Philosophizing Shakespeare

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be his final dissertating student, and I hope that he can now enjoy his retirement

that much more fully knowing that this thesis is now complete.

Philosophizing Shakespeare explores the impact of Classical virtue ethics on Shakespeare's dramatic art, particularly his art of characterization. By focusing on the vernacular tradition of practical virtue ethics in Renaissance England – a tradition importantly distinct from institutional Latin philosophizing, but equally bound up with Aristotle's ethical thought -- I maintain that vernacular moral-philosophical writings share Shakespeare's interest in the dynamics of situated moral reasoning, particularly within the domains of social and domestic life. This practical, worldly emphasis, I argue, represents the foundation for ethical decision-making and for *ethos* (moral character) in Shakespeare. *Philosophizing Shakespeare* therefore argues for the importance of thinking about Shakespeare's characters as moral agents, while also demonstrating some of the historical and philosophical roots to the concept of moral agency in Shakespeare's England.

By contextualizing practical English-language moral-philosophical writings within the tradition of Renaissance Aristotelian thought and, in particular, the critically neglected strain of vernacular Aristotelianism in the Renaissance, *Philosophizing Shakespeare* builds on recent historical scholarship by Charles Schmitt and David Lines, who have recast Aristotle as a formative though eclectic influence on Renaissance European culture until well into the seventeenth century. At the same time, I consider Shakespeare's use of Aristotelian philosophical ideas as a typically eclectic kind of adaptation. In my discussion on *The Merchant of Venice*, I propose that Shylock is animated by a concept of virtue quite distinct from Aristotle's, but nevertheless just as central to his motivation as a character and behavior within the play. By focusing on the philosophical problem of *akrasia* (weakness of the will or moral incontinence), I also emphasize ways in which plays such as *The Winter's Tale* problematize Classically modeled selves.

Resumé

Ma thèse *Philosophizing Shakespeare* explore l'impact de l'éthique de la vertu classique sur l'art dramatique de Shakespeare, à savoir sur l'art de sa caractérisation. L'éthique de la vertu pendant la renaissance anglaise comprend une vaste sélection d'écrits et d'écrivains, des interprètes de Thomas d'Aquin aux pamphlétaires. Dans cette thèse, je me focalise sur la tradition vernaculaire de l'éthique de la vertu pratique en Angleterre de la Renaissance – une tradition qui est particulièrement distincte de la philosophie latine institutionnelle, mais qui est également coincé par la pensée éthique aristotélicienne. Contrairement à la philosophie académique, les écrits vernaculaires de la philosophie morale s'inscrivent à l'intérêt de Shakespeare pour la dynamique du raisonnement moral dans des situations spécifiques, particulièrement dans les domaines de la vie sociale et domestique. Cette emphase pratique et mondaine représente le fondement pour le savoir décisif éthique et pour l'*ethos*, ou le caractère moral, celui-ci étant présent dans des manuels de comportement en anglais et des traités sur la santé humaine et l'émotion. Je propose ici qu'il existe un lien considérable entre la conception de soi offerte par la philosophie morale articulée par ces écrivains et la caractérisation shakespearienne des individus tels que Shylock. A travers l'exploration ce qui constitue l'analyse des personnages de Shakespeare comme ayant une conception éthique, je me focalise sur les manières dont les notions de vertu servent de source de ce qui s'avère être une orientation hautement idiosyncratique pour les personnages de Shakespeare. Ainsi, je fournis un contexte pour leurs choix pratiques qui dote ces choix et leur comportement d'une signification morale. En plaçant les écrits de la philosophie morale en langue anglaise dans le contexte de la tradition de la pensée de la Renaissance aristotélicienne, et en particulière, dans la trop négligée variété d'aristotélisme vernaculaire pendant la Renaissance, je me base sur l'érudition de Charles Schmitt et David Lines, qui ont reformulé Aristote comme ayant une influence formatrice, quoique éclectique, sur la culture européenne de la Renaissance jusque le dix-septième siècle était bien entamé. A la fois, nous considérons l'usage de Shakespeare des concepts philosophiques aristotéliciens comme une espèce

d'adaptation typiquement éclectique. En se focalisant sur des problèmes philosophiques tels que l'acrasie (l'incontinence, ou la faiblesse de volonté), l'auto déception, et l'excès émotionnel, les chapitres individuels de ma thèse se concentrent sur les manières dont les pièces de Shakespeare représentent en même temps que problématisent des « soi » façonnés classiquement.

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Introduction: Philosophizing Shakespeare

I. How and why is Shakespeare philosophical?

Immediately before devising his plan to stage a conscience-catching evening of theatre, Hamlet concludes act 2, scene 2 of Shakespeare's tragedy by bemoaning his own shortcomings. He deliberates about his failure to spring to action and avenge his father's murder, asking

> Am I a coward?
>
> Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
>
> Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
>
> Tweaks me by th' nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat
>
> As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this?
>
> Ha? 'Swounds, I should take it. For it cannot be
>
> But I am pigeon-livered and lack gall
>
> To make oppression bitter, or ere this
>
> I should have fatted all the region kites
>
> With this slave's offal. Bloody bawdy villain!
>
> Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
>
> O, vengeance!
>
> Why, what an ass am I![1]

Hamlet's tone in this portion of the well-known soliloquy is unmistakably defensive. He is plagued by questions that read as direct challenges to his constitutional and ethical makeup, and affronts to his virility and dignity. His self-

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[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2.2.559-71.

directed questions unman, disarm, and humiliate him – he imagines the 'plucking off' of his beard, and his nose being tweaked, as a child's might be, stripping him of his virtues.

As much as Hamlet's soliloquy implies a series of conventional Renaissance tropes about ideals of *virtu*, it is also an incredibly philosophically self-reflexive monologue. Hamlet here expresses the self-scrutiny and keen interest in the causes of his condition that renders him among Shakespeare's most profoundly philosophical characters. But Hamlet is philosophical in a much more specific sense in this scene, too, in that he engages with those standards of behavior that resonate for him morally and characterologically. What I mean by this is not Harold Bloom's sense of a self-overhearing Hamlet, or the Hamlet of the Romantics whose over-full sensibilities were thought to be unsuited to the constraints of action-in-the-world.[2] What I am referring to, and what I think Hamlet is also referring to in this scene, is the way in which Hamlet's self-concept is shaped via notions of virtue. What interests me about Hamlet's speech and Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre more generally, isn't the moral imperatives and sententious pearls so often read as expressions of Shakespeare's own philosophical conclusions about the nature of life, or the moral 'lessons' the plays intend to impart to audiences ("all the world's a stage," etc.). Rather, Shakespeare's plays are philosophical in a very particular sense, which I want to call "virtue ethical."

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[2] Harold Bloom, "Hamlet," in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998). For a selection of the Romantic critical writings on *Hamlet*, including Charles Lamb, Samuel Coleridge, and William Hazlitt, see Jonathan Bate, ed., *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

As its name denotes, virtue ethics is a mode of philosophical speculation centrally concerned with the cultivation of virtue. It is, at once, a historically specific phenomenon dominated by Classical thought, primarily Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*; as well as an approach to the study of philosophy adaptable to a variety of historical eras including, most recently, our own. In recent decades, a stunningly diverse array of modern philosophers have chosen to revive discussions of virtue and Aristotle's moral thought, partly in the context of a search for alternatives to modern deontological and utilitarian modes of moral inquiry. Where Kantian moral philosophy prioritizes categorical imperatives and asserts the importance of rationalized concepts of duty stripped of their subjective resonances, while utilitarian thought values quantitative calculi, Aristotle's anthropocentric concern begins with a Socratic inquiry into the nature of the good life, and moves into a consideration of those virtues he deems capable of actualizing it.

Classical virtue ethics is also, of course, a philosophical approach to ethics that has a particularly significant history in Renaissance intellectual and cultural life. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued in *After Virtue* that virtue ethics as a historical phenomenon and a mode of moral reasoning buttressed by particular structures of thought, dwindled with the conclusion of the early modern era.[3] From a strict historical vantage point, Classical virtue ethics is also comprised of that well-defined series of virtues first spelled out by Aristotle, which shaped moral-philosophical considerations in Aristotle's era and well into Shakespeare's day.

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[3] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3d ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 2007).

Aristotle's virtues – moderation, courage, prudence, etc., -- were certainly an embedded feature of the cultural, political, and philosophical life of Shakespeare's England, and they are necessarily also relevant to Shakespeare's plays. This is particularly true for *Hamlet*, whose protagonist struggles to live up to his father's manifestly Aristotelian-heroic ideals.

My aim, however, is not to locate the catalogue of Aristotle's own moral ideals in Shakespeare's dramatic corpus, as some scholars have done with varying degrees of success.[4] Instead, my aim is to, in a sense, recede back onto virtue ethics' skeleton, away from the particular virtues Aristotle catalogues, back onto those structures of thought that support his intense regard for the cultivation of virtue. Rather than focusing on "the virtues," I am interested in what it means to

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[4] See, for example, David Beauregard, *Virtue's Own Feature: Shakespeare and the Virtue Ethics Tradition* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), which I discuss in a subsequent chapter. See also Paul Cefalu, *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Christopher Crosbie, "Fixing Moderation: *Titus Andronicus* and the Aristotelian Determination of Value," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2007), 143-73; W. R. Elton, "Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 331-37; Lars Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Arthur Kinney, *Shakespeare and Cognition: Aristotle's Legacy and Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2006); David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997); Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Zamir Tzachi, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

be oriented towards and centrally motivated by the pursuit and actualization of virtue, because I believe that Shakespeare's moral agents are motivated in these ways. I am therefore interested in virtue ethics not as a set catalogue of moral contents, but rather, as a system of reasoning about the moral life that admits of a plurality of goods. In this, my ambitions are not dissimilar to those of some modern philosophers who have attempted to make virtue ethics relevant to the exigencies of twenty-first century ethical inquiry.[5] My project is, like that of some modern-day philosophers and literary scholars, also disposed to seek new relevance for virtue ethics, in the sense that the study of Shakespeare and moral philosophy is not merely a matter of historical curiosity, or what Nietzsche termed 'antiquarian knowledge' divorced from all current relevance. Quite the contrary, virtue ethics' strong new appeal among philosophers and a handful of literary scholars is the product of particular developments of thought and institutional shifts in moral philosophy that enjoy parallels with institutional shifts within literary studies.

Virtue ethics re-emerged in the modern academy as a response to the disciplinary and methodological status quo of Kantian and Utilitarian moral thought, modes of inquiry specifically and self-consciously defined as modern. In many English departments, New Criticism was also strongly self-identified as a quintessentially modern approach to literary criticism that aspired, above all else, to a kind of scientific rationalism. Both Kantian and New Critical approaches endeavored to streamline inquiry into rationalized modes of insight stripped of

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[5] See, for example, Martha Nussbaum on this point: "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category," *Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 163-201.

subjective influence. The Neo-Kantian insistence on moral duties, conceived as universal laws stripped of their contingency upon subjective agents, has strong parallels with many New Critics writings, which likewise aspired to remove from literary analysis any relationship to the subjective agents who author works of fiction. The field of considerations for what is to be considered legitimate critical fodder for literary legitimate analysis was substantially whittled down.

Modern morality, and Kantian philosophy in particular, was likewise characterized by a highly selective understanding of what constitutes a moral quandary. Many instances where individuals are faced with the possibility of having to make a choice do not constitute moral predicaments at all in the Kantian view. Some virtue ethical theorists' strong objections to this kind of moral exceptionalism can be read as expressions of dissatisfaction with the undergraduate and post-graduate educational experiences of their day, which emphasized a strong Kantian approach to philosophical problems. This is Nussbaum's view of the sociological origins of modern virtue ethics, and she recalls that philosophical education in that era was characterized by a strong focus on problem situations and isolated examples of human choice, usually in the form of desert-island type counterfactuals.[6] Under this program, elements of moral decision-making nowadays considered important, such as emotional feedback and the character of moral agents, tended to be displaced or avoided altogether. They were thought to represent something outside the frame of what was considered 'proper' and immediately relevant to serious philosophical inquiry. There is an

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[6] See Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics."

obvious analogy to be drawn between this model of philosophical practice, which insists on a rigid exclusion of allegedly extra-philosophical considerations, and New Critical practices within literary studies, which similarly propose to focus exclusively on the language of the text without reference to anything "outside" of it, particularly actual people.

By contrast, the Classical conception, and Aristotle in particular, is much more panoramic in its consideration of what counts as part of the moral life, and more attentive to the sorts of elements that factor into moral judgments than stringent neo-Kantian approaches.[7] This model of moral judgment insists that moral inquiry involves the scrutiny of *all* aspects of lived experience, without exception, and is not just a way of 'doing' philosophy when particular situations deemed to have moral content arise. Rather, virtue ethics has been depicted by some as a way of conceiving of the moral life in a way that remains responsive to a much broader range of factors within human experience. Under this conception, a great many predicaments merit scrutiny within the life-long enterprise of moral deliberation, because even minute human predicaments and choices represent sites for the potential cultivation of character.

My interest in virtue ethics and Shakespeare is, first and foremost, dictated by how I see virtue operating in Shakespeare's plays, which is to say, non-schematically. Although I would hesitate to describe the moral universe of a play

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[7] On this point, see See David Norton on this point, in "Moral Minimalism and the Development of Moral Character," in Peter French, Theodore Uehling, Jr., and Howard Wettstein, eds., *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

like *Hamlet* as Aristotelian in the sense of being animated by Aristotelian philosophical imperatives, I maintain that virtue ethics and Aristotle's ideal of courage can nevertheless help account for what makes individuals like Hamlet tick. More broadly, a moral praxis characterized by an orientation towards virtue can, I aim to demonstrate, help account for the diverse personalities and moral agendas thought to animate early modern selves and, by implication, also Shakespeare's casts of characters. As I hope to make clear throughout this dissertation, the moral universe of Shakespeare's plays is fundamentally virtue ethical, even if the particular moral goods or 'virtues' imagined by various characters are highly idiosyncratic.

This dissertation's exploration of virtue ethics in relation to Shakespearean drama explores what it means to think about virtue ethics *without* the virtues, or at least, without an overarching regard for the ways in which Shakespeare's plays or his characters embody them. Rather than focusing on virtue as a catalogue of philosophical abstractions which Shakespeare's characters somehow manage to 'embody,' I find it both more compelling and rewarding to think about how notions of virtue structure character in the plays. In a similar vein, this dissertation considers the ways in which virtue ethics can help interpret moral agency in Shakespeare. Moral agency, that nexus of intentional and emotional states that condition speech and action in the plays, has long been the terrain of philosophically-minded character critics like A. C. Bradley, and continues to represent a source of fascination of great critical significance to Shakespeare scholars. Despite recent high-profile debates about the nature of early modern

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inwardness, the moral agency of Shakespeare's characters continues to be a matter of importance within Shakespeare studies, so long as scholars continue to maintain that the reasons why literary characters speak and act have significance, and are worth mulling over. Investigations into virtue ethics' relationship to Shakespearean drama can contribute towards the richness of those accounts in manifest ways, as I aim to make clear.

An example from *Hamlet* will help illustrate why and how virtue ethics is an important way of considering the moral agency of Shakespeare's characters. But first, I would like to focus on an example from Aristotle. In Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the virtue of courage.

> The brave man is proof against fear so far as man may be. Hence although he will sometimes fear even terrors not beyond man's endurance, he will do so in the right way, and he will endure them as principle dictates, for the sake of what is noble; for that is the end at which virtue aims. The rash man is generally thought to be an impostor, who pretends to courage which he does not possess; at least, he wishes to appear to feel towards fearful things as the courageous man actually does feel, and therefore he imitates him in the things in which he can. Hence most rash men really are cowards at heart, for they make a bold show in situations that inspire confidence, but do not endure terrors.[8]

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[8] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, and W.H.D. Rouse. Loeb Classical Library. (London: Heinemann, 1926), 3.7.2.

Aristotle's courageous man is, first and foremost, a human being capable of experiencing normal human fear; he even sometimes feels frightened of things that are not life-threatening, or what Aristotle suggestively refers to as those "terrors not beyond man's enduring." And yet, what Aristotle finds admirable about the courageous man is his ability to nevertheless reliably evidence an internalized principle, and feel fear "in the right way." For Aristotle, the right way of expressing courage seems to be tied to internal processes, and not only rational states, but also emotional ones. Although those states are invisible – after all, the rash man can appear to have them by mimicking courageous behavior a time or two -- they comprise the clearest evidence that a person has, indeed, internalized a virtue. For Aristotle, external evidences of virtue – physical displays of courage and the like -- are not sufficient; this can easily constitute a form of play-acting. Hamlet is well aware of this, too, from the very outset of the play, aware that displays of mourning are "actions that a man might play", and seemingly also aware of the *potential* for indeterminacy in visible signs (these are actions that a man *might* play).[9] Instead, real virtue is, itself, for Aristotle and for Hamlet, something that runs deeper than mere showmanship. Because of the contingency of circumstance and, in Hamlet's estimation, people's propensity to lie and be villainous, true virtue can also be difficult to discern. The courageous person for Aristotle is someone who has internalized virtue, and the evidence that he has done so is the consistency and reliability with which he acts virtuously. That

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[9] *Hamlet* 1.1.84. Katharine Maus calls attention to this point in her excellent study, *Inwardness and Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

consistency of character constitutes a kind of proof that virtue has shaped self-cultivation in significant ways. The person who has been thus shaped is someone for whom courage, or magnanimity, or whatever virtue he has instilled in himself, now comprises part of the fabric of his moral character or *ethos*.

Hamlet's explanation of his inability to exact revenge in 2.2 appeals to Aristotle's understanding of courage in at least two ways: it parallels Aristotle's estimation of courage on the level of that particular virtue's contents. Aristotelian courage is the virtue Hamlet clearly aspires to embody. More significantly, however, Hamlet also models Aristotelian virtue at the level of the architecture of his own character. He is importantly constituted, in the sense that his self-understanding is constructed, through a virtue ethical framework.

What does it mean to claim that the scaffolding of Hamlet's character is virtue ethical? Hamlet's self-concept is both enabled and circumscribed by virtue, in this case, the virtue of courage. The courageous ideal scripts out a particular course of behavior – behavior which, Hamlet is well aware, also requires a corresponding constitutional, inner component in order to add up to a tangible result. The dramatic context of Hamlet's soliloquy in 2.2 immediately after his encounter with the acting troupe highlights Hamlet's awareness of this fact. During that encounter, he laments the actor's ability to generate lifelike signs of emotion "all for nothing./ For Hecuba!" while he, Hamlet, has "the motive and the cue for passion", yet "like a muddy-mettled rascal" says nothing.[10] Hamlet in this episode calls attention to the discrepancy between constitution, feeling and

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[10] 2.2.545-55.

behavior specifically through the figure of the actor -- someone who speaks words

movingly, but without the interior conviction of character that Aristotle's model

of the courageous person explicitly requires. Aristotle's model of the courageous

individual, we might recall, includes not only the signs of courage, but an

affective dimension, too, involving someone who *feels* things in the correct way

according to the correct measure.

The virtue of courage in Hamlet's case serves an important constitutive

function. It delineates those commitments that he values, and therefore manages

to organize everyday experience into a series of meaningful encounters that carry

ethical significance for him. His response to the actor's rehearsal expresses some

of those areas of significance; the courageous standard against which he measures

himself represents a kind of lens through which he perceives everyday

phenomena. Virtue also serves an important regulative function for Hamlet.[11]

Hamlet's ideal of courage functions for him as a regulating standard, an ideal that

forms part of a system of heroic virtue that Hamlet associates with his father. That

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[11] The regulative function is the one that has been most emphasized in critical
discussions of early modern moral thought, particularly in discussions of the
regulation of passions described in a variety of writings on the passions in this
period. For a modern discussion of the significance of Renaissance self-
regulation, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-
Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); as well as "Reason, the
Passions, and the Good Life," in D. Garber and M. Ayers, eds., *The Cambridge
History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy,* vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge
University Press,1998). For a view of how early modern materials script out
models of self-regulation, see Nicolas Coeffeteau, *Table of Humane Passions,*
trans. E. Grimeston (London, 1621); and Guillaume Du Vair, *The Moral
Philosophie of the Stoicks*, trans. Thomas James and ed .Rudolph Kirk (New
Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1951); Pierre Charron, *De La Sagesse,
Livres Trois* (1601). The frontispiece for Henry Earle of Monmouth's *The Use of
Passions* (1649) depicts the well-regulated soul wherein the individual passions
are in chains, positioned appropriately below an enthroned reason.

heroism also carries with it a clearly defined set of actions, in this case, the violent satisfactions of "fatt[ing] all the region's kites" with "offal" in response to the perceived offences he imagines enduring. Hamlet's ideal of courage implies a series of actions that he feels constitutionally inadequate to perform – he is literally unable to produce the requisite substance, in this case, bile, to generate courage -- and so virtue's regulatory dimension is experienced as a painful constraint. Consequently, Hamlet feels that he "has that within which passeth show" both in the sense of something that is more authentic than the actor's display, and also in the sense of something that does not conform adequately to the very ideals he prizes – ideals which script out particular codes of conduct he is unable to successfully imitate or reproduce. These two aspects of virtue – constitutive and regulative –are inextricably joined in Shakespeare. In *Hamlet*, the virtue of courage establishes the conditions of possibility for Hamlet characterologically – conditions that make the world intelligible for him and endow it with meaning and value while, paradoxically, also excluding those elements of his character that do not conform to that model of the good life.

It is worth speculating about whom Hamlet imaginatively engages in his soliloquy in 2.2, and whom he believes prods him with such sharp and painful questions. One possibility, perhaps the most obvious, is that he rehearses speaking to his uncle, Claudius, who has alienated him from court, but whom Hamlet dares not accuse publicly of murder. Another possibility is that Hamlet's insistent questions reflect a different invisible interlocutor, namely, the ghost who torments him. The ghost problematizes springing to action because, as Hamlet shortly

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thereafter admits, the spectre he has seen may in fact be a demon, manipulating

him towards maleficent ends. He might also be inserting himself into the play he

has just seen the actor perform, and his posturing here may, in part, be rhetorical,

an example of play-acting. Yet another possibility for this scene, however, and

one that I think is far more likely, is that Hamlet here engages in a heated

dialogue with the ideals he associates with his father – the virtue of courage that

torments him, because it scripts out a clear course of action that he is

constitutionally unable to follow. Though Hamlet is able to supply rhetorical

effusiveness – what he subsequently characterizes as the whore-like "unpacking

his heart with words" – he is unable to measure up to the overarching conception

of virtue, here depicted through the imagery of swift and violent revenge, and

elsewhere associated with duty-bound adherence to his father's imperative.

Aristotle's, and Hamlet's understanding of courage as a rule can begin to

sound like a kind of deontological principle or categorical imperative that is an ill

fit for the subjective nuances that characterize his lived experience. After all,

Hamlet's soliloquy is a heated dialogue with an interlocutor who unrelentingly

and insultingly demeans him, and elsewhere Hamlet is confronted via the ghost

with standards of conduct to which he cannot measure up.

Virtue's status as a set of rules that are sometimes ill-fitting for the

subjective agents who practice them is a problem both within Shakespeare's play,

and one that also threatens the meta-critical programme I am here advancing,

which seeks to apply virtue ethics to Shakespeare's notoriously messy characters

in useful, not reductive or overly-schematic ways. On the one hand, this problem

speaks to a problem within critical practice, and the largely deontological way that Aristotle is typically read and understood within literary-critical discussions. Aristotle's ethical thought is often reduced to a series of abstract principles that are applied to the aesthetic particulars of a play or poem. This is quite typical of the way in which the *Poetics* is taught in literary classrooms. A character's merits, under this way of reasoning, are measured according to how faithfully or unfaithfully he measures up to the overarching Aristotelian 'rule.'

In one sense, Aristotle's philosophy does authorize this type of approach. Virtues ought ultimately to operate as behavior-governing principles that not only regulate action, but also at some internal level, reshape inwardness, including desire. Aristotle's remarks about the rash man in Book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as an imposter – someone who "wishes to appear to feel towards fearful things as the courageous man actually does feel" – suggest that what distinguishes the virtuous person is that he goes beyond merely imitative behaviour; his intentional and emotional states correspond with the virtue, and so he also *feels* things in a particular way.[12] This can begin to sound like a series of rules intended to not only govern behavior, but from the perspective of a literary-critical hermeneutic, also invite highly schematic modes of analysis that tend not to accord very successfully with the non-schematic quality of Shakespearean drama. Where a poet such as Edmund Spenser is concerned, a schematic approach to virtue becomes a useful critical strategy both on the level of the moral architecture

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[12] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, and W.H.D. Rouse. Loeb Classical Library. (London: Heinemann, 1926), 3.7.2.

of *The Faerie Queene*, which is plotted along a Protestantized, Classical moral-philosophical axis, and also at the level of character. Spenser's questing knights *do* actually represent philosophical abstractions, and are intended to embody virtues like temperance, holiness, and chastity.[13]

Typically in Shakespeare studies, this model of thinking about the Classical virtues as a series of principles results in lop-sided approaches to Shakespeare's characters. Over-focusing on abstract principles, and seeking out correspondences between those abstractions and Shakespeare's moral agents becomes the focus, rather than seeking to explain the complex representations of moral agency in Shakespeare. The virtue-as-principle model threatens to overshadow the kinds of quirky, subjective representations that abound in Shakespeare's plays.

If Aristotle's moral-philosophical thought stopped short at the level of moral ideals, there would not be much point in examining Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre with it in mind, and little reason to philosophize Shakespeare at all. However, Aristotle's principled approach to virtue is really only half the story. The other half is the part of his philosophy that attends in exquisitely detailed, empirical ways to the actualities of implementing and actualizing virtue in the here-and-now. In Aristotle's view, the exercise of virtue requires practical judgment that takes place in three dimensions.[14] The challenges of actually being

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[13] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene,* 3d ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton. (New York: Longman, 1977).

[14] See, for example, Aristotle's discussion in Book 3 of the *NE* of the nature of deliberation, where he concludes, "[w]e deliberate about things that are in our control and are attainable by action." Aristotle's point here is that the proper

good, rather than simply knowing the good, as Socrates maintained, involves for

Aristotle the exercise of prudent calculation amidst contingent circumstances. In

Renaissance moral-philosophical and theological discourse, this type of activation

of inert intellectual contents is typically framed through discussions of the will.

And there is a case to be made that characters like Hamlet in fact suffer from

weakness of the will, or what Shakespeare's contemporaries knew as *akrasia*:

moral incontinence. I address this possibility and the problem of *akrasia* in a more

concerted way in Chapter Three.

　　Virtue as a concept remains useful to the study of Shakespeare so long as

it does not remain confined to abstractions. In fact, virtue in Shakespeare is

decidedly the opposite of abstract: it is eminently practical, and signifies

something about the way in which characters interpret and engage with the world

around them. Charles Taylor has referred to identity as an "orientation in a space

of moral questions" – a formulation that emphasizes the way in which a person's

character is defined through the commitments they hold dear, as well as the ways

in which those commitments interrelate with the world.[15] Taylor's estimation of

identity as an orientation relative to moral questions helps bring to the fore an

important consideration for virtue ethics, too: the role of practical, lived

experience in shaping and re-shaping moral character. In Shakespeare, the

exigencies of practical moral decision-making continually subject philosophical

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objects of human deliberation are those things amenable to human direction, i.e.:
those practical concerns capable of being directed by the application of
intelligence and effort. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham.
Loeb Classical Library, 3.3.7.

[15] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

ideals and comfortable intellectual knowledge to the rigors of practical testing. It is for this very reason that moral reasoning in Shakespeare is frequently characterized as situational, The dramatic contexts in which Shakespeare's characters think, feel, speak, and behave are pressing ones experienced as real dangers, intrigues, and emotions for them. I have been proposing that the moral quality of Shakespeare's plays is virtue ethical, but it is so only insofar as virtue ethics also entails a strong practical dimensionality that takes into account the profoundly situated nature of the moral life, as it is lived.

This is something Aristotle's moral outlook also acknowledges. Aristotle's emphasis on principles of virtue is matched by a concern for integrity when it comes to moral character. Aristotle suggests as much when he writes that the happy person "will possess the element of stability" and will "bear the changes of fortunes most nobly, and with perfect propriety in every way." The internal cogency and harmonization of the virtues amounts to a form of internal self-cultivation in which one makes the best one can of one's natural resources. Aristotle analogizes that "a good general makes the most effective use of the forces at his disposal, and a good shoemaker makes the finest shoe possible out of the leather supplied him."[16] Ultimately, Aristotle's vision of moral development imagines the self's co-naturality with principles of virtue – a figuration that equally emphasizes the self's integrity with its own moral ideals. Of course, for Aristotle these must be rational and objectively worthy ideals. In Shakespeare,

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[16] *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. 1.10.11-13.

those ideals are more idiosyncratic, as I will make clear in subsequent chapters. But overwhelmingly, Aristotle's view of the moral life does emphasize a principle of self-consistency with one's own moral ideals, remaining mindful of them even within situations where it is difficult or challenging to do so. Aristotle's moral vision requires a kind of accountability to those ideals – a vision of the moral life that emphasizes moral-characterological coherence rather than self-attunement to universal harmonies, as Plato's philosophy maintains.

Shakespearean drama is not an illustration of a set of principles; rather, individuals like Hamlet express what it actually feels like to be defined by courage. Part of that subjective experience of virtue entails the experience of a sense of moral accountability towards those ideals that define moral character.[17] Hamlet's self-understanding is importantly defined by the idea that he is a good, loyal son faithful to his father's ideals and way of life. Those moral commitments, in turn, entail a series of moral responsibilities or "I ought" type of obligations for him. If Hamlet's sense of himself is characterized by the concept of a good and loyal son, then part of that identity entails an ethical commitment to exact revenge for his father's murder. The "I am" is dependent on "what I do" as well as "what I ought to be doing." Phrased slightly differently, the "I ought" expresses the way in which an individual moves into the phenomenological and the practical, and literally completes and enacts *ethos* within the domain of lived experience.

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[17] By subjective, I mean literally those capacities through which individuals process and render intelligible their experience of the world, and not the historically conditioned, psychologized inwardness with which Renaissance scholars have recently taken issue.

The continuum between thought and action that is so central to this conception of the moral life also means that notions of virtue are inseparable from conceptions of what individuals of that sort *ought* to be doing. The "ought to" is another way of describing a principle of moral responsibility, and the kind of moral responsibility hard-wired to the Classical concept of *ethos* or moral character means that moral character itself is importantly linked to a certain kind of awareness of one's moral obligations.

Classical moral character does not just denote identity in an inert sense, as a series of attributes or qualities. Identity contains both active dimensionality (what I choose), as well as an idealistic aspect (what I want), and is shaped gradually and progressively into substantive moral character. The practical concern for how that is worked out in the world is an important part of many Renaissance vernacular writers' conception of the moral life, as is a teleological sense of the purpose towards which moral striving is directed. This understanding of virtue was also operative in Shakespeare's day in discussions of plants and flowers, as a function of the way that an herb's virtue, for example, was described. The virtue of a plant consists of its operative principle or essential quality, but also that thing that makes it useful, through which it operates phenomenologically as a curative substance. Plants, but also human beings were imagined, through the discourse of virtue, to be oriented towards some redeeming end. The conventional figuration of virtue as an arrow, recounted in John Wilkinson's 1547 English translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics* ("a man shooteth at his pricke for his marke, so every craft hath his final intent which does

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set forth the worke") – emphasizes the sense in which virtue not only aims at an intended target, but is also something that is in motion, progressing temporally and spatially towards a desired aim.[18]

II. Virtue ethics and the critical tradition

Shakespeare scholars, and character critics in particular are already aware of the heuristic value of moral ideals for characters like Hamlet. Mustapha Fahmi's article "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human", which appears in a collection of essays devoted to discussing the critical contribution of Harold Bloom, is one such publication. Fahmi's essay addresses Bloom's well-known theory of Shakespeare's characters as self-overhearers, and his central point is that Shakespeare's characters are *not* self-overhearers, in the sense that they do not develop, nor are they constituted through a mysterious self-generating process of growth via the sheer exuberance of their own supra-human personalities. Instead, Fahmi advances the more moderate claim that Shakespeare's characters, in fact, develop and are constituted by the relationships or *dialogues* in which they engage with the individuals who matter to them.[19]

The notion of dialogically shaped personhood, and of dialogism in general, is rooted in Bakhtinian theory, but despite the Bakhtinian genealogy Fahmi claims for his argument, it shares a great deal in common with an Aristotelian approach, too. A significant portion of Fahmi's impetus to deploy

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[18] John Wilkinson, *The Ethiques of Aristotle, That is to Saye, Preceptes of Goode Behavoute and Perfighte Honestie.* (London, 1547)
[19] Mustapha Fahmi, "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human," in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds., *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 97-107.

Bakhtin's dialogism can, I think, be understood as a function of a more widespread critical interest in finding moderate alternatives to Bloomian and post-structuralist modes of characterological criticism. Bloom's brand of criticism, which insists on the absolute supremacy of the autonomous Shakespearean subject, represents one extreme, while a Foucauldian social constructivism that insists on human subjectivity as nothing but an empty husk, represents its inverted twin. Dialogism manages to understand the identity of fictive agents as imbricated within the social worlds they inhabit, in a way that defies Bloom's sense of the social as merely ornamental, and Foucault's sense of it as thoroughly constitutive.[20]

Fahmi's position, much like Aristotle's, takes seriously the presence of a social world as well as moral agents who inhabit and act within it. For Aristotle, the moral virtues themselves are ways of orienting the self within the temporally situated life. For Aristotle, the business of moral philosophy pertains to those things that are "practicable or attainable by man," in contrast to philosophical idealism and its concern for Ideas of the Good.[21] Moral virtue in Aristotle and in Shakespeare is not something that exists in a vacuum, but is instead a highly responsive and importantly practical phenomenon.[22] In contradistinction to Bloom's notion of Shakespearean character as timeless and hermetically isolated

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[20] See Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*; and Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
[21] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. 1.6.13.
[22] See, for example, Aristotle's discussion at 1.6.16 in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the importance of considering particular human predicaments in their particular varieties rather than appealing first to general principles or ideals.

from socio-historical actualities (and, as Fahmi argues, Bloom's own similarly flawed self-concept as a critic wholly uninfluenced by rivals like Greenblatt), the Shakespearean dramatic universe that Fahmi describes is populated by characters with a high level of attentiveness and sensitivity to their environments, whose identity is importantly shaped by their contact with other social agents. "Shakespeare's characters," he writes, "become full individuals capable of change because, like other individuals, they are engaged in a continuous dialogue, or dispute, with those who matter to them."[23] Some of those contacts serve to reinforce pre-existing elements of a character's persona, but Shakespeare's plays also represent social encounters as potential challenges, and ones that often threaten to endanger and overwhelm an individual's sense of characterological integrity. Hamlet's relationship with his father is a clear example of these tensions. The very imperative to avenge which he derives from Old Hamlet forces him to, at the very least, confront a series of physical dangers (committing regicide is no simple task), and at most, perform a series of actions mechanically, but without feeling (by leaving Gertrude to the pangs of her own conscience), without attending to the living social relationships that will inevitably suffer rupture in the wake of his revenge.

Shakespeare's characters are importantly animated by ideals, and those ideals often exist in competitive tension with the exigencies of circumstance or, in Hamlet's case, with the parameters of his "pigeon-livered" constitution and the corrupt world of Elsinore in which he must attempt to survive and thrive.

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[23] Fahmi, "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human," 99.

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Character criticism like Fahmi's has revalued the usefulness of moral ideals to the critical understanding of Shakespeare's characters. He has, in a sense, already made ample use of virtue ethics via the priority he assigns to virtue in the analysis of Shakespeare's characters. Virtue, understood as a set of ideals, has important expressive value for Shakespeare scholars that can help character critics come to a more accurate, distortion-free estimation of who Hamlet, Hal, and Horatio most aspire to be.

Many of the moral-philosophical ideas Aristotle foregrounds –self-awareness; an intensive focus on the mechanisms of practical reason; a preoccupation with the intentional and emotional states that condition intentional action – have figured prominently in the work of scholars under the guise of philosophical approaches to Shakespeare. Stanley Cavell's work on *King Lear* is perhaps the most well known scholarly writing to adopt an agency-based approach to Shakespeare's dramatic works, and many of his ideas share important parallels with the Aristotelian concepts I have been describing. Cavell pays particular attention to the mechanics of moral agency in Shakespeare, and he scrupulously scours and reconstructs the intentional and emotional states of Shakespeare's fictional characters, most famously Lear himself.[24] Michael Bristol's later criticism is also a good example of work that pays careful attention to behind-the-scenes questions in Shakespeare as a way of making sense of some of the play's most pressing open questions. For Bristol, deliberation about

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[24] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), particularly "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*.

questions like how many children Lady Macbeth may have had encourages the close consideration of Shakespeare's use of language, and for him, this kind of deliberation about the fictional lives of Shakespeare's characters and intensive linguistic scrutiny forms the basis for ethical and political reflection in actual contexts, too.[25]

But why is it important to think about virtue or moral agency in Shakespeare specifically as a function of virtue ethics, rather than some other type of philosophical approach? After all, Fahmi emphasizes Bakhtin, not Aristotle, in his discussion of Shakespeare. Cavell imagines Shakespeare in relation to skeptical thought, and Michael Bristol invokes Charles Taylor, A. C. Bradley, and a host of assorted philosophical voices in his treatment of the plays.

One of the reasons why it remains useful to situate philosophical discussions of character through a historically grounded category like Classical virtue ethics is that Renaissance inwardness and, by implication, character, has been submitted to an intensive degree of critical scrutiny and disparagement in recent decades.[26] That scrutiny and the increased awareness of the importance of

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[25] See Michael Bristol, "How Many Children Did She Have?" in John Joughin, ed., *Philosophical Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2000), 18-33.

[26] See Margreta de Grazia, *'Hamlet' without Hamlet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Grazia, "When Did Hamlet Become Modern?" *Textual Practice* 17, no. 3 (2003): 485-503, "Hamlet before Its Time," *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 62, no. 4 (2001): 355-75; "Teleology, Delay, and the 'Old Mole,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1999): 251-67; as well as Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, "The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1993): 255-83. See also Catherine Belsey, "The Romantic Construction of the Unconscious," in Francis Barker et al., eds., *1789, Reading, Writing, Revolution: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature, July 1981* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1982), 67-80. as well as Jonathan Goldstein ???

historicized categories of analysis have cast an unflattering sort of attention onto

and non-historicized approaches. Philosophical discussion of character can and

often do read as a-historical or non-historical – a quality that threatens to render

philosophical approaches to Shakespeare irrelevant to the wider field of scholarly

debate in Shakespeare studies. I mention this not as a way of capitulating to any

specific argument about Renaissance inwardness, particularly those that cast

inwardness as an irrelevant anachronism. This dissertation aims to contribute

towards a renewed and greatly fortified conception of the fullness, verisimilitude,

and complexity of Shakespeare's characters, inwardness and all.

However, it would be naïve to pretend that attacks on Renaissance

subjectivity have not called negative of attention to approaches that refuse to

historicize their claims. Philosophy, particularly modern analytic philosophy,

tends to be one of those domains that is more concerned with the logical

coherence of ideas than with their historical nuances. From the standpoint of

today's critical landscape in Shakespeare studies, this can begin to sound like

something approaching Bloom's refusal to pay any mind to cultural and historical

factors in the analysis of Shakespeare's plays. In a not unrelated sense, analytic-

philosophical approaches to Shakespeare are rarely seen in Shakespeare studies

nowadays.[27]

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[27] See Eva Dadlez, *What's Hecuba to Him? Fictional Events and Actual Emotions*
(University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) for an example
of one such analytic-philosophical approach to the question of fiction and emotion
in *Hamlet*. Dadlez's contribution and approach to the plays is a conspicuous rarity
within Shakespeare studies.

Philosophical argumentation may be about the cogency of ideas more than it is about the historical contexts that condition forms of knowledge, but tracing the specific socio-historic forms through which Aristotle's or Shakespeare's ideas took shape is not surely inimical to the enterprise of either the philosophical or literary understanding of Shakespeare. Tracing how it is that Aristotle's ideas were being digested and utilized by a range of vernacular English writers, Shakespeare among them, is part of the aim of this dissertation. This includes investigating the complex ways that Aristotle's thought was being syncretized with other Classical and Christian ideas, particularly Stoic and Pauline-Calvinist strains of Renaissance thought. Hamlet's attitudes towards emotion, for example, engage with and reflect both Aristotle's ideas, as well as Cicero's.

When Hamlet declares, rather paradoxically, in 3.2: "Give me that man/ That is not passion's slave and I will wear him/ In my heart's core – ay, in my heart of heart,"[28] he rehearses a Stoic, not an Aristotelian commonplace about emotion that views passion as a fundamentally irrational, corrosive force. The Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, involving a state of release from the pressures associated with passionate arousal, constitutes one of the most recognizable features of the Stoic philosophical perspective, and one with which Hamlet struggles throughout Shakespeare's tragedy. The paradox inherent in Hamlet's remark to Horatio nicely encapsulates the central problematic associated with his perspective on emotion: Hamlet both venerates the apathetic man who refuses to be passion's slave, and relies on the discourse of affectivity to rehearse that very veneration.

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[28] *Hamlet*, 3.2.67-9.

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The footnote to this speech in the Arden edition reminds readers that "cor" the

Latin root for heart, is repeated in Hamlet's insistence that he would "wear" such

a man in his "heart's core" - a point that reinforces his dependence on the

language of emotion despite his attempt to dismiss it.[29]

Emotion was widely understood as a site of interface between public and

private worlds in early modern discussions of the passions. For sixteenth-century

English Jesuit Thomas Wright, passions are fundamentally liminal, responsive to

both external phenomena and closely tied to the physiological processes that

affect humoral balance and result in the immediate, physical experience of

emotions like anger and fear.[30]

The relationship between inner and outer, private and public, in which

emotion has a place within the enterprise of moral character-formation, and within

socio-political life, is an important dimension of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Under a

virtue ethical concept, the socio-political domain represents the natural extension

of internal self-cultivation. That very domain is the one that Hamlet views as

completely mismatched to his own convictions, intentions, and feelings.

Where Aristotle's vision of virtue is inclusive of emotions, or at least a

rationally-refined set of them, the Stoic view is radically opposed to passion in all

of its forms. The Stoic conception views emotion as fundamentally non-cognitive,

and forms of invasive diseases that poison rational thought. In the seventeenth

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[29] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 301n.69.
[30] Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*. Ed. William Webster Newbold. (New York: Garland, 1986).

century, Stoicism was a philosophy associated with inwardness and retreat from public life. As Christoph Strohm persuasively argues, the advent of Renaissance Neo-Stoic thought occurred in the wake of enormous religious and political upheavals throughout early modern Europe. In response to those disruptions, Stoic thought turns instead towards the inner landscape, emphasizing the ideal of *ataraxic* self-cultivation that discounts external goods while prioritizing inner tranquility.[31]

The Stoic ideal of *ataraxia* consists first and foremost of an inward state – one often but not exclusively premised upon an ideal of removal from civic life. Tracing the Renaissance interpretive tradition associated with *apatheia*, it is difficult to find its consistent or obvious political analogue, or a clear relationship to the realm of socio-political action, in contrast to Aristotle's civic humanism, which preoccupied a range of seminal humanist figures in fourteenth- and fifteenth- century Italy. Seventeenth-century Neo-Stoic thought, in fact, emphasizes a kind of moral exceptionalism, or series of issues for which it was deemed acceptable to retain private opinions without expressing them publicly.

It is certainly a truism to state that Shakespeare's era was one characterized by enormous socio-political and intellectual upheavals. In *After Virtue,* MacIntyre describes early modernity as a significant period of transition in Western ethical thought, and it is equally possible that a play like *Hamlet*'s

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[31] See Christoph Strohm's "Ethics in Early Calvinism." *Moral Philosophy on the Threshold of Modernity.* Ed. Jill Kraye and Risto Saarinen. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2005).

representation of emotion can help make sense of some of those monumental shifts.

It also makes a good deal of sense to consider ways in which virtue itself may have been coming unmoored from "the virtues" in this period, in the sense that those shifts necessarily meant eclectic meldings, changes, losses, and movement towards concepts and modes of organization that had yet to crystallize into formal or institutionalized structures.

Aristotle's consonance with Shakespeare has little to do with the formal, institutionalized Aristotelianism evidenced in Latin commentaries, or with the static rules outlined by his subsequent neoclassical interpreters. Shakespeare's dramatic art reflects a practical, vernacular emphasis typical of the popular medium in which he wrote and the kind of situated moral agency represented in the plays, which incorporates and tests philosophical ideas as much as it rehearses or imitates them. In *Shakespearean Pragmatism*, Lars Engle discusses the idea that Shakespeare engages in a form of philosophical speculation via characters who interrogate stable concepts and authoritative ideas rather than merely reiterating philosophical points of view. He argues that the philosophical as a category is something other than the postulation of stable concepts and universal truths.[32] Where Engle locates Shakespeare's approach to philosophical contents in the later thought of American pragmatists like Dewey and James, my interest in moving the discussion backwards towards those Aristotelian-inspired thinkers writing in the vernacular tradition in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries

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[32] Engle, *Shakespearean Pragmatism*, introduction.

highlights the sense in which those ideas Engle isolates had yet to be articulated as part of a developed philosophical programme. The concepts being dealt with in Shakespeare are still messy, and still, as it were, embedded in the tangle of ideas that were as much a function of a deconstructed, disarranged sense of what had been lost as they were portents of what was later to become a well-developed system of thought. The sense of mourning, melancholy and loss that pervades a play like *Hamlet* seems to call for an account that is as attentive to what has been un-done as it is to whatever new strains were to later emerge from the ashes. This dissertation's focus on *ethos* or moral character – its constituent elements, and the kind of teleology it imagines between inner and outer, private and social worlds, provides the basis for discussing what has been lost in a work like *Hamlet* as much as what was subsequently to arise from the ashes.

One of the most pervasive critiques of modern virtue ethics among philosophers has been that virtue ethics fails to provide prescriptive accounts of behavior, or concrete assertions about what to do when faced with moral choices. Although this deficiency undoubtedly poses genuine problems for philosophers interested in thinking through virtue ethics' viability as a mode of moral theorizing, virtue ethics' lack of prescriptive specificity may well be one of its strengths for the study of Shakespeare's plays. One of the possibilities raised by this insufficient specificity is that there may well be no recipe-book for virtue ethics, not in the sense currently required by philosophers. Instead, virtue ethics seems to require something like the use and exercise of instrumental judgment, in which moral ideals are applied to the exigencies of particular situations in

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response to the practical requirements of individual agents and their circumstances. The virtues, in this sense, are eminently practical, because they respond to the contingencies of lived experience.

The philosophical objection to virtue ethics as a mode of moral theory that is insufficiently prescriptive at the level of action stems from virtue ethics' sometimes frustrating emphasis on moral character over and above specific moral behaviors. Moral behavior under a virtue ethical conception is a function of what the moral individual does; it is not a set prescription or particular set of isolate-able behaviors. This particular approach to character is evocative of Renaissance conduct manuals such as Castiglione's *The Courtier*, which articulates a similar estimation of what constitutes gentlemanly conduct[33]. As much as conduct manuals like Castiglione's are effusive in their exposition of the secrets of how to behave like a gentlemen, their accounts also boil down to a certain inimitability that requires that one actually be a gentleman in order to meet the requirements of ethical and behavioral decorum, and consistently generate gentlemanly behavior. The secret of behaving like a gentleman is, it turns out, the possession of that interior nobility capable of responding to any given situation as a noble person should. This kind of emphasis on the primacy of moral character is, from the standpoint of modern moral theorizing, understandably frustrating in its circularity. However, this model also opens up other possibilities for

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[33] Baldassarre Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation: An Authoritative Text Criticism,* ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).

understanding the relationship between virtue and practical action in new and, from the standpoint of Shakespeare scholarship, significant ways.

This understanding of virtue calls attention to the importance of applying instrumental judgment to everyday moral decision-making in a way that effectively actualizes moral ideals. After all, the kind of consistency of character Aristotle mentions literally involves habitually choosing to behave in ways that reinforce rather than degrade the integral link between moral ideals and moral praxis. Do this enough times, and it solidifies as a kind of moral-characterological integrity, or an internalized rule that results in a kind of ethical decorum.

Alfred Mele has called attention to what he perceives to be a problem with Aristotle's model of moral deliberation when it comes to this issue.[34] For him, that model is fundamentally unreasonable, because it requires that a person be virtuous in order to behave virtuously under those circumstances when there is little or no time for moral deliberation. Reduce the time in which a decision must be made down to an instant, and individuals, he argues, must rely on their true moral 'natures.' Under these circumstances, only those who have already internalized the principle, or are already virtuous, will make the correct choice. In response to Mele's concluding suggestion that Aristotle's model of rational deliberation is neither rational nor deliberative, I would like to point out that the Aristotelian virtue ethical model of character also emphasizes the importance of habit in the cultivation of moral character and sound moral habits.[35] Although

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[34] Alfred Mele, "Choice and Virtue in the *Nicomacheam Ethics*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 405-23.
[35] Mele, "Choice and Virtue" 423

these may not directly serve an individual confronted with a moral choice in the immediate sense that Mele highlights, it does hold out the promise of re-fashioning the self along moral lines in a more temporally extensive sense, of an agent's moral life over the long term. Equally, Aristotle's estimation of virtue as a kind of consistency of character can function as a goal – a goal which, in and of itself, has enormous motivational power to encourage the kind of moral practice that can help actualize moral ideals.[36] Of course, the lifelong practice of moral self-cultivation involves giving a kind of priority to moral experience and the day-to-day exercise of moral choice that, in the long-term, may manage to smooth over the inconsistencies between moral ideals and constitutional proclivities, and cultivate character in effective, real ways. Fundamentally, Aristotle's model therefore calls attention to the importance of taking responsibility for and exercising one's functions as a moral agent in habitual, regular ways over the course of an entire life-span.

Before it becomes possible to discuss Aristotle's ideas in a real way in relation to Shakespeare, it is important to first encounter Aristotle as he was understood in the Renaissance, including those ways that his thought was being translated, read, and utilized in Shakespeare's day. In Chapter One, I explore Aristotle's intellectual legacy in the Renaissance in order to better account for what being philosophical and virtue ethical meant to Shakespeare's contemporaries. In early modern England, vernacular moral-philosophical writers scrupulously attended to those elements that underwrite moral agency and the

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[36] See David Norton on this point, in "Moral Minimalism and the Development of Moral Character," in *Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue*.

moral life, and those intentional states, both rational and emotional, that antecede physical actions. They did this while pondering the relationship between environmental cues, inward responses, and larger questions of human health and happiness in manuals on the passions, volumes of *sententiae*, and guides to human health.

Chapter One explores early modern English-language self-help writing produced in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England. My discussion focuses on the ways in which self-help writing from the period outlines a comprehensive yet distinctively vernacular project of virtue ethical philosophy – in other words, philosophy lived out in the everyday. I discuss some of the features that characterize the vernacular Renaissance approach to virtue ethics, including its characteristic emphasis on contingency, and the relationship between situated reasoning amidst contingent circumstances and moral agency. While this may seem merely pragmatic, in fact these ideas form part of a much older way of conceiving of philosophy rooted in Aristotelian moral thought, particularly Renaissance adaptations of it. Vernacular writing of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that addresses human health and happiness gesture towards the practical nuts-and-bolts of the moral life that have important points of correspondence with Shakespeare's art of characterization.

While Chapter One anatomizes Renaissance accounts of moral agency, Chapter Two focuses on the intractable challenges of locating sources of moral agency in Shakespeare. The problem in Shakespeare isn't that virtue hardly matters; the issue is that it matters differently to different characters. Moral

commitments are different for Hamlet than they are for Iago. Cordelia's moral orientation, to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase, differs greatly from Cleopatra's. I turn to a discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* and the play's notoriously inscrutable Jewish moneylender, as a way of exploring the challenges of sourcing out ethical commitments in Shakespeare's plays. In Shylock's case, those sources have remained elusive, in large part, because of a tendency on the part of the critical tradition to ignore them in favor of reductive Patristic paradigms for interpreting the play.

I propose in Chapter Two that Shylock's sources of moral agency *are* made available in the play, and that they are importantly bound up with Shylock's self-concept as a Jew and his strong identification with the Biblical figure of Jacob. By exploring ways in which the Genesis Jacob stories map onto Shakespeare's plays, I provide an account of moral agency in *Merchant* that takes seriously the importance of Shylock's self-estimation as a member of the Jewish nation. Although Aristotle hardly counted Shylock's Jewish *ethos* among his list of moral virtues, I point out ways in which Shylock's *ethos* can nevertheless be explicated through a virtue ethical model of character that examines virtue as a function of characterological orientation, rather than the particular virtues Aristotle enumerates.

Chapter Two devotes considerable attention to the Patristic paradigm that imagines a correspondence between Jews and base materialism on the one hand, and spiritualized mercy and Christians on the other. Although I argue against the suitability of that paradigm for reading Shakespeare's comedy, at the same time, I

inquire into the nature of the intersection between the literal, the concrete, and the

practical on the one hand, and the abstract, the ideal, the immaterial on the other

when it comes to the formation of ethical identity. When it comes to *The*

Merchant of Venice, those two elements have been juxtaposed into a relationship

which, I argue, audiences ought to find unsettling. In Chapter Three, I explore an

equally unsettling correspondence between matter and spirit in *The Winter's Tale*,

in particular the critical tendency to read its ethical turns through the lens of

Pauline grace while ignoring the play's practical ethical developments. I focus in

this chapter on *akrasia* or weakness of the will as a way of explaining both the

play's theological and practical-ethical dimensionality.

Chapter 1: Virtue Ethics in Shakespeare's England

I. Aristotle in the Renaissance

Before turning to the matter of Aristotle and Shakespeare, I first intend to

address the thorny topic of Aristotle's influence on Renaissance culture. I describe

Aristotle's Renaissance presence as a thorny subject for scholars because until

very recently, Aristotle's relevance to Renaissance intellectual life has been

clouded by a series of pervasive critical misapprehensions. Aristotle's impact on

early modern European culture was widely presumed to be vestigial and

reactionary, particularly so in contrast to Plato's. Aristotelianism was supposedly

reaching the end of its long shelf life by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in

the sense of becoming increasingly irrelevant to the progressive intellectual

endeavors of the early modern era.

For many decades, few historians approached the topic of Aristotle in the

Renaissance with a view towards revisiting actual evidence of Aristotle's

influence. Instead, historical discussions of early modern intellectual history

tended to be guided by a series of assumptions about how that influence operated,

and how it was constituted.[1] Historians and literary scholars alike devoted far

more energy to discussing Renaissance Neo-Platonism and humanism because

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[1] Among historians, Eugenio Garin and Paul Oskar Kristeller are among the
notable exceptions to this tendency. Kristeller was among the first twentieth-
century scholar to point out that Aristotelian thought in the Renaissance was
anything but a "body of common doctrines" or a stable corpus of received ideas
transmitted in a pure form over time. In Kristeller's view, Renaissance
Aristotelianism was comprised of a group of thinkers with diversified opinions on
many different issues. Those thinkers "shared a common terminology, a common
method of argument, and the reference to a common body of authoritative texts,"
but produced varying conclusions about those texts. *Renaissance Thought II:
Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 113-14.

these were the movements identified as sites of innovation among the era's leading intellectuals. Consequently, Aristotle's influence was frequently described through a contrast with that of Plato and the humanists. Typically, historians aligned Aristotle with conservative academic contexts and anti-progressive scholastic academic infrastructures, while Plato was associated with progressive, crypto-modern ideas and innovations.

The supposed decline of Aristotelian thought in early modernity was often implicitly linked to the advent of Renaissance Neo-Platonism. The two influences were often depicted as rivals locked in a seesaw of intellectual dominance, with the fate of Aristotelianism imagined to be inversely bound up with Neo-Platonism's strong new appeal in Renaissance Europe. For many intellectual historians, Plato and Aristotle embodied more than just two distinctive approaches of the kind illustrated in Raphael's *School of Athens*, with its downward-pointing Aristotle and upward-motioning Plato. Each philosopher was associated with a particular era's modes of thought, with Plato standing for the progressive ideas that, via humanists, supposedly superseded those of the outmoded, more conservative Aristotle.

Under this view of intellectual history, a text such as Petrarch's *On His Own Ignorance*, which expresses a complex, ambivalent relationship to Aristotelian thought, was thought to signal the beginning of a paradigm shift away from rigid, reactionary scholasticism towards fresher, more recognizably modern ideas and methodologies. The Renaissance *zeitgeist* came to be linked both explicitly and implicitly for many modern historians and literary scholars, with a

characteristically early modern longing for alternatives to Aristotelianism and medieval intellectual culture. Where the Renaissance was – and arguably still is -- frequently described as a period of transition and movement away from medieval modes of thought and social organization and structures towards modern practices and values, the Renaissance *qua* Renaissance also became importantly bound up, for many modern intellectuals, with a monumental shift away from Aristotle. It was this crucial turn away from medieval Aristotelian scholasticism towards humanist ideals that allegedly precipitated Western culture's progress into modernity.

These assumptions about Renaissance Aristotelianism, its relationship to modernity, and its connection to other contemporary intellectual influences comprised a commonly accepted part of the *grand récit* of Western intellectual history for several generations of twentieth-century historians and teachers of history. It certainly accounts for the way that I encountered Western intellectual history and the concept of the Renaissance when I first studied it in high school and then college. However, with the recent publication of Charles Schmitt's *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (1983) and David Lines' *Aristotle's Ethics in the Italian Renaissance* (2002), Aristotle's influence on Renaissance European culture has begun to enjoy renewed attention from historians and, shortly thereafter, also from a select range of literary scholars.[2] Schmitt's and Lines'

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[2] Charles Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); David Lines, *Aristotle's Ethics in the Italian Renaissance (1300-1600): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). Literary scholars who have recently pursued Aristotle's influence on Renaissance culture and Shakespeare in particular include David Beauregard,

studies have effected a much-needed revision of the current historical

understanding of Aristotle's place within Western intellectual history. As

Schmitt's study makes clear, many of the assumptions about Aristotle in the

Renaissance that have shaped historical thinking for decades, in fact, have little or

no grounding in evidentiary criteria.

Schmitt's study is not the first to argue for a revised view of Aristotle's

early modern intellectual legacy; Paul Oskar Kristeller and Eugenio Garin both

advocated for a revised view of Aristotle's importance to Renaissance intellectual

life as early as the nineteen-fifties. However, Schmitt's *Aristotle in the*

Renaissance is the first historical investigation of Aristotle's influence to

intensively review printing records, university records, and other archival

materials that consider a range of specific uses of Aristotle in the fifteenth,

sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. Schmitt's efforts to revisit Aristotle's

presence in Renaissance European intellectual life have certainly extended and

fleshed out Kristeller's initial claim three decades prior in *The Classics and*

Renaissance Thought, that Aristotelians and humanists were not opposing forces

pitted against one another. Renaissance Aristotelians or so-called scholastics

relied on the same texts as humanists, including the works of Aristotle, and both

scholastics and humanists responded to a common register of ideas,

methodologies, and authoritative writings in ways that were typically syncretic,

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Luke Wilson, Christopher Crosbie, and Joshua Scodel. I discuss their
contributions later in this chapter.

drawing conclusions from Aristotle on one issue while relying on Plato or Seneca for others.[3]

Schmitt has established a persuasive case for a vital Aristotelian presence in Renaissance European culture, arguing that Aristotle's philosophy remained close to the pulse of pressing contemporary developments in a way that previous scholarship had overwhelmingly ignored. His work calls attention to the sheer variety, multiplicity, and vitality of Aristotelian intellectual activity in Renaissance Europe. Most importantly, he recasts the category of Aristotelianism by pluralizing it, coining the term 'Renaissance Aristotelianisms.'[4] Schmitt's deliberately pluralized 'Aristotelianisms' has since become a *mot de clé* among intellectual historians, signifying the plurality -- in the sense of abundance as well as diversity -- of Aristotelian intellectual activity in the early modern period, as well as its strongly syncretic and eclectic tendencies. The plurality of Aristotelian thought in early modern Europe, Schmitt maintains, speaks to an ongoing engagement between Renaissance thinkers and Aristotelian philosophy that constituted an important part of the early modern era's intellectual vitality. That vitality had once been attributed to the advent of Neo-Platonism, and Schmitt has

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[3] Paul Oskar Kristeller. *The Classics and Renaissance Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), 41-42.

[4] See Schmitt, *Aristotle in the Renaissance*, 18-25, for a discussion of the spectrum of uses of Aristotle in Renaissance Europe, and the connection between Renaissance humanist scholarship and the widespread scholarly translation and preparation of Aristotle's texts in the period. Schmitt explains that Aristotle was more commonly approached through the Greek in the sixteenth century, and a broad, historicized knowledge of Classical institutions, literature, and philosophy. Additionally, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a rise of philological specialists who placed great care in translating Aristotle's work, producing good texts to then be studied by philosophers.

convincingly argued that this simply is not borne out by the evidence. Schmitt, Lines, and a handful of other intellectual historians have managed to successfully call into question the old, familiar picture of intellectual life in Renaissance Europe, which had categorized the post-humanist intellectual climate as Neo-Platonic, anti-scholastic, and inimical to Aristotle. In the wake of these studies, it has become increasingly apparent that Aristotle was not only marginally present within Renaissance culture, or present solely within conservative academic life. In fact, many of the most so-called progressive areas of the European intellectual landscape remained fundamentally Aristotelian until well into the seventeenth century, in ways that are only now beginning to come to light with increasing scholarly attention.

Within institutionalized Christianity, the Reformation did not diminish widespread interest in Aristotelian natural and moral philosophy; Aristotle's writings continued to remain current, even among Reformers. Virtually all post-1517 sects of European Christianity (including but not limited to Jesuits) utilized Aristotle's philosophical insights.[5]

Within academic institutions, Aristotle's ideas remained current and influential well outside those areas of intellectual life long associated with scholastic strains of thought. Moreover, the term 'scholastic' itself misleadingly

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[5] Martin Luther's famous tirade against Aristotle is an illustrative example of how leading intellectual figures heavily steeped in Aristotelian learning were often the same ones who publicly disclaimed Classical philosophy. Luther's repudiation of Aristotle is therefore at least somewhat ironic for readers familiar with his own deeply Aristotelian educational background, and his intellectual indebtedness to Classical philosophical thought . See his "Disputations against Scholastic Theology, 1517," in James Atkinson, ed. and trans., *Early Theological Works* (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1962).

conceals a broad spectrum of thinkers and ideas, each of which utilized and adapted Aristotle eclectically. "Concealed beneath the umbrella of 'Aristotelian' are a very large number of thinkers of very diverse orientation," Schmitt reasons. "The stereotype 'Scholastic' in no way describes the range of possibilities – and actualities – present in the historical development of events."[6]

Aristotle's place within continental European and English universities did not vanish or even diminish with the rise to prominence of humanist scholars. Humanist-directed university curricula continued to include Aristotle, particularly the *Ethics*, as a primary reference text, although it was typical for humanists to attempt to contextualize Aristotle's philosophy among his Greek peers.[7]

Recent studies of Renaissance printing records convincingly establish that members of the European reading public were keenly interested in Aristotelian philosophy throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Aristotelian print culture not only persisted; it positively flourished in the sixteenth century, when an explosion of new translations and editions emerged, comprising a corpus rivalled only by Biblical literature. Schmitt cites three to four thousand editions of *Aristotelica* published between the invention of printing and 1600. By contrast, editions of Plato "stand at less than 500."[8] The cultural effects of the widespread re-translation of Aristotle in this period, which must have been significant, still represents unexplored territory for historians, though the topic certainly merits sustained scholarly treatment. What has been noted by historians is that from the

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[6] Charles Schmitt, *John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England* (Kingston, Ont.: McGill-Queens University Press, 1983), 217-18.
[7] See Lines, *Aristotle's Ethics in the Italian Renaissance*.
[8] Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance,* 13-14.

1570s onward, a renewed interest in Greek versions of Aristotle resulted in the publication, following Casaubon's 1590 edition, of dual language Latin and Greek editions of both single and collected works of Aristotle.[9] Aristotle's works were available on a massive scale to a broad range of readers in this period. Not only instructors, but also university students owned copies of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the sixteenth century, Aristotelian philosophical texts were available for advanced scholars proficient in Latin and Greek, school-aged learners with some Latin, and those who had little Latin or formal philosophical training at all. In the domain of moral philosophy, the *Nicomachean Ethics* remained the standard text consulted by students at Cambridge and Oxford, and commentaries on the *Ethics* like John Case's *Speculum moralium quaestonium* constituted "the unofficial textbooks of the Elizabethan Faculty of Arts."[10]

There is little that is controversial about asserting that Aristotle was among the most entrenched and authoritative of philosophical authorities in Renaissance Europe. From the point of view of traditional historical scholarship on Aristotle, however, it is surprising that his authority managed to generate a multitude of eclectic new responses from interpreters. Internal consistency was once held up as the defining feature of pre-modern Aristotelian thought in Europe. Recent studies, however, document clear and detailed instances where

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[9] See Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance*, chap. 2.

[10] James McConica, "Humanism and Aristotle in Tudor Oxford," *English Historical Review* 94 (1979): 299. As I will discuss in the following section, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was, curiously, not among the Classical works translated into English in the Renaissance, except for one poor rendition from an Italian translation. The lack of a 'good' English translation of such a seminal work represents a historical curiosity that merits a great deal more attention than it has received.

Renaissance thinkers approached Aristotle in precisely the opposite ways: they

tended to overwhelmingly use and adapt bits of his philosophy syncretically. In

the Renaissance, Aristotle was being adapted in ways that varied tremendously

from thinker to thinker. Schmitt, echoing Kristeller, convincingly argues that

Aristotelianisms in the Renaissance were characterized by eclectic adaptation, not

the wholesale digestion and repetition of received ideas.[11] Subsequent studies of

Aristotle in the Renaissance published in the wake of Schmitt's book have made

increasingly clear the stunning diversity and eclecticism of Aristotelian sub-

cultures throughout Europe.[12] Further scholarship on the particular socio-cultural

practices of Renaissance Aristotelian thinkers and networks of thinkers promises

to further complicate the traditional, schematic view of his influence, and further

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[11] According to Schmitt, "Eclecticism became an Aristotelian *status quo* in the sixteenth century nearly everywhere; in England with Digby and Case, as well as in Italy with Verino and Mazzoni. That century, though it saw a certain 'purifying' tendency, was in large measure an age of differing blends of eclecticism, as much among university Aristotelians as among Platonists. We must not forget that when we evaluate the philosophical thought of the age" (*Aristotle and the Renaissance*, 102).

[12] Intellectual and cultural historians' increasing focus in recent years on singular thinkers' eclectic use of Aristotle represents a promising sign that the once-standard perception of Renaissance Aristotelianism as a unified, homogenous system of knowledge has begun to lose currency. David Lines' extraordinary, ambitious examination of Aristotelianism in the Italian universities spans the period from 1300 to 1600, and pays careful attention to individual institutional contexts as it surveys aspects of a larger European phenomenon; Charles Lohr is currently at work on a catalogue of vernacular European translations and commentaries of Aristotle – a contribution that will offer a much-needed addition to extant catalogues of Latin philosophical Aristotelica, and will further expand the scholarly understanding of precisely who was interpreting and translating Aristotle throughout Western Europe.

elucidate the diversity of Aristotelianisms in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries.[13]

Syncretism clearly constituted the rule rather than the exception for early modern commentators like Oxford's John Case, who read and interpreted Aristotle Neo-Platonically, as well as for those who syncretized Aristotle's thought with Stoic and Christian ideas, as virtually all of his interpreters tended to do. Even among Latin philosophical commentators, Aristotelian thought in early modernity was surprisingly heterodox. Within Latin commentaries it is not uncommon to find insights that diverge radically from Aristotelian doctrine in the seventeenth century in works that purport to elucidate his philosophy – a phenomenon that Jill Kraye values positively as a form of creative adaptation, and Schmitt takes as a defining feature of Aristotle's eclectic presence within Renaissance culture.[14]

Despite producing commentaries that often disputed Aristotle's claims, Renaissance Latin scholars who engaged with Aristotelian texts, ideas, and methodologies also contributed to the pervasiveness of Aristotle's ideas within academic circles, helping to expand the parameters of Aristotelian philosophy by bringing his ideas, insights, and practices to bear on contemporary concerns, even if only to modify or reject those ideas. Modern scholars, in turn, now face the task

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[13] The static model of Aristotelian philosophy espoused by previous generations of historians was unduly reductive, and was often accompanied by a similarly reductive, static model of medieval culture which has since been widely discredited.

[14] Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy," in Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1283-84.

of accounting for Aristotle's influence in ways that account for the immense

sprawl of texts and figures that fall into this newly enlarged and reconfigured

category. In one significant sense, the conceptual stretch required to bring older

models that emphasized internal consistency into line with current approaches that

favour syncretic adaptation is not all that extensive; scholars have long studied

Renaissance intellectual movements, particularly Neo-Platonism and humanism,

with a view towards their syncretic tendencies.[15] Syncretism already figures in

many scholars' accounts of the period's intellectual history and the complex

relationship to authoritative sources evidenced by its writers. Aristotle's

philosophy was, in fact, subject to an equally diverse range of adaptations by

Renaissance thinkers, writers, and philosophers. Aristotle's Renaissance

interpreters were typically as eclectic as Neo-Platonists like Ficino in their use,

translation, and adaptation of philosophical source-materials.

In a different sense, however, a new perspective on Aristotle in the

Renaissance does require a massive shift in critical thinking, particularly when it

comes to the study of literary works. Typically, the study of Aristotle and

literature tends to remain focused on structural analysis and utilizing the *Poetics*

as a series of hermeneutic meta-principles. These new findings about Aristotle

suggest at alternative possibilities for understanding the relationship between

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[15] Syncretism is recognized by many scholars as a basic feature of Renaissance humanism. Syncretism has also become central, in many cases, to the scholarly understanding of Renaissance Neo-Platonism as a philosophical sub-genre and as a literary mode. See Stephen Farmer, *Syncretism in the West* (Tempe, Ariz.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1988); and Sears Jayne, *Plato in Renaissance England* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995); as well as the introduction to Jayne's translation of Ficino's *De Amore,* entitled *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1944).

works of fiction and philosophical contents, by opening up to view a less schematic understanding of the two. By acknowledging the plurality and eclecticism of Renaissance Aristotelianisms, the question then becomes: in what ways do literary contents adopt and adapt, rather than regurgitate and merely figure or depict, philosophical ideas? How, if at all, do these particular adaptations differ from academic digestions of Aristotle's ideas? Once these types of questions emerge as significant points of entry into literary and dramatic works from the Renaissance, literary and historical scholarship can begin to more fully and accurately map out Aristotle's lines of influence within early modern culture, and understand the complex relationship between fictional and philosophical modes of discourse in early modernity.

For early modern interpreters of Aristotle, eclectic adaptation and syncretism constituted the rule rather than the exception. The non-schematic quality of Renaissance Aristotelian thought is both exciting and daunting for scholars interested in coming to terms the long half-life of Aristotle's ideas. The very concept of Renaissance Aristotelianisms invites speculation about the influence of Aristotle's philosophical ideas within a vast expanse of cultural territory including vernacular culture, particularly areas like the theatre where philosophical ideas were given distinctive voices and quite possibly, new forms. Typically, Aristotle scholarship has focused on academic Latin translations and commentaries. Those parameters beg to be enlarged given recent historical findings, and the door has certainly been opened to thinking seriously about Aristotle's influence outside the doors of institutional contexts in areas heretofore

left out of Aristotle scholarship. Schmitt, whose work focuses exclusively on academic Aristotelian thought, nevertheless reasons that "[w]hile Aristotle was the institutionalized philosophical writer *par excellence* for the Middle Ages and Renaissance, his position in more informal contexts should not be minimized. Works such as the *Oeconomics, Ethics, Politics*, and *Problemata* were much read by an intellectual milieu different from the academic one."[16]

Aristotle and the Renaissance has provided fertile soil for what has become a small but significant new moment of flourishing for Aristotle within the humanities. Currently, however, there are a number of important challenges facing scholars interested in vernacular Renaissance Aristotelianisms. There are no extant catalogues detailing the kinds of vernacular *Aristotelica* published in Renaissance Europe.[17] In addition to this lacuna, there has been no sustained attempt on the part of historians to theorize vernacular Renaissance Aristotelianisms, or study the distinguishing characteristics of vernacular translations and commentaries. Despite these scholarly omissions, there is abundant evidence of a complex and pervasive engagement with Aristotle by English-language writers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, particularly among playwrights. This is certainly the case for Aristotle's ethical thought; Shakespeare makes direct reference to the *Ethics* in at least one of his plays, and consistently dramatizes instances of prudent deliberation and attempts

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[16] Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance*, 114.
[17] Charles Lohr is currently completing one such catalogue.

to moderate constitutional and behavioral excesses in a way that relies explicitly on Aristotelian ethical concepts.[18]

Notwithstanding the scholarly lacuna surrounding vernacular Aristotelianisms, interest in Aristotle within Shakespeare studies is beginning to emerge as an important new area of scholarship. Although only a select few historians have produced book-length studies focused on Renaissance-related *Aristotelica* in the years following Schmitt's study, Schmitt's insights have inarguably changed the way that literary scholars approach the question of Aristotle's influence on intellectual culture in fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century Europe. A small but significant number of Shakespeareans have begun to incorporate his insights about Renaissance intellectual history into their work, questioning the parameters of Renaissance Aristotelianism as a category, and rethinking its importance to the Renaissance cultural imagination. The pluralized notion of Aristotelianisms has, for example, alerted emerging Shakespeare scholars such as Christopher Crosbie to Aristotle's sustained ability to elicit intellectual response and foster debate in early modernity in ways that were anything but reactionary, doctrinaire, or homogeneous.[19] Other Shakespeare scholars, notably Luke Wilson, have usefully focused on the ubiquity of Aristotle's ethical thought in the Renaissance, addressing the relationship between

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[18] See Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). See also Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[19] Christopher Crosbie, "Fixing Moderation: Titus Andronicus and the Aristotelian Determination of Value," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2007), cites Schmitt's study, and clearly makes use of Schmitt's notion of a dynamic, deeply embedded Aristotelianism in early modern England.

Aristotelian philosophy and cultural institutions such as the theatre and the courthouse.[20] Joshua Scodel's discussion of moderation, *Excess and the Mean*, makes a similarly comprehensive claim about the influence of Aristotelian moderation on normative ethics in early modern England, presenting a wide variety of cultural evidence to demonstrate just how thoroughly saturated Shakespeare's England was with Aristotelian moral-philosophical thought.[21] These studies, along with a number of other recent and forthcoming publications, signal a promising new interest in Aristotelian philosophy, particularly in Aristotle's ethical thought, that ventures beyond the usual academic parameters to which scholars of Renaissance Aristotelianism typically adhere.[22]

Renaissance Aristotelianisms were a far more dynamic, eclectic series of phenomena than scholars have, until fairly recently, been willing to acknowledge. Renaissance Aristotelian thought's pervasiveness and its eclecticism have

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[20] Luke Wilson argues that Aristotelian notions of practical reason were central to theatrical and legal representations of personhood in the Renaissance – an argument that is prefaced on the notion that these philosophical ideas were pervasive and epistemologically significant to early modern culture, and also fundamental to the period's basic understanding of human agency. See Wilson's *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[21] See especially Scodel's introduction.

[22] See the recently published *Shakespeare and Moral Agency,* edited by Michael Bristol, which contains a version of this chapter in my essay, "What's Virtue Ethics Got To Do With It? Shakespearean Character as Moral Character" (London: Continuum, 2010), 184-99. For recently published studies of Shakespeare and philosophy, see Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning behind the Plays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). Martha Nussbaum has recently reviewed both books, along with A.D. Nutall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), in "Stages of Thought," *The New Republic* 238 (May 7, 2008): 37-41.

tremendous implications for intellectual and social historians as well as for

Shakespeare scholars. This is especially true when it comes to Aristotle's moral-

philosophical thought or what the early modern era understood as practical ethics.

Practical moral virtues such as moderation, prudence, and temperance comprise

centrally important concepts with wide-ranging areas of application within

Renaissance culture, and these concepts germinated in Aristotelian moral-

philosophical soil in early modern England. For many late sixteenth- and early

seventeenth-century playwrights, including Shakespeare, Kyd, and Marlowe, the

practical virtues formed a kind of backbone for dramatic realism with which they

anatomized the operations of practical reason. Theatrical representation itself in

the Renaissance may have been centrally bound up with moral philosophy as a

discourse, and Aristotelian moral-philosophical ideas about practical reason were

importantly tied to both theatrical and legal modes of representation in England in

the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[23] If we take Crosbie's recent

argument about philosophy's centrality to theatrical representation in the

Renaissance seriously, Renaissance philosophy as a discursive mode represented

a significant and unique site of convergence for many of the generic and thematic

considerations modern critics have long studied in the works of Shakespeare,

Kyd, Jonson, and others. The early modern theatre, in Crosbie's view, served as a

venue for staging philosophy, and theatrical representation in early modern

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[23] See Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, especially his introduction and chap. 1, which addresses practical reason and Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

England may have actually been *about* philosophy and the scope of issues and questions it encompassed.[24]

A small but significant amount of recent scholarship on Shakespeare and philosophy has greatly reinforced and also nuanced the current understanding of how Shakespeare's dramatic art may have intersected with Renaissance philosophical concepts and the discourse of philosophy more generally. The more traditional approach to the question of philosophy and Shakespeare, however, focuses on academic intellectual life and formal Latin philosophical traditions, and not vernacular transmutations or popular adaptations of philosophical concepts. David Beauregard's *Virtue's Own Feature* represents one of the most historically detailed of the recent book-length attempts to cross-read Shakespeare's plays with Aristotle's moral philosophy, particularly Thomistic Aristotelianism. Beauregard's work is in many ways typical of older approaches, relying on a rigidly conceived notion of what comprises philosophical ideas, and thinking through their correspondence with Shakespeare's *dramatis* personae who, one way or another, supposedly embody them. Beauregard describes the relationship between Aristotle and Shakespeare as a clear and evident line of influence – one that the modern estrangement from Classical virtue ethics has unfortunately occluded.[25] His study, which proposes to "clarify an important part of the ethic implicit in [Shakespeare's] plays," proceeds under the assumption that Shakespeare's plays represent a clear ethic, or at least one that would have been

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[24] Christopher Crosbie, "Philosophies of Retribution: Kyd, Shakespeare, Webster, and the Revenge Tragedy Genre" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2007).

[25] David Beauregard, *Virtue's Own Feature: Shakespeare and the Virtue Ethics Tradition* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995).

perceived clearly by early modern audiences.[26] However, in focusing on academic

philosophical concepts in isolation from those eclectic adaptations that

characterized not only vernacular, but also academic Aristotelian Renaissance

thought, *Virtue's Own Feature* misses out on what is distinctive about Aristotelian

philosophy in the Renaissance. Beauregard's study consequently elides much of

what is dynamic about Shakespeare's characters by casting them as embodiments

of philosophical abstractions.[27] Conversely, studies such as Christopher Crosbie's

recent article on *Titus* and moderation evidence why there is a great deal more at

play in the theatrical adaptation of philosophical source-materials, particularly

when it comes to the issue of how characters "embody" or take up philosophical

ideas in Shakespeare.[28] Rather than imagining Classical moral philosophy as a

roster of images signifying philosophical abstractions (various virtues, vices, and

their iconographical referents), the most successful and compelling Shakespeare

scholarship has instead usefully pointed out that philosophical ideas were subject

to enormous variation and modification. Moreover, literary and dramatic

"modifications" in no way discount the very philosophical nature of the questions

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[26] Beauregard, *Virtue's Own Feature*, 9.
[27] See John Hennedy's review of Beauregard's book, in *Renaissance Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1997): 283-85. Hennedy aptly critiques Beauregard's reduction of Shakespeare's characters to singular virtues or vices, claiming that it neither does justice to Aristotle's complex eclecticism in the Renaissance, nor to Shakespeare's inventiveness and creativity in deploying philosophical materials. "[Beauregard's] unwillingness to recognize eclecticism results in a truncated approach to a *Hamlet* without Stoical influences as well as an unchanging Prospero and badly underrated Miranda, caused by unawareness of Montaigne's contributions to the *Tempest*… Claiming that Shakespeare merely exemplified moral categorizations established by others, however impressive their systems may be, is to deny the originality and development of Shakespeare as a dramatic 'thinker' in his own right."
[28] See Crosbie, "Fixing Moderation."

and ideas being addressed; in fact, as Crosbie's work has amply demonstrated, those ideas manage to take on new and complex Shakespearean afterlives within the plays.

I want to reiterate, at this point, that I have no real aim to argue that Shakespeare was an Aristotelian in the typically understood sense of that term. Shakespeare was a dramatist who incorporated a diverse array of social languages into the dramatic universe of his plays. Among these can be counted bits of Aristotelian moral-philosophical discourse. The plays are not Aristotelian in the sense of being animated or supervened by Aristotelian imperatives, according to the way that philosophy is traditionally said to accord with literary contents, that is to say, deontologically and schematically. Rather, Shakespeare's use of Aristotle remains both eclectic and syncretic, and is in this sense entirely consistent with the era's general response to Aristotle's thought. The usefulness of Aristotle's moral-philosophical thought does not reside in its ideological correspondence with Shakespeare's characters, or the ways that they feel or think about the world they live in, though there is certainly a case to be made that some characters more accurately and convincingly 'embody' philosophical abstractions than others. Emphasizing correspondences of these kinds only manages to demean Shakespeare's dramatic achievements by turning his characters into derivations of philosophical source-materials. Aristotle's usefulness to Shakespeare resides in the heuristic value of his moral-philosophical ideas at the level of moral agency in Shakespeare's plays. Aristotle's ideas about the cultivation of virtue and moral character can help provide a qualitatively rich

account of the operations of practical reason in Shakespeare. They can also help account for the types of intentional and emotional states that generate speech and action in the plays, and that help scholars account for why Shakespeare's characters do and say the things that they do. Moreover, there is a historically meaningful tradition in Renaissance England of thinking this way about the moral agency of actual human agents – one which Shakespeare makes use of in relation to the fictional persons who populate his dramatic canon.

As innovative as some of the most recent scholarship on Aristotle and Shakespeare has been, the question of Shakespeare and moral agency has only just begun to open up as a valid and meaningful area of inquiry within Shakespeare studies. Shakespeare's complex representations of moral agency have yet to be examined at the characterological level in light of one of the era's most significant philosophical authoritative sources on moral agency and practical reason: Aristotle's ethical thought. To be even more specific, the moral-philosophical aspects of Shakespeare's plays have yet to be studied historically in light of some of the larger questions Aristotle's thought was being enlisted to address in early modern England – questions about the nature of human happiness and thriving, that speak strongly to what modern philosophers call 'virtue ethics.' Although the long history of Shakespeare criticism abounds in so-called philosophical perspectives on the plays, most famously A.C. Bradley's, few scholars have chosen to address the plays' relationship to the historically specific Renaissance English philosophical tradition associated with virtue ethics, while

maintaining the comprehensive emphasis on questions of happiness and thriving that defined virtue ethics in this period.

Virtue ethics has in recent decades become a buzzword within philosophy departments, signifying a mode of philosophical speculation centrally concerned with the cultivation of virtue and moral character. Early modern moral-philosophical writings, particularly vernacular ones focused on moral praxis, are centrally concerned with the cultivation of particular virtues such as prudence and temperance. Renaissance English writers address an aspect of human life and identity that has been largely elided by literary scholars, particularly within recent treatments of Renaissance inwardness. I am referring to moral-characterological identity, or what Aristotle termed *ethos*. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to exploring the relationship between *ethos* and Shakespeare's art of characterization, focusing on vernacular moral-philosophical writers' understanding of virtue's place within human affairs. I focus on how Aristotle's practical moral thought was being digested by vernacular early modern writers and those who penned conduct manuals, practical guides to health and happiness, and other Renaissance self-help books. My goal in that discussion is to show how this mode of writing is deeply informed by Aristotelian moral thought and Aristotle's concern with the cultivation of virtue.

It is not my aim to furnish a study of the theatre and its material or ideological re-presentation of philosophical contents, nor is it my intention to furnish a biographical examination of Shakespeare's possible connection to philosophical figures of his day, or a new or enlarged view of the way that

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Shakespeare or his contemporaries managed to literally present philosophical

contents through stage-craft. Instead, I aim to expose an important feature of

moral-philosophical writings of the period that also figures crucially in

Shakespeare's art of characterization. I do not place Aristotle at the center of my

study in order to try to read Aristotelian imperatives or forms into Shakespeare;

rather, foregrounding Aristotle is more akin to brushing the dust off of a painting

in order to see it more clearly. In brushing away some of the dust of critical

misapprehension from Aristotle, and reexamining his place within the

Renaissance cultural imagination and early modern intellectual history, it

becomes increasingly possible to see the contours of Shakespeare's moral agents

– their reasons for acting and speaking as they do – with increased precision and a

more comprehensive understanding of why these intentional and emotional states

are important critical considerations in the assessment of Shakespeare's plays.

II. Vernacular Moral Philosophy in the Renaissance

Did Shakespeare read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*? There is certainly

evidence in his plays that he was conversant with some Classical moral-

philosophical writings. Based on what we know about his early educational

experiences, it is safe to say that Shakespeare very likely came into contact with

Cicero's *De Officiis*, since that work comprised primary reading for school-aged

children in the mid-to-late sixteenth century. *De Officiis* was treated as a more

accessible companion to Aristotle, and in it Cicero echoes and slightly

reconfigures several key Aristotelian concepts. For example, the Aristotelian

mean becomes the "golden measure" in Cicero.[29]

At least one of Shakespeare's plays makes direct reference to a passage

from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In act 2 scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Troilus and*

Cressida, Hector explains:

> Paris and Troilus, you have both said well,
>
> And on the cause and question now in hand
>
> Have gloz'd, but superficially, not much
>
> Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought
>
> Unfit to hear moral philosophy.[30]

Hector's point is that both Paris and Troilus are incapable of the kind of sustained,

cool-headed philosophical reflection Aristotle foregrounds in the *Ethics*, and are

instead more like the youth Aristotle maintained were ill-suited to the study and

practice of philosophy. This reference to a fairly sententious statement from the

Nicomachean Ethics may or may not constitute evidence that Shakespeare read or

thought about Aristotle in a serious or sustained way. The reference does imply

that Aristotelian moral philosophy can be counted among those many social

languages that Shakespeare sought fit to incorporate into his dramatic work.

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[29] T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke,* 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), claims that Shakespeare was likely to have seen Grimald's text if he had *De Officiis* at all. According to Baldwin, Cicero was universally approved among scholars and theorists in the last half of the 16th century (2:585). Baldwin goes on to claim that the book Hamlet pores over would have been presumed (by Shax's Elizabethan audience) to be Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (2:606-7)

[30] 2.2.163-67. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Frances A. Shirley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Although we will likely never know whether Shakespeare read Aristotle directly, what we can ascertain is that if he read Aristotle in English at any point throughout his life, it was in very poor translation. England represents a peculiar and challenging case when it comes to translations of Aristotle. There quite simply were no good English-language translations of seminal works like the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Shakespeare's day. Unlike sixteenth-century Italian, French, and Spanish vernacular translations of Aristotle, the only contemporary English version of the *Nicomachean Ethics* available to Shakespeare's contemporaries was John Wilkinson's 1547 *Ethiques of Aristotle* – a work rendered from the Italian rather than the original Greek or scholarly Latin, and one which displays little of the philological finesse characteristic of humanist editions.

In mid-to-late sixteenth-century England, Wilkinson's *Ethiques* comprised the only English-language translation of Aristotle in circulation, although there were plenty of English-language handbooks, such as William Baldwin's enormously popular 1555 *A Treatise of Moral Philosophye* written for an educated, literate elite, that reference or directly cite Aristotle, as well as academic Latin sixteenth-century commentaries on Aristotle's ethical writings, such as Samuel Heiland's 1581 commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and John Case's *Speculum quaestionum moralium* first printed at Oxford in 1585.[31] Among vernacular writings, many English-language moral-philosophical writings

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[31] Samuel Heiland, *Aristotleis ethicorum ad Nicomachum* (London: H. Bynneman, 1581); John Case, *Speculum quaestionum moralium* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1585).

intended to be used as companions or as handbooks incorporated Aristotle in ways that range from direct citations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* or summaries of its arguments, to the entirely false attribution of the author' ideas to Aristotle.

When discussing Aristotle's influence on Renaissance culture, it can be tempting to focus exclusively on translations and commentaries like Case's *Speculum*. And works like Case's were unquestionably well known among academics. However, an impressive array of vernacular materials was available in Renaissance England that take up Aristotle's ethical thought in less direct, but no less significant ways. Vernacular moral-philosophical books written in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are among the most important and prolific of these materials. English-language conduct manuals, guides to human health and happiness, treatises on virtue and the passions, and books of collected wisdom all evidence a profound concern with Aristotelian moral-philosophical ideas in the domain of applied ethics. These volumes, though necessarily written for a literate public and inherently shaped by the particular and sometimes very local circumstances, ambitions, and aims of their authors, offer among the most explicit, intensive, and accessible treatments of practical, applied ethics and human moral agency. It is tempting to imagine Shakespeare perusing these books as he wrote *Hamlet* or *Measure for Measure*, and of course that temptation runs particularly strong in the case of figures such as Thomas Wright, an English Catholic priest and persistent thorn in the sides of both Elizabeth and James. Wright wrote *The Passions of the Minde*, a fascinating and subversive exploration of human emotion and its relationship to rhetorical craft, and first published it in

1601 through Shakespeare's own printer, Valentine Simmes. Whether or not

Shakespeare read Wright's books is not an issue I directly address here, at least

not from the perspective of historical evidence. What interests me more about

Wright's volume, and others that share Wright's fascination with human emotion,

health and happiness, is its articulation of early modern ideas about the mechanics

of moral decision-making and the moral life.

What do I mean by the mechanics of moral decision-making and the moral

life? Categorically, these topics include but are not limited to Renaissance

discussions about the management and regulation of physiological processes, and

the emotional states and humoral constitutions underwritten by them. Such

discussions abound in Renaissance English-language self-help writings, and these

have increasingly become part of the fabric of literary scholarship within the last

two decades, particularly within studies that address Renaissance inwardness.

Katharine Maus' seminal work, *Inwardness and Theatre in the English

Renaissance,* deploys a range of these materials to help reconstruct the complex

dynamics of early modern epistemology.[32]

For the most part, however, literary studies addressing English-language

self-help writings have been dominated by materialist approaches and their strong

preference for viewing vernacular self-help materials as evidence for de-

centralized early modern selves. Within the last two decades, a variety of studies

focused on the Renaissance body have made use of vernacular moral-

philosophical writings in their examinations of pre-modern corporeality, arguing

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[32] Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

for a more or less Foucauldian reading of early modern inwardness.[33] Gail

Paster's introduction to one of the most fascinating and compelling of these recent

attempts to re-imagine Renaissance inwardness, *Humoring the Body*, describes

the early modern experience of emotion as "a premodern ecology of the passions"

-- a site that the outside world not only penetrates, but also constitutes.[34] Paster's

study of the humoral body usefully emphasizes that the human experience of the

world in the Renaissance was not the disembodied mind's encounter with an

external reality discrete from it. Paster's point is that the early modern experience

of the world and, specifically, of emotion was a profoundly embodied kind of

encounter. As Paster's book amply demonstrates, the early modern body and its

exigencies were hardly inert, mute entities; Renaissance bodies effectively talk

back, and those conversations form the subject of extensive analysis throughout

her book. Paster's exploration of early modern corporeality and the exigencies of

embodiment is indeed fascinating; however, when it comes to the ways in which

the Renaissance body was organized and its impulses ordered, there is a great deal

more to be said about rational, even cognitive forms of organization of both the

body and the self of which it formed an integral part. An important part of that

organizing framework in early modern accounts of human health that translates

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[33] See Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); as well as Paster, *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, ed. Gail Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). See also William Fisher's study of gender in early modernity: *Materializing Gender in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[34] Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 9.

the experience of embodiment into an experience of being human is, within this period, decidedly moral-philosophical.

In works such as *A Touchstone of Complexions*, a popular sixteenth-century Dutch guide to health and well-being that was first translated into English in 1576 and enjoyed widespread circulation and multiple printings, author Levinus Lemnius offers the following advice to his readers:

> If a man throughe abundance of humours, and stoate of bloude
> and spirites, feel hymselfe prone to carnalitye and fleshiye luste,
> let him, by altering his order and diet, enjoyne to himselfe a most
> strict ordinary and frame his dealings to a more stayed moderation.
> But if hee feele himself to bee of a nature somewhat sulleyne and
> sterne, and given somewhat to a wayward, whining testye, churlish,
> and intractable spirit…. it shall not be ill for such a one to frequent
> dancing, singing, womens flatteryes, allurements, and embracings,
> provided always, that all the same be not otherwise done nor meant,
> but in honestye and comeliness, within a reasonable measure."[35]

Lemnius' introduction presents a typological schema wherein individuals are classed according to their dominant humoral characteristics. Sanguine bon-vivants, he maintains, are different from sullen melancholics, and Lemnius goes into great detail throughout his book about how and why each personality-type is differently constituted. Lemnius' account, narrated through humoral discourse, depicts a very differently conceived set of ideas about the self-world relationship

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[35] Lemnius Levinus, *A Touchstone of Complexions*, trans. Thomas Newton (London: Thomas Marsh, 1576), 6.

than those espoused by twenty-first century North Americans. However, the object of Lemnius' discussion is unquestionably not merely the humors themselves, but the establishment of humoral equilibrium as a function of human health and, ultimately, happiness. Health is not solely a function of material considerations; rather, it is through the language of humoral physiology that Lemnius, like so many writers from this period, articulates a vision of moral self-cultivation that is directly and firmly rooted in human agency and practical choice.

In *Touchstone*, Lemnius cites a roster of entertainments – a Renaissance version of sex, drugs, and rock n roll, including dancing, singing, and women's flatteries – that form part of the diversions that can potentially detract from or contribute towards a state of humoral equilibrium. With a distinctly Aristotelian concern for moderating excess, Lemnius describes how this list of enticements operates very differently on different personality-types. Each type, in fact, requires a particular strategy of action in the face of sensual delights. Lusty hedonists exacerbate their underlying sanguine excesses by engaging in these types of pursuits. For withdrawn, depressive individuals, these entertainments can be beneficial in moderation. The result of these practical, day-to-day choices is the moderation or exacerbation of underlying humoral dispositions and complexions – a result that we might just as easily describe as a state of happiness or eudaemonia.

One of the ways of actualizing happiness and maintaining equilibrium for Lemnius lies in understanding the categorical parameters of our particular

humoral proclivities and making the appropriate choices. Lemnius' anecdote, like those of so many English-language Renaissance moral-philosophical writers, recounts the story of a highly charged moment of temptation: there is dancing, music, sensual pleasure -- elements imagined then, as now, to evoke powerful responses more-than-capable of overriding better judgment. However, better judgment itself is understood to be contingent first and foremost upon knowing who you are. It is not a function of applying a single universally applicable rule; for example, dancing and womanizing are always dangerous. For Lemnius, choosing intelligently requires the instrumental application of insights about humoral character in the face of external cues. Writers from the period tended to figure these cues as unpredictable, arising suddenly in the course of day-to-day life. These moments often represent instances of temptation in which a desire to pursue a pleasurable, but ultimately harmful course of action runs strong. In order to be useful, typological classifications must be selectively and intelligently applied to a series of specific empirical circumstances. The ultimate outcome of those small-scale choices is then imagined to have a morally determinative effect on a person's humoral constitution – their basis for health and happiness.

The brief excerpt I cited from Lemnius' account contains several identifiably Aristotelian elements, most centrally Aristotle's emphasis on self-knowledge and his concern with practical virtues – in this case, moderation. Self-knowledge is represented by Lemnius as an individualized recipe, not a one-size-fits-all prescription, and here Lemnius adheres closely to Aristotle's formulation

of the moral virtues as functions of a mean.[36] The field of application for the

virtue of moderation for Lemnius, as for Aristotle, is the domain of lived

experience – a domain characterized by contingency, which ultimately requires

choices in the form of intentional actions. Because of the contingent nature of

lived experience, and because practical virtues like moderation are fundamentally

responsive, moral virtues actually manifest polymorphously, depending upon the

circumstances at hand and the disposition of the agent in question.

Moderation is fundamentally relational for both Aristotle and Lemnius. It

comes into being in a concrete sense in response to the circumstances of the

moment, which may be far from ideal. The exercise of moral virtue requires

instrumental judgment that applies ideals and principles to a set of particular,

often volatile circumstances. Moral virtue therefore also requires highly

individualized, tailored kinds of recipes. According to Aristotle, there are

ultimately a set number of recipes that constitute appropriate moral responses. In

other words, there are objective determinations of value that ought to guide

situated decision-making. However, those determinations must take into account

the detailed particulars of the circumstances at hand, which may or may not be

similar to the situations of our friends and neighbors. [37]For Lemnius, dancing,

singing, and womanizing are good for some constitutions; they are bad for others.

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[36] See 2.2.6-7 and 2.6.8-15 of *The Nicomachean Ethics* for Aristotle's discussion
of virtue as a function of a mean.
[37] On this point, see Aristotle's discussion at 1.6.16 of the *NE* where he describes
the importance of considering the particularities of actual cases as opposed to
contemplating ideal forms. See also *NE* 3.3.7 for a discussion of the proper
objects of deliberation, which for Aristotle must be practical and culturally
relevant matters.

Aristotle also acknowledges that the more successful prescriptions appeal to

increasingly detailed views of the situation at hand; therefore, in practice,

distinctive circumstances actually require relatively distinctive recipes, and all

instances of moral judgment certainly require the exercise of instrumental

judgment to determine what constitutes an appropriate response.[38] The exercise of

instrumental judgment in the form of highly situated reasoning is precisely what

Lemnius advises his readers to do. The process begins with self-awareness, and

practical choices based on that awareness follow.

For Aristotle, the virtues tied to actions are necessarily tied to the realm of

contingency in a way that other, more speculative virtues are not. The distinction

between practical (moral) and speculative (intellectual) virtues was an important

one for Aristotle's vernacular English Renaissance interpreters, just as it was for

medieval philosophers and theologians. While Aristotle's practicality tends to be

understood nowadays as a function of his scientific curiosity and formidable

achievement in natural philosophy, in early modern England that practicality

resonated first and foremost within the domains of ethics and economics-- those

branches of moral philosophy concerned with social and domestic relationships,

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[38] See *The Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8.9, where Aristotle asserts that virtue needs to be put on active service, and cannot exist in a merely inert or inoperative form. In 2.1.7, he also comments that "our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the correspondence activities. Hence it is incumbent on us to control the character of our activities, since on the quality of these depends the quality of our dispositions. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits or another…" See also his comments at 2.2.1, on the purpose of the study of ethics, which is not to gain an intellectual grasp of virtue, but to become good. Wherever possible throughout this chapter, I cite from R. Rackham. Ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, W.H.D. Rouse trans., *Nicomachean Ethics.* Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1926).

self-governance and management of households. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conduct manuals, books of collected wisdom, and vernacular moral-philosophical handbooks routinely associate Aristotle with the applied branch of philosophy distinct from the one that concerned the intellectual virtues.

Aristotle's practicality, of course, stands in direct contrast to philosophical idealism, particularly the kind long attributed to Plato. Rather than seeking harmony between the self and universal principles, Aristotle – the philosopher associated with practical affairs in the Renaissance -- was being adapted to discussions of moral virtues, political life, and moral agency. Discussions of practical action tended to explicitly and implicitly rely on Aristotle, and Aristotle's crucial distinction between knowing virtue and actually living well resonates throughout sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts of how to behave virtuously. For Aristotle, happiness itself is a kind of performance or "doing well."[39]

Many of the writings on moral agency from Shakespeare's day go to great lengths to spell out how best to retain moral integrity in the face of practical circumstances. Readers must find ways to adaptively translate moral ideals into the practical domain, thereby attaining a measure of worldly happiness. What is continually emphasized in accounts like Lemnius' *A Touchstone of Complexions* is the need to remain self-present in moments that require practical decision-

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[39] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.8.4. Aristotle goes on to comment at 1.8.9 that, "a man may possess the disposition without its producing any good result." At 2.4.5 he also writes that, "it is correct therefore to say that a man becomes just by doing just actions and temperate by doing temperate actions; and no one can have the remotest chance of becoming good without doing them." *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library.

making. Self-presence constitutes a basic precondition for keeping those moral ideals in play, even within circumstances where it no longer feels pleasurable or immediately desirable to be good. In *A Touchstone of Complexions*, Lemnius' recipe for moderating humoral imbalance crucially relies upon an accurate assessment of whether we are lusty or melancholy and, even more crucially, relies on our continued awareness of our strengths and weaknesses during moments when we most tend to forget ourselves – in other words, very practical, situated moments when we may not be able or willing to engage in lengthy deliberation about what is good for us.

Lemnius is emphatic that self-awareness represents a basic starting-point without which further self-regulation and prudent decision-making simply is not possible. The marginal note to the section I cited above from *A Touchstone of Complexions* reads, "every man must search out his own inclination and nature." For Lemnius, self-awareness determines whether "dancing, singing, womens flatteryes, allurements, and embracings" constitute dangerous incentives to vice or harmless diversions.

Lemnius' emphasis on self-knowledge is a nearly ubiquitous feature of contemporary English-language writings about the moral life. In just one example, James Perrott in *The First Part of Consideration of Humane Condition*, published in 1600, foregrounds self-knowledge by describing the incentive towards self-understanding as a basic precondition for the successful understanding of others. "The knowledge of thy selfe being the beginning of all true knowledge," he writes, "and without this no knowledge or consideration can

profit thee, be it of matters never so exquisite, or of mysteries never so high."

Perrott then goes on to describe self-knowledge as the epistemic foundation that

conditions the human experience of the world.

> For as it doth concerne every man to learne what is done at
>
> home, before hee goe abroad: for doth it behove him to
>
> knowe himselfe, before he looke into others. It is true that
>
> many men seeme to knowe many things, and yet, not
>
> knowing themselves, they knowe nothing at all; or at least,
>
> they knowe nothing in that, which doth most availe them.[40]

The Socratic *nosce te ipsum* is among the most sententious of Renaissance dicta;

however, what Perrott and others often gesture towards in their usage of the

expression is self-knowledge's highly individualized aspect. In more explicitly

Aristotelian terms, this amounts to empirically detailed deliberation about what

course of action to pursue, and this is precisely what we find in the various

sixteenth and early seventeenth-century manuals that elaborately and

voluminously catalogue ways to maintain and preserve a healthy mind and body.

Even detailed, voluminous self-help materials require self-reflection and

selective application on the part of the reader. Because doing what is right is not

always easy or pleasurable, self-cultivation actually requires a kind of vigilance

and self-transparency that can prove extremely difficult to sustain in the day-to-

day. As any person who has struggled with addiction or weakness is well aware,

knowing the right thing to do in the abstract, when temptation is not immediately

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[40] James Perrott, *The First Part of Consideration of Humane Condition* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1600), 9.

in view, is much easier to do than making the right choice when faced with a concrete situational trigger that weakens resolve, and leads to self-harming behavior. Texts like *Touchstone* attempt to cultivate the practical self-awareness required in just such moments. That awareness represents a crucial form of practical knowledge that can help individuals actualize moral ideals in concrete, day-to-day contexts.

Renaissance self-help books encourage readers to perceive themselves in relation to an external world that continually confronts them with choices and moral predicaments. Every moment becomes as an occasion to ameliorate or degrade health, happiness, and moral integrity. Philosopher David Norton phrases the point simply and effectively: within virtue ethics,"'the moral situation' is the life of each person in its entirety"[41]

Day-to-day, situational considerations certainly represent the starting point for philosophical, ethical living in Renaissance self-help books such as Lemnius' *Touchstone of Complexions*, and this feature of Lemnius' work denotes a strong virtue ethical strain within not only his writing, but a wide variety of self-help materials written in this period.

Guides to human health and happiness written in the sixteenth century often advise readers on how to address constitutional imbalances through the regulating effects of diet, exercise, social interaction, and other practical behaviour. Lemnius' work, along with contemporary guides to table manners, childrearing, and handbooks on the passions, all place a great deal of emphasis on

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[41] David Norton, "Moral Minimalism", 183.

practicality and ordinary, day-to-day choices as venues for a distinctly

philosophical topic: the actualization of happiness. Although the empirically

detailed episodes many of these works seize on and catalogue are, without

question, eminently ordinary, the instances of choice they parallel are also

important components of more comprehensive philosophical considerations about

the good life. The two elements of the moral life – practical and speculative - are

virtually inextricable for writers such as Francis Segar. Segar's extremely popular

1557 publication, which enjoyed multiple re-printings until well into the 1680s, is

entitled *The schoole of vertue & booke of good nurture, teaching children &*

youth their duties, and its title suggests at the close pairing of practical guidance

and notions of virtue.[42] This close intertwining of practical and speculative

elements marks a significant point of resemblance to Aristotle's own account of

moral development. Aristotle's account of *phroneisis*, practical wisdom,

emphasizes the act of choosing intelligently in relation to a set of concrete,

empirically specific circumstances. ""It is to be held the mark of a prudent man,"

Aristotle writes, "to be able to deliberate well about what is good and

advantageous for himself, not in some one department, for instance what is good

for his health or strength, but what is advantageous as a means to the good life in

general."[43] For Aristotle, moral character-development cannot occur without the

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[42] Francis Segar, *The Schoole of Vertue & Booke of Good Nurture, Teaching Children & Youth Their Duties* (Oxford: William Seares, 1557).
[43] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. 6.4.1. See also 6.7.6-7 for Aristotle's account of the prudent individual's close consideration of contingent particulars in relation to actions, rather than speculation about static generalities or principles.

cultivation and exercise of practical wisdom; the fulfilled and happy life requires

practical virtues, particularly practical wisdom, otherwise known as prudence.

In fact, prudence was the Renaissance virtue most closely associated with

practical moral excellence, and it was often defined as the first or foremost of the

cardinal virtues. Prudence is a particularly instructive virtue because it is so

eminently practical, while also remaining tied to a more comprehensive project of

philosophical self-actualization. Following Aristotle, many Renaissance accounts

situate prudence somewhere between craft-knowledge (*techne)* and intellectual

contemplation (*sophia)*. Prudence occupies a crucial middle ground between base-

level know-how and speculation about the causes of things. In the 1565 English

translation of *The Boke of Wysedome,* John Larke describes prudence in strongly

Aristotelian, Boethian terms as an instrument for considering purposes or "ends."

"It is not sufficient to know the things as a man doth see them before him, but

prudence is that which doth measure the end of all thynges."[44] The "end of all

thynges" refers to both a temporally extensive sense of how things work out (the

prudent person excels at seeing the long-term view) as well as the qualitative

purpose towards which all things aim, which requires a more extensive field of

vision as well as a better conceptual grasp of how individual elements fit together

into a compositional totality. Although Larke's sense of prudence is surely

infused with a measure of theological gravitas, intending to convey the

importance of extra-worldly considerations, his sense of prudence as an expansive

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[44] John Larke, *The Boke of Wysedome* (London: Thomas Colwell, 1565), 9. *The Boke of Wysedome* is attributed to Larke but was first published anonymously. Larke was a member of More and Heywood's circle, and he served as More's own chaplain.

form of insight is surprisingly congruent with a basic Aristotelian regard for

prudence as a form of far-reaching, keen judgment.[45]

Throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, prudence was

consistently associated in England and beyond with a mode of situated, practical

reasoning. It was frequently described in explicitly temporal terms as the ability to

make sense of present circumstances armed with an understanding of the past, or

as a form of vision that anticipates future consequences with open eyes.

Representations of prudence in the visual arts such as Titian's *Allegory of*

Prudence figure it as a three-headed entity facing past, present, and future

simultaneously – a formulation with deep historical roots, echoed in Chaucer's

late fourteenth-century description of prudence in *Troilus and Criseyde* as a three-

eyed figure.[46] Chaucer's Crisyede explains her inability to see the present clearly

by exclaiming: "Prudence, allas! Oon of thyn eyen three/ Me lakked alwey."[47]

Prudence's temporality suggests at a kind of worldly wisdom and ability to

overcome short-sightedness. In *The Boke of Wysedome*, Larke equates prudence

with a form of diligence, likening it to the ant gathering food for winter,

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[45] At 6.4.1-4 of the *NE,* Aristotle offers a provisional definition of prudence as an ability to effectively deliberate about the moral life in practical, strategic terms. He explicitly differentiates between narrowly self-interested judgment that can sometimes appear prudent, and the more comprehensively-conceived virtue of prudence that interest him, which considers moral development and not just personal gain.
[46] Vecellio, Tiziano, *Allegory of Prudence*. 1656-1570.
[47] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Crisyede,* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 5.744-45.

"remembering himself of the time past, knowing the time present, and providing for the time to come."[48]

The Renaissance estimation of prudence as the foremost moral virtue highlights its value as something that goes above and beyond a mere practical skill. In Renaissance accounts, prudence is linked to the philosophical goals associated with the well-lived life – a connection that rescues it from overtones of worldly success, self-serving profiteering, and especially Machiavellian cunning.[49] What makes prudence a virtue in many of these accounts is its often silent, invisible orientation towards an ideal – an orientation that directs and guides decision-making in the here-and-now.

By the late sixteenth century, prudence had become germane to a variety of areas of English Renaissance life, appearing within political, religious, philosophical, as well as economic writings. Many of these usages draw directly on Aristotle's treatment of *phroneisis* in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[50] Miles Sandys' 1634 treatise, *Prudence: The First of the Foure Cardinalle Virtues* stays close to Aristotle's account, proclaiming that "[a]ccording to that in Aristotle, those are prudent who can rightly take Counsell in those things, which

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[48] Larke, *Boke of Wysedome,* 7.

[49] In the absence of objectively worthy moral ideals, an individual with keen vision and an ability to predict long-term success begins to resemble a frighteningly efficient sociopath, and of course, many of the era's most successful playwright's including Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare took great delight in dramatizing just these types of figures.

[50] See sections 1 and 2 of M. Lindsay Kaplan's edition of *The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). These sections, which address Venice and finance respectively, both contain excerpts from Renaissance materials that express contemporary English fears about Italian cunning that often come close to depictions of Aristotelian prudence, as well as discussions about the relative merits of prudence and risk-taking within English fiscal policy.

are good and profitable to themselves."[51] Sandys relies on an economic term -- the

profit principle -- to describe prudence's specific, short-term advantages. Rather

than stopping short at a profit-principle, however, Sandys' discussion continues,

insisting that profit is not to serve as an end unto itself, but rather, for a different

purpose: "to reason of our well-living." Sandys comments that "again, hee

[Aristotle] termes prudence a virtue of the understanding, by which wee may

consult of Good and Evill things which belong unto Felicitie."[52]

Situational reasoning about what is "profitable" remains importantly

linked to a more comprehensive form of insight for Sandys. Long-term thinking

about the moral life is a practical affair, but practical choices are also important to

the overall, lifelong project of cultivating happiness or "felicitie." Sandys'

'felicitie' could also be described using Aristotle's term, *eudaemonia*. While

modern translators have variously interpreted Aristotle's *eudaemonia* as

happiness, thriving, the good life, or simply living a beautiful life, Sandys'

particular formulation of it as felicity -- a term that denotes prosperity, luck, and

success (also at the root of the English 'happy') -- reinforces an important

connection between comprehensive ideals associated with philosophical

fulfillment, and the very practical circumstances that condition those ideals.

Many English Renaissance vernacular moral-philosophical writers deploy

Aristotle's ethical thought by applying virtue ethical principles to a wide range of

practical circumstances and day-to-day problems. The tendency to view Aristotle

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[51] Miles Sandys, *Prudence: The First of the Foure Cardinalle Virtues* (London, W. Sheares, 1634). Sandys was a knighted member of the aristocracy about whom very little biographical information is reliably known.
[52] Sandys, *Prudence,* 49.

in this way, as a moral philosopher useful for the management of practical daily concerns, is an entrenched feature of both Latin and vernacular pre-modern ethical thought. For writers like Aquinas, Aristotle is not only *the* philosopher; he is one whose ideas are serviceable to even the most microcosmic aspects of lived experience. Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* represents the pre-eminent Latin example of practical moral philosophy that attempts to apply Aristotle comprehensively and universally to every aspect of human life. Many vernacular moral-philosophical writings from the English Renaissance similarly use Aristotle as a philosophical starting-point for discussions of practical ethics. Renaissance self-help books that focus on temperamental self-regulation and the management of the passions consistently emphasize minutely practical empirical details through extensive (and sometimes exhaustive) catalogues of humoral 'types' and situational triggers. However, these materials also frame those detailed catalogues within larger discussions of comprehensive moral goals. These are often described in humoral language or through the discourse of complexional equilibrium, as in Lemnius' introduction, which cites Cicero in proclaiming that "it standeth every man upon, perfectly and thorowly to know the habit and constitution of his owne body, which consisteth in a temperament and mixture of foure qualities, hot, moist, cold and dry."[53] Just as often, however, discussions of practical matters are framed in the language of moral virtue, as in Joseph Hall's 1604 *Two guides to a good life The genealogy of vertue and the nathomy of sinne*, or Guillaume du Vair's 1623 *The true vvay to vertue and happinesse*. For

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[53] Lemnius Levinus, *A Touchstone of Complexions*, intro.

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Aristotle as for many early modern moral-philosophical writers, prudence represents a form of excellence, and the *phronimos* or deliberative person is someone who not only excels at formulating practical decisions; he does so in a way that evidences a stable, philosophically refined disposition.[54]

Thus far, I have focused on how practical moral behavior was being discussed within vernacular moral-philosophical writings of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England. These Renaissance handbooks, guidebooks, and treatises have important points of connection with certain basic Aristotelian ideas about moral virtue, and some of the ways in which Aristotle imagined the fashioning and re-fashioning of the ethical self via the habitual exercise of moral decision-making. Despite the apparent banality of many Renaissance discussions' lengthy expositions of various typological schemas and situational particulars associated with everyday decision-making, these discussions evoke a consistent, though eminently practical sense of the philosophical life as it was imagined to operate in the here-and-now of Shakespeare's day.

Because of the early modern self's amenability to being shaped and re-shaped through habitual practice, choice is often imagined as a crucial occasion where health, happiness, and order can be temporarily imposed on a chaotic mélange of fungible humors, unwieldy passions, and strong physical desires.

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[54] The stability that Aristotle values as evidence of philosophical striving is, for him, the result of long-standing, habitual practice. Under this conception, choices concretize habits of mind, and have morally stabilizing effects on the agents responsible for them. This happens over time, in fact, over the span of an entire lifetime, often with few or no outward signs of the inner changes that accompany genuine moral development.

Prudent reasoning of the kind outlined by Sandys and discussed extensively by

Aristotle in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* becomes centrally important

because it represents a form of thinking oriented towards practical planning that

can help actualize the good life in manifest, practical ways. Choice for both

Aristotle and Renaissance writers like Thomas Wright is envisioned as a crucial

opportunity to align inward states with moral ideals in the face of a world

characterized by contingency and change. [55]Choice within the context of these

discussions therefore has a distinctly moral dimension because it resides at the

crux of where ideals about the good life join together with concrete circumstances

and the material balance of humors in the body. Over the long term, morally

beneficial choices create effective habits of virtue by re-making or refashioning

the self along moral lines. *A Touchstone of Complexions* links the ability to

balance one's humors to self-awareness of one's own requirements, and Lemnius

thereby emphasizes just how responsive the Renaissance body was imagined to be

in the face of behavioural modification and practical, habitual choices.

The human body was also imagined as deeply vulnerable, subject to the

effects of choice and to the range of circumstantial temptations and forces at play

in the world. According to Levinus' account, choosing to exacerbate rather than

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[55] On this point in Aristotle, see 2.1.ii of *NE*, where Aristotle remarks that "our present study, unlike the other branches of philosophy, has a practical aim (for we are not investigating the nature of virtue for the sake of knowing what it is, but in order that we may become good, without which result our investigation would be of no use), we have consequently to carry our inquiry into the region of conduct, and to ask how we are to act rightly; since our actions, as we have said, determine the quality of our dispositions." See also 2.4.2-6 for Aristotle's discussion of the importance of putting knowledge to active service. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library.

moderate a humoral imbalance or dispositional proclivity represents more than an isolated moment of decision; it also represents an occasion to materially re-balance the equilibrium of humoral fluids in the body and quite literally remake oneself materially, and morally. While the material dimension of these discussions has been greatly emphasized by recent scholarship in Renaissance studies, it is worth re-asserting that it is not primarily or exclusively a material self being imagined as the subject of these accounts. Accounts like Lemnius' clearly evoke a moral-philosophical or ethical self subject to the shaping effects of habitual behavior and continual readjustment in the face of shifting inner and outer worlds. The longed-for equilibrium of the body, mind, and spirit, imagined in terms of health and happiness, or 'felicitie,' carried strong moral, not just physiological, overtones, just as the longed-for state of balance and happiness denotes a decidedly ethical sort of fulfilment.

An important part of that ethical fulfilment and happiness was, in many Renaissance accounts, tied to the social domain. The exercise of one's talents and publishing of one's virtues in a public context represents, for many writers, the ultimate form of actualization where virtue can be not only expressed, but also communicated socially. In *The Passions of the Minde*, Thomas Wright emphasizes career choice when he narrates an anecdote about a merchant who fails at his profession only to discover his true vocation as a preacher. For Wright, career choices ought to reflect the fabric of moral character, conceived here in vocational terms. He writes:

No man ought to be employed to any office, act, or exercise

contrary to his natural passions and inclination. This rule

concerneth all sort of superiors in the employments of their

subjects, all parents for the education of their children,

schoolmasters for the training up of their scholars. The

ground of this rule dependeth of long experience, and

reason. For by experience we learn that men be oftentimes

employed to one trade and never can profit therein:

contrariwise, when either they of themselves or others do

change that course to another whereunto they were inclined

they become very excellent men. I knew one in Flanders

employed of his friends to be a merchant, against his inclination;

but he never scarce could abide to deal in merchandise, and so

at last therewith awearied left them and turned his course to

study, wherein he excelled, and became one of the rarest

preachers there. I myself heard him preach after, very godly and

learnedly; a hundred such examples I could bring you.[56]

Wright's passage points to the significance of moral agency and the power of

human choice to situate and orient human endeavour towards its most successful

outcome. The self being imagined here is not passive or an empty receptacle

powerless before a swirl of stimuli and humors. Wright's example is an individual

whose moral character is subject to continual redefinition through daily choices,

some small and some broad.

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[56] Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall,* ed. William Webster
Newbold (New York: Garland, 1986), 163.

Clearly, the broader social implications of vocational choices are what concerns Wright in this passage, while the broader project of *The Passions of the Minde* focuses throughout on effective rhetorical skills and the means of persuasively communicating with audiences. Without doubt, Wright also had very personal reasons for both of these interests.[57] The subject of Wright's anecdote, a failed merchant-turned-preacher who "never scarce could abide to deal in merchandise" becomes not just a story about personal vocational fulfilment, but insofar as Wright's subject serves as a moral exemplum ("a hundred such examples I could bring you," Wright assures us), the anecdote carries the implication that broad social phenomena -- economic failure, religious apathy -- are indeed functions of choice and human agency, and well within individuals' capacity to influence and direct.

Accounts of choice like Thomas Wright's go beyond the sense of choice as mere selection. Choice in many Renaissance moral-philosophical discussions becomes a moral phenomenon that functions reflexively, expressing and also shaping moral identity. Choosing correctly involves not only making a selection, but also doing so with the awareness that even small-scale decisions have morally constitutive effects.

This understanding of choice is deeply Aristotelian; Aristotle linked choice or what he termed *prohairesis* to moral character. In the *Nicomachean*

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[57] Wright, a Catholic priest committed to spreading Catholicism in England, was manifestly interested in the broader socio-religious precipitates of vocational choices, insofar as those choices could serve as catalysts for influencing others. He was also manifestly concerned with how to spread Roman Catholicism in Protestant England, all the while concealing his own intentions when it suited him to do so.

Ethics, Aristotle ties *prohairesis*, which some translators render as 'choice' and others as 'responsible action,' to *ethos* (moral character). Aristotle remarks that *prohairesis* "cannot exist without both intellect and a moral condition of the mind…. In the sphere of action," he writes, "good action and the reverse cannot exist without intellect and moral character."[58] Aristotle's conception effectively makes choice expressive of moral character and also contingent upon it.

This formulation can be problematic for modern readers. Choice nowadays is typically identified as an act of selection from among a range of available options. When faced with the decision about whether to eat carrot sticks or a chocolate éclair for my mid-afternoon snack, my choice, typically understood, is whichever food I actually end up eating, provided I am given free access to both snacks. There is no question of my characteristic set of attitudes about snacking, or to my habitual snacking practices: only to my particular decision in this instance.

Conversely, for Aristotle, *prohairesis* is qualified by the two things excluded by the modern understanding of choosing: my characterological disposition, in this case, as either a health-conscious or self-indulgent person; and my habitual proclivity to actually snack on either pastries or vegetables on a regular basis. Only when there is a correspondence between the two (sweet tooth and chocolate éclair, or healthy eater and carrot stick) in relation to the actual choice I have made in this instance is there an example of choice. When there is a non-correspondence, say, if I am a health-conscious person but eat the éclair

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[58] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics: Book Six*, trans. and ed. L. H. G. Greenwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 1139a.

today, there is not, in Aristotle's view, an instance of choice, but rather an instance of *akrasia*, or uncontrolled desire for ends known to be self-harming.

Gertrude Anscombe's seminal 1967 essay "Thought and Action in Aristotle" explores this dimension of Aristotelian thought, and succeeds in emphasizing *prohairesis'* estrangement from modern notions of choosing. She describes Aristotelian *prohairesis* as a "less-than-winning concept," in contrast to his notion of practicality, which continues to inform modern notions of praxis.[59] Anscombe's discussion manages to emphasize just how great a disparity there is between a moral-philosophical view centered on character and one that is, to use philosopher David Norton's phrasing, much more minimalist, and wholly unconcerned with characterological integrity.[60]

Under a virtue ethical conception, the ethical self is one bounded by an integrity that strives to continually bring moral ideals into line with practical choices. Often, in vernacular moral-philosophical writings from the Renaissance, this is represented as a function of sustained awareness of one's ideals in the face of practical decision-making. Of course, there has been significant debate among philosophers about what, exactly, this type of self-watchfulness entails. On the one hand, it may comprise the basic moral scaffolding upon which all rationally-ordered societies are constructed, in the sense that individuals are held accountable for their actions.[61] Conversely, it may require something resembling

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[59] Gertrude Anscombe, "Thought and Action in Aristotle," in *Articles on Aristotle II: Ethics and Politics,* ed. Jonathan Barnes et al. (London: Duckworth, 1977), 61-71.
[60] Norton, "Moral Minimalism."
[61] For an elaboration of this view of Aristotle, see T. H. Irwin's "Aristotle on

the self-vigilance that also characterizes the Stoic view of rationality's function in ordering and regulating the soul. If the requirements of Aristotle's rationalized view of moral self-cultivation really are this extreme, what is involved in the enterprise of moral character development amounts to a kind of rationalized self-effacement few would be capable of practicing fully.[62]

Ultimately, virtue ethics' utility for the study of Shakespeare resides most convincingly in the enterprise of character criticism, for understanding the role and value of moral ideals to Shakespeare's characters, as well as the practical circumstances that condition and test them, The virtue ethical model of character I have been advancing suggests at the possibility of understanding Hamlet from the inside out, according to the ideals that drive him that may not be visible materially, but are nevertheless central to the way that he understands his own behavior, also central to the processes of reasoning, thinking, and feeling that condition meaning for him, and which condition his speech and behavior within the play. Arguably, these are the same principles that allow scholars, actors, and audience-members to reconstruct the processes associated with practical reason for these characters. This is hardly an anachronistic enterprise or a matter of imputing a non-existent subjectivity to these beings. On the contrary, it is something of which these characters are, themselves, eminently aware, and which

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Reason, Desire, and Virtue." *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 567-78.
[62] For a consideration of this perspective on Aristotle's philosophy, consult Martha Nussbaum's "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category." *Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 163-201 as well as "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 32-53.

also figured significantly in the Renaissance estimation of what it means to be human.

Chapter 2: Jewish *Ethos* in the *Merchant of Venice*

I. Considering Shakespeare's Jew as a Jew

In Chapter One, I discussed ways in which moral ideals and practical choices function interactively in Shakespeare, constituting and reconstituting the ethical self. Moral identity according to many vernacular moral philosophers hinges upon a principle of integrity and a sustained awareness of constitutional requirements even in moments when it is challenging or distasteful to remain aware of them. That awareness is reflected and also problematized in a variety of ways throughout Shakespeare's dramatic canon, from Lear's "who is it that can tell me who I am," to Hamlet's lines in act 5, scene 2, "Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet/If Hamlet from himself be taken away." Indeed, Shakespeare's dramatic works feature numerous instances where self-coherence, moral self-accountability, and self-intelligibility slip away or suffer rupture, resulting in characters who momentarily forget themselves or fail to recognize their own actions and behavior as their own. In these instances, moral identity is first and foremost a problem associated with a character's internal self-understanding. Often, these cases veer into what philosophers term *akrasia* – the knowing pursuit of self-harming courses of action, which I address in detail in Chapter Three's discussion of *The Winter's Tale*.

But slippages in moral coherence and confusion over moral identity are sometimes functions of more than just characterological disorientation or moral incontinence in Shakespeare; just as often, they are functions of critical interpolation. While it may seem facile, perfunctory, or obvious to assert that

moral orientation matters in Shakespeare's plays, determining sources of moral

orientation for Shakespeare's characters can, in point of fact, be extremely

challenging. Character criticism is particularly vulnerable to misreadings, and

often provides a ready venue for critics to transpose their own values onto the

plays. The challenges of reading Shakespeare's characters without reading too

much of ourselves into them are still very much what they were for T. S. Eliot,

who aptly remarked that "the critic's qualification for venturing to talk about

[Shakespeare] is, that I [i.e.: the critic] am *not* under the delusion that Shakespeare

in the least resembles myself, either as I am or as I should like to imagine

myself."[1] This same concern with unthinkingly reading too much of our selves

into Shakespeare's plays has certainly underwritten recent historicist critiques of

characterological approaches to Shakespeare, including debates about early

modern inwardness, and the very notion of 'character' itself in Shakespeare.

Although New Historicist critiques of early modern subjectivity and

character have arguably imposed a useful degree of self-awareness on character

critics nowadays, the problem of reading character in Shakespeare and,

particularly, of which character's voices come to dominate scholars' approaches

to the plays, is still very much a live issue. While the tendency to unthinkingly

read ourselves into Hamlet and Cordelia may have been usefully problematized in

the wake of recent debates about early modern subjectivity and character, a

related issue has emerged out of those discussions, which is less well addressed

by them. That matter concerns which character's perspective becomes the

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[1] T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," in *Elizabethan Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 36.

scholar's Archimedean point, and it is seemingly an even more intransigent and, arguably, inescapable critical concern for scholars of Shakespearean drama. In a recent issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Hugh Grady's review of Christopher Pye's essay concludes by focusing on this very problem. Pye's work hardly conforms to the type of character criticism that New Historicist scholars like Margreta de Grazia have attacked, or for that matter, to any simplistic theoretical coordinates. And yet the problem of what Grady, referring to Carol Thomas Neely's designation, terms "Iago criticism" persists as a real problem within Pye's essay, for Grady.[2] Grady concludes by remarking that Pye's analysis of *Othello*, though brilliant, implicitly takes Iago's part. He comments that Pye "says very little about Iago's point of view, but incorporates aspects of [it] into his own analysis… in effect, giving Iago the determining vision of the play."[3] For Grady, Pye is an Iago critic, and that particular hermeneutic carries with it a critical blind spot, occluding his view of, among other things, Iago. Examining a particular play through the moral architecture of a singular character tends to generate these kinds of blind spots. The result can be a problematic occlusion of important, even essential aspects of the play. What the history of character criticism points to

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[2] Hugh Grady, "Theory 'after Theory': Christopher Pye's Reading of *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2009): 458. Grady discusses various types of *Othello* criticism outlined by Carol Thomas Neely, which roughly correspond to Iago critics, Othello critics, and Amelia critics. See Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 106-8.
[3] Grady, "Theory 'after Theory,'" 459.

rather clearly, sometimes embarrassingly so, is that these occlusions also frequently have roots in the very real shortcomings and intolerances of critics.[4]

The intersection between the personal investments of critics and character criticism in Shakespeare is arguably nowhere more problematic than within the critical legacy surrounding Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.[5] *Merchant*'s critical tradition has frequently read Antonio's invidious characterization of Shylock as a statement of fact about his character, dismissing Shylock as a "devil" who manipulates towards his own malicious ends. This certainly has been the perspective of influential critics like Barbara Lewalski, whose argument on allegory in the *Merchant of Venice* patently takes Antonio at his word and reads not only Shylock, but also Jewishness as an allegory for "thrift" and "niggardly prudence."[6] For Lewalski, *Merchant*'s Jewish "thrift" and "prudence" serve as counter-points to Christian selflessness and self-sacrificial "venturing".[7] In her estimation, there is nothing resembling an actual Jew in Shakespeare's play, nothing endowed with a distinctive or internally coherent ethical orientation. It is

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[4] See, for example, Michael Bristol's "How Many Children Did She Have?" in John Joughin, ed., *Philosophical Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2000), 18-33, for an astute discussion of how critical strategies like L. C. Knight's often mask authors' own personal moral attitudes about topics like motherhood and what constitutes a good wife.
[5] See the introduction to Janet Adelman, *Blood Relations: Christian and Jew in the Merchant of Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), where she begins by foregrounding the problematic link between institutional anti-Semitism within Shakespeare studies and *The Merchant of Venice* – a connection which Adelman cites as the motivating impetus for the book.
[6] Barbara K. Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1962): 330
[7] Ibid., 329.

all simply a matter of the allegorical pattern of the play, which she is convinced follows a Patristic scheme.

It is difficult to see Lewalski's estimation of Jewishness and Christianisty in the play as a merely allegorical one, despite Lewalski's assertion that the play's own structure is fundamentally patterned on allegory, and does not represent *actual* Jews and Christians. In fact, the dichotomy between letter and spirit that she identifies at the heart of *The Merchant of Venice* is, itself, deeply bound up with the history of anti-Semitism and the flesh-and-blood persecution of actual Jews. It is not only difficult, but decidedly problematic from a moral standpoint to hold this type of allegorized approach to the play up as an ideal model, when it so evidently elides the strong and admittedly difficult moral claim that *Merchant* makes on audiences.

Of course, Shylock makes the critic's task of disentangling our sense of Shylock from the anti-Semitism expressed by the play's Christian characters all the more difficult by being difficult to read. Moody, cryptic, at times stubbornly silent, Shylock's motivations are opaque, his speech often a cryptic, doggerel English. Many of his utterances are frustratingly obscure, refusing to reveal a clear intention or point of view. It is far from apparent what types of ideals animate Shylock on a number of key plot points, including the bond he seals with Antonio. Is it friendship he wants, or does he harbor murderous intentions towards Antonio? These points are in no small way tied to the play's affective economy, and critical responses to Shylock's character.

In previous chapters, I suggested that Shakespeare's plays are neither

Aristotelian nor philosophical in the sense of corresponding to a set of identifiable

philosophical imperatives. I instead proposed that Aristotle's, and moral

philosophy's serviceability to Shakespeare rests on a much less prescriptive point.

I proposed that reading Shakespeare philosophically involves borrowing from

virtue ethics' intensive focus on the mechanics of situated moral agency.

Philosophy so conceived, I pointed out, functions as a non-deontological model

for moral agency at the level of character and practical action in Shakespeare. In

this chapter, I propose a similarly non-deontological approach to *The Merchant of

Venice*. Rather than presuming that Shakespeare animates his comedy according

to a Patristic dichotomy in which Jews necessarily correspond to degraded

Christians, I am instead suggesting that the overarching 'rules' of the play - its

moral centre – are very much a function of a different series of hermeneutics,

which do not correspond to the letter/spirit dichotomy as clearly or neatly as

Lewalski seems to believe. Rather than presuming the moral lesson at the heart of

the play to be a Patristic dichotomy between letter and spirit, as Antonio and,

later, Portia insist, I am instead interested in ways in which the play appears to

invoke religious differences only to problematize prescriptive readings such as

Lewalski's. At the same time, I take seriously Antonio's – and Shylock's --

emphasis on religious difference as fundamental to this play. Unlike a tendency

within secular-humanist *Merchant* scholarship to focus on topics other than

religion as a way of side-stepping the play's own emphasis on religious

particularism, my intention is to flesh out religiously-grounded motivations in the

play that have been elided by scholars in order to more fully account for the complex moral agency of *Merchant*'s characters, particularly Shylock's moral agency.

Julia Reinhard Lupton has recently argued that Shylock's approach to situational predicaments in *The Merchant of Venice* is deeply embedded in an ethical, Torah-based hermeneutic based in considerations of practical reason.[8] Lupton refers to Shylock's identity in the play not as *ethos*, but as *ethnos*, or national identity distinct from the Christian understanding of nationhood as a "universe of 'nations' (*ethne*) united in Christ."[9] For Lupton, the Jewish *ethnos* in *Merchant* is "defined by a religious code and a genealogical imperative" that sets Jews apart from the play's Christian characters.[10] Part of that imperative, in Lupton's estimation, consists of the entry into the covenant of *brit milah* or circumcision, which sets Jews apart as a "stranger-nation" – one that, within the terms of the play, is bracketed by Pauline Christianity. In this chapter, I flesh out sources of moral agency for Shylock by closely and intensively considering not only Shylock's *ethos* in the secular-humanist sense, that is to say, divorced from any meaningful connection to his religious identity as a Jew; instead, I foreground Shylock's Jewish *ethnos* and his membership in a Jewish nation as Lupton understands it, that is to say, as a stranger-nation defined by covenant. I view Shylock's ethnological identity as a primary consideration for understanding his *ethos* as a character. But rather than focusing on the racial or theological

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[8] Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Exegesis, Mimesis, and the Future of Humanism in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Religion and Literature* 42, no. 2 (2002): 123-39.
[9] Ibid., 125.
[10] Ibid.

dimensions of nationhood germinating in early modern England as a way of getting at how Shylock's religious identity informs his *ethos*, I instead propose that the Jewish *ethnos* for Shylock is importantly defined through its orientation towards foundational Biblical narratives. Jewishness for Shylock is importantly evidenced in his hermeneutic strategies for interpreting Scripture and his relationship to the characters who populate it. Rather than viewing Jewishness as a cultural construct devoid of any relationship to religious practice or theology, as many modern critics of the play have done, I propose looking at Jewishness, and Shylock's Jewishness in particular, through those foundational narratives, examining how they are applied to the exigencies of present-day concerns according to the dictates of moral praxis and daily life. As Reinhard Lupton has argued, that particular hermeneutic strategy is, itself, characteristic of early midrash, and reflective of an important aspect of Jewish practical existence, particularly in the diaspora.[11]

By shifting my focus away from the Patristic concern with letter-versus-spirit that has animated so much *Merchant* criticism, I turn in this chapter towards questions sourced from within the Jewish tradition itself relating to Jewish identity and belonging – questions that touch on issues of interpolation, cultural identity, and essentialism. By focusing on questions of moral agency from Shylock's perspective, this chapter examines ways in which scenes from the play can and do evoke responses rooted in Jewish perspectives on the world. Those responses are importantly bound up with episodes from the Torah explicitly and

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[11] Ibid.

implicitly introduced over the course of the play. The main narrative I am

concerned with is the so-called parable of the parti-colored lambs recounted by

Shylock in act 1, scene 3, which he cites as he negotiates the loan with Antonio.

There has been no shortage of scholarship on Christian perspectives on this

narrative, particularly accounts that read 'Old' Testament narratives typologically

through the lens of the 'New' Testament, or explain the presence of these stories

in Shakespeare's play as Shylock's attempt to justify usury.[12] However, no

scholarship has yet actually included Jewish exegetical voices into the discussion

of the passage's significance in Shakespeare. It is my intention to correct this

oversight.

By inquiring into sources of Jewish personhood for Shylock, I ask whether

there is a Jew in Shakespeare's play – someone dimensional enough to be

considered in light of that same motivational complexity scholars locate in many

of Shakespeare's characters. I follow the play's own lead by inquiring into

sources of motivation that remain, first and foremost, rooted in religious

affiliation and, in Shylock's case, grounded in his Jewishness. While *Merchant* is,

without question, a play full of anti-Semitic speeches uttered by anti-Semitic

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[12] On these points, see Karl Elze, *Essays on Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1874), 73; William W. Lloyd, *Critical Essays on Plays of Shakespeare* (London: George Bell, 1875), 103; Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 270; Elmer Edgar Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies: Historical and Comparative in Method* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 323; E. E. Stoll, *From Shakespeare to Joyce: Authors and Critics; Literature and Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1946), 123; Harold R. Walley, *Essays in Dramatic Literature: The Parrott Presentation Volume* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1935), 237; Cary B. Graham, "Standards of Value in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1953): 145-51; and Leah Woods Wilkins, "Shylock's Pound of Flesh and Laban's Sheep," *Modern Language Notes* 62, no. 1 (1947): 28-30.

characters, the play's perspective as a whole has too frequently been conflated with its anti-Semitic voices, as though hatred of Jews were the only perspective on Jews being made available in the play. It is worth mentioning that much present-day scholarship still follows Lewalski's lead, regarding Shylock as an allegorical amalgam of Christian stereotypes about Jews. Shylock is still overwhelmingly read through a hermeneutic other than the one the play identifies with his character, which is to say, a Jewish one.

Without question, the intervening decades since Lewalski first published "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*" have seen scholarly investigations of *Merchant* shift towards more historically attuned arguments. This shift, however, has only intensified the tendency among many scholars to overlook Jewish perspectives in the play. Historians have long maintained that there were few Jews living in England in Shakespeare's day. This historical assertion has, in turn, significantly shaped and bounded many late twentieth- and early twenty-first century discussions of *The Merchant of Venice*. Readings of *Merchant* that interpret Shylock as an amalgam of Renaissance preconceptions rather than as a character with a uniquely Jewish identity frequently find fortification in the historical claim that there were few or no Jews in England at the time of the play's composition.[13] There is no 'real' Jew in Shakespeare's play because there were no 'real' Jews in Shakespeare's England.

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[13] Although some scholars have resisted the assertion that there were no Jews living in Renaissance England, most notably Janet Adelman in *Blood Relations*, even her exceptionally nuanced approach to Shylock takes as its foundation the Patristic approach to Scripture, and reads Biblical allusion in the play solely according to a Christian interpretive lens.

Much of the most compelling recent scholarship on *The Merchant of Venice* has taken precisely this tack as a way of investigating not Jewishness, but English perspectives on it. Englishness as a concept is, as James Shapiro has pointed out, deeply bound up with fantasies of national and racial purity, and equally strong convictions about English culture's exemption from Jewish contamination.[14] Shakespeare's centrality to English notions of cultural heritage and its self-understood cultural and aesthetic legacy has made *Merchant* a particularly important – and problematic – part of the English literary canon for this very reason.[15]

As fascinating and indispensable a piece of scholarship as Shapiro's *Shakespeare and the Jews* is, however, it too fails to consider the Jewish Shylock, or imagine Shylock as a Jew in the sense that I am emphasizing. Despite this omission, Shapiro's point about Jewishness and Englishness actually speaks strongly to my desire to read the play through a Jewish hermeneutic: contemporary notions of Englishness were threaded through with notions of culture and racial purity not tainted by Jews, and this very notion of purity implicitly, by Shapiro's own admission, brings along with it the specter of the very thing it most fears and reviles. Finally, there is always a Jewish presence with which to contend in *Merchant;* the question that remains is how best to account for and explicate it.

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[14] See James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), introduction.
[15] See Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews,* 3-4; and Adelman, *Blood Relations*.

The question that lurks at the heart of a great many recent accounts of *The Merchant of Venice* that address its Jewish aspects is the degree to which that Jewish presence is a product of Christian interpolation, or is to be approached on different terms. I am suggesting that the play's Jewish presence and its Jewish moneylender stand on their own two feet, so to speak. I make this assertion, in part, because it seems reasonable to me to approach Shylock as an individual with a distinct ethical orientation towards the world in the same way that I approach Hamlet or Leontes. Questions of moral agency in Shakespeare tend, as I have previously argued, to take the same basic form that they do outside of fictional contexts. Determining Hamlet's reasons for acting is just as complicated as figuring out why my friends and neighbors behave the way that they do. In neither case does having recourse to interpolated stereotypes entirely or fully account for why these individuals speak and act the way they do. If this much is true of Hamlet, it is also true of Shylock.

Investigating a Jewish Shylock, rather than a Christianized parody of Jewishness, is also a function of allowing characters to speak for themselves, in the sense of responding critically to those paradigms and values that animate them ethically. In the article by Mustapha Fahmi that I discussed in the previous chapter, Fahmi suggests that getting to know Shakespeare's fictional characters, much like getting to know actual people, involves becoming acquainted with the ideals they themselves hold dear. It also requires an understanding of their

relationship to those influences that have helped forge their identity.[16] In Fahmi's view, understanding Shakespeare's characters involves paying attention to formative influences, to intentions, aspirations and fears, some of which are actually embodied by interlocutors who are present, some of which, if we take up Fahmi's (and Bakhtin's) fuller notion of dialogic engagement, live in memory or the imagination. The great strength of Fahmi's argument resides in his direct appeal to character criticism's weaknesses and his success at redressing several of these shortcomings. For example, successful character criticism must find a way to avoid unthinkingly transposing the critic's own values onto the plays and their characters. The tendency to transpose what T.S. Eliot's formulation aptly phrases in the first person "I" ("I am *not* under the delusion that Shakespeare in the least resembles myself, either as I am or as I should like to imagine myself") is often exacerbated by a related proclivity for allowing characters to have the final word about one another. Shakespeare's plays provide a multitude of examples of characters whose personal motivations, ambitions, and interests lead them to describe others in highly self-interested, biased ways. Claudius refers to Hamlet as simple-minded; Hamlet calls Ophelia a whore. Neither opinion is, of course, an objective estimation of the other's worth. By refocusing on each character's distinctive sources of ethical orientation, individuals' evaluations of one another become part of what scholars must account for about the play, rather than statements of fact to be unthinkingly accepted as true.

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[16] Mustapha Fahmi, "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human," in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds., *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 97-107.

In "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human," Fahmi suggests at what an ethical orientation might look like for Antony, whose commitments suggest a profound attachment to chivalric values. Elsewhere, I have suggested that courage animates Hamlet's conception of virtue. But what about for Shylock?

If Shylock does have a distinct 'ethical orientation,' to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase, comprised of identifiably Jewish commitments, surely it is an orientation comprised of something other than those inhuman qualities assigned to him by Antonio. Antonio's characterization of Shylock in 1.3 as a devil who perverts Scripture certainly parrots the Patristic estimation of Jews as degraded Christians. It is worth emphasizing that Antonio's beliefs about Jews, however pervasively circulated within early modern European culture, hardly represents an objective or complete measure of Jewishness, and was certainly in no way espoused by Jews as a measure of their own worth or identity either in the Renaissance or in the eras that precede or follow it.

We ought to regard Antonio's comments with a healthy degree of suspicion, despite the pervasiveness of those same anti-Semitic tropes in Shakespeare's own day. The passage Shylock cites in the episode that provokes Antonio's comment comes from the Book of Genesis, and in an obvious sense – a sense clear both to us and to Shakespeare's early modern English contemporaries – the statement is a deeply inaccurate one. Jews and the Jewish Torah historically *precede* Christianity and its New Testament – a fact of which early modern Christians were keenly aware.

In fact, the problem of historical precedence and Judaism's inextricability from Christianity's account of its own origins is signaled by Antonio's comment, and manages to zero in on an area of keen anxiety within early modern English culture when it comes to Jews: what Adelman has described as the Christians' unpaid debt to the Jews – an indebtedness both shameful and ineradicable to Christians.[17] This theological debt offers a suggestive way of accounting for Antonio and Bassanio's treatment of Shylock in the play, and most certainly contextualizes these characters' need to pursue Jewish financial assistance while rebuking and denigrating their creditor.

The problem of Christianity's Jewish paternity is, on the one hand, an issue explicitly rooted in Judaeo-Christian relations. On the other, however, it also signals a more pervasive concern with origins and precedent shared by other kinds of writers in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries feature an increasing number of English literary and exegetical works that openly struggle with the problem of cultural and religious indebtedness, along with issues of religious, spiritual, and national precedence, from Milton's ambiguous relationship to Classical influences to Spenser's attempts to poetically denigrate Roman Catholicism. Protestant theologians in late sixteenth and seventeenth-century England were genuinely challenged by the problem of how to account for and explicate Christian Scripture in a way that addressed but also superseded competing traditions, including both Catholic and Rabbinical interpretations of Sacred texts. Although the historical claim that there

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[17] Adelman, *Blood Relations*, intro.

were few Jews living in Renaissance England can easily translate into a critical

tendency to ignore signs of Jewish influence, theological writings of the period

betray a poignant anxiety about Jews: Jews were still viewed as powerful threats

to Catholic and Protestant religious supremacy. As Janet Adelman points out,

John Foxe's vision of nationalist providentialism betrays a nagging concern with

Jewish claims to privileged status. Foxe worries in a 1578 sermon over Jewish

claims to special status precisely because their claims are so much clearer and

therefore, from his perspective, more dangerous than rival Protestant English

claims to supremacy. Foxe notes anxiously that Jews are descendants of Abraham

– a lineage based in blood-line descent, while England's claim to privilege is far

messier, based on much newer notions of national privilege steeped in land

boundaries.[18]

The question of a Jewish presence in Renaissance England is a complex

one not resolved by appeals to statistical data about numbers of Jews living in

England in the sixteenth century. Such data has, in any event, been steeped in

controversy, and scholarly discussions surrounding those studies often reveal the

complexity of the question about who counted as Jewish.[19] How is Jewishness to

be measured? Did Jews who no longer practiced 'count'? Did they count if they

practiced in secret? If they practiced in secret, how is it then possible to accurately

count them?

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[18] John Foxe, *A Sermon Preached at the Christening of a Certaine Iew at London* (London: Christopher Barker, 1578), quoted in Adelman, *Blood Relations,* 28-33.
[19] See Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*.

One of the ways in which Jews continued to count in Renaissance England was in the interpretation of Scripture. English-language commentaries on the Bible from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries regularly feature summaries of Rabbinical perspectives on Biblical verses that are recounted before Christian exegetes proceed to their own explications. This is a decidedly evident feature of several English vernacular commentators, including Andrew Willet's and James Maxwell's. In point of fact, many Christian summaries of Jewish commentaries reveal a complex set of attitudes, sometimes more philo-Semitic than anti-Semitic. There is certainly an avid interest in the Hebrew language, Hebrew philology, and in Rabbinical perspectives on these verses. These types of inclusions and instances where Jewish content and Jewish perspectives are afforded recognition and attention suggest that even within a culture in which there may have been few recognizable Jews, a Jewish presence nevertheless resonated on a number of levels in surprisingly complex ways within early modern English culture.[20]

Finally, the issue of whether Shylock can be thought of as a character with a distinct ethical orientation rather than as a one-dimensional comic foil, at least in part, amounts to a question about how carefully we choose to define notions of presence. Although Renaissance England surely lacked large numbers of flesh-and-blood Jews, an indelible Jewish presence nevertheless persisted there in at least one important sense highlighted by Shylock and contemporary Christian

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[20] For an insightful discussion of some of the evidence for multivalent English Renaissance perspectives on Jews and Jewishness, see Aaron Kitch, "Shylock's Sacred Nation," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2008): 131-55.

exegetes: through Scripture. Shakespeare's culture was still very much a religious culture, and post-Reformation England was intimately familiar with Biblical narratives, and acutely cognizant of the existence of rival interpretations of them, including Hebraic ones. When Shylock makes reference to the Genesis parable of the parti-coloured lambs in act 1, scene 3 of *The Merchant of Venice* in what represents the sole instance of exegetical interpretation in Shakespeare's entire dramatic canon, he is therefore not necessarily or merely, as Antonio asserts, a devil who can cite Scripture for his purpose. Rather, Shylock's citation resonates as an act of self-identification rooted in Jewish sacred writings – writings which, contrary to Antonio's logic, were subsequently appropriated by Christians under the guise of the "Old" and "New" Testaments.

For Shylock, as for any Jew, there is no "New" Testament; there is only the Torah – Sacred writings that require nothing extra or "new" to complete or redeem them.[21] Despite the critical tendency to approach Shylock's Jewishness exclusively via the Patristic imagination, Shakespeare's Jew and the comedy in which he appears are actually more accurately understood in relation to interpretive tensions in the period between Jewish and Christian religious traditions and their distinctive ways of reading a set of common Scriptures. As Reinhard Lupton has insightfully pointed out, those tensions are, themselves, an embedded feature of the Pauline Christianity referenced by the play.[22] Those

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[21] This principle was explicitly formulated by Maimonides and forms part of his Thirteen Principles of Faith. See Moses Maimonides, *Maimonides' Introduction to the Talmud: A Translation of the Rambam's Introduction to His Commentary on the Mishna,* trans. Zvi L. Lampel (New York: Judaica Press, 1975).
[22] See Lupton, "Exegesis."

tensions point towards a complex and problematic interdependence keenly felt within Renaissance culture and mirrored in *The Merchant of Venice*, generated by the reliance on a shared Bible. Looking at *Merchant* through a Jewish hermeneutic also presupposes the presence of two distinctive traditions with distinctive ways of reading a common set of Sacred writings, rather than relying exclusively on the interpolated and highly distorted Christian version of Jews that has formed such an integral part of the letter-versus-spirit dichotomy typically used to interpret the play.

In the sections that follow, I outline a way of making sense of Shylock's motivations, his words, and his behaviour that pays closer attention to exegetical voices surrounding the Biblical passage Shylock invokes. Shylock makes reference in act 1, scene 3 to an episode from the Genesis Jacob cycle known as the parable of the parti-coloured lambs. The episode includes verses 25 through 43 of Genesis chapter 30, and Shylock's formulation of that parable is as follows:

Shylock: When Jacob graz'd his uncle Laban's sheep, -

                 This Jacob from our holy Abram was

                 (As his wise mother wrought in his behalf)

                 The third possessor: ay, he was the third.

Antonio: And what of him? Did he take interest?

Shylock: No, not take interest, not as you would say,

                 Directly, interest, - mark what Jacob did, -

When Laban and himself were compromised

That all the eanlings which were streaked and pied

Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank

In end of autumn turned to the rams,

And when the work of generation was

Between these woolly breeders in the act,

The skilful shepherd pill'd me certain wands,

And in the doing of the deed of kind

He stuck them up before the fulsome ewes,

Who then conceiving, did in eaning time

Fall parti-coloured lambs and those were Jacob's.

This was a way to thrive, and he was blest:

And thrift is blessing if men steal it not.[23]

As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, this scene is typically read and discussed – and glossed by the play's editors – as Shylock's attempt to justify usury.[24] It is important to point out that there is no mention of usury in this scene, or indeed anywhere in the play; in fact, the word "usury" itself occurs only four times in Shakespeare's entire canon. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare

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[23] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice,* ed. John Russell Brown, *The Arden Shakespeare: Playgoer's Edition* (Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998). All subsequent citations from *The Merchant of Venice* in this chapter are from the Arden edition of the play.

[24] See the Arden Playgoer's edition as a good example of a reputable scholarly edition that glosses the episode this way, as does Lindsey Kaplan's *Texts and Contexts* edition (M. Lindsay Kaplan, ed., *The Merchant of Venice: Texts and Contexts* [New York: Palgrave, 2002]). Also, see footnote 12 of this chapter for a more extensive list of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century critics who take this position about Shylock's intentions.

includes only "usance" – a term mentioned by Shylock in reference to the rate of interest, and on one other occasion in relation to the act of borrowing. The question of usury in the play only really accounts for Shylock's motivations and behavior in this scene if we accept at face value Antonio's designation of him as an unscrupulous profiteer unworthy of our respect.

In an important sense, Shylock's attempt at exegetical interpretation in 1.3 outlines not only at a particular argumentative strategy rooted in the demands of his negotiations with Antonio; it also outlines a distinctive way of life informed by religious narratives and shaped by centuries-long exegetical and cultural dialogic engagement with them. Biblical stories such as these represent sites of ethical deliberation, spiritual guidance, and normative standards for a range of daily practices, including commercial ones relating to money lending. This was true as much for Christians as it was for Jews in the Renaissance.[25] The Biblical passage Shylock references, centered around the tale of Laban and Jacob breeding and dividing their respective flocks of cattle, offers important clues into the *ethoi* that animate both Christian and Jewish characters in the play. Moreover, the Biblical episode referenced by Shylock and the stories that surround it, known as the Jacob cycle, constitute an important inter-text for Shakespeare's play whose themes, plot structures, and moral dilemmas recur throughout *The Merchant of*

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[25] See Kitch, "Shylock's Sacred Nation," for a more extensive discussion of this point. Arnold Williams also discusses this point with reference to the Renaissance understanding and use of the Book of Genesis, which was widely regarded as a source-book for practical guidance about agriculture, farming, and other trades. Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), esp. the introduction.

Venice. The Genesis Jacob cycle's emphasis on means-end morality, prudent versus profligate lifestyles, and the theft of daughters has notable parallels with central structural elements of Shakespeare's comedy, and both, in an important sense, are stories about primordial religious and ethical differences. By focusing on the Jacob cycle, this chapter begins to recuperate these important Biblical inter-texts from the margins of Shakespeare scholarship, while advancing an account of their meaning that recognizes their significance as sites of deliberation, engagement, and ethical orientation for both Christians *and* Jews, and of course, also for Shylock.

II. Formative Influences: Shylock as Jacob

As Antonio and Shylock begin to negotiate their loan in act 1, scene 3, Shylock lapses into a story about Jacob breeding cattle for his uncle Laban. Antonio initially appears nonplussed by Shylock's digression, and fails to see its relevance to the matter of whether Shylock will, in fact, agree to loan him three thousand ducats. "And what of him [i.e.: Jacob]? Did he take interest?" he asks. This mild curiosity is followed by an exegetical dispute about the meaning of the passage Shylock invokes. Antonio claims that, "This [i.e.: Jacob's success at breeding cattle] was a venture sir that Jacob serv'd for,/ A thing not in his power to bring to pass,/ But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven."[26] In Antonio's mind, the Biblical passage suggests that Jacob's success at multiplying cattle owes everything to divine intercession.

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[26] 1.3.86-88

Shylock's view of the passage from Genesis, which differs significantly from Antonio's dismissive appeal to divine intervention, emphasizes lineage and generational entitlements -- "This Jacob from our holy Abram was/ (As his wise mother wrought in his behalf)/ The third possessor: ay, he was the third." – as well as human intervention in the form of hard work.[27] There is also a sense of Divine entitlement that frames the episode for him – after all, Shylock is the third, not the first possessor of that wealth. However, Shylock's citation of the parable clearly reveals his admiration for Jacob and what he was able to accomplish through ingenuity and skill. "[M]ark what Jacob did", he proclaims. He then proceeds to recount the skilled breeding practices that helped him multiply the speckled and streaked cattle more quickly and successfully than Laban's solid-coloured animals.

Shylock evidently identifies with Jacob as he negotiates the loan with Antonio, and identifies himself as a Jacob-like figure throughout these early negotiations. His skills are Jacob's skills, such as the ability to make things -- in this case, ducats -- multiply. However, the Jacob episode serves as more than just an illustration of Shylock's point or, as Antonio alleges, a sly rhetorical gloss for predatory financial practices. The Biblical citation offers a window onto Shylock's self-understanding in this scene, as well as his understanding of the loan with Antonio.

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[27] As Michael Bristol pointed out in our collaborative presentation for the Shakespeare and Performance Research Team at McGill University, "work" is the present tense of "wrought" – a term that implies an application of human ingenuity and endeavour, as is the case with metalworking or wrought iron, where metal is worked into a desired form.

Shylock's rhetorical self-positioning in relation to the Scriptural passage suggests that he identifies strongly with the characters in the story. He uses Jacob's story as an analogy for his own present-day practices, and in fact, identifies himself as the Biblical Jacob in this scene. The Folio play-text substitutes "I" for "aye" in this line, as in, "I, he [i.e.: Jacob] was the third" rather than "aye, he was the third". This formulation insists on an important degree of self-identification, if not confusion on Shylock's part with the figure of Jacob.[28]

Self-identification with Jewish Biblical characters is not unusual among Jews, and in fact, it informs a range of Jewish religious and cultural practices. Biblical ancestors tend to be viewed as members of one's distant, yet immediate family, and Shylock's self-identification with Jacob is entirely in keeping with Jewish cultural practices that encourage a sense of immediate participation in these stories. Such practices have extended well into the present-day observance of ritual holidays among Jews. It is a common feature of Passover celebrations, where the Seder meal reenacts the events of Exodus. The Jewish practice of naming children after characters from the Pentateuch also strongly encourages self-identification with Biblical figures. The circumstances surrounding a child's birth or parentage are frequently decisive in the selection of an appropriate Hebrew name for the child. Often, a set of characteristics are imposed when a child is named after a particular patriarch or matriarch for very specific reasons, for example, the time of year in which they are born, the parents' time of life

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[28] On this point, see Marc Shell, "The *Wether* and the Ewe: Verbal Usury in *The Merchant of Venice,*" *Kenyon Review* 1, no. 4 (1979): 65-92, esp. 68.

when they are conceived (being a late-born child could result in a name like

"Isaac"), or their status as converts to Judaism. All female converts, for instance,

are given the Hebrew name "Ruth."

Along with an array of characterological strengths and weaknesses

associated with names like "Ruth" and "Noah" come a series of situational moral

predicaments linked to these characters. There is a particular moral landscape

evoked by these names, and a series of choices and moral questions bound up

with them. Shylock's citation therefore functions to set the stage in a

characterological, but also an ethical sense, and by identifying himself as Jacob in

1.3, Shylock contextualizes his present negotiations with Antonio within the fuller

ethical and thematic framework of the Genesis story. His systematic application

of details from the Genesis story onto his present circumstances is, as Reinhard

Lupton has pointed out, entirely in keeping with Jewish-midrashic hermeneutics,

which seek to "coordinate the narrative and the prescriptive dimensions of Torah"

by applying those stories to the exigencies of daily life.[29]

The Jacob-figure depicted in the verses Shylock cites from Genesis 30: 25-

43 is a lucky talisman of sorts, according to many Rabbinical commentators. He is

someone whose presence generates prosperity. "I have learned by experience that

the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake", are Laban's words to Jacob at verse 27.[30]

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[29] Lupton, "Exegesis," 125. On this point, Lupton also cites Jacob Neusner, *A Midrash Reader* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 76.
[30] I cite here from the King James Bible, and rely on this version throughout the reminder of the chapter when citing from Genesis. In the chapter that follows on *The Winter's Tale*, I cite from the 1560 Geneva version as a way of calling attention to the early modern Protestant understanding of these verses. However, for the sake of clarity in this chapter, I opted to use the modernized King James

According to the Hebrew commentaries, Jacob is someone who has been selected for divine favour. Laban's stores of cattle and grandchildren have increased steadily since Jacob's arrival into his household. Indeed, one of the *midrashim* about this particular verse recounts an anecdote wherein Laban pats Jacob down as he moves to kiss him, expecting to find gold hidden on his person. When gold fails to materialize, he waits until Jacob returns home, and digs up a patch of ground next to where he stood. Lo and behold, he finds gold and silver buried there.[31]

In fact, Jacob is the object of substantial divine entitlement throughout the cycle of stories in which he appears in Genesis. He is the favorite son, at least as far as maternal favor is concerned, and he is also clearly favored by God, although precisely what being chosen amounts to within a tradition singled out equally for blessings and persecution turns out to be a complex, ambivalent issue in both the Book of Genesis and the commentaries that frame it.

In this episode from the Jacob cycle, the sense of divine entitlement that Laban admires in Jacob is qualified by the verses that precede and follow the admiring one. Where Laban has observed "the signs" – a reference some commentators interpret as part of an idolatrous religious practice, Jacob has observed his growing household and surveyed the practical resources needed to

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version in order to call greater attention to exegetical interpretations of these passages, which respond to the Hebre rather than the English text. Where relevant, I call attention to the Hebrew text in order to emphasize the lexical subtleties and word play often picked up by Rabbinical commentators.

[31] Menahem Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation: A Millennial Anthology*, 9 vols., trans. and ed. Harry Freedman (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1953), 4:109.

sustain his flourishing flock of cattle, women, and children.[32] While Jacob is

without question the object of divine entitlement in the Hebrew commentaries, of

equal importance is Jacob's much more ordinary entitlement through hard work,

and his commitment to supporting his family. This is arguably the greatest point

of contrast between Laban and Jacob when it comes to the *ethoi* that inform their

practical behavior, according to the commentaries. Laban is depicted as someone

who thrives thanks to the labor of others, notably Jacob, while Jacob is someone

who thrives by virtue of his own toil and willingness to put his shoulder to the

grindstone.[33] "There are shepherds who feed but do not keep guard, and shepherds

who keep guard but do not feed. I will both feed and keep guard. Beloved is labor,

for all the prophets engaged in it," one commentator writes about this passage.[34]

Jacob's divine entitlement and his wealth are made possible because of his

labor; the two elements are, in an important sense, coterminous, and form part of

what Aristotle would have understood as Jacob's *ethos*: a combination of his

essential disposition, reinforced and reaffirmed by a habitual practice. The *ethos*

that most accurately characterizes Jacob is, in one sense, very close to the

Aristotelian practical virtue of prudence. His behavior in a number of key

instances in the Jacob cycle, such as the procurement of his brother's birthright

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[32] Parallels between wives and cattle are drawn out nicely in the Hebrew text; Leah's name means "ewe lamb" and Rachel's means "wild cow." There is a great deal of wordplay between cattle and female name references in this part of the Jacob cycle. For example, when we first meet Rachel in Genesis 29:9, we are told "Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she kept them." The Hebrew is "ki roach hu," which translates as "she was a shepherdess," and also "she was grazing" – the word "roach" can mean either shepherd or the verb "to graze."
[33] He works seven additional years for the privilege of marrying Laban's youngest daughter, Rachel.
[34] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* 4:108.

and the stealing of his father's blessing, speaks to his ability to not only survive but also achieve enviable levels of prosperity through cunning, perseverance, and the ability to anticipate future consequences.

These very abilities also appear to determine Shylock's business practices in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock certainly aspires to Jacob's cunning, success, and thrift. These assets, and thrift in particular, have been regarded somewhat unkindly within the critical tradition, bound up with the suspicion of Shylock's usurious business practices and his supposed ill intentions toward Antonio in this scene. However, usury is actually something of a red herring if we consider Shylock's own perspective on things. The story Shylock references, along with the Biblical commentaries that help explicate the story from a Jewish perspective, deals much more explicitly with questions of thrift in the older sense – that is to say, questions of thriving. The kind of thrift Shylock admires in Jacob, which he picks up on in the scene with Laban and the cattle, considers the material basis for thriving as an adjunct to a much more comprehensive notion: a kind of eudaemonistic flourishing, or concern for the good life.

Shylock appeals to thrift on two separate occasions in 1.3. The first is when he describes an unpleasant past encounter with Antonio. "He [Antonio] hates our sacred nation, and he rails,/ Even there where merchants most do congregate,/ On me, my bargains and my well-won thrift".[35] The second usage occurs in his conclusive summary of Jacob's success: "This was a way to thrive,

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[35] 1.3.45

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and he was blest:/ And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not."[36] Although both

usages can and often are read in the more modern sense of thrift as penny-

pinching, Shylock's usage in both cases also appeals directly to the older sense of

thrift as thriving. In the second instance, "thrift" follows immediately after

"thrive" in the lines "This was a way to thrive, and he was blest:/ And thrift is

blessing, if men steal it not." The sense of thrift as thriving here is especially

appropriate to Shylock's understanding of the Biblical passage's meaning, which

has nothing whatsoever to do with being economical in the sense of being cheap.

For Shylock, the "way to thrive" is importantly bound up with the strategies of

Jacob, whom he views as a moral exemplar.

Just as thrift in its more modern sense carries the negative connotation of

being cheap, the act of stealing ("thrift is blessing if men steal it not") to which

Shylock refers in this speech is frequently read as an indication of Shylock's

usurious financial practices, or more generally as an indication that Shylock is

thinking about or intending to justify usury.[37] It is sometimes read as Shylock's

attempt to justify gauging Antonio on the loan, or attempt to trap, cheat, or "Jew"

him. However, the theft to which Shylock refers can also be read as a much more

complex reference in accordance with the situational complexities of the scene.

By referring to Jacob, Shylock's usage of "theft" speaks directly to what Jacob

does *not* do in breeding Laban's cattle: he does not steal his uncle's property.

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[36] 1.3.84-5

[37] See H. B. Charlton's discussion of this passage from Genesis and its
relationship to 1.3 for a complex consideration of the nuances of Shylock's
behavior and intentions in that scene in *Shakespearian Comedy* (New York:
Macmillan, 1939), esp. 140-55, which I discuss shortly.

Although Jacob manages to come away with the lion's share of the flock, he does it not in a deceitful or unsanctioned way, according to commentators. This may, at least in part, be Shylock's point in recalling the Biblical story. As I will soon point out, the work involved in skillfully breeding the flocks is an important aspect of this story's Rabbinically derived meaning.

In a different sense, however, Shylock's usage of "theft" in this scene can be read self-reflexively, as a comment about the theft of Scripture and the appropriation of Jewish Sacred writings at the hands of Christians like Antonio. In fact, this kind of theft, in which Biblical stories are appropriated and refashioned and their Jewish origins erased (but never with complete success) is precisely what Antonio attempts to instantiate in this scene. Antonio refuses to take Shylock's exegetical gloss on the parable of the parti-colored lambs seriously; in fact, he tries to have the final word on the passage's meaning. Antonio refashions the story to his own ends – "this was a venture Jacob served for, a thing not in his power to bring to pass," he determines, right after he denigrates Shylock as an illegitimate and immoral manipulator.[38] Shylock insists that Jacob never stole his uncle's cattle, while Antonio insists that Shylock has illegitimately made those verses his own by interpreting them incorrectly.

H. B. Charlton's 1938 *Shakespearean Comedy* is conspicuous for its insistence on the complexity of Shylock's motivations in this scene. Charlton's analysis actually takes seriously the possibility that Shylock might engage in the loan negotiations with Antonio intending to befriend him. Shylock intends to

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[38] 1.3.87-88.

engage Antonio in a complex ethical and exegetical debate via the Biblical parable, in Charlton's view. What Shylock receives from Antonio is a rather hard-headed repudiation. Ultimately, the negotiations devolve into a purely financial exchange between creditor and borrower before collapsing into the basest kind of material exchange of flesh for ducats – one which radically devalues human flesh. This devaluation and the discursive regress between Shylock and Antonio that reverts back to a base materialism is, ironically for Charlton, prompted by Antonio, not Shylock. Charlton believes that Shylock experiences this regression as a genuine disappointment.

What is interesting about Charlton's analysis is the suggestion that Shylock attempts to engage Antonio in a meaningful exchange over the passage in question – an attempt that Antonio deliberately and callously thwarts. And there is a distinct possibility that Shylock does, in this scene, engage Antonio in something that does not begin as a bad-faith kind of baiting. Charlton's analysis begins to explore the complexity of the attempt at inter-faith exegetical dialogue in 1.3 – a dialogue that suggests at more comprehensive differences on the level of moral agency.

Shylock's estimation of "what Jacob did" in the parable of the parti-colored lambs is, in some ways, a vocalization of Jewish Rabbinical perspectives on this passage, just as Antonio's attitudes share important parallels with early modern Christian exegetical glosses on Genesis 30. In the Biblical passage Shylock invokes, several years have elapsed after Jacob steals his brother's birthright and his father's blessing; Jacob has left his parents' home and made a

home and a family for himself among Laban's kin. In the verses that chronicle Jacob's breeding experiment, Jacob manages to elicit a near-miraculous outcome extremely favorable to him, but unfavorable to Laban. After striking an agreement to divide their cattle and go their separate ways, Jacob manages to make his own share of the flock -- the speckled and spotted animals -- breed far more abundantly than the solid-colored animals that are to be Laban's share. This outcome goes against the natural genetic tendency of the cattle to produce more plain-colored offspring than speckled. With a distinctly practical-interpretive midrashic spirit, the Rabbinical commentaries display a marked interest in the dynamics of what Jacob manages to do in this verse. Going into great detail, they elaborate on the skilful interventions that make Laban's sheep breed slower and less abundantly than his own; they discuss the correct work ethic for situations in which an employee must tend to his employer's as well as his own flocks; and they venture opinions about the precise terms of Jacob and Laban's initial agreement. One commentator explains, "We may learn from Jacob that an employee who works faithfully receives his reward in this world in addition to the portion stored up for him in the World to Come."[39] Indeed, the emphasis in many of the Hebrew commentaries is undeniably practical when it comes to what Jacob does with the spotted cattle.

The focus on practical concerns and on the subtleties of contract and property law -- the main offshoot of these episodes in the Talmud -- stands in marked contrast to early modern Christian approaches to these same Biblical

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[39] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, 4:112.

verses. Although not all of the commentaries are as explicit as Antonio that "this

was a venture Jacob served for, a thing not in his power to bring to pass," the

debate about who exactly was responsible for the multiplication of speckled cattle

remains a consistent point of discussion for Renaissance Christian commentators.

For these exegetes, the moral status of Jacob's actions in the cycle as a whole is

problematic, and stands in need of substantial and often lengthy justification. The

Christian commentaries are full of what Arnold Williams refers to as "hair-

splitting distinctions" which attempt to excuse Jacob of the various sins he

commits: lying, dishonouring his father, tricking his brother, etc.[40] "The means

which Jacob used, was not artificial or fraudulent, but natural, not depending on

man's skill, but God's blessing," writes Andrew Willett in his 1608 *Hexapla in

Genesin*.[41] "Although then that nature had her work, we cannot say that nature

wholly did it," he adds.[42] Early modern Christian commentators place a great deal

of emphasis on divine intercession as the most and perhaps only satisfying way of

absolving Jacob of these moral offences. Willett's 1633 edition of *Hexapla in

Genesin Exodum* devotes a whole sub-heading in *The Explanation and Solution of

Doubtful questions and places* to the question of "Whether Jacobs device were by

miracle or by the workes of nature."[43] In the same spirit, Henry Ainsworth in his

1616 edition of *Annotations Upon the First Book of Moses,* writes that "naturally

the cattel would bring forth others like themselves, and so Jacobs part should be

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[40] Williams, *Common Expositor,* 169.
[41] Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin* (London: Thomas Creede, 1608), 320.
[42] Ibid., 321
[43] Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin and Exodum* (London: John Haviland, 1633), 275

few. But by Gods extraordinary providence, it fell out otherwise."[44]

The story of Jacob and the parti-colored lambs also finds its way into a variety of non-theological early modern English sources as well. The focus of many of these accounts rests on the story's occult aspect, and how Jacob is magically able to make something come from nothing. In *The Secret Miracles of Nature*, the Dutchman Lemnius Levinus cites the story as evidence of the mind's powerful influence upon the formal characteristics of the body.

> Whilst a man and woman embrace, if the woman think of the man's countenance, and look upon him, and thinks of anyone else, that likeness will the child represent… Jacob used that strategem, who was afterwards called Israel, laying rods he had pilled off the rinds from, before them everywhere, and so he made the greatest part of the flock spotted and party-colored.[45]

In the same spirit, English writer Thomas Wright concludes that the parable of the parti-coloured lambs illustrates the imagination's effect upon the physical appearance of offspring.

> Galen also reporteth, that a woman beholding a most beautiful picture, conceived and brought forth a beautiful child by a most deformed father, we have also in the Scriptures the like experience in Jacob, who to cause his ewes conceive speckled lambs, put sundry white rods in the channels where the beasts were watered, and thereby the lambs were yeaned party-

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[44] Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations upon the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis* ([Amsterdam]: [Giles Thorp],1616).
[45] Lemnius Levinus, *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (London: Jo. Streeter, 1658), 11.

colored.[46]

Both writers devote considerable attention to explaining "the power of Imagination" as part of their discussion of the human passions. The passions' power to stir men's souls and to spread or 'multiply' among men, coupled with the imagination's ability to seemingly create something out of nothing, made them objects of intense scrutiny that were sometimes equated with Jacob's breeding-sticks.

Clearly, a considerable degree of anxiety finds its way into vernacular discussions of Jacob's pilled wands in early modern England. Wright and Levinus' examples, which are drawn from ancient Greek medicine, carefully skirt but never entirely conceal an anxiety about female infidelity, and the woman's "mysterious" ability to affect the fruits of reproduction. Much has been made of this imagined ability and the dangerous female agency that supposedly underwrites it. It has served as the foundation for a number of recent readings of Jessica's character and of the intractable, underlying pollution associated with her Jewishness in the play. The idea that tainted individuals were not only themselves infected, but were also polluting to others certainly finds its way into English vernacular writings about Jacob in this period. In a work published in 1638 by Richard Younge entitled "The Drunkard's Character," Jacob's wands are assigned an explicitly negative value. Younge writes

The bad conditions of popular persons are like Jacobs speckled

Rods, they make the people bring forth their owne party-colored

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[46] Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*.

actions. The ill customs of the eminent, are drawn up like some

pestilent exhalations, and corrupts the air round about.[47]

Here, the wands are symbols for the contagiousness of not only morally corrupt

actions, but also the socially corruptive behavior of influential persons. Jacob's

skill in the parti-colored lamb episode consists of the ability to induce thriving

through sexual reproduction. The ability to hinder or encourage multiplication is

something that is sometimes perceived as an occasion for the festering of sin and

vice. Thriving and success in these instances is intertwined with anxieties about

corruptive influence and the multiplication of morally suspect commodities. This

is, in part, what Antonio suggests at when he accuses Shylock of twisting

scripture. The corruption Antonio reads into Shylock's agenda is very much a

function of his suspicion about Shylock's ability to profit based on charging

interest. Money lending at interest is something that Antonio implicitly casts as an

unnatural, un-Christian skill in 1.3, despite the normative presence of financial

"venturing" within English economic discourse by the early seventeenth-century,

along with Bassanio's own risky financial practices which require an infusion of

Jewish capital.[48]

Despite some of the negative connotations associated with vernacular

English elaborations of Jacob's pilled wands, Jacob himself was regarded with a

great deal of admiration in the early modern world. Both Christian and Jewish

traditions highly esteemed Jacob's willingness to care for and protect his family.

Jacob is an exemplary figure associated with the positive, eudaemonistic sense of

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[47] Richard Younge, *The Drunkard's Character* (London: R. Badger, 1638), 170.
[48] See Lindsay Kaplan's *Texts and Contexts* on this point.

"thrift" in an economic context: he is consistently associated with the successful management of households. Both Jewish and Christian commentaries share a common appreciation for Jacob's work ethic, and praise his ability to provide for his kin in active and responsible ways. In *The Mirrour of Religious Men*, published in 1611, James Maxwell remarks that "the children of Jacob are taught not to live Idlely and without some lawfull calling or trade, and rather to embrace the condition of service then to spend their time in sluggishnes, idlenes, and sinne."[49] Ironically, it is only when prohibitions are placed on Jews' ability to practice a legitimate trade in Renaissance Europe that usury becomes a prominent topic of discussion among Jewish community leaders. Hence, sixteenth-century Italian physician and Rabbi David de Pomis reasons, in a very Jacob-like way, that the Jewish practice of lending money to Christians arises out of necessity rather than malice. His arguments suggest that what Jewish financiers seek is the ability to practice their profession is a self-respecting way that allows them to support their families. In *De Medico Hebraeo*, he writes: "If the Jews do 'bite' with usury [i.e.: charge usurious interest rates], this is not by permission of the law, but by a cogent necessity which, as it is thought, may make this excusable."[50] Although de Pomis does not excuse the practice of usury, he does provide some clarification about the motives behind it – motives which foreground the presence of a strong work ethic blunted by constraining circumstances.

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[49] James Maxwell, *The Mirrour of Religious Men* (London: E. White, 1611), 105.
[50] David De Pomis, *De Medico Hebraeo* (Venice, 1587), in H. Friedenwald, *The Jews and Medicine,* 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944), 404, quoted in Kaplan, *Texts and Contexts*, 219.

Shylock's view of things, if it follows Jacob's, suggests that what he actually seeks is an opportunity to ply his trade in a self-respecting way. He does this through Jacob's own insistence on the altogether natural and routine nature of the work that he, like Jacob, performs, which has made him rich. In an even more pragmatic sense, Shylock attempts to do what Charles Spinosa aptly summarizes as "getting by according to the abilities God has given him."[51] Those very abilities constitute the "use of that which is mine own" – a use which, for Shylock, carries not only physical and financial, but also moral resonances. Shylock contextualizes that wealth in terms of divine entitlements and generational lineage that he traces back to Abram. For Shylock, usury is not so much at issue as the question of his relationship to Antonio. Are they kin, or friends? Are they strangers? Are they merely businessmen performing a transaction with no shared Biblical history? Each of these considerations conditions the kind of moral landscape that establishes an ethical context for practical decisions, including the issue of whether or not to charge Antonio interest or lend him money gratis.

The Jewish practices surrounding lending money to Christians center around questions about the nature of the relationship between Christians and Jews. In many accounts, including de Pomis', there is a kinship, rooted in Biblical narrative, imagined to exist between Christians and Jews. De Pomis' reasoning about lending practices dictates that because Christians and Jews are brothers and therefore descendants of Jacob and Esau respectively, their relationship is fraternal and not characterized by the kind of enmity or indifference that exists

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[51] Charles Spinosa, "The Transformation of Intentionality: Debt and Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*," *English Literary Renaissance* 24, no. 2 (1994): 394.

between strangers. That kinship for de Pomis, as for early modern English culture pervasively, was rooted in the Jacob-Esau story. Conversely, De Pomis views Moslems, the descendants of Ishmael, as strangers to the Jews, and Jews are therefore permitted to charge them higher interest rates. "If the Christians be of the lineage of Esau," he reasons, "he is thereby a brother of the Jew, and may not be harmed by us… it is in no way allowed to the Jews that they should practice usury, either among themselves, or among the Christians who are their brothers. It may, however, be permitted to practice this among foreigners (or for foreigners to practice it among themselves)."[52]

Early modern accounts frequently figure kinship bonds between Christian and Jews through the example of the Biblical Jacob and Esau. By implication, Christians and Jews were understood to be brothers, though quarrelsome ones. There is good reason to believe this is the way that Shylock initially views the bond with Antonio in 1.3. When Shylock proclaims that he "hates him [Antonio] because he is a Christian," and proposes to "feed fat his ancient grudge" against him, his comments are suggestive of more than just a personal grievance, and more than the kind of animosity that arises from an ugly encounter in the marketplace. Shylock's intense and deep-seated loathing of Antonio is one of the most difficult elements, psychologically, to account for from this scene. Why does Shylock hate Antonio so viciously, and refer to that hatred and his grudge as "ancient"? If we look to Antonio and Shylock's personal history, it is very difficult to make psychologically plausible sense of Shylock's deep-seated

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[52] David de Pomis, *De Medico,* quoted in Kaplan, *Texts and Contexts*, 219.

animosity without imagining that these two have a long and fraught history between them – in fact, a history so long and fraught that it predates either of them individually.

Imagining a shared Biblical past for Shylock and Antonio also helps contextualize the staking of the bond from Antonio's perspective. After all, Shylock's Jewishness is the principal cause for Antonio's shunning and shaming him in public. Antonio has refused to do business with Shylock in the past, spurning Shylock's "bargains and well-won thrift", even spitting on him in public, according to Shylock's report. Antonio's refusal to enter into a commercial relationship with Shylock up until he is driven by necessity to do so is, itself, predicated upon the same ancient Judeo-Christian rivalry that informs Shylock's view of things in 1.3. In effect, their lack of commercial affiliation is predicated upon religious animosity; the fact is, Antonio is a Christian who does not deign to do business with Jews.

From a Jewish perspective, the Jacob-Esau rivalry carries with it a sense of participating in and living out a world-historical destiny. Several Rabbis describe the conflict between the brothers as primordial and in an important sense, insurmountable, fated to recur again and again throughout history. It begins with the twins in utero; it accounts for their strange positioning in birth. Jacob holds onto Esau's heel, which accounts for the name "Yaakov" in Hebrew, meaning "heel-grabber." It acquires world-historical resonances in the Hebrew commentaries when the two brothers' identities shift in accordance with the commentators' own historical era. They are described alternately as Israel and

Edom, Israel and the Canaanites, Rome and Judea, as Christian and Jew by sixteenth century commentators, and later as Israel and all of Western civilization – a usage which the Hebrew word "goyim" (meaning "other nations") nicely captures.[53] In *Genesis* 25:22 - 23 these twins described as locked in conflict, even in utero. Their embryonic conflict is, in fact, embryonic in another important sense in that it foreshadows the enmity that will exist between two distinct nations, one fathered by Esau, and one by Jacob. *Genesis* Chapter 25, verses 22-3 narrates:

> And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it
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> be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the Lord. And
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> the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two
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> manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one
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> people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall
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> serve the younger.

The commentaries often prophesy that where the nation of Jacob thrives, the nation of Esau will wane. This struggle, contention, or enmity, is articulated by Shylock very early in *The Merchant of Venice* when Shylock depicts his relationship with Antonio. "I hate him, for he is a Christian . . . I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."[54] The grudge is "ancient" not only in the sense that these two characters have personal issues, but in the larger sense that the "grudge" refers to a history that precedes their individual history. There is a kind of *ethnos-*

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[53] See Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* vol. 4, and the selection of commentaries there on Genesis 25:23.
[54] 1.3.37, 42.

based determinacy responsible for the enmity between these characters. But the idea of a historical destiny is framed or represented as a rivalry between brothers.

For Shylock, the business of the three thousand ducats may very well represent a present-day reenactment of an ancient Biblical rivalry between brothers. This rivalry is framed via an enmity between Christians and Jews, and catalyzed in the present moment by Antonio's refusal to do business with him or afford him the expected social courtesies. Although in a more modern, psychological context, this type of reenactment of the past might be explained as an attempt to work out, repeat, or resolve past trauma, in a religious context it is very much a function of the ritual observances that underwrite a devout consciousness.

For Shylock, the Genesis episode establishes a set of fixed parameters for his present-day negotiations with Antonio. Those fixed parameters, insofar as they are Biblical, importantly pre-date him. The Genesis story establishes a series of characterological and moral typologies that Shylock, in one sense, is simply reenacting. However, there is also a sense in which Shylock views his wealth as a product of his own effort and striving in a distinctly personal sense. He, after all, claims the role and even the name of Jacob for himself, along with the skills that have allowed Jacob to achieve enviable levels of prosperity. In a Jewish context, the most common formulation of moral agency is expressed in the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" -- an expression that nicely captures the sense of present effort required to actualize and fulfill whatever pre-scripted ordinance contextualizes the immediate moment.

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The way in which Shylock sees himself in 1.3 as a Jacob-like figure endows the "merry bond" with not only personal, strategic resonances, but also deep historical significance. For Shylock, wealth itself becomes evidence and confirmation of his divine Jacob-like entitlement. After all, he is a third, not the first, possessor of that wealth. Shylock's discussion of the loan with Antonio also includes Rebecca. If Shylock is, as he claims, only the third possessor of the wealth after Abram (the first possessor) and Isaac (the second possessor), he is able to take possession thanks to her maternal wisdom.

What is significant about the work Rebecca performs in the Genesis story is that it manages to work *against* the grain of the affective patriarchal preferences that govern her household. In the case of her two sons, she must work against her old, blind husband's clear preference for types like Esau, the rough-hewn, burly son known for his hunting and his powerful physical appetite. Rebecca's agency and wisdom in bringing about the stealing of Esau's birthright are central, because the blessing and the birthright are rightfully due to someone of Jacob's disposition and character – someone both mild and clever. Rebecca is, of course, keenly aware of which son merits the blessing, even if Jacob is not. Rebecca, who has already conversed with God about her two sons, understands that the possession of the blessing is too important to be decided on the basis of dietary preferences, or even on birth order. She knows that Jacob is the one who must receive it, even if an element of deception is involved in bringing this about. Rebecca performed her work "wisely" in the sense of seeing to it that Jacob became the "third possessor" after Abraham and Isaac. To have allowed Esau to receive the

blessing would be in some sense to defy God's will, as Rebecca understood it. However, the sense of obeying or accepting God's will here is quite different from any kind of passive acceptance of a pre-scripted ordinance. Much like other episodes in the Jacob cycle, the possession of the blessing requires the active participation of wisdom and human agency. In this episode, both human participation and divinely ordained events are required to bring about the correct state of affairs.

The fact that Jacob is Rebecca's (and God's), but not Isaac's favorite, suggests that part of what is entailed in blessings and entitlements in the Genesis Jacob cycle is struggling against normative principles, and defying seemingly fixed, insurmountable elements such as birth-orders and paternal proclivities. Prudence and skill, rather than privilege and entitlement seem to be those *ethoi* that animate Shylock. There are, of course, suggestive parallels between the Esau-Jacob ethical contrast when it comes to the carefree, easygoing lifestyle prized by *Merchant's* Christian Venetians in contrast to Shylock's own practices.

The play's bracketing of Shylock's exegetical gloss within Antonio's Christian account of the Genesis parable, however, manages to re-inscribe the curious predicament associated with Jewish life in the diaspora – the a kind of prefigurative conflict imagined to exist among Jews and other nations or "goyim" not only in this section of the Genesis Jacob cycle, but throughout all of Jewish history. That predetermination gets articulated at great length in Rabbinical commentaries surrounding passages from the Genesis Jacob cycle that detail Jacob and Esau's curious position in utero.

The rivalry between the twin brothers in Genesis, though nowhere directly referenced in Shakespeare's play, does manage to point towards an extremely relevant ethical contrast between Shylock and Antonio. In the commentaries much is made of Esau's inability to say what he wants - he doesn't seem to know the word for lentils, only the word for something red. One commentator writes that, "When they saw that Esau was totally committed to coarse meaningless labors not befitting civilized man, to the extent that was incapable of even recognizing the lentils as such, (knowing only) their color (not their name)"[55] Jewish exegetical commentary places considerable emphasis on Esau's tremendous appetite, suggesting that the immediacy of his physical hunger is the reason he gives up his birthright so easily. In some commentaries, this is expressed in elaborations on Esau's scepticism about the possibility of a life to come. "Does the future world exist? Or will there be a resurrection of the dead? Will Abraham who has died, and who was more precious than any other, return again?" Jacob thereupon retorted: "If there is indeed neither a future world nor a resurrection of the dead, of what use is the birthright to you? Sell me first thy birthright."

Esau is characteristically unable to delay immediate gratification in favor of future rewards or the promise of future entitlements. The Rabbinical commentators describe him as powerfully, at times self-destructively, driven by his own physical appetites. In one elaboration, the name "Esau" is described as a derivative of the Hebrew word "Edom," meaning red. One commentator

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[55] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* vol. 4, and his selection of commentaries on Genesis 25:27-34.

elaborates on the provenance, remarking that when he comes in famished from the fields and smells Jacob's cooked lentils, he can scarcely articulate the request for a bowl of stew. Instead, he says something akin to: "give me the red thing." Another Rabbi explains that Esau must wait around for the dish to finish cooking, all the while complaining about Jacob's choice of lentils over quick-cooking venison. Some Rabbinical exegetes even claim that Esau willingly relinquishes his birthright, gives it up, in effect, for a mere bowl of lentil stew, never having valued it in the first place.

Where Esau is continually associated with base appetite and short-term interests in the Rabbinical commentaries, Jacob is characterized as studious, crafty, and future-oriented. The most important of these futural concerns, of course, is the promise of renewing God's covenant and fathering the Jewish nation. In fact, Antonio's reason for seeking Shylock's services in the first play – the entire motivating instance for the play - mirrors Esau's short-term hedonism. Bassanio's profligate lifestyle epitomizes the kind of pleasure-centered, resource-squandering risk-taking associated with Esau's trading his birthright for a mess of pottage.

Struggling against seemingly impossible odds and anticipating that there will be struggle in attaining success constitutes one of the moral lessons distilled from the uncanny episode from slightly later in the Jacob cycle too, where Jacob wrestles with an angel until dawn. That wrestling match is not unlike the way that Shylock proposes to "catch Antonio upon the hip" – a reference to a wrestling move - in act 1 scene 3 of Shakespeare's play. In Genesis 32, the angel strikes

Jacob upon the hollow of his thigh, but in the end, Jacob prevails. From that perseverance, Jacob acquires a new name, Israel – the name representative of all Jewish people, which in Hebrew means, "I wrestled with God." "Thy name shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel; because thou hast had power with God, thou shalt also prevail with men."[56] Even with an injured thigh, perseverance and fortitude are seminally important, because blessings for Israel and his descendants are intertwined with struggles.

III. Stealing Daughters, and Who Isn't Jewish

The loan of three thousand ducats at no monetary interest is importantly predicated upon a distinction in the play between who is Jewish and who is not. The Biblical passage I have been looking to throughout my analysis of *Merchant*, I have argued, establishes a network of relations that determines ethical courses of conduct in the here-and-now for Shylock.

I have been also been arguing that Shylock's identity is defined by his ethnographic identity as a Jew, and his ethical identification with the Biblical Jacob. In 1.3, Shylock attempts to invoke Antonio's participation in an age-old Biblical conflict, which requires an investment that is neither aesthetic, token, nor simply financial; within Biblical terms, it is a function of establishing a covenant between them. The Jewish covenant, or "brit" in Hebrew – is one that requires active and deliberate affirmation from every member of the community.

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[56] Genesis 32:28

Moreover, it requires not exactly a pound, but a certain amount of flesh, in the form of circumcision, or what is referred to as a "briss."

Edward Andrew has argued that Shylock's attempt to solicit Jacob's friendship in this scene represents a desire to convert Antonio back to Judaism.[57] There certainly is anecdotal evidence that some legal prosecutions of Jews in early modernity for attempting to forcibly "circumcise" a Christian, were actually attempts to re-establish religious claims over conversos.

Jessica's desire to abscond with her Christian lover is a different, but related way of testing the normative standards of a particular body of beliefs known as "Judaism". Her desire to convert asks whether those limits can be willingly transgressed by someone who bears the intention of breaking the original covenant. If entry into the covenant, in a Jewish sense, is defined by circumcision or "briss," hers is, in effect, the desire for an anti-circumcision – a search for both a physical and spiritual exit strategy from her father's house.

Genesis presents us with a young female character who also desires to "go out" from her home, although the extent of her desire to effect a permanent break from her faith and family is something the narrative leaves open, unlike Shakespeare's portrayal of Jessica. I'm referring to Dinah, Jacob's daughter, who in chapter 34 winds up in a messy romantic entanglement with a local non-Hebrew. In both Shakespeare's play and in *Genesis*, the seduction of a Jewish woman is associated with the charms of music and poetic language. The commentaries tell us that Shechem "attracted her [Dinah's] attention by playing

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[57] Edward Andrew, *Shylock's Rights: A Grammar of Lockian Claims* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

music within her hearing", and "seduced her with words".[58] In both cases, the

woman in question is reputed to be very beautiful; with Dinah, the commentaries

tell us that, "her image stayed in his [Shechem's] mind, so great was her

beauty"[59]. Genesis 34:1-2 recounts,

> And Dinah the daughter of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob, went out to
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> see the daughters of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the
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> Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and
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> defiled her.[60]

The King James translation uses the word "defiled" to describe what happens to

Dinah when she leaves her family and explores the surrounding area. The

translation from the *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* prefers the less

pointed "humbled" – "and he humbled her", but the sense of violation is roughly

equivalent, and where the *Encyclopedia* chooses a more moderate verb, its

commentary is clear about the egregiousness of the "humbling" that takes place.

The exegetes are inconclusive on the point of whether there was actual sexual

contact between Shechem and Dinah, but even in the absence of that kind of

violation, verbal seduction would have constituted a grave and irreparable harm to

her reputation and the reputation of her family, according to one commentator.[61]

Jacob's sons initially enter into a compact with the nation of Shechem in

which the Shechemites agree to undergo circumcision to try to rectify the messy

Dinah debacle, with the understanding that inter-marriage between the tribes will

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[58] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpreation,* 4:174-75.
[59] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, 4:175
[60] Genesis 34:1-2
[61] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* 4:174-76

be permissible in the future. Part of this deal also establishes that Jacob's sons will be given full access to Shechem's commercial networks. In effect, Jacob's family is offered the chance at full and free socio-economic participation. On first inspection, this appears to be an auspicious and equitable arrangement for everyone – a non-violent ending to a potentially explosive series of missteps, and the first stage of successful multi-cultural co-existence. Of course, things work out very differently, and the overture of circumcision-as-peace-offering turns out be merely a ploy to catch the Shechemites at their most vulnerable. The sons of Jacob slaughter them all while they recover from their surgery, and Dinah is returned to her family.

The Dinah story presents readers with something that appears to resemble the *lex talionis* principle that also underwrites a great many scholars' critical appreciation of Shylock. The pound of flesh epitomizes Shylock's base materialism, just as the Israelites' attack on the Shechemites a similar, more aggressive form of Jewish bloodthirstiness. The kind of justice sought by Jacob's sons appears to be not only retributive, but actively vindictive, beyond any measure of initial injury or loss. Within Shakespeare's play, this sense of predatory retributive justice could be read into Shylock's rage after being "cheated" out of his ducats and his daughter, and his increasing, unrelenting drive after Jessica's departure, to exact that pound of Christian flesh.

Although there is no denying the unmitigated violence of the Hebrews' attack on the men of Shechem, the Jewish commentaries point out that there was considerable deception and double-speak in the negotiations between Shechemites

and Hebrews, that reflects a great deal more hostility and suspicion than a cursory reading would detect. There is the matter of Dinah's initial defilement, which the commentaries suggest could never serve as the basis for any form of valid contract, be it among nations or between God and men. One commentator reflects upon Abraham's circumcision, the archetypal referent for the principle of covenant:

> With this my covenant, which was said unto our father Abraham: If ye will be as we are, that every male of you be circumcised - for the sake of Heaven and not in order to contract marriages. For the circumcision that we underwent when we were admitted to the covenant of Abraham our father was at eight days old, a circumcision of holiness and not one of defilement.[62]

In this commentator's view, daughters are not to be exchanged for trade privileges, nor for the privilege of marrying attractive foreigners. The basic prohibition, here, is not unlike the problem when it comes to Shylock's bond with Antonio: living human flesh cannot be the stuff of bartered exchange. There is something fundamentally un-kosher about a business agreement that traffics in human beings.

It becomes clear enough how Shylock's initial bond is most decidedly un-Jewish, and not only un-Jewish according to a series of partisan Jewish rules, but also in a much broader sense of bartering human flesh in the context of a business arrangement. But the play also shows ways in which the un-Jewishness of the

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[62] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* 4:179.

bond is something the Christian participants also willingly agree to, and even take pains to orchestrate. The Christian interest in the bond may, as in the case of Jacob's sons and the Shechemites, have more going on beneath the surface than a mere loan of three thousand ducats. That 'something more' is directly related to a pound of flesh, or rather, several pounds of living flesh that are hotly desired by Lorenzo, and, once stolen, bitterly mourned by Shylock – Jessica herself.

Dinah is absolutely central to the *Genesis* account of what happens at Shechem. Even when the narrative appears to have shifted concerns and moved on to the subject of lifting trade restrictions and opening up possibilities for intermarriage, the brutality of that final act of revenge hammers swiftly home the conclusion that it was really about Dinah all along. The possibilities for overcoming deep-seated enmity, and for peace and even friendship, are obvious red herrings in the Genesis account, and they may well be in Shakespeare, too. This is not to say that we ought to interpret Shakespeare prescriptively, as a series of final pronouncements about the impossibility of peaceful Jewish-Christian relations. Shakespeare's comedy, however, seen through the lens of this biblical inter-text, does suggest that genuine gestures of friendship are often much more fraught, than they appear, and rarer.

Shakespeare's play certainly seems, initially, to be 'about' the need for a loan of three thousand ducats to finance a romantic business venture. The fact is, Antonio's agreement to the terms of Shylock's bond, and the subsequent relationship that bond engenders between them – including Shylock's being called out to dinner, and leaving Jessica the opportunity to abscond with Lorenzo, results

in the same kind of theft as the one scripted in Genesis – the theft of a prized

daughter. A Christian motivational scenario that includes the deliberate and

premeditated theft of daughters, unconventional as it may seem, is not something

Shakespeare's text ever precludes. The play's treatment of the loan raises the

question: why do Antonio and Bassanio approach Shylock for a sum of money

which Shylock is incapable of staking, but which he must approach Tubal, a third

party, in order to raise. Why Shylock? What does he have, in particular, that they

want so badly, and would they not have known whom to approach directly for

such a large sum of money? Even Shylock's insistence that Antonio "look to his

bond" immediately before he launches into the "hath not a Jew eyes speech"

suggests that Shylock sees through the ruse. He sees the bond for what it is – a

ruse for stealing his daughter. His expression of grief over his ducats may well be

an attempt not to allow Antonio the satisfaction of having hurt him, by

disavowing his feelings for Jessica.

If the pound of flesh, thus understood, constitutes the play's underlying

motivational scenario, the Jewish commentaries on the final verse of the Dinah

episode raise an interesting point in relation to the final verse of Genesis 34,

"Should one deal with our sister as with a harlot?"[63] One commentator writes:

"Their answer was telling and final. It teaches us that Dinah had been forced, and

had not consented to Shechem."[64] An earlier observation made by one

commentator suggests that consent is really the central issue of the entire Dinah

affair. The Hebrew text uses the word "na'ara" in verse 4, which translates into

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[63] Genesis 34:31

[64] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* 4:185.

"damsel", when Shechem says "get me this damsel unto wife". When (as in the case of this verse), the Hebrew word for damsel lacks the final "hei", it shows that the girl has not yet reached puberty.[65] In the Masoretic Hebrew text, Shechem's words for "get me that damsel unto wife" are "kach li et hayeladah hazot le-ishah." "Yeladah" is the word for a female child in modern Hebrew, "yeled" is a male child, and the resonance is unmistakeable.[66] One commentator states the matter clearly: "Dinah was eight and a half years old".[67]

The answer to the question of whether Jessica can really ever effect a conversion to Christianity is, in a sense, that no, she can't, not in any way that counts. The reasons for it within the terms of the play are that, like Dinah, she hasn't yet fully grown into a mature sense of Jewish personhood, or developed the agency to reject or make alterations to that dimension of her person. She simply isn't formed enough, and doesn't possess enough prudence, common sense, or *seichel*, to be able to fully understand the implications of inter-marriage – something which her post-absconsion scene with Lorenzo makes absolutely clear. When she finally finds herself alone with her lover, up close and personal in 4.1, it is as though she can finally read between the lines of all that beautiful speech, and one of the resonances that comes through is her regret over her own blindness. "In such a night did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well, stealing her soul with many vows of faith, and ne'er a true one."[68]

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[65] Ibid., 4:176.
[66] *The Holy Scriptures: A Jewish Bible According to the Masoretic Texts* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing, 1979).
[67] Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation,* 4:176.
[68] 4.1.17-19.

Although physically able to effect an escape from her father's house, it is not clear what it means for Jessica to escape from the faith that has defined her life at such a tender age. Perhaps the most telling account of what it means for Jessica is the story we hear of her, that she sold her mother's ring in exchange for a monkey. This theft of a precious object belonging to her parents makes her not like Dinah at all, but like Rachel who steals her father's idols and hides them in the blankets of her camel's saddle before she leaves her paternal home. These idols or "teraphim" were pagan objects reputedly endowed with the power of speech. One commentator writes that Rachel's reason for stealing them was to prevent them from revealing her location. The ring which Jessica pawns serves the opposite function, I think, revealing precisely where she is and where she has been, like pawning a Van Gogh painting – this is an object that narrates her movements and calls attention to her whereabouts. But even more than that, the stolen ring is an object clearly endowed with enormous sentimental as well as economic significance for Shylock's family. Objects like rings or household gods report on a family's domestic history. In Rachel's case, there is a sense in which her father's pagan idols and her own pagan upbringing are things she will have to keep hidden, because they no longer have a place within the Jewish household into which she has married. In Jessica's case, such objects and their history can only be childishly sloughed off in exchange for a worthless diversion, because she is yet to have truly laid claim to them in the first place.

Chapter 3: Grace, Akrasia, and Moral Agency in *The Winter's Tale*

I. The critical context

The Winter's Tale is infamously set in motion by Leontes' sudden,
seemingly unprompted display of paranoid jealousy. The Greek root of paranoia –
para nous – suggestively evokes a mental state that is, somewhat paradoxically,
characterized by being outside of mindfulness. And indeed, Leontes' mental and
emotional state at the outset of the play is remarkable for its isolation from the
appeals of rational argument, and for its utter lack of grounding in material cause.
His paranoia discounts not only Hermione's appeals; it manages to radically
discount any and all forms of argument and forensic evidence. From the
standpoint of practical ethics, Leontes' convictions are *sui generis* principles more
than they are the products of dialogic engagement with the world, and in that
sense, they fail to accord with the basic requirements of social and ethical life.
And yet Leontes' passionate conviction that his wife has been unfaithful manages
to have a profoundly destructive effect on the lives of those at court in Sicilia, and
becomes inscribed into the lives of others with the force of law. Leontes' world-
view is, ultimately, the one that counts at court. Leontes is a terrifying example of
ethical self-isolation and dysfunction.

The Winter's Tale's conclusion is no better at furnishing a coherent model
of moral-psychological or social functioning. On the level of character, the final
act's reanimated statue is, itself, an impossible contradiction of both a once-dead-
but-now-revivified Hermione, and one who has lived the past sixteen years very

much alive in exile.[1] Even more significantly, to consider *The Winter's Tale*'s

conclusion through the moral agency of its characters is to contemplate a

Hermione utterly and inexplicably transformed, now willing to forgive Leontes

for her own long suffering and the death of their son. Effectively, the play's

conclusion features a reunion whose plausibility and palatability hinge upon both

radical and invisible, unstaged transformations at the level of character: Leontes

must have repented for his terrible behavior, and Hermione must have forgiven

him.

     The Winter's Tale is a play whose critical junctures not only feature, but

hinge upon such breaks and discontinuities. It insists, at various points, on the

phenomenon of individuals who act outside of themselves characterologically

from one moment or episode to the next. These rash, seemingly unprompted shifts

have caused some critics to question whether the play is indeed Shakespeare's.

More routinely, however, critics have advanced theological explanations of these

discontinuities, specifically, Pauline theology's insistence on grace as a principle

bestowed on the most depraved of souls. From a certain perspective, this would

appear to account for Leontes' developmental trajectory, since his transformation

from raging paranoiac to spiritualized supplicant over the course of the play

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[1] Because Leontes had earlier made a point of being shown Hermione's corpse, Hermione is both a statue come to life, and also, by Hermione's own admission, not a reanimated statue, but merely a wife who has lived in exile for sixteen years. Stephen Orgel's discussion of this contradiction maintains that "Shakespearean drama does not create a consistent world," but rather, "continually adjusts its reality according to the demands of its developing argument." *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 36. See also Orgel, "Shakespeare Imagines a Theatre," in Kenneth Muir, Jay L. Halio, and D. J. Palmer, eds., *Shakespeare, Man of the Theatre* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983).

appears as unmerited and uncaused as his initial bout of jealousy. Critical strategies that have emphasized grace as the operative principle within the play have tended to read the play's ethical turns positively, casting the final restitutions as moments of unmitigated redemption. This is particularly true within critical accounts of Leontes' later turn towards conscience, where the play's wondrous, fantastical, and supernatural aspects become points of emphasis.[2]

From a certain standpoint, Shakespeare's late romance would then appear to bypass ethics' practical dimensionality, particularly the kind of practical, phronetic ethics associated with Aristotle's moral philosophy. Sudden, monumental shifts in character are not part of the enterprise of moral-characterological development under Aristotle's model. Rather, it is through regularized, habitual practice that moral improvement is gradually inscribed over the course of an entire lifetime.

Conversely, *The Winter's Tale* explicitly evokes the wonders associated with religious conversion, miracles, and theatrical as well as theological wonder. Shakespeare's romance does indeed effect a number of de-stabilizations to empirical, rational forms of knowledge, all the while incorporating the discourses of magic, aesthetics, and faith into the play's lexical tapestry. There is a sense in which the ethical therefore occupies a particularly uneasy place in *The Winter's Tale,* as does the domain of practical action that, under Aristotle's conception, grounds moral character.

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[2] See, for example, J. V. Cunningham, *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*. (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1951).

At least two not unrelated tendencies from within the critical tradition particularly reinforce this uneasiness. The first, which I just discussed, consists of bracketing Leontes' moral self-accountability by appealing to a principle of grace to explain his transformation. Turning from *The Winter's Tale*'s practical moral resonances towards paranormal principles such as grace does reorient some of the play's dark moral implications, instead making the play's conclusion into a happy ending. Basic questions about the play's ethical coherence, such as why Hermione wordlessly accepts her husband after sixteen years in exile have, within the critical tradition, been overwhelmingly substituted for discussions of grace – a principle that, once introduced, threatens to obviate ethical praxis and render it epi-phenomenal.[3]

The second point worth considering is a more recent historicist claim that modern demands for narrative coherence impede the present-day appreciation of what the play is actually doing or what it really 'means.' Under this view, *The Winter's Tale* deliberately de-stabilizes linear, narrative coherence and meaning as part of its aesthetic strategy. Several scholars have recently taken this approach to the play, emphasizing early modern culture's appreciation for the aesthetic experience of incoherence and mystery.[4] In Renaissance England, aesthetic obscurity comprised a legitimate and valued feature of works of art – one that early seventeenth-century audiences felt did not require any further explication or

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[3] Another possibility for the popularity of this kind of critical approach to the play is that it represents an occasion to excuse Leontes of his bad behavior towards his wife – one that reveals the highly self-interested perspectives of critics who feel that such behavior in actual contexts is also excusable.

[4] See Orgel's introduction to *The Winter's Tale,* 61-62.

resolution. Stephen Orgel has suggested in his introduction to the Oxford edition

of *The Winter's Tale* that reading the play through the lens of a distinctly modern

preference for coherence and explication is anachronistic, and misses out on

something fundamental about the play as it was originally intended and

appreciated by audiences. His point is that our strong modern preference for

clarity prevents us from seeing the play as it originally signified to early modern

culture – that is to say, as an aesthetic construct not intended to make linear,

coherent sense. The hermeneutic model discussed by Orgel, of course, runs

directly counter to the kind of criticism that Michael Bristol terms 'vernacular',

defined by the readerly application of common-sense knowledge about the world

and its workings to the situational particulars of the play in an attempt to work out

some of its contradictions and fill in gaps in the story.[5] It also suggests that the

kinds of practical ethical questions evoked by the play's characterological shifts

are somewhat misplaced, since they appeal to notions of temporal,

characterological, and moral-philosophical coherence simply not borne out by the

play itself.

   In mentioning these two schools of critical thought about the play, I want

to point out that the tendency to elide discussions of practical ethics in *The*

Winter's Tale has, historically, formed an important part of its critical legacy.

However, the play itself does not require that we, like Hermione, awaken our faith

in order to understand, appreciate, or make sense of it; neither does it require that

we avoid or downplay the troubling ethical questions it raises. The mystery and

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[5] See Michael Bristol, "Vernacular Criticism and the Scenes Shakespeare Never
Wrote." *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (2000): 89-102.

wonder that so often catalyzes historicist and Pauline theological readings of *The Winter's Tale* can equally serve as an occasion for concerted treatments of ethics in the play. In fact, a select few scholars have pursued this line of inquiry into *The Winter's Tale*. By asking what constitutes meaningful resolution in Shakespeare, James Knapp reasons that *The Winter's Tale*'s most obscure moments are, in fact, the ones that recall characters like Leontes to their ethical obligation through an encounter with otherness. The ethical is therefore bound up with a kind of practical judgment for Knapp. Rather than leaving things in a state of suspended mystery, behaving ethically involves meeting the need to respond to others, even with the knowledge that our responses may be flawed.[6]

It would be inaccurate to claim that critics of the play have wholly failed to attend to *The Winter's Tale*'s moral dimension. The critical tradition has certainly issued practical reason-based explanations that emphasize Leontes' moral reeducation and renewed commitment to moral self-improvement through habitual practice towards the end of the play. Some critics even turn to Aristotle to argue this point.[7] It is of course wrong to say that Paulina's efforts to reeducate Leontes are successful. Gregory Currie correctly reasons in his discussion of agency and repentance in *The Winter's Tale* that "[Aristotle's] picture is of moral growth through moral action…. Saint-like sorrow and the saying of endless prayers do not provide for this activity in either form, though some would think

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[6] James A. Knapp, "Visual and Ethical Truth in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2004): 253-78. Knapp effectively argues that See esp p 258.
[7] See Susan Snyder and Deborah Curren-Aquino's introduction to *The Winter's Tale*. (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

them a worthy accompaniment to it in a case such as this."[8] However, what is striking is the critical tendency to overemphasize a redemptive ending to the play as a way of making morally palatable sense of its denouement, whatever his critical strategy of choice happens to be.

Without recourse to the transformative power of grace and notions of characterological redemption, *The Winter's Tale* representations of moral agency appear dark and disturbing, evidencing a lack of mature ethical sensibility on the part of its principal characters. At the play's end, Hermione behaves as a kind of automaton who has seemingly relinquished every bit of her agency; Leontes has failed to take moral accountability for his behavior, and his point of view, once again, fails to acknowledge others and the harm he has caused them. With scenes like these in mind, there is a strong case to be made that *The Winter's Tale* is a play that insistently effects conspicuous rifts to the fabric of moral character and the domestic relationships that sustain and ground it. The play continually stages not only threats to the integrity of its marriages, but also the possibility of remarriages, as in Paulina's case. *The Winter's Tale* also suggests that families can be reconstituted anew, even after members are mistreated or even murdered. Long absences, changes of heart and of conscience, and a host of related rifts to temporal and ethical continuity abound in Shakespeare's comedy. And while the play foregrounds these kinds of shifts and discontinuities, critical accounts have tended to smooth them away, often via Pauline teleological explanations that emphasize the redemptive power of grace. Are conventional, faith-based

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[8] Gregory Currie, "Agency and Repentance," *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*. Ed. Michael Bristol (London: Continuum, 2010), 178.

explanations really the best or indeed the only way of accounting for the play's

peculiar structure and its problematic lack of moral-characterological coherence?

As Stanley Cavell has pointed out, among *The Winter's Tale*'s

inconsistencies must be counted certain omissions that carry decidedly ethical

weight. Cavell astutely zeroes in on how the absence of Leontes' and Hermione's

son Mamillius from the play's final family reunion poses genuine problems to *The*

Winter's Tale's ethical and logical coherence. He focuses in particular on why

Mamillius is not revived along with Hermione as part of the play's other

restorations in Act Five. Mamillius' death and absence from the final

reconciliation seems, bizarrely, not to mitigate the happiness of the play's ending

for any of Leontes' family-members; the family unit has been reunited minus one

member, and by all accounts no one, not even his mother, seems recalled of the

dead boy. We might be inclined to ask, along with Cavell, whether in the final

reunion scene, the child's bereaved mother would be just as keen to forget such an

absence, or view the ending as so many critics have, as a happily reconstituted

family whose new son-in-law symbolically makes up for the loss of a son.[9]

What is particularly salient and useful about Cavell's argument is that he

refuses to allow aesthetic or symbolic considerations to drown out the ethical

questions posed by the play, or override its implicit inconsistencies. The central

inconsistency I aim to attend to in this chapter is incoherency at the level of

character. Although other types of absences and disruptions within the play have

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[9] Cavell, "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winter's Tale*," in
Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2003), 193.

been routinely addressed by scholars, from its generic and temporal discontinuities to its failure to adhere to dramatic unities, *The Winter's Tale*'s ruptures also resonate forcefully on the level of characterological integrity, particularly the kind associated with the Classical model of ethical development. From a common-sense perspective, it hardly seems possible that the Hermoine who pleads for her life in the opening act could be the same person who uncomplainingly embraces Leontes at the play's conclusion. Moreover, scenes like these are hardly exceptional within the play; the phenomenon of self-absenting in fact constitutes a recurrent feature of action, language, and characterization in *The Winter's Tale*.

The Winter's Tale foregrounds breaks from the kind of integrity associated with Classical moral character, not simply by providing instances of characters who behave viciously (though it does furnish examples of vicious cruelty); more to the point, *The Winter's Tale* dramatizes individuals who act outside their own characterological dispositions. Those character breaks beg an important question: what does it mean to act outside of one's own character? I maintain that Hermione's plea in act 3, scene 2 offers an important clue to the problems of character coherence and moral agency in the play, when she asserts, "You, my lord, best know,/ Who least will seem to do so, my past life/ Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true,/ As I am now unhappy."[10] Hermione uses the word "continent" to describe her moral integrity, and her usage of the term implies both sexual and moral senses of continence. Typically, incontinence in the Renaissance

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[10] *The Winter's Tale*, 3.2.29-32

had the sense of an inability to contain one's desires. In relation to women, this referred explicitly to the virtue of sexual chastity and women's capacity to remain sexually faithful to their husbands. "Incontinent" also implies temporal immediacy, as in Roderigo's use of it in *Othello* when, immediately after failing to prevent the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, he says to Iago: "I will incontinently drown myself."[11] What the editors of the Oxford edition tell us Roderigo means by "incontinently" is immediately, without delay. This particular sense of incontinence as "immediacy" can also help explicate the moral type of incontinence typically referred to nowadays as weakness of the will. Something occurring "immediately" can refer to its unprompted quality, or to its occurring without the usual kind of build-up. In a moral capacity, we might stretch this a little and say that incontinence implies an unmooring from the kind of settled consistency of character and processes of deliberation discussed by Aristotle in his treatment of virtue in the *NE*.

This type of inconsistency is worthy of critical investigation on its own moral-philosophical terms in relation to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, without needing to fall back on supernatural explanations. The moral-philosophical problem of *akrasia* is sufficiently puzzling, and was so considered by a range of Classical philosophers and their Renaissance interpreters. For Aristotle, akratic action evidenced characterological incoherence in which knowledge of the best course of action somehow does not result in an agent pursuing the action he judges best. *Akrasia* is for Aristotle a specifically moral-psychological problem,

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[11] *Othello* 1.3.304.

and one that he explores in detail in Book Seven of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In

7.3, Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* focuses on a particular problem concerning

the way that knowledge is used and activated, which typically involves instances

of appetitive excess. "For example," he writes, a man "may know and be

conscious of the knowledge that dry food is good for every man and that he

himself is a man, or even that food of a certain kind is dry, but either not possess

or not be actualizing the knowledge whether the particular food before him is

food of that kind."[12] For Aristotle, *akrasia* arises, at least in part, when knowledge

about what is best remains inert, or is not sufficiently rooted in habit and mental

functioning to reliably guide behavior. Hence, his examples of akratic behavior

consist, in addition to strong appetitive and passionate responses, of actors who

utter words without grasping their meaning, and men who are asleep or drunk and

functioning at a remove from their own knowledge of what is best. "Men who fail

in self-restraint talk in the same way as actors speaking a part," Aristotle

reasons.[13]

     Akrasia was also defined as a moral-theological problem in Renaissance

England, particularly one associated with Pauline theology and Calvinism more

generally. Paul identifies akrasia as a problem of the will and its inadequacies at

moving sufferers beyond their carnal desires towards a state of spiritual rebirth. "I

of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of

sin," Paul remarks in chapter 7 verse 25 of *Romans.* For Paul, the experience of

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[12] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library,
7.3.6.
[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library,
7.3.8.

akrasia operates as a sign of both the desire to be good, and also a form of evidence that in order to be good, humans require divine assistance in the form of grace. Paul's conception of akrasia emphasizes a sharp division between un-compliant flesh and a spiritual longing to transcend the corruptions of material life, and that division generates akratic action. "The good that I do I would not," he writes, "but the evil which I would not, that I do."[14]

There is a good case to be made that several of Shakespeare's plays feature akratic protagonists characterized by an inability to act in accordance with their own better judgment. Hamlet may be an *akrates*; so might be Macbeth, as Seth Shuger has persuasively argued.[15] In addition to their concern with appetitive excesses and the phenomenon of being overwhelmed by passion, Renaissance discussions of moral incontinence also frequently foreground the regret experienced by agents who immediately rue their akratic behavior as soon as they perform it. In fact, Renaissance moral-philosophical handbooks frequently isolate agent regret as a distinguishing feature of incontinence that is thought to mark individuals who experience it as men of good moral character very different from individuals who habitually pursue self-harming pleasures with no afterthought.[16] Although agent regret is not a feature of several key modern philosophical accounts of akratic action, it nevertheless remains an important part of the Renaissance understanding of incontinence. In 1580's England, a popular re-

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[14] *Rom.* 7.19

[15] Seth Shugar, "Knowing is Not Enough: Akrasia and Self-Deception in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*" (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 2006).

[16] See, for example, Anthony Nixon's 1616 *On the Dignitie of Man* (Oxford), particularly his section on temperance, intemperance, and stupidity.

translated English version of Seneca's *Medea* features a prominent expression of regret following Medea's violent murder of own children. Medea characteristically experiences self-loathing immediately after performing the murder of her two children in front of her husband. "I feel regret and shame for my deed. What, wretched woman, have I done? Wretched? Even if I feel regret, I have done it. Great pleasure is stealing over me against my will."[17] Medea, along with Circe, figured prominently as a figure for akratic action within Renaissance culture, signifying overwhelming passion that refuses to remain subject to rational control, with the result that individuals' own actions appear alien and inexplicable to the very people who have performed them.

Within modern philosophical accounts of *akrasia*, weakness of the will tends overwhelmingly to be discussed as a problem of action. Some modern philosophers' treatment of *akrasia*, most notably that of R. M. Hare, have followed Socrates in denying the existence of *akrasia*. Hare reasons that knowledge of the best course of action necessarily implies a choice to act accordingly that knowledge, and therefore there can be no instance of acting against one's better judgment.[18] For Hare, this is due to the special quality of evaluative judgments, which are necessarily linked to actions in a way that other kinds of judgments are not. Hare's position, which articulates a strongly internalist argument about evaluative judgments' special relationship to action, has been countered by a number of other philosophical perspectives, most notably

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[17] Seneca, *Medea*, trans. H. M. Hine, Aris and Phillips (Warminster: 2000), 989-991. For a sixteenth-century English translation, see Seneca, *Medea* in *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies,* trans. Thomas Netwon (London, 1581).

[18] Hare, R. M., *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

that of Donald Davidson. Davidson's essay "How Is Weakness of the Will

Possible?" positions *akrasia* as a form of irrationality that is problematic but

nevertheless possible.[19] For Davison, *akrasia* occurs when early forms of

judgment, which he terms all-things-considered judgments, fail to issue in what

he terms all-out or unconditional judgments about what it is best to do. Some

agents, Davidson reasons, cannot make the leap from considering all of the

evidence at hand to arriving at a conclusion about what to do, and the result is

irrational behavior that appears to go against one's summary judgment of the

situation. For Davidson, however, there is no true contradiction in this type of

phenomenon because these types of judgments represent related but different

species of reasoning. Instead, what is evidenced in these cases is a defect or

weakness in an agent's rationality.

In the wake of Davidson's arguments about *akrasia*, philosophers have

discussed weakness of the will in ways that correspond to either internalist

arguments that favor a strong connection between through and action, or

externalist ones that argue against a simple or strong link between them. Alfred

Mele's seminal discussion can be counted among the externalist variety, and his

argument makes the case that those motivational forces that underwrite agents'

desire for an object can be extremely powerful – more powerful, in fact, than

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[19] Donald Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

agents' rational evaluation of the object may admit.[20] In a similar vein, moral psychologist Michael Stocker has argued there are important psychic forces that mediate between motivations to act and evaluative judgment, that complicate any direct connection between the two. His arguments will prove important to my consideration of the psychology of Leontes' akrasia in the pages that follow.

Certainly within Renaissance England, there was an important tradition of thinking about *akrasia* and moral incontinence as moral-psychological problems. And as I mentioned, evidence from Shakespeare's plays suggests that some of his most well known characters likely had akratic tendencies. But is *The Winter's Tale*'s Leontes among them?

In many ways, Leontes does not entirely fit the parameters of moral incontinence, and yet he is someone who is characterized by his intense paranoia, and a sense of behaving irrationally and considerably outside of his own characterological frame. With some semantic finessing, it might be possible to argue that Leontes exhibits a slightly different form of *akrasia*. And yet clearly Shakespeare was more than capable of crafting characters who more closely approximate genuinely akratic figures, and who embody that philosophical problem more accurately and straightforwardly than Leontes does.

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[20] Mele argues that "the motivational force of a want may be out of line with the agent's evaluation of the object of that want". Alfred Mele, *Irrationality* (Oxford Press, 1987), 37.

Leontes is far from the most clear-cut case for *akrasia* in Shakespeare.

And yet in this chapter, I will argue that *akrasia* goes a long way towards

accounting for the peculiar quality of moral agency in *The Winter's Tale*, and for

the puzzling cases of characterological self-absenting we see at its outset and

conclusion. I am particularly keen to deploy moral psychologist Michael

Stocker's incisive analysis of *akrasia* as a short-circuiting of adult modes of

reasoning in my examination of Leontes' behavior. Stocker's account is based in

Aristotle's discussion of *phantasiai,* which Stocker then uses to interpret

Aristotle's position on *akrasia*. His perspective elides some of the important

elements of Aristotle's own account of akratic action; however, his insights

manage to, I think, paint a complex and compelling portrait of some of the interior

causes of moral incontinence that have enormous relevance to Leontes'

predicament in *The Winter's Tale*, and still engage with important features of

Aristotelian moral philosophy more generally.

II. Pauline akrasia

In early modern England, one of the most recognizable and familiar

expressions of moral incontinence was St. Paul's in *Epistle to the Romans*. Paul's

statement on akrasia begins at chapter 7, verse 15. The King James Bible's

translation reads, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I

want, but I do the very thing I hate." Paul's account of akratic behavior reflects,

on the one hand, a typical summary of Classical moral incontinence where an

agent knowingly pursues a self-harming course of action, and fails to make

rational sense of his own behavior. And yet Paul's account is also distinctive in its emphasis on akratic behavior as primarily a problem of the will. Paul is acutely aware that his actions go against his better judgment even as he performs them. The 1560 Geneva version is even more explicit about the way that akratic action involves a violation of the agent's will. The Geneva version, reads, "[f]or I alowe not that which I do: for that I wolde, that I do not: but what I hate, that I do."[21]

Paul is clear that he does not "alowe" or condone the actions he performs, and equally clear that his actions contravene his will. At 7:19, he further clarifies, "For I do not the good thing, which I wolde, but the evil which I wolde not, that I do." The expression of inner conflict accompanied by a lucid awareness that one has behaved akratically typifies moral incontinence, and that awareness is clearly evident in these verses. But contrary to the Classical moral-philosophical account of akrasia, which understands it as a primarily cognitive problem, Paul's estimation of incontinence first and foremost identifies *akrasia* as problem of the will rather than a cognitive deficiency. This formulation is, incidentally, echoed by some modern philosophers, who refer to *akrasia* as 'weakness of the will.'

Paul's subsequent remarks in *Romans* clarify that, for him, it is in fact weakness of the will that complicates his ability to act in accordance with his better judgment. At 7:18, he laments, "For I knowe, that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me: but I find no meanes to performe that which is good." Paul's will is properly oriented towards a particular kind of behavior, but he is unable to find the "meanes to performe that

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[21] 1560 Geneva version. For all subsequent citations from *Romans* in this chapter, I draw on this edition.

which is good" because his flesh is uncooperative and unwilling to cede to his more spiritually inclined volition. His will is therefore ineffectual; it stands in need of external ratification and animation in order to carry him towards a longed-for spiritualized truth.

Paul's account of *akrasia* is evidently steeped in Christian theology in a way that cognitively centered Classical moral-philosophical accounts of incontinence are not. That theology radically discounts the value of what Paul terms "flesh" – physical longings and the actions that follow from carnal desires, all of which count for him as evidence of original sin. The desires of the flesh are, within the Pauline framework, imagined to exist in direct competition with spiritual goods.

Pauline moral incontinence and the Calvinist commentary that helped interpret its meaning for many early modern Protestants, is emphatic about the importance of spiritual redemption, which translates suffering and internal turmoil into signs of spiritual growth and renewal. The Pauline experience of *akrasia*, particularly under a Calvinist reading, amounts to a distinctly human lament about the fallen nature of carnal man. Paul is unable to do with his flesh what he desires spiritually to accomplish. It is only through Divine grace that he can imagine being redeemed from his incarnate predicament, and be spiritually reborn.

Paul's view of things, elaborated by Calvin, outlines the spiritual perils of what he regards as his own inherently depraved humanity. Humans are of the flesh; therefore, everything they do and perceive with their sense is inherently depraved. Calvin comments that

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Under the name of fleshe, is comprehended what so ever men

bring with them out of their mothers wombe. And men being

taken for such as they are borne, and for such as they be so long

as they retayne their own witte, are called fleshe: for as they are

corrupt, so they neither savoure nor breathe any thing, but that is

grosse and earthly. On the contrary, the spirit is called the

renewing of our corrupt nature, whiles God reformeth us to

his image…. That newness which is wrought in us is the gift

of the spirite."[22]

This account of *akrasia* expresses the fundamental discomfort of life as a

spiritual creature locked inside an inherently corrupt body. What *akrasia* amounts

to for Calvin is an expression of what it *feels* like to be kept in a state of continual

depravity -- annoyed, checked, restrained, and seduced by his own nature. The

akratic agent is always kept far below what he seeks because he is incarnated into

a corrupt body. In a sense, what Calvin provides is a description of the basic

human condition as a Protestant – one that emphasizes the need for a vigilant and

rigorous tempering of all carnal desires in the interests of spiritual growth.

In fact, *akrasia* forms part of the discourse of temperance in the

Renaissance according to many moral-philosophical writers, too. In chapter 31 of

The Golden Grove Moralized, William Vaughan contrasts intemperance with

incontinence. He reasons that the incontinent person is more morally redeemable

than the intemperate one. The intemperate man, Vaughan argues, is incurable in

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[22] John Calvin, *Commentarie upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans,* trans. Christopher Rosdell (London, 1583), 87.

his pursuit of self-harming pleasure; he is an unrepentant sinner. Conversely, the

incontinent man knows that vicious pursuits are wrong even as he pursues them,

only he is overmastered by his "lordly perturbations," and so yields to bad

decision-making against his own will.[23] Intemperance, he writes, is a "goggle-

eyed Venus" that hinders honest learning and "metamorphozeth a man into a

beast."[24] In a similar spirit, Anthony Nixon reports in *On the Dignitie of Man* that

temperance is the virtue that moderates desire. Continence and incontinence are,

in his estimation, both offshoots of it. Where concupiscence and desire are

governed by reason, the result is moral continence. What distinguishes the

incontinent man is that he is not in the habit of being vicious; the evidence of this,

for Nixon, is that the incontinent person instantly regrets his bad behavior, and

clearly has an awareness that he has chosen badly.[25]

Incontinence forms part of the Renaissance discussion of temperance in

moral-philosophical writings, and also figures importantly in works of fiction

from the sixteenth century. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* features a questing knight

who has a significant run-in with intemperance in Book Two. In Spenser's epic

poem, Guyon, the temperate knight, finds his way to the Bower of Bliss, where a

witch-like figure named Acrasia tempts men into a state of sensual self-abandon.[26]

The Bower of Bliss poeticizes abandonment to the pleasures of the flesh in a way

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[23] William Vaughan, *The Golden Grove Moralized in Three Bookes* (London: Simon Stafford, 1600), chap. 31, "Of intemperance and incontinence."
[24] Ibid.
[25] Anthony Nixon, "Of temperance, intemperance, and stupiditie," in *On the Dignitie of Man Both in the Perfections of His Soule and Bodie* (London: Edward Allde, 1612), 78.
[26] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene,* ed. A. C. Hamilton. Longman Annotated English Poets (New York: Longman, 1977).

that also accords with other Renaissance representations of intemperance that figure abandonment to pleasure as a species of moral laxity. That laxity was also frequently understood literally as the loss of the requisite boundaries that allow sensual temptations to be resisted. Conversely, Renaissance discussions of temperance often figure the morally <u>continent</u> individual as one who possesses the vigilance to contain his desires and maintain moral fortitude in the face of sensual temptations.

The akratic individual is someone who is unable to erect stable boundaries that might allow him to resist sensual temptations, while the continent person is able to remain self-bounded and inured to sensual temptations. This model of continence, which understands temperance as a form of self-delineation, is precisely what Leontes' paranoid state of mind models at the outset of *The Winter's Tale.* Leontes' state of mind is a rule unto itself; his paranoia is characterized by its absolute isolation from all evidence, persuasion, or ratification that comes from outside his self-created fantasies. His ideas about his wife's infidelity, his childhood friend's betrayal of him, and his loyal courtier's conspiracy against him have absolutely no recourse to external cues. Moreover, as his paranoia intensifies, Leontes' tendency to inure his judgment against the world is only exacerbated, and he moves towards increasingly inward sources of conviction founded upon imaginatively generated 'truths.' Leontes, in effect, distorts the conventional Renaissance model of temperance; he performs the extreme version of self-inuring against not only the sensual temptation that erodes moral continence, but all external stimuli.

Leontes' paranoid disengagement from the dictates of empirical evidence

figures, at least initially, as a response to the perceived incontinence of his wife.

Leontes' response to what he believes is an act of cuckoldry, rapidly crystallizes

his impermeability to evidentiary input and persuasive rhetorical appeals. The plot

of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* is thus catalyzed via a perceived rupture to the

integrity of Leontes' marriage, and that plot is rendered increasingly terrifying as

Leontes comes to believe the fantasy he conjures about his wife's sexual

promiscuity. His initial twinge of suspicion about Hermione quickly devolve into

a radically discounted view of all worldly phenomena, and an intense loathing for

all material forms, which he increasingly regards as tainted by Hermione's

transgression. He imagines a range of everyday objects as contaminated by her

infidelity, and all of the body's senses are, in his estimation a-tingle with signs of

her infidelity. He pronounces to Camillo,

> Ha'not you seen, Camillo –
>
> But that's past doubt; you have, or your eyeglass
>
> Is thicker than a cuckold's horn – or heard –
>
> For to a vision so apparent, rumor
>
> Cannot be mute – or thought – for cogitation
>
> Resides not in that man that does not think –
>
> My wife is slippery?[27]

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[27] 1.2.267-272.

Later, in act 2, scene 1, Leontes refers to Hermione's body as "her without-door form", a description which plays off that sense of her body as sexually incontinent and unable to remain sealed to sexual conquests.

Everything Leontes perceives he perceives through the lens of Hermione's alleged sexual incontinence. Moreover, Leontes imagines Hermione's incontinence as a force that not only contaminates everyday objects; he imagines its contagion infecting him as well. Hermione's alleged behavior effects a highly unwanted transformation in Leontes, by rendering him a cuckold – a horned creature not unlike the animals enchanted and transformed into pigs by Circean sensual charms. Circe, an important Renaissance figure for incontinence after whom Spenser models the witch Acrasia, famously turns the men of Homer's *Odyssey* into swine after they fail to resist her charms.

By imagining that his wife has cuckolded him, Leontes imagines himself as the passive recipient of her lapse in virtue and the recipient of its contagious effects. The sexual incontinence of which he accuses Hermione is a contagious kind of incontinence, in that he imagines it infecting not only the world of everyday objects, but also his domestic life, and the integrity of his family and viability of his lineage.

This view of incontinence, which connects it with contagious corruption, has strong associations with the Pauline account and Calvin's interpretation of it. For Calvin, Paul's discussion of *akrasia* constitutes a meditation on the sinfulness of all flesh through the principle of original sin.

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This same Pauline disparagement of 'flesh' can be read into Leontes'

disparaging treatment of his son, as well as his subsequent failure to recall him at

the play's end. Mamillius is, within the play, associated strongly with an

empirical rigor. He observes with keen insight that his nurse's brows are "blacker,

yet black brows, they say, become some women best, so that there be not/ Too

much hair there, but in a semicircle, or a half-moon with a pen."[28] Mamillius not

only seizes upon the color of his nurse's brows; he also remarks with incredible

precision on the physically specific attributes associated with a particular model

of facial beauty. Symbolically, Mamillius can be linked with the very carnality

and worldliness that, under a Pauline conception, is ultimately relinquished in

favor of spiritual rewards, much in the way that Mamillius is ultimately 'replaced'

at the play's end with a new son-in-law. The Pauline understanding of *akrasia*

offers a way of accounting for the lost and subsequently forgotten Mamillius that,

though admittedly unpalatable, is still worth rehearsing here for the sake of what

it suggests about the applicability of the Pauline world-view to the play,

specifically via Paul's meditation on akrasia in *Romans* and Calvin's highly

influential interpretive gloss of it.

Equally, for Leontes the problem and the source of the poisonous infection

to which he succumbs is not really sensual temptation *per se*; it is the entire

forensic realm that he distrusts. Leontes' radical paranoia entails a repudiation of

all forms of sensory input and acquaintance with the world, comprehensively. He

effectively engages in a total rejection of both his wife's 'flesh' and the desires it

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[28] 2.1.8-11.

implies, along with his newborn child's, and any and all forms of evidence that suggest at her innocence. That repudiation can indeed be read suggestively as a kind of radical perversion of the Pauline division of flesh from spirit.

III. Aristotelian akrasia

I want to say that this is not the end-point of the story of *akrasia* in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale.* It is possible, though, to conclude with this level of analysis, and appeal to Pauline grace to explain Leontes' shift in character. After all, Pauline teleology scripts suffering as a phenomenon that roots humans in the experience of their own mortality, even as it signals a fundamental depravity – a depravity that underscores the tremendous disparity between human carnality and spiritual transcendence, while simultaneously emphasizing the absolute need for divine intervention through Grace. And Leontes does appear to evidence a renewed, revivified perspective towards the end of the play, capped by the "awakening of faith" that prefaces his reunion with Hermione. Leontes' radical discounting of all forms of evidence, including the impassioned appeals of both Hermione and his loyal courtier Camillo, on a certain level of signification, evidences a desire to rise above the corruption he imagines has infected his court and family life. In this sense, he mirrors Hamlet's initially unsubstantiated dissatisfaction with the world at court.

Leontes also evokes Othello's experience of jealousy in manifest ways, particularly the sense in which everyday objects come to be endowed with an undue significance born of the extravagances of emotionally-fueled, imaginative

excesses. However, unlike Othello's jealousy, Leontes' experience of paranoid obsession over his wife's presumed infidelity is entirely unprompted by external agents. There is no Iago baiting Leontes to respond this way or that, stage-directing his emotional responses. The cue for Leontes' jealousy in *The Winter's Tale* is Leontes or, more accurately, Leontes' mind, which generates both the evidence for his jealousy as well as the impassioned state of jealousy itself. This dramatic set-up, and the distinct lack of cues for Leontes' jealousy within the terms of the play's plot, invariably calls a particular significance to Leontes' cognitive processes, along with those intentional and emotional states that comprise them. This unique feature of *The Winter's Tale*'s presentation of jealous paranoia, which in effect renders them as uncaused by any external cues, provides a suggestive point of entry for considering the play in relation first and foremost to inwardness, or moral psychology, rather than theology. *The Winter's Tale* is worthy of a second look when it comes to its representations of moral agency -- one that attends more closely to moral-philosophical and specifically moral-psychological considerations.

Within Pauline theology, the akratic predicament functions as a sign of spiritual expansion and evidence of the operation of the divine spirit within. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it is the akratic person's capacity to experience incontinence that marks him as someone singled out for spiritual development. The anguish recounted by Paul in *Romans* 7 thereby becomes not only a chronicle of suffering, but also a manifest token of a turn towards salvation. For Paul,

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akrasia is, in a manner of speaking, a natural by-product or expression of the fundamental depravity of the human condition.

Conversely, for Aristotle *akrasia* is evidence that someone has acted outside of themselves characterologically. This is a particularly curious phenomenon for Aristotle, because it involves an agent knowingly behaving in a way that runs counter to their better judgment, implied by the kinds of conclusions typically arrived at through the usual processes of rational deliberation by someone who usually possesses moral-characterological integrity in the face of choice. For Aristotle, *akrasia* is a distinctly moral-characterological problem, but one that he particularly associates with moral-psychological development.

Aristotle identifies two types of *akrasia* in Book 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* and distinguishes between the two. The first, which some modern philosophers refer to as paradigmatic *akrasia*, occurs when reason is overcome by non-rational motivations. The second type, non-paradigmatic *akrasia*, occurs when reason is overcome by an overpowering emotion – say, anger – that is itself rationally motivated.

Aristotle's account of paradigmatic *akrasia* focuses on the sense of moral incontinence that features what Michael Stocker refers to as the motivational opposition of reason and a certain sort of desire for bodily pleasures characteristic

of animals and young children.[29] Aristotle's account is moral-developmental, and focused on those structures of thought that enable and impede akratic behavior.

The desires that Aristotle is interested in for his account of *akrasia* are particular kinds of desires unlike basic biological urges or reflexes. For Aristotle, the desires that generate akratic behavior involve the formation of attitudes towards objects, for example, the desire for sweet things, which one values because one has a sweet tooth. And yet, in Aristotle's view, those desires that generate akratic behavior are also characterized by an immediacy that slips in under the radar of rational deliberation, confronting agents directly, without the benefit of moral deliberation.

These kinds of judgments Aristotle terms *phantasiai*. *Phantasiai* are characterized as mental objects that straddle a curious intermediate ground between generalizations and particulars. They are a feature of a particular stage of moral-psychological development that is childlike, because under their influence, agents are not capable of consulting with moral principles, only with particulars. The example Aristotle provides of this kind of immediate non-deliberativeness is someone who eats something sweet even though they know they should not.[30]

That sense of "I ought", we might recall from this dissertation's introduction, amounts to a kind of moral self-accountability that follows from a mature and well-developed ethical sensibility, in the Aristotelian view. It stems

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[29] My account of Aristotle's paradigmatic akrasia and its relationship to moral-psychological development draws heavily on Michael Stocker's account in "Aristotelian *Akrasia* and Psychoanalytic Regression" *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 4, no. 3 (1997): 231-41.
[30] Ibid., 233

from having not only understood a principle or moral ideal intellectually, but also from having, at some level, internalized it to one's moral identity, even if it has not yet become so ingrained that it generates the correct active response on every occasion.

Having recourse to moral principle implies a particular level of moral self-awareness that only adults, in Stocker's understanding of Aristotle's view, possess. Only adults are capable of exercising *prohaireisis* or choice. Choice involves using an evaluative principle, "a universal belief, requiring, advising, or allowing the chosen acts and goals."[31] However, according to Aristotle, when people act akratically, the pleasures that overcome them "do not work via, or even in accord with, principles and reasons… Akratics think and desire, and act upon *phantasiai*, in much the way animals and children do."[32]

For the akratic individual, thought and desire translate directly into action, as they do for the continent or virtuous person, only they do so in the akratic's case without the benefit of consultation with normal adult processes of moral deliberation. In the case of the akratic, there is no practical syllogism. In the case of reasoned moral action, i.e.: action that does occur as a result of a practical syllogism, the behavior in question concludes a piece of practical reasoning. But in the case of *akrasia*, there is no process of deliberation, and the action is not the conclusion of anything – it is simply a mindless kind of action, as in Esau's 'give

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[31] Ibid., 234. Also, Stocker adds, "To choose, we might note, does not require being good, but only having and acting on principles and universals. So, Aristotle says, 'For the…. [self-indulgent person] is led on in accordance with his own choice, thinking that he ought always pursue the present pleasure.'"
[32] Ibid.

me the red thing', signifying an automatic response that skips over the step of mindful deliberation entailed by Aristotle's understanding of moral choice.

This type of Aristotelian *akrasia* is the one that Stocker terms "paradigmatic," and it is typified by the absence of evaluative judgment and practical reason.

In the case of children who exhibit this behavior, they lack the psychic processes and moral maturity that allow them to reason syllogistically. However, in Stocker's estimation and in Aristotle's, adults do have that capacity, only somehow, in the case of akratic behavior, they do not avail themselves of those mature reasoning capacities, and instead experience *phatasiai*, as children do. In Stocker's view, paradigmatic *akrasia* evidences a form of psychoanalytic regression in which a person slips from adult mature modes of moral reasoning into childlike ones.[33] The problem he identifies, however, and which he locates within Aristotle's own account of *akrasia*, is this: how do these two modes of reasoning – adult and childlike, manage to coexist within a single individual? While the regressive-psychological account of *akrasia* does provide an explanatory context for how this kind of regression might occur, the real question is whether it is possible for an adult capable of mature moral reasoning to also be capable of experiencing the world in a childlike way. The answer for Stocker, and for Aristotle, is that it is not possible. Stocker asserts that there is a fundamental incommunicability between the differing modes of experiencing the world, childlike and mature. A dual-modal agent so capable of experiencing the world in

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[33] Ibid., 234-35.

both childlike and adult forms would imply a kind of fundamental incoherence at the level of character. Stocker concludes by admitting that there is no real way of accounting for that kind of regression or incoherence when it is experienced in a temporary way by someone who is otherwise capable of morally reasoned decision. Aristotle's idea, too, is that adults in possession of adult mastery aren't able to suffer from paradigmatic *akrasia*.[34]

How does this account of Aristotelian *akrasia* help interpret *The Winter's Tale*'s representations of moral agency? In an obvious sense, Leontes' paranoia, like Othello's jealousy, is characterized by the experience of powerful emotion. Emotion and *akrasia* have a particularly significant relationship to both Pauline theological and Aristotle's Classical moral-philosophical understandings of incontinence. Passion also marks a significant point of difference amongst these two approaches. The passions for Paul, particularly those experienced in the throes of akratic suffering, function both as signs of human weakness and evidence of divine election. Passions are, in effect, what render us sensible of our own deficiencies relative to spiritual truths. For Calvin, these experiences have a strong moral and spiritual value that he reads into Paul's meditation on *akrasia*. Their implicit value draws on the etymological sense behind the word passion, derived from the Latin *passio*, meaning the ability to passively co-experience the passion of Christ on the cross and his sufferings. This passivity is what recalls people to Christ, and the need for salvation through grace.

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[34] Ibid., 238-39.

In the moral-philosophical, Classical view of *akrasia*, excessive passion and the inability to temper it often results in incontinent behavior. Paradigmatic *akrasia* entails acting not just with emotion, but *because* of emotion. It involves acting not just with anger or fear, which could become courage, but simply because of them, in a state of being subject to them, in other words. The phantastical experience of passion for Aristotle is valued distinctly negatively for the precise reasons that Calvin values passion so positively: it renders us inert and passive in crucial ways, particularly, for Aristotle, in relation to moral reasoning and the rational structures of thought that support it.

The most simplistic philosophical renderings of this account of *akrasia* figure excessive passions as forces that simply overwhelm rational capacities. Medea, one of the Classical figures associated in the Renaissance with akratic behavior, epitomizes this view when she exclaims in Euripedes' play: "I am well aware how terrible a crime I am about to commit, but my passion is stronger than my reason, passion that causes the greatest suffering in the world." [35] However, we might equally locate in Medea's statement Aristotle's more complex notion of being overwhelmed by *phantasiai*, which short-circuit the processes of rational decision-making that denote coherent ethical choice, and which constitute moral character.

Certainly what characterizes Leontes' behavior in a literal sense at the outset of the play is a kind of excessive jealousy that clouds his ability to rationally evaluate his wife's innocence. And certainly, the excessive passion that

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[35] Euripedes, *Medea and Other Plays*. Trans. John Davie. (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 1078-80.

overwhelms him and renders him mentally deranged, also renders him incoherent psychologically. But in a more concerted sense, Leontes is also characterized by a longing for escape through regression. Regression represents the primary strategy he deploys throughout the opening act as he attempts to reason his way towards the truth about the conspiracies he imagines taking place at court. In revaluing first Hermione, then Leontes, and then Camillo, Leontes' paranoia effects a revisitation of past moments that initially appeared innocent, but which now appear to reek with a threatening significance. Leontes reasons that his passions and suspicions represent valid cues to the actual existence of his fears in-the-world. "Cogitation resides not in that man that does not think," he reasons.[36] Leontes, throughout the opening act, manages to imaginatively instantiate his worst fears by revisiting those moments and rewriting them according to the imperatives of his paranoia.

Regression is explicitly coded in the play in terms of a childlike self-absenting from the structures of moral thought that entail rational choice and moral self-accountability. The scene is set for thinking about this kind of regression at the very outset of *The Winter's Tale*, before Leontes even arrives on the scene. In act 1, scene 2, Polixenes describes an episode from their shared childhood to Hermione.

We were, fair Queen,

Two lads that thought there was no more behind

But such a day tomorrow as today,

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[36] 1.2.270.

And to be boy eternal….

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th'sun,

And bleat the one at th'other; what we changed

Was innocence for innocence – we knew not

The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed

That any did. Had we pursued that life,

And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared

With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven

Boldly, 'not guilty', the imposition cleared

Hereditary ours.[37]

In Polixenes' idyllic pastoral account of childhood, there are no temporal

distinctions, but only an eternal present in which Polixenes imagines himself as

utterly oblivious to the presence or passage of linear time. There are also no

boundaries between the two friends; they are represented as docile and

animalistic, and developmentally prior to language - the two boys, imagined as

lambs, bleat rather than speak to another. Even more significantly, Polixenes

represents this childhood as being prior to principled knowledge, and prior, even

to the ability to conceptually grasp the existence of moral-evaluative standards

("we knew not the doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed that any did."). Leontes at a

later point describes knowledge in similar terms, as a form of poison.

There may be in the cup

A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,

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[37] 1.2.62-73.

> And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
>
> Is not infected; but if one present
>
> Th'abbhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
>
> How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
>
> With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.[38]

For Leontes, knowledge itself is the poison that threatens to split his sides. What he longs for is a regression away from knowledge - "Alack, for lesser knowledge!" is his cry at the outset of this speech.

Linear time for these men is instantiated through the trappings of sexual maturity and the entrance into heteronormative relationships aimed at the creation of legitimate heirs. Identity-formation is bound up with the ethical requirements of family and socio-political life.

Under this conception, Hermione becomes an instigator and symbol of the moral obligations associated with adult male life, and the requirements of linear time. For Leontes, she becomes a figure for the anxieties attendant upon him to produce a legitimate heir. Leontes' is a kind of longed-for recursion back in time to a place unbounded by those kinds of moral obligations and the anxieties they generate. However, Leontes, unlike Polixenes, is wholly unable to regress. His paranoid state leads him to relentlessly locate signs of corruption and of Hermione's incontinence everywhere around him. His recursive movement is not back in time. That imaginative movement back into memory for him only mirrors and amplifies his present-day anxieties about paternity and the burdens of

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[38] 2.1.38-45.

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responsibility associated with his position. Instead, that recursion shifts him back into a kind of self-isolation, where he increasingly relies on his own idiosyncratic and deeply misguided accounts of the past.

As a direct result of this recursive movement, Leontes obviates his actual moral responsibilities towards his wife and children. His self-isolation and desire not to know amounts to a failure to assume the accountability inherent in the role of husband and father – accountability that, ironically, only manages to drive him to treat his family-members more abusively.

Although Leontes' paranoia may be the involuntarily result of a mental disease or defect, the convictions that issue from those regressions carry the force of rational deliberation in the play in the sense that they become inscribed as law. Leontes' impressions determine the social framework through which behavior is regulated in a legal, political sense at court. As creator of law, he generates those conditions that structure and circumscribe behavior, and allow or impede the expression of others' convictions. In that sense, he is entirely unlike Hamlet, who throughout his play remains subject to Claudius' determining political vision.

Leontes' law is one that, in a sense, requires akratic behavior of his subjects. The threat of what I venture to call compelled *akrasia* is made explicit in Camillo's speech:

I must be the poisoner

Of good Polixenes, and my ground to do't

Is the obedience to a master, one

Who in rebellion with himself will have

All that are his so to. To do this deed

Promotion follows. If I could find example

Of thousands that had struck anointed kings

And flourished after, I'd not do't; but since

Nor brass, nor stone, nor parchment nears not one,

Let villainy itself forswear't. I must

Forsake the court. To do't or no is certain

To me a breakneck.[39]

Camillo is aware that the rational order at court is one that requires deeply self-harming courses of action, or choices that comprimise him morally and compel him to act outside of what he knows to be true.

Leontes' establishment of a fundamentally irrational rule of law at court suggests that his abandonment of those strictures that characterize him morally as a father and husband are a function of voluntary behavior on some level. Knowingly self-harming behavior of the kind outlined by Camillo becomes an embedded feature of the Sicilian court so long as Leontes' paranoid judgment also comprises the rule of law in Sicilia.

Though nowhere directly invoked in *The Winter's Tale,* akrasia finds its way into the play's representations of moral agency in bits and pieces throughout the play, signaling the rupturing of rational order and coherence that allows for genuine philosophical consistency at the level of character. *Akrasia* perhaps best

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[39] 1.2.351-63.

captures the flavor of those disruptions in Shakespeare's play, and does so

without obviating, but by attending closely to them.

Conclusion:

Shakespearean character and moral character aren't usually regarded as synonymous or even compatible concepts within literary studies. Typically, scholars emphasize representational or performative considerations in their accounts of character and leave Aristotle's conception of the ethical life to moral philosophers. My dissertation insists that an *ethos*-based account of character can help us make good sense of Shakespeare's fictional agents, and can contribute towards our understanding of his plays in original and useful ways. From a historical standpoint, Aristotle's *Ethics* was seminal to the academic study of philosophy in Renaissance England, while within vernacular moral-philosophical writings of the period, Aristotle remained the most frequently referenced authority. Historian Charles Schmitt maintains that Aristotelian philosophy constituted *the* principal epistemological backdrop against which subsequent innovations were measured in early modern Europe, and his research makes a convincing case that Aristotelian intellectual cultures continued to flourish in Europe until well into the seventeenth century. Classical virtue ethics represented a vital, pervasive, and entrenched mode of deliberating about human behaviour within Shakespeare's era. Within modern literary critical discussions of Classical virtue ethics, however, (and these are few and far between in Shakespeare studies,) Aristotle reads like a static catalogue of virtues, and Shakespeare's characters are read as flat allegories of singular virtues or vices, resulting in overly-schematic, joyless readings of the plays. Attempts to read Shakespeare 'philosophically' have tended to fundamentally misunderstand the basic sense in

which virtue ethics mattered to the Renaissance and the way in which it matters to Shakespeare's characters. In this dissertation, I have argued that virtue ethics in the Renaissance provided a conception of personhood grounded in principles of moral responsibility – principles that remain highly influential and relevant to modern characterological criticism. Moral self-coherence acts as an important basis for self-understanding for characters like Hamlet and Shylock, and the principle of moral self-accountability serves as a significant touchstone for understanding the moral agency of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. Rather than offering a series of virtues or vices that define who these characters are, viewing them as moral agents emphasizes those obligations, bonds, and connections that signify strongly to them, and which define and help delineate identity in the plays.

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