

# **Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark**

A Collection of Essays on Shakespeare  
in his Christian Context

Edited by

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**Series in Literary Studies**



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# Preface

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Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark? The question was put to each of the contributors to the collection that follows. They received no further guidance about how they were to understand the question nor how they were to shape their responses. No particular theoretical approach, no shared definition of the question was required or encouraged. Rather, they were free to join, in whatever way they thought useful, the extensive discourse about the impact that the Christian faith and the religious controversies of his time had on the poems and plays of Shakespeare. Some of the writers chose to dig more deeply into veins already opened. Others struck out on their own, finding new or less familiar entries into the question. The range of their responses points not only to the openness of Shakespeare's work to interpretation, but to the seriousness with which they reflected on the question and to their careful and sensitive reading of the poems and plays.

Shakespeare lived in a time of transition. The values and beliefs of the old medieval world and those of the emerging early modern one, both at work in the culture, created tension and sometimes conflict. Observation versus reasoning in science, representation versus iconography in art, the private conscience versus ecclesiastical authority in religion, metaphor versus allegory in hermeneutics were just some of the ways in which the tension manifested itself. While the list could indeed go further, the various elements were not in fact dichotomous but inextricably intertwined with no clear distinctions between or among them. Ideas, beliefs, methods circulated and interacted freely in the culture of Shakespeare's England, blurring categories and organizational systems. The heterogeneity of Shakespeare's world is reflected in the heterogeneity of the chapters that follow, each an individual response to the complex question they engage.

At the same time, what the plays and poems reveal about Shakespeare's Christianity is itself unclear, and that lack of clarity has also contributed to the variety of responses in the collection. All the writers recognize, to some degree or another, that the tension in Shakespeare's world between the old and the new, between the medieval and the early modern, brought uncertainty (and in some cases anxiety) to the minds and hearts of Shakespeare's contemporaries and at times violence and repression to the social order. But what Shakespeare himself believed, how he responded in his work to the religious turmoil of his time remains uncertain. For some of the contributors here, Shakespeare's plays are inescapably indeterminate (even evasive) and open to a multiplicity of possible readings. For others, Shakespeare, as it were, takes a stand and, through the careful patterning of his plays, speaks more or less unambiguously to the religious and political issues of his time.

Michael Scott, in his introduction, isolates four significant questions about Shakespeare's Christianity and the influence of Christian belief on his work, questions that are raised and discussed repeatedly in the chapters that follow. Was Shakespeare a Catholic or a Protestant? To what extent does Shakespeare engage the Christian mystery of the relationship between death and redemption? How does the openness of Shakespeare's work to multiple interpretations complicate our responses to the question of his Christianity? How did the traditions and conventions of Christian medieval drama influence Shakespeare's plays?

The book is divided into five parts. The chapters in the first part seek to characterize Shakespeare's spirituality. For Paul Edmondson, it is grounded in the Incarnation: God entered the world, taking on human flesh and blood. As a result, everything in the world can reveal the presence of God among us and thus lead to what Edmondson calls "a radial inclusivity." Paul Fiddes describes Shakespeare's spirituality as an "openness to the other," a sacramental vision of the world that finds "under the appearance of the material . . . a reality that is nothing less than Divine grace." While the paths they take are very different, the two chapters seem to arrive at essentially the same place.

In the second part, Beatrice Groves and Michael Collins take a more familiar approach to the question and look at some of the ways in which Shakespeare deploys Biblical themes, language, and structures in his poems and plays. The first chapter focuses on the Psalms, the Biblical book to which Shakespeare alludes more often than any other, and it connects his various references and allusions to specific translations of the Psalms. The focus of the next chapter is on the parables. It proposes that while the theological vision and narrative patterns of these Biblical stories are reflected in Shakespeare's comedies, the meaning of that reflection remains secular and finally uncertain.

As the Protestant Reformation took hold, the long tradition in the Christian church of reading Scripture allegorically began to give way to a more literal or metaphoric approach. While they did not entirely abandon the allegorical method, Luther and Calvin encouraged their followers to look for the literal sense of Scripture and to resist allegorizing every element in the text. But the allegorical way of reading did not suddenly disappear: both Scripture and secular literature continued to be read allegorically, not simply by Catholics, but by Protestants as well. Edmund Spenser's great poem, *The Faerie Queene* (1590/96), testifies to the hold that allegory continued to have on the culture of England in the second half of the sixteenth century.

The chapter that opens the third part, by Molly Clark, shows that the allegorical conventions of the old morality interludes turn up in Shakespeare's more naturalistic plays like *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part I*. The chapters that follow go a step farther and find an allegorical dimension to Shakespeare's work that would arguably have been recognized and understood by at least some of his contemporaries. In these readings, the plays, through their characters and events, speak specifically to the theological and political issues of their time. Clare Asquith examines the ways in which both plays and poems address themselves to the Elizabethan Oath of Supremacy. Andrew Moran next explains how St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (together with Ovid and Aristotle) informs *The Taming of the Shrew*. Finally, Gerard Kilroy finds one of the sources for *Romeo and Juliet* in the Song of Solomon and proposes analogies between the play and Dante's *La Vita Nuova*.

The fourth part consists of three chapters that explore, in various ways, the role of Christian faith and practice in two of Shakespeare's plays. In the first, Rowan Williams argues that in *The Merchant of Venice* the "staging of the Jewish-Christian conflict is framed by a set of Biblical and theological motifs." But, at the same time, "not far below the surface" of the play, "fundamental theological categories and images are distorted and subverted." Yvette Khoury's chapter asks why Shakespeare represents nuns and friars in his plays and then suggests how he employs their theological assumptions and ways of life to achieve his dramatic purposes. Finally, in a chapter on *Measure for Measure*, Elizabeth Schafer examines the challenge that Isabella's Christian faith—her belief that "her eternal soul is at risk if she does not resist the sexual predator Angelo"—presents to contemporary secular audiences and then analyzes the ways in which various modern productions have responded to that challenge.

In the fifth and final part, John Drakakis, takes the word "Christian" as largely a political or sociological phenomenon. For Drakakis, what Shakespeare's plays reveal is that Christian belief and cultural practices are simply one of the means by which the powerful sustain and extend their power in the secular world.

Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark? As the essays here make clear, it is a controversial question that necessarily evokes a range of controversial responses. But, inevitably, after any such responses have been recognized, articulated, and read, the question remains, for Shakespeare's work—complex, ambiguous, multivalent—will continue to suggest other responses to this central and elusive question, responses, like the ones collected here, that may in the end tell us more about ourselves than they do about Shakespeare and the Christian culture in which he lived and worked.

# Introduction

## Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark

Michael Scott

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**Abstract:** We look at the past through the lens of the present. What we say therefore about the past needs to be qualified by a question mark. Shakespeare is no exception. A belief in God and Christianity was part of the compulsory ideology of his time. But personal beliefs are private matters. No one actually knows what he personally believed or indeed what branch of Christianity (if any) he favored. This opening chapter identifies four of the significant areas discussed in questioning Shakespeare's Christianity: What kind of Christianity does he seem to espouse—Catholic or Protestant? To what extent does he examine the Christian “mystery” of the relationship between death and redemption? Does Shakespeare's apparent openness of view complicate our response to the question of his Christianity? What influence did the Christian medieval dramatic traditions have on his work?

**Keywords:** Elizabethan Catholicism, Elizabethan Protestantism, Medieval drama, Shakespeare interpretation, Christian mystery, Shakespeare's beliefs.

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It is problematic to address history, since we look at the past through the lens of the present. We make assumptions, even statements, through our personal predilections and the ideologies of the society in which we live. In *Shakespeare's Loss of Eden*, Catherine Belsey writes:

...the problem of history is not the real, but our account of it, our record of its past, which is always delimited by the signifier. We cannot know the past outside the residues it leaves, and these remains are always subject to our interpretation... We have no direct access to a past that exists outside the construction that we put on it in the present. (12)

What we say therefore about the past must always be qualified with a question mark, and Shakespeare is no exception. Shakespeare does not appear to have

been a polemicist for Christianity, but we do perceive Christianity as prevalent in theme and structure throughout his works. Shakespeare, like all Elizabethans, had to be a Christian, since the law demanded it, but in one respect, the question mark will always remain. How can we possibly know how Shakespeare personally regarded the compulsory, national religion of his period or whether he even believed in God? As Jonathan Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy* has noted, an intellectual skepticism was present in the age concerning God, the accoutrements of religion, and the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, when we examine Shakespeare's plays, we need to consider how the Christian culture in which he lived and wrote is reflected in his work.

As noted in the acknowledgements, this book derives from a series of talks given to the general public. Our audience came from a variety of backgrounds, including academics and students, but also people with just a general interest in getting to know about Shakespeare. In this introductory chapter, based on the talk to open the series, some of the parameters for the essays that follow are set. Four significant areas are identified in relation to the question of Christian Shakespeare.

1. Beginning with the example of *Hamlet*, we might ask, what kind of Christian was Shakespeare: Catholic or Protestant?
2. To what extent does Shakespeare examine the Christian mystery of the relationship between death and redemption?
3. i) Does Shakespeare's general openness of view complicate our response to the question of his Christianity and of a Christian vision?  
  
ii) That question is considered with specific reference to *The Merchant of Venice*.
4. How did the Christian medieval dramatic traditions influence Shakespeare's work?

### **Part 1: What kind of Christian was Shakespeare: Catholic or Protestant?**

Christian elements abound in Shakespeare's work, but we cannot determine whether his vision/sensibility/faith (if any) is Catholic or Protestant. Let us consider the example of *Hamlet*.

Certainly, Shakespeare was familiar with Catholicism, its teaching and practices. But evidence also shows that he was aware of Protestant teachings

as well. In *Hamlet*, we find the ghost of the murdered King who speaks about his torment in Purgatory:

.... I am thy father's spirit,  
 Doomed for a certain time to walk the night.  
 And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
 Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.13-17)

The Ghost's words are clearly a Catholic reference, as the Protestant reformers discarded the idea of Purgatory. Yet later in the same play, we find another passage, which appears to be taken almost directly from the Protestant reformer, Jean Calvin (1509-64). (See Robin Headlam Wells 117- 20). Referencing St. Matthew's Gospel (10.29), Calvin writes in *The Institution of Christian Religion* (1535) that God sustains Christians

"...with singular providence" caring "for every one of those things that He hath created even to the least sparrow.... providence is called that, not wherewith God idly beholdeth from heaven what is done in the world, but wherewith as guiding the stern He setteth and ordereth all things that come to pass." (Quoted in Wells 119-20)

In *Hamlet*, the Prince, in accepting a preordained future, seems to echo Calvin's words:

... we defy augury: there's a 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. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? (5.2.150-3)

Earlier in the play, Hamlet also asserts, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" to which Horatio responds, "That is most certain" (5.2.10-11). Hamlet's words in both cases would have been recognized as a Protestant statement of predestination, at odds with the Catholic doctrine of "free will."

The debris of Catholic sacramentalism appears to be scattered, as in a wasteland, throughout the play. It could be suggested that Roman Catholic practice and liturgy was still vivid in the collective memory of Shakespeare and his audience. King Hamlet, for example, has died in a garden – perhaps reminiscent of Eden – where his ear has been infused with poison rather than anointed by Holy Oils, which was one of the practices of Extreme Unction, the Catholic Church's sacrament given to those near death. The play also recalls

the Sacrament of Confession. Claudius, in attempted prayer, admits his guilt, but realizes that he still enjoys the benefits of the murder he has committed. As such, his confessional prayer is worthless:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (3.3.100-2)

We may also find a negative resonance with the Sacrament of Baptism, as water in this play is not used as a cleansing of the soul from original sin but is rather the means of Ophelia's death by drowning, which it is implied is a possible suicide. (See the discussion below of 5.1.175). Furthermore, we are presented throughout the play with the degradation of the Sacrament of Marriage in the "incestuous" relationship between Gertrude and her brother-in-law Claudius (which harks back to the start of the Reformation in Henry VIII's accusations that he was incestuously married to his sister-in-law Catherine of Aragon). Finally, haunting the whole of the play, is a crime that has been committed against an anointed representative of the Lord. A King is anointed at his Coronation, in the same manner, that a priest is sacramentally anointed at his Ordination. The relationship between Kingship and Priesthood goes back to the King/Priest, Melchizedek, in the Old Testament, Book of Genesis.

What is evident is that Shakespeare was not afraid to use either Catholic or Protestant interpretations of Christianity for his dramatic purposes. But similarly, he had to take great care. Religion and politics had been firmly fused together by Henry VIII's reformation. People had been dealt with viciously, tortured, and executed for straying away from the religious path set by the prevailing government. Such a path was determined by the religious persuasion of the monarch, whether Protestant or Catholic, or something in between. In John Marston's play, *The Malcontent* 1603-4 written shortly after *Hamlet*, a courtier Bilioso is asked, "What religion are you of now?" He replies, possibly referring to the ascent to the throne and arrival in London of James I, "Of the Duke's religion, when I know what it is." (4.1.91-92). A dramatist had to tread a political tightrope. Two of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and Thomas Kyd (1559-1594), died as relatively young men after sailing too close to political subversion and being accused of "atheism."

Shakespeare cleverly balances religious reference or statements, even over questions relating to the "unforgivable sin" of "suicide." Throughout the play, Hamlet questions the existence of a life after death and the nature of suicide itself, but never provides an answer. Indeed, his final words are "The rest is silence" with all the ambiguity lying with the word "rest."

As noted above, at the burial of the drowned Ophelia, it is implied that she may have killed herself. When her brother, Laertes, complains at the scant ceremony of her burial, the priest replies, "Her death was doubtful." (5.1.175). It is an interesting use of the word. It could mean "suspicious," in that they do not know whether it was by accident or by suicide. Literally, however, it implies "full of doubt," as Hamlet had been throughout the play, over the matter of death itself. But whatever, the priest justifies the nature of the scanty burial service because, "great command o'ersways the order". In other words, the King has determined the nature of the service. As it was in Elizabethan and Jacobean London, the monarch decided what was what! Shakespeare writes as it is. He is not, in my view, a Christian polemicist, although some later chapters in this book argue otherwise. But that in itself is the richness of critical debate around the question of the dramatist's Christianity.

### **Part 2: The Christian mystery of the relationship between death and redemption?**

Shakespeare had a fascination with the Christian mystery of the relationship between death and redemption. For him, these were an ever-present reality he repeatedly expressed, whether in tragedy, comedy, history, or pastoral. In an unpublished lecture "The End of the Humanities?" (given at St John's College Oxford, 2 November 2018, as part of *The Future of the Humanities Project*, of which *Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark* is a component), Terry Eagleton put a contemporary slant on the issue of death as the universal human fate. Eagleton states:

Only by accepting death as an absolute limit can it become a horizon. Which is to say that Calvary was a genuinely tragic action. It didn't of course end badly, but then tragedies don't always do so. Think of the *Oresteia*. Tragedy can just mean that you have to be hauled though Hell if you are to achieve any degree of redemption. As Marx comments, only by a loss of humanity can there be a renewal of it. Such is the crookedness of humanity that only by virtue of a breaking can human powers be remade. It's on this that Marxism, Christianity, and psychoanalysis are all agreed, at different levels and in different ways.

Shakespeare, three hundred years before Marx or Freud, was recognizing and expressing something which is universally characteristic behind the action and thoughts of people. It is a yearning for life, but also an understanding of death as both a conclusion and a new beginning, not necessarily of the individual but of the way life itself continues. Throughout the sonnets and plays, Shakespeare is

obsessed with the passage of time. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, in her quandary when she realizes that Olivia has fallen in love with her, remarks:

O time, thou must untangle this, not I.  
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie. (2.2.35-6)

Narratives have beginnings and endings, whilst the time between moves the story either towards redemption and celebration or towards death. Many of Shakespeare's comedies start with death or the threat of death, which is seen as a beginning of a journey of self-discovery to something new.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, this movement is made clear through the narrative, from the sentence of death placed on Egeon at the beginning of the play to the recognition scene with his sons and the reunion with his wife, the Abbess, at the end. *Twelfth Night* opens with Duke Orsino, love-sick for Olivia whose father and brother have died. Scene two finds Viola saved from death but fearing her brother, Sebastian, has been drowned. The drama subsequently moves through a plethora of comic mistaken identities to a final recognition scene, whereby all is revealed in the celebration of the love between Viola and Orsino and between Olivia and the newly found Sebastian. *As You Like It* begins with the reported death of Orlando's father and continues with the threat of death made by his brother Oliver, but ends with reconciliation between the brothers and their marriages to Rosalind and Celia. All these "new beginnings" are earthly, not necessarily "Christian" in terms of a new life in heaven.

In tragedy, new beginnings actually end in death. King Lear, in abdicating, thinks that he is creating a new comfortable world for himself, but it results in deaths, which signal new beginnings for the country. Othello marries Desdemona, but their "new lives" are destroyed through the progress of the narrative, ending in the death of both, but life itself continues. In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* Shakespeare begins and ends with images of death, but also points to the start of new regimes. These tragedies all understand death as both a conclusion and a new beginning, but it is a secular beginning not necessarily a Christian one. Shakespeare's structure is modelling the cycle of life: birth, death, renewal. The cycle is not necessarily associated with the rebirth of an individual but rather with the continuance of time and the earthly existence of society and mankind.

In one of the later plays, *The Winter's Tale*, the death of Antigonus, savaged by a bear, is simultaneous with the finding of the baby, Perdita, by the old shepherd, who says to his son, "But look thee here, boy. Now bless thyself. Thou met'st with things dying, I with things newborn. Here's a sight for thee: look thee, a bearing-cloth for a squire's child." (3.3.98-100). One person dies

and another is born. That is how life and death interweave. The conclusion of the play “brings a rebirth.” The supposedly dead Hermione is being commemorated by the unveiling of a statue in her memory. But her husband and re-found child, Perdita, are in error, believing her to be dead. The statue moves and breathes, revealing that although Hermione “died,” her life has continued. She is to them “reborn.” A Christian context can be given to this, especially as the agent of her “rebirth” is named Paulina, but equally, the play works dramatically without a Christian association. Her loyal friend, Paulina, has merely kept her hidden for many years.

Earlier in the play, the character of Time had itself appeared, as a dramatic figure, saying:

I, that please some, try all, both joy and terror  
 Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error,  
 Now take upon me, in the name of Time,  
 To use my wings. Impute it not a crime  
 To me or my swift passage, that I slide  
 O'er sixteen years and leave the growth untried  
 Of that wide gap, since it is in my power  
 To o'erthrow law and in one self-born hour  
 To plant and o'erwhelm custom. (4.1.1-9)

Time moves on and we have to follow her power. None of this is especially Christian, but it is a fact of nature. In Shakespeare's case, it is a theatrical device, showing a truth about ageing, to which we, the audience, are all subject. In this regard, many of his *Sonnets* concentrate on the themes of time and mutability. Over and over again, in the *Sonnets*, he makes clear his belief in immortality, not of the human individual but of the written word. It is within his “powerful rhyme” that he will immortalize his “only begetter of these ensuing Sonnets. Mr. W.H.” In Sonnet 55, for example, he writes:

Gainst death and all oblivious enmity  
 Shall you pace forth, your praise shall still find room  
 Even in the eyes of all posterity  
 That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
 So, till the judgement that yourself arise,  
 You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Academics argue over the identity of Mr W.H., but the irony is that it is not actually known who he was. It is not the “only begetter” who is really important, but the poem itself. It is the poem which will last until the end of time - the “ending doom” of the “judgement day” for all mankind. There is a

Christian reference here, in terms of “resurrection” at the second coming of Christ. But that is not where the emphasis lies. The importance is the immortality of the poem: “You live in this”. If we translate this sentiment to his plays, we discover some things which are very obvious but remarkable.

### **Part 3 (i): Shakespeare’s general openness of view**

The openness of Shakespeare’s plays to interpretation further complicates our response to the question, “Christian Shakespeare” and our efforts to understand Shakespeare’s Christianity/Christian vision within the plays. The versatility that we find in a Shakespearean text is itself liberating, because, as Kiernan Ryan demonstrates in *Shakespeare and the Future*, the play’s “meanings” do not have a finality.

To grasp a Shakespearean play as fully as possible at any point in time is to recognise that its gaze is bent upon a vanishing point at which no reader or spectator can hope to arrive. Like the hat that the circus clown kicks out of reach every time he steps forward to pick it up, final comprehension of the play is perpetually postponed by each act of interpretation. Built into Shakespeare’s plays, as into his poems, is the expectation that whatever eyes are viewing them at a given moment, other “eyes not yet created” (Sonnet 81) will one day view them in another light. (198)

Further, unlike human beings, Shakespeare’s fictional characters are, in a sense, “immortal.” Prince Hamlet dies at a performance one day only to reappear on stage the next day. In this fact, the question of “Christian Shakespeare” becomes more complex. *Hamlet* has been in regular performance, in one production or another, for over four hundred years, and in that respect, it has undergone constant changes in interpretation. No Hamlet is the same because the character is played by different actors in different contexts. As Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) states, each actor plays the role in their “own right as one placed in the circumstances created by the play” (248-49). This still influential early twentieth-century Russian theatre director continued by asserting that “the motive forces of [the actor’s] psychic life are united in action and interdependent” with the character found in the script. The original dramatist is not thereby in total control of the medium of production.

This openness is also the case in acting traditions which are not psychologically based, such as those of Bertolt Brecht (1878-1954) or Charles Marowitz (1934-2014), where a deliberate ideological slant is placed upon a production or adaptation of Shakespeare. Something of the genius of Shakespeare is thereby found in the malleability of his scripts for performance

and interpretation. If Shakespeare had been an ideologue for Christianity, his plays would not have survived the test of time. Trevor Nunn's 1976 renowned RSC production of *Macbeth*, with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench, was comfortably set in a Christian context, with Duncan shown as a Christian King and with the accompaniment of traditional Christian liturgical elements. But as many other productions have shown, this play does not have to be located within a specific Christian setting. For example, Gregory Doran's dark and foreboding production for the RSC in 1999, with Antony Sher and Harriet Walter, had a modern setting, reminiscent in part of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s.

A distinction has to be made between the historical dramatist—Shakespeare as the man writing in his immediate context—and *Shakespeare* as the Works that have come down to us. Further, we have to ask what are the “residues” we are reading into our interpretations of these texts which prove so malleable in production. The plays, in many cases, exist in more than one printed edition, in the various early Quartos and in the First Folio (1623), with differences between the editions. Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark may have a different reply, depending on different productions, adaptations, textual editions, and editorial decisions made through the centuries up to the present day. Drawing on the work of Frederic Jameson, Alexa Alice Joubin states, “... works do not in and by themselves contain meanings; rather as they move through the world, they soak up and accrue meanings” (64). Current ideologies thereby set the parameters of the question itself, but within these parameters we also have to take account of the history of the text and its performance. As will be seen later, two of the contributors to this book, Dr. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Professor John Drakakis, a Cultural Materialist, approach *The Merchant of Venice* from their differing ideological perspectives, one Christian, one not. This is a Shakespearean play which causes significant controversy today, reflecting the Christian culture in which Shakespeare wrote, whilst maintaining a stance on that culture which is like the clown's hat, constantly slipping from his grasp. Let me also consider this play, albeit briefly.

### **Part 3 (ii): Shakespeare's openness of view in relation to *The Merchant of Venice***

*The Merchant of Venice* can be seen as an example of the elusiveness of Shakespeare and the difficulty of pinning down the Christian vision in his plays. Following the Holocaust, W.H. Auden made the point that recent “history has made it utterly impossible for the most unsophisticated and ignorant audience to ignore the historical reality of the Jews.” Asserting that very few Elizabethans would have ever encountered a Jew, he stated that Jews in Shakespeare's day would have been thought of as “fairy-story bogeys with

huge noses and red wigs” (223). It is implied that within such a context, Richard Burbage first created the role of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. His portrayal of Shakespeare’s Jew was apparently a comic stereotype, since that is how, years later, in the early eighteenth century, the character was portrayed on the London stage by Thomas Doggett (1640-1721) at Drury Lane and subsequently by Benjamin Griffin (1680-1740) at Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Their portrayals were in a 1701 adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* by George Granville, titled *The Jew of Venice*.

Granville, in his adaptation, had made the role of the Jew the focus of the play, cutting out the final act. The stereotypical portrayals of Doggett and Griffin may have reflected Shakespeare’s original intention within the context of Christian London of the 1590s, or they may have skewed those intentions. In any case, audiences today would find such portrayals offensive in their anti-Semitism. Joan Ozark Holmer points out that “some advances were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries towards limited forms of religious tolerance among Christians, but anti-Semitism remained Europe’s most socially acceptable form of intolerance” (18). *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore, could well have been written in line with a prevailing Christian, anti-Semitic culture. Yet issues in relation to the text and indeed in the evolution of the play within a tradition of performance at least raise further questions.

A key moment, in looking at the character of Shylock, comes with the famous passage:

I am a Jew. 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 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 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. (3.1.40-49)

Contemporary readings and performances of this speech might demonstrate a tolerance in the writing and in the consequent understanding of the characterization, even of the original Shylock. It may be a signal that Shakespeare was before his time in his thinking, that Shakespeare’s Christian vision was closer to the great commandment Christ gave to his followers—to love one’s neighbour as oneself. Indeed, at the end of the play, the Christian

Lorenzo cites the Hebrew Bible when he thanks Portia for the deed of gift, suggesting perhaps an affinity between Judaism and Christianity that the characters fail to recognize but the play does.

A sympathetic acting tradition of the role can be seen from 1741 with Charles Macklin, who discarded the red wig of the Jewish caricature, replacing it with a red hat and a more humane, but still comic, portrayal. (See William Appleton). In 1814, Edmund Kean took another step, rescuing the original play from Granville's adaptation, restoring the final act. From then on Shylock was no longer to be a caricature. In 1879, Henry Irving developed the character even further by providing Shylock with a tragic quality and adding an extra silent but emotionally charged scene. After Shylock's daughter Jessica had eloped with the Christian Lorenzo, Shylock silently entered the stage as if to return home. The curtain slowly lowered to end the act. This short silent dramatic interpolation left the audience with the sympathetic expectation that Shylock was going to find the house empty and himself bereft of his beloved daughter. It had a powerful effect. It was one used again in the twentieth century, most notably in Terry Hands' 1971 R.S.C. production, when Emrys James, as Shylock, actually entered the house and started searching for his daughter, going from room to room, as the scene came to a close. As I have noted in *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist*, Bernard Shaw disliked Irving's tragic Jew, stating that it "simply was not Shylock at all" (Quoted in Scott 48). Auden states that such actors were not changing the role "out of a sense of moral duty" but rather "because their theatrical instinct told them that the part played seriously, not comically, offered them greater possibilities" (223).

Plenty of evidence throughout the play suggests that Shakespeare was critical of both Jew and Christian. The trial scene (4.1) may demonstrate the triumph of Christian over Jew, but it still leaves us with a question. As Joan Holmer notes, the Christian theologians were at variance in how to deal with people not sharing the Christian faith. She points out that whilst St Thomas Aquinas "argued against the use of constraint to convert pagans and infidels," St Augustine "espoused that Christians should be intolerant of error" (18). Forcing the Jew to become a Christian at the end of the trial is Augustinian. But it can be argued that the triumphalism of the Christians tends to demonstrate a lack of both Christian love and mercy—a failure, that is, to show the essential elements of humanity, a failure to live out the fundamental Christian virtues of love and forgiveness, the very virtues they expect Shylock to exhibit in the courtroom. Shakespeare's "Christian vision" in such readings is critical of aspects of Christianity in Elizabethan contemporary practice.

#### **Part 4: The influence of Christian medieval dramatic traditions on Shakespeare's work**

The influence of the Mystery and Morality plays on Shakespeare suggest another dimension of his Christian vision. But was it their form or content or both that engaged his imagination as he wrote?

The story of Christ's Resurrection became in the ninth century the starting point for the development of English drama through the *Quem Quæritas Trope*, enacted by monks at the Easter ceremonies celebrating the risen Lord. As part of these ceremonies, a simple question and answer in Latin took place. One side of the choir, representing the angels, stood to ask a question and then sat down. The other side, representing the Marys who had come to anoint Christ's body in the tomb, stood to give the response. It is translated as follows:

Question [of the angels]:

Whom do you seek in the sepulchre, O followers of Christ?

Answer [of the Marys]:

Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, O heaven-dwellers.

[The angels:]

He is not here, he has risen as he had foretold;

go, announce that he has risen from the sepulchre.

(*Quem Quæritas Trope* in Bevington 26)

This trope developed into extended *Sepulchrum* plays and onwards into Easter "performances" such as the *Peregrine*, depicting the disciples meeting the risen Jesus on the way to Emmaus. Later, at Christmas, the Office of the Shepherds (*Pastores*) and the Office of the Three Kings (*Magi*) were developed and enacted.

These rudimentary plays, however, were all ancillary to the central ritual of the Catholic Church, which was and remains the Sacrifice of the Mass. The Mass commemorates the Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. These events became also the structure for the Medieval Mystery Cycles, the great pageants of approximately fifty short plays that dramatized various Biblical stories prefiguring the coming of Christ and recounting His own Life, Passion, and Resurrection. The Catholic Christian message was that Christ died as an expurgation of man's sins, "for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (*Letter to the Hebrews* 9.22). In Christ being the Son of God, His death did away with the need for primitive acts of sacrifice to appease God, because the sacrificial victim itself was Jesus Christ, God's only son, who overcame death through rising again. The belief that death had been brought into the world because of man's inherent sinfulness derived from the

Biblical story of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, committing the “original sin” of disobedience to God’s rule. Forgiveness of sin had been made possible by Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross at Calvary. This event was replicated through the ritual performance of the Mass, the daily offering up of Christ, the Son of God, to God His Father.

Despite Henry VIII’s Reformation of the Church in England and Wales in 1534 and the subsequent ban on the performance of the Mystery Cycles, they continued to be enacted until the 1580s. At the same time, recusant Catholics continued to go to Mass in secret throughout the Tudor period. Shakespeare, born in 1564, might well have seen a late Mystery Cycle and would probably have known the Order of the Mass.

In 1958, Bernard Spivack (*Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*) demonstrated the influence of medieval Morality Play on the development of Tudor and Stuart plays. He saw, for example, the allegorical figure of Vice within the Christian / Catholic Morality Play as an antecedent of Iago in *Othello*. These ideas have been richly debated over the last sixty years or so. Recently, in some circles, the idea of Shakespeare being a recusant Catholic, who employed allegory in his works, has emerged. (See, for example, Clare Asquith, *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*). This largely Catholic allegorical view is contested but is one which is of sufficient interest and scholarship as not to be ignored. There may be no compelling arguments to prove that Shakespeare was a Catholic, although historians have offered some interesting speculation on that topic. Michael Wood (*In Search of Shakespeare*) suggests that Shakespeare’s mother, Mary Arden, kept to the Catholic faith as did his father John Shakespeare, but David Scott Kastan, in *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion*, is more cautious about such assertions.

Molly Clark points out later in this book that the Catholic tradition of the Morality Plays, although they had become increasingly secularized and politicized in the Tudor period, continued to influence Shakespeare even after they were no longer performed. This form of drama, as the Morality Play, originally focused on the battle for man’s soul. In the *Castle of Perseverance* (c.1425) good and bad angels literally battle it out to take “Mankynde” either to Hell or to Heaven. The good angels always won because the figure for whom they were fighting was not an individual, but the representative of all mankind, and mankind had been saved through Christ’s sacrifice in the shedding of His blood. This form of drama was later individualized, resulting in Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* (1592) with Faustus, at the end, being taken off to Hell. But, with Shakespeare, we might ask whether it was the form or the content of the Morality Plays that engaged his imagination.

We can conclude, however, this general opening chapter concerning the Christian influence on the plays with an example of Shakespeare’s

appropriation of the Morality Play. In *Everyman*, a morality play of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the character of Everyman has to reconcile himself to the fact that in death he will lose everything except his “Good Deeds.” In the epilogue to the play, a doctor warns the audience to “... forsake Pride, for he deceiveth you in the ende” (Bevington 963). In *King Richard II* (1595/6), Shakespeare creates a complex individual as the King, whose own failings result in the revolt against him and the usurpation of the throne by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke. As Bolingbroke’s forces gather, bringing Richard’s fall from power closer, Shakespeare provides the King with a remarkable speech. The words go beyond Richard’s immediate situation as King to the universal fate of every human person, whatever their status.

.... within the hollow crown  
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
 Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,  
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
 To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,  
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
 As if this flesh which walls about our life,  
 Were brass impregnable. And humoured thus,  
 Comes at the last and with a little pin  
 Bores through his castle walls, and farewell king!  
 Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood  
 With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,  
 Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,  
 For you have but mistook me all this while:  
 I live with bread like you, feel want,  
 Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,  
 How can you say to me, I am a king? (3.2.155-72)

Here the word “bread” may be important in any Christian interpretation, since Christ referred to himself as “the bread of life.” Richard is accepting that he is not God-like. He needs bread to live. Within his anointed kingship, he is still a mere mortal. In the fall of Richard II is the medieval concept of life ending with a dance of death. The Christian heritage—embodied in the morality plays—and human reality are joined, the “absolute limit” perceived not just for a king, but for everyman. As we have seen Shakespeare’s plays show a fascination with mutability, time, and death. They concern the reality of “here” and only ever at best speculate on the “hereafter.”

Because meanings are conferred from generation to generation, it is impossible to discover Shakespeare’s personal beliefs—whether Christian or

not. We can perceive only “through a glass darkly.” History has hidden and created too many unknowns. We are entrenched in our own concerns and attitudes towards religion, atheism, secularisation, equality, democracy, culture, and leadership. Shakespeare was immersed in a Christian culture at war with itself over belief, practice, and moral behaviour. But what that culture meant—to Shakespeare and in his plays—will remain always the enigma: Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark.

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