complete only when in connubial bliss with Romeo, but to be separated from him is unbearable. If married love is to be the new principal sacral locus for Protestants, instead of ecclesial officials, rituals, and buildings, then what to do about this two body problem? Husband and wife can be separated in a way that individuals cannot be separated from the Holy Church. Juliet's statement maps the inconsistencies that flow from attempting to merge the Catholic definition of ultimate love as universal charity with the Protestant reprioritization of married love as supreme. Juliet asks if Romeo would have to die and become a heavenly mediator for her to re-establish her connection with God. The play's eventual answer to her question is that this would only be a half-measure, for the only way for the combination of Catholic and Protestant versions of absolute love to be complete is for both husband and wife to die together, their souls fused together in

an infinite and eternal afterlife. Indeed, it is only after their almost simultaneous deaths that their families reconcile in a spirit of Christian love.

Another typically Franciscan tactic employed by the friar is to enclose Juliet, albeit in a tomb, as a way of protecting her from the world. As Francis did with Clare by stowing her away in the netherworld of conventual half-life, Friar Laurence plunges Juliet into a protective half-death. When he finds Juliet awake in the Capulet vault at the end of the play, he says that he will "dispose" of her among "a sisterhood of holy nuns" (5.3.156,157). His radical proto-Protestantism has retreated. Laurence becomes an increasingly cautious Franciscan at the end of the play, eschewing the extremism of his Order's originally revolutionary attachment to ecstatic love. His words of comfort to Juliet's parents are indicative of this retrenchment, which culminates later in the play:

> In these confusions. Heaven and yourself
>
> Had part in this fair maid, *now heaven hath all,*
>
> And all the better is it for the maid:
>
> Your part in her you could not keep from death,
>
> *But heaven keeps his part in eternal life.*
>
> The most you sought was her promotion;
>
> *For 'twas your heaven she should be advanc'd:*
>
> *And weep ye now, seeing she is advanc'd*
>
> *Above the clouds, as high as heaven itself?* (my emphasis, 4.5.66-74)

This manner of dealing with women is a recurrent Franciscan practice, as it was in Francis' dealing with Clare, one that is also observable in *Much Ado About*

Nothing. Friar Francis is the officiant at Claudio and Hero's first attempt at marriage. He witnesses Claudio's humiliation of her. Claudio accuses Hero of sexual infidelity. Francis' solution to the crisis is like Laurence's. He subjects Hero to a fake death as a way of protecting her reputation from further harm and to change "slander to remorse" (4.1.211):

> Let her awhile be secretly kept in,
>
> And publish it that she is dead indeed.
>
> Maintain a mourning ostentation,
>
> And on your family's old monument
>
> Hang mournful epitaphs and do all rites
>
> That appertain unto a burial. (4.1.204-09)

In this comedy, Hero is transformed during her pseudo-death into an acceptable mate, for the culprits behind her false slander are discovered. Yet, both marriages, which are not quite solemnized at the end of the play are shot through with irony. The ceremonies are delayed until after the end of the final act, but in this comedy there is hope that Beatrice and Benedick's married love will meet the high standards for companionate matrimonial love to which Protestant societies aspired.

Such is not the case in the tragic *Romeo and Juliet*. Friar Laurence's machinations have disastrous repercussions for the couple. It is in large measure due to his collusion that Romeo and Juliet's marriage must be kept secret. Friar Laurence scrambles to serve as an intermediary between the divided spouses, but his efforts are flawed. He promises that their separation will only be temporary, and that he will help, but his actions have effects that impede the couple's

successful reunification. In one sense it is possible to feel empathy for Friar

Laurence when his messages to Romeo fail to be delivered. In another sense,

however, the predicament in which he finds himself is of his own manufacturing

and may even reflect a profound unspoken desire to sabotage their earthly

marriage in favour of a return to the transcendence of Franciscanism's strictly

metaphorical matrimonial ideals. His Franciscanism may not be so proto-

Protestant after all. Juliet certainly has doubts about the friar: "What if it be a

poison which the friar / Subtilly hath minist'red to have me dead, / Lest in this

marriage he should be dishonor'd" (4.3.24-26)? She decides that her doubts are

baseless and that Friar Laurence is worthy of reverence, but she does not reach

that conclusion without some hesitation: "I fear it is, and yet methinks it should

not, / For he hath still been tried a holy man" (4.3.28-29). As a spokesperson for

the Franciscan Order, Laurence has been placed under a great deal of sociological

and theological pressure in the play. The ideological purposes to which this drama

subjects him as a representative of Franciscanism are crushing.

His character initially attempts to accommodate intense love in marriage

as a superlative good. This attitude coincides with the Protestant idealization of

married love. Poetic modes of Franciscan thought that metaphorically glorified

conjugal love and erotic fulfillment as ways of understanding divine love are put

to the service of Protestantism's escalating valuation of matrimony. By working

to ground those abstract Franciscan metaphorical principles in an actual courtship

and marriage, however, the play tests the extent to which Friar Laurence and his

Order's ideology of love could be recovered as part of the Reformation's

matrimonial project. Friar Laurence is attracted to the idea of marriage as a

heuristic for transcendent divine love, but his words and actions are ultimately insufficient for uniting the couple on earth. His actions undermine the possibility that worldly married love could become society's principal sacral locus. Friar Laurence then assumes a thoroughly cautious Franciscan view of the crisis at the end of the play. As I have already indicated, upon finding Juliet awake in her family's tomb, he begs her to come with him so that he can place her in a nunnery. His words in that speech also indicate that he now views his activities as having gone against nature: "come from that nest / Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep" (5.3.151-52). He appears to come to believe that God has passed judgment on the events that transpired. The friar's attempts to condone Romeo and Juliet's marriage have failed because they are not in accordance with divine will: "A greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents" (5.3.153-54). Both Juliet's husband and another potential husband have died: "Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead; / And Paris too" (5.3.155-56). From Laurence's perspective, the best possibility for her is to be committed to the safe haven of celibate, conventual life: "Stay not to question, for the watch is coming; / Come, go, good Juliet, / I dare no longer stay" (5.3.158-60). He will "dispose" of her among "a sisterhood of holy nuns" (5.3.156,157). According to the friar, it is time to retreat from the matrimonial experiments that have gone so horribly wrong.

The friar, who has added spiritual momentum to the love experiments so far in the play, decides at the end that he must land on the safe side of these controversies. The Prince commands those gathered in the final scene to "clear these ambiguities" (5.3.217). He wants to know "their spring, their head, their true

descent" (5.3.218). In keeping with the notion that Franciscanism is at the source

of many of the play's concerns, it makes sense that Friar Laurence is the one to

respond to this question of origins:

> I am the greatest, able to do least,
>
> Yet most suspected, as the time and place
>
> Doth make against me, of this direful murther;
>
> And here I stand both to impeach and purge
>
> Myself condemned and myself excus'd. (5.3.223-27)

The Prince eventually replies that "We still have known thee for a holy man," but

only after Laurence recounts his version of the facts (5.3.270). He does not lie

about the events, but he does leave out any of the spiritual motives that informed

his actions, including his desire that Romeo and Juliet's love for one another

could unite Verona in a state of "pure love" (2.3.92). For example, he withholds

in his long closing speech why he married Romeo and Juliet in secret. He omits

his desire that the marriage of the young couple might have rescued Verona. Any

Protestant idealization of marriage is also elided in his narrative.

The Secularization of Love

The couple's fathers, however, once they are told of their children's love,

marriage, and death, seek to frame Romeo and Juliet's marriage as glorious

anyway. Montague proposes to commission a statue of Juliet. He "will [raise] her

statue in pure gold" (5.3.299). Capulet replies that Romeo's memorial will be just

"as rich" (5.3.303). Yet, the ostentatiously "rich" "pure gold" of the proposed

statues is not the "pure love" (2.3.92) countenanced by Friar Laurence. These

monuments are conflicted symbolic tributes to the Protestant celebration of married love, not of the *caritas* evoked by traditional public Catholic statuary. The fathers' idea of the statues seeks to aggrandize the institution of marriage, thrusting Romeo and Juliet's private union into full public relevance. The statues would serve as socially prominent architectural symbols of Romeo's and Juliet's wedded love. The proposed immobilized pair of statues attract a plurality of possible beliefs, religious and secular, on the lovers' abortive conjugal love. Their statues will become indeterminate, secularizing works of art on love, like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which in the interim since its first performances has become the "preeminent document of love in the West" (Callaghan "Introduction" 1). There are an infinite number of ways in which to interpret *Romeo and Juliet*—an endless number of ways in which to believe in the transcendent reaching after ecstatic union it dramatizes. That radical indeterminacy is what makes its representation of love so secularizing in its own time and our own. Love and marriage have come to mean so many different things to so many different people around the world today, most of whom, in the anglophone world at least, have made Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into the foundational literary expression of passionate companionate love.[88]

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[88] Callaghan offers a lucid description of *Romeo and Juliet*'s readiness to contribute to the modern formation of the ideology of romantic love:

> The play's ending . . . constitutes a means of monumentalising (quite literally in the golden statues of the lovers) and thereby reproducing *ad infinitum* . . . the ideological imperatives of the lovers' most poignant erotic moments. Crucially, then, the social effectivity of the ideology of romantic love is characterised fundamentally by its capacity for self-replication. Thus, the narrative imperative of *Romeo and Juliet* to propagate the desire with which it is inscribed constitutes a resistance to historicisation that has been extended by criticism's production of the

Romeo and Juliet's secularizing pluralization of belief possibilities about

love in its own time was not conceived of, nor received in, as optimistically

positive ways as it commonly is today. The tragedy is at least partially

disapproving of the secularizing transformations of older, steadier, beliefs about

love, which were compromised by the Protestant idealization of married love. The

Protestant glorification of married love is shown in *Romeo and Juliet* to be a

fantasy in which lovers, sanctified through the idealization of married love,

emanate divinity from the paired pedestals on which they have been placed, but

this dream of sanctified wedded bliss cannot account for the multiplicity of

worldly matrimonial adversities faced by couples, including the inevitable

physical, emotional, material, and spiritual motions to which married love is

prone. Marriage becomes a central preoccupation of a holy life, but its daily

meaning necessarily differed from couple to couple. Each household might

theoretically consecrate the meaning of married love in different ways once

behind closed doors. These pluralizations secularized the meaning of wedded

love, both from inside the conjugal dyad and from without. The proposed statues

and the play itself represent and promote that secularization by attracting multiple

readings. The fathers' attempt to salvage their children's death as a meaningful

opportunity to monumentalize the social worth of wedded love may appear to

support Protestantism's elevation of the sacredness of marriage as a unified and

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play as universal love story. In this respect, the mimetic dynamic
curiously mirrors the capitalst mode of production, whose goal is not
immediate use but accumulated and multiplied future production. The
play's inclination towards replication and multiplication is a manoeuvre
that propagates a version of erotic love which is consonant with the needs
of an emergent social order. ("The Ideology" 88)

unifying principle, but from other, more critical perspectives on the secularization of matrimonial love at the time, the separateness of the statues affirms that this attempt to re-consecrate marriage was tragically doomed.

Epilogue

The more precisely the position is determined, the
less precisely the momentum is known in this
instant, and vice versa.
Werner Heisenberg, "Uncertainty Principle"

One of the primary challenges of practicing historicist literary criticism

may be addressed by way of comparison with the above conundrum, first

articulated by the theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg in 1927. Like

Heisenberg's observation that the more precise his identification of a particle's

position, the less perfectly accurate his measurement of its momentum, and vice

versa, it seems that the more we attempt to bring into synchronic historical focus

phenomena in the past, the less we are able to assess with precision their

diachronic historical significance, and vice versa. I would add, however, that as is

also the case in quantum mechanics, in which despite the resulting limitations, a

particle's position and momentum each remain necessary as variables in the

measurement of the other, synchronic and diachronic historicities are also

mutually required in order for us to attempt to observe either version of the past.

In other words, according to this analogy, it would be impossible to think in

remotely accurate ways about a specific historical moment without also

recognizing the sweep of history in which it is involved—although in putting the

diachronic in the service of the synchronic in this way, we lose partial sight of

historical change. By that same token, it would be impossible to track historical

change without simultaneously being able to describe specific occurrences in the

past—although in putting the synchronic in the service of the diachronic in this

way, we lose partial sight of the complexity of historical details. As in

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the very exactness of measurement of the one diminishes the accuracy of assessment of the other.

Although I do not intend in this thought experiment to suggest that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle somehow proves that synchronic and diachronic historiographical methodologies inescapably limit each other, it does often appear that the more critical studies tend toward the synchronic examination of phenomena in the past, the less such research may be inclined to account for their diachronic significance, and vice versa. Certainly this dissertation has not always maintained a perfect balance between synchronic and diachronic perspectives on Shakespeare's participation in the secularization of early modern England, sliding in turns too far into one point of view at the expense of the other. And yet, perhaps maintaining a relentlessly consistent balance between both forms of historical perception would come at too high a cost, at the expense of obtaining very precise synchronic and diachronic readings. In the midst of these challenges, what exactly a perfectly simultaneous synchronic and diachronic literary historical assessment would be is unclear.

According to classical physics, inaccurate measurement of the physical universe is caused by flawed equipment or human error. So too in old historicism, in which the past was conceived of as a more or less objective reality. In particle physics, on the contrary, imprecision of measurement is often an inevitable complication of scientific investigation, as in the observer effect, when even perfectly calibrated instruments alter what they measure. New historicism has generally approached the past with a keen sense of this constructedness of interaction between the observer and the observed. It has not, however,

adequately theorized the relationship between the synchronic and diachronic

forms of historical inquiry that I have sketched here. The quantum mechanical

uncertainty principle is a helpful thought-tool for identifying the difficulty

inherent in combining fine-grained analysis of phenomena in the past with a

precise awareness of their contributions to change across time, but the solution to

this dilemma remains for now indeterminate.

This dissertation set out to offer a renewed diachronic perspective on the

participation of Shakespeare's theatre in the secularization of early modern

England. By engaging with Taylor's revisionist theorization of secularization, it

has produced synchronic analyses of a series of topics in Shakespeare's plays,

each of which were resonantly implicated in the secularizing processes of early

modernity: tolerance, demonism, blasphemy, and love. These investigations have

revealed that while Shakespeare's dramas often conveyed an implicit recognition

of the possible opportunities that secularization presented, they also represented it

as a development that could render humans vulnerable to social and to

supernatural harm.

Finally, one of the implications of my overall thesis that I would like to

emphasize is the idea that if critics focus too synchronically on religion in

Shakespeare's drama, in isolation from diachronic secularizing processes, they

risk provoking retaliatory compensatory secularist readings.[89] On the contrary,

attempts to study the secular very synchronically, in isolation from the diachronic

secularizing pluralization of belief in the period, may invite reductive religious

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[89] See, for instance, Mallin's *Godless Shakespeare*.

interpretations.[90] In each of these scenarios, critical debate is liable to become

extremely polarized.[91] This dissertation has aimed to overcome such tendencies

by providing broadly encompassing examinations of the pluralizing evocativeness

of beliefs at play in several Shakespearean secularizations, each of which had

particular resonances in their own time, yet which also continue to reverberate and

proliferate in new ways in our time as well.

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[90] See, for example, Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*.

[91] There are, of course, many critics who aim to occupy stretches of the broad expanse of critical ground I am claiming, but they remain generally inclined to side with a more or less religious or secular perspective on Shakespeare. For lucid discussions of the full range of recent criticism on Shakespeare and religion see Kenneth J. E. Graham and Philip D. Collington's introduction to *Shakespeare and Religious Change* and Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti's "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies."

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