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CORTNEY WILMERING  
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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. David Anderson, Chair

Dr. Daniela Garofalo

Dr. Ronald Schleifer

Dr. Kenneth Hodges

Dr. Jane Wickersham

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*In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*

*Amen.*

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## ABSTRACT

By the time Shakespeare's plays first appeared on stage in the late-sixteenth century, the Elizabethan campaign against English Catholics had reached its peak. However, Roman Catholicism continued to influence the English throne, the English Church, and most especially, those men and women who remained devoted to it. Through Shakespeare's works, we can see a sharper picture of the early modern English Catholic experience and gain a new respect for the individual, political, and ecclesial interests that contributed to it. I begin with the individual in Section I, examining the experience of those who had to determine the depth of their patriotism to a state that had criminalized their religion and eliminated many of its celebrations. In chapter one, I explore *Hamlet* and the psychological effects of the surveillance culture that Claudius implements and that others appropriate in order to investigate one another and protect themselves. I compare this "rotten" climate of suspicion in Elsinore to Elizabethan England and the anxiety suffered by recusant Catholics as a result of state surveillance into their religious practices. In chapter two, I turn to *The Merchant of Venice* and its implicit gesture towards Corpus Christi, the Catholic feast that once honored the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist but that had been eradicated from the English church calendar after the Reformation. The play's clearest references to Corpus Christi occur in its fixation on flesh and in its marriage trope, but these elements then also thrust to the forefront the Jewishness of Christ's flesh and the difficulties associated with conversion. *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice* reflect individual English Catholics' desire to practice their religion peacefully, without state interference in the theological teachings they espoused or the feast days they chose to commemorate.

In Section II of this dissertation, I shift away from the individual Catholic and towards the traces of Catholicism in the English monarchy and its state-run church. In chapter three, I discuss *Richard II* and the inherent instability of English kingship. The play frequently alludes to historical ruptures in primogenitary inheritance both before and after Richard's abdication to Henry Bolingbroke. It also demonstrates the failure to enact sacramental permanence in the coronation ritual. Through its display of these problematic traditions, *Richard* argues that Christian kingship must be actively stabilized and not simply left to Providence in order to survive. Finally, in chapter four, I look at Erastian governance, the fusion of state and ecclesial authority, in *Measure for Measure*. In featuring a Catholic duke adopting clerical authority in the Catholic region of Vienna, Shakespeare uses a Catholic veneer to imagine the consequences of English Erastianism under James I. Through it, he hints that Erastian governors will ultimately seek political ends at the expense of their people's spiritual needs and that religious figures who willingly suborn their church to the state fail to serve those entrusted to their care. *Richard II* and *Measure for Measure* reveal the power of the state and the church to affect individual souls and seem to insist that an autonomous church, such as Roman Catholicism, presents the most effective check on royal absolutism and its appropriation of ecclesial authority.



## INTRODUCTION

The 1570 papal bull officially excommunicating Queen Elizabeth I from the Roman Catholic Church, *Regnans in Excelsis*, written under Pope Pius V, evinces much of the confidence that the early modern papacy had in its ecclesial and political authority: “We...who by God’s goodness are called to the aforesaid government of the Church” pronounce Elizabeth “to be deprived of her pretended title to the [English] crown and of all lordship, dignity and privilege whatsoever.” It further promises to include “in the like sentence of excommunication” all “nobles, subjects, [and] peoples” who pledge loyalty to Elizabeth as queen and who continue in dutiful obedience to her. More than three decades earlier, the Church had also excommunicated her father, Henry VIII, but in his case, the excommunication remained exactly that, an excommunication.<sup>1</sup> It reprehended only Henry’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon and his later destruction of the English shrine to St. Thomas à Becket (MacCulloch 227). In other words, it limited its scope to Henry’s sacrilege and did not openly deny Henry’s right to his royal position. By contrast, *Regnans in Excelsis* extended far beyond the scope of Elizabeth’s disunity with the Catholic Church to her political right to the throne. It even threatened all of her Catholic subjects with separation from the Church and probable damnation should they dare to exhibit loyalty to their national sovereign.

Proclaiming to speak on behalf of the corporate body of the “government of the Church,” this bull at once addressed Elizabeth, Queen of England and the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and all of her subjects, especially those wishing to remain Catholics in good standing. In this way, it implicitly acknowledged the vested authority of three separate bodies: the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, the English monarchy, and the Catholic individual,

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<sup>1</sup> Albeit, an excommunication that still prophesied upon him “eternal damnation”

whose conscience should have been able to determine the direction and application of his or her own loyalties. Because it demanded a complete renunciation of Elizabeth and unwavering loyalty to itself, the Church exacerbated an already severe crisis for English Catholics. Historian Peter Holmes summarizes the questions that such people faced:

First, what forms of religious observance could be maintained under persecution and how far could the dissenter go in accommodating himself to the ecclesiastical and doctrinal order established by his ruler? In short, what form should his religious opposition or resistance take to a church which he considered heretical or idolatrous? The second problem was more obviously political: was the political regime of the sovereign to be recognised and were his commands to be obeyed; or might disobedience, even rebellion, be lawful? (2)<sup>2</sup>

For early modern English Catholics, siding with Elizabeth meant excommunication and her “heretical and idolatrous” form of worship meant almost certain damnation, while siding with the Church too overtly meant “rebellion,” sedition, and all the physical and financial torments associated with such a crime. The formation of an underground Counter-Reformation in England, led by the newly-formed Jesuits with the imprimatur of the papacy, strongly indicates that many English Catholics could and did try to continue practicing their faith while remaining patriotic subjects of the crown. Yet they still faced risk whether they chose a side or attempted to find a middle ground between their church and their sovereign.

William Shakespeare, generally regarded a loyal Englishman, becomes a prominent figure in this discussion of English Catholicism and authority when we consider not only how frequently Catholicism features in his plays but how sympathetically it is portrayed, especially when compared with the works of his contemporaries. Most Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas that reference Catholicism or include Catholic characters in their *dramatic personae* often did so with some degree of anti-Catholic animus. For example, while the Irish Catholic bishop in

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<sup>2</sup> See also Robert P. Merrix and Carol Levin’s article, “*Richard II* and *Edward II*: The Structure of Deposition,” p. 3

George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (c. 1591) honorably adheres to papal authority (2.2.11-19), he is overruled and chided by his Protestant comrades. Lord Stukeley refers to him as the "lordly Bishop of Saint Asses," while Captain Hercules argues that the bishop acts out of thoughtless obedience to the Church, that he "talks according to his coat,/ And takes not measure of it by his mind" (2.2.49-54). In an even greater show of anti-Catholic sentiment, John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) introduces us to Monticelso, a cardinal-turned-pope who presides over the murder trial of Vittoria, ruthlessly interrogating her in Latin in order to confuse and frustrate her. Elsewhere in the play, he mirrors early modern images of the devil by carrying a black book with the "names of all notorious offenders/ Lurking about the city" (4.1.29-36)<sup>3</sup> and encouraging Duke Francisco to seek a "bloody audit and the fatal gripe" (4.1.18-19) against those who have poisoned his sister. Early modern English dramatists such as Webster and Peele who created such a distasteful version of the Roman Church had many reasons for doing so. Some were motivated by ardent Reformed conviction. Others, by a desire to please the English sovereign and those in power. There may have also been those who saw a professional opportunity in the recent eradication of Catholic religious plays, filling this dramatic void with plays that not only avoided "the old and dangerous themes" of Catholic tradition (Duffy 582) but that poked fun at the faith as well as earlier audience's enthusiasm for it.

Shakespeare, however, breached this early modern English dramatic norm and instead created, if not a fond portrayal then at least an ambivalent one. His depiction of Catholicism was so dissimilar to other drama in his day that some openly accused him of being a Catholic

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<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Monticelso probably gleans the information regarding such "notorious offenders" through sacred confession. According to Canon Law, priests may not make "use of knowledge that confession gives him" (1467), under threat of severe punishment that may include defrocking.

himself.<sup>4</sup> Even now, several centuries after his death, many scholars continue to make a similar claim. Father Peter Milward boldly entitles his own book *Shakespeare the Papist* and actively promotes the notion that Shakespeare was born, educated, and died a Catholic. However, as reviewer Thomas Merriam notes, Milward does so “without scholarly referencing,” relying solely on play passages that, in his erudite opinion, seem to relate to specifically Catholic theology or tradition. David N. Beauregard, who copiously cites the scholarship that Milward avoids, still comes to a similar conclusion: that “Shakespeare seems to have evaded to one degree or another any indication of his faith, a fact that suggests his Catholicism rather than his adherence to the Elizabethan Church” (15). Other scholars are more skeptical. Richard Wilson essentially dodges the question of Shakespeare’s religious affiliation, offering only that “if the dramatist can be aligned with any party,” Shakespeare might have been “one of those moderate Catholics” (ix). Likewise, Alison Shell briefly mentions in passing only his “possible Catholicism” (2). To summarize the variations among those who support a Catholic Shakespeare, we may turn to Lee Oser, who imagines these ideas on a “Catholic spectrum”: “At one extreme, Shakespeare is a recusant; in the middle, a Catholic humanist; at the other extreme, merely a nominal Catholic” (381).

If the above scholars are correct, that Shakespeare was at the very least nominally Catholic, then it could certainly alter our apprehension of various plays. But we need not pinpoint Shakespeare’s personal religious identity in order to assess the religious sympathies expressed in them. Dennis Taylor, who co-edited with Beauregard on a separate project, talks of Shakespeare “tip[ping] the balance toward the Catholic pole” in *Richard III* (4). And though he professes disinterest in “the theology behind the ghost” in particular, “whether it was ‘Catholic’

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<sup>4</sup> John Speed, an ardent Puritan, accused Shakespeare of associating with the executed Jesuit, Robert Parsons, referring to the two men in 1611 as “this papist and his poet.” See also Wilson, p. 12

or ‘Protestant,.’” Stephen Greenblatt likewise claims that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare “inherited and transformed” Catholic doctrines regarding Purgatory and the Eucharist (4; 3). And Claire Asquith offers that Shakespeare may have included certain themes and speeches in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* to draw Elizabeth’s attention to the plight of “conscientious Catholic” academics compelled to take the Oath of Supremacy in order to gain admittance into Oxford University (81).<sup>5</sup> While such scholars sidestep the issue of Shakespeare’s own religious practices and focus exclusively on what his plays evince about Catholicism, their individual and varied readings point to a consistent softness towards Catholicism throughout his dramatic corpus that may or may not reveal something about his true religious convictions.

Despite these readings and others, there are still many scholars convinced that Shakespeare was a committed Protestant and that his works reflect this Protestant bent. Responding to those such as Greenblatt and Louis Montrose who saw the early modern stage as a substitute for the “theatricality” of the Catholic Mass, Jeffrey Knapp adds that Protestant “English theology and ecclesiology shaped [Shakespeare’s] drama at a fundamental level” (9), even as he also refutes Greenblatt and Montrose’s generally dismissive attitude of faith and religious practice. Huston Diehl refers to Shakespeare’s “Protestant aesthetic,” though she also argues that Shakespeare “challeng[es] the vehement antitheatricality of radical Protestants” (394; 396). And Jean-Christophe Mayer, who attempts to find some middle ground in the debate in *Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith*, calls “claims that Shakespeare was a Catholic... somewhat of a shortcut” (12). Mayer is wisely cautious about assigning a religious label to Shakespeare. Anyone attempting to determine Shakespeare’s religious identity relies mainly on what can be

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<sup>5</sup> See her article, “Oxford University and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*” (2003). In it, she also discusses the plight of “conscientious Puritans” who were similarly burdened by Oxford’s requirement that all students take the Oath of Supremacy.

inferred from his dramatic writings, with all of the vagueness and contradiction in and between them. The best we can do is to read into “what Shakespeare did not write” (Wilson 1) and give an educated guess. Gleaning from his works that Shakespeare was a devoted English Protestant is not unreasonable.

Nevertheless, though enriched by the scholarly contributions of those who are unsure about or who openly disagree with the conclusion, this dissertation presumes a Shakespeare who was at least moderately Catholic. John R. Yamamoto-Wilson, who takes no position in the matter, did us all yeoman’s service in methodically cataloguing all the known evidence supporting the notion that Shakespeare was Catholic. The list is ample and is footnoted here.<sup>6</sup> Yamamoto-Wilson cautions that all of this evidence is still largely “circumstantial” (351), and there are certainly plays that challenge Beauregard’s judgment that Shakespeare’s Catholic religious figures are “exceptionally sympathetic” (249). *King John* and *Henry VIII*, both cited in this introduction, come to mind.<sup>7</sup> But this dissertation does not aim to assess the quality or extent of Shakespeare’s personal devotion. Through years of reading and research, I have noted that, unlike so many other early modern English dramas, his plays take seriously the institution of Roman Catholicism, genuine Catholic faith as understood by its practitioners, the Catholic sacraments, and clerical celibacy. I have therefore concluded that his plays take these elements of Catholicism seriously because the playwright himself took them seriously first. And while my

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<sup>6</sup> Yamamoto-Wilson recounts that: “Shakespeare’s mother, Mary Arden, came from a strongly Catholic Warwickshire family; his home town, Stratford, was regarded as a Recusant stronghold (the Catesbys, of Gunpowder Plot fame, were among the Catholics living there); many Stratford schoolmasters and pupils had Catholic sympathies (Shakespeare’s first teacher, Simon Hunt, became a Jesuit in 1575, while Robert Debdale, a fellow pupil of Shakespeare’s, was executed as a priest in 1586); when Shakespeare was nineteen years old his cousin, Edward Arden, had his head stuck on a pike for keeping a Catholic priest; his father’s will, discovered in 1757, is unquestionably Catholic and gives the lie to the theory that his recusancy was for purely secular reasons; Shakespeare’s wedding was at a church whose vicar, John Frith, was reputed to have Catholic sympathies; and his daughter was fined for recusancy” (351). For further details, see his article “Shakespeare and Catholicism.”

<sup>7</sup> David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore mention the above two plays as well as *Henry V* and *Hamlet* as examples of Shakespeare avoiding the “predictable prejudices” “within Protestant culture” (12; 13).

own Catholic faith may have led me to see sympathy in passages where others have read parody or ambiguity, I hope at least that it has not clouded my ability to provide a reasonable interpretation of his texts. Therefore, I proceed with the presumption of a Shakespeare who was Catholic in education and in personal sentiment, if not in practice, a necessary precondition if the following project is to cohere and make sense.

### Section I: Shakespeare and the English Catholic Individual

As a man who was surrounded by Catholic sympathizers and immersed in Catholic influence (Yamamoto-Wilson 351), William Shakespeare must have understood very well the English Catholic's dilemma, whether to extend loyalty to the church or to the sovereign. To summarize the English Catholic suffering we may look to Queen Katherine of *Henry VIII*, who is similarly caught between the power of the English king and the power of the Roman Catholic Church:

[C]an you think, lords,  
That any Englishman dare give me counsel?  
Or be a known friend, 'gainst his highness' pleasure,  
Though he be grown so desperate to be honest,  
And live a subject? Nay, forsooth, my friends,  
They that must weigh out my afflictions,  
They that my trust must grow to, live not here:  
They are, as all my other comforts, far hence[.] (3.1.96-103)

Katherine wisely realizes not only that she has lost her king's affections but that her erstwhile marriage has become a political tool that will make her an enemy within her own adopted

country. No “Englishman” will “counsel” her or be her “friend” at the expense of the king. Her Catholic allies “live not here” but “far hence.” Many Catholics in Shakespeare’s England felt a similar sense of alienation in their own country and a geographical detachment from their fellow Catholics on the continent. William M. Baillie asserts that by “tying Katherine’s downfall to the elimination of the rapacious and papist Cardinal Wolsey..., the play emphasizes strongly the nationalistic and Protestant victory embodied in [Henry VIII’s] divorce and remarriage” (262). If Baillie is right, then the play also implicitly concedes—perhaps even laments—the defeat of English Catholicism and the desolation of many English Catholics.

Many scholars have written extensively and persuasively regarding Shakespeare and the English Catholic experience, and I am indebted to them for enlightening my research and analysis for this dissertation. Richard Wilson’s *Secret Shakespeare* and Steven Mullaney’s *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* both explore various cultural and spiritual consequences of the English Reformation and Shakespeare’s dramatization of them. Likewise, David N. Beauregard and Maurice Hunt have written prolifically on the sectarian issues addressed in Shakespeare’s plays. And historians such as Peter Lake, Michael Questier, Eamon Duffy, and Euan Cameron have provided many insights into the post-Reformation historical tableau into which Shakespeare was born and that his plays so often reflect. Identifying and particularizing the English Catholic experience and Shakespeare’s grappling with it is an important contribution to ongoing critical conversations. In the first section of this dissertation, I explore the English Catholic’s ever-evolving relationship with the Roman Catholic Church as seen in two of Shakespeare’s plays, *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. I will then explore in Section II the continuing tension between the Catholic Church and the English monarchy as seen in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *Measure for Measure*. Western geo-politics and England’s



Catholic roots continued to shape the English monarchy and its church long after the schism from Rome. To get a better sense of Shakespeare's English Catholic experience, I will first consider the social and then the institutional pressures that likely affected the English Catholic community's faith and patriotism.

#### Chapter One: "I have an eye of you": *Hamlet* and a Culture of Surveillance

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I begin with the radical end of the early modern English Catholic experience: Catholic recusancy. This small subgroup of "obstinate papists" consisted of those who actively defied English laws regarding practice of the "new faith" and, in extreme cases, sought to subvert and assassinate the excommunicated Queen Elizabeth. Because of the seditious nature of their resistance, recusants almost always practiced their faith and networked with other Catholics in secret, a secrecy that then bred distrust of their fellow countrymen. Elizabeth reciprocated this distrust. The result was a hyper-awareness of the other and a recursive cycle of mutual resentment. In short, a surveillance culture emerged whereby Elizabeth's court and her recusant subjects believed they needed to keep a watchful eye on one another as a means of self-preservation.

In *Hamlet*, we see much the same dynamic between king and subject as Claudius imposes a similar kind of surveillance culture upon Denmark that Elizabeth, both wittingly and unwittingly, imposed on England. Claudius creates this type of systematized surveillance to protect his secrets and his position of power. He primarily uses it to target Hamlet, the next in line to the throne and greatest threat to his kingship. Remain in Elsinore, "in the cheer and comfort of our eye," he implores his nephew (1.2.116), though his watch of Hamlet is anything but cheerful or comfortable. This line initiates an *eye* motif that recurs throughout the play.

Claudius, with his “kingly eyes” (4.7.46), is the main instigator of the surveillance culture within the play, and the self-involved Hamlet certainly considers himself the main victim of it.

However, as I discuss, Hamlet also harnesses the power of “the eye” and employs it against his uncle and his uncle’s minions. Claudius cannot control the surveillance culture he creates. He too falls victim to it, indicating that the consequences of surveillance, whether in Shakespeare’s Elsinore or Elizabeth’s England, create a febrile atmosphere of suspicion, insecurity and mistrust.

Though sovereigns such as Elizabeth and Claudius order the implementation of a surveillance culture, they do not personally do any surveilling. Instead, they use an “organized network of informers and spies” (Parker 257). Elizabeth had a Privy Council and employed such fearsome figures as Richard Topcliffe and Francis Walsingham. Claudius has his trusted advisor, Polonius, and Hamlet’s schoolfellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rather than simply dismiss their espionage as *prima facie* acts of royal obedience, I examine what motivates Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Claudius’s behalf. Polonius demonstrates an almost gleeful desire to uncover people’s secrets, even willing to subject his own son to “forgeries” and “slight sullies” (2.1.20; 42) if doing so affords Polonius further information. In designing his schemes, Polonius considers himself a man “of wisdom and of reach” (2.1.65), one who has the power and perhaps the duty to authorize intelligence-gathering. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, by contrast, acknowledge their lowly position and willingly offer their own free will in service to their king. We “here give up ourselves in the full bent/.../ To be commanded,” Guildenstern proudly vows to Claudius and Gertrude (2.2.30-32). The purpose of exploring these different spies so carefully is to understand the ways in which the play comments on the complexity of Elizabethan spies and the cost of their enterprise.

Still, espionage is not limited to princes or their “intruding fools.” In fact, *Hamlet* exposes the voyeuristic natures of many beings, including the audience, whom Hamlet implicitly calls “guilty creatures sitting at a play” (2.2.590), purgatorial spirits such as the Ghost, and even God Himself. In *Hamlet*, we have what Charles K. Cannon calls “a pattern of diminishing concentric circles” (208): God watching us watch the characters watch one another. “The Everlasting” (1.2.131) watches and listens and knows, a burdensome omniscience that Claudius and Hamlet both explore in their turn. God’s celestial and earthly creatures have a similar propensity towards watchfulness, albeit one without His perfection. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare implies that those of the play and those in Elizabethan England have a God-given impulse for watchfulness and discovery, an instinct rife for abuse if left uncontrolled.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* gives us some insight into the psychological and social repercussions of investigating people’s consciences, thus providing a means of understanding the experience of faithful individual Catholics and clandestine Catholic communities in Tudor England. And while the play does not allegorize the recusant experience per se, it does present us with a similar climate of suffering, distrust, secrecy, and condemnation endured by these religious dissidents as well as their queen. It also permits the hope that such “rotten” state surveillance will someday be made known and that the victims of it will be similarly vindicated.

## Chapter Two: “Riveted with faith” and “flesh”: Corpus Christi in *Merchant of Venice*

The second chapter addressing the experience of the English Catholic community explores the loss of traditional Catholic practices as well as the threats of religious otherness in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare makes sustained allusion to the old Catholic celebration of Corpus Christi, a feast that commemorated the Real Presence of

Christ in the Eucharist but that was removed from the English liturgical calendar after the Reformation. In his comprehensive historical accounts of the English Reformation and its effects on English Catholics, *The Stripping of the Altars* and *The Voices of Morebath*,<sup>8</sup> Eamon Duffy argues that within this community there was a kind of fatalist resignation towards the power and permanence of the new faith at the expense of many of their formally-cherished traditions. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare pays homage to a once-beloved feast day to remind us what we lose in ecclesial reconstruction as well as to compel all Christians—but especially Catholics—to face their own Jewish origins, a lesson in history that may encourage some degree of religious tolerance just as it reveals many of the complexities attending the Real Presence in the Eucharist.

In this play, religious identification is as challenging as it was in Elizabethan England, and I spend much time scrutinizing the ways that characters understand their own religious identity and the religious identity of others. Just as Shylock assures us, “I am a Jew” (3.1.55), we can be assured that the Christians in the play are not simply Christian but Catholic in particular and that their catholicity matters if we are to take the Corpus Christi references seriously. *Merchant* is set in the Catholic stronghold of Venice and in close proximity to the Vatican. Additionally, Portia makes references to the sacrament of confession (1.2.128-129), to a monastery (3.4.31), and to praying before religious iconography (5.1.31), all exclusively Catholic practices. Though mostly hidden, the Catholic backdrop that the play presumes therefore adds Corpus Christi to its themes of the body, food, and spirituality.

*Merchant* presents these themes in a number of ways but most especially in Shylock’s obsession with the Christian body and in its marriage trope. From the opening act, we sense that

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<sup>8</sup> Duffy has many other works on the subject, including *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers* (2006) and his most recent book, *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England* (2017), to list but a few.

Shylock views Antonio's flesh as more than just collateral for his loan, devolving as he does from considering it "not so estimable, profitable neither,/ As flesh of muttoms, beefs, or goats" in Act I to "dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it" by Act IV (1.3.165-166; 4.1.100). The fleshly language therefore does not simply refer to Antonio and to the value of the human person but to Christ and the invaluable-ness of His flesh on earth and in the Eucharist, commemorated on Corpus Christi. Ken Colston describes the Eucharist as "the source and summit of divine love" (116), but Shylock, the most visible representative of the Jewish community in *Merchant*, does not see it that way. I believe that Shakespeare includes eucharistic language within this particular play in order to disrupt the Church's narrative, often depicted in medieval miracle plays like the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, that a personal encounter with the Eucharist would move Jews to Christian conversion and to help Christian audiences contend with the Jewishness of Christ and the transubstantiated bread and wine.

The marriage trope of the play gives us similarly mixed signals regarding flesh and Christian salvation. Though he also likely loves her, Bassanio initially characterizes his future wife, Portia, in terms of her wealth, as "a lady richly left" (1.1.161). Gratiano closes the play by imagining his wife's future fidelity in decidedly material terms: "Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing/ So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (5.1.306-307). Finally, the interfaith couple, Lorenzo and Jessica, first elope in disguise (2.8.15-16), do tremendous disservice to Jessica's father by pawning his wedding ring in exchange for a monkey (3.1.111-112), and then compare themselves to a series of ill-fated married couples (5.1.1-23). The marriages of the play reiterate its sacramental eucharistic theme but also call to mind many other complexities regarding the Eucharist and Catholic sacraments in general. As a sacrament, marriage ideally "feeds the soul"

and provides a means of accessing God's grace. However, as *Merchant* reminds us, it is also often used as a means of achieving earthly ends as well.

The conversion moments of *Merchant* trouble many modern audiences and critics and validate Harry Berger Jr.'s description of the play as "a comedy of embarrassment" (4) and Chris Jeffries' argument that "Shakespeare disguise[s] a political play as a romantic comedy" (38). But the conversion moments likewise echo the Corpus Christi hope that all partake of the "lyvyng bread, which came downe from heaven" (Jn 6:51).<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare's play longs for old faith traditions like Corpus Christi just as it questions their supposed universal appeal.

## Section II: Shakespeare, the English Throne, and the Church

As necessary as understanding the complexity of this English Catholic experience is, I believe that Shakespeare did not limit his presentation of the crisis of English Catholicism to its practitioners alone. Rather, he viewed the crisis as the result of three competing and occasionally overlapping bodies of authority: English Catholics, the Roman Catholic Church, and the English monarchy. For this reason, in Section II of my dissertation, I shift to explore the effects of the loss of English Catholicism on the body of the English monarchy, on individual English monarchs—individual souls who likewise must contend with God and right worship, and to a lesser extent, on the papacy. References to the tug-of-war between the English throne and Rome are scattered throughout Shakespeare's corpus. For example, King John, a Catholic and a man interested in protecting his own earthly authority, rails to Cardinal Pandulph:

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<sup>9</sup> All biblical references come from the *Bishops' Bible* (1568).

What earthy name to interrogatories  
Can task the free breath of a sacred king?  
Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name  
So slight, unworthy and ridiculous,  
To charge me to an answer, as the pope.  
Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England  
Add thus much more, that no Italian priest  
Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;  
But as we, under heaven, are supreme head,  
So under Him that great supremacy,  
Where we do reign, we will alone uphold,  
Without the assistance of a mortal hand:  
So tell the pope, all reverence set apart  
To him and his usurp'd authority. (3.1.153-166)

In this speech, John sounds much like King James VI of Scotland, who in 1587 wrote the following to Elizabeth in the hopes of preventing his mother's pending execution:

What law of God can permit that justice shall strike upon them whom he has appointed supreme dispensators of the same under him, whom he hath called gods and therefore subjected to the censure of none in earth, whose anointing by God cannot be defiled by man unrevened by the author thereof, *who, being supreme and immediate lieutenants of God in heaven, cannot therefore be judged by their equals in earth?* (qtd from Akrigg 82; emphasis mine)

Just as James claims that the "supreme and immediate lieutenants of God," the royal heads of state such as himself, "cannot therefore be judged by their equals on earth," Shakespeare's John denies that any earthly "interrogatories," especially the "unworthy and ridiculous" pope who has "usurped" his authority, may judge those who are the "supreme head" of their respective

dominions. James and John's arguments both make mention of the spiritual as well as political authority that God has granted them and passionately aver that no one, not even "their equals on earth" may rightfully contest their authority. In other words, both kings imagine themselves to enjoy a kind of divine inoculation from opposition that, I will argue, Shakespeare did not agree they had.

Whatever the kings and popes thought about themselves and one another, Elizabethan and Jacobean Catholics were not mere spectators in the conflict that subsisted between the English monarchy and the papacy. They were important participants in it. To historians Peter Lake and Michael Questier, Catholic "victims of state power were also agents, the initiating subjects of a struggle for the control of some of the central ideological, rhetorical, and material weapons mobilized by the state against them" (230). In this way, the English Catholic community presented itself as a third body of authority holding state government and the Church to account. And, as much as they may have disagreed, the three all had some need of one another. The meddlesome papacy provided England a religious and political motherland against which the growing nation might demonstrate its independence and strengthen its global profile. It also provided a primer for the frame of the newly-established Church of England, a fact to which James himself admitted when he wrote to his son, Prince Charles: "I have fully instructed [some Anglican bishops] so as all their behaviour and service shall, I hope, prove decent and agreeable to the purity of the primitive church and yet as near the Roman form as can lawfully be done, for it hath ever been my way to go with the Church of Rome *usque ad aras*" (qtd in Akrigg 397). According to James, England could not deny its Catholic past or the force of the Catholic Church in the present. Shakespeare intuited the English monarchy's need of its supposed enemy, the



Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, and therefore subtly dramatizes the tension between them in several of his plays.

The Roman Catholic Church and the Holy See likewise had a vested political interest in the English state. The English disavowal of the Catholic Church and its public indifference to papal bulls and excommunications embarrassed the Church and challenged its already-diminished authority. Because it was losing minds and souls in its battle with Protestant Christendom, the Church commissioned the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that in turn launched its own Counter-Reformation in the hopes of restoring all European states—including England—back to the Catholic fold. In its convocation, Trent conceded that in order to reclaim European souls, the Church must first make in-roads with European leaders, to whom “God has entrusted almost the entire direction of affairs” (1). To see the tenuous relationship between the Church and the English monarchy unfold, we may return to *Henry VIII*, whereby various noblemen accuse Cardinal Wolsey, one of Shakespeare’s iconic Catholic villains, of crimes against the English state. To Wolsey, the Duke of Suffolk pronounces:

Because all those things you have done of late  
By your power legative within this kingdom  
Fall into th’compass of a praemunire;  
That therefore such a writ be sued against you,  
To forfeit all your goods, lands, tenements,  
Chattels and whatsoever, and to be  
Out of the king’s protection. (3.2.338-344)

Suffolk forces Wolsey to forfeit all church treasure and land within his purview back to the English state and, effectively, to renounce his English citizenship and his Englishness entirely.

Suffolk may immediately direct his order to Wolsey, but since the historical Henry so forcefully excised Catholic “goods, lands, tenements, [and] chattels” from the English realm and pilfered so much Catholic treasure, his words apply just as aptly to the Catholic Church, which would soon be similarly humiliated and forced “out of the king’s protection.” The Catholic Church was in crisis. The Protestant Reformation in general had revealed a church addled with corruption, and the English Reformation and its formal establishment of a separate English church added a political component to an otherwise ecclesiastical schism. To reassert itself as a doctrinal and political force, the Catholic Church needed to attempt some degree of reconciliation with the English throne, even as it attempted to subvert it. The authority of the Catholic Church, though wounded, continued to exert itself throughout Shakespeare’s lifetime. As such, he includes it in many of his plays as an effective counterbalance to the state as well as the Church best able to bring its members to salvation.

In order to explore the ways that this geo-political struggle plays out within the works of Shakespeare, I have selected to examine in particular *Richard II* and *Measure for Measure* as plays that feature statesmen who must face the implications of their own political power, their divine appointment, and the Catholic Church as a separate institutional authority. The English monarchy and the Roman papacy both contended which was the mightier during Shakespeare’s day as well as in his plays. To ignore this global conflict whilst attempting to comprehend the English Catholic experience on an individual and community level would be to erase the individual Catholic as a constitutive feature of the political bodies of the English monarchy and the papacy and to overlook the humanity and the individual souls that comprised these massive geo-political institutions.

### Chapter Three: “The death of kings”: *Richard II* and Destabilized Kingship

The first chapter of Section II examines *Richard II* as it addresses the English throne, its Catholic past, and the problems of kingship. Medieval understandings of kingship believed that the “pageantry and ritual” (Geckle 115) associated with the coronation ceremony infused a king with divine authority therefore marking him as Christ’s representative on earth, while early moderns presumed that a king’s primogenitary succession manifested his divine appointment and godly authority. *Richard II* demonstrates the impossibility of both perspectives and posits instead a rather difficult alternative: that Christian kingship is inherently unstable, that Richard’s power has always ever been fragile and subject to material harm like usurpation, and therefore that the throne must be carefully controlled and protected in order to survive.

One significant way Shakespeare makes the instability of kingship clear is through the historical events that precede and succeed those presented in the play. Many characters nostalgically recall the “sacred” (1.2.17) reign of Richard’s grandfather and royal predecessor, Edward III, a man who ascended the throne following a successful coup waged against his father, Edward II. References to Edward III also bring to mind the history of Richard’s nonage and the galling behavior of many of Richard’s relatives, including Henry Bolingbroke, who took advantage of Richard’s youth and inexperience. Finally, the play “anticipates the future calamity of English history” (Irish 131) by giving a brief glimpse at the stain that usurpation will leave on Henry Bolingbroke’s reign as King Henry IV. Not only does it feature Henry’s own future adversary, Henry “Hotspur” Percy, who makes a pledge of fealty to Bolingbroke that the audience can never take seriously, but it also ends with Henry professing agonizing guilt over Richard’s lifeless body: “Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe,/.../ I’ll make a voyage to the Holy Land,/ To wash this blood off from my guilty hand” (5.6.46-50). The threat of usurpation

afflicts Richard from the moment of his coronation, and it ultimately deprives him of power and his life. Neither his divine appointment nor his holy anointment saves him.

And yet, for much of the play, Richard insists on the inviolability of his anointing. “Not all the water in the rough rude sea/ Can wash the balm off from an anointed king,” he assures himself (3.2.54-55). The reason that Richard trusts his anointing so implicitly is that by the time of his accession, English royal tradition had viewed the coronation ritual as a kind of civic sacrament that would give his kingship the kind of permanence that some Catholic sacraments give to their recipients. Because of the medieval conflation of civic ritual and Catholic sacramentalism, Richard later views his deposition as an offense against the sacraments he has received, that his baptism and his marriage have now been “blasphemously parodied and countermanded” (Schuler 193). The problem is not that Richard misunderstands his anointing or the gravity of his deposition. The problem lies with the failed medieval philosophy that linked kingship with Catholic sacramentalism in the first place.

Because he has always intuited the “sad stories” of kingship (3.2.156), Richard initiates his own deposition and attempts to adopt Bolingbroke as his son to minimize its disruption to the line of succession. He is the first to mention deposition in the play (3.2.144) and maintains that he will “adopt” Bolingbroke “heir” in the process (4.1.109). The Queen likewise echoes Richard’s adoption language (2.2.60-61), a move that makes Bolingbroke’s adoption more concrete and simultaneously mitigates the couple’s own barrenness. Richard thus asserts control over his fecundity and his kingship, even as his body fails to reproduce or to defend his crown.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert M. Schuler counters: “The legitimizing force of ‘descending’ is further weakened by context: neither an adopted ‘heir’ nor a ‘throne’ can claim the blood ‘descent’ (‘from him’) of direct royal lineage. Bolingbroke cannot ‘ascend’ ‘In God’s name’ at all, but only ‘descend’ morally in the attempt to rise, like Milton’s Satan” (181).

Shakespeare's *Richard II* does not so much resign itself to the impossibility of stable kingship as it does argue for actively stabilizing it. It refuses to accept the permanence of any sacramental component to the coronation ritual. And it hints strongly that practical means of support, a strong royal court and a strong royal army, are vital to retain and stabilize power and to avoid the fate that Richard prophesies upon kings: that "all" are eventually "murder'd" (3.3.160). By admitting the impermanence of sacred kingship and the necessity of carefully controlling the hereditary line of accession, *Richard* suggests that the English monarchy examine its own limitations, its dual earthly and Christian nature, and its inherent separation from sacramental transcendence.

#### Chapter Four: "Trust not my holy order": *Measure for Measure* and Erastian Governance

The final chapter of this dissertation looks at the consequences of the conflation of state and ecclesial authority as seen in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. In this play, Duke Vincentio attempts to resolve the moral dissipation of his city by adopting the disguise of a Franciscan friar, making a bungled foray into the religious lives of his people in order to curtail their sexual immorality. In so doing, he ventures into Erastian governance—that is, the fusion of state and state church authority—in a way that approximates the English crown's establishment of and control over the Church of England. It is my contention that Shakespeare includes such a mixed and conflicted leader in this play to suggest that trusting civic leaders with ecclesial authority could be potentially injurious to the spiritual health of their people since Erastian governance so frequently resulted in religion becoming, according to J. Neville Figgis, a "creature of the State" (83).

The Duke's religious cover as Friar Lodowick allows Shakespeare to have some fun with terms such as *pardon*, *sin*, *mercy*, and *high authority* (4.2.108-113), exposing that in Erastianism, many of them turn into political tools that eventually secularize Christian justice (Goossen 235). But the most profound consequence of Vincentio's unauthorized adoption of a friar disguise manifests in the Duke's new relationship with the established church and its established clerisy. While his adoption of the friar disguise defies Catholic rules regarding clerical ordination, the Duke still manages to instrumentalize ordained friars to act on his behalf. He compels Friar Thomas to furnish him with the proper dress and mannerisms of Franciscan friars (1.3.47-50), a command which Thomas readily follows. The Duke also enjoins Friar Peter to be a mouthpiece for his ducal seat (4.5.1-9) and to perform at his command the rite of marriage, a Catholic sacrament the Duke blasphemously reduces to a mere "office" (5.1.385-386). Beauregard considers it a mark of Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies that in *Measure*, "none of the Franciscan religious violates a vow of chastity, poverty or obedience" (253). However, Thomas and Peter in fact do disobey their superiors by disobeying canon law, shifting their first loyalties away from the church and onto the state.

For its own part, the Catholic Church in *Measure* cedes to state domination by permitting the unauthorized "Friar Lodowick" to "hear[] confessions, offer[] deathbed counsel, and attempt[] to offer last rites" (Goossen 227). But even aside from Catholic ritual and the fake friar disguise, the authentic Catholicism that exists in the play is often marginalized and extreme in nature. The Poor Clares convent is set on the periphery of Vienna and requires of its sisters fanatical adherence to an excessively rigid legal code (1.4.1-15), transforming religious piety into comedic absurdity and giving some scholars good reason to point to this scene as evidence that Shakespeare took a dim view of Catholic monasticism. The Church's ecclesial autonomy in

*Measure* may even collapse entirely into the Viennese throne when the Duke asks Isabella, the Poor Clare postulate, for her hand in marriage. “What mine is yours and what is yours is mine,” he proposes (5.1.548), hinting at a complete sublimation of the church and the state. Isabella never utters a response to this proposal, leaving us uncertain about her future role in the Catholic Church and even more significantly, the Catholic Church’s larger role in Vincentio’s Vienna.

Rather than argue for the separation of church and state, Shakespeare’s *Measure* compels us to examine the consequences, both positive and negative, of the Erastian fusion of both entities. Because it gives us hope for a restoration of Viennese peace and morality only through the return of Vincentio to his rightful ducal seat and the return of the church to its limited scope, Shakespeare seems to express doubt regarding a prince’s ability to venture into spiritual matters just as he seems to favor a church that offers itself as a counterbalance to unchecked state power and that exercises its own power to gain the salvation of souls.

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Frequent sectarian changes during the Tudor dynasty, the continued secret practice of Catholicism, and the growing influence of other Reformed communities, especially Calvinist Puritans, all prevented Shakespeare’s England from unifying under a single state church and a settled dogma. His plays hint at many religious tensions while also evincing a marked and consistent sympathy for the Roman Catholic Church, sympathy that other early modern dramatists either did not share or did not care to depict. That this generally fond portrayal of Catholicism did not deter Shakespeare’s popularity, alarm the Privy Council, or forestall a fierce twenty-first century debate regarding his religious identity speaks to his complex dramatizations

of faith, community, nation, and personal conviction. The pathological surveillance culture in *Hamlet* and its resulting psychological torment; the joys of Corpus Christi celebrations, the enigmatic doctrine of transubstantiation, and the challenges of Jewish flesh in *Merchant of Venice*; troubling histories, the loss of Catholic sacramentalism, and the instability of Christian kingship in *Richard II*; and Erastian governance and the willing subordination of the church in *Measure for Measure* all reveal some aspect of Shakespeare's worldview and his connection to Catholicism. Through his works, we can see a sharper picture of the early modern English Catholic experience and gain a new respect for the political, theological, and individual interests that contributed to it.



SECTION I:

Shakespeare and the English Catholic Individual

## CHAPTER ONE:

### “I have an eye of you”: *Hamlet* and a Culture of Surveillance

In 1585, on the occasion of the execution of Doctor William Parry, a well-known Catholic convicted of plotting to assassinate Queen Elizabeth, many English churches said a prayer of thanksgiving for the “vigilant eye” of God’s providence for its “sudden interruption of [Parry’s] endeavour.”<sup>11</sup> Parry had originally worked for Elizabeth to spy on continental Catholics, but a subsequent, clandestine conversion to Catholicism as well as some financial troubles prompted him instead to participate in a plot against her. In apprehending Parry, it appears that Elizabeth had, indeed, dodged a bullet since his plan was supposedly to shoot her as she traveled in her carriage. In the disruption of Parry’s plot, God’s “vigilant eye” may certainly deserve some credit. However, there were also other, more corporeal forces that directly led to Parry’s condemnation. One of his fellow conspirators, Sir Edmund Neville, had turned him in, and Parry himself made a complete confession while imprisoned in the Tower of London.

In this prayer of thanksgiving, the idea of God’s “vigilant eye” was invoked to comfort Elizabeth and all good English Protestants that the powers of God would protect them from an insidious reversion to papistry. Catholics who heard this prayer though likely disagreed. Instead, they would have presumed that God’s “vigilant eye” favored them and their desire for the return of Roman Catholicism to England. For these Catholics, a Protestant invocation of God’s “vigilant eye” was a misappropriation of God’s will and authority and became instead a metaphor for the English secular state that claimed to do God’s work. From this perspective then, the state, in defiance of God’s will, sought to probe the hearts and consciences of its people,

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<sup>11</sup> From “An Order of Praier and Thanksgiving... with a short extract of William Parries Voluntarie Confession written with his owne hand” (1584). See also Patricia Parker (258).

engendering within them a sense of paranoia, a fear of being always under surveillance, not just from God but also from their royal leadership and their fellow man.

Of all the victims of Elizabeth's campaign against English Catholics, Parry is one of the least sympathetic figures. In fact, many might claim he was justly killed by his own treachery: against his queen, against an employer who trusted him, and against those Catholics he had betrayed to her. But his treachery and the treachery that Neville committed against him are a microcosm of a larger socio-political game played by Elizabeth and her Catholic subjects, one that no longer tolerated a "live-and-let-live" mentality and that now required state interference in the daily lives of religious others. While the Protestant prayers praised the far-reaches of God's "vigilant eye," some Catholics would instead have understood the phrase as Patricia Parker does: as a "euphemism for state intelligence" (256), one that remained ever watchful of those who threatened Elizabeth's power. These Catholics adapted to their position as enemies-of-the-state in two major ways. Some adopted the antic disposition of what others derisively called "church papistry," publicly attending Anglican services while privately retaining their Catholic identities. The other group were called recusants,<sup>12</sup> Catholics who elected to practice their faith in spite of the financial cost and the possibility of pain and death. Moderate recusants refused to attend services and accepted the penalties imposed upon them as a result, but they still did not openly defy the crown. However, a small but militant group of recusants abided Elizabeth's gaze while secretly working to subvert her in the hopes of restoring England to the Roman Catholic Church.

After the pope excommunicated Elizabeth and declared her reign illegitimate, these same devout Catholic subjects found additional cause to oppose Elizabeth's enforcement of religious

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<sup>12</sup> Strictly speaking, the term *recusant* does not refer to Catholics only. Other religious minorities, including Anabaptists and even some fundamentalist Reformers, were also considered recusants. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term to refer to Catholic recusants only.

uniformity. For some committed English Catholics, Elizabeth had crossed a line, reaching beyond what was required to maintain peace and security within her realm and into the private dictates of their consciences. This intrusion into their consciences by a monarch that the pope refused to recognize created a significant dilemma. Most could admit that a ruling monarch may expect basic obedience to her edicts if the realm was to continue under her leadership, but these same Catholics believed that obedience to her religious authority as Supreme Governor of the Church of England threatened their salvation and prevented the restoration of England to the One True Church.

Though the play is not an allegory of the recusant experience per se, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* still gives us a taste of the anxiety that recusants experienced under Elizabeth's anti-Catholic campaign.<sup>13</sup> Because of his illegitimacy, an illegitimacy known only to himself, Claudius develops an obsessive desire to access others' inner thoughts, an attempt to intrude into mind and conscience that resembles the "vigilant eye" of the Elizabethan state. Marcellus famously summarizes the result of this surveillance culture: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). The "rottenness" of Claudius's crime and the surveillance he implements in order to conceal it permeates the entire "state." Marcellus, a mere guardsman, intuitively recognizes this corrupting force for himself and recognizes it as an all-consuming national pathology that leads directly to deceit, madness, and death. By the end of *Hamlet*, only non-Danes such as Horatio and Fortinbras and those Danes who live outside of the court, manage to survive. The pernicious surveillance culture eventually subsumes all of those within the sovereign state's immediate purview.

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<sup>13</sup> Though writing specifically about Edgar from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in his book on early modern literary martyrs, David K. Anderson claims that "Shakespeare is engaged in a thoroughgoing examination of what it means to be persecuted" by the state (15). See *Martyrs and Players in Early Modern England: Tragedy, Religion and Violence on Stage*.

Since the play opens and closes with the presence of other kings, the shocking appearance of King Hamlet's ghost and the presumed coronation of Fortinbras, the play discredits King Claudius's authority from beginning to end, even before we learn about the circumstances of his rise to the throne. By contrast, the historical accession of Elizabeth represented the stable continuation of the royal line and a return of English Protestantism. But in one key respect, Claudius's royal temperament resembles that of Elizabeth: both monarchs officiously observed those individuals and communities that threatened their power and encouraged such people to fear them in return. Claudius wants to prevent his illegitimacy from being made known and therefore surveils those who might discover it. Elizabeth wanted to prevent Catholic rebellion and therefore surveilled those who might engage in it. Through the fictionalized Danish court in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare permits an examination of royal surveillance culture and allows us to appreciate more fully the psychological ramifications suffered by those forced to endure it.

### **English Catholic Recusancy and a Culture of Suspicion**

Queen Elizabeth's repression of Catholicism and of Catholics developed over time and intensified mostly in reaction to the increased fanaticism of some recusants. At least in the very early stages of Elizabeth's reign, Catholics had little to fear. Though commenting at the end of her reign, Sir Francis Bacon famously insisted that Elizabeth never sought "to make windows into men's souls" regarding religious convictions, and the fact that no Catholics were executed during the first dozen years of her reign supports his point. In 1567, the Catholic Thomas Harding lauded Elizabeth's "advised stay from hasty and sharp persecution" and contended that Elizabeth in fact protected her Catholic subjects from the persecution of Protestant clergy

(Holmes 47). Between 1570 and 1579, Elizabeth ordered the execution of five Catholics, but in each case, they were convicted of crimes against the state and not crimes of faith. Of the executed, three of them involved themselves in the Northern Uprising of Catholic nobles against Elizabeth in 1569, and the two others overtly declared their allegiance to the pope over the queen. In the name of their faith, these men committed treason and received the prescribed capital punishment.

However, the cold war subsisting between Elizabeth and devoted Catholics began to heat up in the mid-1570s. Pope Pius V had formally excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570. The bull of excommunication issued against her effectively excommunicated all English Protestants as well (Tiffany 121) since it claimed they were subjects of a “pretended queen,” a heretic who had “seized” her “pretended title to the crown.” It also openly advocated for English Catholics to renounce their allegiance to her in favor of her cousin, Mary Stuart. Though not all Catholics were much affected by a formal declaration of apostasy that they already presumed her, it did embolden some to resist Elizabeth and to take more drastic measures to defy English Protestantism and the English crown. A seminary in Douai, France, instituted to educate Englishmen to become priests, began to send those they ordained back to their homeland in the late 1570s (Wilson 49-50), increasing the expanse of Catholic practice and providing more opportunities for English children to be educated by Catholic priests. Elizabeth’s eventual, if reluctant, execution of Mary Stuart in 1587 once again reignited the ire of English Catholics, prompting a few to call for her deposition (Shell 109). By 1590, the state fear of a Catholic revolt had grown so great that William Cecil, Elizabeth’s Lord High Treasurer and virtual prime minister, commissioned the creation of a Lancashire map which identified all houses in the county suspected of popery, no small feat considering it was, in Richard Wilson’s words, “the

most Catholic of English counties” (44). Cecil and others zeroed in on Lancashire because other European Catholic countries such as Spain—with its formidable Armada—considered it a strategic port whereby continental Catholics might infiltrate the English Isle (47). Thus, Elizabeth faced religiously-motivated political opposition from within and without her own country, and she responded by persecuting some of her Catholic subjects with increasing severity.

In the back-and-forth between Elizabeth and her Catholic subjects, both sides could claim some victories. But for certain Catholics, the acts of resistance committed by their religious brethren and the punishments exacted upon them as a result only strengthened their fervor. According to Peter Lake and Michael Questier, passive non-compliance no longer satisfied them. They now considered resistance to Elizabeth and the Church of England a matter of religious principle (13). Richard Chamberlain sees this form of recusancy as the epitome of active non-action, that the very purpose of recusancy “was not merely not to act, but also to be *seen* not to act” (132). These Catholics did not consider themselves as witnessing for the faith unless others acknowledged their acts of resistance. This community then influenced one another and encouraged one another by the extent of their willingness to resist oppression and practice their faith. Recusants began compiling eye-witness accounts of persecution, extraordinary tales of bravery, and even letters and confessions of victims and martyrs in order to witness to God’s grace in the face of tremendous suffering (Shell 3). In addition to refusing to attend Church of England services, recusants subverted the law by smuggling forbidden priests into England, housing them, and offering their homes for the performance of Mass and other sacraments. The arrival of Jesuit priests like Fathers Robert Parsons and Edmund Campion, educated in Spain and returned to England with a special dispensation from Pope Gregory XIII, invigorated repressed

Catholics to exercise their faith. These fervent Catholics would no longer remain silent. Instead, they would challenge the legitimacy of what they called the “new faith” and work to restore England’s Catholic inheritance.

As might be expected, this new-found courage to subvert the queen and the national church in direct defiance of English law led directly to further legal restraints on Catholics and Catholic worship. Pursuant to the Act of Uniformity (1558), the names of those who refused to attend weekly services had been recorded in the court pipe rolls, and all such persons were subject to a 12d-per-month fine, a considerable burden for most recusants, especially the poor. By 1581, Parliament had raised such fines exorbitantly, to £20 per month, effectively pricing Catholicism out of the reach of nearly all recusants.<sup>14</sup> After three months of non-payment, recusants forfeited up to two-thirds of their estate and were sent to prison for debt (Walsham 85). The prospect of financial ruin and debtor’s prison certainly encouraged erstwhile recusants to adopt the “new faith” at least publicly, and some did so.<sup>15</sup> Among those who argued in favor of conformity were Archdeacon Alban Langdale and Father Thomas Bell of Lancashire. Even Robert Parsons agreed to some acts of conformity that were intended to render the queen patriotic service (Holmes 90). But others continued to defy the state and their fellow Englishmen who went along with English Protestantism out of personal devotion, religious ambivalence, or a reluctance to make waves.

For these fervid Catholics, the penalties for even private practice of their faith were daunting. The Act against Fugitives over the Sea (1571) banned the personal ownership of “such

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<sup>14</sup> At this time, approximately 98% of the English population had a yearly income at or below £100 (Schwoerer 100).

<sup>15</sup> Derek Hirst offers a counter perspective. He says instead: “There is little evidence of families being ruined by [recusancy] fines, and, as with other penal laws, the pressure for enforcement came from hungry courtiers anxious to make money from fines” (80).



vain and superstitious” sacramental items as rosaries, crosses, pictures, and the Agnus Dei. But the penalties for the possession of such material was still relatively minor compared to other acts of Catholic defiance since owning sacramentals risked only the loss of land and property. The Religion Act of 1580 outlawed saying or attending Mass entirely. Lay persons who harbored Catholic priests or who permitted priests to say Mass in their homes could face imprisonment and even execution. While imprisoned, many were subjected to torture since such interrogation tactics easily persuaded even the most obstinate suspects to give up the names of fellow accomplices. In a particularly brutal case, Elizabeth’s most notorious priest-hunter, Richard Topcliffe tortured and raped recusant Anne Bellamy in the Tower of London until she revealed the whereabouts of the Jesuit priest Father Robert Southwell. Southwell was soon after arrested, tortured, and hanged, and Bellamy gave birth to Topcliffe’s illegitimate child (Kilroy 143). The horrific deaths of men like Southwell and the betrayal of lay persons like Bellamy (Topcliffe promised her that her family would not be harmed if she confessed), must have weighed heavily on their minds and dampened the resolve of even the most ardent Catholics.

As fearsome as figures like Topcliffe were, recusant Catholics also needed to fear even those dedicated Catholic priests whom the state arrested. Because their very presence constituted an act of treason (Walsham 52), Jesuit priests were almost uniformly subjected to torture before their executions in order to extract information about their associates. While enduring the agony of the rack, Edmund Campion revealed some of the names of those to whom he had ministered while in England, including William, Lord Vaux and his brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Tresham (Kilroy 283). While Campion admitted their names under physical duress, others began to cooperate with Anglican authorities under only the mere threat of torture and execution. I do not

make this statement to pass judgment on their acquiescence but instead to illustrate the depth of fear that pervaded some recusant circles.

A secondary motive that Topcliffe and others had to torture Jesuits and their accomplices was to induce their associates to abandon Catholicism and join the Anglican cause. And in some cases, Topcliffe was successful. Jesuit priest, Henry Garnet, best known for his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot, remained ever wary of his fellow brothers of the cloth, and with good reason, as Fathers Edward Grately and Gilbert Gifford both became informants for the Crown (Holmes 169). The potential consequences of Catholic fidelity were gruesome, and the possibility of being named was rather great. The very people bearing their sins and their souls to ordained priests in confession had to worry that these same priests or their fellow recusants might betray them in a moment of weakness.

Still, the actual population of recusants who were directly penalized for their faith practice was relatively small. To paraphrase Hamlet, the numbers did not try the cause. Derek Hirst estimates that “[t]here were probably between 30,000 and 40,000 recusants, or principled absentees from church, in England in 1603” (81), a very small minority in a country nearing four million people. Moreover, towns with a high concentration of Catholics tended to be those in northern counties, not in London or the surrounding areas (Tarragó 124). Because of the sparse and rather widespread Catholic population, the relatively few ordained priests in England needed to cover wide swaths of territory in order to bring the sacraments to those who had long gone without them. Though Jesuit priests were Elizabeth’s religious and political antagonists, priests of other orders, especially those ordained before her reign, were otherwise ordinary English subjects who wanted only to be left alone to practice their faith in peace. Only 116 such priests were formally executed under Elizabeth, although more than twice that number were imprisoned

at some point (Lake and Questier 199).<sup>16</sup> And imprisonment was not unequivocally negative for priests and their flock. Though prison conditions were often deplorable, prisons themselves were also sometimes much more permissive in terms of religious practice than the outside world. Catholics often visited prisons in order to attend Mass and receive other sacraments (225). In fact, Robert Parsons himself admitted that “priests who are shut up in prisons are sometimes of more use to us there than if they were at liberty. For these men, being always definitely in the same place, make possible the visits of many people who are unable to discover the whereabouts of other priests” (qtd in Lake and Questier 203). Priests in prison could minister to their people with relative ease. Those Catholics outside it could practice their faith with only minor inconvenience and minor concessions to the Crown and the Church of England. Though all Catholics needed to remain circumspect when practicing or discussing their faith, only foreign-trained seminary priests, Jesuits, and fanatics such as Margaret Clitherow, who ascribed to the belief that anything less than recusancy amounted to apostasy, truly needed to fear for their lives under Elizabeth and the long reaches of her religious police state.

By the time William Shakespeare composed *Hamlet* in 1600, the tension between Elizabeth and the recusants had grown considerably. Though both aged and only a few years from death, Elizabeth and Topcliffe continued to persecute Catholics steadily. Three years earlier, Topcliffe and others had arrested fellow dramatists Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe for their play, *The Isle of Dogs*. Since no known copy of the play has survived, it is difficult to imagine the language, imagery, or implication that so concerned the authorities. Yet something within the play’s content stirred Topcliffe and the Privy Council to outlaw the play and to imprison not only Jonson and Nashe but also three of the play’s actors. Such a move served as a

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<sup>16</sup> As a percentage of the overall priest population, this number is actually rather high. Lake and Questier estimate that there were 471 priests living in England under Elizabeth (199).

warning to other writers and performers to limit the political and religious commentary in their works. Shakespeare, a suspected Catholic, would certainly have understood this warning. Though scholars today debate his true religious affiliation, rumors about Shakespeare's Catholicism swirled throughout his career. In 1611, the Puritan John Speed linked the lately-executed Parsons to Shakespeare, calling the two of them "this papist and his poet, of like conscience for lies, the one ever feigning, the other ever falsifying the truth" (qtd in Wilson 12). Whether he was a recusant Catholic or simply presumed to be so because of his family and other associates, Shakespeare mined a very tricky profession that thrived on social commentary but that risked antagonizing people in power.

Rather than providing an escape from the cultural anxiety encouraged by this surveillance power, in composing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare actually invites us to explore it.<sup>17</sup> The lurking Ghost of King Hamlet; the paranoid King Claudius; the self-appointed watchman, Polonius; the hired informants, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; the audience; and even God all contribute to the fear of exposure that *Hamlet* develops. Hamlet moves from resigning himself to their watchful gazes, to resisting them through his "antic disposition," to gazing back at them in "The Mouse Trap," a shift in behavior similar to the ever-shifting temperament of the English recusant movement. Much of the recent scholarship about *Hamlet* has focused on the various sectarian issues that the play raises, and the conflicts arising from these sectarian issues certainly contribute to the intensity of the play's climate of suspicion. But theological issues—with the notable exception of the concept of purgatory—are not a primary concern here. Catholicism is not the impetus for Claudius's paranoid watchfulness, though it was the central cause of Elizabeth's surveillance of

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Parker makes a similar observation, noticing "the obsession everywhere in *Hamlet* with spying and being spied upon" (256). However, Parker's interpretation relies heavily on the notion that the secretive nature of the play derives from a patriarchal presumption within it that women cannot keep or be trusted with secrets (254). For more, see her book *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (1996).

her recusant subjects. There is also no evidence of physical torture or attempts at financial ruin in the play, and Elizabeth did not plot to kill all Catholics who questioned her authority. The comparison between Elizabethan England and *Hamlet* is not absolute. The two realms are instead connected by the psychological torture they each imposed on their respective subjects through rabid watchfulness. *Hamlet* suggests that Shakespeare viewed surveillance culture as an overreach of royal authority since such surveillance goes beyond the royal duty to “keep the laws of God and of nature”<sup>18</sup> into an investigation of the individual conscience. David N. Beauregard makes a similar argument, that in Claudius’s Denmark “there is an atmosphere that...parallels the Elizabethan state, with its paranoid preparations for war, its spying, its execution of Catholic priests, and its general disruption and suppression of traditional Catholic ritual” (60-61). Through an examination of Hamlet, Claudius, and others, we can understand some of the consequences of the Elizabethan intrusion on the consciences and psychological well-being of English recusants and appreciate more fully the level of fear experienced by those who chose authenticity to self over compliance and personal safety.

### **“An eye like Mars to threaten and command”: Watchfulness and the “eye” motif**

Though the prayer marking William Parry’s condemnation thanks the “vigilant eye” of God’s providence, *Hamlet* features different, more insidious versions of the “vigilant eye”: the eye of the state and the eye of the individual. The state’s eye incites fear because of the empirical power behind it. The individual’s eye, because of its proximity and supposed friendliness. Such

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<sup>18</sup> Jean Bodin, the early modern political philosopher who first explicated the theory of the divine right of kings, summarized ideal kingship as one that “keeps the laws of God and of nature.” He further elaborated that such a king “fears God, is merciful to the afflicted, prudent in his undertakings, brave in action, modest in prosperity, constant in adversity, true to his plighted word, wise in council, careful of his subjects, helpful to his friends, terrible to his enemies, courteous to men of good birth, a scourge of evil-doers, and just towards all.” See his treatise, *Les Six livres de la République*.

eyes, rather than being the proverbial windows to the soul, represent a desire to penetrate other people's minds and consciences. This motif of the eye in *Hamlet* highlights the surveillance culture of Denmark and puts all characters on alert that they are constant objects of the gaze. Parker aptly illustrates the "rotten" social climate that this surveillance culture creates when she remarks on the "claustrophobia" of the play (257). As an illegitimate usurper, Claudius is the one who first implements this surveillance culture over those he perceives as threats, but once this surveillance culture takes root, he no longer wields sole control over it. Though his "kingly eyes" may retain the most political power, they cannot contain surveillance to those he wishes to watch or to those secrets he wants to discover. The "claustrophobia" of the play comes not solely from Claudius's despotic watchfulness but from the suffocation that comes from nearly everyone believing that they are being watched by someone else and the inherent difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe. Those in Elsinore and the recusants of early modern England were sometimes forced to presume the worst about fellow members of their community, that all were foes until they proved otherwise, a social pathology that would have bred only ever more suspicion.

But, just as a fish rots from the head, a surveillance culture must come from the top since the power to reward or punish sustains it. Thus, Claudius remains largely responsible for implementing it, even if others abuse it as well. From almost the first moment he appears on stage, Claudius introduces the notion that while in Denmark, those who threaten him will live under the omnipresent gaze of the state. As the only living child of the deceased king and the next in line to the throne, Hamlet poses the greatest threat to Claudius's power and therefore becomes the primary target of Claudius's surveillance. Though couching it in terms of familial concern and avuncular interest, Claudius implores Hamlet "to remain/ Here in the cheer and

comfort of our eye” (1.2.116) rather than return to Wittenberg to continue his education, as Hamlet prefers. Richard Chamberlain reads this scene as the genesis of Hamlet’s refusal “to endorse a state of affairs which is both false and wrong” (147), though in this particular moment, Hamlet does not refuse. He agrees to stay even as he remains aware of Claudius’s true meaning: in requesting that Hamlet remain where he can see him, Claudius tacitly warns Hamlet not to admit publicly that he senses something evil afoot. Even before Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost or his adoption of an antic disposition that defies Claudius’s “state of affairs,” Hamlet takes as a threat Claudius’s invitation for Hamlet to live “in the cheer and comfort of [his] eye,” refusing to answer Claudius and instead perfunctorily telling his mother, “I shall in all my best obey *you*, madam” (1.2.120; emphasis mine). Hamlet sidesteps Claudius’s warning and implies instead that his mother is the only authority figure to whom he is bound. In so doing, Hamlet not only distances himself from the norms of the state as Chamberlain argues, but his ironic reply suggests a fatalistic acceptance of his uncle’s political and social control or a reluctance to fight against it.

Though he initially succumbs to the surveillance that Claudius imposes on him, Hamlet soon after accepts and perhaps even relishes this dangerous game of surveillance. Not only does he craft “The Mouse Trap” and force Claudius to witness a reenactment of his own demise, by Act V Hamlet issues an even stronger threat against his uncle. Upon his return to Denmark after a thwarted trip to England, Hamlet writes to Claudius: “High and mighty, you shall know I am set naked on your kingdom. *Tomorrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes*, when I shall, first asking your pardon, thereunto recount the occasion of my sudden and more strange return” (4.7.44-48; emphasis mine). Just as Claudius recommends in Act I that Hamlet stay “in the cheer and comfort of” the “eye” of his surveillance state, Hamlet now recalls the “eyes” image as a

synecdoche for Claudius's tyrannical watchfulness. Unlike his father, who Hamlet claims embodied the martial power of the Danish state by using his "eye like Mars, to threaten and command" his soldiers in battle (3.4.58), an appropriate exercise of kingly authority, Claudius abuses the power of his sovereign gaze by attempting to penetrate Hamlet's interiority and control his being. That Hamlet preemptively admits to Claudius that he is unarmed ("I am set naked on your kingdom") evidences his perspicacity regarding the power of the sovereign and the king's surveilling eyes. Hamlet knows that his "sudden and more strange return" will already alarm the state. His "nakedness" then attempts to convince the kingly eyes not only that he is "no longer dressed in the habits of madness" as Louise D. Cary argues (793), but even more that he has nothing more covering his interior self. Hamlet's letter implicitly warns Claudius that he knows that Claudius's "kingly eyes" will watch him, and knowingly hints to the king that he too will be watching in his turn.

In mentioning Claudius's "kingly eyes," Hamlet warns his uncle that he is on to Claudius's schemes just as he has accepted his objectification under the king's watchful gaze. This mutual understanding creates a sort of parity between the two men: they know one another's secrets and may approach one another on essentially equal footing. But Hamlet's appropriation of Gertrude's eyes suggests that no such equality subsists between mother and son. After Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her bedchamber, repeatedly importuning her, "Have you eyes?...Have you eyes?" (3.4.74; 76), she admits:

O Hamlet, speak no more!

Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,

And there I see such black and grainèd spots

As will not leave their tinct. (3.4.90-93)



When forced to do so, Gertrude recognizes her own sins and her own indirect participation in Claudius's crimes. While this use of the eye directs Gertrude to a realization of truth, it still comes through Hamlet's control over her gaze since he instigates her introspection ("Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul," "O Hamlet, *thou* hast cleft my heart in twain"). Gertrude's realizations are important for her personally, and they convince her to ally herself to Hamlet against Claudius going forward. In fact, her character changes so dramatically in this scene that some scholars have even observed a spiritual component to Gertrude's self-discovery. In his seminal text, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), renowned Shakespearean critic A. C. Bradley argues that for Gertrude, Hamlet functions as a father-confessor in the Catholic tradition of sacramental confession. He claims that Hamlet "selflessly" works to redeem "a fellow-creature from degradation" and eagerly welcomes her "first token of repentance" (138).<sup>19</sup> If the shift in Gertrude's character and her interactions with her family are markedly different after this scene, as those like Bradley contend, then it is important to remember that Hamlet initiates this transformation. Margarethe Jolly's careful examination of the two quarto versions of *Hamlet* as well as the source material, *Les Histoires Tragiques*, has convinced her that Shakespeare deliberately grants Gertrude more agency in Quarto 2, the most famous version of *Hamlet*, than in any other version of the play (97). Yet, even in this fullest expression of Gertrude's self-agency, it is still Hamlet who has penetrated the interiority of Gertrude's conscience, who "prompts her inward gaze" as Grace Tiffany explains it (115), and leads her to this *anagnorisis*. Gertrude's use of the image of the eye illustrates for us the process of her own self-discovery. At the same time, she admits that she does not actually control what she sees. Hamlet controls her

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<sup>19</sup> See also Paul D. Stegner's "'Try what repentance can': *Hamlet*, Confession, and the Extraction of Interiority" for further discussion of Hamlet as a Catholic father-confessor.

revelation of truth, indicating that, to some extent, he has harnessed the power of the Danish surveillance culture against his mother for his own gain.

Perhaps because of the eye's vulnerability to outward control, there are several characters in *Hamlet* who refuse to relinquish control of their eyes and instead use them to conceal their interior beings. In this way the eye then becomes an instrument for performance, a theatrical disguise to which Hamlet refers and that the First Player employs. Hamlet philosophizes about the performative capabilities of the eye. He informs his mother that human tears, "the fruitful river in the eye," "are actions that a man might play" (1.2.80; 83-84). The First Player later confirms Hamlet's thought. The actor so convincingly recounts Aeneas' tale to Dido<sup>20</sup> that his very body fools his audience into believing that he truly feels the fear and sadness of the story he relates. Changes in the color of his face and, most especially, the tears he conjures to his eyes signal to others the authenticity of his performance. In his own version of giving o'er the play, Polonius abruptly cuts off the First Player's performance: "Look, whe'er he has not turn'd his colour, and *has tears in's eyes*. Prithee no more!" (2.2.519-520; emphasis mine). Hamlet echoes this description, expressing wonder that "this player here"

Could force his soul so to his own conceit

That, from her working, all his visage wann'd,

*Tears in his eyes*, distraction in's aspect,

A broken voice, and his whole function suiting

With forms to his conceit[.] (2.2.551-557; emphasis mine)

And yet, just as the tears and the other affectations of performance denote emotional authenticity,

Hamlet and others are reminded that the First Player has no such emotions within him. The

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<sup>20</sup> This play's Virgilian source material similarly grapples with truth and the human propensity for deception (Danner 47)

production of tears, a bodily function that Laertes later describes as involuntary (4.7.186-190), then becomes a double sign, the signification of true emotional surges as well as the performance of them. In other words, tears convey emotions in the most raw and recognizable way, and yet the ability to affect them masks the absence of these same emotions. The performative capability of the eye then not only serves as a reminder that true interiority can be disguised, that “with devotion’s visage/ And pious action we do sugar o’er/ The devil himself” (3.1.47-49), it also alerts us to the deceptiveness of those around us. We cannot truly know who sheds authentic tears and who uses tears as a means of emoting authenticity (Danner 52). This ability to use eyes and tears to perform emotions underscores just how carefully Hamlet and the other subjects of Claudius’s surveilling gaze must tread within this corrupted and dangerous environment. That Hamlet envies the First Player’s skill indicates that he wishes he could perform in ways that would conceal his true thoughts and beliefs, even from his closest relations and friends. The player has been professionally trained to assume a false identity and is thus expected to cry without genuine cause. The origins of Hamlet’s sense of paranoia, the Danish surveillance state, compels Hamlet to assume an antic disposition and to wield his eyes in order to conceal his true self.

Despite the prominence given to the eye within the play and its connection to the gathering of state intelligence and individual paranoia, the characters in the play can almost never trust the information they gather from what they have seen. Hamlet deceives most members of the Danish court with his antic disposition, a display of madness that they all witness with their eyes but cannot confirm otherwise. Hamlet misunderstands what he sees when he finds Claudius on his knees, ostensibly praying in Act III (Stegner 118). And all the spectators of the fencing match at the end of the play believe they are watching a fair and friendly game of sport

rather than a rigged and deadly opportunity for violence and vengeance. Parker notices a disconnect between the play's "preoccupation with spying" and the "the reliability of *evidence*," a "problem" she claims "traversed so many contemporary early modern contexts, particularly where there was reliance on messengers or report" (259). Though the characters witness much, much of what they witness is either entirely wrong or only half-correct. Jamey Hecht summarizes that "what looks healthy is corrupt, and vice versa" (289), demonstrating that the real danger of surveillance is that no human can ever entirely comprehend anything, especially using just the eyes. The "vigilant eye" of God has total and perfect knowledge, while the human eye is limited in its ability to perceive and understand. The state may have more resources and means of discovery than any one individual, but the information gleaned from such surveillance is still always incomplete. The gap between what is seen and what is true—and perhaps even more importantly, people's ignorance of the gap—makes the surveillance culture that much more oppressive. Except in God's perfect "vigilant eye," a person may only be partially seen. The threat of being only partially understood or partially misunderstood makes people even more aware of the stakes involved in their public and private actions since others may report on an action or statement that they have only partially witnessed. Whether in Shakespeare's Denmark or Elizabeth's England, the whole person and his motives cannot ever be known, and yet others can still convict him based on incomplete information.

### **Loyalty to the Monarch and Active Spying**

In a manner reminiscent of those in Elizabethan England employed by the queen to identify and persecute Catholic practitioners, both Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage in active spying. This form of spying differs drastically from deliberately overhearing

conversations, as Polonius does with Hamlet and Ophelia and attempts to do with Hamlet and Gertrude. It is also different from intruding upon an otherwise private moment by sheer happenstance, as Hamlet does during Claudius's prayer and perhaps also when he witnesses Ophelia's funeral procession. Rather than remaining inert listeners, passively absorbing into the porches of their ears the leprous distilment of gossip and private discourse, active spies intrude themselves into the lives of others, initiating a discourse that otherwise would not take place. Such willingness to spy on those within their immediate circles cannot help but poison otherwise close relationships.

For those early modern Englishmen tasked with uncovering illicit Catholic practice, the act of spying is a form of service or employment, an expression of what they do but not of who they are. Though major figures like Francis Walsingham and Lord Burghley, top-tier members of Elizabeth's network of intelligence, were deeply invested in and handsomely rewarded for gathering information, most spies were often coerced into the task (Archer 5). For Polonius, spying goes beyond serving the state and flattering the sovereign. Polonius spies because he enjoys it. The enjoyment he experiences from learnings others' secrets becomes most apparent when he unnecessarily orders Reynaldo to spy on his own son. Act II opens with Polonius instructing Reynaldo, his servant, to spy on his son, Laertes, who has recently returned to live in France. Polonius's orders for Reynaldo range from unsettling to repugnant. Though eventually tasking Reynaldo with observing Laertes's behavior for himself (2.1.72), Polonius gives very explicit instructions for his servant to spread slanderous rumors about his son first in order to see if other respectable Danes confirm them. Just as he invites Reynaldo to accuse Laertes of drinking heavily, visiting brothels, fighting, and swearing (2.1.26-27), he asks Reynaldo to spread such rumors using a soft and innocuous tone in order to ingratiate Reynaldo with his

interlocutors and to diminish the threat that such words pose. Despite the distasteful nature of it, Polonius seems amused by the scheme, imagining it to be “a fetch of warrant” (2.1.41), as evidence of his cleverness. Polonius not only has no compunction about having his son smeared publicly, but he considers himself clever for doing so. Perhaps for this reason, Doris V. Falk reads Polonius’s actions here as indulging “prurient interest” (28), but it is much more sinister than that, as Polonius implicitly admits. He distances himself from it by foisting the task onto his servant, using Reynaldo as a layer of separation in order to conceal the lengths he is willing to go in order to discover his son’s true character. This layer of separation is an acknowledgment that Polonius understands the inappropriateness of his behavior, but it does not prevent him from indulging in it. That he also volunteers to spy on Ophelia and Hamlet (2.2.162-164) and on Gertrude and Hamlet (3.1.184-188) reveals his penchant for spying, that he uses it readily. While some spies were conscripted into the task and others imagined that their acts of spying were necessary for the security of the state, Polonius indulges in it as a sport, indicating that not all spies were motivated by patriotic service, or in the case of those attempting to out Elizabethan Catholics, religious conviction.

Though spies were not monolithic and Polonius is no dramatic analog of any particular person or group of people, his tactics do resemble those employed by some of Elizabeth’s priest-hunters. While not as well-known as Campion, Parsons, or Southwell, Father John Gerard established a name for himself among his fellow English Catholics by writing and speaking out in favor of recusancy and advocating that arrested recusants “equivocate” when asked by interrogators to divulge the names of other Catholics. A group of Catholic theologians developed the strategy of equivocation to preserve their people from denying the Catholic faith,

endangering their fellow Catholics, or lying to law enforcement (Holmes 90; 121).<sup>21</sup> Gerard later employed this strategy himself while in prison. His general outspokenness and his open work against the crown naturally brought him to the attention of Walsingham and his minions. One informant noticed Gerard during a trip to Paris in 1588 and attempted to gain intelligence on him, circumstances not unlike those involving Laertes and Reynaldo. Gerard remained on Walsingham's watchlist for years afterward until he was ultimately apprehended in London in 1594. While in prison, Gerard wrote a harrowing description of the raid: "As we were preparing everything for mass before daybreak we heard, suddenly, a great noise of galloping hooves...I was hardly tucked away when the pursuivants broke down the door and burst in" (qtd in Kilroy 143). He was eventually tortured and executed. While Shakespeare may not necessarily have had Gerard in mind when he constructed the Polonius-Laertes-Reynaldo scheme, the similarities subsisting between the two cases suggest that such scenarios were, if not commonplace, then at least known to most Elizabethans.

Polonius's casual attitude regarding spying, especially towards his son, taints our reception of him as a royal courtier and father figure, but the atmosphere of distrust that it engenders would have been very familiar to an early modern audience since most Elizabethan espionage was organized and financed by important members of the inner royal court (Archer 3).<sup>22</sup> We then experience the latent tension and distrust most fully once we understand that there is no evidence to support the idea that Laertes has done anything untoward while away in France.

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21 Holmes readily defines *equivocation* as "lying," and lists several forms that equivocation might take: ambiguous words, evasion of the question, "mental reservation" of a phrase that would alter the meaning of an uttered statement, and "amphibologie," which essentially involved outright deception with the "mental reservation" of the actual truth (120-121). Many early modern Catholic theologians harbored serious misgivings regarding equivocation, though it was designed to protect people from self-incrimination or the potentially-fatal incrimination of others.

<sup>22</sup> According to Archer, "Sovereignty and intelligence were united in a culture of surveillance that was chiefly defined by life at court. Early modern intelligence gathering was ultimately in the hands of court aristocrats." See *Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance*.

Rather, Laertes has conducted himself in France exactly as his father advises him to do in Act I (Harkins 340). Laertes appears to be a decent man. Although he eagerly desires to return to France following Claudius's coronation (1.2.55-56), the very fact that he returns for such an event demonstrates a commitment to civic duty and to the sovereign. He likewise returns to Denmark expeditiously following the untimely death of his father and demands justice for him, even at the risk of his own soul:

How came he dead? I'll not be juggled with.

To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!

Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!

I dare damnation. To this point I stand,

That both the worlds I give to negligence,

Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged

Most thoroughly for my father. (4.5.133-139)

Laertes's instinctive filial response to Polonius's death indicates that he loves and remains loyal to his father, even if it means "dar[ing] damnation" and participating in what could potentially descend into an open rebellion against Claudius (the "rabble" cry "Laertes shall be king! Laertes king!"). Ophelia soon after laments that all of Elsinore's violets have died along with her father (4.5.187-189), implying that her father was the only loyal member of the court. But she overlooks her own brother, who demonstrates a ruddy faithfulness to Denmark and to their father. He has done nothing to spark his father's suspicion against his character, and his behavior even in death reveals that he is as of a man faithful and honorable. In discussing what she calls an evolving code of honor in early modern England, Reta A. Terry examines the use of the term *honor* in *Hamlet*. She ultimately concludes that, despite "a chivalric sense of honor which



emphasized the importance of blood and lineage,” the early modern notion of honor meant that one also needed “to behave in such a way as to please both their state and their God” (1071). Like those Elizabethans who were surveilled in a quest to serve God and the state honorably, Laertes and many other innocent people who simply lived their lives could not escape the officious scrutiny of others, even scrutiny from their own family members. Even if they did not realize the looming pressure of such scrutiny, the very possibility of such scrutiny created a tense, distrustful environment that seemed to follow them wherever they went.

While the fact that Polonius takes great pains to conceal his chicanery reveals that he knows that spying is an unsavory means of investigative discovery, he has good reason for using spying so cavalierly: practically no other character voices an objection to it. The only person who questions it is Reynaldo, who worries that spreading rumors about Laertes “would dishonor him” (2.1.28). Yet, Reynaldo ultimately agrees to the task, making him complicit in the scheme and perhaps tacitly encouraging Polonius to continue spying. While Reynaldo at least demurs at the thought of dishonoring Laertes, Claudius readily accepts Polonius’s plan to eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia’s conversation, replying immediately to the idea: “We will try it” (2.2.167). Likewise, when Polonius offers to eavesdrop on Hamlet and Gertrude, Claudius further supports the spying scheme: “It shall be so./ Madness in great ones *must not unwatch’d go*” (3.1.190-191; emphasis mine). Here, Claudius frames Polonius’s spying as an imperative (“must not”), a necessary step for the supposed safety of the state, Hamlet, and others. In this way, Claudius’s need for intelligence and Polonius’s personal gratification in acquiring it resemble Elizabeth’s professional relationship with Walsingham. While she objected to the use of violence against recusants, Walsingham often employed extreme measures to extract information, and Elizabeth rewarded him handsomely for his efforts (Archer 46). And while Polonius never personally

engages in acts of violence, his excessive intrusiveness certainly violates others' sense of safety and self-preservation and carries with it the king and queen's overt or understood approval. Spying on behalf of the state has no real power without the imprimatur of the sovereign. Claudius and Gertrude both signal their approval of Polonius's behavior, suggesting that they support this environment of spying and distrust that Polonius so happily actualizes.

And of course, a sovereign such as Claudius or Elizabeth would have many good reasons for spying on their respective subjects, so naturally they would support some degree of surveillance of those they consider threats. It bears repeating that those Jesuit priests who were executed in early modern England were not convicted of heresy but of treason (Lake and Questier 233). The difference between the two crimes was sometimes slight,<sup>23</sup> but there is ample evidence that such priests presented a real political threat against the crown. In addition to their involvement in the Babington and Gunpowder plots, Jesuit priests often recruited young Englishmen into the priesthood with "the extraordinary and entirely counterintuitive claim that they would further 'the liberty of their country' by delivering the same into the hands of foreign governors" (237). Since *la raison d'être* of many Jesuit priests in England was to subvert the monarch and return the population's religious loyalties to the pope, Elizabeth and James had good reason to seek such men out. Their hidden identities, by their very nature, required subterfuge in order to be discovered. Their Catholic faith may have threatened the English throne and the supremacy of the English Church, but the Jesuits were political as well as religious figures. Hamlet's religious sympathies pose no threat to Claudius, but his political position does. He is the new heir-apparent as well as the person most likely to want to avenge King Hamlet's

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<sup>23</sup> Anderson acknowledges the overlap between the two crimes, stating unequivocally that such "deliberate and savage executions entirely merit the label 'religious violence,' whether the victim was found guilty of the crime of belief or whether, as in the case of Catholic priests executed under Elizabeth and James, he was charged with treason because of the bare fact of his vocation" (16).

death, should he ever discover the true cause of it. His very being therefore invites surveillance, even if it is the surveillance of a corrupted and paranoid government.

But Polonius has his own motives for wanting to spy on Hamlet. He claims he does so out of a sense of “duty” to “to my God and to my gracious king” (2.2.48-49) and likely out of genuine fatherly concern for Ophelia, but by all appearances, he also thoroughly enjoys spying on others. Because he so readily involves himself in spying schemes, he helps create a climate of distrust and anxiety within the Danish court. Perhaps the regicidal implications of “The Mouse Trap,” clearly authored by Hamlet, justify Polonius’s espionage in Gertrude’s bedchamber. However, he suggests he attend this conversation before the performance of “The Mouse Trap” takes place, indicating that he spies out of titillated curiosity and not concern for either Gertrude or Claudius’s safety. Polonius’s earlier actions against Laertes, a move that has no political purpose, further underscores this point. His compulsive spying then not only tempers the audience’s sympathy for his death. It also imposes upon the characters within the play a larger social anxiety that stems from their sense that they are under surveillance. Hamlet hints at this intuition when he interrupts his erratic musings about nunneries and the inherent untrustworthiness of men to ask Ophelia: “Where is your father?” (3.1.131). Even amid their desultory conversation, this question is particularly disruptive. Unlike his rather nebulous rhetorical questions about whether Ophelia is “fair” and “honest,” this question demands a concrete answer. “Where is your father?” Ophelia has a living father who must be somewhere. Some have posited that this line indicates that Hamlet has somehow spotted Polonius behind the arras (Honigmann 59), and many performances have been staged in just this way. But even if Hamlet does not actually know the answer, as Ophelia, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and the audience do, that Polonius is in the room with him, he still senses Polonius’s looming presence.

Thus, Polonius need not even be physically present in order to “be” there. He reconfigures the dynamics of Elsinore since everyone wonders if he is there watching and listening, even when he is not. Polonius therefore exceeds the bounds of protecting the monarch and his daughter by making others irreversibly aware of his potential presence, his connection to the king, and his obsessive desire to discover their true identities. While he lives, Polonius presents a constant threat to those in his inner circle who may or may not have something to hide. To say that Shakespeare constructs the character of Polonius in order to mimic the behavior of those tasked with outing recusant Catholics may overstate the issue. However, the character of Polonius does reflect some of the paranoia evinced by the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts regarding the private discourses and private religious practices of their people.

Unlike Polonius, who spies not simply because he has to but because he wants to, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are more or less compelled into engaging in active spying. Claudius and Gertrude have asked them to discover the cause of Hamlet’s strange behavior (2.2.1-18), and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not refuse the command from their king. However, they admit that they venture beyond mere obedience when they state:

**Rosencrantz:** Both Your Majesties might, by the sovereign power you have of us,

Put your dread pleasures more into command than to entreaty.

**Guildenstern:** But we both obey,

*And here give up ourselves in the full bent*

*To lay our service freely at your feet,*

*To be commanded.* (2.2.26-32; emphasis mine)

This response to Claudius and Gertrude’s summons indicates a ready willingness to spy. They first acknowledge their subjection to royal power, and then grant the king and queen permission

to extend that subjection to the “full bent” of their entire beings. In short, they submit their personal agency to the will of others. Though the state creates their positions as spies, the spies themselves then readily accede to the call to spy. Terry ties their accession to the growing Elizabethan sense of honor which requires “acting in complete obedience to the state” (1082), a nearly maniacal sense of duty to the king.<sup>24</sup> Their alacrity to work against their friend on behalf of the king certainly helps establish a culture of distrust and paranoia within Elsinore, just as Polonius’s self-appointed spying does.

Despite repeated claims about their “childhood” intimacy with Hamlet, the text never reveals a true intimacy between the pair and the prince. We first meet them whilst they receive their marching orders from Claudius. Every subsequent conversation they then have with Hamlet is therefore tainted. Though Hamlet greets them with the epithet, “My excellent good friends” (2.2.225), he immediately intuits their treachery. While he does admit to them that he has been in low spirits recently, he spends much of their discourse reproaching them for their dishonesty:

**Hamlet:** ...But, in the beaten way of friendship, what make you at Elsinore?

**Rosencrantz:** To visit you, my lord, no other occasion.

**Hamlet:** ...Were you not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with me. Come, come. Nay speak.

**Guildenstern:** What should we say, my lord?

**Hamlet:** Anything but to the purpose. You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to color. I know the good King and Queen have sent for you. (2.2.270-282)

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<sup>24</sup> Terry also states that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not act out of personal ambition, that Claudius “manipulates” them into such extreme servility, a further indication that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not so much individual underlings as one amorphous being of faceless, emotionless obeisance (1083). I make this argument in the subsequent pages of this chapter.

Hamlet immediately senses their perfidy, or from their perspective, their honorable obedience to the state. This scene provides no evidence of any subsisting intimacy between the three aside from some casual male banter and rather makes us only more aware of tension between them instead. From their very introduction, the play positions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as pawns of the monarch. Claudius himself admits to them that “The need we have *to use you* did provoke/ Our hasty sending” (2.2.3-4; emphasis mine), a sentiment that Hamlet echoes later when he warns them that Claudius has used them like a “sponge” (4.2.12-22). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are merely instruments that propagate the surveillance culture in Elsinore, and they comply with their own instrumentalization. Their work against him makes intimacy with Hamlet impossible. That state intelligence networks sometimes recruited spies from within the social and familial circles of suspected rebels denied the possibility of deep, personal relationships within the community, fostering a society of generalized distrust that would have been very familiar to some early moderns.

Because Claudius has selected Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for his own use and because we see no authentic displays of intimacy between Hamlet and them, the supposed youthful friendship that they once enjoyed exists only in the play’s various descriptions of it. Aside from Hamlet’s extemporaneous epithet, “My excellent good friends,” all other commentary minimizes their relationship and situates it entirely in the past. In his conversation with Gertrude, Hamlet refers to them as “my two schoolfellows,/ Whom I will trust as I will adders fanged” (3.4.209-210). The term *schoolfellows* sidesteps the notion of friendship or intimacy entirely. It acknowledges only that at one time they attended the same school at the same time, an admission of shared space and not shared intimacy. Claudius describes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as “being of so young days brought up with” Hamlet and as “so neighbored to his youth and

havior” (2.2.11-12). He noticeably does not call them Hamlet’s “friends.” Nor does he mention anything about them playing together as children or about any special bond they had formed. Instead, Claudius remarks on the nearness of their age and perhaps even implies that in former years, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern monitored Hamlet’s “havior.” If so, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have always ever been Hamlet’s watchdogs and that Hamlet has always had to tread carefully while in their presence. The surveillance of Elsinore is such that even those presumed to be allies, such as old school friends, must ever be doubted and suspected since some presumed that their first duty must always be to the state (Terry 1083). Hamlet’s “excellent good friends” are not “excellent,” “good,” or “friends.” The pair exist merely to surveil, rendering them essentially identity-less pawns within the king’s greater surveillance scheme.

Their insincere friendship with Hamlet contrasts starkly with the genuine friendship he shares with Horatio. Horatio is not summoned to Elsinore in service to the king but comes of his own volition in order to grieve with Hamlet over the death of Hamlet’s father (1.2.176). Hamlet speaks specifically about the depth of their friendship, telling Horatio: “Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,/ And could of men distinguish her election,/ Sh’ hath sealed thee for herself” (3.2.62-64). Hamlet’s words here express deliberateness and intentionality: “choice,” “distinguish,” “election.” Despite Hamlet’s sentimental expression of love for Horatio, some critics have minimized the depth of Horatio’s character and his purpose in the play. Though Grace Tiffany acknowledges the significance of a dying Hamlet entrusting Horatio to “tell [his] story,” she otherwise describes Horatio only as “the play’s most objective observer” (127). Michael Booth calls Horatio “almost nobody, a character almost wholly uncharacterized, the only kind of character for whom there can be room in a play that will barely contain Hamlet himself” (17). He later figures Horatio as the object of action, as one who absorbs but does not

participate: “the witness, the pure and perennial addressee, the audience’s representative on the stage, whose own extinction, though inevitable, is the one calamity that this stage tragedy does not permit within its frame” (24). In belittling the importance of Horatio within the play, Tiffany and Booth undermine the significance of the trust that subsists between Hamlet and Horatio. Horatio is an escape from the surveillance culture imposed on Hamlet by Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, an oasis so particular in Hamlet’s life that after his death, Hamlet’s very essence continues through Horatio, whom Hamlet trusts to “tell [his] story.” The intimacy subsisting between Hamlet and Horatio is made more pronounced by the dysfunction that poisons his relationships with other supposed intimates. His connection with Ophelia is tumultuous. He proclaims to her “I did love you once” and “You should not have believed me...I loved you not” within the space of five lines (3.1.116-120). His connection to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern consists only of proclamations of friendship and treacherous acts against one another. With Horatio, Hamlet is uniformly, unwaveringly faithful.

Because of their one-dimensional purpose and nature, Booth ought to call Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “almost nobody,” not Horatio. This characterization of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would then fall in line with the assessment of other scholars who have remarked on the indistinguishable nature of the pair. Both Tiffany and Chamberlain describe them as “interchangeable” (111; 156), and they each cite the king and queen’s farewell to the men as evidence:

**Claudius:** Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

**Gertrude:** Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz. (2.2.33-34)

Certainly the transposing of their names in association with the word *gentle* encourage a sense of interchangeability between the two men. However, even more significant than their



interchangeability as objects, Shakespeare actually positions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as exchangeable interlocutors, as responding to comments made to the other with a seamless singularity. Immediately after the end of “The Mouse Trap,” the pair entreat Hamlet to visit Gertrude in her bedchamber, and the following exchange evinces their synonymy as speakers:

**Guildenstern:** ...If it shall please you to make *me* a wholesome answer, I will do  
your mother’s commandment; if not, your pardon and my return shall be  
the end of my business.

**Hamlet:** *Sir*, I cannot.

**Rosencrantz:** What, my lord?

**Hamlet:** Make *you* a wholesome answer[.] (3.2.314-319; emphasis mine)

Here, the words *me*, *Sir*, and *you* all refer to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz together, although at least two of those words demand a singular antecedent. Hamlet’s “Sir” seems to be addressed to Guildenstern, but it is Rosencrantz and not Guildenstern who responds to it. The distinction between being interchangeable characters and interchangeable speakers is an important one, especially as it relates to the spying culture endemic in the society of the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as one-unit-in-two-persons suggests that their identities have been subsumed by their instrumentalization. They no longer have even their own voice. Shakespeare undermines their individual personhood to underscore the fact that they have sold themselves to and have been entirely absorbed by the state. Their conscience, friendships, even their very words do not really exist except to support the sovereign power.

The interchangeability or oneness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is threaded throughout the play. The two never appear separately in any scene. They arrive together, and the English execute them together at Hamlet’s behest (5.2.46-47). Therefore, Hamlet’s comparison

of Guildenstern to a recorder and Rosencrantz to a sponge apply to both men equally and concurrently. Hamlet explains at length his purpose in using such metaphors, and both aptly illustrate what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have done to him. The word *recorder*, though, carries with it an added layer of subterfuge that further reveals the men's treachery against their supposed friend. As used in the play, a recorder refers to a musical instrument. However, the word also carries a juridical meaning. According to the *OED*, a recorder was "a magistrate or judge having criminal and civil jurisdiction in a city, state, or borough." Though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not have power as such, they represent an extension of the power apparatus of the monarchy. Even in the most benign definitions of the word listed in the *OED*, a recorder was either "a witness" or "a person who records or sets something down in writing; *spec.* an official employed to record wills, deed, court proceedings, etc." In other words, as recorders, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become part of the public memory of the actions at Elsinore. Though they undeniably attempt to "play" Hamlet like a "pipe" (3.2.369), they also document Hamlet's behavior in a quasi-official capacity, making them apparatchiks in Denmark's police state.

### **"Seeing unseen": Hamlet as the subject and object of the gaze**

Though much of feminist criticism often discusses female characters as objects of the patriarchal gaze, in *Hamlet*, the patriarchal gaze does not just fall on Gertrude or Ophelia but on Hamlet. This lingering patriarchal gaze, imposed on Hamlet by both the Ghost and King Claudius, irreparably alters Hamlet's decisions and behaviors and attempts to deny Hamlet all sense of personal privacy. This loss of personal privacy encourages Hamlet's defensiveness and makes him particularly suspicious of others. But this sensitivity to others' gaze does not originate

with Hamlet and Claudius's surveillance state but with humanity in general and God Himself. In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve attempt to hide from the gaze of God immediately following their disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit. Soon afterwards, their son Cain murders his brother, Abel, and then attempt to try to avoid God's omniscience by initially refusing to discuss Abel's whereabouts with Him. After denying any knowledge about Abel, Cain famously asks of God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). Cain effectively attempts to conceal from God the truth regarding Abel's death. Claudius, who rightfully compares himself to Cain (3.3.37), actually attempts to appropriate some of God's omniscience by observing others and acquiring knowledge that will suit his purposes. To this end, he turns his patriarchal gaze onto his nephew since Hamlet poses the greatest threat to Claudius's power. In order to contain Hamlet's threateningness, Claudius tries to control what Hamlet can know and the ways in which he can respond to the knowledge he gleans. In other words, he wants access to the very interiority of Hamlet's mind. When Hamlet refuses him entry, Claudius plots to have him killed. In this way, Claudius represents the most extreme form of monarchical tyranny: the desire for a Godlike omniscience that can access the interiority of his subjects and a murderous inclination towards them when such access is denied him.

Claudius first intrudes on Hamlet's autonomy when he chides Hamlet for excessively mourning his father, and Hamlet instinctively recognizes this intrusion as a sign that he is being watched. In only his second line of the play, Hamlet expresses regret to his uncle that he has been "too much in the sun" (1.2.67), imagining Claudius in the Godlike position of the sun, looking down on everyone. Then, directing his words to Gertrude, Hamlet makes a clear distinction between what "is" and what "seems" to be (1.2.76), between what he experiences on the inside and what he shows publicly. Paul D. Stegner claims that, for Hamlet, this dissociation

between the outward and the inward “injects suspicion into the direct correspondence between the visible signs and interior disposition” in general (114). Perhaps Hamlet may doubt a “direct correspondence” in all circumstances, but he also relies implicitly on Claudius’s outward reaction to “The Mouse Trap,” indicating that he, too, presumes some connection between Claudius’s inner guilt and his physical reaction to the play. Rather than reading Hamlet’s distinction between his outward appearance and his inward grief as the collapse of all outward/inward connection, I believe that Hamlet’s discussion here instead manifests an instinctive suspicion of his observers. In his first appearance in the play, Hamlet admits that he must conceal much of his internal being from the Danish court. Because they not only criticize his outward displays of grief but also its inward analog (which, by all measures, appears deeper than what he shows), Hamlet intuits that he cannot trust either his mother or his uncle with his inward emotions and personal thoughts. They are watching him. They have been watching him. And now he must guard himself against their gazes in order to deflect them as best he can.

Hamlet’s adoption of an “antic disposition” marks his most well-known deflecting tactic. Much has been made of it within the wide breadth of *Hamlet* scholarship. Though voicing a minority opinion, Samuel Johnson dismissed it as a plot element with “no adequate cause,” intended only for “mirth.” More recently, Chamberlain argues that the antic disposition reveals Hamlet’s true nature as a “pure refuser,” a term Chamberlain uses to describe those who refused arbitrary categorization in early modern England (149). Stegner tautologically explains the antic disposition as a manifestation of Hamlet’s “confidence in being able to manipulate exteriors and mask his true motives” (115). Greenblatt approaches it with much more nuance, calling the antic disposition ill-suited to its purpose since it does not deflect attention away from Hamlet. In fact, it alarms others even more since they believe his odd behavior is a devolution of the excessive

mourning he has already shown (218-219). Therefore, Greenblatt notes, it is difficult to separate Hamlet's "deliberate performance" of his antic disposition (218) from "the trappings and the suits of woe" he has donned for some time now (1.2.83). But my point is not the efficacy of the ruse or its purpose to the plot. I mention it because it is Hamlet's most obvious response to the sense that he is being watched, just as it permits his own subversive plot to unfold by allowing him to watch Claudius in his turn.

It is tempting to read Hamlet's reaction as a literary manifestation of Michel Foucault's theories regarding institutions of power and the supposed arbitrary category of madness. Many critics, including Joseph Sterrett and historians Jim Sharpe (Lake and Questier 229) and John Michael Archer (101), have already done so.<sup>25</sup> David Beauregard also states that "by adopting a posture of passivity in the face of royal corruption" (55), Hamlet effectively acquiesces to his own demise, an implied Foucauldian reading. And though writing about Shakespeare's corpus more broadly, Daniel Juan Gil likewise takes a staunchly Foucauldian stance and argues that "Shakespeare uses his plays to explore the phenomenological experience of utter subjection to sovereign power" (1). But reading Shakespeare through a Foucauldian lens denies *prima facie* examples of subjective agency, such as Hamlet's willful adoption of the ruse, his composition of "The Mouse Trap,"<sup>26</sup> and rewriting Claudius's commission for the English so that it orders them to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead of him. Each of these acts of self-expression and personal agency run counter to Foucault's presumption that state power overrides an individual's expression of will. In their own resistance to Foucauldian readings of early modern England, Lake and Questier argue that the Foucauldian lens locates all power within the state and the state

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<sup>25</sup> Other critics, like Paul D. Stegner, have eschewed Foucauldian readings of *Hamlet* quite strongly.

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Kezar goes so far as to say that this act, writing "The Mouse Trap," amounts to "making words kill" (12), a demonstration of personal agency and resistance against the state if ever there were one.

apparatus, which in the case of Elizabeth and James, overstates the degree to which monarchs could unilaterally control their subjects. It also obscures the very real power exercised by recusants of all religious stripes (231). The very existence of observant Catholics, Anabaptists, and indeed even radical Protestants defies the notion of ultimate state control, even if such religious others needed to practice their respective religions in hiding.<sup>27</sup> Rather than viewing Hamlet's descent into performative—or perhaps, actual (Greenblatt 219)—madness as the natural result of despotic monarchical control, Hamlet's adoption of an antic disposition demonstrates power and defiance towards state surveillance, not his submission to it.

Hamlet actually goes a step further than simply resisting Claudius's obsessive supervision. Through his writing of and the performance of "The Mouse Trap," Hamlet launches his own campaign of covert surveillance, making Claudius the object of his intense gaze and deepening the paranoid atmosphere of Elsinore at the same time. Hamlet avows a scrupulous observation of Claudius's behavior during the play: "I'll observe his looks;/ I'll tent him to the quick. If he do blench,/ I know my course" (2.2.597-599). Hamlet commits himself to monitoring Claudius to the very reaches of the man's fingernails ("I'll tent him to the quick.") However, in practice, Hamlet's gaze is not nearly so meticulous. He and Horatio agree that Claudius reacts strangely to "The Mouse Trap," but Hamlet concludes much more from it than Horatio does. While Hamlet has determined that "[t]his realm" of Denmark was indeed "dismantled" by Claudius's act of regicide and that he would now "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound," Horatio responds with much more ambivalence. He gives lukewarm replies to Hamlet's enthusiasm, saying only that he has likewise observed Claudius's reaction and that he "did very well note him." Even his retort that Hamlet would get only "[h]alf a share" of "a

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<sup>27</sup> Lake and Questier make the argument that martyrdom was a form of state resistance, perhaps the strongest means of defiance available to religious dissidents (230).

fellowship in a cry of players” (3.2.275-288) suggests that Horatio does not necessarily share Hamlet’s confidence in Claudius’s guilt, but is reluctant to dispute with him (Sterrett 750).

Horatio’s uncertainty regarding Claudius’s guilt indicates that mere surveillance does not always yield information from the person observed. Hamlet’s unequivocal assurance of Claudius’s guilt then reads more like confirmation bias than any revelation of truth. The fact is that merely gazing at a person or a person’s reaction in a singular moment cannot determine his interior thoughts, motives, or belief, a significant flaw in this form of intelligence gathering.

Claudius’s later confession, which the audience alone hears,<sup>28</sup> resolves any doubt about his guilt and reassures the audience that Hamlet and not Horatio is correct in assessing Claudius’s guilt. But our reassurance does nothing for the possible injustice of Hamlet’s reading of Claudius. As Sarah Beckwith points out, “Claudius responds not to the dumb show depicting his murdering of old Hamlet, but to Hamlet’s substitution of nephew for brother” (274).<sup>29</sup> In other words, Hamlet manipulates the evidence in his favor: he showcases a scene whereby a nephew murders his uncle and not a brother murdering his brother, convicting Claudius based on a reaction to a threat against his own person and his throne, ostensibly by Hamlet himself. Thus, Hamlet shares some responsibility for the paranoid climate of the Danish court. While he actively resists the king’s gaze and the interference of the king’s minions, Hamlet himself imposes his own gaze on the king, a gaze that more closely resembles Polonius’s slander of Laertes than it does objectively test Claudius’s guilt. Hamlet’s obvious enjoyment of the spying game, an enjoyment shared by Polonius, may reflect a certain universal condition of human nature: the delight in knowing another’s secrets. But this delight then caters to the basest of

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<sup>28</sup> According to Stegner, the fact that the audience can hear Claudius’s prayer is a later addition to the play, that originally “Claudius’s prayer was meant to be spoken aloud but unintelligible to the audience” (118).

<sup>29</sup> See also Booth, p. 16.

human instincts: the belief that one has a right to know another's secrets and that one may use a wide array of unethical means to discover them.

“The Mouse Trap” assures Hamlet that Claudius has murdered his father and gives him some personal enjoyment and self-congratulations for his clever scheme. At the same time, it also serves another purpose for Hamlet: he uses it to determine the true identity of the Ghost. After all, “[t]he spirit that [he has] seen/ May be the devil, and the devil hath power/ To assume a pleasing shape” (2.2.599-601). Claudius’s supposed confirmation of “the ghost’s word” vindicates Hamlet’s belief that Claudius is a murderer and that the ghost is the spiritual being of his father. This vindication may relieve him somewhat, since it means that he has once again communed with his father and is able to help his father achieve eternal satisfaction. However, it also poses an additional layer of anxiety for Hamlet because he knows now that he is always ever being watched, and by spirits of unknown origin. The Ghost’s narrative that he is “[d]oomed *for a certain term* to walk the night,/ And for the day confined to fast in fires” (1.5.11-12; emphasis mine) suggests the he comes from the piteous, but ultimately sanctified, state of purgatory. According to Catholic thought, purgatory is the only spiritual state that is temporary and that both heaven and hell are permanent states. So, the Ghost’s finite “term” implies that he must reside in purgatory (Greenblatt 230).<sup>30</sup> The return of King Hamlet in the form of a spirit alerts Hamlet that his father—and perhaps other purgatorial spirits as well—might be watching him. The Ghost does not interact with anyone besides Hamlet. Though he appears initially to the guardsmen and Horatio, the Ghost clearly does so because he believes they will bring Hamlet to him. Horatio correctly hypothesizes: “This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him” (1.1.177). That

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<sup>30</sup> This theology is based largely on St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which says, “If any mans worke burne, he shall suffer losse, but he shalbe safe hymselfe: nevertheless, yet as it were through fire” (1 Cor 3:15). See also Peter Milward (17).



the Ghost beckons and speaks to—and only to—Hamlet emphasizes this point. The Ghost uses the guardsmen and Horatio to get to Hamlet. Once Hamlet learns of the existence of the Ghost, he must also accept that this ghost—whether a “spirit of health or goblin damned” (1.4.40)—knows him, and most importantly, always sees him. While others escape the notice of the Ghost, Hamlet has no private life. He cannot escape the eyes of the earthly sovereign or of celestial spirits, even when he thinks he is all alone.

In order for me to argue for the possibility of his father’s continual presence, it is necessary for me to establish the twofold implications of purgatory within the play. First, Hamlet can take the Ghost seriously only if it comes from a state of salvation, not damnation<sup>31</sup> because demons from hell cannot be trusted.<sup>32</sup> Second, if Hamlet accepts that purgatory and purgatorial spirits exist all around him, then he now has an additional group of beings that can observe him at will. Hamlet confirms his awareness of the Ghost’s presence when he, the recent student from Lutheran Wittenberg, asks rhetorically of the Ghost: “*Hic et ubique?*” (1.5.165), which literally translates to “*Here and everywhere?*.” Both Greenblatt and Katherine Eggert draw a direct connection between *Hic et ubique?* and Catholic ritual. Eggert, writing in response to Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory*, ties the phrase to Thomas Aquinas, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the real presence of the Ghost in Elsinore (56). Greenblatt ties it instead to purgatory and “those souls here and everywhere” “who had been laid to rest in the churchyard” (235). The presence of the Ghost demands at least a consideration of the Catholic

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<sup>31</sup> The most compelling argument against purgatory within the play’s context is the fact that the Ghost asks Hamlet to seek revenge on his uncle, a sinful command that is entirely anathema to the salvific purpose of purgatory (Oakes 63).

<sup>32</sup> Doctor Faustus in Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* learns this lesson the hard way, and his personal demon, Mephistophilis, appries him of this truth. Knowing that Faustus will not believe him, Mephistophilis informs Faustus: “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed/ In one self place; but where we are is hell,/ And where hell is, there must we ever be” (2.1.121-123).

doctrine of purgatory,<sup>33</sup> but it more practically alerts Hamlet to the unrelenting presence of his father's eyes and ears. Steven Mullaney writes at length about the trauma such a demand would have on Hamlet:

Purgatory is where his father resides, undergoing a long, painful, and searing penitence. He inhabits a papist lie, an imaginary afterlife where he nonetheless suffers actual and excruciating pain. The two Hamlets and their eschatologies are impossibly and simultaneously embodied on the Elizabethan stage, in all their incompatibility and mutual exclusivity. (16)

If Catholic doctrine is then true, Hamlet's father will remain a haunting presence until he is released from purgatory or until Hamlet's own death.<sup>34</sup> Hamlet can do nothing to escape the presence of his father since the Ghost and his looming gaze are literally "here and everywhere."

Nowhere is Hamlet more aware of his father's watchful gaze than while he is in his mother's bedchamber. In contrast to Act I when Hamlet deliberately stations himself atop Elsinore in the hopes of encountering the Ghost, without warning in Act III the Ghost penetrates the most intimate of domestic spaces within the castle, the Queen's closet, in order to admonish Hamlet's lack of focus. Even intimate discourse with his mother cannot shield Hamlet from his father's intruding presence. Hamlet anticipates the reason for his father's appearance, asking almost rhetorically, "Do you not come your tardy son to chide,/ That, lapsed in time and passion,

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<sup>33</sup> According to Anthony Low, all pre-Reformation English Christians would have believed that ghosts come from purgatory (455). This deeply theological language that Shakespeare includes then reflects a shift in the relationship and the connection post-Reformation Christians had with their relatives who had passed on. Steve Mullaney explores the losses of this change: the charnel houses, Masses and prayers for the dead, the hope that deceased loved ones might be called on to intercede on behalf of the living. But old habits and belief systems die hard. Though the Reformation may have eliminated the belief in purgatory, Elizabethans clearly still understood a latent connection to those who had gone before them and the importance of earthly ritual on souls that had passed on. Many people, including Protestants, continued to offer services on behalf of their dead long after they ostensibly stopped believing in purgatory (Kilroy 145).

<sup>34</sup> Writing from a decidedly Catholic position, David Beauregard argues that the Ghost's purgatorial origins resolves the issue regarding the morality of the Ghost's call for vengeance against Claudius. According to Beauregard, Protestants believed Ghosts were either evil spirits or mere illusions, so any command they might issue would automatically be considered immoral. However, if the Ghost comes from purgatory as Catholic teaching says he can, then his commands are therefore moral since they are issued by a being in a state of deferred salvation. Beauregard also notes that "Catholic tradition, stemming from Aquinas and extending to Suarez in the sixteenth century, allowed for tyrannicide under certain conditions" (53).

lets go by/ Th' important acting of your dread command?" (3.4.110-112). Though the Ghost's appearance surprises Hamlet, his purpose in doing so does not, suggesting that Hamlet senses, and has always sensed, his father's watchfulness.

The fact that the Ghost affirms Hamlet's suspicion, that his "visitation/ Is but to whet [Hamlet's] almost blunted purpose" (3.4.114-115), does more than simply echo Hamlet's awareness of his father's omnipresence. It in fact evinces a kind of symmetry in Hamlet's thoughts and the Ghost's will. Hamlet guesses the Ghost's purpose before it ever speaks. When it does speak, it merely confirms Hamlet's suspicion: the Ghost appears to steer Hamlet's mind and purpose back toward revenge. This brief exchange then becomes Hamlet's recommitment to empty himself of all thoughts except those pertaining to revenge. Hamlet earlier avows:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?

And shall I couple hell? O, fie! Hold, hold, my heart,

And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,

But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmixed with baser matter. (1.5.93-105)

In this speech, Hamlet does not actually promise revenge. Instead he promises to remember his father and to think only on thoughts of vengeance (Tiffany 114). According to the stage directions, the Ghost is not even on stage to receive this promise from Hamlet. Hamlet actually directs his words to “all you host of heaven” and the “earth,” not to God or to the Ghost (except to the extent that God is included in the “host of heaven.”) Rather than promising actual revenge, Hamlet promises only to align his thoughts with the Ghost’s “commandment.” And Greenblatt notes that the Ghost’s “parting injunction, the solemn command upon which young Hamlet dwells obsessively, is that he *remember*” (206),<sup>35</sup> though the death of King Hamlet does not even initiate this form of remembrance. This remembrance of the Ghost comes only after Hamlet learns the circumstances of his death. Hamlet’s vow to remember his father is what prompts the Ghost’s return in Gertrude’s bedchamber. It is Hamlet’s thoughts, thoughts already promised to the Ghost, that prompts his understanding for the Ghost’s return and demonstrates his own interconnection with the Ghost’s will.

### **“God be wi’ you”: *Hamlet* and God’s omnipresent surveillance**

Hamlet’s intuition regarding the constant, hovering presence of the Ghost and his constant awareness of the Ghost’s will calls to mind the play’s larger struggle with the omnipresence and omniscience of God, an omniscience not unlike that perceived to be coming from the state. As reflected in the prayer read upon William Parry’s execution, Patricia Parker notes that “*Hamlet* comes at [a] crucial historical juncture, the point where an older language of divine or angelic intelligence, or the eye of God, was being converted into the new lexicon of

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Beckwith takes aim at Greenblatt’s “isolation of the Eucharist and purgatory from practices of penance,” calling it its own “form of forgetting,” a clever rebuke for a book that focuses on remembering (256).

espial, and the ‘privy intelligences’ provided by a progressively more organized network of informers and spies” (257). To support her point further, she discusses various early modern literary uses of cherubim, the order of angels entrusted with deep knowledge and keen sight, including Shakespeare’s own *Troilus and Cressida* (3.2.70) and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (11.128-131). In *Hamlet*, the cherubim-as-spy image appears in this exchange between Hamlet and Claudius:

**Claudius:** ...Therefore prepare thyself.

The bark is ready and the wind at help,

Th’ associates tend, and everything is bent for England

**Hamlet:** For England?

**Claudius:** Ay, Hamlet.

**Hamlet:** Good.

**Claudius:** So is it, if thou knew’st our purposes.

**Hamlet:** I see a cherub that sees them. (4.3.44-52)

Claudius’s reference to his “purposes” nearly dares Hamlet to question his motives for sending Hamlet away. Like his recent attempt at a prayerful confession, Claudius here hints to Hamlet that his “purposes” are unsavory, an implied confession of malintent. Hamlet’s reply suggests that he understands Claudius’s evil purposes, and though he does not know the specifics of them, that they are known to the cherubic angels and to God. This moment thus reveals both the power and the limitations of the state. Claudius can send Hamlet to England, and he can commission the English to execute him. However, he cannot avoid the eyes of heaven who will witness his sinful order of wanton violence.

Hamlet's reference to the "cherub" suggests and Claudius understands the suggestion that the host of heaven witness their every deed. Indeed, of all characters, Claudius most clearly enunciates the burden of God's ever-present gaze. In his vocalized private confession of guilt, Claudius oscillates between being overwhelmed by God's hovering presence and insisting on distinct separation from it. Claudius's desire to avoid God's gaze justifies Stegner's designation of it as "the famous failed prayer scene" (117) and Sterrett's claim that Claudius "cannot find a prayer because he cannot conceive of anyone listening and can find nothing definitive, a soul within or a friend without, that can give his prayer meaning" (756). But both Stegner and Sterrett either miss or dismiss Claudius's open professions of God's unfailing presence and His unfailing omniscience. Claudius makes his awareness of God most plain:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,  
A brother's murder! ...  
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,  
And, like a man to double business bound,  
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,  
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand  
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,  
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens  
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy  
But to confront the visage of offence?  
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,  
To be forestallèd ere we come to fall,

Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;  
 My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer  
 Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?  
 ...  
 May one be pardoned and retain th' offence?  
 In the corrupted currents of this world  
 Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,  
 And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself  
 Buys out the law; but 'tis not so above.  
 There is no shuffling; there the action lies  
 In his true nature...  
 O wretched state! O bosom black as death!  
 O limèd soul, that, struggling to be free,  
 Art more engag'd! Help, angels! Make assay. (3.3.36-69)

This speech is riddled with references to a listening God and an awareness of God's constant gaze. But more than simply awareness, Claudius's words also express a decided exhaustion with God. The king stands "double business bound," understanding the eternal implications of sin while trying to be a man of the world at the same time. For this reason, he reiterates the earthly benefits of sin ("My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen"). He enjoys them and cannot enjoy them at the same time because his awareness of God's disapproval taints them. He openly laments his "wretched state," a reference to his current disregard for his soul in favor of temporary delights. His "limèd soul" has not just struggled in the past. Nor will it struggle in some time to come. Rather, his "limèd soul" remains in a constant battle, always "struggling"

with itself and its bodily appetites. Claudius wants to leave this “wretched state,” but recoils at all the alternatives to it: confess his guilt publicly and renounce the benefits of his crime or die and burn in hell for all eternity. Claudius is not just a sinner painfully aware of God’s intruding gaze. He is a king overly wearied by the eternal nature of his own soul and God’s perfect knowledge of it.

In this way, Claudius and Hamlet once again reveal similar sentiments. While Claudius expresses spiritual and physical fatigue from faults already passed, Hamlet expresses this same fatigue for what he cannot do now: commit suicide. He laments his “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable” life as well as God’s edict “‘gainst self-slaughter” (1.2.132). Not only is life “weary,” but it is also “unprofitable.” He cannot gain anything from living but is forbidden from dying by his own hand. Hamlet later longs for “that sleep of death” (3.1.67), the rest that would naturally follow his “weary” life, even as he knows that suicide would make the “sleep of death” anything but restful since he would then likely go to hell. Greenblatt believes that Hamlet “is driven to thoughts of suicide by comparably unbidden, repeated inward recollections. He cannot get his dead father out of his mind” (213). And to a certain extent, Greenblatt is right. Hamlet longs to be reunited with his deceased loved ones, as further evidenced by jumping with Laertes into Ophelia’s grave (5.1.259). But even more strongly than he longs for reunification, Hamlet resents God’s refusal to permit it and the eternal consequences of thwarting God’s will. When voicing his weariness and despair, Hamlet does not even use the name of God, but instead refers to Him as “the Everlasting” (1.2.131), focusing exclusively on God’s interminable nature. When Hamlet then asks, “Heaven and earth! Must I remember?” (1.2.142-143), he despairs at the prospect of interminable, sorrowful remembrance. He sees this state of constant remembering



both in heaven and on earth as a prison sentence. Indeed for him, Denmark and the Everlasting edict against suicide are a prison.

Hamlet's impatience for his own demise contrasts starkly with his seemingly limitless patience to find a way to damn Claudius. The popular reading of Hamlet as indecisive overshadows this other motivation in Hamlet's deferred vengeance: Hamlet can delay the gratification of revenge in order to assure himself that he achieves pure revenge rather than mere "hire and salary" (3.3.79). Though all the while hoping for his own death, Hamlet willingly waits to confirm Claudius's guilt through "The Mouse Trap" and declines to kill Claudius while he prays. In fact, Hamlet never actually plots a means of killing Claudius. Unlike Claudius, who actively schemes to kill Hamlet on several different occasions, Hamlet yet lives to say "This thing's to do" (4.4.45). The fact that Hamlet seizes the opportunity to stab and poison Claudius at the end of the play may indeed be for Hamlet the "dying exultation" that Booth claims it to be (14), but it is worth considering that Hamlet kills Claudius impetuously and only after Laertes has apprised him of his own impending doom. Hamlet has seemingly infinite patience with himself and with enacting the perfect vengeance plan, just as he expresses extreme impatience with God's laws and God's watchfulness. Hamlet's inconsistent patience reflects his larger understanding of the temporariness of the world and the eternal, unfailing permanence of God's gaze.

While state surveillance does not have the power to extend its control over its subjects beyond their lifetimes, it can produce a similar experience of burdensome vulnerability and exposure that God ostensibly imposes on His creation. Just as Hamlet cannot escape the Everlasting's eyes and laws, he cannot escape the looming presence of the state. He has become so sensitive to its presence that he stabs a man concealed by a curtain without first discovering

the man's true identity (3.4.25). He presumes it is the sovereign, and to the extent that Polonius functions as a proxy of sovereign power, Hamlet is correct. Hamlet alludes to the many pitfalls of state oppression when he mentions the "many confines, wards, and dungeons" of the world (2.2.247). Hamlet offers these images as metaphors for his own feelings of mental and psychological imprisonment. However, in literal confines, wards, and dungeons, the state functionaries can always view and watch and observe, albeit without God's perfection. The imprisoned cannot control the state's gaze and cannot place themselves outside of it.

Shakespeare may have understood this sensitivity to state surveillance personally and culturally. As a young man, he allegedly worked in a Billesley library which contained within its walls a priest-hole, an architectural means of concealing private religious practice (Wilson 24). He may have known of its existence and may have used it to conceal a priest or other evidence of Catholic practice. He may not have. But at the very least, others within his community employed this priest-hole and others like it as a means of hiding their Catholicism from the state's awareness. In addition to tricks such as priest-holes, many early modern dissidents used other means of avoiding the state's intruding gaze. English nobles sometimes donned expensive clothes or constructed elaborate estates in the hopes of distracting the monarch and other courtiers from learning too much about them personally, evincing what Archer has determined to be a Foucauldian and Lacanian sense of paranoia (10).<sup>36</sup> The construction or repurposing of what Wilson calls a "labyrinth of priest-holes, attic chapels and underground passages" (23) and the redecoration of their estates indicates that such early moderns considered this stately gaze an immutable fact of life. It was not a temporary intrusion or a minor inconvenience but a

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<sup>36</sup> See also Wilson, p. 24.

seemingly Godlike permanent feature and a Godlike desire for perfect knowledge of their most private convictions.

### **“To a public count”: Hamlet as the object of our gaze**

The early modern English audience must have laughed uproariously when the gravedigger in Act V makes a joke at their expense. Obviously not recognizing the Danish prince, the gravedigger discusses Hamlet with the man himself:

**Gravedigger:** Young Hamlet...he that is mad and sent into England.

**Hamlet:** Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?

**Gravedigger:** Why, because ‘a was mad. ‘A shall recover his wits there, or if ‘a do not, ‘tis no great matter there.

**Hamlet:** Why?

**Gravedigger:** ‘Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mad as he. (5.1.147-154)

Like Barnardine in *Measure for Measure*, the gravedigger charms the audience with his lowbrow accent and lowbrow jokes (Gurnis 161), but then endears himself even further to the audience by including them in the conversation. The gravedigger is at once unaware and fully aware of his joke’s target, and because the clown so deliberately gestures to the audience, we now literally have a role to play in *Hamlet*.

But we have also always been there watching. In attending the play, we naturally assume an otherworldly and also very proximal position over the goings-on at Elsinore Castle. If, as Hecht implies, the playwright is the deified creator of the play’s world (211), then we the

audience are deified omniscient observers of it. This Godlike posture allows us then to participate in the surveillance culture and the game of secrets that so riddle the play. Like Hamlet does to Claudius during “The Mouse Trap,” we may “tent” the characters “to the quick” (2.2.598). Within the divine chain of being, God watches us watching characters watch one another. Charles K. Cannon aptly illustrates this phenomenon as “a pattern of diminishing concentric circles” (208). Though benign, we come to impose our gazes on the fictional lives of the play’s characters. It is our only purpose there, so Hamlet is right to refer to us unwittingly as “guilty creatures sitting at a play” (2.2.590). We are guilty of wanting to know the characters’ deepest secrets, of spying on them in order to find such secrets out, and of passing judgment based on what we have seen.

Shakespeare is quite clever in luring us into our own spying venture. While the argument may be made that all playwrights and filmmakers do the same thing every time they practice their craft, the audience’s role as espials is particularly significant in *Hamlet*, as Cannon admits: “No plays of the period manage to disguise the fact that they are plays, written as they were for playhouses where few concessions were made to verisimilitude. It is the emphasis the theater elements receive in *Hamlet* and their close association with the theme that is unique” (205). While many playtexts may include some sense of a looming audience, Shakespeare includes in *Hamlet* meta-theatrical images and language such as the players, “The Mouse Trap,” and even Fortinbras’s closing command for his captains to “[b]ear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage” (5.2.398) to keep this dramatic construct in the forefront of our minds. Though we may be absorbed by the events of it, Shakespeare will simply not let us forget who we are: “guilty creatures sitting at a play.”

In addition to Hamlet's indirect reference to us as "guilty creatures" and to the gravedigger's jest, there are other examples from the play that suggest the characters are aware of our presence. The final line of Hamlet's first soliloquy is one such example. After he repines over his father's death and Claudius and Gertrude's overhasty marriage, Hamlet tersely cuts off his speech, saying rather unexpectedly, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.159). Stegner connects this line to Hamlet's later reference to the interior being of his "mind's eye," claiming that access to such interiority of the mind's eye "exist[s] in check by the tongue" (115). That both bodily metaphors appear in the same act supports Stegner's point. Shakespeare wants us to imagine parts of the body as instruments (or as Laertes might say, "organs") in revealing ourselves to the outside world. But more practically speaking, Hamlet's self-command to "hold [his] tongue" indicates that he has literally been talking out loud. The soliloquy construct typically presumes that the audience gains access to a character's true motives and feelings through the contrived vocalization of otherwise unspoken thoughts. But in this soliloquy, Hamlet seems to be speaking out loud in the most literal sense. Otherwise, he would not need to silence himself upon the approach of his friends (1.2.159).<sup>37</sup> While a person may certainly talk to himself, especially in a private moment, Hamlet's behavior here still suggests that he intuits a listening audience outside of himself. This other listener is at once God and the audience. Hamlet acknowledges our presence and entrusts us with the secret misery he tries so desperately to conceal from everyone else. We spy on his one-person conversation and are rewarded by becoming secret-keepers, a meaningful compliment from such an otherwise distrustful character.

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<sup>37</sup> Stegner makes a similar point about Claudius's prayer, remarking that his profession that his "words fly up" but his "thoughts remain below" (3.3.97) suggests that Claudius utters his prayer aloud, even though Hamlet does not hear him (118).

Hamlet repeats this same sentiment when he mentions the angels witnessing his conversation with Claudius. His comment, that he sees “a cherub who sees” Claudius’s true intentions (4.3.52), comprehends us in the audience among his angelic figures. His earlier references to “heaven” and “the other place” (4.3.34-35) support the idea that Hamlet does literally refer to cherubic angels when he says the word *cherub*. However, Hamlet also claims to “see” these figures, and if he could look just beyond the fourth wall, he would indeed see us there. Like the purgatorial and heavenly figures he imagines might spy on his interactions with others, Hamlet intimates that he can sense our looming presence with him, a *deus absconditus* in his midst (Sterrett 757). Just as he then conflates Claudius and Gertrude, reminding Claudius that “man and wife is one flesh” (4.3.56), so too does he conflate us with all other celestial spirits present there. While flattering (not to mention sanctifying), Hamlet’s comparison of us to angels also serves as a warning. He is aware of our omniscience and the power that such omniscience grants to those who have it. Just as some early moderns occasionally used heavenly cherubim as a euphemistic representation of the state (Parker 256), so too can the audience become a state-like adversary if we abuse our privilege of omniscience. Though he takes this power more literally than I believe Shakespeare intends, Dennis Kezar wonders, “If to be imitated or dramatically rendered by Shakespeare is somehow ‘fatal,’ what does it really mean for Shakespeare to kill for a living? In what ways do poet and audience collaborate in producing a literary death?” (7). Kezar’s orientation activates the audience, making them fellow conspirators in the carnage of the tragedy. This reading goes too far, but it does call to mind the power that the audience has over the play itself. Hecht makes the opposite claim, arguing instead that we “who watch are powerless, invulnerable observers relishing our safety from what so wretchedly destroys the legendary figures on the stage” (284). But Hamlet’s gestures towards us indicate

that we do indeed have power over him and others. His dying refusal to tell us more of himself (5.2.339-340) and his affirmation that “rest is silence” indicate at least that he no longer trusts us or that we must be “satisfied in nature” (5.2.242) with what we already know, that the rest of his story belongs to “the unsatisfied” (5.2.341) and not us. Our position as the ever-present audience calls this play into being,<sup>38</sup> and because of our importance, we can make ourselves privy to the underbelly of Shakespeare’s Denmark. But Shakespeare and his characters still control when our privilege to see it ends.

## **Conclusion**

Of all the burdens that Hamlet endures during the course of the play and immediately before it, the loss of personal privacy and the inability to know whom to trust are perhaps the most difficult. By the end of the play, we feel a sense that Hamlet is relieved by his impending death and that he does not have to take arms against himself in order to make it happen. He spends much of his dying energy speaking about the fact that his dying: “I am dead, Horatio,” “as this fell sergeant, Death,/ Is strict in his arrest,” “Horatio, I am dead,” “O, I die, Horatio!,” “I cannot live to hear the news from England,” and that Fortinbras “has my dying voice.”<sup>39</sup> In a manner reminiscent of J. L. Austin’s theories regarding illocutionary speech acts, Hamlet nearly speaks his death into being. Even though uttering the words “I am dead” prove the opposite to be true, Hamlet relishes the death that will remove him from the “solicitations” of the recent

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<sup>38</sup> Similar to the tired philosophical question, “If a tree falls in the woods, does it make a sound?”, a play does not exist as such without an audience. Even should actors conduct a full performance in front of an empty theatre, no play has occurred. Roleplaying has occurred but not a play.

<sup>39</sup> According to Gerard Kilroy, Horatio’s subsequent mention of a “bloody question” may have been a reference to the “bloody questions” posed to recusants while in the Tower of London. Should the pope send an army to invade England, the question went, “Whose side would you be on—the Pope’s or the Queen’s?” (144). Because it so often descended from intense interrogation to torture and even death, it became known as the “bloody question.”

“occurrences” (5.2.359-360). However, his actual death does not actually end the burden of the gaze since now Fortinbras and his Norwegian captains will honor him with a prominent position of repose on “the stage” (5.2.398). They will likely bury him in a conspicuous place of reverence, a respect not necessarily granted to the other deceased characters, including the king, whose act of regicide has never been made known publicly. Fortinbras orders only that their bodies be taken up (5.2.403). In this way, Fortinbras removes their bodies and their lives from our gaze, but Hamlet’s remains remain. Even in death, Hamlet never escapes the gaze.

Such are the consequences of being the target of a state-imposed surveillance culture. Even death does not bring release from it because this culture is larger than one individual or one threat. The surveillance culture imposed on early modern English recusants effected similar results. Even those subjected to torture and a humiliating death could not hide themselves from the state’s gaze. As Dennis Kezar reminds us, after their deaths, “tombs and corpses were still desecrated in acts of punishment; the bodies of the condemned were still mutilated and displayed according to vestigial or recusant belief in post-mortem suffering; monuments and effigies were still carved” (14). Death did not conclude the abuse inflicted on their bodies, even if it could no longer be inflicted on their spirits. Some recusants relished this opportunity to make one final expression of their religious consciences and stand in defiance against the state that would try to control them (Lake and Questier 230). But ultimately these expressions of defiance gave way to submission. The Catholics who managed to avoid physical persecution and who had resisted Anglican conversion as much as they could eventually fell to disenchantment and disheartenment when the glorious deaths of the martyrs came to naught. Most eventually converted to the “new faith,” however reluctantly, when the sacrifices of their Catholic brethren failed to prevent the Church of England from taking root (Duffy 592). Hamlet expresses a similar feeling of futility



when he muses to Horatio: “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now; yet it will come. The readiness is all” (5.2.217-220). Neither Hamlet nor the recusant Catholics could forestall their fate any more than they could control the surveillance culture that brought about their demise in the first place.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* makes plain the stakes involved in an overbearing and officious state and the psychological and physical consequences suffered by the victims of it. Communities fracture from distrust, and relationships atrophy when true intimacy cannot be reached. Claudius’s sins cost Hamlet the life of his intended, a friendship with her brother, and the filial bond with his mother. Claudius’s paranoia indulges and encourages the worst instincts of perhaps otherwise well-intentioned subjects like Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The surveillance culture Claudius establishes to protect himself and his power implodes and yields only war-like carnage. Fortinbras rightly remarks at the end of the final scene, surrounded by the corpses of Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius that “[s]uch a sight as this/ Becomes the field” (5.2.403). It is war. Death comes to those in Shakespeare’s Denmark who attempt to safeguard their interior beings from Claudius’s reach, just as death sometimes came to those in early modern England who attempted to safeguard their private religious practices from Elizabeth’s reach. But the similarities between the two realms are limited. Though some early modern Catholics suffered greatly under her reign, in general Elizabeth was not a paranoid tyrant with a penchant for murdering her political adversaries. In the interest of preserving the Church of England, she did sometimes violate the religious convictions of some generally faithful English subjects (Holmes 169) and did authorize punishing many who held fast to their Catholic faith. Even more importantly, she forced many Catholics and other religious minorities to live in

fear and to decide whether to defy their queen or defy the dictates of their consciences.

Separating subjects from their private beliefs created for both Elizabeth and Claudius a climate of distrust and growing resentment. Through *Hamlet*, Shakespeare teaches us the sanctity of personal conviction and implicitly warns the state against encroaching too much upon it. By the same token, the arrival of Fortinbras also gives us the hope that the advent of new leadership might usher in a new era of tolerance and freedom. In the meantime, for those such as recusants who have been silenced, the play may “speak loudly for” them and may report them and their cause aright to the unsatisfied.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### “Riveted with faith” and “flesh”: Corpus Christi in *The Merchant of Venice*

Unlike many of Shakespeare’s characters who are assumed an ambiguous Christian religious identity, Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* is unequivocally Jewish. In fact, he is not just a Jew. Oftentimes, he is *the Jew*, a phrase ascribed to him throughout the play. Tubal may be the one who ultimately funds Antonio and Bassanio’s venture, but Shylock funnels the money from place to place, from person to person, and from business to business, making Shylock the play’s locus of Jewish identity and economic exchange. Unlike *Henry VIII*, which dramatizes the transition of a man and a nation from Catholicism to English Protestantism, *Merchant* dramatizes for us a continuum of Judeo-Christian identity: Jews, forced Christian converts, willing Christian converts, Christians, and Christ-like saviors. The play is deeply grounded in issues relating to personal religious identity, religious communities, and inter-faith commerce. Because Shylock’s religious identity stands in such stark contrast to the Christianity of the rest of the characters, it becomes the focus of much of the play’s criticism. However, very little critical attention has been dedicated to parsing through the Christianity presented in the play. Situated mainly in a bustling Italian city and well within the geographic purview of the papacy, the play does not just present us with an ambiguous, non-denominational Christianity but a specifically Catholic Christianity. It is my contention that the latent Catholicism within it reveals to us the sacramental aspects of *Merchant* and can even help reveal for us some of Shakespeare’s own grapplings with Jewishness and the Jewishness of Christ.

Much of the *Merchant* scholarship has discussed Christian themes that appear within the play, and I will discuss and contend with some of these readings in the following sections. But very few of these readings even bother to articulate that the Christianity within the play should

be more precisely categorized as Catholicism. Brooke Conti's understanding of *Merchant* as a reformulation of Easter Vigil, the holiest of Catholic religious observances that dates back to the early Church fathers, is a notable exception.<sup>40</sup> Conti makes a strong case for a connection between *Merchant* and Easter Vigil, but she misses something vital: the link between *Merchant* and the Catholic observance of Corpus Christi. This feast, celebrated immediately following the Easter season, reminds Catholics that the literal body of Jesus Christ that was tortured, executed, and then resurrected is continuously present in the transubstantiated bread and wine of Holy Communion. I believe that Shakespeare includes such frequent and detailed references to the body in *Merchant*, especially the bond of a pound of flesh, in order to call to mind this important Catholic feast and to help Christians of all stripes come to terms with the Jewish flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.

### **A Brief History of Corpus Christi**

First introduced in the twelfth century, the Catholic Church formally added the Feast of Corpus Christi under Pope Urban IV, whose papal bull of 1264 enacting the feast day lamented that Holy Thursday's celebration of the Real Presence in the Eucharist was often overshadowed by other events commemorated on that day, including Christ's washing of the apostles' feet and His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Urban agreed with others at the time that the liturgical calendar needed a day dedicated exclusively to the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. It is thought that the feast was originally the idea of a medieval French mystic, Saint Juliana of Liège, who for decades reported having visions of Christ pleading with her to establish a feast day in honor of His body and blood. In any case, once the feast was established, it quickly

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<sup>40</sup> See "Shylock Celebrates Easter" (2015)

became one of the most beloved celebrations on the medieval church calendar. Eamon Duffy not only refers to it as “the most spectacular” feast to be added during the Middle Ages, but describes in detail the enormous impact it had on the social and economic fabric of medieval Catholic communities:

Its progress in lay affections can be traced to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by the foundation and spread of Corpus Christi guilds to honour the Host as it was carried in procession, and the emergence of the Corpus Christi processions as major civic events. Craft guilds and urban corporations saw in the ritual order of the great processions associated with the feast an opportunity for civic and social iconography...an opportunity for the display of the worship and the social clout of those involved...Particularly in urban parishes, Corpus Christi became a focus of elaborate ceremonial and lavish expenditure on banners, garlands, lights...These celebrations also became the principal occasions for the performance of cycles of devotional and didactic plays on the theme of salvation history, which in some places involved virtually the whole community. (43-44)

For all intents and purposes, Corpus Christi became a major communal and religious focal point outside of the high holy days of Christmas, Ash Wednesday, and the Easter Triduum. On this day, the community might overtly and lavishly celebrate the tenets of their faith without risk of commercializing or showing undue joy on an otherwise gravely solemn occasion. The feast of Corpus Christi was an important day for the spiritual, social, and economic health of the local community and thus quickly became a favorite amongst entrepreneurs and clergy alike.

However, the advent of the Protestant Reformation meant the elimination of almost all extra-Christmas and Easter celebrations, including Corpus Christi. The Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII, Thomas Cranmer, officially abolished the English celebration of Corpus Christi in 1548 (Duffy 460), less than twenty years before Shakespeare’s birth. While official English law might have easily eradicated such customs and traditions, people’s hearts were not so easily changed. Some, especially those reluctant to accept the new English ecclesiology, would have had a long memory regarding sacred traditions like Corpus Christi

since for them, Queen Mary's recent Catholic reign kept hopes alive for a restoration of English Catholicism. In fact, devout Catholics in some of England's western counties staged an open rebellion at Exeter in 1549, fighting to oppose the continuous repression of Catholic worship under the supreme governorship of the Protestant King Edward VI. Though this "Western Rebellion" was ultimately a failure for those seeking to maintain their Catholic religious practices, it was launched with the hope of achieving a kind of religious stalemate with the English crown, one that would allow them to attend Mass and observe other Catholic festivals such as Corpus Christi, just as they had "in tymes past" (qtd in Duffy 132).<sup>41</sup> In some cases, communities sacrificed most of their military-aged men for this cause, meaning that these same Catholic communities sacrificed much of their own flesh in pursuit of maintaining traditional Catholic worship. They did not ultimately succeed, however, and acquiesced most unwillingly to new religious practices that had been foisted upon them, practices that did not include Corpus Christi.

Born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare lived a considerable distance from these discontented Western Rebels, whose ardor had likely diffused somewhat by the time Shakespeare reached maturity nearly forty years after the Exeter skirmish. However, the feast of Corpus Christi still likely had an impact on his early life. Not only had some continental writings, translated into English and published in London, used the feast of Corpus Christi as an understood calendar reference point,<sup>42</sup> but many English Protestants also discussed Corpus Christi as both a familiar former feast day and as a point of contention with the Catholic

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<sup>41</sup> From *The Voices of Morebath*. Here, Duffy quotes from a list of demands given by the Western Rebels.

<sup>42</sup> See Pierre d'Avity's *The estates, empires, & principallities of the world* (1615).

Church.<sup>43</sup> In 1616, Thomas Beard railed against feasts such as Corpus Christi and All Saints' Day as "invention[s]" of the Catholic Church that never "were once heard of" in the days of the early church fathers.<sup>44</sup> In his *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579), the ardently anti-Catholic Edmund Spenser denounced the "lustihede and wanton meryment" (line 42) of the Catholic feasts celebrated in May, the month in which Corpus Christi was most likely to fall. And even Raphael Holinshed, whose 1587 chronicles inspired many of Shakespeare's plays, made mention of the feast in several of his chronicle entries, including those relating to King Macbeth of Scotland (5.1.2).<sup>45</sup> These casual references to the feast of Corpus Christi attest to a greater English familiarity with the feast and its continued influence on Elizabethan culture. Anti-Catholic polemics such as those written by Beard and others would not need to address this feast so particularly if it did not represent a lingering threat of Catholic resurgence. The feast of Corpus Christi took root in English culture almost from its inception. That the Anglican festival known as the Day of Thanksgiving for the Institution of Holy Communion continues to this day indicates that its Catholic forbear, Corpus Christi, has always been an important celebration for Englishmen of all Christian stripes.

### **More Than Just a Pound of Flesh: The Case for Corpus Christi in *Merchant***

It is difficult to read *Merchant* without noticing various characters' obsession with flesh, the physical body, and food. Their "fleshy" language not only keeps our focus on the physicality of the characters themselves but on the communal acts of eating, sharing, and the physical and

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<sup>43</sup> See John Bale's brief chronicle of Catholic popes and bishops, *The pageant of popes contayninge the lyues of all the bishops of Rome, from the begininge of them to the yeare of Grace 1555* (1574).

<sup>44</sup> See *A retractiue from the Romish religion*

<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, Holinshed's mentioning of Corpus Christi in this particular section occurs much later than the historical events that Shakespeare recounts in *Macbeth*.

spiritual implications of nourishment. All of these elements factor heavily into the celebration of Corpus Christi, the yearly event that reiterates the literalness of Christ's flesh and blood in the Eucharist as an indispensable means of sustenance for the body and soul. Another term for the Eucharist, Holy Communion, evinces another spiritual purpose of the sacrament: to unite Christian peoples as one community at Christ's banquet, where Christ feeds and nourishes each member individually just as He marks them as one collective earthly manifestation of His eternal body. Saint Paul explains this phenomenon in his first letter to the Corinthians: "For as the body is one, it hath many members, and all the members of one body, though they be many, yet are but one body; even so is Christe" (1 Cor 12:12).<sup>46</sup> The Catholic Church interprets this and other such biblical references to mean that Christ calls each person to be a part of His One Body and eat of His One Body in the sacrament of the Eucharist. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare highlights some of the benefits and problems associated with this complex biblical edict.

The central conflict within the play is the surety of one pound of his own flesh that Antonio offers to secure Bassanio's loan of three thousand ducats from the Jew, Shylock. This business arrangement occurs early in the play, Act I Scene 3, a scene rife with the bodily and eucharistic language that undergirds Corpus Christi. Shylock calls for Antonio's "fair flesh, to be cut off and taken/ In what part of [his] body pleaseth" Shylock should Bassanio renege on his pledge (1.3.149-150). He also avows that the very being, the very man of Antonio is "sufficient" collateral for the requested loan. He repeats matter-of-factly that Antonio "is sufficient... The man is...sufficient" (1.3.16-17; 25). This term *sufficient* carries with it theological as well as economic implications. According to Catholic thought, Christ's sacrifice on the cross "possess[es] an intrinsic and infinite value" which is "*sufficient* to counterbalance the infinite

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<sup>46</sup> All biblical references in this chapter are taken from the Bishops' Bible of 1568.



insult offered to God, which is inherent in sin” (Ott 188; emphasis mine).<sup>47</sup> In other words, Christ’s Crucifixion is entirely *sufficient* to appease God for every sin ever committed by mankind. No more is needed. Just as Antonio’s financial reputation and his “fair flesh” are “sufficient” surety for Shylock to loan Bassanio three thousand ducats, Christ’s “fair flesh” on the Cross is sufficient for God to give every penitent sinner infinite forgiveness for their transgressions.

Antonio’s sufficiency in Shylock’s estimation becomes even more apparent when we consider that many *Merchant* critics have identified Antonio as the play’s designated Christ-figure.<sup>48</sup> In his explication of *Merchant* as an allegory for the Prodigal Son story, Charles Pastoor notes that in this retelling, Antonio is both the “God-like figure” and the “fatted calf,” essentially fusing into one being Christ as God and the sacrificial feast (8). Ken Colston likewise sees Antonio offering his body as surety as a “Christ-like act,” a type of “crucifixion for his friend” (124). Colston also claims that many directors have deliberately staged *Merchant* so that Antonio assumes this Christ-like posture. And Conti presumes that Antonio stands for Christ, at least in the courtroom scene (188). Shylock’s insistence that Antonio will suffice as surety against the potential sin of defaulting on the loan immediately calls Christ to our minds, at a very early moment in the play. This language of sufficiency therefore colors our understanding of the events that subsequently unfold. Though his endless brooding and the fact that Antonio requires his own savior in Portia compromise his association with Christ, the language of Christ-like

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<sup>47</sup> It is also worth noting that, during the prayers of consecration, the traditional Anglican communion rite speaks of Christ having “made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and *sufficient* sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world” (emphasis mine). In this way, the Church of England echoes the Catholic notion of the sufficiency of Christ’s Crucifixion and the sufficiency of Holy Communion.

<sup>48</sup> Susannah Heschel offers the possibility of Shylock, rather than Antonio, as a potential Christ-like figure (412). Conti concurs but only for the purposes of Act V (190).

sufficiency which Shylock uses for Antonio at least draws a connection between Antonio and Jesus, if not an allegorical representation.

Shylock's use of the word *sufficient* is key for introducing the connection between Antonio and Christ, but it is another line from Shylock in Act I Scene 3 that draws a connection between Antonio and the transubstantiated Eucharist and the commemorated feast of Corpus Christi. After informing Bassanio that he must first borrow the loaned sum from his Jewish friend, Tubal, Shylock then welcomes Antonio into their conversation by declaring, "Rest you fair, good signor!/ Your worship was the last man in our mouths" (1.3.56-57). This oddly-phrased address, though brief, is laden with eucharistic language. The most striking component of these lines is the figuration of Antonio as a "man in our mouths." Shylock intends to impart that he and Bassanio have just been speaking about Antonio, but the rhetoric instead reorients this greeting into carnal, bodily consumption, just as it foreshadows the idea of Shylock feasting on Antonio's flesh.<sup>49</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas was the first Catholic theologian to name and explicate the process by which bread and wine becomes the flesh and blood of Christ:

[F]or the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ's body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ's blood. Hence this is not a formal, but a substantial conversion... [T]his is done by Divine power in this sacrament. (3.75.4)

In sum, the bread becomes "the whole substance of Christ's body." So when communicants receive the consecrated Host, they literally ingest Christ's body. Shylock mirrors this same idea of having a literal body, "a man" in the "mouths" of Bassanio and himself, a phenomenon that occurs at the reception of Holy Communion. In referring to Antonio as "Your worship," Shylock

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<sup>49</sup> It also harkens back to Shylock's earlier aside that he "will feed fat the ancient grudge [he] bears" Antonio (1.3.44; Bevington 81).

recalls the act of worship done to the consecrated Host during the Mass as well as the act of eucharistic worship that provides the basis for the feast of Corpus Christi.

Other elements of this scene reference the Eucharist in a much more indirect way. For example, Shylock's biblical allusion to Laban's sheep not only refers to his own (and Jesus's) Jewish roots, but it also articulates a Eucharistic *typos* from the Christian Old Testament and the Judaic Torah. In recounting the Laban story from Genesis, Shylock refers to the biblical Jacob as "The skillful shepherd" (1.3.82), but his turn of phrase instead calls to mind Jesus, the Good Shepherd and the Sacrificial Passover Lamb. In Shylock's retelling, Laban's otherwise directionless ewes cast their eyes upon the wood of "certain wands" (1.3.82), a reference both to Christ's wooden Cross and to the blood of the lamb on Jewish doorframes during Passover: "And they shall take of the blood and stryke it on the two syde postes, and on the vpper doore post, euen in the houses where they shall eate hym" (Ex 12:17). During the feast of the Last Supper, the night before the Crucifixion and the first act of Eucharistic consecration, Jesus commemorates the Passover with His apostles, melding into a single moment the metaphors of lambs, wood, blood, bread, and wine. And just as Shylock's Jacob marks the next generation of "parti-colored lambs" (1.3.86) for himself against Laban, God instructs the Jewish people to mark themselves against their Egyptian captors through the blood of a literal lamb, and Christ marks His own lambs through His death and resurrection, the sacrifice commemorated in the Catholic Mass. Colston compares Shylock's Laban anecdote with the Catholic Eucharist, noting that both can be included in "that traditional Catholic category, cooperation with grace" (116). And indeed, Laban's ewes in Shylock's story cooperate by following Jacob's scheme, altering the flesh of their offspring so that their new lambs are infused with the essence of the wood, a

wood molded and shaped by “the skillful shepherd” for the purpose of directing them towards himself and away from sin.

The rich use of eucharistic language regarding sufficiency, Antonio as a “man in our mouths,” and Shylock’s eucharistic Passover *typos* inaugurates the play’s eucharistic theme in Act I Scene 3, but the tropes of supper and feasting recur throughout the play. Despite his earlier refusal to do so, Shylock agrees to have dinner with his Christian business associates. In relating to Jessica his reservations about this outing, Shylock muses: “But wherefore should I go?/ I am not bid for love—they flatter me—/ But yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon/ The prodigal Christian” (2.513-16). As might be expected, the word *prodigal* here is often used to support a reading of *Merchant* as a reformulation of the Prodigal Son story (Pastoor 4; Colston 105; Klause 66). This critical connection between *Merchant* and the Prodigal Son is significant for our purposes here since, as these scholars remind us, one of the classic readings of the Prodigal Son parable is that it describes the relationship between the Jews, represented by the elder brother, and the Gentiles, represented by the returned prodigal son. But the Prodigal Son connection is not the only Christian metaphor embedded in this scene. Shylock’s full quotation here can also be understood in another Christian context: Shylock insists that he attends the dinner so that he may “feed upon/ The prodigal Christian,” yet another assertion of metaphorical cannibalism that makes sense literally when placed within the context of Corpus Christi.

As already noted, Corpus Christi festivities were an elaborate, celebratory affair. Diarmaid MacCulloch describes them as an expression of “lavishly traditional eucharistic devotion” (161). Miri Rubin argues that the medieval church encouraged robust Corpus Christi jubilation precisely because the theology of transubstantiation was a difficult one to accept, even for devout Catholics. The sometimes ill-educated or licentious priests entrusted with enacting

transubstantiation gave Catholics further reason to doubt it. As a result, Corpus Christi became “a ubiquitous spectacle of summer open-air festivity which exemplified orthodoxy and encouraged participation” (102-103). One key feature of Corpus Christi celebrations were the performances of Christian cycle and eucharistic miracle plays, plays that often depicted Jews with a deep initial aversion to the Eucharist eventually converting to Christianity on account of a miraculous encounter with a consecrated Host. Jacob Lackner summarizes these medieval literary presentations thusly. They begin, he says,

with a Jew or Jews attempting to subvert or harm Christianity. When their evil act is reversed or hindered by a miracle, the Jew or Jews convert. Even without committing an evil act, the Jewish male usually needs to witness a miracle to convince him to convert, so that his conversion ensues from an external stimulus. There are exceptions to this rule, but they are rare. (27)

Perhaps the most famous example of a medieval miracle play depicting such a Jewish conversion is the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*.<sup>50</sup> In Croxton, the Jew Jonathas and his Jewish friends attempt to desecrate a consecrated Host, a Host they have purchased from an unscrupulous Christian merchant named Aristorious who has stolen the Host from under the nose of a negligent and intoxicated priest. However, these same Jews are prevented from imposing any effective violence on the Host because of the power of the consecration, a consecration that the rather dubious priest has ostensibly enacted. Eventually, Jesus Himself appears before them and asks the men to end their Jewish malevolence and convert to Christianity, an edict they promptly obey. This play and others like it were a common feature of Corpus Christ revelry and served the double function of providing amusement as well as orthodox eucharistic didacticism.

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<sup>50</sup> The original title of the play was actually “The Play of the Conuersyon of Ser Jonathas the Jewe by Myracle of the Blyssed Sacrament.”

The similarities between Croxton and *Merchant* are manifold and have been discussed by literary critics for decades.<sup>51</sup> My purpose in discussing Croxton and other such miracle plays is not to reiterate these similarities but to extend the comparison between the plays to an association between *Merchant* and the Corpus Christi feast day that made such miracle plays so popular. Like Croxton, *Merchant* has at its core a central focus on the flesh, on material consummation (both at the dinner table and in the marriage bed), and on Christian conversion. Bassanio summarizes the conflation of these elements when he says:

I have engaged myself to a dear friend,  
Engaged my friend to his mere enemy,  
To feed my means. Here is a letter, [Portia],  
The paper as the body of my friend,  
And every word in it a gaping wound  
Issuing lifeblood. (3.2.261-266)

In this short quotation, Bassanio alludes to Christ-like self-sacrifice (“Engaged my friend, to his mere enemy,/ To feed my means”), Christ-like crucifixion (“every word in it a gaping wound/ Issuing lifeblood”), and eucharistic consumption (“to feed my means”). The issue of the supposedly inviolable bond between Antonio and Shylock is a contract between two individuals, but it also reminiscent of the contract (or “covenant”) that Jesus engages with his disciples at the Last Supper, the inaugural moment of eucharistic transubstantiation. In *Merchant*, Shakespeare not only brings such eucharistic imagery to our minds but also recalls the not-so-distant eucharistic celebration of Corpus Christi.

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<sup>51</sup> See Robert L A Clark’s “Othered bodies: Racial cross-dressing in the *Mistere de la Sainte Hostie* and the Croxton play of the sacrament” (1999) and Cameron Hunt McNabb’s “Hocus Pocus and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*” (2014).

As plays like Croxton suggest, the presence of Jews factors heavily in the unfolding of the Corpus Christi narrative. As Lackner notes, “The motif of a Jew converting to Christianity strengthened the position of orthodox Christianity. The Jewish characters in these stories convert to the *true* faith, not to one of the various heresies in Medieval Europe” (27; Lackner’s emphasis). And “orthodox Christianity” is precisely the didactic (if not also the worshipful) purpose of Corpus Christi. A Jewish non-Christian encountering the flesh and blood of Christ through the consecrated Host affirms that the orthodox teaching regarding the Real Presence of the Eucharist is a universal truth. It also encourages the hope for the conversion of all souls, a hope that Christ commands His apostles put into practice: “Go ye therefore, teache *all* nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and of the sonne, and of the holye ghost” (Matt 28:19; emphasis mine). The miracle plays need the presence of otherwise damned souls to be saved by Corpus Christi in order to convince any audience that adherence to orthodox Christianity will lead to the conversion of “all nations” as Christ requires of His followers.

The presence of non-Christians such as Jews creates the necessary dramatic tableau for a Corpus Christi miracle play. In a similar way, the presence of the Jewish Shylock<sup>52</sup> compels the association between *Merchant* and Corpus Christi. Susannah Heschel goes so far as to say that “Shylock’s Jewishness is signified in the play not through his faith or practice, but as constructed by a Christian theological narrative that is dedicated to its eradication” (425), that the narrative always anticipates his eventual conversion just as all miracle plays anticipate the eventual conversion of their respective Jewish figures. We have already seen examples of Shylock using (if not necessarily believing) eucharistic language, but Shakespeare takes this association a step further and uses the voice of Shylock to reiterate the humanity of the Jewish people. In perhaps

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<sup>52</sup> And to a lesser extent, the Jew Tubal, the Jewess Jessica, and the Moorish Prince of Morocco

the most heart-wrenching of all Shakespearean speeches, in Act III, Shylock pleads for us and for his fellow man to see Jews as persons (Russin 122):

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not get revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should be his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.55-69)

Spoken in prose rather than high-minded blank verse and avoiding the figurative language for which Shakespeare is well-known,<sup>53</sup> Shylock's speech makes plain the likenesses between Christians and Jews. No one in the audience can possibly misunderstand his meaning. Jews have the same physical needs, have the same social instincts, and have the same susceptibility towards sin and revenge as their Christian counterparts. The speech is so laden with Christian *pathos* that John Klause notes a similarity between it and the writings of Father Robert Southwell, an Elizabethan Jesuit and a possible acquaintance of Shakespeare. Klause claims that Shylock "makes use of" the same language that Southwell "had used to describe the suffering body of Christ, the Jew in whose name generations of Jews had been 'hurt' and made to 'bleed'" (76). This speech draws the audience and the Christian characters into the Jewish experience, unlike other early modern dramatizations of Jews, like Barabas in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, which repel audiences and encourage further ostracization of the Jewish other (Yaffe 13; Nirenberg 82).

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<sup>53</sup> Some, including Stephen Schillinger, have noted the terse language that Shylock uses in general, especially in his conversation with Bassanio in Act I scene 3 (94). This penchant for verbal clarity is a distinguishing feature of Shylock's, one perhaps that allows us to hear Shakespeare's own voice through him.



Amidst his pathetic language, in his memorable speech, Shylock also employs language that ties it in with eucharistic consumption and Corpus Christi. Nearly half of it focuses exclusively on the physicality of the Jewish body. It has “eyes,” “hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions.” It also requires nourishment, remains vulnerable to harmful and external forces, and is just as mortal as the Christian body. Thus far, Shylock makes a strong case for a universal human condition just as he unwittingly hints at Christ’s suffering and the eucharistic banquet. Words such as *passion* and *execute* as well as questions such as “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” and “If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility?”<sup>54</sup> do not overtly reference Christ but are infused with Crucifixion imagery nonetheless. In so doing, Shylock and Shakespeare thrust the Jewishness of Christ to the forefront. Shylock forces us to confront the physicality of the Jewish body and, by extension, the physicality of the Jewish body of Christ. The Jewishness of Christ’s flesh and blood then also utterly suffuses the Eucharist, meaning that, for Catholics, the purest form of physical consumption and nourishment is naturally and entirely Jewish. The Eucharist that Catholics readily consume and worship during Corpus Christi was once fully Jewish and becomes fully Catholic, was once fully bread and becomes fully Flesh. In her extensive juxtaposition of Jesus and Shylock, Susannah Heschel wonders if, through His baptism in the Jordan River, “Jesus, in fact, fully transformed himself from Jew to Christian” (409). Heschel ultimately determines that He does not because most early modern societies would not accept the erasure of Jewishness even from a Christianized body and soul, even from Jesus Christ Himself. However, the Catholic belief in Corpus Christi perhaps complicates her otherwise unequivocal denial. Though almost all early modern Christian

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<sup>54</sup> Much of medieval and early modern antisemitism stems from the errant belief that Jews were responsible for Christ’s Crucifixion. James Shapiro summarizes this anti-Semitic understanding of Jews as “the accursed descendants of those who had killed Christ and who continued in their devilish ways” (13). See also Heschel, p. 431

denominations recognized the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the Mass and the doctrine of transubstantiation were exclusively Catholic practices and beliefs. While Christ's physical body on earth was decidedly Jewish, His transubstantiated body in the Eucharist becomes Christianized for Christian purposes. Though Shylock does not necessarily intend to express these theological complexities in his "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, his allusions to Christ and Christ's body compel us to contend with them nonetheless.

The theological issues that his speech tacitly broaches ask the Christian characters of the play and the Christian members of the audience to confront and accept the Jewishness of Christ and, for Catholics, the Eucharist. But the speaker himself, Shylock, either misses or ignores the references to Christ and the Eucharist entirely, indicating that while Shakespeare wishes to explore these theological issues, his iconic Jewish figure does not. One of the clearest demonstrations of Shylock's imperviousness to Christian influence, even after his forced conversion, is his insatiable desire to feed on everything but the Eucharist. Not only does he express a desire to "feed upon/ The prodigal Christian" as already noted, but he even frames this "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech as a precursor to extracting the pound of flesh to which he is entitled. About the pound of flesh, Shylock pronounces that, "If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge" (3.1.50-51). Then, just as he sues for his pound of flesh redress, Shylock announces to Portia and the court, "I crave the law,/ The penalty and forfeit of my bond" (4.1.204-205). His hatred for Christians and for Antonio specifically causes him to hunger for bizarre and potentially poisonous consumables. His cannibalistic utterances are sometimes shocking and deeply unsettling, leading many critics to read them as evidence of a deeply anti-Semitic early modern era or, occasionally, even a deeply anti-Semitic playwright. And there is certainly evidence to support an anti-Semitic reading or to presume an anti-Semitic audience. As

Pastoor notes, most early moderns viewed Jews simply as those who “refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and refuse to participate in the sacred feast” (7). In other words, they exist entirely outside the holy Communion of the Lord, and as a result, they crave that which fails to satisfy. Saint Paul, himself a Jewish convert to Christ, alludes to such misapplied appetites and to the Christian desire for community and Holy Communion:

Brethren, I woulde not that ye shoulde be ignoraunt, howe that all our fathers were vnder the cloude, and all passed through the sea, and were baptized vnto Moyses in the cloude, and in the sea: And dyd all eate of one spirituall meate. And dyd all drynke of one maner of spirituall drynke...But in many of them had God no delite: for they were ouerthrowen in the wildernesse. These verily are ensamples to vs, to the intent that we shoulde not lust after euyll thynges, as they also lusted...The cuppe of blessing which we blesse, is it not ye partakyng of the blood of Christe? The bread which we breake, is it not the partaking of the body of Christe? For we that are many, are one bread and one body, in as much as we all are partakers of one bread. (1 Cor 10:1-17)

Saint Paul warns otherwise devout Jews (and Gentiles) about the natural human desire for “euyll thynges” and presents the Eucharist as the antidote to such desires. And yet, Shylock continues to indulge his evil appetites. He even makes a mockery of the Eucharist and transubstantiation when, speaking with Bassanio, he reviles at the thought of “eat[ing] of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into” (1.3.31-33). Though in this moment, Shylock recoils at the pollution of consuming pork, the notion of Christ infusing food with the devil expresses a kind of demonic inversion of the act of consecration both at the Last Supper and at the Mass. Shylock deliberately separates himself from the Christian table and issues blasphemous insults against those who sit there. His invectives against Christians and his cannibalistic cravings for Christian flesh support critical readings of Shylock as evidence of early modern and Shakespeare’s antisemitism. However, like Martin D. Yaffe, I hesitate to extrapolate too much about Shakespeare’s views based solely on one character or a few dramatic lines (20). To the reasonable objections issued by those who read antisemitism in the play, I can offer only

the perhaps dissatisfying rejoinder that, if Shakespeare wished to expose his own or his culture's anti-Semitic sentiments in *Merchant*, at least his presentation of Shylock also includes a robust willfulness and admirable self-determination in the face of strong opposition. Though Shylock is at moments a distasteful character, he at least stands strong in his convictions (until his forced conversion), a strong contrast to, say, the pathetically gullible Othello, another of Shakespeare's Venetian Christian converts.

### **“Thou art mine own flesh and blood”: Corpus Christi and the Marriage Bed**

Regardless of Shylock's personal refusal to acknowledge the eucharistic language that he himself employs, the notion of the Eucharist as the true means of corporal and spiritual nourishment pervades the play. It even resounds through the play's marriage trope since marriage is an institution and a human relationship predicated on human carnality, fleshly consummation, and the hope for salvation. During the Middle Ages, marriage, a vocation still considered less holy than a vocation to religious life, was nevertheless also associated with eucharistic communion and Corpus Christi because it provided the nexus of physicality and spirituality. Marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with His people is a biblical one. This image undergirds the entire narrative of the Old Testament book the Song of Songs whereby the Bridegroom claims He has “eate honey from my honey combe...[and] drunk my wine with my milk. Eate, ye freendes, drynke and be merrie, ye beloved” (5:1). The twelfth-century French Benedictine, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux preached many sermons on the Song of Songs, insisting that “For Christ's flesh is real food. And perhaps for that reason...the bride [of the Song of Songs] addresses him as though one of the shepherds...The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep! He gives them his life, he gives them his flesh...his flesh for their food.” Many

early modern writers adopted this same association too, using eucharistic language to describe sexual and marital relationships. In John Donne's poem "Twickenham Garden," for example, the speaker laments "The spider Love, which transubstantiates all,/ And can convert manna to gall" just as he implores "lovers" to "take my tears, which are love's wine." Because the Eucharist feeds real human flesh just as It feeds real human souls, the carnality of sex and the marital sexual union mirror this notion of feeding the body to care for the soul.

On several occasions in *Merchant*, various married persons refer to their spouses or their marital relationships in terms of food. While minding Belmont for Portia, who has absconded to Venice disguised as Baltasar, Lorenzo and Jessica have the following exchange:

**Lorenzo:** ...First let us go to dinner.

**Jessica:** Nay, let me praise you while I have a stomach.

**Lorenzo:** No, pray thee, let it serve for table talk;

Then, howsoe'er thou speak'st, 'mong other things

I shall digest it. (3.5.83-86)

This banter conflates marital flirtation and literal consumption, making their words of marital friendship "serve for table talk" just as they feed their relationship. Though David Nirenberg describes their marriage as "a double-dealing language of love and lucre" (89), it might be better described as a double-dealing language of love and larder. Earlier in this very scene, Jessica has avowed "I shall be saved by my husband. He hath made me a Christian" (3.5.17-18). Therefore, Jessica's "table" banter with Lorenzo merely extends the consumption imagery she has already proffered as a metaphor for Christian salvation. Her marriage is food for her personal satisfaction and a means for her personal salvation. It feeds her body and her soul.

Many critics are quick to question the compatibility of Lorenzo and Jessica and the likelihood of their marital contentment. Conti, Yaffe, and Harry Berger, Jr. all comment on the rather foreboding list of literary lovers to whom Jessica and Lorenzo compare themselves in Act V (183; 67; 22). Carol Levin and John Watkins recount that a number of *Merchant* directors have opted to stage this scene not as “one of lovers teasing each other romantically in the moonlight but rather a scene of scathing bitterness” (105). Robin Russin moderates their skepticism somewhat, stating only that in this marriage, each partner achieves his or her ultimate desire: Lorenzo inherits Jessica’s (Shylock’s) wealth, and Jessica gains the status afforded to wealthy Christian wives (125). Undoubtedly, the text supports some uncertainty regarding this marriage as a love match, although one might just as easily express similar misgivings regarding the gold-digging match of Bassanio and Portia.<sup>55</sup> But in many ways, romantic love within the marriage is beside the point. Jessica imagines that her marriage to Lorenzo places eternal salvation within reach: “I shall be saved by my husband.” While this line may indicate that Jessica sees Lorenzo as her savior rather than Christ, when viewed against her next sentence: “He hath made me a Christian,” it no longer carries with it any blasphemy but instead articulates orthodox Catholic teaching. Against a rising Protestant emphasis on companionate marriage and marital friendship (McQuade 417), the Catholic Church both expanded as well as reiterated the traditional understanding of the spiritual purpose of Christian marriage. The Council of Trent, the governing body of the Catholic Counter-Reformation determined that God’s secondary motive for post-Lapsarian marriage was to encourage each partner to help bring the other spouse to salvation, though His primary motivation was the “generation and bringing-up of offspring”

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<sup>55</sup> Though Langis calls Bassanio and Portia “the golden pair, epitomizing the graces of the Christian Venetian culture” (22), there are those who do, in fact, doubt the pair as a love match. See Ken Colston (118) and Russin (121).

(Ott 462). Since matrimony mimics Christ's relationship with His church, a relationship of dependency whereby the church needs her bridegroom for salvation, each married person too should ultimately sacrifice him or herself in favor of his or her spouse. This call for self-sacrifice falls primarily upon husbands, whom Saint Paul orders to "loue your wyves, euen as Christe also loued the Church, and gaue hym selfe for it" (Eph 5:25). Jessica's hope that Lorenzo will lead her to salvation reflects accurately Christian views on marriage and expresses a hope for the perhaps ill-matched pair that has otherwise eluded so many *Merchant* scholars.

As mentioned above, marriages like the one between Jessica and Lorenzo are a microcosmic representation of Christ and His church. The marital sexual union, the closest joining of two mortal bodies on earth, is bested only by the reception of the Eucharist and the literal ingestion of Christ into the corporal body. The physical and spiritual communion of the marital act and the Eucharist function so similarly that the Church often employs erotic and matrimonial language to describe Eucharistic theology. Ludwig Ott claims that "baptised persons should *desire* the Eucharist" (396; emphasis mine). The Council of Trent encourages those who receive communion "sacramentally and spiritually...[to] approach this divine table clothed with the wedding garment" (78). And Christian mystics, popular during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, often reported orgasmic-like reactions when participating in eucharistic adoration. Perhaps the most famous mystic, Saint Teresa of Ávila, describes just such an encounter with Christ and the Real Presence of the Eucharist:

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it, and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it...It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed, a great share. (164-165)

The marital act as the fulfillment of sexual desire serves as an apt metaphor for the eucharistic fulfillment of the soul's desire for God since both involve—in fact, require—appetites, food, bodies, souls, and satisfaction. For this reason, Jessica's conversation with Lancelot, in which she declares that Lorenzo will bring her to salvation, also incorporates all of these elements. Not only does she affirm the promise of salvation, but Lancelot then replies, "This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs. If we grow all to be pork eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money" (3.5.21-24). Lancelot's line may be a crass joke, but it still hints at sound eucharistic theology. Just as all Christians are called to the table of the Lord to partake in one Holy Communion, now all Christianized Jews may forego adherence to their laws forbidding the consumption of certain foods. All may eat of the same food, including pork. Pork, which the Levitical law pronounces "unclean" (11:7-8), has now been purified, "is sanctified by the worde of God" (1 Tim 4:5). The purification of human food and the remission of the law against pork symbolize the infinite purification of the bread and wine through transubstantiation. Thus, Jessica's marriage to Lorenzo, at least in her vision of it, corresponds to the flesh and blood of Christ and the feast of Corpus Christi that yearly celebrates it.

To a lesser degree, Lorenzo expresses this same belief in the salvific grace that marriage offers according to the Catholic Church, as well as its inherent association with the Eucharist. Once he learns that he will inherit his father-in-law's wealth upon Shylock's death, Lorenzo breathes a sigh of relief: "Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way/ Of starvèd people" (5.1.294-295). In mentioning "manna," Lorenzo accomplishes two important tasks. First and foremost, he reiterates the eucharistic nature of marriage, that his marriage to Jessica will bring him the fulfillment for which he has long hoped. God gives the Israelites their daily fill of manna as they make their long journey away from slavery and towards the Promised Land (Ex 16:1-38). As



such, manna is perhaps the most recognizable eucharistic *typos* in the Old Testament (Colston 116).<sup>56</sup> Lorenzo's marriage to Jessica brings the fulfillment of a future of wealth and security, assured sustenance while on the earthly journey. Of course, the manna of wealth offers only an earthly form of personal fulfillment. While the material form of the consecrated bread and wine feeds the spiritual body of its recipients as well as the physical body and leads these same recipients towards eternal salvation, material wealth feeds only the physical needs of Lorenzo and Jessica. It may even threaten their spiritual bodies since "love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim 6:10). But in any case, Lorenzo does view marriage as a means of personal fulfillment, even if it is a decidedly earthly form of it.

The second task that Lorenzo accomplishes in his reference to "manna" is that he has now identified himself with the Jewish nation from which his wife originates. In other words, he has "Judaized" himself, a concept that James Shapiro mentions (8) and on which Nirenberg remarks at length. Just as Jessica claims that her marriage to Lorenzo has made her into a Christian, Lorenzo affirms that his marriage to Jessica now identifies him as Jew. Berger understands this act of Judaizing as Lorenzo "effortlessly tak[ing] up his new role as a Jew" now that he has become Shylock's presumed heir (40).<sup>57</sup> Not only is this adoption of the Jewish identity rather hopeful in a play that sometimes presents Jews in a rather unsavory manner, but it also reflects accurately the type of total self-giving from an ideal Christian spouse. Lorenzo now presumes his wife's Jewishness upon himself, just as she adopts his Christianity. They see one another as extensions of their own being, challenging the critical suspicion of their happiness,

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<sup>56</sup> See also Conti (189)

<sup>57</sup> Lara Bovilsky demurs slightly from presuming that Lorenzo adopts some of Jessica and Shylock's Jewishness onto himself. She instead argues that Lorenzo's use of "manna" (as well as Portia acting as a "second Daniel" [4.1.221; 331]) is an example of "Jewish signifiers and stances...appealing to non-Jews" (70-71). See "'A Gentle and No Jew': Jessica, Portia, and Jewish Identity."

and closing the play on the same note of marital unity that Bassanio and Portia and Nerissa and Gratiano all express.

Since she is Jewish and therefore otherwise outside of those elected for salvation,<sup>58</sup> Jessica's potentially sanctifying marriage presents a radical shift in its relationship to the eucharistic table. The other marriages we witness in *Merchant*, Portia and Bassanio, Nerissa and Gratiano, are comprised of already-baptized Catholic Christians who have ostensibly partaken of the eucharistic feast since they reached the age of reason. Jessica is an interloper who now commands a seat at the table that was once reserved for them alone. And just like Jessica believes her marriage, a bond that Ken Colston calls "an existential flesh-and-blood commitment" (114), will lead to her ultimate salvation, so too do the other married persons of the play speak of the salvific potential of their mates using decidedly eucharistic language. While Portia awaits Bassanio's selection in the casket game, she sings: "Tell me where is fancy bred,/ Or in the heart or in the head?/ How begot, how nourishèd?" (3.2.63-65). In beautiful poetry, Portia elucidates orthodox Catholic teaching regarding both marriage and the Real Presence. In this case, the word *bred*, a homophone for *bread*, calls to mind the bread of the Eucharist, one that penetrates the heart and the head, that is, the spirit and the physical body. Marriage and the eucharist "nourish" the soul, though to different degrees, and both are "begot" through the same means: Christ. Then, when Bassanio correctly selects the leaden casket, he finds within it an approximation of Portia's flesh, or in his words, "Fair Portia's counterfeit!" (3.2.115). Just as marriage attempts to imitate but can never fully parallel the graces offered by Christ's flesh, the

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<sup>58</sup> Modern Vatican writings have assured that Jews may achieve eternal salvation without Christian conversion. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth, Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, Pope Benedict XVI writes that "the Jews themselves are a living homily to which the Church must draw attention, since they call to mind the Lord's suffering." He also cites Hildegard Brem, who states unequivocally that "the Church must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews" (75). The Catechism, written and directed under the auspices of the Roman Curia, continues to affirm this teaching today under Pope Francis. See "A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*."

portrait of Portia that appears in the casket reflects a miniaturization of Portia's flesh but cannot duplicate it. Both marriage and the portrait are good and represent well the goodness of God and the goodness of one's spouse, but neither can possibly provide the same salvific joy of Corpus Christi.

In spite of the fact that Portia actually marries Bassanio, many scholars still insist that Antonio is Bassanio's true spouse, or at least his true love. Unhae Langis refers to Antonio's "homoerotic love toward the young nobleman" (29), and Russin believes that Antonio suffers from "homoerotic rejection" (119). Colston claims that Bassanio and Antonio enjoy merely a "mutual friendship," one that remains subordinate to the "higher union" of Bassanio and Portia (120), while Berger goes so far as to claim that whether Bassanio and Antonio "have sex" is "central" to the play, though the question, he admits is ultimately "unanswerable" (17). The critical focus on the nature of the relationship subsisting between Antonio and Bassanio stems, I believe, from an inability to find a motivation for Antonio's behavior. His sadness and self-sacrificial friendship lack a direct cause, so some critics impose one upon him, imagining a homosocial triangle<sup>59</sup> onto the play with Antonio and Portia competing for Bassanio's affections. If we accept their reading, that Antonio has some sort of erotic attraction to Bassanio that may or may not be reciprocated, and take it a step further, that Antonio and Bassanio's "mutual friendship" merely stands for the marriage they cannot enact, then Bassanio's language regarding his would-be husband also reflects the grace for salvation that marriage brings. In order to illustrate this point, I would like to refer to a line from Bassanio that I have discussed previously.

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<sup>59</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that in literary triangles consisting of two men and one woman, the men direct their same-sex attraction towards the woman since heterosexual bonds are "safer" and more socially acceptable. See her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

Upon learning in Belmont that Shylock has demanded redress for the forfeited bond, Bassanio exclaims:

I have engaged myself to a dear friend,  
Engaged my friend to his mere enemy,  
To feed my means...  
The paper as the body of my friend,  
And every word in it a gaping wound,  
Issuing lifeblood. (3.2.261-266)

Though in the 1590s the word *engaged* did not specifically indicate a betrothal of marriage, it did mean to be bound or secured by pledge, a definition that closely approximates our concept of betrothal and one that easily transitioned within about a hundred years or so to mean to be bound for marriage.<sup>60</sup> Taking this word to mean closely bonded, Bassanio's imagining of Antonio as a savior who can "feed" his "means" then completes the Corpus Christi-like analogy since Antonio then serves as savior and consecrated Host. Later, Bassanio makes to Antonio a similar promise of self-sacrifice, avowing that "The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all,/ Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood" (4.1.112-113), but his promise does not contain the same offer to "feed" Antonio continuously as Bassanio claims has been done for him. Bassanio's offer avoids the Corpus Christi reference since he offers his "flesh, blood, bones, and all" only as a terminal sacrifice, not as a means of "feeding" Antonio continuously as transubstantiation and marriage promise to do. Thus, Bassanio's utterance to Antonio avoids the salvific grace that marriage otherwise gives, rendering their offers to one another asymmetric and unequal. If the critics are correct in presuming a quasi-marriage between the two men, then, according to

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<sup>60</sup> The OED lists Henry Fielding's *Love in Several Masques* (1728) as the first known use of the word *engaged* meaning "to bind by a promise to marriage."

Bassanio, Antonio offers the marital custom of salvific service while Bassanio offers only service, the communion bread devoid of the real presence.

Whatever the affections between the two men, the sacramental marriage between Bassanio and Portia is what actually mirrors Christ's relationship with His church and the eucharistic covenant celebrated on Corpus Christi. The feast of Corpus Christi observed the literal presence of Christ through consecrated bread and wine but also tangentially acknowledged the presence of Christ in other sacraments like marriage and in the begetting of children. Weddings were expressly forbidden during certain seasons of the liturgical year, including Lent and the Easter octave (*Council of Trent* 191). While there is no documented association between Corpus Christi and a rush of medieval May weddings, there more than likely were many weddings that fell in and around Corpus Christi since the feast day follows hard upon Pentecost, the official end of Eastertide. Those engaged couples who had deferred their nuptials during the solemnity of Lent, Easter, and the Easter octave might schedule a wedding on Corpus Christi without fear of over-rejoicing. The Corpus Christi revelry that the church encouraged coincided nicely with the celebration of new marriages, new families, and the hope for new life. The flesh of Christ in the Eucharist, the flesh of Antonio, and the fleshly union of marriage within *Merchant* all contribute to the moments of triumph within the play. While the play is not an allegory for Corpus Christi feasting, the fundamental purpose for Corpus Christi, the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, also undergird the play's fundamental theme of hope and salvation. Through the allusions to Corpus Christi and a longing for the resurgence of such Catholic liturgical traditions, Shakespeare reminds us that such social customs and celebrations may help unite otherwise utterly disjointed communities such as the bustling international epicenter of

Venice, Italy, just as it thrusts into the forefront the Jewish roots of their celebrations and their holy feast.

### **Religious Otherness: Identity and non-catholic Catholicism**

Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of examining the religious climate of Elizabethan England and the religious themes of Shakespeare's dramatic corpus is the fact that it is quite tricky to reconcile current and early modern notions of religious identity. Early moderns fixated on sectarian identity much more deeply than we do now, and they readily misused and mislabeled those outside their own religious communities, perhaps even more so than we do today. Shifts in religious affiliation factor heavily in our understanding of *Merchant*, and they become remarkably difficult to mine when trying to argue that the play deliberately calls to mind the particularly Catholic tradition of Corpus Christi. How can we determine the catholicity of a play that keeps much of its Catholicism so hidden? By contrast, the play will simply not let us forget the Jewishness of Shylock, Jessica, and Tubal, and to a lesser extent, the presence of Moorish others. We have many different religious communities intermingling within the play, and the religious otherness of the other groups seems to predominate the means by which they categorize one another. "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?," Portia-disguised-as-Baltasar famously asks the Venetian court (4.1.172). Not only are these two groups considered mutually-exclusive, but Baltasar presents Jewishness as a singularly identifying characteristic. In order to argue that the play carries with it a decidedly Catholic undertone, I will first explicate the problems with religious categorization both within the play and within its greater early modern Western context.

In many cases, modern scholars, including Unhae Langis (32; 34), wish to imagine religious categories in a very distinct way: the subject and the “other,” that early modern people naturally accepted and felt a sense of belonging with those who believed as they did, and they naturally remained wary of those who did not. One was either in or out of a particular faith group.<sup>61</sup> Such an exaggerated oversimplification of religious pluralism would seem to make for very easy categorization of others: with us or with “them,” inside or outside, on the side of God or on the side of God’s enemies. The problem in practice is that language and categorization simply do not paint an accurate picture of the western religious tableau, either in the play or in Shakespeare’s own time.<sup>62</sup> Elizabethan England was decidedly English Protestant, and Catholicism was once again outlawed under Elizabeth’s rule, as were a variety of other religious faiths including Judaism, though English antisemitism began long before her rise. In 1290, King Edward I, a distant but direct ancestor of Elizabeth’s, formally expelled all Jews from England, and Jews were not readmitted to England openly as Jews until 1655, when England was under the control of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. Yet, these laws did not necessarily impact the religious practices of individuals, their own understandings of their religious identities, or the religious identities that others presumed upon them. English Protestants sometimes referred to Catholics as “Jews” since Catholics believed in the law and that good works were necessary for salvation (Heschel 429).<sup>63</sup> Puritans were likewise associated with Judaism since some radical

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<sup>61</sup> Emmanuel Levinas writes an especially poignant explication of this phenomenon. Motivated as he was by the horrors of the Holocaust and his own Jewish identity, his “Ethics and the Face” (from his *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l’extériorité* published in 1961) argues both for the existence of a violent instinct within each person against the “other” but also that the humanity of such an other’s “face” helps quell that violent instinct. See also Annabel Herzog’s “Levinas and Derrida on Translation and Conversion.”

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Schillinger issues a similar warning against the “same/other” dichotomy, claiming that “while an intuitive way of imagining the text is to see Shylock as the alien, unknowable, and demonized other to the normalized Christian community, the sight lines in the play are likely much more complicated. ...[W]e would be wise not to reify an essentialist othering of Judaism in the text, especially as it relates to any apparent politics or interpretive perspectives for the play. All of this is to say, Shylock is less an absolute alien than a kind of *doppelganger*” (84).

<sup>63</sup> See also Klause p. 88.

Puritans insisted on keeping kosher and circumcising their children (Shapiro 8). And Klause makes the case that “It is clear from other contexts, especially in the *Epistle of Comfort*, that when [Jesuit priest Father Robert Southwell] speaks of persecutive Jews, he is often thinking of militant Protestants” (88). According to James Shapiro, “the word *Jew* had entered into the English vocabulary in the thirteenth century as a catchall term of abuse, often directed at other Christians” (24). In other words, Jews are Jews, Catholics are Jews, Puritans are Jews, and high English Protestants are Jews. So everyone is othered, and everyone is Jewish. From this perspective, *Jewish*, not *catholic*, ought to mean “universal.”

The looseness with which religious groups misidentify people not of their own is hardly limited to early modern England or the early modern continent. In a much more contemporary example, Jacques Derrida claims that his native Jewish community in mid-twentieth century Algeria did much the same thing: “[W]e called all the non-Jewish French people ‘Catholics,’ even if they were sometimes Protestants, or perhaps even Orthodox: ‘Catholic’ meant anyone who was neither a Jew, a Berber, nor an Arab” (*Monolingualism of the Other* 52). When recognizing or insulting tribal otherness, people have very little motive to name people accurately. In many cases, they enjoy the slipperiness of naming since naming can be used to attack several groups at the same time. When early moderns mention the Jewishness of their Puritan counterparts, they insult both Judaism and Puritanism at the same time, a win-win for those suspicious of both faiths and of their respective practitioners. Because of this human tendency to misidentify others and the hostile intentions that often motivate such instances of misidentification, it is difficult to trust the names and categories assigned to various Elizabethan groups and various Shakespearean characters.



“I am a Jew,” Shylock unequivocally avers in Act III Scene 1. Shylock, Jessica, and Tubal’s Jewishness are made plain to us through their own words and through their associations. And for the most part, we can rely on their Jewishness. I cite Shylock’s instance of religious self-identification because it contrasts so starkly with the religious designations presumed on the other characters of the play. Because it takes place in Venice, was written by a Christian, and performed to an overwhelmingly Christian audience, the play presumes upon the rest of the *dramatis personae* a generalized Christian identity. In fact, the word *Christian* appears twenty-six times in the play, but in all but a few instances, the word is used by Shylock, Jessica, or Lancelot. Lancelot is an interesting character with interesting religious implications for the play that I will address later, but in the cases of Shylock and Jessica, the term *Christian* imparts the implied meaning of “non-Jew” almost more than it does “believer in Christ.” Shylock and Jessica employ the word to indicate those outside of their nation. No Christian character from the play uses the term to identify themselves or one another as believers in Christ. Antonio twice insists upon the impending conversion of Shylock to Christianity, once as a mere hope (1.3.177), once as a judicial command (4.1.385). Under the guise of Baltasar, Portia also orders that, should Shylock “shed/ One drop of Christian blood” in the taking of his bond, then his “lands and good/ Are by the laws of Venice confiscate/ Unto the state of Venice” (4.1.304-310). Thus, the word *Christian* is primarily used within the play to isolate and particularize Shylock and the Jewish community. It is not used by Christians to express their faith or to identify themselves, unlike Shylock who adamantly swears “I am a Jew.” The word *Christian* within the play much more strongly suggests “non-Jew” than it does “follower of Christ.”

The intermingling of Christians and Jews in the play is important, and it is therefore notable that the *Christian* designation is most often uttered by a Jewish character. Shylock

maintains that he “hates” Antonio “for he is a Christian” (1.3.39) and that he will dine with Bassanio and Antonio “to feed upon/ The prodigal Christian” (2.5.16). Then when Salerio and Solanio relate Shylock’s reaction to the news of his daughter’s elopement with Lorenzo, they adopt his voice and mockingly lament, “My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter!/ Fled with a Christian? O, my Christian ducats” (2.8.15-16). In entrusting the Jewish characters to reorient the meaning of *Christian*, Shakespeare removes much of the religious tenets associated with *Christian*, using it mainly to contrast with the identifying name of *Jew*. In *Merchant*, we have Christians and Jews as well as the recurring presence of Moors. But Jews are Jews, and Christians are non-Jews. Such are the main religious identities of *Merchant*.

The particularization of the Jewish community through language makes sense in a city that has already spatially particularized and isolated it. Unlike Elizabethan England, Renaissance Venice did indeed have a Jewish ghetto. Thus, Jews were literally contained within and without the main Venetian community. But *Merchant* is not Renaissance Venice in any appreciable way except in Shakespeare’s imagination of it, and as some *Merchant* scholars have noted, Shakespeare’s play does not allude to a Jewish ghetto at all (Hunt 163; Rosen 96).<sup>64</sup> So Shakespeare’s understanding of a bustling metropolis and an epicenter of international commerce is one of blended living and continual intermingling. Despite Shylock’s insistence of a distinct Jewish “nation” (3.1.53; 3.1.81), the city of Venice does not recognize a distinct Jewish nation, only Jewish individuals living within its limits. The separation of Jews and Christians occurs then in their language, in their disparate treatment of one another, in their distinct religious practices, and in the unequal recognition of their rights since Jews were not citizens

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<sup>64</sup> Notably, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, though dramatizing much more extreme antisemitism than *Merchant*, does not refer to a Jewish ghetto either (Rosen 101).

(Russin 123; Yaffe 48; Bovilsky 68).<sup>65</sup> Otherwise, the Venetian Christians and Jews in *Merchant* live in close proximity to one another, as their familiarity with one another and the ease of their business arrangements attest.

The Jewish characters in *Merchant* do not recognize or perhaps do not realize differences within the umbrella term *Christianity*. But in Elizabethan England, a time and place almost obsessed with Christian particularization, the term *Christianity* carries with it many contentious definitions for many different groups of so-called Christians. As Chris Jeffrey has it, “the historical fact is that any split in the community of Elizabethan England between Christians and Jews was a minor issue. The salient, deadly serious conflict was within Christendom, between Protestants and Catholics” (38). Some English Protestants may have distanced themselves from Catholicism only ambivalently, but some ardently opposed Catholic practice. English Puritans saw the Church of England as a watered-down version of idolatrous popery and formed their own groups precisely to distance themselves from milquetoast Protestantism. The Catholics, for their part, saw the reformation movement as a devilish usurpation of Christ’s true church and oftentimes continued to practice in secret in direct defiance of English law. And despite all of the ecclesiastical differences between these groups, they all united in their utter abjuration of the Anabaptists, a group of professed Christians who suffered grave persecution in both Catholic and Protestant states. For each of these groups, sectarian differences within Christianity literally meant the difference between heaven and hell, and they viewed one another as constant threats against one another’s salvation.

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<sup>65</sup> Since they were banished from England, any Elizabethan Jews were not considered citizens either (Shapiro 11). Most English Jews converted to Christianity outwardly, though some likely maintained Jewish religious convictions in private. The most famous Elizabethan Jewish convert, Rodrigo Lopez, was Elizabeth’s personal physician—or he was until he was accused of attempting to poison her. He was subsequently convicted of the crime and executed in 1594 (Klause 69; Shapiro 3; Levin and Watkins 92).

Nonetheless, Jews, at least those in the play, do not recognize any particular sect of Christianity, or if they do, they do not mention it. Instead, they refer to their religious counterparts only as “Christians.” The play does not articulate the Catholic identity of its Christians, referring instead only to Jews and Christians. But the Christianity within the play is a decidedly Catholic form of Christianity, and the particularity of Catholicism in it matters. The evidence for the catholicity of *Merchant* Christians is understood but oftentimes goes unarticulated, as the generalized *Christian* term preferred in the play and the scholarly reception of the play’s Christianity both affirm. The play takes place in Venice, a city located in a staunchly Catholic Italian region. Portia is the character who most overtly alludes to a Catholic identity, insisting as she does that she would rather the Prince of Morocco “should shrive me than wive me” (1.2.128-129), that she will seclude herself in “a monastery two miles off” while Bassanio attends to the bond ordeal in Venice (3.4.31), and through her messenger, Stephano, that she has busied herself kneeling and praying “By holy crosses” during Bassanio’s absence (5.1.31). That Portia presents such Catholic forms of Christian expression and that none of the other characters bristle at such Catholic practice suggest strongly that the Christian characters are not just Christians. They are Catholics.

Perhaps because in sixteenth-century Venice, the Christian population is almost uniformly Catholic, the distinction need not be stated since, for all intents and purposes, to be Christian in this time and place meant to be Catholic. Except that it is not really sixteenth-century Venice. It is sixteenth-century England, with all of its attenuating sectarian complexities, trying to imagine sixteenth-century Venice. It is unlikely that reformed persons of any denomination, be it Church of England, Puritan, or other, would hear the word *Christian* uttered in the play and have understood it as an ecumenical term that encompassed all Christian forms.

Nor would they necessarily associate it with Catholicism. As Stephen Schillinger notes, “It is not self-evident that ideological circumstances would lead Shakespeare and his audiences to see themselves as being in a sympathetic position with Italian-Catholic aristocrats and plutocrats” (84). More than likely, each individual would have projected his own concept of “Christian” onto the play’s use of the term. Only Portia’s brief suggestions of Catholic practice and its Catholic setting definitively tie the Christianity of the play to the Catholic Church.

### **“Hard food”: Corpus Christi and conversion in *Merchant***

In order to see the traces of Corpus Christi within *Merchant*, we must first see the play’s catholicity. For this reason, I have attempted to examine closely the religious categories as they exist in the play. As a Jewish convert to Christianity, Jessica best demonstrates that these categories are often difficult to fix, especially the concept of Jewishness. And to some extent, the generalized “Christian” moniker works in the play precisely because it does not delve too deeply into the various nuances of Christian division. But the Catholic tenor of the play’s Christianity remains, as many *Merchant* scholars have documented. In addition to Brooke Conti’s comparison of the play to the Catholic Easter Vigil and John Klause’s comparison of the text with the writings of Father Southwell, Chris Jeffrey asks, “Is Shylock a Catholic?” and suspects that Shakespeare “saw that Judaism could serve as code for Catholicism, another persecuted religion; and, whereas Catholicism most emphatically was perceived as a threat by the authorities, Judaism was not, so it would be safe to evoke sympathy for a Jew on stage” (39). Some like James Shapiro remark on the Catholic rules regarding lending and usury that frame much of the play’s material exchanges (48). Ken Colston and Susannah Heschel even associate

some aspects of the play and the Real Presence of the Eucharist, a Catholic belief that strongly separates it from other Reformed sects of Christianity. Colston says that the “Holy Eucharist is thus a special figure of Belmont’s mysterious, miraculous wealth” (116) since the grand estate is a Christianized version of the “manna” of material possessions that Lorenzo references. And Heschel wonders that “if Christ is present sacramentally in the wine and wafer, is the Jewish body of Shylock still present in the converted, Christian Shylock, the Jew and Judaism incarnate in the Christian?” (412). The Catholic version of Christianity that the play presents has been well-noticed and eruditely examined.

However, none of these scholars has yet made the link between the play and the feast of Corpus Christi, even those who discuss the play’s eucharistic implications. But in a play that both obsesses about and oversimplifies religious categorization (Pastor 7), the inclusion of Corpus Christi reiterates the catholicity of the play’s Christianity just as it also hints at the Jewishness of the initial Corpus Christi at the Last Supper. While belief in transubstantiation and the Real Presence is a Catholic one, Holy Communion began as a Jewish practice, albeit a decidedly heterodox version of Judaism. Jesus Christ was Jewish, as were all of His apostles who received the bread and wine that Jesus claimed to be His own flesh and blood. Thus, the belief in transubstantiation is Catholic, but the flesh is Jewish. Shylock’s expressed hunger to feed on Christian flesh and for the acquisition of Antonio’s flesh makes a mockery of this belief just as it reiterates the Jewish foundation of Corpus Christi. Shylock dines with Christians in order that he may “feed upon/ The prodigal Christian” (2.5.15-16), an expression of personal hatred that still unwittingly calls to mind the feeding of Christianized Jewish flesh in the Eucharist.

In creating a Jew who demands the extraction of a pound of Christian flesh on which he wishes to feed, Shakespeare does not express antisemitism or dramatize an act of superfluous

butchery. Rather, he seems to channel the Jewish attempts at Host desecration often featured in eucharistic miracle plays, and in doing so, shatters a facile and unrealistic medieval narrative regarding Christian conversion. Jonathas from the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is motivated to prove the belief in the Real Presence false, disparaging the thought that “they seye how the prest dothe yt bynd,/ And be the might of hys word make yt [the Host] flesshe and blode” (lines 19-23). Likewise, Shylock is determined to demonstrate the worthlessness of Antonio’s proffered flesh. Shylock has already admitted that “A pound of man’s flesh taken from a man/ Is not so estimable, profitable neither,/ As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats” (1.3.164-166). Dismissing the value of Antonio’s body and denying himself the financial windfall that Portia has offered him in exchange for mercy, Shylock insists on his bond in the courtroom scene, a posture that echoes that of Jonathas who so casually dismisses the infinite value of the Holy Wafer. Jewish origins, transubstantiated flesh, and Christian conversion all converge in the Real Presence of Corpus Christi. Yet Shylock’s maniacal insistence on a pound of Christian flesh, an insistence that is denied him, then leads directly to his forced conversion. In Shakespeare’s unsettling rendition of a Corpus Christi miracle play, the Catholic state, the civil court, and the pressure of social opposition impose Christian conversion onto an otherwise unwilling Jew, a gravely sinful appropriation of personal agency. The purpose of the eucharistic miracle plays was to assure Christians that transubstantiation was true and that their Jewish brethren would easily convert to the “true faith” once they encountered Jesus in the consecrated Host. Shakespeare’s play disrupts this idealistic image and forces us instead to face Jewish hesitancy to conversion as well as the cold reality of state-sanctioned impositions of conversion onto non-Christian peoples such as Jews that the Catholic Church supposedly reviled.

The conversion aspects of *Merchant* become quite messy, and oftentimes they offend modern readers. Jessica's conversion at least appears genuine on the surface and seems to stem, if not from her own conviction, then at least from her romantic aspirations. But Shylock's conversion instead comes from Antonio's extra-legal fiat. John Gross outlines in minute detail the dubious legality of Shylock and Antonio's court proceedings, not the least of which is the fact that a "civil action is suddenly transformed into a criminal case, and the court, without in any way reconstituting itself, delivers a verdict and passes sentence" (77)—a sentence issued by the defendant against the plaintiff, no less. From this standpoint, the conversion foisted upon Shylock is unjust, superfluous, and anathema to Catholic teaching (91). Even Aquinas argued vehemently against the forced conversion of Jews, claiming that individual souls needed to come to Christian conversion of their own volition (*Summa* 2.10.8).<sup>66</sup> For all of these reasons and more, many *Merchant* scholars point to the forced conversion of Shylock as the preeminent example of antisemitism within the play (Langis 34; Russin 123).<sup>67</sup>

But, for all the critical wrangling about Shylock's forced conversion, it does not seem to bother Shylock as much as does his inability to extract his precious pound of Antonio's flesh. Once his conversion sentence has been passed down, Shylock seems resigned: "I am content" with it, he says (4.1.390). Though his later pronouncements that he is "not well" and that he wishes to leave the court presently (4.1.392-393) belie any sense of contentment, he inexplicably does little to resist this forced conversion. Earlier during the trial scene, Shylock firmly avers at various times, "I stand for judgment. Answer: shall I have it?," "I stand here for law," and even "By my soul, I swear/ There is no power in the tongue of man/ To alter me. I stay here on my bond" (4.1.103; 142; 238-240). These are statements of confidence and perhaps even sardonic

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<sup>66</sup> See also Yaffe, p. 12

<sup>67</sup> See also Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*



impertinence in the face of heated opposition. And yet, once cornered by the minutia of the law to which he desperately clings, he becomes so defeated that he willingly abandons the one characteristic that has defined his identity, his Jewishness, and he consents to Christian conversion. In Act III, he boldly declares, "I am a Jew," but by Act IV, he does little to preserve his Jewishness. Yaffe describes the difficulty in assessing Shylock's motives and self-identity, noting that, "Far from being a paragon representative of" Jewish law, Shylock "is knowingly inconsistent with regard to it, if only in order to 'feed fat the ancient grudge' he bears Antonio" (61), that he "stands, as it were, somewhere between Jewish law and Venetian law" (62). Jane Blanchard adds an alternative reading to Shylock's devolved character:

Since he operates best by fixed bonds of obligation, not by flexible bonds of affection, he becomes 'not well' after his shocking defeat and forced conversion because he has lost his sureties in law, in trade, and even in religion, and he does not know how to function without them. (209)

Shylock seems to be all of these possibilities at once. Once he loses his legal bond with Antonio, he has lost all bondedness with every Venetian sub-community. His only remaining family member, his daughter, has willingly eloped, converted, and exchanged his wedding ring for a monkey. The Christian society that has always viewed him as alien has been unmerciful to him beyond what the law commands, suggesting that they will continue to prevent him from total Christian communal acceptance despite his conversion. This same conversion, though against his volition, will also isolate him from the Jewish community that has always included him since it rejects their protections and the religious beliefs and practices that unite them. Unlike the Jews from medieval miracle plays, who become absorbed into the community through their new Christian identity and their shared Communion under Corpus Christi, Shylock disappears from the community entirely. In this way, Shakespeare defies the idea that the shared Communion of Christ will unite all persons under the bondedness of His flesh and blood. Shylock has already

relied too heavily on his bond with Antonio's flesh. His supposed bond through Christ's transubstantiated flesh sadly yields a similarly empty promise.

Shakespeare continues to hint at the problems regarding the promise of Corpus Christi, in that he erases some—though not all—traces of Christian conversion from the stage. One major distinction between *Merchant* and its medieval predecessors is the elimination of staged baptisms. In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, Jonathas and his fellow Jews are baptized on stage in the play's dramatic apotheosis. The stage directions explicitly state that, after the Jews have an encounter with the literal Christ, who has shape-shifted from the consecrated Host into Real Flesh and Blood, "*Here shall the bysshoppe crysten the Jewys with gret solempnyté*" (line 951). The Eucharist compels the Jews into a conversion of their own choosing. The Jew Malchus speaks for the entire Jewish group when he avows: "And therfor all we with on consent/ Knele onto yowr high sovereynté,/ For to be crystenyd ys owr intent" (948-950). Their baptism is not an incidental or casual event in the play. It is its didactic climax. Croxton attempts to reveal the Real Presence of the Eucharist and the supposedly universal desire for the Eucharist, especially amongst the unconverted, like the Jews.

But Shakespeare eliminates this pivotal moment from our viewing. Though he may do so because staging sacred rituals such as baptism and marriage was considered sacrilegious and therefore taboo on the Elizabethan stage, the fact remains that the moment of baptismal conversion shifts from being a play's main focus to a secretive and possibly unseemly practice from which the innocent eyes of the audience must be shielded. Jessica's conversion occurs at the same time as her hidden elopement. In fact, her marriage and her baptism are so hidden that both she and Lorenzo partake of them while disguised, she as a young male torchbearer, he in masque (2.4.1-2; 24). We do not witness their marriage or her baptism. Unlike Jonathas and his

men, Jessica never utters a desire for baptism per se, only marriage and its attending associations with the Eucharist. Likewise, her participation in these sacraments are shrouded in deceit and theft. Jane Blanchard summarizes Jessica's perfidy nicely: "Jessica breaks the bond of filial obedience and the convention of female modesty by eloping in the disguise of a boy in the company of a Christian husband and in possession of her father's jewels and ducats" (216). Her conversion occurs off-stage and through criminal means. Before their staged baptism, Jonathas et. al provide a poignant public confession of their crimes against the Eucharist and against other members of their community. Jessica and Lorenzo instead elope away from the eyes and ears of the audience and their fellow community members and punctuate their sacramental participation with sinful indulgence. In one final gesture of filial defiance, Jessica pawns the ring given to her father by her late mother (3.1.113-115). First, she engages in a marriage that she believes will separate her from her father permanently (2.5.58), and then she insults her now-estranged father's marriage in solemnizing her own. The sinfulness and self-absorption that surrounds Jessica's marriage and her baptism indicate that Shakespeare harbors some misgivings about the potential universal desire for conversion (Levin and Watkins 97)<sup>68</sup> and even the legitimacy of some conversions even after they have taken place.

If we are uneasy about the foundation of Jessica's conversion, we are at least certain that she has, indeed, converted and received baptism. We have no such textual assurances regarding her father's baptism. Following his loss at trial, Shylock asks permission to depart from the court and from the narrative, and the Duke and the playwright comply with his request (4.1.393-395). The Duke issues only one stern warning: "Get thee gone, but do it" (4.1.95), with "it" ostensibly referring to Shylock's baptism. Does Shylock ever actually receive baptism and convert?

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<sup>68</sup> Though here, Levin and Watkins refer to Jessica seeing her father as embodying these cultural stereotypes about Jews, their reference works likewise to support the idea that the play in general also reinforces such stereotypes.

Kenneth Gross (not to be confused with John Gross) asks a similar question: “Can we imagine the scene of his baptism?”<sup>69</sup> Gross must presume that it occurs because he then also asks us to “Imagine his first Communion, his putting into his mouth the body and blood of Christ” (109). I highlight Gross’s ruminations primarily because Gross discusses the direct connection between baptism and reception of the Eucharist. If Shylock receives baptism, it is a markedly Catholic one that will then compel him to partake of Communion. References to baptism within the play thus carry with them the added valence of Catholic conversion and the unifying Communion of Corpus Christi. A conversion to Catholicism means that Shylock will now finally feed on Christian and Jewish flesh through a reception of the Holy Eucharist. Would Shylock as a recipient of Christ’s flesh and blood encourage or horrify early modern Catholics? Levin and Watkins argue that Jessica’s “defection” from her father would have “relieved” Shakespeare’s audience since it “lessens the fear of the power of the Jewish man of the English Renaissance” (106). Perhaps Shakespeare’s omission of Shylock’s baptism and reception of the Eucharist would have provided a similar sense of relief. Shakespeare leaves us no clear answers regarding Shylock’s forced conversion, indicating that he had his own doubts about the possibility of true Jewish conversion and the supposedly universal appeal of the Holy Eucharist.

But beyond the unsettling images associated with Shylock’s baptism and first Communion, the fact remains that we presume these sacraments upon Shylock, a presumption that the text does not necessarily support. Gross may let his imagination run wild about such scenes precisely because Shakespeare denies us them. Rather than bringing him into the fold of

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<sup>69</sup> Brooke Conti likewise presumes that Shylock’s baptism takes place, claiming that “as with Jesus’s empty tomb, Shylock’s absence from act 5 might be said to be a precondition for belief in his transformation” (190). I believe this reading too closely aligns Shylock with Christ, but her point about a presumption of a supposed “transformation” within Shylock is certainly plausible.

the greater Christian community, Shylock's supposed conversion, a conversion that Grace Tiffany calls "a mockery of faith" (396),<sup>70</sup> essentially erases him from it. He never appears again on stage, and no character ever expresses any kind of reaction to his conversion one way or the other. John Gross believes Jessica might rejoice should she learn of her father's conversion but also admits that "her reaction lies beyond the confines of the play; and if she ever thinks of him with pity or regret, she does not give any sign of it" (74). Despite the continued presence of his daughter and his wealth that will help support future generations of his own flesh and blood, Shakespeare effectively cuts off any connection between Shylock and his progeny. He is at once very present and entirely absent from the future of the play and the other characters. Rather than ushering in a deepened relationship between the Jewish and Christian characters, the absorption of all into Christianity simply excises Jewishness from the community almost entirely. The medieval plays placed Jewish baptism directly in front of the audience to erase any ambiguity about its occurrence and its importance. Shakespeare's elimination of this critical moment<sup>71</sup> casts doubt on its occurrence as well as the hopes for Christian acceptance of Jewish converts.

Based on Jessica's sullied baptism and Shylock's possibly non-existent one, we may deduce that Shakespeare had his own doubts regarding true Jewish conversion. Lorenzo's reference to manna at the close of the play does hint at some potential reconciliation between the two, but it is only a hint and is open to different interpretation. He leaves us instead with the converted Jewish Catholicism of Jessica and the clown, Lancelot, who presents his own kind of Jewish-Catholic liminality. Though a baptized Christian, Lancelot also professes to be "the Jew's

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<sup>70</sup>Russin makes a similar point although with an important distinction. She reads Shylock's forced conversion as "an act of violence, not in any way an invitation for him to achieve either salvation or forgiveness" (123). In other words, the baptism, should it take place actually has no real spiritual effect. While her reading effectively eliminates the powers that God may exercise in his baptism, the only real powers worth mentioning, it also does speak to the dismissive attitude that many Christians may have had regarding the efficacy of Jewish baptism.

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Marlowe likewise eliminated an on-stage baptism from his *The Jew of Malta*.

man” who fears he will, to borrow Shapiro’s term, “turn Jew” (7) should he continue in Shylock’s service (2.2.85;107). His later assertion that he must “bid my old master the Jew to sup tonight with my new master the Christian” (2.4.18-19) demonstrates that Lancelot exists in between the two faiths and commits a kind of conversion of sorts when he transfers his employment from Shylock to Bassanio (2.2.136-143).

In shifting from a Jewish to a Christian master, Lancelot engages in many of the same behaviors as Jessica. Aside from the movement from Judaism towards Christianity, Lancelot and Jessica both deceive and ultimately abandon their respective fathers, choices that attempt to erase their personal ancestry and origins. Like the problematic Jessica, Lancelot is a figure whom the audience does not necessarily want to emulate. He is a clown. Berger rightfully observes that “It says something about the culture of ‘Venice’ that *Merchant*’s only instance of conscience-driven inner conflict [leaving Shylock’s employment] is consigned to the clown and staged as something to be laughed at” (16). We may like Lancelot, but we do not take him seriously. Neither do the other characters in the play. Lancelot does not leave Shylock’s home secretly under the cover of darkness, like Jessica does. Shylock has offered Lancelot to Bassanio, openly and deliberately (2.2.136-140). And upon his departure, Jessica calls him “a merry devil” who only “Didst rob” her “hellish” house “of some taste of tediousness” (2.3.2-3). Her language is a series of negatives that serves only to say that Lancelot’s presence made her house less bad than it otherwise would have been, a tepid compliment indeed. He is likeable, but he is still a clown. Within *Merchant*, the clown converts, the thievish Jessica converts, and the maniacally flesh-obsessed Shylock converts under legal duress. In dramatizing such examples of Jewish-to-Christian conversion, Shakespeare seems either to laugh or cringe at the prospect of Jewish conversion. While this stance need not be anti-Semitic in nature, it does doubt the possibility of

the kind of wholehearted and solemn conversion that the Corpus Christi miracle plays made seem so natural.

Despite the fact that the Christianity presented in *Merchant* is Catholic and therefore always carries with it the added valence of Eucharistic desire and adoration, the play cannot seem to settle upon what Jewishness is and what separates it from the Catholic faith that descends directly from it. The Jewishness of Christ and the catholicity of Corpus Christi are both entirely indivisible and entirely irreconcilable for many early modern Christians of various denominations. And just as the play cannot fully comprehend the imbrication of the Jewish and the Catholic faiths, the audience of predominantly Protestant persuasions<sup>72</sup> cannot fully embrace the homage to the Corpus Christi feast that the play makes. Despite the real presence of Corpus Christi within *Merchant*, Shakespeare simply does not present us with a clear, traditional association between the feast, the Catholic Church, and the Venetian Christian community. While he may wish to honor the abandoned feast through his play, he does not allow the Corpus Christi elements to force us into any conclusions regarding Jewishness, religious conversion, and the Catholic Church's supposed universal appeal.

## Conclusion

Of all of William Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* perhaps most strongly resists traditional dramatic categorization. It contains scant traces of comedic characteristics since the marriages are hurried and oftentimes obscured. And as Harry Berger, Jr. comically

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<sup>72</sup> David K. Anderson cogently pushes back against the modern scholar's tendency to particularize the religious identities of the early modern English theatre's audience, preferring instead "to take the audience as a whole—albeit a whole made of diverse parts" (*cf* 10). His point is an apt one, but it is safe to presume at least a preponderance of Protestant sympathies by the late 1590s.

observes, “If *Merchant* is not a tragedy, it’s because nobody manages to kill or to die before the play ends” (41). Likewise the play does not comfortably accommodate traditional, orthodox religious categorizations. What, according to *Merchant*, is Christianity? Is it Catholicism? Is it non-Jewishness? Are there not also traces of a Reformed element which eschews dogmatic “fleshly” ritual and instead encourages Antonio’s Christ-like sacrificial posture, whereby a man may “bestowe his life for his frendes” (Jn 15:13)? Indeed, all of the various characters’ attempts to eradicate Jewishness and to adopt Christianity serve only to heighten the spectral presence of latent Judaism even further. While this paradox reiterates the Jewish origins of Christianity more generally and the feast of Corpus Christi in particular, most early modern Christians of all stripes would have blanched at the reminder of Christ’s undeniable Jewishness and Christianity’s own Jewish ancestry. Jessica describes Lorenzo’s role in her conversion in a most unsettling way: “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” (5.1.19-22). While Christianity of some form may be the “one, true faith,” the conversion of the Jews oftentimes came through unlawful and duplicitous means. For being a universal truth, some Christian missionaries indeed “stole” converted souls with “ne’er a true” word uttered. Christ’s truth apparently required additional unsavory help to appeal to non-Christian minds and hearts.

Shakespeare’s play does not necessarily sidestep the ugliness that too often accompanied medieval and early modern Christian conversion, hence the difficulty many have in calling the play a comedy in the traditional sense. However, it does also present some sense of hope, both for the converted and the future of integrated living (Rosenshield 34). Though many critics have wondered at the dramatic purpose of Act V since Act IV so adequately resolves the major



conflict of the play,<sup>73</sup> Act V certainly provides the time when “the three newlywed couples...each for the moment at odds, soon become reconciled” (Yaffe 9), a culmination of communal tolerance and stability for which there have already been signs. For these signs, we may most notably look to the rather apathetic Christian reception of Jessica and Lorenzo’s act of miscegenation and Lancelot’s impregnation of the Mooress servant (3.5.35-37) (Ungerer 113). Even the Prince of Morocco, a figure that the audience does not cheer but likewise does not necessarily scorn, “does not conform,” according to Gustav Ungerer, “to the Elizabethan stage stereotype of the villainous black Moor” (104). Though modern suspicions of the play and its potentially anti-Semitic elements are valid and worth considering,<sup>74</sup> the ending of the play does offer the hope of some level of communal acceptance, if only in the far reaches of the idyllic Belmont.

And yet, this sense of potential acceptance likewise accords with the play’s homage to the traditional observance of Corpus Christi. Though imperfectly, the play’s struggle with universal conversion therefore also struggles with the supposedly universal table of the Holy Eucharist. It addresses the implications of what Saint Paul says to the Corinthians: “The cuppe of bleffyng which we bleffe, is it not partaking of the blood of Christe? The bread which we breake is it not the partaking of the body of Christe? For we that are many, are one bread and one body, in as much as we all are partakers of one bread” (1 Cor 10:16-17). Paul claims that all are called to the banquet of the Lord, and the banquet of the Lord on earth is the banquet of Holy Communion. However, there were many, including observant Jews, who either rejected this call or were forced into accepting it through intimidation and violence. The Corpus Christi celebration, founded originally to assuage Christian doubts regarding the Real Presence in the

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<sup>73</sup> See Conti, p. 178 and Heschel, p. 430

<sup>74</sup> See Berger, p. 31 and Heschel, p. 410

Eucharist, in many ways then reiterates these same doubts. Shakespeare seems to admit in the play the difficulty of Catholic eucharistic theology as well as what to do with those whose personal and religious convictions deny it. Perhaps Shakespeare believed that because of the suppression of celebrations such as Corpus Christi, Reformed Christianities simply could not appeal to Jews such as Shylock. This play gives us much on which to chew regarding flesh, food, conversion, and intra-communal relationships. We do not have the tidy, unifying closure that the medieval miracle play provided for its audience. Instead, we are left with the mere hope for happy Catholic marriages and the memory of a Jewish presence that Belmont will not welcome and that Venice tries so hard to expel.

SECTION II:

Shakespeare, the English Throne, and the Church

## CHAPTER THREE:

### “The death of kings”: *Richard II* and Destabilized Kingship

Amidst its mellifluous language and its decidedly non-violent dramatization of deposition, one of the aspects of William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* that has most fascinated scholars is that it supposedly manifests a lingering tension between medieval and early modern philosophies regarding kingship. Many argue that the greatest division subsisting between King Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke is that Richard cleaves to a medieval, traditional kingship philosophy that is inextricably linked to Christian kingship and that believes that his divine appointment, confirmed by holy anointing, cannot be erased. For his part, Bolingbroke ushers in a new philosophy of English kingship, one less rooted in the “pageantry and ritual” that “reigned” in the medieval era (Geckle 115) and that is more focused on the inherent and irradicable powers bestowed upon kings by the nature of their very beings.<sup>75</sup> Though he perhaps oversimplifies, Henry E. Jacobs claims this new early modern understanding of kingship “provides an exemplum in the exercise of power which has no basis in law whatsoever” (3) since it diverges so dramatically from the ritualized order that Richard’s medieval kingship provides. The medieval philosophy valued the external markings of kingship: the crown, the anointing, and their associations with Catholic sacramentalism. In perhaps the most renowned treatment of medieval philosophy, kingship, and *Richard II*, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Ernst H. Kantorowicz charts the medieval theological progression that at first linked the English king with Christ’s kingship but that eventually imposed upon the English king the notion of Christ’s *corpus mysticum*. Eric L. Santner summarizes that this progression “allowed for the aggregation and

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<sup>75</sup> For his introduction to the *Richard II* monograph, *Richard II: New Critical Essays*, Jeremy Lopez identifies this controversy as one of the main topics driving current *Richard* conversations (6). He also reminds us that much of the political themes of the play apply much more aptly to Elizabeth than to Richard (1).

sacramentalization of all manner of secular entities, including, above all, the state and its various offices and institutions” (39). In other words, medieval thought applied the universal nature of Christ’s kingship to English kingship, and since Catholic sacraments were the ritualized vehicles through which humans could assuredly receive Christ’s grace, it made sense to try and “sacramentalize” English kingship. I will discuss later the impossibility of this sacramentalization, an impossibility that others, including Kantorowicz, note at length. The main point here is that medieval England valued the external imposition of holiness and grace onto kingship through rituals such as anointing and the reception of Holy Communion.

The early modern period brought about a shift from a focus on the external infusion of holiness to the inherent holiness of God’s appointed. While the rituals associated with coronation continued, those who received them and those who witnessed them oftentimes valued them more as traditional rituals and not necessarily as vehicles of grace and holiness. Early modern England had generally grown suspicious of such rituals as “idolatry and scam” (Siemon 53), due in large part to the proliferation of Reformed theologies that eradicated five of the seven Catholic sacraments and that openly denied the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. While Alice Hunt’s book, *The Drama of Coronation*, challenges the presumption that Tudor coronation ceremonies were completely divested of sacramentalism, she too admits that they had evolved enough from the medieval model that Elizabeth used her coronation procession as “a spectacular piece of political theatre, knowingly disregarding the empty power of religious ceremony in favour of a public theatrical apparatus of royal power” (3).<sup>76</sup> Though the coronation ceremony was still invaluablely sacred in the sense that it marked a king with both civil and ecclesiastical authority, there is little doubt that the *sacramental* nature of the ritual had altered considerably. A

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<sup>76</sup> See also Albert Roll’s *The Theory of the King’s Two Bodies in the Age of Shakespeare*.

king's association with Christ was now thought to have come from within himself, an association that the coronation ceremony formally recognized but did not enact into being. This belief in the inherent Christological nature of the king (and not just the office) led directly to a general belief in the divine right of kings. God revealed His desire for a particular person to be king by having that person born into the position of primogenitary inheritance. While he errs in deposing Richard and prematurely acceding the throne, Bolingbroke manifests this natural holiness through his position as Richard's heir-apparent, the righteousness of his cause against Richard, as well as what Raphael Falco calls his natural "charisma," an attribute closely associated with royalty.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, these two philosophies regarding kingship are rather similar, and they are both almost comically tautological. The king is holy because he is anointed, and he is anointed because he is holy. Nonetheless, the nuances between these two philosophies factor significantly in *Richard II*. Because the early modern philosophy is predicated on the inherent divinity of an English king, it at once affirms the eternal divinity of Richard's kingship. Yet it also seems to prefer Bolingbroke's natural leadership over Richard's anointed ineptitude.<sup>78</sup> For this reason, scholars have grappled with the location of power within the play, with the moment that power is transmitted between the two men, and whether Richard can ever truly separate himself from his kingly identity. Falco argues that Richard can never separate himself or be separated from his

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<sup>77</sup> Determining Bolingbroke's royal appeal and his right to rule has proven difficult. To what degree can ambitious instincts and natural leadership manifest God's will? Ben Taggie summarizes the ambiguity of the problem when he points out Bolingbroke "has erred not in his quest for power, but because he disrupted divine order" (21). Merrix and Levin expound on this same topic, claiming that both Edward II and Richard II are so incompetent in their royal leadership that they "must give way to more capable rulers" (4).

<sup>78</sup> Rebecca Lemon attempts to explain the apparent contradiction, stating that "[T]he play does not represent this political model of the divine right of kings neutrally. Shakespeare stages this doctrine as a prop for corrupt kingship, displaying a limit-case for divine right theory as subjects consent to rule by a murderous sovereign. He thus exposes a contradiction at the center of this political theory: divine right damages rather than protects subjects and kings" (256).

kingliness (79). Invoking Foucauldian notions of signifier and signified, Patricia Canning decides that the signified concept of the King “subsumes” the kingly signifier of Richard’s corporeality, effectively arguing as well that a separation of the two would be impossible (16). Richard is king, and the king is Richard.

Except when he is not. Kantorowicz calls the medieval legal recognition of “the King’s two bodies,” the notion that a king has a personal *corpus naturalis* while at the same time occupying the enduring body of the *corpus regis*, a “problem” and a “fiction” (7; 23). In discussing the ways in which Richard attempts to construct a new identity for himself after his deposition, Robert P. Merrix and Carole Levin admit that such a new identity is, in fact, possible (4). Though he hedges considerably with repeated use of the word *if*, Christopher Pye ultimately accepts that Richard may unking himself, at least in theory (83; 85). And in a scholarly case of splitting the proverbial baby, Donovan Sherman has determined that “the deposition does not cleave one body from another but locks the king into the space between bodies and roles” (33). Shakespeare’s dramatization of the fall of King Richard and the rise of King Henry IV has generated many different interpretations regarding the essence of kingship, and the play itself seems to tolerate nearly all of them all at once. From watching or reading *Richard*, it is very difficult to determine where and when one king and one kingship ends and another begins.

However, I contend that the reason that determining kingship and kingly essence in this play is so difficult is not due to the differences between medieval and early modern kingly philosophies. The purpose of Shakespeare’s play is not to dramatize these differences. Instead, it dramatizes for us the inherent instability of Christian kingship more generally. The medieval attempt to associate kingship with holy ritual and the early modern belief in the inherent holiness of the king both tacitly make the same admission: that the kingly office itself must be carefully

controlled and contained. I believe that the play reveals Shakespeare's own skepticism of stable kingship through the problematic rise of Edward III and the troubled Lancastrian dynasty, through the impossible association between kingly anointing and Catholic sacramentalism, and through Richard's active abdication. The office of the English king refuses to stabilize underneath Richard, both in the events showcased during the play and those that precede and succeed it. The instability of other English monarchs, those to whom the play alludes and those within Shakespeare's own time, further underscores the relatively unstable nature of English kingship and highlights for us the impossibility of stable kingship in practical form.

### **The troubling Plantagenet history and the tainted Lancastrian legacy**

Though he selects Richard II to evidence the instability of kingship (as he does Kings John and Henry VI, in their respective plays), Shakespeare makes it clear that Richard does not initiate this instability and that it continues long after Richard's death. One of the key ways that Shakespeare illustrates the unstable condition of English kingship is through the frequent references made to Richard's grandfather and royal predecessor, Edward III. Though he died approximately twenty years before the setting of the play, the spectral presence of King Edward III acts as a unifying figure for both Richard's and Bolingbroke's supporters. Various characters reference him either directly or indirectly seven times, using Edward III as a synecdoche for the halcyon days of his fifty-year reign. Although military failures and political malaise plagued Edward's final years on the throne, England achieved many years of military success and parliamentary development under his leadership (Harriss 66). Raphael Holinshed claims in his chronicles (1587) that "Examples of bountious liberalitie and great clemencie he showed manie,



and the same verie notable; so in maner alone amongst other kings was found to be one, subject to none, or at the least, to verie light and small faults” (706). And of course, Edward was father to Gaunt, York, and Gloucester (among others) and as much a grandfather to Bolingbroke as he was to Richard.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the image of Edward not only binds many of the characters through a common ancestor. It also harkens back to a time in recent memory when hereditary succession coincided with strong, effective leadership.

The references to Edward within *Richard* come from various speakers with various motives, but they all position Edward as a paragon of English kingliness. The Duchess of Gloucester alludes to Edward in order to guilt Gaunt into avenging Gloucester’s death, reminding Gaunt that her murdered husband was “One vial full of Edward’s sacred blood” and that “all the precious liquor spilt/ Is hack’d down.../ By envy’s hand and murder’s bloody ax” (1.2.17-21). Her allusion not only appeals to Gaunt’s sense of familial loyalty, it lionizes Edward as the ultimate victim of her husband’s death. She frames this image of “spilt” blood not as belonging to Gloucester but as belonging to Edward, making Edward the primary focus of her husband’s assassination instead of her husband. Gaunt and Richard then continue the Duchess’s lionization of Edward in the following exchange:

**Gaunt:** O, had thy grandsire with a prophet’s eye  
Seen how his son’s son should destroy his sons,  
From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,  
Deposing thee before thou wert possessed...

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<sup>79</sup> Falco claims that because Bolingbroke “is not the first son of a first son and therefore does not have the same mystified claim to the family’s charismatic endowment,” “he must count on integrating a combination of destabilizing elements with the highly stable idea of a kingly office to effect the political homeostasis he implicitly promises when he ‘laieth challenge or claime to the crown’” (96). In other words, he must argue for stabilized English kingship just as he attempts to upend it, a very delicate balance, to be sure.

**Richard:** ...Wert thou not brother to Edward's son,  
This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head  
Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders

**Gaunt:** O, spare me not, my brother Edward's son,  
For that I was his father Edward's son!  
That blood already, like a pelican,  
Hast thou tapped out and drunkenly caroused.  
My brother Gloucester...  
May be a precedent and witness good  
That thou respect'st not spilling Edward's blood. (2.1.104-131)

This vehement argument on Gaunt's deathbed gives us a dizzying rhetorical illustration of a family tree whereby every branch is not necessarily referred to by name but by its connection to Edward III. Even Gaunt's reference to his brother and Richard's father, Edward the Black Prince ("O, spare me not, my brother Edward's son") recollects Edward III more than it does the deceased Black Prince since it is interpolated between several references to Edward the father, not Edward the son. One final reference to Edward III is made when Bolingbroke dispatches Northumberland to approach Richard at Flint Castle. Northumberland diffuses the tension of the current rebellious siege and attempts to temper Richard's ire by appealing to the names of the now-passed Gaunt and to Richard's "royal grandsire's bones" (3.3.106). These references to Edward III are scattered throughout the play, bringing the characters' and the audience's minds to the past just as they must focus on the problems of the present.

Although many of the characters wax nostalgic about Edward's reign, Shakespeare does not necessarily allude to him so frequently in order to recall the glory days of the past. Rather

than representing the ideal manifestation of kingly leadership and monarchical stability, Edward III actually brings to the forefront all of the instabilities that undergird the kingly office. Edward III acceded to the throne in 1327, despite the fact that his father, Edward II, was still alive. According to Holinshed, in Parliament, “it was concluded and fullie agreed by all the states (for none durst speake to the contrarie) that for diuerse articles which were put vp against the king, he was not worthie longer to reigne, and therefore should be deposed, and withal they willed to haue his sonne Edward duke of Aquitaine to reigne in his place” (584). Thus, Edward III rose to power prematurely because of the deposition of his father. Edward II’s wife, Isabella of France, and her lover, Roger Mortimer instigated this deposition and may have even orchestrated the death of Edward II, which occurred shortly after his formal abdication (Ormrod 177-8). While Edward III was guiltless in the acts of insurrection against his father and may have ruled England more effectively than either his father or Richard II, the relative success of his reign does not undo the unsavory circumstances surrounding his coronation.

Christopher Marlowe was the first early modern playwright to dramatize these events, penning *Edward II* in 1592. Shakespeare quickly followed suit, writing *Richard II* just three years later. The similarities between the plays are remarkable, especially in their respective abdication scenes. Scholars as far back as Charles Lamb have noted the similarities (Skura 41), and many have fixated on Shakespeare’s purpose in modeling his play after *Edward II*. I borrow the word “modeling” from Maurice Charney, who calls *Edward II* “a model or prototype” for *Richard II* and argues that “Shakespeare is trying valiantly to outdo Marlowe and to go him one better” (32). Though ultimately focusing on the differences subsisting between the plays, Robert A. Logan concedes that Shakespeare opportunistically imitated Marlowe’s deposition structure in the hopes of matching the theatrical success of *Edward II* (108). Merrix and Levin suggest that

Shakespeare follows Marlowe's example because both playwrights want to draw a likeness between the process of abdication and the process of kingly death (2). Taking a more skeptical approach and criticizing some modern critics' "embarrassing" homosocial fantasies concerning Marlowe and Shakespeare (120), Paul Menzer downplays the supposed influential relationship subsisting between the two playwrights and argues instead that, if anything, *Richard II's* awkward imitation of *Edward II* actually "generates the play's critical and theatrical heritage" (118). In fashioning *Richard* after *Edward*, Shakespeare undoubtedly took advantage of Marlowe's basic narrative structure as well as the lesson in recent political history that his play provides. However, it also stands to reason that Shakespeare has intuited a deeper connection between the two men and their respective stories. In mirroring Marlowe, Shakespeare reminds us that the rupture of Bolingbroke's deposition was preceded by the rupture of Roger Mortimer's deposition. In Mortimer's case, the deposition resulted in the rise of the heir-apparent, Edward III. Thus, the deposition did not so much redirect primogenitary inheritance as expedite it. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's allusions to Edward III and his conscientious imitation of Marlowe's play consistently remind the audience that Richard is not alone in losing his kingly office. They may even hint that Mortimer's successful coup bolstered Bolingbroke while he planned to wage his own. The Edwardian-Plantagenet history that lays the foundation for Richard's own reign set a rocky precedent of monarchical dissolution, noble opportunism, and royal overthrow. In some ways then, Richard's reign was doomed before it even began.

And the history of Richard's reign prior to the events of his own play similarly reflects the instability of his tenure. The play makes much of the recent murder of Thomas of Gloucester, but the precariousness of Richard's kingship goes much further back, extending all the way to Richard's nonage and the venal officiousness of his uncles, the supposed sacred vessels of

Edwardian blood. When Edward III died in 1377, his grandson Richard was only ten years old. Richard's own father, Edward the Black Prince and the heir-apparent to Edward III, had died from illness the year before. The Black Prince's death immediately shifted the line of succession to Richard, though he was too young to rule. However, three of Edward III's sons were still alive and well: John of Gaunt, York, and Gloucester.<sup>80</sup> Richard's relationships with his uncles vacillated considerably during this time. The Lords Appellant, a group of influential magnates headed by Gloucester, encouraged the "Wonderful Parliament" of 1386 to execute some of Richard's preferred nobles, including the Earl of Suffolk. The Lords Appellant then defeated the royal army in a skirmish at Radcot Bridge, a battle instigated by the royal army in a failed attempt to reestablish Richard's kingly authority. Holinshed summarizes Richard's reaction to this military defeat thusly:

When the king then perceyued himselfe to be enclosed on eche side, he talked eftfoones with the Archbilhop and his affociates that were Messengers betwixt him and the Lordes, willing them to declare to the Lordes that he would be contented to treate with them in reasonable order, whervpon they required that he should on the morow next ensuing come vnto Westminster, where he should vnderstand their demaundes. (1.12.1)

According to historian Miriam Rubin, this humiliating defeat meant that "Richard was as good as deposed for some three days," and survived only because "no credible alternative emerged to his rule" (130). Though not necessarily incompetent, Richard was young and his personal magnate preferences led other powerful factions to oppose him. He also did not have the general support of his people as a guard against insurrection. Richard's reign continued but so did distrust and subversive dissent.

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<sup>80</sup> In addition to Edward the Black Prince, Edward III was preceded in death by his second son, Lionel of Antwerp (1338-1368).

In addition to Gloucester, the Lords Appellant included amongst its members Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray, and though they reconciled with Richard soon after the melee at Radcot Bridge, their earlier disloyalty to Richard factors heavily into their behaviors in the play, especially the opening scene. This scene features Bolingbroke and Mowbray accusing one another of murdering Gloucester, eventually agreeing to a trial-by-combat in order to determine the guilty party. The events dramatized in this scene take place over a decade after the incident at Radcot Bridge, but Bolingbroke reminds the audience about his and Mowbray's membership amongst the Lords Appellant when he proudly professes, "Come I appellant to this princely presence" (1.1.34). It is important to note that Richard himself likely authorized his uncle, Gloucester's assassination. In some ways then, the identity of the murderer matters little. The play seems to finger Mowbray as the culprit since Richard refuses to moderate Mowbray's permanent banishment although he lessens Bolingbroke's banishment from ten years to six.<sup>81</sup> Regardless of culpability, the recent mortal assault against Gloucester and the distant uprising of the Lords Appellant in 1386 all remind us that Richard's kingly authority had been challenged for decades prior to his deposition and that his entire reign seems to have been plagued with intrafamilial suspicion and threats against his monarchical power. The Lords Appellant tested Richard long before he reached majority. Bolingbroke's impending threat showcased in the play merely continues this pattern.

Like the history regarding Edward II, the history regarding the Lords Appellant and the challenges Richard faced early in his minority may have been recently dramatized in *Thomas of Woodstock*, a play whose author, publication date, and even official title have eluded experts but whose inclusion in the MS Egerton 1994 manuscript suggests that it was performed with some

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<sup>81</sup> See also Geckle, p. 114.

regularity during the Jacobean period. The play focuses on the titular character, Thomas of Woodstock (Gloucester), but it likewise exhibits the actions of the Lords Appellant *vis-à-vis* Richard, convincing some scholars to give it the alternative title *Richard the Second, Part One* (Corbin and Sedge 4). Even if granting that this title stretches the connection between the two plays too much, the history presented in *Thomas of Woodstock* cannot be divorced from the events presented in *Richard*, and the presumed popularity of *Thomas of Woodstock* gives us confidence that, depending on when the play was actually written and performed, the audience may have brought with them the knowledge of this history when they went to see *Richard II* or vice versa. Despite the strong connection between these two plays and the events they showcase, however, few *Richard* scholars remark on the history of the Lords Appellant or on the allusions to it within *Richard*.<sup>82</sup> Bradley J. Irish is an exception, using the connection between these histories as the focus for his article, “Writing Woodstock: The Prehistory of *Richard II* and Shakespeare's Dramatic Method.” Irish contends that *Richard* directs its gaze both forward and backward, looking ahead towards the Lancastrian dynasty but also turning to look back at the rise and fall of the Plantagenet dynasty, particularly at Richard's early part in its downfall. Irish insists that the murder of Gloucester “was not a discrete event” either in the play or in the chronicle source material, that it manifests the tenuous relationship between Richard and his uncles, as well as the paranoia that pervaded the court under such unpredictable conditions (132; 134). Irish pays particular attention to Gaunt's deathbed conversation with Richard, whereby Gaunt laments to Richard:

O, had thy grandsire with a prophet's eye

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<sup>82</sup> Though he does not discuss the tumult within Richard's minority either, Lopez does at least point out that, “Shakespeare seems almost to have sought to erase the historical record: there is no mention of Richard's minority kingship, the rebellion of 1381, the Merciless Parliament of 1388, Richard's first wife, or the rise and fall of Robert de Vere” (16).

Seen how his son's son should destroy his sons,  
From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,  
Deposing thee before thou wert possessed,  
Which art possessed now to depose thyself. (2.1.104-108)

Irish calls this passage a “vision of preemptive deposition” that “suggests the extent to which King Richard has warped the natural order” (146). Yet, the “preemptive deposition” comes not just from Gaunt, but from Richard himself. Richard insists in the opening scene that he will remain an impartial adjudicator of the trial-by-combat, assuring Mowbray: “Mowbray, impartial are our eyes and ears./ *Were [Bolingbroke] my brother, nay, my kingdom's heir*” (1.1.115-116; emphasis mine). From the very beginning of the play, Richard already foreshadows Bolingbroke's impending usurpation and the kingship of Henry IV. Thus, Shakespeare unites the past, the present, and the future. The history between Richard and the Lords Appellant indicates that Richard's kingly position was always tenuous. Even in the opening scenes of the play, when his kingship appears most assured, Richard alters this surety and prefigures his early demise by calling Bolingbroke his “kingdom's heir.” Though Bolingbroke actually is the heir-apparent to the childless Richard, Richard's mentioning of it suggests that he has already entertained the thought of Bolingbroke's takeover, and the end of the play vindicates this premonition. Richard's power has always ever been unsettled from the very moment of his coronation, and the twenty years of his reign that precede the play, a history that the play continuously brings to the forefront, underscores this unsettledness.

Just as the beginning of the play recalls the history of Richard's reign, the end of the play showcases his death and provides a brief glimpse of Henry IV's reign, a glimpse that further indicates the permanent instability of English kingship. It makes plain the fact that King Henry



IV's deposition of Richard and his tacit approval of Richard's assassination will tarnish the Lancastrian dynasty, a tarnish that most *Richard* audience members will know eventually devolves into the bitter royal squabble known as the War of the Roses. I will return later to the ending of the play and its role in exposing the instability of kingship. However, long before the close of Act V and the coronation of Henry, the play hints at trouble within Henry's reign and threats against his own power through his alliance with Henry Percy. Shortly after the death of Gaunt and Bolingbroke's rebellious return from exile, Bolingbroke gains a key ally in the Earl of Northumberland and his son, Percy. Upon their introduction to one another, Percy avows to Bolingbroke: "My gracious lord, I tender you my service,/ Such as it is, being tender, raw, and young,/ Which elder days shall ripen and confirm/ To a more approvèd service and desert" (2.3.41-44). Percy, later known as Hotspur, here offers to Bolingbroke a sincere offer of military allegiance, a critical offer from a nobleman who lives along the Scottish borderlands. And for the purposes of *Richard*, Percy holds true to this promise. However, he eventually withdraws his support and issues his own challenge to Henry's throne four years later. Shakespeare uses Percy's rebellion as the focus for the next installment of the *Henriad*, *Henry IV*, Part I, a play that ends with Percy's death at Henry's hand.

But here in the early stages of his own rebellion, long before they turn against one another, Bolingbroke gladly accepts Percy's offered love like love, telling his northern ally that "as my fortune ripens with love,/ It shall be still thy true love's recompense./ My heart this covenant makes, my hand thus seals it" (2.3.48-50), and the stage directions call for a meaningful handshake between the two. The language the men employ in forming this quasi-sacrosanct alliance is important. Bolingbroke embraces Percy's loyalty, claiming that their declaration here a "covenant makes" and that their handshake "seals." While the word *covenant*

originally meant “military oath,” within a play that attempts to conflate the civil and the religious, its use also elevates their promise from an earthly one to a spiritual one. In the Old Testament, *covenant* is used to describe the compact that God makes with Abraham, and many church fathers therefore used the word *covenant* in their writings about baptismal vows (Ott 325). In *Richard*, the word may also be applied to sacramental marriage, whereby two persons echo a sentiment similar to Bolingbroke’s, that “My heart this covenant makes.” The Catholic Church began formally recognizing matrimony as a sacrament in the early Middle Ages. While I will discuss later Richard’s failed attempts to link kingship with Catholic sacramentalism, this handshake between Percy and Bolingbroke provides another example of failed sacramental imitation whereby the two men pledge a faithful, covenantal relationship to one another and seal their vows through the external sign of a handshake.<sup>83</sup> Even Percy’s promise that his later years shall “confirm” the nascent loyalty that he now pledges to Bolingbroke calls to mind the sacrament of confirmation that, among other things, “is the perfection of Baptismal grace” (Ott 366). This formalized alliance between Bolingbroke and Percy has thus a strategic value as well as a supposedly spiritual permanence.

The link between a covenant, the Old Testament, and Catholic sacramentalism reinforces the seriousness of the pledges that Percy and Bolingbroke make to one another. All signs indicate that both men recognize the gravity of their mutual promise and, more importantly, express intention to keep this promise in the future. Percy promises that his future actions will “confirm” his loyalty, while Bolingbroke promises that he will reward such loyalty after his “fortune ripens.” And yet, even this covenantal exchange fails to bear fruit. In other words, it really is not covenantal at all. Henry infuriates Percy by refusing to ransom Percy’s brother-in-law, Edward

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<sup>83</sup> Catholic sacramental theology believes that an external sign is a constitutive feature of a sacrament (Ott 326), so the handshake in this instance is important in order to view this moment as an attempt at Catholic sacramental ritual.

Mortimer (*Henry IV*, Part I 1.1.36-61), prompting Percy to renege on his promises of military allegiance and to engage in his own act of rebellion against the crowned Henry, an act of rebellion that leads ultimately to his death. In fact, their alliance is so vacuous an exercise that Robert M. Schuler refers to it as an “unholy bargain,” akin to Bolingbroke’s acquisition of the throne through military might and not the election of God (192). Because the later history subsisting between these two men is so well known to the audience, their eventual war with one another heavily shapes the way that this scene in *Richard* is understood. The two are never truly aligned because they are always ever at war with one another. The audience will not deny the future that it knows and so will deny the sincerity of the pledges they make to one another in *Richard*. As such, the threats against Henry as king figure significantly even here, long before he ascends the throne. Bolingbroke, the man who so easily wrestles the throne from Richard, must fight constantly in order to keep the throne for himself once he is king. His own power is never firmly settled, even after his coronation and the death of his predecessor.

The ill-fated attempt at creating a covenant and a quasi-sacramental ritual out of their alliance casts doubt on the sincerity of political alliances and the weight of a human promise. It also prefigures the end of Act V when King Henry truly begins to feel the severity of deposition and regicide. In this scene, Northumberland and Percy initially join Henry on stage, a tableau that acts as a transition between *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, Part I. As such, it cannot help but also bring us back to the future, a future of broken promises and violent disagreement. Flanking Henry with those who will soon rise against him impresses upon us the precariousness of Henry’s own reign and his own power. But Henry’s personal pathos makes this closing scene most remarkable. Faced with the corpse of Richard, Henry then vocalizes the impossibility of his position: “Though I did wish him dead,/ I hate the murderer, love him murdered” (5.6.39-40).

His concomitant desire for and abhorrence of Richard's death reveals the impermanence of kingly sacralization in general as well as the unstable foundation upon which his own kingship will be built. He at once calls for one to "rid me of this living fear" (5.4.2) and at the same time punishes the one who fulfills it, denying the assassin Exton his "good word" and "princely favor" and then condemning him to exile: "With Cain go wander through the shades of night,/ And never show thy head by day nor light" (5.6.42-44). Though Exton has already presumed that his "deed is chronicled in hell" (5.5.116), it is no more than the actualization of Henry's own desires. In a perverse show of logic, Henry must completely annihilate Richard—murder him—in order to attain power, an admission of Richard's continued kingly sacredness and the inherent weakness of his abdication. George L. Greckle has noted a comical aspect of this scene, a "nice touch by Shakespeare," whereby the "contrite Machiavel" Henry, a man forced into exile for fulfilling Richard's murderous desires, now exiles another man for fulfilling his (116). Since Holinshed's chronicle says nothing about Exton's exile, Shakespeare's addition does create a macabre parallel between Henry and Exton and simultaneously reminds us of Henry's own troubling history. Bolingbroke threatens Richard's reign during his minority as a member of the Lords Appellant. He threatens it again by staging a successful coup, and now his own kingship is threatened by the guilt of his own political successes. The precariousness of the English throne continues for Henry just as it did for Richard and for Edward II before them.

Though he blames Exton for Richard's death, Henry admits his own culpability in Richard's deposition and demise when he makes a solemn pledge to "make a voyage to the Holy Land/ To wash this blood off from [his] guilty hand" (5.6.49-50). Of course, neither the historical nor the fictional King Henry ever accomplishes this task. While the historical Bolingbroke made many trips to the Holy Land and Prussia in the decade prior to his usurpation

(Webb 134), he made no such trips afterwards. And as though the first scene in *Henry IV*, Part I were an extension of the final scene in *Richard II*, Shakespeare's King Henry in his own play quickly dismisses the possibility of the pilgrimage, insisting instead that violent uprisings among the Welsh "Brake off our business for the Holy Land" (1.1.48). This line from *Henry* merely confirms what we already suspect at the end of *Richard*, that Henry's promises to atone through pilgrimage, though perhaps uttered with sincerity, are ultimately empty. Like the covenantal exercise with Percy, Henry's call for an expiating pilgrimage does not come to fruition. Though James Philips argues that Henry's call for pilgrimage reveals his "renewed vigor" for justice (173), such a reading gives too much credence to Henry's professions of overwhelming guilt and too little credence to Henry's rather casual dismissal of the pilgrimage in *Henry IV*. Donovan Sherman acknowledges the expiatory powers of such a pilgrimage, but then argues "they also attempt to heal the abstract injury to the ability to graft ritualistic utility onto things. Henry attempts to lend symbolic power to the blood and bier, as if directing the action of the play in order to supply closure *through effective pageantry*" (28; emphasis mine). While God's forgiveness for the deed may be possible, such spiritual expiation would not necessarily protect Henry from the earthly consequences of his actions should he fulfill the pilgrimage. But in any case, the potentialities of a pilgrimage are a moot point since he never actualizes it. Instead, he closes the play with professions of a "soul...full of woe" and excessive "mournings" for Richard's "untimely bier" (5.6.45-52). That the stage directions then call for the characters to "exeunt in procession, following the coffin" means that even in death, Richard still leads while Henry follows. Richard actually ushers us into the reign of Henry IV and Part I of his play, not Henry. Thus Henry's reign always carries with it the spectral presence of Richard, a presence

that continuously compromises Henry's own kingly authority and causes irreparable damage to all of the Lancaster monarchs that follow him.

The Lancastrian dynasty continued through primogenitary succession in accordance with traditional English royal practice, but it could never escape the original sin of Richard's deposition.<sup>84</sup> For one thing, rumors that Richard was still alive persisted for years, perhaps even decades (Rubin 172), causing the spectral presence of Richard's kingly authority to dog Henry IV's claim to sovereignty. Henry's son and heir, Henry V, continued to carry the burden of his father's tainted reign, at least in Shakespeare's fictitious recreation of him. On the eve of his St. Crispin's Day battle, Henry V prays:

O Lord,  
O, not today, think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown!  
I Richard's body have interred new,  
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears  
Than from it issued forced drops of blood.  
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay  
Who twice a day their withered hands hold up  
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built  
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests  
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do;  
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,

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<sup>84</sup>In his book, *Shakespeare's Marlowe*, Logan articulates this same point very succinctly: "At the end of the play, the dramatist leaves open the possibility of future retribution for Richard's usurpation and death" (107).

Since that my penitence comes after all,  
Imploring pardon. (*Henry V* 4.1.290-303)

In this moment, Henry V expresses very strongly the fear that God will exact on him and his men the very revenge that Richard portends in his dying words, that “the hand” that murders him “shall burn in never-quenching fire,” and that same hand “Hath with the King’s blood stained the King’s own land” (*Richard II* 5.5.108-110). Though Exton’s hand literally commits the crime, Henry V recognizes that his father’s authorization of it renders him and his bloodline just as culpable for it. Among claims of repeated prayers for forgiveness on behalf of the crown and vague promises of promoting more prayerful acts in order to assuage God’s displeasure, Henry V here also reminds God and the audience that he has had Richard’s body re-interred, a move that possibly fulfills Richard’s earlier prophecy that he would one day be buried along with his royal predecessors “in the King’s highway” (*Richard II* 3.3.155) at Westminster Abbey. The entire second tetralogy and basic English history vindicate Richard’s prophecies<sup>85</sup> while his death continues to haunt those who were barely alive during his kingship. Even Henry VI, who succeeded his father, Henry V, felt the effects of his grandfather’s deposition. Due to Henry VI’s weakness and incompetence, the English court fell into chaos with the War of the Roses and the throne fell into the hands of the York dynasty, with peace coming only with the Tudor, Henry VII.

Shakespeare’s *Richard* takes great pains to include within itself the past and the future while attending very carefully to Richard’s present despotism and Bolingbroke’s righteous indignation. The frequent references to Edward III incite feelings of patriotic fervor and love for

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<sup>85</sup> Jacobs stands firmly among those who insist that Richard represents medieval political philosophy, while Bolingbroke represents the early modern version. He therefore connects the prophecies uttered within the play, claiming that they “provide a chart for the movement from a medieval to a Renaissance world view and the shift from law to power” (5).

the English crown just as they also recollect the unfortunate circumstances surrounding Edward's own coronation and the successful coup staged by Roger Mortimer at the expense of Edward II. The intrafamilial fighting between Edward III's sons and Richard, the effective ousting of Richard during his minority, and the subsequent assassination of Gloucester further underscore the instability of the family structure, even when the throne passes on according to primogenitary custom. The undulations of the Lancasters, the breach between Henry IV and the Percys, Henry V's early death, Henry VI's timidity and susceptibility to usurpation, and the bloody War of the Roses all suggest that their dynasty was doomed from the start. The Bishop of Carlisle himself presages these events, prophesying that

The blood of English shall manure the ground,  
And future ages groan for this foul act,...  
And, in this seat of peace, tumultuous wars  
Shall kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound...  
O, if you raise this house against this house,  
It will the woefullest division prove  
That ever fell upon this cursed earth. (4.1.137-148)

The events that precede Richard's rise and those that follow it all factor in heavily as we watch the tensions between Bolingbroke and Richard boil over to treason, deposition, and regicide. Henry E. Jacobs notes that the characters Richard, Gaunt, and Carlisle "are profoundly medieval in their ideology" regarding their "perception of kingship and succession" while Bolingbroke "provides an exemplum in the exercise of power which has no basis in law whatsoever" (10; 3). It may be tempting to grant Richard, Gaunt, and Carlisle credit for at least adhering to an organizational system and an ethos regarding stable order. However, cleaving to medieval



understandings of kingship is not necessarily more virtuous and civilized than Bolingbroke's supposed departure from them. Edward III was foisted onto the throne through the forced abdication and humiliation of his father, a fact that overshadows even Edward III's otherwise glorious legacy. Likewise, Bolingbroke is Richard's heir-apparent and errs only (though egregiously) in taking the throne before it is lawfully his. Many of those who occupied the English throne did so because they enjoyed both the mark of inheritance and the military support to back them up. As Richard himself has it, the one unifying characteristic of all kings is that they are all taunted by death and potential usurpation,<sup>86</sup> and that at some point, "[a]ll" are "murder'd" (3.3.160).

### ***Richard and Failed Medieval Sacramentalization***

Once Bolingbroke's rebellion gains considerable traction, one of the first lines of defense that Shakespeare's King Richard offers for his right to reign is the supposedly intractable royal anointing that he received at his coronation ceremony in 1377. Upon his return from Ireland, he boasts to Aumerle and the Bishop of Carlisle that "Not all the water in the rough rude sea/ Can wash the balm off from an anointed king" (3.2.54-55). In this scene, Richard gives a very elaborate and eloquent summary of medieval philosophy regarding kingship (Taggie 21). He insists that "The breath of worldly men cannot depose/ The deputy elected by the Lord" and that God will smite "this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke" (3.2.56-57; 47) for attempting to disrupt His plan for the English throne. Richard's fixation on his anointing and its significance within medieval (and to some extent, early modern) political theology offers both justification for his confidence and, ironically, an explanation for his eventual deposition.

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<sup>86</sup> Merrix and Levin make an interesting comparison between usurpation and death, essentially arguing that to depose the king was to kill him (2).

Since at least 1308 and the coronation of Edward II, the English royal coronation ceremony included not only a Mass and the reception of the Eucharist but, significantly, the Bishop of Canterbury anointing of the king with holy oil. The ritual with oil comes from the Old Testament tradition whereby the kings of Israel<sup>87</sup> received anointing as a manifestation of God's appointment and favor (Kantorowicz 46). It is thought that the Romans introduced this ritual to their conquered people (including early medieval Europeans) through the *Pontificale Romano-Germanicum*, a German-Christian text written and dispersed throughout the continent in the 960s. By the time of Richard's coronation in 1377 then, the English followed the coronation ceremony outlined in the *Liber Regalis*, a book that maintained many of the rites commanded in its predecessor, the *Pontificale*. Though translated from Latin into English in 1603 for the coronation of James I, the text and ceremony explicated in *Liber Regalis* remained more or less unchanged until 1685 (Hunt 5). During the ceremony, the Archbishop anointed the king, saying:

Lett these handes bee annoynted with holy oyle, as Kinges and prophetes haue beene Anoynted, and as Sammuell did annoynt David to bee King, that you maye bee blessed and established a King in this Kingdome, over this people whom the Lord thy God hath giuen thee to rule and gouerne, Which hee vouchsafe to graunt, who with the ffather and the holy ghooste liueth and reigneth nowe and forever. *Amen.* (Wickham Legg 23)

While the early Norman-English kings were anointed only with oil and only on their heads, the *Liber Regalis* calls for an anointing "Of the Breaste, Betwene the shoulders, Of both the shoulders, Of the boughtes<sup>88</sup> of both his armes, [and] Of his head in the Crowne" (25). This ritual then closely resembled infant baptisms whereby "the priest [made] the sign of the cross on the infant's chest and again on its back, between its shoulder blades, using holy oil or chrism" (Karant-Nunn 144), further establishing the sacramental-like nature of the king's anointing. For

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<sup>87</sup> The priests of Israel were likewise anointed with oil.

<sup>88</sup> "Bows," or outward bent of the elbows, anointed along with the head and breast to "signify glory, courage, and knowledge" (Legg lii).

many medieval European Christians, the moment of anointing held so much meaning because it marked the moment of transition of kingly power from one body to his successor (Hunt 6). To be anointed was to receive the *corpus mysticum* of English kingship, a theory that Richard erroneously believes will inoculate him from the external threat of Bolingbroke's rebellion. This medieval theory deludes Richard into underestimating the existential reality of Bolingbroke's plot because it clouds over an inherent deficiency in English kingship: its constant susceptibility to disruption and change.

Despite its denial of the true character of the kingly office, the medieval philosophy attracted so many believers because of its biblical roots and from the many efforts made to incorporate Catholic sacramentalism into it. As it was prescribed in the *Pontificale* and later the *Liber Regalis*, texts both rooted in Catholic teaching if perhaps written without the Church's imprimatur, a king's anointing was believed to mirror the sacred permanence of Catholic sacramentalism. Holy oil, often referred to as *chrism*, is featured in several sacraments, but is functionally necessary only in confirmation and extreme unction<sup>89</sup> (Ott 365; 447). All seven sacraments require an outward sign in order to manifest the grace that these sacraments ostensibly give to believers. No sacrament occurs without its designated outward sign. In the cases of confirmation and extreme unction, a bishop or priest anoints the head of the sacrament recipient as the earthly signifier of God's grace. For confirmation, this anointing is particularly significant since the sacrament of confirmation is a sacrament of initiation, meaning that it leaves an indelible mark on the recipient's soul (333). Therefore, individuals may not remove or repeat it. St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes that confirmation bestows upon the recipient "the seal of the

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<sup>89</sup> This sacrament is also sometimes referred to as anointing of the sick.

Holy Ghost which cannot be erased in all eternity” (366), a strong theological assertion of the lasting effects of anointing with holy oil.

Not coincidentally, medieval European royals appropriated the Catholic use and significance of anointing with oil. In the medieval coronation ceremony, as John Wickham Legg explains, the anointing “conveyed a sacred and indelible character to the sovereign. Fathers of the Church and other writers of great authority bear witness to the sacramental nature of this royal unction” (li). For all intents and purposes, medieval English theology established its own civil sacrament in anointing a new monarch with the assumption that such an anointing would effect the same “indelible” mark on the soul of the monarch that chrism would implant on the soul of a confirmand. Since medieval Christian thought deemed the coronation ceremony a quasi-sacrament, it is little wonder that Richard believes that his own coronation anointing cannot be removed by Bolingbroke or anyone else. His soul is marked as king, and a king he must then ever be.

The problem with this thinking, of course, is that it is patently wrong, both as a practical matter and in its impossible association with Catholic sacramentalism. As a practical matter, Bolingbroke can and will usurp the throne, an event that will not shock the audience. The audience already anticipates Bolingbroke’s usurpation, so Richard’s insistence regarding its supposed impossibility rings hollow. The fictional Richard does not know the ending like the audience, but because the audience already knows Richard’s vulnerability to usurpation, his naïveté then comes off as hubris, the same hubris that fells all tragic heroes, including Richard, whose play is fully-titled *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. His other attempts at self-assurance reflect this hubris and this ignorance. Though Bolingbroke’s army advances while Richard’s own Welsh army has disbanded and several prominent members of his court have

defected to Bolingbroke's camp, Richard wastes time admiring the supposed military prowess of the English land rather than working with his advisors to devise a military response. He assumes the inert rocks of the earth will "Prove armèd soldiers" (3.2.25). He orders his spiders and toads to obstruct Bolinbroke's men and "Do annoyance to their treacherous feet" (3.2.14-17). And he relies on snakes hidden within the flowers picked by his enemies to "with a mortal touch/ Throw death upon" them (3.2.22). In other words, he eschews the necessity of an actual army in favor of the natural world, the natural world's recognition of his kingship, and the permanence of his anointing. He believes that his anointing makes him the natural king and the natural victor against any rebellion. He imagines the permanence of the English land as proof of his permanence of power. He incorrectly assumes that his very presence, his body of anointed kingship, will induce Bolingbroke to "tremble at his sin" (3.2.53) of rebellion and abandon it. Such naïveté demonstrates not only a willful underestimation of the threat posed by Bolingbroke but a total disregard for the competent counsel offered by those still loyal to him. Both Carlisle and Aumerle impress upon Richard a sense of urgency regarding his response to the rebellion (3.2.27-35). Still, Richard denies the immediacy of the problem. In fact, the historical Richard was so complacent about Bolingbroke's march that, according to Rubin, Bolingbroke "had traversed a large part of the kingdom, north-east to south-west, practically unopposed" (171). Shakespeare's Richard reacts to Bolingbroke's advances with similar complacency. When Aumerle attempts to incite Richard into acting as commander-in-chief, telling him: "Comfort, my liege. Remember who you are" (3.2.82), Richard still willfully misunderstands this veiled reference to Richard's kingly authority. Rather than receiving it as a call to action, Richard relaxes under the supposed permanence of his kingship. He ignores the looming threat of usurpation, ignores sage military advice, and instead simply indulges in the kingly authority with

which he does nothing.<sup>90</sup> His puerile response to Bolingbroke's real threat manifests the rather empty protection that his kingly anointing promises him. His kingship has been in danger since its inception and certainly from the outset of the play. Within living memory, natural kingship had been disrupted and overtaken by earthly forces. Thus, Richard's belief that any anointing could combat such danger reveals just how unaware he is regarding earthly power and the precariousness of kingship more generally.

Despite the obvious problems with relying on divine anointment and appointment, it is important to remember that Richard has good reason to take comfort in them. The pervading wisdom regarding kingship during the medieval period insists upon their inviolability. According to historian Nigel Saul, "Richard was seen in ritualistic terms as a sacred icon, supreme and all-powerful. He was invested with a mystical, almost a godlike quality" and that English subjects' "only proper relationship with him was one of obedience; resistance to his authority was tantamount to resistance to the will of God" (239). Though most medieval persons would have acknowledged that monarchs were susceptible to corruption, many still saw the sufferings imposed on them as a result of this corruption as God's justified retribution against them for their sins. And there was also some medieval hope that a divinely-appointed ruler would naturally follow God's call for just rule, as James Philips has discussed at length. Both the Magna Carta and the coronation oath "reiterated justice as a duty of the monarch," Philips claims (161). In this way, Richard's anointing has not failed to protect him. Rather he has failed to uphold his kingly duty to protect the rights of his people. His theft of Bolingbroke's property and, as some of his

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<sup>90</sup> Siemon likewise observes the pragmatic attempts of Richard's counselors to urge a more forceful response to Bolingbroke's campaign, stating that the "attempts of Carlisle and Aumerle to put a positive spin on his utterance, far from supporting what he says, convey significant reservation through their matter of fact tone" and that their "concrete urgings speak eloquently by their contrast with King Richard's lyrical curses" (187).

common subjects suggest, his injudicious use of the nation's treasure (2.1.238-61) mean that he has violated his anointing and not the other way around. Still, the medieval presumption to which Richard holds fast, that kingly anointing stabilizes the English royal throne and grants the king God's unremitting protection, turns the joke on itself by claiming a permanence that has never existed and that in some ways grants kings license to rule injudiciously, despite the calls for just governance in the king's civil and spiritual contracts.

If we view kingship from a medieval perspective, one that believes almost uniformly both in Christ's permanent kingship (God promises David, "And thyne house, and thy kingdome shall be established for ever before thee, thy throne shall be established for ever" [2 Sam 7:16]) and an earthly hierarchy that believes the king "*in officio figura et imago Christi et Dei est*" (Kantorowicz 48), Richard's reliance on his divine anointment and appointment makes sense. But just as his hubris regarding Bolingbroke's rebellion proves foolhardy, Shakespeare's Richard's singular dependence on his anointing reveals for us the problem in the medieval association between holy anointing and Catholic sacramentalism. The most basic explanation for this problem in association is the fact that nothing on earth is permanent, while everything spiritual is, by definition, eternal. Therefore, Richard's recognition that all kings are eventually "murder'd" actually intuits the impossible association between the temporality of earthly kingship and the eternalness of God offered through the sacraments. It is this impossibility which prompts Kantorowicz's derisive assessment of the king's *corpus mysticum* as a "state of superhuman 'absolute perfection'" as a "royal *persona ficta*" (5). Earthly kings and kingdoms must die. Though God promises David an eternal kingdom, God fulfills this promise not through an earthly kingdom but Christ's eternal kingdom. In this same way, Catholic sacramentalism

promises eternal, spiritual permanence, not earthly, temporary permanence, itself an absurd contradiction.

Despite the fact that a kingly anointing cannot achieve the same spiritual effect that Catholic sacraments do, Richard invokes the power of Catholic sacramentalism throughout his deposition scene in a vain attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of his unkinging as well as the sinful nature of kingly deposition. He cries: “I have no name, no title,/ No, not that name was given me at the font,/ But ‘tis usurped” (4.1.256-258). In Richard’s framing, the moment of Christian baptism, the moment at “the font,” establishes names and titles, a framing that accords with the notion that baptism leaves an indelible mark on the souls of the baptized.<sup>91</sup> In this way, human ritual and human action transcend earthly temporality and reach God’s eternity. And because they reach God’s eternity, humans cannot undo or erase them. A moment in time transforms into a beginning-less and endless state of soulful being. And yet, Richard understands his unkinging as an act of complete erasure, as the complete denial of title and of name, a statement that at once denies the reality of Bolingbroke’s deposition as well as the permanent nature of the individual soul. Souls cannot be erased, destroyed, or undone. But kings can be replaced, deposed, and executed. Indeed, we may “sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of kings” (3.2.155-156) but not the death of souls. While Richard is in no danger of losing his baptismal mark of salvation, he is in imminent danger of losing his kingly title. It is his kingship and earthly kingship in general that may and will be undone, not his baptism.

Thus the problem in the general medieval association between kingly anointing and baptismal permanence is made clear, and the benefit of hindsight permits historians to note the contradiction with ease. But Kantorowicz claims that many medieval philosophers also

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<sup>91</sup> According to Schuler, those in the High Middle Ages believed “a coronation...was like the sacrament of baptism in that the body politic ‘wipes away every imperfection’ of the body natural” (194).



acknowledged this contradiction as well, that “the sacramental problem of the king’s *character indelibilis* would always remain a matter open to controversy” (18) throughout the Middle Ages. Adding to the “controversy,” Shakespeare was an early modern and his rendering of Richard an early modern fictional construction. This early modern Richard placed within an artificial medieval setting himself intuitively has a problem with associating his anointing with his baptism. So instead he asserts: “With mine own tears I wash away my balm,/ With mine own hands I give away my crown,/ With mine own tongue deny my sacred state” (4.1.208-210), at once linking and then abjuring his “balm,” his “crown,” and his “sacred state.” All of a sudden, that which cannot be done, the act of unkinging, becomes an assertion of personal agency. Not only can he be unkinged, but he will do it himself. Christopher Pye calls Richard’s unkinging an actualization of “endless self-mockery,” “an oath that cannot affirm itself except by refuting itself” (85). While it indeed may be a mockery of the self, it is also a mockery of the entire medieval political philosophy that at one time convinced Richard of his own kingly permanence. Kingship is inherently unstable. As a human invention, it cannot possibly achieve the lastingness of the spiritual realm. Only as he deposes himself does Richard admit to this truth.

Aside from his own education regarding kingly anointing and Catholic sacramental permanence, Richard also enjoys the unwavering support of the Bishop of Carlisle to buttress his continued kingship. Though Richard wavers in his trust for the permanence of his anointing after he returns from Ireland, Carlisle rallies his spirits, reminding him, “Fear not, my lord. That Power that made you king/ Hath power to keep you king in spite of all” (3.2.27-28). Here, Carlisle imagines God as Power, an allusion to the understood hierarchy subsisting between God and the English monarch. The medieval treatise known as the Norman Anonymous explicates this hierarchy thusly:

The power of the king is the power of God. This power, namely, is God's by nature, and the king's by grace. Hence, the king, too, is God and Christ, but by grace; and whatsoever he does, he does not simply as a man, but as one who has become God and Christ by grace. (qtd in Kantorowicz 48)

Though not speaking for the church necessarily, this writing evinces an understanding of kingship and kingly power likely held by many Norman and English ecclesiasts (42), and one that Carlisle invokes. In speaking of God as Power, Carlisle calls Richard "Power" by extension.<sup>92</sup> Carlisle's support for Richard, which continues until Richard's death, is important because in some ways, it carries with it the "power" of the entire Catholic Church. And the play is quite sympathetic towards Carlisle in general. As already mentioned, Carlisle's prophecy regarding the Lancasters transforms into a powerful curse when the Lancasters descend into the War of the Roses. And indeed, Henry IV admits the importance of Carlisle's religious authority when he pardons Carlisle's treason against him and charges him instead to "Choose out some secret place, some reverent room" in order to "liv'st in peace, die free from strife" (5.6.25-27). Here, Henry gives an astonishing gesture of mercy considering that Carlisle's act of treason is no half-baked plan but one well-coordinated with the Abbot of Westminster and Aumerle and solemnized, as Jeremy Lopez reminds us, "with a mutual taking of the sacrament" (214). Carlisle's unwavering support for Richard as well as the coordination between Catholic authority figures like Carlisle and the Abbot of Westminster, under the auspices of the Eucharist, seem to suggest that the Catholic Church affirmed the medieval theology that essentially "deified" the English king (Kantorowicz 47) and tried to sacramentalize his anointing.

Unfortunately for Richard, the Church's support for him and his sacred anointing cannot prevent Bolingbroke's usurpation and demonstrates instead the medieval church's error in espousing a doctrine that so casually sanctifies and even, to use Kantorowicz's word, deifies a

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<sup>92</sup> Canning appropriately refers to it as "Christological power" (10).

monarch. The failure of church authority figures like Carlisle and the Abbot to prevent Richard's deposition or to restore him to the throne mirrors Richard's own failure to link his anointing with his sacramental baptism. Despite the solemn and spiritual ritual associated with coronation, royal anointment simply cannot effect the same kind of permanence that Catholic baptism and confirmation offer to souls. Richard unwittingly admits as much when Henry IV forces Richard to prison without the Queen: "Doubly divorced! Bad men, you violate/ A twofold marriage, twixt my crown and me,/ And then betwixt me and my married wife" (5.1.71-73). Strictly speaking, Richard does not accurately portray what Henry has imposed on Richard and his marriage to the Queen. They are not being forced to divorce. But even more importantly, Richard attempts once more to align his kingship with Catholic sacramentalism, in this case the permanence of marriage and the permanence of kingship, with the same futile results. Though "a consummated Christian marriage...is a perfect replica of the indissoluble union of Christ with the Church" that therefore "cannot be dissolved by human authority" (Ott 464), the human authority of King Henry IV, which actually has not effected a divorce between Richard and the Queen, has managed to effect a divorce between Richard and his crown. While Robert M. Schuler may be correct when he reads this scene as further perversion of the sacraments in "Bolingbroke's demonic 'new world'" (199-200), this moment also reflects Richard's own distortion of sacramental theology. What God does, including marking baptized souls with grace and recognizing an indissoluble bond between married persons, is permanent. What man does, including anointing the body of a king, is temporary.

The failure to link sacramentalism with kingship indicts medieval political philosophy rather than Richard or Carlisle. In fact, Carlisle intuits the problems associated with this philosophy when he encourages Richard to engage with Bolingbroke militarily. Before Richard's

meeting with Bolingbroke at Flint Castle, Carlisle advises Richard:

My lord, wise men ne'er sit and wail their woes,  
But presently prevent the ways to wail.  
To fear the foe, since fear oppreseth strength,  
Gives in your weakness strength unto your foe,  
And so your follies fight against yourself.  
Fear, and be slain. No worse can come to fight;  
And fight and die is death destroying death,  
Where fearing dying pays death servile breath. (3.2.178-185).

In addition to chiding Richard for his timid passivity (Falco 66), Carlisle here also charges Richard to use earthly power and earthly means to retain his earthly throne. God's "Power," though impossible to oppose, is also impossible to harness with any degree of permanence. God could intervene on Richard's behalf, but He has no obligation to do so. Because Christ establishes the sacraments during His life on earth, God obligates Himself to extend grace through the sacraments and claim as His own souls that have been baptized. God first establishes the sacraments and then honors those who participate in them. Human attempts to establish their own sacraments, such as kingly anointing, do not compel God in any way. Richard's position on the throne is always ever under threat, is always ever temporary. His misguided trust in the sacramental nature of his throne, a trust shared by most of his medieval brethren including much of the Catholic Church hierarchy, deludes him and ultimately fails to protect him.

**“What you will have, I'll give, and willing too”: Richard and Active Abdication**

Richard's family history, the tainted Lancastrian dynasty, and the eroding medieval political philosophy that explicitly connected the English throne to God and Catholic sacramentalism all converge together to create a general suspicion about the permanence of kingship and the presumption of the king's two bodies, an environment that fosters within Richard a sense of personal instability as well. Richard anticipates his own downfall, the downfall that destroyed his great-grandfather's position on the throne, that threatened his reign during his nonage, and that eventually brings about the rise of King Henry IV. As a result, despite all his protestations to the contrary, Shakespeare's Richard actively abdicates the throne he has never stably occupied. He does so first by initiating the play's abdication discourse, making his speech a harbinger for the usurpation he knows he cannot avoid. Then, this abdication discourse gives way to adoption discourse whereby Richard and the Queen indicate that they have willingly adopted Bolingbroke as their own, creating a parent/son relationship with him that then slightly mitigates the rupture of Bolingbroke's premature takeover for his "father." In making these claims, I do not wish to question Bolingbroke's own ambitions for the throne. Nor do I want to imply that because ideal kingship never truly existed neither could practical, stabilized kingship. Elizabeth's protracted reign gives strong evidence that practical kingship was at least attainable. Instead, I argue that stabilized and stable kingship are not the same. *Stable* implies a sort of stasis, the settled and natural state of being. *Stabilized* implies that the stability must be actively achieved and maintained and that a threat against this stability always looms about. Richard is sensitive to the precariousness of kingship, and his active abdication and attempted adoption of Bolingbroke are tacit admissions of it.

Perhaps the clearest indication that Richard hastens his own deposition is the fact that he is the one who first mentions the possibility of deposition. In so doing, the fictional Richard

follows the example of his fictional antecedent, Edward II, who is also the first character within *Edward II* to reference deposition (Merrix and Levin 3). Though he does not utter the word *deposition* per se, Edward mocks the treasonous Mortimer's attempts to invert their respective roles and issue him orders: "Here, Mortimer, sit thou in Edward's throne;/...wear you my crown" (1.4.36-37). Richard, on the other hand, assumes a defensive posture and mentions deposition because Bolingbroke has him cornered at Flint Castle. After Bolingbroke's arrival, Richard muses to himself:

What must the King do now? Must he submit?

The King shall do it. *Must he be deposed?*

The King shall be contented. *Must he lose*

*The name of king? I' God's name, let it go.* (3.2.143-146; emphasis mine)

This verbalized internal dialogue marks the first time anyone has mentioned deposition or usurpation of any kind in the entire play. Edward's derisive allusion to deposition implies that it may not actually happen, that Edward still retains the upper-hand, even in the face of active sedition. Richard's open use of the word *deposed* first openly admits the possibility of deposition and then expounds on how such a deposition will unfold. Not that it *may* unfold, but that it *will* unfold. What must the King do now? He must "submit," "lose the name of king," "let it go," and "be deposed." "The King shall do it." Robert P. Merrix and Carole Levin refer to these words as a mere "prelude to the coming deposition" (4). And certainly, the deposition is unavoidable. Bolingbroke enjoys the backing of a robust army, the support of many of Richard's former advisors, and an advantageous position since Richard has locked himself away in Flint Castle. As a trapped man, Richard may initiate the deposition rhetoric simply because he has run out of options. As Merrix and Levin have it, "both Edward II and Richard II are maneuvered into

positions in which they are forced to depose themselves” (5). Yet Richard’s words do more than “prelude” or imply a “forced” deposition. Though he utters them only to himself and his close advisors, Richard’s words shift the current conflict from a static, albeit imbalanced, standoff between himself and Bolingbroke to a complete reversal of their relationship, a relationship in which “The King shall be contented” to “submit.” The fact that Aumerle begins to weep as a result of Richard’s musings (3.3.160) and that Northumberland impatiently desires permission to usher Bolingbroke into the castle (3.3.176-177) indicate that the other characters in this scene understand Richard’s true intentions. Richard himself initiates the talk of deposition, and in so doing, calls attention to the instability not just of his own reign but of the English throne in general.

Because he begins the deposition through Richard’s rhetoric and not Bolingbroke’s, Shakespeare assigns Richard much of the responsibility for it, a shift that minimizes Bolingbroke’s treason and engenders some sympathy for his cause, particularly in the first half of the play. Bolingbroke tells York that his rebellious return to England results from desperation: “What would you have me do? I am a subject/ And I challenge law. Attorneys are denied me,/ And therefore personally I lay my claim/ To my inheritance of free descent” (2.3.133-136). And even in the face of Richard’s self-imposed imprisonment in Flint Castle, Bolingbroke claims through the voice of Northumberland that

His coming hither hath no further scope  
Than for his lineal royalties, and to beg  
Enfranchisement immediate on his knees;  
Which on thy royal party granted once,  
His glittering arms he will commend to rust,

His barbed steeds to stables, and his heart

The faithful service of Your Majesty. (3.2.112-118)

His conversation with York and this by-proxy statement to Richard suggest only a desire to take rightful ownership of his lands. And at least in theory, Bolingbroke has good reason to expect Richard to return them to him since kings were expected to emulate Christ's perfect justice (Philips 161; Rubin 119), and medieval English law specifically protected inheritance and property rights, even the property rights of serfs (Saul 77). The English Magna Carta likewise affirms that "No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions" unless "by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land" (article 39).<sup>93</sup>

Bolingbroke's rights are well ratified by law and heraldry, and up to this point, his words and deeds reveal nothing but a demand for redress. The righteousness of his cause and the evenhandedness of his rhetoric contrast starkly with Richard's ready discussion of deposition and submission. In this way, the play assigns much of the blame to Richard for the deposition, not the rebellious Bolingbroke.

Many *Richard* scholars disagree on the extent to which Bolingbroke initially intends deposition. H. David Brumble reads his language unequivocally as a ruse whereby Bolingbroke may conceal his ulterior ambitions for the throne (64). Undoubtedly, Bolingbroke must walk a fine line in his rhetoric and in his interactions with Richard, whatever his ultimate motives. Raphael Falco claims that Bolingbroke's circumspect approach evinces a natural form of royal "charisma," a charisma that becomes especially apparent when contrasted with Richard's inability to connect with the populace. This charisma not only upends the established system of

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<sup>93</sup> Even if the exiled Bolingbroke is no longer a "free man," the Magna Carta also protects the rights of criminals, assuring even heirs with felonious convictions that the crown will return all seized lands after a year and a day (article 32).



governance, but also softens the people's reception of his act of treason and leads them to view it as a form of "salvific heroism" (65). In other words, Falco believes that Bolingbroke's populist appeal encourages his suit of usurpation, even if he does not originally intend to take such a step. Since Richard and his friends remark on Bolingbroke's connection to the people, even as Bolingbroke leaves England under the shame of exile (1.4.23-36), Falco's point is well taken. But George L. Geckle disagrees, arguing instead that Bolingbroke repeatedly calls only for the return of his lands and that "his desire to be king is never made clear until he is actually on the throne" (116). With the exception of Richard's speech in the final scene (5.5.1-66), *Richard II* is markedly devoid of asides and soliloquies, preventing the audience from gaining access to many of the characters' hidden motives. So Bolingbroke's true intentions upon his return to England can only be conjectured. But in many ways, his motives do not necessarily matter. Even if Bolingbroke does desire to take the throne from Richard, Richard still remains the one who first mentions the possibility of it. Richard initiates the deposition rhetoric, Richard begins the formal destabilization of his throne, and Richard thus tacitly calls attention to the precariousness of the throne that Bolingbroke and others will occupy.

Perhaps because he understands the tenuousness of his reign, even before Bolingbroke mounts a serious threat against it, Richard employs language of adoption regarding Bolingbroke, making overtures to align Bolingbroke more closely to himself as a means of mitigating Bolingbroke's disruption of the throne and Richard's irreparably damaged stature. This adoption rhetoric is key because it is almost entirely superfluous. Should Richard die at any time before his deposition, Bolingbroke would immediately inherit the throne. Richard is childless. While he and the Queen might still conceive an heir should Richard continue as king, Bolingbroke stands as the heir-apparent until such a new heir materializes. As such, Richard does not need to

“claim” Bolingbroke as his own in order to ensure that Bolingbroke succeeds him. Richard’s adoption language then suggests that he desires to claim an even more immediate kinship with Bolingbroke. As I have already mentioned, Richard first uses this adoption language in the first scene of the play, long before Bolingbroke’s rebellion or Richard’s impending death. In an attempt to convince Mowbray that he will show Bolingbroke no partiality, Richard says:

Mowbray, impartial are our eyes and ears.

Were he my brother, nay, my kingdom’s heir,

As he is but my father’s brother’s son,

Now, by my scepter’s awe I make a vow,

Such neighbor nearness to our sacred blood

Should nothing privilege him nor partialize

The unstooping firmness of my upright soul.

He is our subject, Mowbray; so art thou. (1.1.115-122)

Though Richard wishes to establish parity between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, emphasizing that both are “subjects,” Richard’s speech has the opposite effect. Rather than a parallel between them, Richard instead reiterates Bolingbroke’s nearness to himself. Bolingbroke is “my father’s brother’s son” and a “neighbor...to our sacred blood.” Mowbray is not. Mowbray has no such familial connection to Richard. Richard’s musing, “Were he my brother, nay my kingdom’s heir,” though couched in the conditional tense, actually enunciates the reality that Bolingbroke is Richard’s kingdom’s heir. From almost the first lines of the play, Richard uses language to situate Bolingbroke as his heir, hinting that Richard does not later cede the throne to Bolingbroke so much as give it to him. In this way, Richard follows the example of Edward II and elects to abdicate to his “son” to ensure a measured stabilization of an otherwise precarious throne.

Richard continues this language of adoption throughout the play, not only as a means of stabilizing the throne, but as a means of mitigating his own barrenness. Even though Richard initially tells Bolingbroke, “Cousin, I am too young to be your father,/ Though you are old enough to be my heir” (3.3.204-5), Bolingbroke eventually becomes a stand-in for the son Richard cannot produce himself. When York arrives at Westminster Hall to inform Bolingbroke of Richard’s submission, he states that “I come to thee/ From plume-plucked Richard, who with willing soul/ *Adopts thee heir*, and his high scepter yields/ To the possession of thy royal hand” (4.1.108-11; emphasis mine). During this time period, an heir did not need to be a husband and wife’s biological offspring. In fact, the Robert of Gloucester chronicles (1297) reports that for an unnamed man, “Henri is eldoste sone, & is eir al so” (*OED*). The mention of both *sone* and *eir* suggest that the two were not necessarily considered synonymous. Thus, Richard does not need to “adopt” Bolingbroke in order to abdicate to him. Bolingbroke will inherit Richard’s power and property upon coronation, whether Richard acknowledges him or not. The fact that Richard “adopts” Bolingbroke indicates that Richard claims him as a quasi-son, compressing their familial connection from that of cousins to that of father and son in order to protect the throne and the primogenitary inheritance tradition.

The Queen echoes this language of adoption regarding Bolingbroke, reinforcing him as the natural, royal heir and implying that Richard’s adoption overtures reflect a more generalized understanding of Bolingbroke as the “son” and heir of the King and Queen. After Green informs her about the Earl of Worcester’s defection to Bolingbroke’s camp, she repines, “So, Green, thou art midwife to my woe,/ And Bolingbroke my sorrow’s dismal heir” (2.2.60-61). Though she has never physically born children, she still identifies herself as a metaphorical mother, giving birth to both her husband’s deposition (“my woe”) and his replacement, Bolingbroke, at the same

time.<sup>94</sup> Meredith Skura goes further with the Queen's metaphor, claiming "Not only has England's 'teeming womb of royal kings' produced Bolingbroke as well as Richard, *but the human Queen too has Bolingbroke in her womb*" (49; emphasis mine). The Queen's imagining of Bolingbroke "in her womb" appears more striking when one considers that the two never actually appear on stage together during the play. Thus, the Queen situates herself as a mother to a man with whom we never see her interact. Her bond with him is familial, not social or courtly. Her position as Bolingbroke's natural mother then becomes a manifestation of her own attempts to secure the English throne, even if it means claiming Bolingbroke as both her "woe" and her "dismal heir."

In *Civile Wars* by Samuel Daniel, a forebear of Shakespeare's *Richard II*,<sup>95</sup> this inherent connectedness between Richard and Bolingbroke is once again made plain through the Queen. In this poem, Queen Isabel actually meets Bolingbroke, but she initially mistakes him for Richard, a misunderstanding that conflates the two men into one person, establishing sameness and an irradicable familial bond between herself and him. Once she realizes that Bolingbroke is not Richard and Richard is not Bolingbroke, the Queen employs language of similarity and resemblance, not sameness. They do not mirror one another; they resemble one another, as a father and son might. Her later assertion that "It may be, [Bolingbroke] laments the wrong is done/ Vnto my Lord, and grieues; as well he may./ *Then he is some of ours*: and we, of right,/ Must pittie him, that pitties our sad plight"<sup>96</sup> (Falco 67-8; emphasis mine) likewise uses the

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<sup>94</sup> Though speaking much more generally, Pye also observes that the Queen's language asks us to examine major political presumptions regarding royal inheritance. He claims that "the scene raises the possibility that the play's entire narrative of usurpation and betrayal reflects a more fundamental drama concerning the origins of the political subject" (89).

<sup>95</sup> Nineteenth-century scholars, John Dover Wilson among them, actually presumed that Daniel composed *Civile Wars* after having seen Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Twentieth and twenty-first century scholars have since reversed this presumption and now believe that Daniel instead influenced Shakespeare (Lopez 17).

<sup>96</sup> St. 76

language of creation and reproduction. Bolingbroke looks like he belongs to Richard and Isabel (“Then he is some of ours”), and the Queen’s language of childbirth in *Richard II* echoes this suggestion. Though the rebellious Bolingbroke makes a poor substitute for a legitimate successor, both Richard and the Queen tacitly acknowledge him as their unofficial adopted offspring, mitigating their sorrowful barrenness and protecting the stability of the kingly line of succession at the same time.

One curious aspect of the pervasive “adoption” language within the play is the fact that the adoption of children was almost unheard of during this time period. Paul Brand goes so far as to say that adoption was entirely non-existent in medieval England (80), and Patricia Crawford claims that in early modern England, adoption was only slightly more common (113). F. W. Maitland does acknowledge that fourteenth-century English laws honored “de facto” adoption (Gager 49), but the judgment he cites to support this assertion merely “acknowledged” one Thomas of Boudon to be the son of one Hervey because the parties could not determine Thomas’s biological paternity. The judge ruled that “it is better in this case to be acknowledged and holden as son, albeit you really are not heir, than to be the very heir in blood but not acknowledged and holden as such” (Gager 187). The law sided with Thomas because it presumed a possible blood connection between Thomas and the deceased Hervey, erring on the side of caution in protecting the connection between blood and property. With medieval English inheritance rights tethered to patrilineal bloodlines (Brand 80-81), the adoption of heirs makes very little sense. Medieval and early modern medical terminology often associated “blood” with a man’s semen. A late seventeenth-century text even refers to sperm as “nothing else but Blood, made White by the Naturall Heat, and an Excrement of the third Digestion” (qtd in Crawford 114). Through the transmission of seminal “blood,” a man endows a future generation with his

own anatomical essence. In this way, a man himself continues to live on through the bodies of his (legitimate) children, and the bodies of his children retain rightful ownership of his property since they are literally infused with his physical being. The adoption of an heir with distant or no blood ties to the father disrupts this linear process entirely. It further fractures the property already divided amongst bloodline heirs, creating intra-familial tensions.<sup>97</sup> And though adoption would seem to help childless couples such as Richard and the Queen control their property after their deaths, the adoption of a non-family heir instead directs family property away from other relatives who might otherwise inherit it and keep it within the extended family. In some cases, poor widows forwent the settlements they received upon their husbands' death and gave such settlements directly to their children. To do otherwise would risk redirecting the property away from the bloodline. Upon remarriage, any property a woman inherited from her first husband would then officially belong to her new husband, and the law did not obligate stepfathers to inherit stepchildren (Crawford 4).

While the historical research presents a logical link between bloodlines and inheritance and reasonably explains the paucity of medieval and early modern adoptions, Shakespeare's extensive dramatic corpus contradicts the supposed absence of adoption as both a cultural and legal phenomenon. The notion of adoption appears in many of his plays aside from *Richard II*. Brabantio not only calls his daughter Desdemona's elopement with Othello "treason of the blood" (*Othello* 1.1.173), he later tells the Duke that, as a result of her "treason," "I had rather to adopt a child than get it/...I am glad at soul I have no other child" (1.3.194;199). This assertion not only assumes the possibility of adopting children in general, but it also suggests parity

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<sup>97</sup> The division of property amongst all inheritable children was a particularly problematic tradition in the early Middle Ages (Backman 146). For this very reason, many kingdoms and nobles adopted the concept of primogenitary inheritance instead.

between a “gotten” child and an adopted one. Orlando of *As You Like It* avows: “I am more proud to be Sir Rowland's son,/ His youngest son- and would not change that calling/ To be adopted heir to Frederick” (1.2.342-344). Orlando indeed underscores his loyalty in preferring his own father to Frederick, since Frederick is the current duke, and any of Frederick’s heirs would stand to inherit his title and property. Orlando’s words are also particularly interesting since they mention nothing of being adopted as a son but only as an “heir,” affirming the distinction between the two designations. The Countess in *All's Well that Ends Well* tells Helena that “Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds/ A native slip to us from foreign seeds” (1.3.140-141), effectively arguing that adoption permits the absorption of foreign bodies into a biological family unit. And the entire play of *Henry VI, Part III* revolves around Henry VI’s willing disinheritance of his own son, Edward, in favor of Edward Plantagenet. In confronting Queen Margaret regarding this political disinheritance, Edward Plantagenet tells her that he is Henry VI’s “king, and he should bow his knee;/ I was adopted heir by his consent” (2.2.91-92). In Shakespeare’s rendering then, Henry VI descends directly from another “adopted” heir, Henry Bolingbroke, and because of Bolingbroke’s ascent to the throne, he now lives in a world suspicious of the natural order of primogeniture kingship. Edward Plantagenet’s discourse regarding his “adoption” reveals not only the political weakness of Henry VI in this particular play but also the agency Shakespeare grants to some of his fictitious men (and in the case of the Countess, women) to choose their heirs actively rather than simply produce them biologically. The pervasiveness of “adoption” rhetoric throughout his works indicate that perhaps Shakespeare lived in a much more adoption-conscious society than the historical research suggests, that

adoption was at least a known concept if not one often practiced,<sup>98</sup> and that Shakespeare likely considered adopted heirs the equivalent of biological ones. Richard's adoption of Bolingbroke then exists in the liminal space between semantics and reality, softening the blow of Richard's abdication and strongly stabilizing the English throne since it may thus continue through "sons" rather than more distant relations.

Having said that, I admit that one major scene in *Richard* particularly complicates the notion that Richard actively abdicates to Bolingbroke as a means of maintaining stability on the throne: the deposition scene itself. In it, Richard's remarkable penchant for melodrama and self-pity come to the fore. He neatly summarizes his performance when he notes that he must act as "both priest and clerk" (4.1.174). He must perform the ritual of his own unkinging ritual, what Sherman dubs his own "de-sacralization" (32) and Schuler a "demonic meta-ritual" (176), as well as receive it. He must erase his balm, the supposed *character indelibilis* of kingship, just as he must have it erased from him. Richard's behavior in this scene makes plain that he does not want to renounce his kingship in favor of Bolingbroke since Bolingbroke asks him three times to "resign the crown" (4.1.201), and yet Richard still equivocates.<sup>99</sup> Even as guards drag him away, ostensibly to the Tower of London, Richard still refers to himself as the "true king" (4.1.319). In his later ruminations in Pomfret Castle, Richard continues to insist upon his kingliness:

Sometimes am I king;  
Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,  
And so I am. Then crushing penury

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<sup>98</sup> Adoption was common in many of the Roman histories that served as Shakespeare's source material, especially Plutarch. Likewise, it was a known biblical concept. Such examples include Moses becoming an adopted Prince of Egypt and St. Joseph adopting Jesus, the consubstantiated Son of God, and raising Him as his own son.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Lamb also commented on the "the reluctant pangs of abdicating Royalty" in *Edward II* (qtd in Skura 41). Indeed, in Marlowe's play, Edward exhibits a similar disinclination for abdication, and with good reason. It not only costs him position and royal power, but it also results directly in his agonizing death in the dredges of the castle.



Persuades me I was better when a king;  
Then am I kinged again, and by and by  
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,  
And straight am nothing. (5.5.32-38)

Richard's difficulty in abjuring his crown and in ascertaining his identity after he has done so is understandable and undermines his other overtures towards active abdication. But abdicating and wanting to abdicate are not the same. Richard abdicates despite his reluctance, despite the uncertainty in which it places him. Christopher Pye insists that "if power is to be transferred legitimately only the king may unking himself. And that is an impossible act" (85), but it cannot be "an impossible act" since he does it. He decides to perform his own anti-*Liber Regalis* ritualized unkinging, eschewing Northumberland's demand that he confess his royal sins (4.1.223-228), and preferring instead to unking himself formally by literally shattering his own image. Richard refuses to participate in the ritual that others have set for him. Instead, he requests and then subsequently destroys a mirror, destroying his kingly image and performing his own burial ritual in then eulogizing himself: "Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport:/ How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face" (4.1.291-292). Because Richard exerts such self-agency here, Jeremy Lopez argues that his "symbolic inversion of the coronation...fulfills the fantasies of the early modern absolutist monarchy, enabling him to assert his own sovereignty outside all legal restraints or competing spheres of authority" (212). In other words, Richard demonstrates the greatest degree of absolute authority in the very act of divesting himself of it.<sup>100</sup> If so, then the early modern political philosophy fails as well, since one naturally infused with divine appointment, such as Richard, elects to cede place to the otherwise unappointed, such as

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<sup>100</sup> Sherman expresses a similar idea, claiming that Richard is "the only figure capable of severing the connection between the divine and the political" (23).

Bolingbroke. Neither the medieval nor the early modern thought regarding kingship can explain abdication or deposition because the abdication moment is the essence of instability. The moment is rife with chaos and irony, but it also explains Richard's momentary control and stabilization of kingship through active abdication. He can identify himself as king and then unidentify himself. He can place himself within the kingly position and then take himself out of it. In this moment, the English crown rests, temporarily detached from the earthly pressures of Bolingbroke's coup, Richard's earlier political mismanagement, and the vicissitudes of public opinion. Richard has already surrendered his crown and scepter (4.1.204), the earthly accoutrement of kingship.<sup>101</sup> Those items represent an earthly signifier of monarchical stabilization. His personal kingly erasure and his subsequent bestowal of kingship onto Henry marks the key moment of Richard's attempt at royal stability, a chimerical ideal that returns to its normal state of forced steadiness as soon as Henry assumes it.

## Conclusion

The true conflict within Shakespeare's *Richard II* is not simply the clash between medieval notions of the king's two bodies and early modern notions of absolutism. It is instead a struggle between what is ideal and what is possible.<sup>102</sup> Essentially, neither the king's two bodies nor absolutism is possible. After all, an early modern absolutist might just as easily echo the medieval Richard's own musing that "Not all the water in the rough rude sea,/ Can wash the

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<sup>101</sup> Falco claims that the removal of these items, "the living evidence of genealogical superiority," forces Richard to rely solely on "on his personal charismatic attributes, which scarcely exist at this stage in the story" (69). For Falco, Richard's lack of charisma dooms his reign since Bolingbroke exudes royal charisma so consistently.

<sup>102</sup> According to Schuler, "the idealized monarch in *Richard II* remains invisible, existing only as an ideal in the political and moral imagination of the spectators" (211).

balm off from an anointed king” (3.2.54-55). In both medieval and early modern ideals, the anointed king is always the king, and the king alone acts as God’s medium for justice and right rule. But of course, Richard does lose his kingly balm. His kingly essence still remains, even after Henry’s ascension, a fact supported by Henry’s de facto assassination of him (5.4.1-11). But Henry tacitly orders Richard’s assassination precisely because his own kingly balm now outweighs Richard’s. Henry has earthly royal power. Richard’s anointed power diminishes and falls victim to the absolutist exercise of Henry’s royal prerogative. As he dies, Richard gains heavenly powers whereby his “seat is up on high,” a spiritual plane that exists in stark contrast to “gross flesh,” his earthly kingship, which now “sinks downward” (5.5.111-112). The King is dead. Long live the King.

Because the play forces us to face the utter impossibility of kingly ideals, it reminds us that such ideals have always ever run contrary to God’s ideals. When the Israelites ask Samuel to appoint a king in order to keep pace and stature with other nations, God replies to Samuel’s prayers thusly:

Samuel, Heare the voice of the people in all that they say vnto thee: For they haue not cast thee away, but they haue cast me away, that I should not raigne ouer them. And as they haue euer done sence I brought them out of Egypt vnto this day, and haue forsaken me, and serued other gods, euen so do they vnto thee. Now therefore hearken vnto their voice: howbeit yet testifie vnto them, & shewe them the maner of the king that shall raigne ouer them. (1 Sam 8:7-9)

God not only grants them a king out of a sense of jealous abandonment, He also warns them that any king will at least occasionally reign in a questionable “maner,” as even the righteous Kings David (the man after God’s own heart)<sup>103</sup> and Solomon demonstrate. The idea of kingship has always ever been a man-centered concept, a disavowal of Christ’s inimitable kingship in favor of earthly power and political organization. But of course, those two concepts, earthly power and

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<sup>103</sup> Acts 13:22

political organization, serve a very practical purpose in a fallen world. To avoid them is to cede ground to evil invasion interminably or to extinction. The Israelites demanded a king in order to assure themselves a practical means of protecting and ordering themselves, and the English medieval tradition was deeply beholden to this Old Testament inheritance. In dramatizing Richard's fall from grace, Shakespeare brings all of these complications of kingship to the forefront. Richard's continued tenure is impossible, and the solution proffered by Bolingbroke's rebellion is sinful and tainted. In this way, both Richard and Bolingbroke are both equally and concurrently viable and equally and concurrently impossible. This reality is not a reflection of the kingly aptitude of either man but a manifestation of the reality of earthly kingship: it can never fully stabilize because it exists only on an earthly, temporal plane. Despite all overtures to sacralize it, an earthly office simply cannot parallel what spiritual eternity alone promises. The lauded and cliched phrase, "God save the king!," itself a vestige of Old Testament kingship, resounds through the centuries because God's intervention is necessary for the continuation of the king's natural body and the theoretical body of kingship.

Left to the natural behavior of man, the office of the king remains under constant threat and is always ever on the brink of collapse. The history of the Plantagenet and Lancastrian dynasties attest to its precariousness. The misguided medieval philosophy which sought to transform kingship into a sacramental vocation eventually failed, and Richard's blundering attempts to align his kinging with Catholic sacraments like baptism and matrimony reflect this failure. His active abdication to his "adopted" son, Bolingbroke, provides him one means of controlling and stabilizing English kingship, and he engages in it most unwillingly and only because he has no other options. He cannot harness the throne because, despite all philosophies to the contrary, earthly kingship is a human construction, a human action essentially devoid of

God's permanence. God's own hesitation in sanctioning its creation suggests that it has always ever been a necessary evil, a manifestation of earthly fallenness that prompts Bolingbroke's righteous suit as well as his sinful means of exceeding it.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

“Trust not my holy order”: *Measure for Measure* and Erastian Governance

It is fitting that the first recorded performance of William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* occurred on December 26, 1604 as part of King James I’s Christmas time seasonal celebrations. Though the most prominent Christian holiday today, overshadowing the much more theologically significant Eastertide celebration of the Resurrection, Christmas was by no means universally observed within James’s three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The Church of England still heartily recognized Christmas, with the Book of Common Prayer including “the Nativity of our Lord” amongst its list of “Holy dayes.”<sup>104</sup> However, the Calvinist Puritans subject to James’s rule, particularly those in Scotland, reviled such festivities. Beginning in the 1560s, the Scottish kirk and the Scottish General Assembly “waged a stern and unremitting campaign against the celebration of Yule, Easter, May Day, Midsummer and saints’ days” (Todd 183). *Measure*, performed at the English royal court in front of statesmen and clerics alike on a saint’s day, the feast day of St. Stephen and the second day of Christmastide, provided the perfect backdrop for examining the complexity of James as a state and church leader. James was at once the king of England, Scotland, and Ireland; the supreme governor of the Church of England; the *de facto* head of the Scottish Kirk and the Church of Ireland; and a potential ally of Catholics and Puritans alike scattered throughout Great Britain.

Though the English crown had engaged in Erastian governance—that is, it had ultimate authority over the state and its national church—since Henry VIII declared supremacy over the English church in the 1530s, the reign of James differed in that it also encompassed people

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<sup>104</sup> All citations from the Book of Common Prayer in this chapter come from the 1559 edition. However, this section regarding observed holy days was added in 1561. The 1605 version of BCP, an edition authorized under James I, still includes the Nativity of Christ as a holy day.

recently considered national and religious foreigners. And, by all accounts, James earnestly desired national unification and peaceful British solidarity. Derek Hirst describes the national mood upon James's coronation:

Despite a plague epidemic which devastated both London and the provinces that summer, the political auguries seemed good. James's motto, '*Rex pacificus*' [the royal peace-maker], points to his conviction that his mission lay in the bringing of unity and harmony. In particular, he saw in his own person the opportunity to heal the centuries-old enmity between the English and the Scots. (98)

And it is this "conviction" for "unity and harmony" and his self-appointed "mission...to heal" some of the hostilities subsisting between his kingdoms that reveal to us one significant consequence of concentrating secular and church power within a single person: such a monarch would likely privilege the interests of his state over the interests of his various churches. In *Measure*, Shakespeare likewise draws attention to this problem, especially—although not exclusively—in the character of Duke Vincentio/Friar Lodowick. It is my contention that Shakespeare dramatizes the conflicts of interest inherent in uniting church and state within the monarch to draw attention to the potential spiritual pitfalls of what became known as Erastianism. I further contend that the play is sympathetic to separate ecclesial and secular powers in order to serve the spiritual needs of the people and to protect the church itself from becoming, in Hirst's words, "a mere creature of the state" (61).

In *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England*, Debora Kuller Shuger addresses this topic in great detail. She astutely observes that "*Measure for Measure*'s unusual opening, with its braiding of rule and religion, sets up...a sustained meditation on its own political moment—the political moment of James's accession, but also, and more significantly, of the Reformation's aftermath" (1). Her ideas have been so transformational that they have spawned many critical responses, including those from Johnathan Goossen and Anselm Haverkamp. I will draw on

Shuger, among many other scholars, throughout this chapter, but I diverge from her ideas mainly in the religiously-charged political binary that she uses to frame her argument. Shuger discusses at length a longstanding struggle between what she calls the early modern “Protestant Left,” a group that she closely associates with Calvinist Puritans, and the classical Western state, a political ideal that she says

does not require the state to embody God’s will or to make men virtuous, but restricts its jurisdiction to secular, public concerns, which in effect both privatizes the sacred and legitimates the private (at least in the long run), and does so by leaving interstitial spaces in the fabric of the common law, spaces where the individual is a law unto himself. (34)

There are significant elements of the play that can be connected to Puritanism as others, including Maurice Hunt, Musa Gurnis, and David Beauregard, have argued cogently, making this critical outlook rife for further exploration. However, Puritanism is but one aspect of a much larger political-ecclesial issue within the play, one that looks beyond one particular faith or religious custom and questions instead whether a monarch, regardless of religious conviction, ought to meddle directly in a church and its doctrine in the first place.

In order to see that *Measure* critiques the Erastian governance that had been lately implemented in England, we need look no further than Duke Vincentio, a secular figure whose adoption of a friar disguise approximates the English monarchy’s adoption of ecclesial authority. While Vincentio is not an allegory for James, Henry VIII, or any other English leader, he does demonstrate for us the difficulty—perhaps even the impossibility—of handling both state and church responsibilities concomitantly. “Your friar is now your prince,” Vincentio informs Isabella as he removes his disguise at the end of the play (5.1.390), enunciating clearly the dichotomy of the friar and the prince, the church and the state. The two are not one, and they overlap only when the Duke takes upon himself religious obligations that help him achieve



political ends. Once the Duke returns as Duke, it seems certain that the future of Vienna will follow the classic Western philosophy regarding the state as summarized by Shuger, one that “restricts its jurisdiction to secular, public concerns.” This resolution and restored order in *Measure* occurs because of the Duke and his rediscovered statesmanship, a statesmanship that at once distances itself from the religious sector and that attempts to rectify its passivity towards social decline in the years prior to the play’s opening as well as its mishandling of spiritual matters in the play’s middle.

In asserting that Duke Vincentio more or less manifests the difficulties associated with Erastianism, a term I will define more concretely in the following section, I know that I also implicitly make the case that the Catholicism within *Measure*—a Catholicism made apparent through the presence of Poor Clare nuns and Franciscan friars, through frequent references to exclusively Catholic sacraments such as confession and marriage,<sup>105</sup> and in its general respect for the celibate religious (2.2.23-25)—acts as a kind of proxy for the Church of England. Chris Jeffrey makes a similar claim about the presentation of Judaism in *Merchant of Venice*: “Judaism could serve as code for Catholicism, another persecuted religion; and, whereas Catholicism most emphatically was perceived as a threat by the authorities, Judaism was not, so it would be safe to evoke sympathy for a Jew on stage” (39). This reading of *Merchant* suggests that perhaps Shakespeare played fast and loose with many religious labels throughout his career, while Jeffrey’s discussion of Catholicism as a political threat implies yet another point that is key for our purposes here: though Catholicism might be comfortably ridiculed in Tudor and Stuart England, “the authorities” would certainly not have gainsaid a drama that contained open, defiant opposition to the Church of England. Thus, it makes sense that Shakespeare did not dramatize

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<sup>105</sup> While only the Catholic Church considered marriage a sacrament, every early modern Christian denomination considered it a holy relationship instituted by God for earthly and spiritual benefits.

Erastian English governance over the Church of England directly. Instead, he created a fictitious Catholic monarch living in a distant Catholic state who experiences many of the same difficulties with Erastian rule that James and Elizabeth faced at home in England.

I freely concede that treating one faith as a proxy for another asks an audience not to believe their lying eyes and to see instead something that the playwright has chosen not to show. However, we need not see Catholicism merely as a stand-in for the Church of England that Shakespeare could not dramatize. Instead, we may also see the Catholicism for what it was during Shakespeare's day: a church that insisted upon its independence from local civic authority, a faith that had dominated England for nearly a thousand years, and an ecclesial hierarchy that looked remarkably similar to the one established by Reformed English kings and bishops. Beauregard observes that in "the Shakespearean corpus as a whole, the treatment of Roman Catholic religious is exceptionally sympathetic," as *Measure for Measure* demonstrates (249). Jessica Slights and Michael Morgan Holmes echo a similar sentiment, commenting that the "monasticism in *Measure for Measure* ought to be examined in light of the remarkable tenacity with which sympathy for Roman Catholicism endured in post-Reformation England" (268-269). *Measure* seems to utilize Catholicism to demonstrate some misgivings regarding the English fusion of church and state authority while also craftily reminding its English audience of the benefits that Catholic influence once had on them and on unchecked royal power.

Through the divided character of Duke Vincentio and his alter-ego, Friar Lodowick, Shakespeare presents a civil authority that restores order only once its religious veneer has been removed in favor of a return to itself and its singularly political identity. Friar Lodowick, the disguised Duke, comically implies the circular solipsism of fusing the church and the state when he wonders, "Where is the duke? 'tis he should hear me speak" (5.1.302). Because he always

carries with him, even *in cognito*, the ducal authority which has been rightly bestowed upon him, Vincentio's primary responsibility must always be to exert civil control, rendering the religious domain a mere secondary concern. As such, Shakespeare's *Measure* implicitly argues that civic leaders ought to focus solely on state matters rather than those relating to the church since such leaders were often underqualified to determine or enact theological precepts. It upholds Catholic religious groups and separate church government as potential counterparts to civil authority. Finally, it hints that a singular royal authority such as Duke Vincentio or the English King James simply cannot meet both the material and the spiritual needs of his people and that, without a strong and autonomous church, the comingling of the secular and the spiritual eventually results in the Erastian victory of the state—to the detriment of its people's souls.

### **“A well-wish'd king”: James and early modern Erastianism**

Even in the earliest discussions of it, the meaning of Erastianism had always been mercurial, and I will address the controversies surrounding Thomas Erastus, the ideology attached to his name, and the early modern British appropriation of it, in this section. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, J. Neville Figgis claimed that “the simpler definition of Erastianism [is] the theory that religion is the creature of the State” (83), while James E. Wood, Jr. added a half-century later that “Erastianism insisted on the religious competence and religious power of the Christian state” (263). Wood, in turn, cites the early modern English theologian John Bekinsau, a man whose ideas predate Erastianism but who nevertheless believed that the monarch held “supreme and absolute right over the church.”<sup>106</sup> Edward Allen Whitney takes umbrage with those who conflate Erastianism with the theory of the divine right of kings since

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<sup>106</sup> See *De supremo et absolute regis imperio* (1546)

the theory of divine right applies mainly to a prince's prerogatives over matters of the state (381). However, since most prominent early modern theologians, Catholic and Protestant, demanded that "obedience...be given to magistrates whether they are good or bad" (295),<sup>107</sup> it is easy to see why some might conflate the two.<sup>108</sup> Allen Whitney is right that Erastianism is not synonymous with the theory of divine right, but the two philosophies still implicitly share a similar vision of a Christian king, appointed by God, leading His nation and, should the king so choose, His church. However, this idealized form of Christian kingship resulted in one particularly demystifying and material consequence when put into practice: Erastian monarchs were first and foremost heads of state who therefore naturally favored state interests over those of the church. In an ideal world, Christian monarchs would rule their states and their churches in equal measure. Unfortunately, no actual Christian monarch could avoid making compromises in order to appease various political and religious factions, and such Christian monarchs would then necessarily value other interests, including national peace or even personal aggrandizement, over theological truth.

But the history of Erastianism is much more complex than the above summations, and its history matters if we wish to understand Shakespeare's wariness of it. Thomas Erastus (né Thomas Lübre) did not intend to enunciate a theory regarding kingship and any official state religion. Instead, he wrote to argue against the liberal use of excommunication and that a magistrate, not a panel of church elders known as presbyters, should have the power to punish

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<sup>107</sup> See "An Homilie Against disobedience and wilfull rebellion" (1571)

<sup>108</sup> Figgis describes this evolution in monarchical power as the "extension of the term Erastian to mean not opponents of excommunication, but upholders of the view that the magistrate could order religion as he liked and command obedience" (81).

Weldon S. Crowley summarizes this devolution of Erastianism thusly: "From Henry VIII to Charles I there crystallized in England an Erastianism in support of absolute monarchy; but the rupture that had occurred between the early Stuarts and their parliaments created the raw materials out of which a new Erastianism was to emerge—a system in which Parliament was to claim its authority over the church and the crown" (566).

those who offend the church. The Zwinglians and Calvinists from Erastus's native Switzerland argued in favor of presbyterian church organization, but Erastus objected to presbyterianism on the grounds that it was not scripturally sound (Crowley 551) and that presbyters were often too willing to excommunicate members from their church. Erastus worried that such a severe judgment would not win over many hearts and minds in a community that had still not yet entirely embraced the Reformed church's theology. In short, according to Figgis, "It was only in subservience to his design of protesting against what seemed to him a monstrous usurpation of arbitrary power that [Erastus] developed—so far as he developed at all—his theory as to the functions of the civil magistrate" (70-71).

Despite Erastus's misgivings, presbyterian ecclesiology gained in popularity in some parts of Europe. In Scotland, where King James VI was born, raised, and catechized, the transition from Catholicism to presbyterianism was particularly smooth. The Scottish Kirk quickly rid itself of what English bishop John Jewel called the "scenic apparatus" of Roman Catholicism (Wenig 288):<sup>109</sup> "holy water," the "appeals to saints," trade guilds, and "much of their festivity" (Todd 1-2). And the Scottish people did not much resist the erasure of Catholicism and the imposition of presbyterianism.<sup>110</sup> Compulsory church attendance and the cooperation of local law enforcement led to a newly-presbyterian people who were well-versed in the precepts of their faith and as deeply committed to their Protestant kirk as they once were to their local Catholic parishes.

In the years following his succession to his abdicating mother, James VI of Scotland faced considerable difficulty in establishing ecclesial authority amidst these formidable

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<sup>109</sup> Taken from a letter written by Jewel to Peter Martyr, likely in 1559.

<sup>110</sup> Perhaps Figgis had Scotland in mind when he called presbyterianism "the most overwhelming ecclesiastical force" in Western early modern Christendom (70).

presbyters, church elders particularly hostile to the philosophies undergirding Erastianism. According to Maurice Lee, Jr., “From the beginning of 1597 until the final completion of the task in 1610, James’s principal preoccupation within Scotland was...to bridle the clerics as he had bridled the earls” (81). Even in Lee’s rather adulatory biography of James do we see the state envision the church and its clerics as something to be “bridled” and contained like other state functionaries. And James had good reason to prefer hierarchical ecclesiological structures like episcopalianism, whereby bishops lead the church, over presbyterianism, which eschewed hierarchical ecclesial authority. As James himself famously reasoned, “No bishop, no king.”<sup>111</sup> A church that hesitated to acknowledge the king as having authority in ecclesial matters would likely also hesitate to yield to the king in civil matters, the reasoning went. James and his presbyters eventually reached a kind of stalemate, a stalemate that James eventually disrupted when he attempted to impose English ecclesiology onto the Scottish kirk only a few years after he ascended the English throne (Lee 177).

And it is this moment when James VI of Scotland became James I of England that informs our purposes here since Shakespeare likely penned *Measure for Measure* during the English interregnum or in the early days of James’s English rule.<sup>112</sup> The English people knew that James would replace Elizabeth on the English throne, and they largely rejoiced because of his kinship with Elizabeth, the stability of peaceful succession, and indeed the continuation of English Protestantism. However, that is not to say that there were not some concerns regarding James, his background, and his personal beliefs. Not only was he the son of an avowed Catholic who had been beheaded for sedition. Prior to his ascension to the English throne, James himself

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<sup>111</sup> See Lee, p. 167 and Derek Hirst, p. 61

<sup>112</sup> It also informs the purposes of critics such as Shuger, Maurice Hunt, and others, who read Calvinist Puritanism as a subtext for *Measure*.

wrote many theological and philosophical tracts regarding kingship and the divine chain of being that gave some Englishmen pause. According to J. W. Allen, “Even while [James] declared that ‘a good king will frame all his actions according to the law,’ he insisted that he was not strictly bound to do so” (5).<sup>113</sup> Thus, James’s own words often contained contradictions and an absolutist arrogance that, though appreciated and shared by some of his subjects, soon devolved into beliefs such as those of John Selden, a philosopher and jurist who wrote during James’s reign, “Whither is the Church or the Scripture the judge of religion? *In truth neither, but the State.*”<sup>114</sup>

Still, such beliefs about kingship and its divine nature were not unheard of in the late-sixteenth century. Elizabeth’s Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, expressed similar sentiments. Weldon S. Crowley claims that Whitgift “recognized in Erastus’ work helpful ammunition for the battle he had been waging for several years” (559). The “battle” to which Crowley refers is Whitgift’s fight in favor of episcopalianism over presbyterianism. English episcopalians saw in Erastus’s philosophies an argument that would help reaffirm a strong church hierarchy. It placed the king atop the church structure with the bishops immediately beneath him, manifesting their ecclesial and political importance.<sup>115</sup> Thus, Whitgift appropriated Erastus’s argument in favor of an ecclesial magistrate and expanded it so that the term “‘Erastian’ became synonymous with exalting the authority of the state in matters of religion; a development not explicit in Erastus’ *Treatise*, but still true to its logic” (Crowley 558).

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<sup>113</sup> See also Crowley, p. 563

<sup>114</sup> This quotation appears in his most famous work, *Table Talk*, which was not published until 1689, long after his death in 1654. Emphasis Selden’s. See also Figgis, p. 82

<sup>115</sup> Shakespeare later creates a dramatic tableau of this episcopalian hierarchy in *Henry VIII* (1613). For Queen Katherine’s divorce trial, the stage directions demand a very particularized courtroom spectacle: *The King takes place under the cloth of state. The two Cardinals sit under him as Judges. The Queen takes place some distance from the King. The Bishops place themselves on each side the court in manner of a consistory: below them, the scribes. The Lords sit next the Bishops. The rest of the attendants stand in convenient order about the stage.* (2.4)

With Whitgift's ardent episcopalianism, James's Scottish ties to presbyterianism, and the relatively recent English reversion to Catholicism under Mary, it is understandable that many Englishmen of all religious stripes might worry about the ecclesiastical consequences of James's succession to the reliably "conservative" Elizabeth (Crowley 297).<sup>116</sup> In October 1604, James wrote his English Privy Council to assure them that he would not seek to implement presbyterianism upon England:

[S]ince I am interpreted to have inclined this way [yielding to the Puritans] for fear of their mutiny, my resolution is that the bishops go on now with their own course according to the proclamation, and if my eye either spare or pity any of the disobedient, then let me incur both the shame and the harm in God's name. (qtd in Akrigg 223)

This letter strongly denounced the kind of church structure favored by the Puritans just as it also reiterated James's belief in his own ecclesial centrality, that he in fact considered himself personally responsible for the "disobedient" amongst his subjects. Clearly, James, a man whom G. P. V. Akrigg says "took religion more to heart" than the politically-prudent Elizabeth (215), governed during a tense and potentially volatile religious climate. Yet, in Erastus's imagination, the possibility of a monarch such as James also doubling as the head of the state church required one significant state attribute: religious uniformity. Figgis uses this word, *uniform*, repeatedly in his essay about Erastianism because it is such a necessary precondition for Erastian rule:

"Erastus was concerned solely with the question as to the proper method and authority for enforcing ecclesiastical discipline *in a State which was uniform in its religion*" (66; emphasis mine); Erastus "is concerned with moral discipline, not doctrine; *with a uniform, not a tolerant polity*" (66-67; emphasis mine); and "*In an age in which uniformity in religion is the political*

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<sup>116</sup> Crowley admits that one of the most significant challenges that *les évêques émigrés* faced upon their return to England under the Protestant Elizabeth was that these radical bishops "had to work with their more conservative queen."



*ideal*, the spiritual organization must claim a deciding view in matters of faith, or religious belief will become merely a question of political convenience” (82; emphasis mine). Wood concurs, stating unequivocally that “the nation-state required religious unity. Any notion of a secular state or of religious pluralism would have been inconceivable” (265). Erastus presumed religious uniformity and philosophized with such religious uniformity in mind. But religious uniformity was—and still remains—utterly impossible in practical form, and England, whose own state church James described as having to fight continuously against “the republicanism of Calvinists and Jesuits” (qtd in Whitney 383), was no exception. A large majority of English citizens identified as members of the Church of England and worshipped accordingly, but there still was no national religious consensus. Something—and someone—had to give.

The ideal of religious uniformity was impossible, and well-intentioned monarchs like James, who were motivated by genuine Christian conviction, were eventually forced to place state interests ahead of those of their respective churches. This practical reality of statesmanship must therefore also shift our understanding of Erastianism away from its original definition, that state authority can best enforce ecclesial law, towards the pessimistic reality that state authority could not truly lead a church as a church. Instead, royal figures turned such a church into another “department of state” (Wood 263). The fact is that James was no presbyterian and no Catholic. He even later wrote: “I ever maintained the state of Bishops and the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy *for order sake*” (qtd in Lee 170; emphasis mine).<sup>117</sup> James wished to cultivate true Christian values and Christian virtues among all British people just as he wanted to establish some degree of episcopalian uniformity in order to unify his three kingdoms (Lee 177). But the truth regarding James’s personal religious sympathies does not matter here. What matters is that the Scottish son

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<sup>117</sup> See James’s “A Premonition to all most mighty monarchs, Kings, free Princes, and States of Christendom” (1616)

of an executed Catholic had recently been crowned king of England, and many Englishmen—perhaps even Shakespeare—considered themselves justified in fearing James’s combined civic and ecclesial leadership.

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare has some fun with Erastianism and the messiness of uniting state and church authority. First, he creates the comical Duke/Friar duality in order to establish an Erastian tableau and to involve his audiences in the Duke’s game. He then pivots and on occasion establishes significant separation between the Duke and his friar alter-ego. While the audience never forgets that Lodowick is actually Vincentio, nearly every other character in the play at one time or other considers the two men to be separate beings. So to some degree, the two men do coexist at various points the play. However, ultimately there is no Friar Lodowick. In Sarah Beckwith’s words, there is only “Vincentio and his fake friar” (203). Therefore, all of Lodowick’s ecclesial influence are created by and subject to Vincentio’s will. In disguising himself as Friar Lodowick, Vincentio has effectively and unnecessarily burdened himself with religious as well as royal obligations. And despite his good intentions, as Lodowick, Vincentio offers problematic spiritual advice, abuses the sacraments, and coopts other friars to act as agents of the state rather than shepherds of the church. Through Vincentio’s bungled venture into the religious domain and the church’s concomitant willingness to be dissolved into the larger state superstructure, we see Shakespeare’s misgivings regarding the ability of even capable Christian monarchs to lead churches. Shakespeare seems to hope instead for an independent church that could resist royal power should it attempt to redirect or attenuate theological truth. Though the two occasionally overlap, he advocates for the return of state power as state power and the return of a church that, if not a separate entity like the Roman Catholic Church, then is at least a separate body outside the direct control of the sovereign.

### **“A devilish mercy in the judge”: Duke Vincentio and Blundered Erastian Governance**

For rulers of Christian states such as King James and the fictitious Duke Vincentio, the difference between secular and spiritual matters is slight. And while all early modern Christian monarchs, including those still beholden to the Catholic Church, considered it their duty to model and enforce Christian principles, those monarchs who also doubled as the head of their respective churches occasionally had to choose between serving their subjects and serving their parishioners. In *Measure*, we see this difficulty unfold through the sacred and secular intermixture of crime, sin, pardon, mercy, and forgiveness. Duke Vincentio, disguised as Friar Lodowick, muses on this very subject as he erroneously anticipates Angelo issuing Claudio’s pardon:

This is his pardon, purchased by such sin  
For which the pardoner himself is in.  
Hence hath offence his quick celerity,  
When it is born in high authority:  
When vice makes mercy, mercy’s so extended,  
That for the fault’s love is the offender friended. (4.2.108-113)

Here, as in the royal and ecclesial court of Great Britain, the complex legal and theological implications of *pardon*, *pardoner*, *sin*, *offence*, *mercy*, and *high authority* all converge within the office of the sovereign. Krystal Marsh articulates a similar idea, that “within the framework of his role as the political head of state, the spiritual, philosophical, and political are merged. The Duke recognizes that sin and crime are closely related categories” (93). Marsh ascribes to James a similar philosophy (86-87). But in this scene, the Duke/Friar does not concern himself with the

spiritual implications of sin so much as he does the peace, prosperity, and morality of the state. He desires a legal “pardon” for Claudio, even one “purchased by sin.” He even argues that reprobate persons of “high authority” can issue forth greater examples of mercy than can leaders of good Christian character, a declaration that nearly privileges mercy from royal sinners over the mercy of royal saints. In so doing, he demonstrates the same Erastian penchant that James also evinced, a penchant that keeps the church on the periphery and subordinates the salvation of individual souls to the *bonum commune*.<sup>118</sup> In this section, I will examine Vincentio’s Erastian governance that, though communally beneficial, oftentimes disregards the spiritual implications of his actions.

Outside of his friar disguise, the most visible way that Vincentio manifests Erastian tendencies is that he employs clerical figures to operate in secular capacities. Despite the fact that friars have a significant presence in the play, they almost never function as priests. We see this secularization of the play’s friars most clearly in Vincentio’s relationship with Friar Peter. Dressed in his royal garments, Duke Vincentio entrusts Friar Peter in Act IV with publicly announcing his “return” to Vienna:

These letters at fit time deliver me.  
The Provost knows our purpose and our plot.  
The matter being afoot, keep your instruction,  
And hold you ever to our special drift,  
Though sometimes you do blench from this to that  
As cause doth minister. Go call at Flavius’ house,  
And tell him where I stay. Give the like notice

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<sup>118</sup> See Goossen, p. 231 and Beauregard, p. 249

To Valencius, Rowland, and to Crassus,

And bid them bring the trumpets to the gate[.] (4.5.1-9)

Here, the Duke takes advantage of Peter's social status as a man of the cloth for secular purposes. The Duke admits as much when he worries that his "special drift" in the interests of the state might make Peter "blench...as cause doth *minister*," words that anticipate the church's disapproval of his deception as well as allude to Peter's own ministerial role. He enjoins Friar Peter to act as a spokesperson for Vincentio's ducal seat, giving "notice" to the Duke's minions: Flavius, Valencius, Rowland, and Crassus. Writing for *The New Criterion*, Kenneth Colston calls Friar Peter one of the play's "minor Franciscan messengers" (22), but this categorization is a bit misleading. He does not instruct Peter to rally the bishops to his command or to prepare his people spiritually for his return. In short, he does not ask Peter to act as a Franciscan at all, despite Colston's claim that he is a "Franciscan messenger." Rather, the Duke uses Peter to act as political messenger much like a Provost, a civic figure who "knows our purpose and our plot" (4.5.2). Instead of being a singularly identifying characteristic, Peter's clerical position is merely incidental. If anything, the Duke selects Peter to carry his message precisely because he is a Franciscan and therefore more likely to be trusted. Peter's Franciscan identity and spiritual authority have been exploited by the Duke, indicating that Vincentio sees clerics as servants of the state as well as their church.

That the Duke uses Friar Peter for his own purposes is perhaps one of the advantages of his royal position. That Friar Peter accedes to being used indicates that he has acquiesced to the power of the state. We see Friar Peter's acquiescence most clearly in the final act of the play, where he sides with the Duke and the state over his church and its teachings. First, Peter reports publicly to the Duke slanders against him that have been uttered in private: "Blessed be Your

Royal Grace!/ I have stood by, my lord, and I have heard/ Your royal ear abused.” He goes on to charge Isabella with “wrongfully accus[ing]” Angelo of sexual harassment, a charge that he has no evidence to support. Finally, he defends the absent Friar Lodowick against Lucio, proclaiming: “I know him for a man divine and holy” (5.1.142-150). Thus, Friar Peter reveals information spoken to him, if not under the seal of confession than with at least the understanding of clerical confidentiality, he lies about Isabella and Angelo, and he claims to affirm that which cannot be affirmed: the religious authority of an unordained man. Each of his statements is reckless and irresponsible, even if Peter believes them all to be true. Beauregard offers the tepid defense that Friar Peter implicitly understands Vincentio’s good intentions and therefore helps bring them “to good account” (261), but this defense only magnifies Peter’s willingness to serve the Duke’s interests over those of his professed church. Vincentio lies to his people and encourages them to engage in more lies, all for political ends. Friar Peter willingly assists him in these efforts. Thus, Vincentio’s Erastian appropriation of religious ordination affects the church by persuading its clerics to cooperate in it.

One other aspect to note in the instrumentalization of Friar Peter is the fact that Peter believes that two separate men, Duke Vincentio and Friar Lodowick, have both taken him into their confidence. Thus, when Peter pronounces:

Upon [Friar Lodowick’s] mere request,  
Being come to knowledge that there was a complaint  
Intended ‘gainst Lord Angelo, came I hither,  
To speak, as from his mouth, what he doth know  
Is true and false, and what he with his oath  
And all probation will make up full clear,

Whensoever he's convented, (5.1.158-164)

Peter believes that he is privy to the inner thoughts and desires of a fellow Franciscan, thus reiterating his membership in a clergy that has literally allowed itself to become embodied with the state. But just as Lodowick's identity as a Franciscan is a lie, nearly everything Peter utters on his behalf is a lie. Lodowick is not sick, and Peter therefore cannot have been entrusted to impart what Lodowick "doth know is true and false." Instead, Peter acts as a mouthpiece for his order and—though he does not know it—his Duke. In so doing, Peter implicates himself in a series of lies that serve the political interests of the Duke to the detriment of the Franciscans. The only time that Friar Peter operates as a man vested with religious authority occurs when he marries Angelo and Mariana, and even this act he performs only out of obedience to the Duke. When the Duke commands: "Do you the office, Friar, which consummate,/ Return [Angelo] hither. Go with him, Provost" (5.1.386-387), Friar Peter obeys. In so doing, he cooperates in the compulsion of marriage, a compulsion that directly contradicts canon law,<sup>119</sup> and he does so in conjunction with the Provost, another representative of the state. Beckwith remarks at length about the absorption of Shakespeare's friars into the state in *Measure*. In other Shakespearean plays, she says, "the friar is the figure who benignly circumvents the problems paternal authority brings to the legitimate desires of the young... . In these plays friars are represented not as a royal priesthood, but as a church unsubsordinated to the state, capable of acting quite independently of the state's jurisdiction." But in *Measure*, Shakespeare "reverses" this role

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<sup>119</sup> The Council of Trent (1545-1563), commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church, rails against such state-imposed marriages: Worldly inclinations and desires very often so blind the mental vision of temporal lords and magistrates, that by threats and ill usage they compel men and women who live under their jurisdiction...to contract marriage against their will with those whom these lords or magistrates propose to them...[I]t is something singularly execrable to violate the freedom of matrimony, and equally execrable that injustice should come from those from whom justice is expected[.] (191). Nearly every early modern Reformed church agreed with this assessment, even those who ardently opposed the Council of Trent.

(201), meaning that in this play, friars are now “a royal priesthood” utterly “subordinated to the state” and manifestly incapable “of acting quite independently of the state’s jurisdiction.” The friars are the state and the state has surreptitiously declared itself one of the friars, an impossible commingling that Vincentio somehow makes possible and to which Peter, a genuine representative of the church hierarchy, willingly assents.

And Peter is not the only friar to yield to the Duke’s political power. In the very first act of the play, Friar Thomas complies with the Duke’s desire to don the friar disguise, making him a willing participant in the Duke’s deception and in the diminution of the friar vocation more generally. Though Thomas exerts some spiritual authority in telling the Duke on no uncertain terms: “It rested in Your Grace/ To unloose this tied-up justice [regarding Viennese debauchery] when you pleased,” a demonstration of the church’s potential to challenge state power, Friar Thomas never voices opposition to the Duke’s adoption of the friar disguise. “Supply me with the habit and instruct me/ How I may formally in person bear/ Like a true friar,” the Duke commands him (1.3.31-32; 46-48). Thomas’s silent response is acquiescence, both personal and ecclesial. In fact, since Thomas furnishes Duke with the requested habit and instruction, he literally cloaks the state in ecclesial robes and invests it with church ritual. The Duke wishes to become a friar in every way except in truth, and Friar Thomas enables this misappropriation of the spiritual office. Goossen describes the consequences of this rather problematic alliance: Vincentio “hears confessions, offers deathbed counsel, and attempts to offer last rites” but “his spiritual work is tainted with political methodology. His language and assumptions remain tellingly juridical, even in their often sacramental form” (27-28). Goossen’s words, though harsh, are also accurate. “Spiritual work” is now “tainted” and the sacraments have become “juridical,” an expression of earthly rather than eternal justice. In true Erastian form, the Duke takes over the



authoritative autonomy of the church and incorporates it into his own. The result is the secularization of the sacred and the subordination of the church to the state.

We see a similar sublimation of the religious into the civil in the Duke's relationship with Isabella. Using his royal position, the Duke indirectly manipulates Isabella into exercising mercy which immediately benefits the state, even if it likewise will yield spiritual benefits. Isabella provides the play's original definition of mercy in her open defiance of Angelo's tyranny:

No ceremony that to great ones 'longs,  
Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,  
The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,  
Become them with one half so good a grace  
As mercy does. (2.2.64-68)

In this moment, Isabella separates mercy from the earthly mechanisms that enforce it. Mercy exists outside of and beyond "the king's crown," "the deputed sword," "the marshal's truncheon," and "the judge's robe." Mercy, she claims, is a Christian "grace," not a principle instituted by the state. However, at the end of the play, the Duke reassumes authority over this "grace" and pressures Isabella to offer Angelo the mercy that will best serve the community: "For this new-married man approaching here,/ Whose salt imagination yet hath wronged/ Your well-defended honor, you must pardon/ For Mariana's sake" (5.1.408-411). Under the Duke's command, the "mercy" and "grace" that Isabella earlier describes transition into "pardon" and "honor." To borrow Goossen's language, spiritual concepts have now become "juridical." The Duke seeks earthly, state-ordered justice, not Christian grace. If Isabella denies Angelo mercy, he would most certainly be put to death, a death that would most harshly impact Mariana because she would then lose Angelo's wealth and protection, the respectability of marriage, and

the restoration of her broken engagement and her lost virginity. The mercy that the Duke helps Isabella offer Angelo benefits Isabella's soul as well as Angelo's, and it provides us some hope for Angelo's ultimate redemption. But these consequences are merely beneficial side effects. The Duke arranges Isabella's mercy to avoid material loss for Mariana and the community, not out of concern for any individual's spiritual well-being.

Not only does the Duke persuade Isabella to turn Christian mercy into juridical pardon, he also potentially persuades her to renounce her religious vocation in favor of a royal position. In proposing marriage to her, Vincentio hopes to obviate the possibility of Isabella's personal celibacy and ecclesial autonomy. In pronouncing to her that "Your friar is now your prince," he declares his own liberty from priestly celibacy and availability for marriage. He then proclaims about the newly-returned Claudio: "If he be like your brother, for his sake/ Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake,/ Give me your hand and say you will be mine;/ He is my brother too." Finally, he openly offers her: "What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (5.1.390; 501-504; 548). Each of these statements promises to exchange or combine the civic with the religious: the friar and the prince, the pardon and the marriage, the dukedom ("what's mine") and the convent ("what is yours.") So much of *Measure* criticism fixates on the Duke's proposal, oftentimes because Isabella vocalizes no response to it. The feminist critic Barbara Baines suggests: "In her silence to the Duke's proposal, Isabella thus adheres to the rules of the sisters of St. Clare: she shows her face but remains silent, perhaps with the key to the convent still in her pocket" (299). Katherine Gillen assumes that Isabella accepts the proposal but uses her acceptance as proof of early modern misogyny, claiming that Isabella's "marriage to the Duke reflects the uneasy process by which playwrights invoked female chastity to legitimize the theater, associating theatricality not with prostitution but with the normative exchange of

marriage and the mimetic authenticity of the chaste woman” (158). And Ronald MacDonald offers us only that “the Duke’s proposal apparently strikes the heroine dumb” (266). Each of these criticisms examines the proposal as it relates to gender relations, and there is certainly much here to feed that curiosity. But I prefer instead to examine the ways that the Duke’s proposal alters state and ecclesial relations. The Duke offers several times—one might even say he pleads—for the religious sister Isabella to become the royal duchess because the two cannot coexist simultaneously. Should Isabella marry Vincentio, Sister Isabella and her Catholic vocational autonomy must also disappear forever.

It is worth noting that Isabella initially hopes to enter the convent of the Poor Clares, a Catholic order historically associated with Franciscan friars (Backman 492). Thus, the Duke’s attempt to pull Isabella from the religious into the secular continues what we have already witnessed in the Duke’s absorption of the Franciscans Peter and Thomas into his jurisdiction. Similar to Erastian governance, a marriage between Vincentio and Isabella would be both the union of man and woman into religious contract and the union of church and state into a single secular superstructure. As already stated, Isabella gives no answer to the Duke’s proposal, so we do not know if she accedes to the state’s cooption of the spiritual. However, the final line she does utter is telling: “Thoughts are no subjects,/ Intents but merely thoughts” (5.1.461-462). These lines indicate a propensity for continued personal agency and a refusal to allow her religious “thoughts” and “intents” to become the Duke’s “subjects.” And indeed, Slights and Morgan Holmes believe that “Isabella’s words support an interpretation of her desire for the state to leave people’s private lives alone” (290). However, Isabella never makes her thoughts known and therefore permits the presumption of a forthcoming marriage to the Duke, a renunciation of

religious “intents,” and the permanent Erastian conjoining of the church and the state at the expense of ecclesial freedom.

Despite many instances of valuing state over religious interests, the Duke does make one gesture that seems to place one of his subject’s souls ahead of his and his community’s secular concerns: he unnecessarily extends juridical mercy to the murderous Barnardine. Amidst issuing directives for Angelo to confess his crimes and marry against his will, Duke Vincentio interrupts himself and abruptly asks:

Which is that Barnardine?

...

There was a friar told me of this man.—

Sirrah, thou art said to have a stubborn soul

That apprehends no further than this world,

And squar’st thy life according. Thou’rt condemned;

But, for those earthly faults, I quit them all,

And pray thee take this mercy to provide

For better times to come. (5.1.489-496)

As elsewhere, this speech combines the spiritual and the civil, treating them almost interchangeably. Vincentio remarks upon Barnardine’s “stubborn soul” and expresses concern about the prisoner’s salvation, claiming that Barnardine “apprehends no further than this world.” Yet, Vincentio does nothing to address these spiritual concerns and instead “quit[s]” Barnardine’s “earthly faults,” a gesture that he here understands as Christ-like “mercy” but that functions more like the material “pardon” that he earlier extracts from Isabella on Angelo’s behalf. In this moment, the Duke privileges the precepts of the Christian faith over civic interests

and extends mercy—a mercy that may expose his people to material harm. MacDonald alludes to this same harm when he remarks that in *Measure*, “[j]ustice and mercy are not finally abstractions, mere forms of words,” that they are in fact “terribly concrete” (279). Barnardine has murdered multiple people. We in the audience may like him because of his drunkenness and his comical refusal to be beheaded earlier in the play (4.3.38-63). We also likely rejoice at his release from prison. But the fact remains that he is an unrepentant murderer, or, as Gurnis describes him, “an emblem of reprobation” (160). He demonstrates no change of heart and offers no promise to avoid violence in the future. He never even asks for the pardon in the first place. Vincentio gives it unsolicited, a necessary precondition of grace but not necessarily of juridical pardon, indicating that it stems from his reach into spiritual authority. That he learns of Barnardine’s situation from his days as a friar (“There was a friar told me of this man,” he says with Friar Lodowick in mind) reinforces this idea. In this particular instance, Vincentio attempts to privilege the church and its spiritual concerns ahead of the safety of the state, and this attempt at blending the church with the state does everything to save Barnardine’s physical body but does nothing to save his “stubborn soul.”

It is also worth considering whether this attempt to place the church’s interest in mercy above the state’s interest in public safety undermines Vincentio’s civic authority. For one thing, he nearly begs Barnardine to accept the pardon he issues: I “pray thee take this mercy,” he says, placing himself in the position to petition for the acquiescence of an imprisoned subject. But in addition to rendering himself inferior to a ward of his own state, Vincentio also makes himself appear impulsive and indiscreet with his pardons, especially when compared with the ardent retribution he seeks against Lucio’s slanders. Though he ultimately rescinds the punishments, he initially orders that Lucio “be whipped and hanged” for privately speaking ill of the Duke. After

all, he reasons, “Slandering a prince deserves it” (5.1.524; 535). Mathew Winston defends the Duke’s sensitivity to slander,<sup>120</sup> noting that the “name of Lucio recalls that of Lucifer, and the crime for which Lucio is punished at the play’s conclusion, slander, may remind us that the devil is the prince of lies, or even that the word *diabolos* means ‘slanderer’” (235). Since slander is then both a crime and a sin, Winston acknowledges the Duke as having some religious authority and that he attempts here to limit the devil’s influence on his state. But more importantly, Vincentio seems to fear Lucio’s slanderous tongue more than Barnardine’s murderous temperament. Barnardine has exacted actual violence upon Vincentio’s people. Vincentio issues an unconditional pardon for Barnardine the murderer but calls for the execution of Lucio the liar. It bears repeating that the Duke soon after “forgive[s]” Lucio (5.1.530) and orders only that Lucio marry Kate Keepdown to atone for his misdeeds, a punishment that Winston calls “not...terribly harsh” (241). But very little of the Duke’s actions in this final scene indicate that he has a strong grasp of perspective or that he can wield Christian authority effectively without compromising his position as civil prince.

Both before and after Duke Vincentio assumes the garb of Friar Lodowick, the Viennese people in *Measure* expect him to model for them not just leadership but Christian leadership. As Shuger succinctly states, “The play is about the nature of Christian rule” (2). However, there is a key difference between Christian and ecclesial rule. The church and state occasionally have competing interests. When Vincentio attempts to absorb the otherwise autonomous church into his court, he dilutes the church’s effectiveness even as he empowers the state. His final speech hints at this amalgamation of power:

She, Claudio, that you wronged, look you restore.

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<sup>120</sup> “That the Duke is sensitive to slander is indisputable,” Kerrigan states (302).

Joy to you, Mariana! Love her, Angelo.  
I have confessed her, and I know her virtue.  
Thanks, good friend Escalus, for thy much goodness;  
There's more behind that is more grate.  
Thanks, Provost, for thy care and secrecy;  
We shall employ thee in a worthier place.  
Forgive him, Angelo, that brought you home  
The head of Ragozine for Claudio's;  
Th' offense pardons itself. ...  
So, bring us to our palace[.] (5.1.536-545)

Using Christian language, Vincentio speaks mainly of secular concerns: “restoring” Juliette, rewarding faithful servants Escalus and the Provost “in a worthier place,” even asking Angelo to “forgive” as well as “pardon” the very earthly head-trick used against him. His reference to the sacrament of confession he places in the past (“*I have confessed her*”) and not as an exercise for Mariana’s spiritual benefit but as a reassurance to Angelo that she will make a good wife. The sacred becomes secular, the friars and the nuns return to the unseen periphery of the city, and the characters process together into the royal “palace,” seemingly detached from much of the church’s influence. In Vincentio, Shakespeare does not doubt the possibility of strong Christian leadership. Rather, he doubts the possibility that strong Christian leadership can also effect strong ecclesial governance at the same time.

**“The demigod Authority”: *Measure* and the Malleable Church**

In the opening act, we learn a hint of the general Viennese political mood regarding the Duke *vis-à-vis* the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church:

**Lucio:** If the Duke with the other dukes come not to composition with the King of Hungary, why then all the Dukes fall upon the King.

**First Gentleman:** Heaven grant us its peace, but not the King of Hungary's!

**Second Gentleman:** Amen. (1.2.1-6)

Though they do not give us specifics, we understand from this brief political discussion that many regional dukes are unhappy with the Hungarian king and his royal government. They even hint at insurrection, calling for their own “peace” at the expense of the king’s. However, even more important are Lucio’s careful words: “If the Duke with the other dukes come not *in composition with* the King of Hungary” (emphasis mine). Although the men’s obvious distaste for the King of Hungary may suggest a hostility towards Catholicism, Lucio still calls for the Austrian dukes, including Vincentio, to come into composition *with*—not against—the Emperor. Lucio alludes to a unification between governor and emperor and hints that the Holy Roman Emperor is merely a figurehead for the composite of one unified Christendom. “Amen,” the second gentleman replies to Lucio’s remarks, reinforcing the religious component of this conversation. Because there is no further mention of the King of Hungary in the play and because the line is uttered by Lucio the troublemaker, it is unlikely that this political climate should factor too heavily in our reading of *Measure*. What it does speak to is a larger question about church structure and ecclesial sovereignty.

Since the Viennese populace expresses such hostility towards the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy he represents, what then do we make of the Catholicism that features so prominently in *Measure*? As I have suggested earlier, I believe one way to consider it is as a



proxy for the Church of England, that Shakespeare indirectly comments on English Erastianism by imagining a Catholic monarch in a Catholic nation experimenting with Erastian rule. As already mentioned, the friars within the play, Peter and Thomas, readily accede to acting as minions for the state. However, in addition to their willing subordination, much of the overt religiosity of the play is either ignored, ostracized, or comically performative. This diminution of the church into the folds of royal power indicate that this particular play doubts an Erastian church's ability to serve its people's souls while also doubting the possibility of Erastian civic leadership.

One key aspect of the church in *Measure* is that it exists almost entirely on the periphery, both geographically and in its influence on people's sexual behavior. Shakespeare first introduces us to his heroine Isabella at the convent, where she confidently declares a desire to join "the sisterhood, the votarists of St. Clare" (1.4.5), a Catholic community of women so strict that it regulates the conditions under which its members may speak to and reveal their faces to men (1.4.7-13). Because isolated Catholic monasteries such as the Poor Clares exercised such a high degree of control over their members, they essentially formed a quasi mini-state within the larger political nation-state. They established their own laws and law enforcement mechanisms that almost always commanded a stronger regulation of freedom and personal choice than the civic government permitted. In the play, the wall that separates the Poor Clare convent from the rest of the Viennese community then becomes a true border wall, with the women of the Poor Clares effectively ruling themselves and nearly disregarding the local and national authorities under which they also live. Postulates such as Isabella, women who have not yet taken final vows that would fully commit them to God and their religious communities, therefore act as a living link between the secular and the religious state, and Francisca's command for Isabella to

“[t]urn you the key” in order to open the convent door to the outside world (1.4.8) reiterates this point. In *Measure*, the geographical space allotted specifically for autonomous church entities is on the outskirts of the Viennese state, detached from the sexual promiscuity of the city and utterly inaccessible to the masculine magistrate.

And yet, even in this space of concentrated Catholic quasi-statehood, the Catholicism we see is amusing and hyperbolic. It does little to enrich or even reach Christian souls. If we examine Sister Francisca’s language to Isabella carefully, we see elucidated within it not just the rigidity discussed above but a comedic melodrama, an affectation of Catholicism that undermines its spiritual purpose. Following Lucio’s shouts, she explains to Isabella:

It is a man’s voice. Gentle Isabella,

Turn you the key, and know his business of him.

You may, I may not; you are yet unsworn.

When you have vowed, you must not speak with men

But in the presence of the prioress;

Then if you speak you must not show your face,

Of if you show your face you must not speak.

He calls again, I pray you, answer him. (1.4.7-13)

Francisca then exits the stage, leaving Isabella, the uninitiated Poor Clare, alone with a man. Considering that the early modern actors portraying both Isabella and Francisca would have been obviously men, this scene has the potential to be remarkably funny. And that is precisely, if I may borrow the Puritanical term,<sup>121</sup> the point. Through the reiteration of the Poor Clares and

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<sup>121</sup> See Maurice Hunt’s “Being Precise in *Measure for Measure*,” David Beauregard’s “Shakespeare on Monastic Life: Nuns and Friars in *Measure for Measure*,” and John Kerrigan’s “Binding Language in *Measure for Measure*.”

their strictness, the Catholicism in *Measure* begins as a joke, giving some scholars good reason to point to this scene as evidence that Shakespeare took a dim view of Catholic monasticism.<sup>122</sup> Slights and Morgan Holmes, scholars who argue that Isabella sincerely desires a Catholic religious vocation and that early modern cloisters offered “ways in which women could find self-affirming affective life together” (263), likewise admit that “Shakespeare’s decision to make Isabella a sister of Saint Clare was likely based on an awareness of the order’s reputation for asceticism” (271). Shakespeare does not merely include the cloistered life as a legitimate lifestyle alternative for women, although he seems to be doing that as well. He predicates much of the play’s comedic character on its radical religiosity, indicating that we should not simply see Catholicism but the radical performance of it. The Church within *Measure* does not open its doors to licentious sinners such as Lucio. In fact, it turns its face away from them. It isolates itself. The sisters of the convent preach to the choir, as they say, by performing for one another strict adherence to ridiculous earthly rules. They do not seek to save souls so much as satisfy themselves of their own holiness.

The joke regarding the Poor Clares and their radical privation continues through the subsequent conversation between Isabella and the lascivious Lucio. When Lucio calls out to Isabella, “Hail, virgin, as those cheek roses/ Proclaim you are no less,” (1.4.16-17), he employs words that parallel the famous Catholic prayer honoring the Virgin Mother of Christ, the “Hail Mary” (Baines 288).<sup>123</sup> The “Hail Mary” is a laudatory prayer that proclaims: “Hail Mary, full of

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<sup>122</sup> Huston Diehl posits that the Duke’s adoption of the friar disguise may “reinforce[] Protestant associations of friars with a fraudulent theatricality, their ‘humblest habits’ with ‘a false disguise.’” See her article, “‘Infinite Space’: Representations and Reformation in *Measure for Measure*,” p. 395. See also Darryl J. Gless’s *Measure for Measure, the Law, and the Convent* (1979), which also categorizes *Measure* within the early modern anti-monastic literary tradition (Slights and Holmes 263).

<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, the second iteration of the Rules of Saint Clare became known as the Isabella Rule, after the its author. This Isabella was “Blessed Isabella, sister of Louis IX, King of France, and founder of the monastery of the Humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Longchamp, near Paris” (Slights and Holmes 272).

grace/ The Lord is with thee.”<sup>124</sup> In appropriating this recognizable prayer, Lucio connects the virginal Isabella with the Virgin Mary, a move that at once attempts to sexualize the Poor Clare novice and blaspheme the Virgin Mary and her sacred celibacy. Rather than iterate her many virtues and her likeness to the Blessed Virgin, Lucio nearly dares Isabella to deny that she is “no less” a “virgin” than the Mother of God. David Beauregard pushes back against a link between Lucio’s language and the language of the “Hail Mary,” insisting instead: “The parallels are too slight and unrealized to provide much parody” (256). But Beauregard’s dismissal of the comparison denies the rather obvious similarities in address between Lucio’s salutation and the prayer’s invocation. It also denies what Shakespeare attempts to do here: to make us laugh at the absurdity of the hyper-religious tableau.

One final aspect of the Poor Clares convent that we should consider aside from its isolated location and its self-contained performative piety is the fact that we never return to it. Once Isabella leaves the convent—and ostensibly her religious vocation—the play itself forgets this autonomous body of religious women, suggesting that once we have moved on from isolated, autonomous religious space, we will never return to it. Thereafter, the church and state are entirely commingled, most prominently so in the person of the Duke/Friar. The Erastian Duke/Friar then contributes to the weakening of the church in two key ways: he does not provide adequate spiritual counsel and he secularizes the sacraments. To recognize the Duke/Friar’s inept spiritual counsel, we need look no further than his meeting with the condemned Claudio. Though he has recently discussed with Juliet her sinfulness and the grace of repentance, he mentions neither to Claudio. Instead, he flippantly advises him to “be absolute for death; either death or life/ Shall thereby be the sweeter,” rambles on about man’s discontented nature, and ends with

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<sup>124</sup> Like nearly all ritual Catholic prayers, the “Hail Mary” was recited in ecclesial Latin during Shakespeare’s time. The following is the Latin version of the English lines given above: “*Ave María, gratia plena,/ Dominus tecum.*”

the nihilistic thought about “[w]hat's yet in this/ That bears the name of life? .../...yet death we fear,/ That makes these odds all even” (3.1.5-41). His speech alternates between excoriating the value of life, lines that nearly echo Hamlet’s despair against “this quintessence of dust” (*Hamlet* 2.2.309), and joking about death. About this scene, Goossen argues that the Duke/Friar “attempt[s] to provide Claudio with perhaps the most profound counsel expected of a clergyman.” However he “cannot get beyond the temporal world over which his jurisdiction rightly lies and so reduces the Christian spiritual hope of life after death to an exhortation to accept death’s finality” (229). Exactly so. The Duke/Friar has no spiritual *bona fides*. Therefore, he “cannot get beyond the temporal world” because his power and authority exist there and only there. His playacting as a clergyman “reduces” Christian soteriology—and by extension, Christian theology in general—to the considerations of the temporal world. The Duke/Friar’s unsanctified spiritual counsel does a disservice to Claudio. It also suggests Shakespeare’s wariness of the “reduction” of spiritual and ecclesial power at the hands of the sovereign.

Such are the results of the Duke’s posture as friar. However, even after he returns as Duke, he still proclaims to have power over spiritual matters, a power that results in state control over the sacraments of marriage and confession. Against their will, the Duke commands that several couples marry. Despite the fact that such a command would go against the theologies of nearly every early modern Christian denomination, Duke Vincentio orders: “Go and take her hence, and marry her instantly./ Do you the office, friar” (5.1.385-386). Not only does he direct for a marriage to take place off-stage and away from the public’s eyes, a hint at the unseemliness of his arrangements, his language also renders the performance of marriage an “office” to be performed at the will of the prince. Beauregard makes the keen observation that if we rely on Shakespeare’s given stage directions for this scene, “the Duke remains dressed in his Franciscan

robes after he has been unhooded by Lucio, ...lend[ing] to the proceedings a certain religious authority” (259). We have departed from the Poor Clares and from Catholic autonomy, and now the only vestige of the church that still remains is a costume. The church’s former domain—including the “office” of the sacraments—now rests in the hands of the sovereign.

In addition to Duke Vincentio’s cooption of sacramental marriage, he also coopts the discourse of the confessional as a tool for state surveillance and magisterial power. The Duke/Friar casually admits about Mariana: “I have confessed her, and I know her virtue” (5.1.537).<sup>125</sup> Not only does this line concede that he has administered the sacrament of confession,<sup>126</sup> a significant departure from his earlier assurances to Friar Thomas that he means only to “bear” himself as a friar in order to “visit prince and people” (1.3.45;42). He then takes the information he has extracted from these unauthorized confessions and makes it public. His claim that he has “confessed” Mariana and “knows her virtue” (5.1.137) does indeed convince others of her virtuousness, but in making this statement, he has now divulged otherwise sacred discourse. Priests and friars cannot reveal publicly what has been told to them in a sacrosanct confession. Since the Duke/Friar is not actually a friar, he is not beholden to such constraints. However, even if his public announcement of Mariana’s virtue cannot violate vows he has not taken, it does violate the discretion and secrecy understood by Mariana when she confesses to him. John Kerrigan takes a more benign view of the Duke/Friar, asserting as he does that “Shakespeare fully articulates the religious frequencies of his denouement ...by putting a cowled confessor into the judgement seat in the role of Duke” (310). However, Kerrigan’s assessment

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<sup>125</sup> The Duke/Friar also claims to be “confessor to Angelo” (3.1.169). However, nothing else in the text supports the idea that he is. Either this claim is a lie in order to gain Claudio’s trust, or he has actually acted as Angelo’s confessor in a scene not featured on stage. If the latter is true, then it serves as an additional example of the Duke/Friar’s sacrilege of Catholic confession.

<sup>126</sup> Marsh refers to the Duke as “both a spiritual and political confessor” (92).

seems to undermine the Duke/Friar's spiritual betrayal of his people. He first desecrates the sanctity of the sacraments by performing them for unsuspecting and sincere penitents, and then desecrates it a second time by publicly revealing the information that such confessions have provided for him. In breaking the confessional seal, he humiliates his confessants and politicizes their infinitely sacred admissions. In treating Catholic sacraments as political tools, he profanes the sacraments and compromises the *bonum commune* by making a mockery of sincere religious practice. That the church does not oppose this secularization of the rituals within its purview indicates that it is willing to sacrifice the sacraments for the sake of Erastian government.

And in *Measure*, the Erastian government prevails, even convincing modern scholars of its public and Christian utility. Shuger surmises:

That the representation of the king as a *mixta persona* gets associated with these claims helps make sense of Shakespeare's Duke, who does not simply disguise himself in a friar's habit, but acts as a priest—hearing confessions, preparing the souls of the dying for eternity, counselling sinners—and who also both exercises spiritual jurisdiction and overrides the law. Since English kings were not clergymen, his disguise is literally sacrilegious imposture, yet...the play nowhere suggests that the Duke's actions are improper; the point of his taking on a friar's role and garb, over and above its utility as a plot device, seems to be rather to indicate, to gesture toward, the sacerdotal nature of royal authority, and thus what it means to 'bear the sword of heaven.' (60)

And Shakespeare likely would have agreed with and advocated for “the sacerdotal nature of royal authority,” but there is a significant difference between Christian kingship and “spiritual jurisdiction.” Rather than seeing the victory of Erastianism in *Measure* as a sign of Shakespeare's endorsement of the political and ecclesial *mixta persona*, I see a playwright who remains skeptical that an Erastian church can wield any significant spiritual influence over its membership. The play opens with Catholic histrionics in a cloistered convent that feed only its own religious fervor. The religious figures in the play make no attempt to save souls or to minister to those steeped in sexual sin while the very trajectory of the play itself continuously

takes us further away from the religious and towards the secular. By its close, the newly-married couples venture into what Duke Vincentio calls “our palace” (5.1.549), a shared political space, not a religious one. The Duke includes the friars in this invitation but only as members of the general public, not as a particular group with a particular role in society. The curtain falls as the Duke promises to “show/ What’s yet behind, that’s meet you all should know” (5.1.549-550). The religious have become—and have consented into becoming—part of the “you all,” the general populace, subjected to royal authority, and exercising none of its own.

## **Conclusion**

In making the case that William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* continues the morality play genre popular during the Middle Ages, Krystal Marsh claims: “If a morality play is meant to teach the audience how to be good Christians, then *Measure for Measure* reorients this tradition in order to teach the audience how to be good subjects and, in turn, good Christians as well” (86). If we follow through with this line of thinking and apply it to the English monarchy as well, then the play also hopes to “teach” sovereigns such as James how to be good Christian leaders. What we find is that the play makes a strong case that even monarchs with the best of intentions bungle their foray into the clerical world and into the spiritual lives of their people. They would instead serve their people much more effectively by focusing mainly on their nation’s earthly concerns and working towards peace and strong social relationships rather than salvation. Duke Vincentio admits as much when he assures Isabella that, though he has cast off his friar costume, “As I was then/ Advertising and holy to your business/...I am still/ Attorneyed at your service” (5.1.390-393). His friar persona tries to provide “holy” instruction to Isabella’s



“business,” but he finds he is much better suited to civic advisement, an “attorney” rather than a minister.

By the end of the play, we are still left wondering whether he can ever truly cast off his clerical position—with all its attending moral responsibilities—once he has appointed himself to it. Though he sentences Lucio in a secular, juridical capacity, Vincentio still insists to the lying nobleman: “Thy slanders I forgive and therewithal/ Remit thy other forfeits” (5.1.530-531). Vincentio “forgives” and “remits,” terms that at once combine Christian and earthly means of justice and justification. In the same way, once the British Isles established their own state churches and entrusted royal monarchs such as Elizabeth and James to lead them, the British royal throne could never fully divest itself of its ecclesial responsibilities, even if it wished to do so. Maurice Lee, Jr. goes even further: “To James, as to virtually all his contemporaries, church, state, and society were so intimately and integrally connected that the separation of the church from the state and society was an idea that flourished only in the sick brains of heretical Browneists and Anabaptists” (167). Like Henry VIII long before him, James presumed upon himself the responsibility for “church, state and society,” and like Vincentio, he would retain authority over all three, even as he took an Erastian position and pursued the state’s interests above all else.

In doubting that state churches might ever provide a strong check on royal interests and royal overreach, Shakespeare does not merely point to the subordination of the Church of Scotland or the Church of England to the Scottish and English thrones. In fact, *Measure* does not even mention by name either church or their respective clergy. But Shakespeare does call out the Catholic Church and its subdivisional institutions such as the Poor Clares and the Franciscan friars. In Catholic regions such as Vienna, the Roman Church might function as a separate body

even as it shared many of the state's goals and worked with state entities to achieve them. But in Jacobean England, it needed to strike a much more difficult balance. On the one hand, James's mother, Mary, was a devout Catholic, often described by fellow Catholics as a martyr to the faith. James even expressed some admiration for the Roman Church, remarking in a letter to Sir Robert Cecil, "I reverence their church as our mother church, although clogged with many infirmities and corruptions" (qtd in Lee 175). On the other hand, he still viewed the papacy as one of the greatest threats to his authority (167). Thus, any continued Catholic presence in the British Isles could oppose James only so far without risking a reprisal of Catholic oppression. But Shakespeare does not let the Church off the hook simply because it may upset the stalemate subsisting between James and his Catholic subjects. He may have instead disapproved of Catholic appeasement in the face of secular interference in church matters and doubted the possibility of the Church of England to retain any degree of theological autonomy.

Perhaps we can read *Measure* as a warning for Catholics not to conciliate too much to the crown. If so, then the play was remarkably prescient considering that James demanded in 1606 that they sign an Oath of Allegiance to him against the pope. But perhaps Shakespeare does not so much worry about the safety of the Catholic population *vis-à-vis* James as he does worry about the preservation of Christian doctrine against civic dilution. Erastian monarchs were often very competent state leaders. According to Lee, King James VI of Scotland's "policy worked. James left behind him in 1603 a country that was far more peaceful, orderly, prosperous (in spite of the lean years of the mid-1590s), and obedient than any living person could remember" (89). Yet historians also typically judge the quality of King James I of England's political leadership with ambivalence. As such, even figures such as James, who by all accounts governed the Scottish nation and church in a satisfactory manner, could not necessarily succeed when they

acquired new and often competing state and ecclesial responsibilities. To simplify the tasks of royal figures and to ensure that churches could maintain and advocate for their own interest, Shakespeare seems to suggest through *Measure* that the church remain fiercely independent of state authority and even remain wary of yielding to state authorities in matters that do not conflict with the Church's religious ethos. Before Duke Vincentio's return to Vienna, Friar Peter assures Mariana that many of her problems will now shortly be resolved, that he himself has found "out a stand most fit,/ Where you may have such vantage on the Duke/ He shall not pass you" (4.6.10-12). In this way, the church puts its members in the best position to be led by their prince, a place where they may keep "such vantage" of him that "he shall not pass" them by.

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