

“Psalms, Soliloquies, *Hamlet*”

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This essay seeks to specify the relationship between an old problem in *Hamlet* criticism and an even older problem in scriptural exegesis. It begins with the premise that Psalm 51—the culturally ubiquitous *Miserere mei deus*—is a crucial intertext for *Hamlet*, and especially for the scene of theatrical testing that is *The Mousetrap*. The psalm was supposedly written by King David during the narrative, related in 2 Samuel 11–12, in which the king seduces Bathsheba, murders her husband Uriah, and is admonished for his crimes by the prophet Nathan. Hamlet, I suggest, self-consciously models himself on Nathan, testing Claudius by reproducing his crimes before him in a masked form. This connection between Shakespearean and scriptural texts poses a further connection between two longstanding interpretive problems associated with them: *when* in the narrative of 2 Samuel does David compose the psalm? And what happens to the notorious “dozen or sixteen”-line speech that Hamlet composes, supposedly to turn *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*? Preachers and scriptural commentators in Shakespeare’s moment vigorously debated the first question; editors and critics since the eighteenth century have spilled as much ink on the second. This paper will propose, I hope, that the second problem is a kind of literary descendent of the first. This obscure genealogy poses some interesting questions about the relationship between Shakespeare, scripture, and the reader: can it be that Shakespeare *intended* the question of Hamlet’s added lines to be irresolvable? To what extent did he model his own writing on the hermeneutic pressures of scripture? Were the eighteenth-century editors who originated the question of Hamlet’s missing lines aware of their scriptural precedent? Or did they unwittingly reduplicate an exegetical problem that Shakespeare had internalized in his composition of *Hamlet*? What, finally, is the relationship between the detachability of soliloquy from narrative that is evident throughout *Hamlet* and the problem of the location of Psalm 51?

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Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2013), especially chapter 3 on allusion; see pp. 119–120 for the connection between *Hamlet* and Psalm 51.

Thomas Fulton and Kristen Poole, “Introduction: Popular Hermeneutics in Shakespeare’s London,” in *The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage: Cultures of Interpretation in Reformation England*, ed. Thomas Fulton and Kristen Poole (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–14.

“On the Matter of Soul and Letter in *Measure for Measure*”

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As he faces the disguised Duke Vincentio, the loyal provost of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* does not recognize his face and yet knows the “character” and “signet” of his letter at a

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glance. That the particularity of inscription constitutes identity as much as face, voice, and the other trappings of the person suits the Vienna of the play, where the ascendant human essence – informed by the discourses of law, justice, and theology – is steadily eroded into an eminently changeable object of perception. Soul and letter converge as that which is made visible, perceived, and variously interpreted by the manipulating self, other subjects, and the law. This double position is, as the duke’s account of his own letter suggests, as variable and unstable as the process of interpretation. The guiding inquiry of this paper will be to consider how *Measure for Measure* represents soul and letter as possible analogues through complex relationships of presentation and interpretation.

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**“Do Not Embrace Me’:
 Aesthetics as Incarnation in Shakespeare and Hegel”**

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Readings of religion in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* often center on the play’s relationship to the Epiphany. Barbara K. Lewalski and R. Chris Hassel, Jr., for example, have suggested that the series of manifestations, unions, and reunions in the final scene gestures toward the Incarnation: just as Christ’s embodiment discloses God’s power to humanity, the revelation of Viola and Sebastian’s “true” identities results in enlightenment for characters like Orsino and Olivia, instilling in them a proper understanding of secular and, by extension, spiritual love. Competing with this restoration of propriety, however, are moments that resist revelation altogether. Viola delays her “embrace” of Sebastian until she can remove her “masculine usurped attire,” while Orsino declares his love for “Cesario” rather than Viola herself (5.1.240-41). Such deferral and misrecognition certainly complicate the play’s representation of gender and sexuality, but I suggest that they equally problematize the aesthetic dimensions of religion in *Twelfth Night*. I use “aesthetic” here anachronistically, perhaps even perversely; I have in mind Hegel’s claim in the *Aesthetics* that art pursues the intersection of sensation and divine intelligibility and therefore goes hand in hand with religion. Hegel allows us to read incarnation as itself thoroughly aesthetic, insofar as it accommodates spiritual transcendence to human perception by reconciling God’s essence with the concrete subjectivity of Christ. It turns out, however, that for Hegel Christian art transcends incarnation, moving from the harmony of embodiment to the discrepancy between mere language and spiritual truth. Rather than reading *Twelfth Night* as an anticipation of the incarnational aesthetics of Ben Jonson’s masques or T. S. Eliot’s criticism, bringing Shakespeare into conversation with Hegel challenges us to reflect not only on the potential disjunction between religious and aesthetic experience but on how we as critics make meaning manifest in early modern literature.

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"Shakespeare's Deficiency"

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Whether he knew it or not (and we have good cause to think that he did know it), Shakespeare's complex representations of human action attempt to work through theological and philosophical problems that lay at the root of the major religious controversies of his time.

This paper examines the way in which Shakespeare played out the consequences of a theological idea at the heart of these debates which, as far as I can tell from reading and conversations with friends who are academic philosophers, does not really have a conventional name: I call it "moral ontology," the notion that there is an intrinsic connection between being and goodness, and thus, between non-being and evil.

Augustine relied upon this idea for his famous theodicy, which absolves God of responsibility for the existence of evil by proposing that evils are in fact forms of non-existence, deficiencies and lacks, and thus were never caused by God. They are generated not by efficient causes, but by deficient causes inherent in the tendency of all things to collapse into nonbeing as they arose out of nonbeing. Augustine gave an ontological answer to an ethical question, an answer which powerfully influenced major theologians on all sides of the reformation-era debates, very often in ways that were disadvantageous to the shadow-play, the sustained communal self-deceptions necessary for successful theater.

Moral ontology plays out in various ways throughout Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, and I would argue that problems arising from it generate major crises and mysteries at the heart of all of his mature works. This paper will focus on Shakespeare's treatment of deficiencies in *Romeo and Juliet* in order to illuminate drama's role in exposing, and perhaps contending against, the tragic consequences that collapse from deficient causes.

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This is a fairly accurate (though at times not very precise) discussion of some theological questions and themes at stake in Shakespeare's tragedies, with special emphasis on what he calls "the human condition." Includes some historical discussion of theodicy, including medieval and early modern treatments of deficient causality.

Kottman, Paul A. "Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and*

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Juliet." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 63 no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-38.

This, along with Julia Reinhard Lupton's response to it, is interesting reading by way of methodological contrast and caution. Kottman's Hegelian interpretation of the play does point up some important questions and possibilities in the play, but I think we cannot dispense with 'historicizing' just yet.

"The Transformation of the Actor in *The Winter's Tale*"

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While critics agree that the characters' experience of the living statue of Hermione at the end of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* has religious overtones, they often disagree on whether the statue scene draws on the Catholic tradition of statue-worship and the transformative sacrament of the Eucharist or is a Protestant repudiation of Hermione as an icon. Drawing on these debates, my paper addresses the statue scene as an exploration of ontological incertitude. Throughout the play, Hermione toggles between an actor playing a living character, an actor playing a dead character, an actor playing an inanimate yet aged object shaped like a once living character, and an actor playing a resurrected, living character again. In other words, the actor must progress through different yet overlapping life cycles. The statue makes visible the process of transformation from the fictional (inert statue) to the real (living body). Rather than understand the scene as the potential for art's redemptive qualities, I will argue that the statue emblemizes the tension between the actor's body in the world and the dramatic character he plays.

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Shakespeare's Sonnets as Sacred Object

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Shakespeare's first 126 sonnets (the Young Man sonnets) increasingly use language that suggests that the poems should be considered to be a sacred object, sometimes as a relic, but especially as a eucharist, containing sometimes the Young Man and sometimes the Speaker. Thus, these poems enact a transformation from secular art object to sacred object. This transformation occurs as the Speaker expresses concern regarding the role that "art" or rhetorical ornamentation plays in presenting the Young Man in the sonnets. The sonnets also display a tension between the secular and the sacred, reflecting the conflicted attitudes regarding the holy and the secular in Shakespeare's day.

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"Performing (Im)patient Poverty: Practicing the Religious Passions in *King Lear*"

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Sarah Beckwith has recently argued that Edgar, as he leads his blind and despairing father to the very precipice of a “cliff” in order to stage his miraculous salvation, is the prime mover in something akin to a medieval morality play that is also, simultaneously, a miracle play. But Edgar’s salvific drama is a decidedly ambiguous one, as “in staging this sideshow, trifling with his [father’s] despair to cure it, he has withheld himself and thereby theatricalized his relations to Gloucester.”¹ And this is, of course, not the only piece of highly affective theatre that Edgar plays at. He is also Poor Tom o’Bedlam, the fiend-followed madman and Job-like sufferer who begs “some charity” and compassion as he haunts (or hallows) *Lear’s* god-forsaken heath. He is a performer, and (perhaps) a redeemer. But he is also an obvious fake, a poor (in every sense) player. In this, he is among those Stephen Gosson lambasted as “masters of vice, teachers of wantonnesse, spurres to impuritie.”

What, then, are we to make of Edgar as Poor Tom, this hyper-theatrical hole-dweller whose performance of poverty, alternately ham-fisted and harrowing, catalyzes something real (or not-real) in *Lear*? What sorts of passions is this not-Edgar meant to rouse (in *Lear*, in us), and to what extent are these solicited emotions to be seen as either desirable or/and authentic? What is the relationship of Edgar’s stylized disguise of poverty to the scriptural injunction to see in the impoverished the image of Christ? This essay will take up these questions as it aims to offer a reading of Poor Tom—and the affective responses he provokes—that is attentive to the contexts of antitheatricality debates, changing perceptions of the “idle” or “vagrant” poor within both ecclesiological and legal discourse, and the uncertain status of powerful emotion in early modern Protestant religious practice.

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¹ Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 85-86.

Religious Turning in *As You Like It*: Shakespeare's Conversion to Meta-Comedy

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The ending of *As You Like It* is almost farcically far-fetched. There's Hymen, the *deus ex machina* who nips same-sex romance in the bud and makes sure Jacks and Jills are all properly paired. Even more unlikely is the eleventh-hour conversion of Duke Frederick, who, after "meeting with an old religious man" in the "skirts" of the "wild wood," is "converted" from his evil plan to attack his brother (5.4.164-66). Jacques, too, soon after, plans to seek out the "convertites" in the woods, maintaining that "there is much matter to be heard and learn'd" from them (5.4.190-91). The conversions of the Duke and Jacques echo Oliver's "conversion" to a better life after Orlando saves him from the hungry lioness in Act 4.3 (4.3.144).

In my seminar paper, I will argue that Shakespeare heightens the artificiality of the play's comic ending to draw attention to its generic conventions and their similarity to the process of (Damascene) religious conversion. The reversal of fortune at the end of a play (Aristotle's *peripeteia*) bears a structural resemblance to the spiritual turn of conversion; the play points towards this similarity with Orlando's repeated physical turning at the moment before he chooses to save Oliver, thus catalyzing Oliver's conversion. By heightening the parallels between theater and religion in his deliberately artificial ending, Shakespeare creates a passive-aggressive meta-comedy with explicit analogies to religious faith. Are such analogies meant to elevate comedy to a quasi-religious status or to denigrate religious convictions by revealing them to be transparently fictional performances? Taking my cue from the title *As You Like It*, I conclude that Shakespeare invites audience members to examine their own expectations about the shapes of stories (both theatrical and autobiographical) and the ways we crave something fundamental to both theater and Christianity: the chance to change.

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"Fairy Devotion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"

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On 20 July 2018, due to inclement weather, the Oxford Shakespeare Festival's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relocated from the courtyard of Oxford Castle and Prison to the chapel of New Road Baptist Church some sixty yards away. There, the communion table doubled as Titania's bed and bower. Resting with Nick Bottom on that table, Titania cooed, "Come sit thee down upon this flowery bed, / While I thy amiable cheeks do coy, / And stick

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musk-roses in thy sleek smooth head / and kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy” (5.1.1–4). A contemporary secular audience might read this accident of performance as a humorous subversion of religious decorum. But what might it evoke for audience members in 1596? At this site of bread and wine, of Body and Blood, might the translated weaver strike them as something to be approached with piety and reverence—even as something transubstantiated? This paper reads Bottom through a lens provided by Reformation-era eucharistic theology. First, I highlight the ways that believers constructed a relationship with the eucharistic Christ that was affective, erotic, and aesthetic. In part, I do this by examining early modern devotional texts that foreground the sensori-emotional effects of belief—works like Thomas Wright’s *Disposition or garnishment of the soule to receiue worthily the blessed Sacrament* (1596) that encourage communicants “to procure an inflamed desire” as they receive Holy Communion. I then unpack a similar dynamic in Shakespeare’s comedy. Through Bottom, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* offers audiences and readers alike a wonder-full resource for meditating upon phenomenologies of desire, love, and communion.

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"Shakespeare’s Secular Saints"

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My paper takes issue with the scholarly argument that stage “emblems” invoking saints or Christ in Shakespeare are Catholic simply because they share visual affinities with saint-statues or pictures of Christ. Disagreeing, I propose that in such cases the “saint” images, no longer sacrosanct (as images) in official religious culture, are presented in secular modes which are most frequently erotic, but sometimes political. To make this case, I will examine four “saint” or Christ images: Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, and Henry V in *Henry V*. Romeo’s first encounter with Juliet most obviously undercuts the image of the enshrined saint, as Romeo and Juliet adapt the language of shrine pilgrimage to their own erotic purposes. The veneration of Hero, who is mock-canonized for her virginity, is promoted by her family as part of a scheme to transform her to a wife; her plot thus participates in the general repudiation of celibacy in favor of marriage which is the main project of Shakespearean comedy. The scene in which Hermione is converted from statue to woman deepens the comic celebration of marriage by dramatizing the need for forgiveness in the marital sphere. Finally, King Henry V’s eve-of-Agincourt resemblance to images of Christ praying in

Gethsemane is undercut both by the geopolitical ambition evident in his words and his comment at the prayer's close regarding its futility.

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"Shylock's Aesthetics"

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This paper discusses Shylock's sense of the aesthetic. In Act Four Scene One of *The Merchant of Venice*, the Duke attempts to halt Antonio's trial by invoking Shylock's sense of mercy. Deflecting his appeal, Shylock responds with a peculiar set of comparisons. Just as some men hate pigs, some cats, "And others, when the bagpipe sings i'th' nose /Cannot contain their urine" (4.1.49-50) so he can "give no reason" for his actions "More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing /I bear Antonio" (59-61). Rather than dismiss these analogies as mere stonewalling, I want to explore the connections they create between aesthetic response, embodied experience and religious identity.

Shylock's image of the incontinent bagpipe-hearer is a paranoid inversion of idealized understandings of musical harmony, like the one proposed by Lorenzo in Act Five. Talking to Jessica, his new convert wife, Lorenzo characterizes music as a powerfully transformative force that can transcend religious, and even species, difference, bringing humans and animals into harmony with the divine. Shylock sees things differently. Where music transforms people, it is more likely to embarrass than ennoble. While inducting hearers into an auditory community, it also marks some out at the level of the body as irrationally and unchangeably different. It thus offers an apt model for Shylock's experience of the legal, social and interpretive structures that govern relations between Christians and Jews in Shakespeare's Venice, structures that locate Jewishness unstably in belief, practice and the body. Shylock's aesthetic pronouncements, here and elsewhere in the play, cast early modern debates about the nature of artistic appreciation and of religious identity as stand-ins for one another. Attending to them does not only clarify Shakespeare's representation of religious difference. It additionally shows how religion, aesthetics and biopolitics can become co-implicated.

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**"“Sweet Creature of Bombast”": Falstaff's Body
and Biblical Authority in 1 Henry IV**

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In *1 Henry IV*, Falstaff and Hal perform a play. Falstaff, pretending to be his young friend, cites the Bible in order to chastise Hal who, in the voice of the king, has denounced Sir Jack and insulted his weight. “If to be fat be to be hated,” Falstaff notes, “then Pharaoh’s lean kine are to be loved” (2.4.460-1). The fat knight, the image of excess, adopts the guise of a biblical commentator in order to justify himself—even if his gloss is not outwardly incorrect, it does seem singularly self-serving, a way to excuse his gluttony and lust for pleasure. Falstaff’s persistent use and misuse of scripture has been variously explained as a way that he parodies Puritanism, a means by which he is parodically aligned with Puritans, or both. It certainly connects him to his original namesake, Sir John Oldcastle, whose iconoclasm and facility with scripture in the face of his Catholic accusers turned him into a proto-Protestant martyr. Critics have suggested that Falstaff redirects Oldcastle’s iconoclasm from sacred to secular concerns; he is an iconoclast whose biblical quotations dismantle Hal’s pretensions to legitimate kingship. But in his play—and precisely through his self-serving use of the Bible—Falstaff invokes the conventions of iconoclasm in order to affirm the pleasure of artifice—and he does so by drawing attention to his own staged body, most often falsely stuffed. Renaissance biblical commentators note that the lean kine who consume their fat brethren and yet do not expand in size most fittingly epitomize unrestrained appetite. What initially seems to be the image of excess is rather an image of plenty. This is precisely to Falstaff’s point: his line suggests to audiences fascinated by the spectacle of the exuberant, excessive, false body onstage that, in the playhouse as in Joseph’s Egypt, the image of excess is only an image.

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