Wherein to Catch the Conscience of the Queen: Dystopian Politics in Elizabethan Drama

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Abstract

Though established English history portrays Elizabeth I (1533-1603) as uniting England under the new Protestant religion, recent historical evidence reveals that extensive counter-currents still existed. This thesis examines how the politico-religious beliefs of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights manifest themselves in their drama, particularly through imagery and allusions. It draws especially from Frances Yates to assert that imagery of white magic, Christian Cabala, and alchemy in these dramatists' works refers to the pure imperial reform movement of Elizabeth's reign, and also from Clare Asquith to illuminate a reading of Shakespeare as a playwright who encoded in his plays a Catholic message and a history of the underground movement in England that presents an alternative history to the established one.

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Introduction

An emerging trail of historical evidence has been discovered in the great field of English history, one which every attempt was made to bury in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when it was forming. This attempt at suppression largely succeeded. Scholars clearing the weeds from new evidence at the beginning of the present century have uncovered a counter-thread from the established account of the English politico-religious climate in the Elizabethan age (1558-1603). The established account tells the tale of a prosperous country won peaceably over to the new Protestant faith and governed by a wise and wonderful Virgin Queen. While this established history is the one which the English people today still learn in their schools, recent discoveries portray a different picture: a troubled country roiling with religious conflict, conflict barely contained and controlled by an iron ruling regime which squashed dissent. The times of the Reformation were far from peaceful for those on both sides of the religious and political divide, and as with nearly all important societal struggles, the religious and political wars of England found expression in the literature of the time. If recent scholarship proves to be correct, some Elizabethan dramatists undercut the attempt at suppression of the true historical record. These playwrights managed to smuggle the true history, the one they witnessed daily, into their work for future eyes to read, and they did so through encoding it in their language.

This thesis will seek to demonstrate that through the literary traditions of punning, allusion, and imagery popular at the time in England, Elizabethan dramatists were able to incorporate shadowed plots and secondary meanings into their works to express their disguised true views, often using imagery of alchemy and white magic to place themselves on one side or the other of the political, cultural, and religious conflicts in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. It

will particularly argue that William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe placed dissenting and, in Shakespeare's case, sympathetic Catholic messages within their drama. The official history reflects the thinking of those on the side of Elizabeth: that a utopia brought about by the perfect knowledge of man could be formed under a reformed religion and its ruler. This is the thinking accompanying the European Enlightenment and its total belief in man's reason. However, the dissenters, both Catholic and Protestant, saw a darker reality of a dystopian police state brought about by pride and human error. The coded language and imagery of Elizabethan drama seems sufficiently mysterious that multiple interpretations are possible, adding layers of meaning and producing intriguing puzzles for even modern audiences to unravel. The hope is that this study will bring some more light to the highly intricate and intriguing history of the time and provide a deeper appreciation for many works of Elizabethan literature, as well as help illuminate the literary techniques used by authors under an oppressive regime. This examination could have practical applications both for studying literature under the oppressive regimes of other times and for the creation of new works in the present age.

The Religious Wars and Elizabethan Drama

A Brief History of the Protestant Reformation

The traditional history passed down through generations of English schools and history books presents England in the second half of the 16th century as a country which, in the midst of a European storm, somehow managed to remain so prosperous and happy that, ever after, this time was called England's Golden Age. The European storm was, of course, the Protestant Reformation, which had started in mainland Europe some years before and was later taken up by the British monarch Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547) in 1534 after Pope Clement VII refused to grant him a marriage annulment so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. Ivor Brown writes of England in

his 1966 book *Shakespeare and His World*, "There was peace in the land, if not outside it" (9), and he adds that "the nation as the years went by realized the value of strong central government personified in the magnetic personality of the Virgin Queen, the strength and splendor of whose reign won her the title of Gloriana" (10). In reality, however, a number of historians since the turn of the twenty-first century have discovered evidence that under the surface of this apparent calm in England, there was a monstrous struggle in the depths of English culture, as Queen Elizabeth I of England fought to maintain a tenuous control over the religion of a country that had, not long before, been deeply Catholic.

Clare Asquith notes that a number of contemporary Elizabethan writers characterized the Reformation as a "storm," and another author calls it a "tsunami" (Daniell 32), which serves to show that the religious transition was indeed intensely difficult and full of struggle for many people. The transformation of England was accomplished by an extremely strict system of laws and surveillance, beginning with the Oath of Supremacy under Henry VIII in 1535, which required all English clergy to swear Henry VIII as the supreme head of the Church in England and renounce the authority of the Pope in Rome (Johnson, et al. 320, 322). The Church under Henry became known as the Anglican Church, or Church of England. And while many poets, playwrights and courtiers lauded Elizabeth I as the source of a new age of peace in England (Jones 401), the only way Elizabeth could maintain this precarious "peace" and prevent the outbreak of open religious struggle was to clamp down with an iron grip upon the Catholic faith and any of its adherents. William Cobbett discusses Elizabeth and her strict laws in the chapters on her in his *History of the Protestant Reformation*, and Hugh Ross Williamson's *The Beginning of the English Reformation* explains how Elizabeth's propaganda hid this aspect of English history. Dissenters had to keep their faith closely under wraps and practice secretly, or face being

imprisoned and, occasionally, tortured or put to death.

The monarch most renowned for her violent methods of enforcing religious adherence was the queen who reigned just before Elizabeth: the Catholic Mary Tudor (r. 1553-1558), alternately (and more famously) known as "Bloody Mary." She ruthlessly persecuted Protestants, ordering four Protestant bishops and 200 of their followers to be burned at the stake. This was, perhaps, the action which rang the death knell for the Catholic faith in England (Johnson et al. 323). But Elizabeth I was at least equally as violent; she ruthlessly persecuted and sometimes executed Catholics, as well, including some of the many Jesuit missionaries trained at Douay, France, who came into England instructed to persevere in their Catholic work until death (Daniell 21). For several reigns after Henry VIII, the dominant religion switched with each reigning monarch; Protestant Edward VI (r. 1547-1553) was succeeded by Catholic Mary Tudor, who was followed by the strongly Anglican Elizabeth I, after whom came the at first self-proclaimed Catholic-tolerant but later stalwartly-Protestant James I (r. 1603-1685). The age was one of anxiety for all citizens of England, whether Protestant (especially non-Anglican, who were called nonconformists) or Catholic. Those who happened to be on the wrong side of the religious conflict, therefore, were well-advised to hide their allegiance, or else face serious and sometimes deadly consequences.

Although any religious dissident suffered consequences in England in the late sixteenth century, the fiercest animosity lay between Protestants and Catholics, and particular penalties applied to Catholic recusants, known as "popish recusants" (Butler 9). Under Henry, Catholics had lost much of their property and the monasteries had been divided up among the nobles; under Edward Seymour, regent for Henry's son Edward VI, around 1549, the Catholic Mass was abolished (Flowers 76). Mary Tudor briefly reinstated Catholicism during her reign, but under

Elizabeth, the Mass was again abolished in 1559, and Anglicanism was made the religion of state (Johnson et al. 324). Elizabeth was not wholeheartedly devoted to the Anglican faith, and she scorned the Protestant clergy (Lilly 448); but because she was the daughter of Henry VIII's union to Anne Boleyn, she was considered by Catholics to be the daughter of an invalid marriage, and so she knew that the Catholic Church would endanger her position on the throne if it was given any influence (Johnson et al. 324). She therefore followed in her father's footsteps and was declared supreme Head of the Church in England, and she continued to impose restrictions on the Catholic faith.

Under Elizabeth, Parliament made it an act of high treason to declare the Queen a heretic or to return to the old religion. It became a crime to say or hear Mass, to go to confession, or to harbor a priest (Johnson et al. 325). Furthermore, without any previous information or complaint, any two justices of the peace could at will tender the Oath of Supremacy to any person, and if the person refused the Oath, he or she became a "popish recusant convict" and a traitor (Butler 11-12). Children couldn't be educated as Catholics, and if sent abroad for Catholic education, they forfeited their English property rights; absence from Anglican services was punishable by fining, and English-born Catholics became guilty of high treason if they came to England from overseas or stayed in England three days without converting to Anglicanism. Popish recusants convict[1] couldn't be employed, employ the services of the courts of law, or be admitted to hospitals, nor travel more than five miles from home without license upon pain of forfeiting all their goods. Also, within three months of their conviction as popish recusants convict, they must renounce their religion and conform to the Church in England, or leave the country. If they did not depart, then they were guilty of felony and subject to the death penalty (Butler 7-10).

[1] The plural of "popish recusant convict" found in Elizabethan legal documents; "convict" means "convicted."

The laws were not, at all times and in all places, exercised to their fullest extent; there was a great deal of leniency. If there had not been, it is doubtful whether Catholicism would have survived in England. The reason that Catholicism was treated with such leniency at first was that Elizabeth believed that once the old priests died out, Catholics would easily convert. Most Catholics at that time did attend Protestant services, and heard Mass only when it could be had; they were hoping that the storm would pass. As the old priests died, however, Catholics began to worry about the question of new priests, and the Church began sending in Jesuit missionaries from the overseas seminary at Douay. Finally, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) imposed a stricter sense of duty on Catholics, declaring it "grievously sinful" to attend Protestant and other heretical worship, as it was the "offspring of schism, the badge of hatred for the Church" (qtd. in Lilly 449). The combination of the shortage of priests and the dictates of the Council caused Catholics to cease their nonchalant behavior, and they no longer attended Protestant services (Lilly 449). Since attendance of Anglican services was legally mandated, this put Catholics in an untenable situation.

An additional major issue of the time was the popularization of Renaissance Neoplatonism in England and nearby countries, the accompanying rise in the popularity of alchemy, and the movement for what Yates calls "pure imperial reform" (Yates 147) in Elizabeth's court—a movement to reform the government of England according to Renaissance Neoplatonic and Protestant values, using white magic, under Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen (Jones 358, 391). Elizabeth found magic of some interest in the early part of her reign, and men such as John Dee, who enjoyed her patronage in return for their efforts, were glad to support her interest in using magic to extend her empire. Frances Yates details the introduction of an element that played a large part in the popularization of alchemy and pure imperial reform: the importation

and Christianization of certain ideas from the Jewish Cabala. A number of Renaissance Neoplatonist thinkers, men such as Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, Francesco Giorgi, and Henry Cornelius Agrippa, teased out elements in Cabala that they saw as compatible with both Christianity and Judaism, even Islam, and argued that these elements could be used as common ground to begin converting Jews and Moslems to Christianity. Gradually, these elements—complex mathematical systems, Hebrew letters, the idea of transformation—became part of the popular philosophies of the time and entered mainstream thinking. They played a large part in the resurgence of alchemy as a reputable and believable science, since alchemy relied a great deal upon systems of numbers and the series of transformations or transmutations that metals went through in the process of creating the Philosopher's Stone. Yates argues that the "occult philosophy" of white magic, Neoplatonism, and melancholy[2] that came with Christian Cabala constitutes the dominant philosophy of the Elizabethan Age (88). John Dee, a self-professed alchemist and conjurer (although much of the conjuring was actually done by his associate, Edward Kelley) brought this philosophy to the Elizabethan court and was a great favorite for some time until he fell out of favor—Elizabeth backtracked from her interest in magic toward the end of her reign, because it had become "too dangerously provocative" by raising a virulent counter-reaction against magic (Yates 126). Before Dee's casting-out, he had great hopes that through his conjuring of what he believed were spirits of light, he might gain special insight into the activities of foreign governments, as well as obtain the secret of transmutation of metals, which would provide the Elizabethan court with endless funds of gold

[2] According to Yates, the "melancholic" was originally the lowest of the four humors (60). However, Agrippa followed the lead of a pseudo-Aristotelian text called *Problemata physica* which subverted this ranking. Agrippa argued in *De occulta philosophia* that melancholy ignites the frenzy leading to wisdom and revelation and attracts the influence of knowledge-giving spirits; hence it became a highly-valued humor for scholars and alchemists.

for the building of an English empire.

The Roman Catholic Church did not approve of Dee's, or anyone else's, conjuring, nor of the philosophy behind it, believing that no spirit who responded to the command of a human being could be a good spirit; they must be demons disguised as angels, a phenomenon which had occurred many times in the history of the Catholic Church. The Council of Trent also opposed Cabala and Renaissance Neoplatonism. The reformers, on the other hand, seemed more often than not to embrace it; Henry Cornelius Agrippa, author of the Christian Cabalist *De Occulta Philosophia*, is regarded by some historians, along with the circle in which he moved, as "the seed-bed of the reformed faith" (Yates 47), John Dee was interested in evangelicalism (102), and Protestants were Dee's main employers (Jones 333). Obviously, many Protestants believed in white magic as a genuinely good thing.

Drama in Elizabethan England

As one may imagine, such an enormous upheaval in the culture of England permeated many aspects of the inhabitants' lives. The recent COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing chaos could perhaps give modern audiences an idea of what it might have felt like for such a culture, whose faith played a great role in their lives at that time, to experience the turbulence of the Reformation and ensuing religious struggles. It would likely have been at the forefront of everyone's minds, particularly those who were on the receiving end of the various monarchs' religious laws. Life became difficult for many people under these circumstances, not only for Catholics, but also nonconformist Protestants. A number of those who suffered were the writers and dramatists of the time whose writings have become immortalized and deeply admired by subsequent generations.

Thomas Dekker, a lesser-known Elizabethan and Jacobean playwright but one whose

works are nonetheless still studied today, was twice indicted for recusancy, in 1626 and 1628. George R. Price of Michigan State University, however, writes that "Dekker's deep faith and conformity cannot be doubted" (33), and he relates the hypothesis of another scholar that Dekker was just trying to avoid arrest for debt by staying away from church, since "officers commonly sought their victims at the church doors on Sundays" (32-33). Since attendance at Anglican services was enforced as a result of the religious struggle, anyone who stayed away from church was automatically supposed to be a recusant from the Anglican religion, even if, as with Dekker, that was not the case.

Recusants also included atheists; anyone who uttered atheistic statements received retribution. Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy*, was tortured for atheistic statements, and later testified against fellow-playwright Christopher Marlowe for the same offense (Leech 518). Marlowe later died, supposedly in a bar fight, but the circumstances surrounding his death have for some time been considered suspicious, and many believe that he was politically assassinated on account of suspicious activities the reigning powers did not like (Cunningham 34). Almost certainly recruited to spy on the Catholic underground at Cambridge and investigate the seminary at Rheims (Keefer 16-17), Marlowe shows signs of Catholic sympathies in some of his plays (Asquith 25), such as *The Jew of Malta* (1590) and *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1604). Particularly in *Faustus*, he decried the Elizabethan interest in a pure imperial reform influenced by Christian Cabala (or Kabbala) and Renaissance Neoplatonism (Yates 147). He died "under curious circumstances" (Yates 135), and Clare Asquith believes his death in 1593 came as the result of intelligence agents (25). She notes that "the biographies of Shakespeare's fellow dramatists make sobering reading," since "almost all of them underwent some form of government pressure, ranging from interrogation by the Privy Council to

imprisonment, exile, even death" (Asquith 24).

Any major outlet of culture would have borne traces, or, more likely, strong imprints, of the religious struggle, including stage drama—particularly since, as has been shown, dramatists had a great deal of firsthand experience of the uncomfortable consequences of the English situation. Drama played a huge role in the still predominantly oral culture of Elizabethan England, for at this time, the English were still in the process of moving away from the culture of singing poets and bards and into the culture of written entertainment and scholarship. Thus, an Elizabethan audience would have been far more accustomed to learning with their ears rather than their eyes, "uniquely attuned to listening," as Laura A. Lodewyck writes in an article on original pronunciation in Shakespearean performances (45). What a modern audience might get from reflecting on and analyzing written plays, Elizabethans would have gotten from attentive listening to stage dialogue, even though cheap editions of plays were being printed.

This oral culture partially explains the prevalence of puns and wordplay in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, which could be used to incorporate not only secondary meanings to words within the play, but also to suggest aspects of the politico-religious situation. During Shakespeare's time, puns enjoyed a singular season of popularity in drama and literature. Sylvan Barnet calls them "an Elizabethan convention" (602), and in fact, punning was "almost *de rigueur* in the conversation of English courtly society, in the jest-books, ballads, and broadsides of popular literature, and even . . . in much more serious language" (Ellis qtd. in Adamczyk 9). The oral culture making aural puns easier for Elizabethans to pick up was the first factor in the prevalence of puns; the second was that the English language experienced an influx of new words shortly before Shakespeare's time, causing the occurrence of similar-sounding or homonymic words that had different meanings (Adamczyk 10). Many of these words came from

French in the years preceding Shakespeare. Adamczyk highlights this in her analysis of a passage from *Love's Labour's Lost*, which contains the line " . . . *adieu*, sweet Jude" (Shakespeare V.2.619), a play on words between *adieu* and *a Jew/Jude* (Adamczyk 18). With the importation of foreign words to English, suddenly the chances became much higher of having a word with a similar sound to another word but a completely different meaning because of its different linguistic origin.

The third factor in the prevalence of puns was that the changes brought on by the Great Vowel Shift, which started in the 13th century and ended around the 15th, allowed words which had not previously sounded similar to become homophonic or similar-sounding. These vowel changes, which thoroughly upset the English system of long vowels and dipthongs, meant that English "built up an impressive collection of new homophonic forms" (Adamczyk 10). As puns depend on similar-sounding words with different meanings, the explosion of homophonic words was a perfect breeding ground for the proliferation of punning.

Used as Elizabethan English people were to listening, the process of picking up the multiple meanings of wordplay and interpreting clever dialogue "in the passing moment of listening" (Lodewyck 46) would have come much more easily to them than to a modern audience, whose main form of education often comes through reading and who are used to being able to go back and find other meanings of words after having read them through once. Of course, a modern audience would have more difficulty than Elizabethans in picking up on Shakespearian puns because of the centuries-long time gulf between modern society and the 1500s; Lodewyck points this out when she writes that "References that feel archaic to us were topical and contemporary to a Renaissance audience" (44). In addition, some meanings which "were the building blocks of Shakespeare's play of language" are obsolete in modern English

(Adamczyk 12). Elizabethan audiences possessed contextual knowledge and cultural references that twenty-first century audiences have inevitably lost over the intervening 500 years.

As a devotee of the arts and theater, Elizabeth patronized a great many playwrights and poets during her reign, enabling them to produce the beautiful and complex works characterizing Elizabethan literature. Her personal fondness for drama, poetry, and music allowed these genres to flower in England during the late 16th century (Asquith 26). However, her patronage was conditional: poets and playwrights, at least those who played for the Queen, had to conform moderately well to the political and religious views of the court, lest they face banned plays, loss of financial support, and occasionally banishment after a great fall from favor—Spenser suffered this latter fate after the publication of *The Faerie Queene*, which Yates attributes to the philosophy of pure imperial reform having become too dangerous and controversial for the court to continue promoting (126). Additionally, David Daniell writes that the Elizabethan regime understood the Douay Jesuit missionaries and Catholic forces as a threat, and so "any Protestant writer of the time felt free to attack" Catholics in their writing (21). Elizabeth's regime censored subject-matter that did not agree with the party line (Hughes 179, Asquith 23-27), and, of course, any monarch would have the power to bring retribution down upon a playwright or court entertainer whose views or message displeased the court. These factors combined to produce a record of history which was strongly anti-Catholic, pro-Anglican, and pro-Elizabethan (Cobbett 1-9)[3], and which apparently expected its drama to exhibit this quality as well (Asquith 24).

Some more modern scholars such as Asquith are questioning the assumption that political and religious attitudes may be taken at face value in literature, given the fact that Elizabethan

[3] While Cobbett's history of the Reformation was published in 1824, he was very much ahead of his time, and his point of view did not become more popularly taken up and confirmed until late in the twentieth century.

literature was censored to agree with the government regime. Dissenting voices would often wish to conceal themselves lest they fell out of the royal favor. Marlowe's plays explicitly criticized the power-hungry imperial aspirations of the English government and its fascination with alchemy; he later died, stabbed under mysterious circumstances in a bar brawl whose facts are debatable and ambiguous and have led many to speculate he was assassinated. Shakespeare's plays at one time underwent severe scrutiny by the crown, and Shakespeare was forced to be more cautious with the political messages in his next few plays (Asquith 105, 121). Playwrights risked suffering poverty and disgrace after falling out of the royal favor (Asquith 24-25). Asquith argues that to avoid such consequences, the popularity of double-meanings and wordplay in literature at the time allowed writers to use a sort of coded language to hide a subplot, which, should it be detected by the Queen or the court, allowed playwrights to disguise dissenting messages in at least a more palatable form than outright openness. Asquith draws on the work of a number of other scholars to make a compelling case for Shakespeare's using this coded language to conceal a pro-Catholic message, one that could escape or be permitted by the Elizabethan censors. Her argument is convincing, for she analyzes the whole corpus of Shakespeare's work and meticulously ties it to historical and biographical details of the Elizabethan times and personages.

Puns would have been one such device for coding meaning. Barnet observes in an analysis of Shakespeare's puns that puns sometimes work to "establish a relation between two ideas" and may exist "chiefly for the wit involved . . . independent of the speakers" (607)—that is, for the ideas as opposed to the purposes of characterization. Adamczyk argues that the Fool in *Twelfth Night* uses wordplay in this way, practicing "the wit of ideas" (19), a form of wit which "rarely seems all innocent and devoid of additional function in the play" (20). One example

occurs in his exchange of wit with Olivia, in which he puns on mending and patching: the dishonest man ought to "mend himself: if he mend, he is no longer dishonest," but if he cannot mend himself, then he ought to "let the botcher mend him" (*Twelfth Night* I.5.41-43)—the "botcher" meaning tailor or cobbler. He drops quite a kernel of wisdom when he follows this up with the observation that mending is only a patch, and "virtue that transgresses is but patched with sin, and sin that amends is but patched with virtue" (I.V.44-45); this wisdom seems to serve as a moral to the characters and audience as much as to characterize the Fool. And a highly interesting politico-religious connection appears when one considers that, as will be examined later, Elizabethans often associated cobbling with the priesthood (Hunt 114); thus, the Fool also seems to be making a punning reference to the mending of the dishonest soul in the sacrament of confession, even promoting it. Such a promotion of a Catholic concept would have been risky in the climate of Elizabethan England, but the Fool can pass it off as part of his jesting.

In a footnote, Adamczyk posits one potential function of such wit-wordplay which has just been demonstrated above by the Fool, which is that "Shakespeare's fools become a subversive social institution: they defy the established order by pretending to serve it. They show how authority can be challenged with wit and humor under the appearance of providing entertainment for the very same authority that is being challenged" (Calvo, qtd. in Adamczyk 21). The second meanings of fools' wordplay in Shakespeare could be commentary on the decisions of their rulers, thinly-veiled advice or criticism. Puns are apt for this purpose, for their very nature makes them subversive; they take the meaning of a word and subvert it, at least partially, with another meaning. And if Shakespeare's fools use wordplay as a means of challenging their lords, questioning their decisions or offering alternatives, then perhaps other non-characterizing puns that appear in Shakespeare's plays are his own commentary: they are

Shakespeare's means of airing his challenges and criticism, particularly concerning the court and England's rulers, in a way that entertains his spectators. As one possible example, Asquith writes that the word *wrack* was a common pun upon *rack* (300), an instrument of torture used in Elizabethan England. For instance, in *Macbeth*, just before the execution of the Thane of Cawdor, the Thane of Angus explains Cawdor is under judgment for treason, colluding with Norway and assisting rebels, in doing so laboring "in his country's wrack" (I.3.111-115). The highly political crimes in which Cawdor was supposedly involved, accompanied by the use of *wrack* instead of *wreck*, suggest the use of the rack on political enemies, and perhaps of the country being "on the rack" in a manner of speaking, through war. And since politics was closely tied to religion in Elizabethan England, religious puns might be construed as having political implications as well. Puns could be a way of hiding meaning in plain sight, obvious to those who know the context but not so obvious to those who don't.

Under such conditions, it seems not only a plausible but a probable supposition that frustrated authors and playwrights whose views disagreed with the mainstream felt the need to express themselves through hiding their messages in double-meanings within their work. W.A. Neilson notes in a lecture for the *Harvard Classics* series that "Seldom in the history of the world has the spirit of a period found so adequate an expression in literature as the Elizabethan spirit did in the drama" (397). If that is the case, then certainly the politics of the time must have found their way into the many works that flowed from the pens of Elizabethan playwrights.

The Politics of Drama in Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare

Just within the past few decades, modern historians have begun to uncover portions of an alternate English history from the established one that has been inculcated through the generations since Elizabeth I reigned upon the throne (Asquith xiv, 4). Elizabeth, as head of the

faction that eventually triumphed in England for well-nigh 300 years—the first Catholic Relief Act, granting freedom of worship to Catholics, was not passed until 1778, and restrictions upon other non-Anglican religions generally lasted until at least the time of William of Orange—was the victor in the religious battle, and as the well-known maxim goes, the winners write history. Recent historians have uncovered evidence of a Catholic resistance movement (Asquith xiv, 5) which kept going underground through the storms of religious persecution, which is evidence enough that Catholics were not willing to give up their faith easily. However, many English people even in modern times are unaware, at least through their public-school education, that Henry's and Elizabeth's reform movements did not peacefully sweep the country without trouble (Cobbett 1-20). Elizabeth was far from unaware of the subsurface resistance to her rule: John E. Cunningham writes that she and James both adopted somewhat of the Machiavellian ruling attitude partially because of the internal religious disputes in England (23), hence the strictness of the religious laws.

As has been referenced earlier, alchemy and white magic became politicized during this time through their association with Elizabeth and her imperial reform. The Renaissance was also bringing about a revolution in knowledge and a return to the ideas of Plato, of which alchemy—strongly associated with Renaissance Neoplatonism and its search for the ideal—was a great part and hence practiced regularly. With alchemy, Cabala, and white magic comprising such a large part of the cultural consciousness of the time, it is no wonder that drama of the age was rife with references to them. After making her argument for the occult philosophy as the dominant philosophy of Elizabethan England, Yates argues that Edmund Spenser was the characteristic poet of the Elizabethan age and that he built his magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene*, around this philosophy (89, 111). At the center of this work is an Elizabeth-like figure, the namesake of the

poem, and many elements of the poem seem to reflect the English court's philosophy of pure imperial reform.[4]

Dee the conjurer makes veiled appearances in a number of Elizabethan and Jacobean literary works. In more positive representations, scholars contend he could arguably be Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and also Lear in *King Lear*. At the end of his life, having fallen out of the royal favor, a rejected and dejected Dee certainly resembled the outcast, misunderstood, raving King Lear in the latter part of Shakespeare's play, and if so, it could be a sympathetic portrait. In a negative representation, Marlowe's conjurer in *Dr. Faustus* is Dee, according to the general scholarly consensus, and this magician comes to a tragic end as a direct consequence of his practicing magic based on Christian Cabala. Because Marlowe clearly does not approve of Dee's conjuring (Yates 141), he presents him in a condemnatory manner.

These varying portrayals of Dee seem to indicate that authors of the time would choose to portray the occult philosophy and white magic either positively or negatively in their plays, based on their political and religious affiliations. As shown above, this supposition is borne out by such playwrights as Marlowe, Spenser, and Shakespeare. After some time spying on Catholic circles in Cambridge for the government, Marlowe manifested distinctly Catholic tendencies, as will be discussed later. It was during this time that he wrote *Dr. Faustus*, a powerfully anti-magic play because of the dreadful fate of its title character when he takes up conjuring. Spenser, on the other hand, whose poetry, by Yates's interpretation, revolved around presenting white magic and the occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age in a positive light—*The Faerie Queene* presents a clearly good conjurer in the form of Merlin, for instance—was a staunch Anglican. Cunningham writes that the imagery in Elizabethan plays can say a great deal about the author, particularly

[4] Asquith, however, believes Spenser's work is "full of sleights of hand" and can be read as quite subversive (22).

citing Shakespeare (26). Shakespeare's personal life remains largely a mystery to scholars, but the traditional general consensus is that he was an Anglican, and in keeping with the hypothesis that Protestants were more favorably disposed toward white magic, readers may see a positive attitude toward it in plays such as *The Tempest*. Peggy Muñoz Simonds has written an article on how *The Tempest* is structured around alchemy. On the other hand, Asquith has argued that Shakespeare was, in fact, part of the underground Catholic movement, and a number of recent scholars either agree with her or have come to see Catholic sympathies in Shakespeare's work.

Marlowe and His "Heretical Papers"

Born the same year as Shakespeare, 1564, Marlowe was one of the first major dramatists of the age who influenced Shakespeare and his contemporaries (Yates 135). His death by stabbing in 1593 left him a mere 29 years of life and experience, yet in his six years as playwright he wrote some of the most enduring plays of the era besides those of Shakespeare and Jonson. Counted among his works are *Tamburlaine*—the only one published in his lifetime ("Marlowe, Christopher" 517)—*The Jew of Malta*, and his most well-known and frightening play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Interestingly, one alternative version of his name is "Merlin" (Leech 518), a name both connected with magic and conjuring and one which makes it immediately expedient for Marlowe to be allusively referenced by his fellow-playwrights and writers. While his death, as has been mentioned, is much-debated and mysterious, one thing clear about Marlowe is that he was a firebrand, a "violent man" as the *Encyclopædia Britannica* puts it (Leech 517). Michael Keefer writes in his critical edition of *Doctor Faustus* that while some other prominent literary figures and patrons of the age, specifically "Harriot, Raleigh and Northumberland," were "all suspected of holding heterodox opinions . . . Marlowe, with none of their discretion, trumpeted his abroad" (Keefer 18). And if his friend Thomas Kyd's testimony

about him is accurate, the opinions Marlowe vented regarding such matters as Christ and his mother's moral character and the superiority of Thomas Harriot to Moses (Keefer 24) were of a particularly unique brand of rebellious dynamism conforming to no mainstream creed of the time—aside from, perhaps, atheism, for which offense Marlowe was briefly imprisoned after Kyd's testimony and also the testimony of one Richard Baines.

Kyd's testimony, however, was extracted after he experienced torture at the hands of the Elizabethan government; the question was over the ownership of "heretical papers" (Keefer 20) found after a government search in his and Marlowe's shared apartment, and which he avowed were Marlowe's (Leech 518). Presumably, if he had not testified against Marlowe, Kyd himself would have been found guilty of the sentiments contained in said papers. Further, Marlowe possessed distinctly risky political connections. The University of Cambridge nearly denied him his M.A. degree, suspicious of "rumors arising out of the fact that he had been supplementing his scholarship money by working as an undercover agent of the state in Sir Francis Walsingham's counter-espionage organization"; it seems they feared he had intentions of defecting to the recusant side which he was supposed to be spying out, and perhaps going to the Jesuit seminary at Rheims to be trained as a priest (Keefer 16). However, Her Majesty's Privy Council itself intervened on Marlowe's behalf, describing him as being "emploied . . . in matters touching the benefitt of his Countrie" (Bakeless qtd. in Keefer 16). The rumors of Marlowe's intended defection suggest that his assignment involved infiltrating recusant groups and spying on them (Keefer 17). E. Michael Jones points out that Marlowe, originally an "impecunious student," had an inexplicable explosion of fortune, enough that he could buy an expensive doublet and dine on costly food. His rise in fortune was likely due to his new job spying on recusants for Walsingham (Jones 372).

At about this time, the Jesuits had established a recruitment network at Cambridge to send Catholic sympathizers back to the seminary at Rheims. In response to this threat to the Elizabethan regime, Walsingham set up his "counter-espionage organization," whose members not only made contact with and reported on Catholic sympathizers at Cambridge, but also went to Rheims "to infiltrate the seminary from within" (Jones 372). Marlowe's sudden rise to wealth was concurrent with the rise of this organization. For an informer, however, he evidently began to grow strangely averse to the Elizabethan cause. Jones writes that his "meteoric rise to fame never completely clarified his political or religious allegiance" (372)—but he was certainly not an obedient reformed Christian. In fact, he was accused by the preacher at Cambridge of spying *on behalf of* the Douay seminary and the recusants, he joined the retinue of the Catholic-leaning Lord Strange (for whose players Shakespeare was a writer), and he "was known as 'a young malcontent with fashionable papist sympathies'" (Nicholl qtd. in Jones 394). Baines, one of Marlowe's greatest accusers (albeit posthumously for Marlowe) and apparently a member of the same spy ring (Keefer 17), accused Marlowe of calling Protestants "hypocritical asses" and stating that "if there be any God or any good religion, then it is to be found in the Papists" (Baines qtd. in Jones 394). Baines, interestingly, appeared to defect to the recusant side during his time as a spy and was ordained a priest at Douay; but he was later arrested for treachery by the head of the English College at Douay. Father William Allen, founder of the seminary at Douay, wrote in a letter to a Jesuit priest, Father Agazzari, that the charges against Baines were of sedition of the seminarians by "licentious" talk and fomentation of discontent; Allen saw Baines as a spy (Jones 372). And Baines himself later wrote in a confession in May 1583 that he had plotted to murder the president of the school, and if that failed had considered "how the whole company might easily be poisoned" (qtd. in Jones 373) by the poisoning of the well or

seminarians' bathing water. While Baines' testimony against Marlowe primarily rested in calling him an out-and-out atheist, the strongly anti-Catholic Baines may have had a more religious bone to pick with this man whose peers could evidently never quite rest assured that he was not a double-agent. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* suggests that Marlowe's killing may have had something to do with "their lordships of the Privy Council," who thought "Marlowe knew too much about them," or with Marlowe's friends who "may have feared what he might be able to say of them under torture" (Leech 518). The Privy Council exercised a strange leniency over Marlowe once he had been arrested, suggesting that there was more to the story than meets the eye—notably, that they bought him off so he wouldn't talk.

Marlowe manifests his political leanings in his plays. As noted above, in recent years, scholars have been increasingly interested in the cultural context—specifically, the religious and political context—of Elizabethan drama; it may be for this reason that a 1969 book by Cunningham describes *Tamburlaine* as a drama without moral intention and with a puzzling second half (36). Yates and other recent scholars, however, have seen in it a critique of Elizabethan government, specifically Elizabeth's vision of a Protestant empire guided by a white magic derived from Christian Cabala. As stated above, Yates traces the influence of alchemists and conjurers such as Mirandola, Bruno, Agrippa, Dee, and Kelley on the Elizabethan culture. Katherine Eggert has written a book entitled *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England,* exploring the close relationship between humanism and alchemy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Another book by Ronald Gray is entitled *Will in the Universe: Shakespeare's Sonnets, Plato's* Symposium, *Alchemy and Renaissance Humanism,* and Stanton J. Linden has written a work of larger scope entitled *Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration*. In addition, an

enormous assortment of articles have examined the presence of alchemical themes in the work of Elizabethan playwrights.[5] These modern scholars have revealed that alchemy was widespread in the scholarly culture at that time. Its more scientific functions are considered the forerunner of chemistry because a great many useful chemical discoveries were made in the quest to turn base metal into gold. But some alchemists sought to apply their art to the spirit as well, to find a means of eternal youth, or to enlist the assistance of spirits in their endeavors. As noted before, the Catholic Church stoutly condemned all meddling in the world of spirits or conjuring, while Queen Elizabeth spent some time enamored of it, partly at the hands of Dee, and explored whether it might be used to further her reign (Yates 99). Because of their religious significance, and because religion was bound up in politics, alchemy and white magic were also highly political subjects of discussion.

Tamburlaine has little to say explicitly about magic, focusing more on the somewhat Machiavellian figure of Tamburlaine, the ruthless conqueror. Cunningham does make a foray into providing political background when he notes that the Machiavellian ruler was particularly important to Elizabethans because of the turbulence of their times and that perhaps they enjoyed watching the drama of *Tamburlaine* for the sake of admiring this figure of power and strength; he also notes that Elizabeth and James ruled with "ruthless force," "artful persuasion," and "decisive action" in their own different ways (23-29). Tamburlaine is such a bloody and ruthless character, however, that Marlowe may have, at least privately, intended the Machiavellian streak in his character to function as a critique of the methods of Elizabeth. Further, time and again it is noted that Tamburlaine has power over his fate. He holds "the Fates bound fast in iron chains"

[5] Barbara Howard Traister, Katherine Shrieves, Anna Feuer, Martina Zamparo, Peggy Simonds, H. W. Herrington, and Roger E. Moore have all written articles on or related to witchcraft and alchemy in Elizabethan drama, to name a few.

and turns "Fortune's wheel about; / And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere / Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome" (*Tamburlaine Part I* I.2.174-177). He declares that he has "power from the empyreal heaven" to defeat his foes (IV.4.29-31), and another character says of him that he "treadeth fortune underneath his feet / And makes the mighty god of arms his slave" (*Tamburlaine Part II* III.4.52-53). Tamburlaine declares he refuses to cease his bloodthirsty conquest until he hears the voice of Jove himself telling him to cease (IV.2.201-203), as if in direct communication with the gods. His directing of fortune and especially of the gods, such as the "mighty god of arms," is reminiscent of Dee's and other alchemists' hope of controlling the spirit world to aid their purposes—in Dee's case, specifically to further the Elizabethan empire. And Tambulaine's monologue regarding his lust for power smacks distinctly of the alchemists' and other Renaissance figures' longing for perfect knowledge and faith in human reason: he says that "Nature, that fram'd us of four elements…Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds" (*Tamburlaine Part I* II.7.18-20), and that human souls can "comprehend / The wondrous architecture of the world…Still climbing after knowledge infinite" until reaching "the ripest fruit of all…The sweet fruition of an earthly crown" (II.7.21-29). Because of its tribute to reason, Yates's motif of pure imperial reform in Elizabethan England lines up well with Tambulaine's description and his ambitions. However, the characteristics of a bloody and ruthless man subvert the idea of pure imperial reform.

In this sense, *Tamburlaine* expresses an anti-Elizabethan, critical view. But what may be a veiled critique of alchemists and their use of spirits is nothing compared to the fiery imprecations against them that are found in *Doctor Faustus*. Whereas the white magic that Dee introduced to Queen Elizabeth and intended to use for pure imperial reform was supposed to be white magic, pure and good, Marlowe depicts it as evil. Dee's magic was a descendant of the

Christian Cabala of Agrippa, who is explicitly mentioned in *Doctor Faustus* when Faustus says he "will be as cunning as Agrippa was" (Marlowe I.i.118). Keefer observes that Agrippa's "Hermetic-Cabalistic notion of spiritual rebirth and deification . . . is . . . ironically echoed in this play" (43), and Yates classifies the work as belonging in "the reaction against Renaissance magic, particularly as formulated by Agrippa" (Yates 137). She adds that Marlowe's Faustus draws a different moral than Agrippa did from the biblical text "all is vanity" (*English Standard Version*, Eccl. 1.2): Agrippa earlier had concluded that "the only learning which was not vain was to know Jesus,"[6] whereas Marlowe's character Faustus pursues the knowledge of magic taught in Agrippa's later *De occulta philosophia*. Marlowe interprets this magic as a summoning of demons rather than any kind of "Christian Cabala" (Yates 137-138). Mephistopheles, the devil whom Faustus summons, demands that he abjure Christ and the Trinity, which, Yates continues, "completely overturns . . . the claims . . . that the most powerful name in Cabala is now the Name of Christ. Faustus's magic is not Christian Cabala but entirely black" (Yates 139). *Doctor Faustus* hence constitutes a critique of the magical philosophy of the time.

However, there is an additional layer to Marlowe's critique of the Elizabethan system: he associates Faustus and his magic with the Puritans of the time, thus extending his criticism to the new Protestant religion as well as magic. Both Keefer and Yates make this point (Yates 141-142, Keefer 41), a point the more meaningful because the traditional retellings of the Faustus legend were identifiably anti-Catholic in tone (Keefer 37; Günter 128).[7] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

[6] However, Agrippa did not therefore abandon his pursuit of knowledge or study of magic. He wrote *De occulta philosophia,* his great treatise on the occult philosophy and alchemy, only a few years after *De vanitate,* from which the examination of the "all is vanity" text comes (Yates 52).

[7] The Faust legend was inspired by a historical Johann Faust, a "self-called philosopher" in Germany in the first half of the sixteenth century who made money "by the practise of magic, fortune-telling, and pretended cures" ("Introduction" 4). His mysterious death in around 1540 sparked legends that he had been carried off by the devil, "by whose aid he wrought his wonders" (4).

the humanitarian and immediate predecessor of Marlowe in telling the tale of Faustus, notably sees Faust as "a titanic striver after truth, a representative of humanity's noblest aspirations, and, whatever his sins and errors might be, in the end he was to be saved" (Günter 128)—a vision much more in keeping with the Elizabethan conception of conjuring than Marlowe's. Marlowe consciously changes the tone of the legend in order to deliver a political and religious message. Like Dee, Faustus intends to use his spirits for a political purpose: Dee wished to use them to defeat Spain and extend the empire (Yates 100), and Faustus intends to use them to "fly to India for gold . . . tell the secrets of all foreign kings . . . wall all Germany with brass . . . chase the Prince of Parma from our land / And reign sole king of all our provinces" (*Faustus* I.i.95). The Prince of Parma is a reference to Spain and the Spanish forces, whom the Protestants, and here, Faustus, hated. And when Faustus's German friends encourage him, they promise that the conjuring king will bring wealth to be used to raise armies against the Catholic King of Spain (Yates 138). Yates notes that Faustus's servant even possesses the "canting" tones of a Puritan (139), telling visitors "Truly, my dear brethren" (*Faustus* I.2.26) while attempting to hide his master's conjuring from them. When Faustus begins the pursuit of conjuring and illicit knowledge, Marlowe aligns Faustus with the Puritan political viewpoint, and in criticizing it offers a sort of indirect support for the Catholic anti-magic counter-movement.

Marlowe is commenting on a social trend of the times: the deification of human reason. This came about when the Renaissance saw a sudden bloom in the pursuit of scientific knowledge and great advances in the areas of anatomy, astronomy, and chemistry through alchemy. The deification of human reason was the sense that humanity could solve all its problems if it simply gained enough knowledge, which knowledge was the lure of alchemy and magic. Marlowe warns of this danger when he has Faustus declare that "A sound magician is a

mighty god" (I.i.64), a clear red flag to his Christian audience that Faustus's intentions are to go beyond his station as a human being. This is a rebuttal of Goethe's view. Yates notes that at the end of the play, the chorus explicitly states the moral, which is "to avoid unlawful things 'Whose deepnesse doth intice such forward wits, / To practise more than heavenly power permits" (Marlowe qtd. in Yates 140). She continues, "It begins to look less like the thought of an heroic individual soul, struggling with problems of science or magic versus religion, and more like a piece of propaganda . . . We are in fact witnessing in this play the reaction against the Renaissance" (140). And she acknowledges the existence of a somewhat undercover, hidden resistance to the Elizabethan regime when she says, speaking of the Puritans' feeling threatened by *Doctor Faustus*, that the "hidden aspects of the Elizabethan situation…probably contain the real truth about what was going on" (142). Keefer's analysis of the play argues that in many places, Faustus's inability to repent showcases the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. His conclusion is that "a Calvinist orthodoxy may appear to win out at the end of this play, but it does so at the cost of being exposed, in the moment of its triumph, as intolerable" (Keefer 42), preventing Faustus from seeking forgiveness because he is predestined to be a reprobate, and condemning him to damnation. Keefer suggests that because of Elizabethan censorship which suppressed "overt challenge to official doctrine" but let "indirection or insinuation" slip in, Marlowe does not offer an alternative to the Calvinism he questions (42); he, does, nonetheless, question it, and perhaps he himself was uncertain of a good replacement, given the later accusations against him of atheism and heretical statements.

Finally, *The Jew of Malta* (1592) has been seen variously as a critique of Gnosticism and Puritanism, and as a story about a man somewhat akin to Baines, for the character Barabbas determines to poison the well of a convent. In the first interpretation, Roger Moore notes that

Barabas "conceives of the earth and its treasures as dead matter which he, as the bearer of a higher spirit, can legitimately exploit" (39), a reflection of the Gnostic attitude that the material world is inherently evil and thus anything done within it has no effect on the spirit. Along with Gnosticism, Moore writes, comes "the temptation to elitism" (44), because Gnostics believe that they have been given special, secret revelation; elitism constitutes a key feature of Barabas's character. Both he and his enemies, the Christians, are convinced that the opposing party is wicked and condemned. The Christians say Barabas's loss of his money is due to his "inherent sin" (*The Jew of Malta* I.2.113), while Barabas asserts that "Some Jews are wicked, as all Christians are" (I.2.116), and calls Christians "unchosen nation, never circumcis'd" (II.3.8). Barabas has the stronger elitism of the two groups, however, for while the friars at least give him the chance to convert, Barabas rejects all the Christians outright, calling them "base slaves," "villains" with "no wit," while he is "born to better chance / And fram'd of finer mould than common men" (I.2.219-224). He is part of the elite, already-chosen, and as such he can dispense with the moral law and the accepted behavior of "common men." This attitude has Gnostic echoes, and Moore adds that Gnosticism held particular danger for Puritans, whose preachers had to powerfully exhort against it, because of the Puritan emphasis on the purely spiritual nature of salvation by faith alone (46). Not only this, but Gnostic attitudes often manifested themselves in Jews and appeared in their Cabalistic works (40), and had a "long association" with alchemy and occult knowledge (47). By criticizing Barabas and his Gnosticism through his strongly unfavorable picture of the Jew, Marlowe invokes associations with Cabala, alchemy, and the occult philosophy that went along with them in Elizabethan England. Perhaps he also warns against the Gnostic tendency of Puritanism, although the Catholics in the play also bear criticism, since their edict against the Jews first motivates Barabas's crimes, and it is implied that the nuns

and friars are not keeping their vow of chastity.

The other perspective on the play, that Barabas represents Baines, finds support not only in Barabas's actions in poisoning the nuns' well, but also in his bragging to Ithamore. He tells Ithamore, "Sometimes I go about and poison wells" (*The Jew of Malta* II.3.181), and "in the wars 'twixt France and Germany, / Under the pretence of helping Charles the Fifth, / Slew friend and enemy with my stratagems" (II.3.192-194). In Marlowe's time, France was mainly Catholic and Germany strongly Protestant; Barabas betrays the French Catholic king, Charles V, by his "stratagems." Barabas also tells Abigail to infiltrate the convent as a nun to retrieve his money, and declares that "religion / Hides many mischiefs from suspicion" (I.2.290-291). These statements all sound suspiciously reminiscent of Baines's plot to poison the seminary at Rheims and of his betrayal of the Catholics in general by infiltrating the seminary and fomenting discontent. Baines's recognition of himself in such an unfavorable portrait in a play might certainly incite him to increased hostility against Marlowe, the playwright. The work has also, unsurprisingly, been seen as anti-Semitic due to the villainous Jewish character Marlowe paints in Barabbas; the only prominent Jew of England of that time was Doctor Roderigo Lopez, who was high in the queen's favor, and Yates suspects that Marlowe was concerned about the queen's being influenced to let Jews come into England, a prospect which many Catholics viewed with concern (Yates 146). Given the association of the Jewish Cabala with the conjuring that Marlowe so detested, his vicious portrayal of Barabbas would resonate with his contemporaries as a comment on the Jewish origins of Cabala.

Shakespeare: "To be or not to be" Catholic

The glover's son from Stratford who went on to be acclaimed as one of the greatest writers of all time has traditionally been considered to be a staunch Protestant, which Michael

Friedman says is "based primarily on the playwright's allusions to Father Henry Garnet, the Jesuit 'equivocator' sent to damnation in the Porter scene of *Macbeth* (2.3)" (118). Yates takes this position in her analysis of white magic in Shakespeare's plays, seeing them as supporting the Elizabethan magical regime, with the exception of *Macbeth* (1623), which was performed under the regime of the anti-magic James I (Yates 108). Yet some voices have dissented, hypothesizing that Shakespeare may have been a closet Catholic, and this hypothesis has been promoted increasingly in recent years.[8] Friedman writes that "the beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed a critical and biographical counter-trend that accentuates . . . Shakespeare's sympathy with the Catholic Cause" (118). E. Beatrice Batson has edited a book, *Shakespeare's Christianity*, which presents both sides of the argument: scholars arguing that Shakespeare had a Catholic perspective, a Protestant perspective, or perhaps a viewpoint that encompasses both.

Yates takes the view that Shakespeare was likely Protestant, due to her conclusion that he exhibits sympathy to the Elizabethan regime of "pure imperial reform" through white magic. In her book *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, the first Shakespeare play she analyzes is *The Merchant of Venice*, and she concludes that "it could live with the Spenserean magic, as Marlowe's play could not" (Yates 155). The play of Marlowe's to which she is referring is, of course, *Doctor Faustus*. According to Yates, "It is generally agreed that Shakespeare had in mind Marlowe's *Jew of Malta"* (149) when he wrote *Merchant of Venice*, even though his characterization of Jews is noticeably different. While Marlowe's Barabbas is "an object of hatred and disgust" meant to incite antisemitism, Yates calls Shylock a "dignified human being" (though other interpretations disagree) whose chief fault, hatred of Christians, results from his

[8] A third position is that Shakespeare had a more modern perspective, a non-Christian one, but given the strong presence of seemingly religious elements in his plays, this thesis will not examine this view.

mistreatment at their hands (149). In the play, Portia's suitors must give up the prospect of marriage forever if they do not win her, yet she still has suitors; Portia also somehow pulls off a convincing impression of a male lawyer. This plot is, as Yates points out, "not credible in a realistic sense," but must allegorize or represent something else. Since the Christian Cabala of Francesco Giorgi (who, incidentally, came from Venice) focused on the issue of conversion and how to find common ground between Christians and Jews, Yates suggests that perhaps Shakespeare's presentation of the conversion issue in this play and his somewhat more sympathetic portrayal of the Jewish person come from a knowledge of and sympathy with Giorgi's theories. She bolsters this argument by citing another scholar who believes that the characters in the legal scene at the end of the play represent various Sephiroth of Cabala.[9] Portia represents the sephira of mercy; Yates sees this mercy as not necessarily Christian in nature, but Jewish-Cabalistic. While Yates does not elaborate on this interpretation, Portia's words can support her interpretation. The references to "God" (*The Merchant of Venice* IV.1.193-194) could be to Jehovah, for nothing in the words seems to point to Jesus Christ or the New Testament. Yates further suggests that Lorenzo's exposition of the universal harmony to Jessica is inspired by Giorgi, since the play occurs in Venice and particularly reconciles Christians and Jews. She also proposes that the casket of lead which Portia's last suitor chooses also relates to Cabala. In Cabala, lead is the metal of Saturn, and according to Giorgi, Saturn represents the religion of the Jews, thus making Bassanio, who chooses the lead casket, represent the Jewish religion (the Spaniard represents Catholicism, and the Moor the Moslem religion) (Yates 153-155). All these connections with Cabala, initially embraced by Elizabeth but condemned by the

[9] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Sephiroth as: "In the philosophy of the Cabbala: the ten hypostatized attributes or emanations by means of which the Infinite (ēin sōph) enters into relation with the finite" ("Sephiroth").

Church, would certainly seem to put Shakespeare in sympathy with the Elizabethan regime.

Yates detects the echoes of the Elizabethan occult philosophy in several other Shakespeare plays, as well. While her book is not about Shakespeare and she makes sure to say so, she does seek to place Shakespeare within the themes of her book, "to look at some familiar Shakespearean phenomena from the point of view of traditions and attitudes which this book has tried to investigate" (173-174). As such, she discusses only selected plays, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear,* and the most quintessentially magical of all Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest*. She limits her analysis to the areas of these works which directly appear to reflect the Elizabethan occult philosophy, but small as this scope may be in the overall body of Shakespeare, she makes some fascinating connections.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), a play whose central core is the antics of fairies, one can immediately see how connections to Queen Elizabeth, the Fairy Queen, can be made. While the fairies could be outcroppings of folk legend, resurrected and infused with new life by Shakespeare's master hand, Yates does not believe this is the case. Rather, she believes that they come from "literary and religious" origins, from "Arthurian legend and . . . the white magic of Christian Cabala" (174). Her main clue to their identity as Elizabethan fairies comes "through their loyalty and through their fervent defense of chastity" (174). They are indeed very loyal to Titania, who commands her servant fairies to wait on Bottom and "bring him silently" and secretly (III.1.192), although Titania's chastity is questionable given her dalliance with this same Bottom. Oberon evinces some interest in chastity, however, or at least true love, for he is greatly displeased when Puck gives the love potion to the wrong lover and causes "some true love turned, and not a false turned true" (III.2.91). Oberon also blesses the three couples at the end so

that they will "ever true in loving be" (V.1.399-400), and declares that "Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower / Hath such force and blessed power" (IV.1.72-73)—that is, chastity has greater power than sensuality. Elizabeth, the Virgin queen, was an image of chastity and hence often related to the goddess Diana and the moon. In fact, Oberon describes the moon as a "Vestal Virgin, a chaste Moon who defeats the assaults of Cupid, an 'imperial votaress'" (Yates 175; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.1.161-163). Yates reads this as Shakespeare's "brilliant summing up of the cult of Elizabeth as the representative of imperial reform" (175). The reference to Queen Elizabeth seems almost undoubted; however, it is one of the characters who makes it, and one must be careful in attributing such a character's words to Shakespeare's own thoughts. In Asquith's interpretation of the play according to a hidden Catholic code, Oberon, the fairy king, represents the Protestants in England (Asquith 109), and so his reference to Elizabeth may function rather as an allegorical marker of his allegiance than as Shakespeare's mouthpiece. In Asquith's interpretation, an interesting reversal of the prevailing imagery, Oberon is the Protestant side and the actual Fairy Queen, Titania, represents the Catholics; while it seems oddly contradictory in light of Yates's analysis of the Elizabethan imperial cult in England, it does seem to fit with Asquith's theory that Shakespeare hid a pro-Catholic message within a play that outwardly conformed to the expectation of the Queen.

The next play Yates examines is *Love's Labour's Lost* (1598). Here, her imagery dovetails with Asquith's interpretation, for both agree that the descriptor of "dark" connects to the Protestants—Yates because darkness was associated with the "dark Saturnian humour" of "melancholy, as defined by Agrippa . . . characterized by a dark complexion" (Yates 177), and Saturnian melancholy was the reigning humor of the alchemists and Christian Cabalists; Asquith because she argues that "dark" was a common term used to describe Protestants due to their dark

garb and lack of the Catholic ceremony and grandeur (Asquith 291). Yates reads the imagery as a positive representation of dark melancholy; one of the characters, Berowne, is in love with a "dark woman" (Yates 177) who is "black as ebony" (*Love's Labour's Lost* IV.3.243). While Berowne acknowledges the king's assertion that his love is like ebony, he says that to him, her darkness is light; she is "born to make black fair" (IV.3.257), and indeed, "No face is fair that is not full so black" (IV.3.149). Shakespeare also makes a reference to "the school of night" (IV.3.241). In an earlier chapter, Yates examines a poem written by George Chapman regarding a school of night, and invokes a history of scholars hypothesizing that Shakespeare's reference in *Love's Labour's Lost* might have "some hidden meaning" (176). In particular, they believe Shakespeare may allude to Chapman's poem, "or rather to a school of mathematicians and philosophers, possibly including Walter Raleigh" (177). The scholarly tradition sees Shakespeare as "satirizing" the group (Yates 177), but Yates comes to a different conclusion: while Berowne is criticized for loving a dark woman, "Shakespeare's allusion to a dark woman, associated with a 'school of night,' might . . . be an allusion to the inspired melancholy" (177). While Berowne acknowledges the warning that "Devils soonest tempt, resembling spirits of light" (*Labour's* IV.3.253), Yates believes this "may be no more than the usual warning to Cabalists of the dangers inherent in their attempts to reach the highest heights," for Berowne continues praising blackness but is "clearly a good Saturnian, not a wicked conjuror" (178). He can hear "the universal harmony" through his love (Yates 178), for love causes the gods' voices to "make heaven drowsy with the harmony" (*Labour's* IV.3.318-319) Once again, Yates notes the absurdity of the plot, the impossibility of the world, the fantastic characters, concluding that Shakespeare's true plot lies "in the other-worldly logic of the imagery" (179). She asserts that Shakespeare here paints a picture of a protagonist associated with the inspired melancholy of the

pure imperial reform, again aligning himself with Elizabeth's side of the religious and political debate.

Yet, one of the plot points which Yates incorporates into her Elizabethan imperial and melancholic interpretation is taken very differently by Asquith, whose argument, too, is compelling. Of Berowne, Yates summarizes, "He assures his friends that in forswearing their oaths in order to follow their loves they are being truly religious" (178); he urges, "Let us once lose our oaths to fine ourselves, / Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths. / It is religion to be thus forsworn" (*Labour's* IV.3.335-337). She argues that through forswearing his oath and embracing his love, Berowne hears the "universal harmony" that was supposed to be made by the sound of the planets moving through their spheres (Yates 178), a concept important to alchemy and conjuring. Asquith's interpretation of this section would be immensely different, however. She sees this play as a thorough investigation of "the morality of taking and renouncing an unbearably restrictive oath" (Asquith 65)—the Oath of Supremacy and other religious oaths. Though Asquith does not address these specific lines in the play, one can employ her interpretation to find their meaning. In such a case, they could be read as serving for a reminder that no forced oath can constitute true religion where the heart and belief, the love, is not in it. True religion lies where the true faith and the true love lie, which might well be in the Catholic Church for many people. Yet Asquith notes that Shakespeare does not elevate either side in this play, avoiding "demonizing Protestants or elevating Catholics" even though "a return to the fold of universal Christendom is seen as England's best hope" (65). By her reading, Shakespeare sees both sides as at fault, with the casualty being "the whole world of English spirituality, tragically banished by the Reformation quarrel" (66). In other words, both Catholics and recusant Protestants faced the struggle of either being persecuted or living an insincere spirituality by

taking an oath they didn't believe. Again, the Reformation would have affected English interior life to much of the extent that COVID-19 has in 2020; just as any reference to the virus would be surely picked up by modern audiences, any reference to an oath would have brought to the Elizabethan English people's minds the Oath of Supremacy and all that it entailed.

Hamlet (1603) is one of the most oft-interpreted plays in the Shakespearean canon. Something about the title character's struggles and existential dilemmas seems to strike a universal tone among suffering humanity. And of course, with a ghost prominent, Yates asserts that the occult "is intensely strong" in this play's world (180). It takes no special analysis to see Hamlet's melancholy humor in the play; indeed, it is one of the most memorable elements. Seen in the light of Christian Cabala and alchemical imagery, however, the question arises of whether Hamlet's melancholy is inspired and prophetic, giving true insight and the right course of action for a bad situation, or whether it is diabolical and weakening, like that of witches, opening Hamlet to diabolic possession and the misleading of evil spirits (Yates 180-181). As it turns out, the ghost in this play possesses true knowledge and the just intention of avenging his murder, and his words are proven by the play-within-a-play, *The Murder of Gonzago* (or, as Hamlet calls it, *The Mousetrap*)—the play as "the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (II.2.543-544). The king's conscience is well and truly caught, and "Hamlet's black humour is proved to be, not the blackness of Hell or of a witches' school of night, but the melancholy of a prophet in a world so badly disobedient to the Law that the universal harmony is inaudible" (Yates 181). Again, for Yates, Shakespeare is aligned with Elizabeth.

Asquith's tack is very different. She sees in Hamlet a coded portrait of Sir Philip Sidney, and offers a number of interesting biographical parallels, such the ghost's "fanciful conceit" that he could make Hamlet's hair stand on end like "quills upon the fearful porcupine" (*Hamlet*

I.5.20), which Asquith associates with the porcupine on the Sidney coat of arms (Asquith 150). Other details include the fact that Hamlet dies from an infected wound, as does Sidney, and that Hamlet's first reaction after seeing the ghost is to take out tablets and write a note, while Sidney was known to jot ideas "on notepads in the oddest circumstances" (Asquith 151). One of the ending lines of *Hamlet*, "The rest is silence" (V.2.341), sounds eerily like the motto on Sidney's portrait in the National Portrait Gallery—the Latin version of "The rest is fame" (Asquith 151-152). Furthermore, she notes that some recent biographers have suggested that Sidney kept Catholic company and may even have secretly harbored Catholic sympathies[10]—in which case, Asquith believes, the portrait of Hamlet represents the situation of many of the intelligentsia in England, anguishing in the conundrum of whether to support the Catholic faith or keep silent. She particularly notes the imagery of the poison coating Hamlet's father's red blood with whiteness, believing it symbolically represents the "killing" of the Catholic Faith, followed by the whitewashing of the churches (Asquith 154). In describing to Hamlet how the "leperous distilment" was administered, the ghost calls his ears "porches" (*Hamlet* I.5.63-64), calling up the image of a building, and says that it "barked about / Most lazarlike with vile and loathsome crust / All my smooth body" (I.5.71-73), just as churches were coated throughout with whitewash. Perhaps the poison's "enmity with blood" (I.5.65) even refers to enmity with the Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ's blood in consecrated communion wine.

Peter Milward holds the same view as Asquith on *Hamlet*, though Milward does not refer to Asquith in his analysis, apparently coming to the conclusion independently of her book. He sees Hamlet as a projection of Shakespeare—that where Hamlet's consciousness leaves off,

[10] The argument of Asquith's main source for this point, Duncan-Jones, is that Sidney may have lobbied excessively for Protestant alliances in order to hide his Catholic sympathies. Duncan-Jones thought it odd that Sidney was under such suspicion at court if he was a faithful Anglican (Asquith 148).

Shakespeare's begins, and that what Claudius says of Hamlet applies to Shakespeare: "There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (*Hamlet* III.1.164-65) (Milward 3). Milward argues that Hamlet's famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be . . ." reveals a great deal about Shakespeare's view of his age, "very much at odds with what has been termed 'the Elizabethan myth'"—the myth of the peaceful, prosperous age of harmony. Milward's interpretation is that Hamlet's dilemma "belongs not to a prince in eleventh-century Denmark . . . but to Shakespeare and his fellow Catholics in Elizabethan England. He and they were facing just such a dilemma" (6)—whether to continue to endure the persecution, or to take arms "by joining in some such desperate 'enterprise' as the Armada of 1588, the Essex Rebellion of 1601, or the Gunpowder Plot of 1605—which, in fact, only made their situation worse" (7). Indeed, the only result of the Gunpowder Plot was that the laws were made harsher; no Catholic was allowed to live less than 10 miles from London, hold a civil office, or practice a profession, and the King could at any time take his property away (Johnson et al. 326). While the Armada, specifically, was defeated some years before *Hamlet* and the Gunpowder Plot occurred afterwards, the question of whether to support or instigate any undertakings of this nature, and whether they were feasible, must have been on the minds of English dissenters throughout this time. In terms of the drama, the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy isn't important, but is a "purple patch" (Milward 7). One of the most telling lines in the play for this interpretation is Hamlet's exclamation, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (*Hamlet* I.2.159). Milward notes that Shakespeare was, like Hamlet and all recusants, surrounded by spies, including "not a few fellow dramatists like Anthony Munday and Christopher Marlowe, and perhaps even Ben Jonson, who certainly turned informer after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to save his own skin" (7). This interpretation of the play seems powerfully convincing; if audiences throughout history have seen something of

themselves in the dilemma of Hamlet, the constrained Elizabethan recusants must have seen even more.

Returning to Yates's interpretation of Shakespeare as supporting the Elizabethan regime, there is one blip on the radar that comes in the form of *Macbeth*, performed before the strongly anti-magic James I; Yates writes that "on the problem of Melancholy, on whether it is the inspired melancholy or the bad melancholy of witches, King James would have been likely to side with Marlowe in seeing it all as damnable" (182). For her, *Macbeth* reflects Shakespeare's attempt at navigating this change in leadership after the death of Elizabeth, for magic in *Macbeth* is "evil necromancy" where "there are no good fairies and we are very far from the Spenserian world" (182). But this is the sole play which she examines which contains no pro-occult philosophy imagery—no positive portrayals of magic, no good fairies, no praises of chastity, and so on—and she does little to explain why in this particular play Shakespeare should go so completely over to the other side of the debate, portraying witches and magic as evil, and yet return somewhat to Elizabethan imagery in later Jacobean plays.

Milward sees *Macbeth* as a highly biblical play, whose unstable and fearful political situation mirrors that of Elizabethan England. He sees biblical echoes of Christ's passion in *Macbeth*, where Macbeth is Judas and Duncan is Christ (Milward 13). Shakespeare's Duncan seems to have been deliberately painted as a great man and holy king, for he differs from the figure in Holinshed, where Duncan is a highly flawed individual against whom a conspiracy was already in place (Miola 69). Milward cites a piece of Shakespeare's imagery as one of the possible pieces of evidence supporting his position: he notes that "gouts"—as in "gouts of blood" in the famous dagger speech—is a word unique to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and Milward suggests it comes from the Latin *guattae sanguinis* "for the sweat of blood during the

agony of Jesus in the Garden as narrated by Luke" (Milward 13). Milward also interprets the scene of Macduff discovering Duncan's murder as referring, perhaps, to the destruction of the monasteries and churches: "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence / The life o' the building!" (*Macbeth* II.3.66-68).[11] The extreme caution Malcolm has to exercise to make sure Macduff is not a spy for Macbeth echoes the extreme caution of Catholic recusants (16). Milward adds that if he is asked for "demonstrative proof that Shakespeare definitely had those Catholics in mind, his very situation in Jacobean England, not least in the immediate aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, made it impossible for him, or for me, to provide such proof" (17). In other words, Shakespeare had to use coded language and therefore his readers, including those 500 years later, have to decode it as best they can. In light of this, Milward calls the evidence instead a convergence of probabilities amounting to a certain conclusion: "All the evidence that has come to light in recent years" suggests "that Shakespeare received a Catholic formation not only at home in Stratford but also in recusant Lancashire, while I would go even further in maintaining that he remained a Catholic throughout his dramatic career, if only in sympathy, and with some fluctuation" (17). So Milward sees rather a Catholic presence in *Macbeth,* which would also fit with the anti-magic of this play.

The next work Yates analyzes, *King Lear* (1606), would not seem initially to be a play with much to do with the occult philosophy, since the only supernatural figure which appears—the demonically possessed Tom o'Bedlam—turns out not to be demonically possessed at all, but only Edgar in disguise. Yates observes that "the problem of why Shakespeare chose to give as a companion to Lear in his destitute state a man who was *pretending* to be possessed by devils has never been satisfactorily solved" (183), but goes on to posit a possible solution: the names of the

[11] This line of Macduff's comes immediately after the Porter scene in *Macbeth*.

devils which supposedly possess Edgar come from a 1603 book by Samuel Harsnett called *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*. According to Yates, this is "a polemical work in which a Jesuit is accused of having induced a sense of demonic possession in some persons, pretending afterwards to exorcise them" (Yates 184). She adds, "It is certain that Shakespeare was using this account" because words and phrases about Edgar are related to Harsnett, and the devils' names come directly from his work (184). Shakespeare thus brings up witch-scares and demonology, but not to rouse terror about spirits and witches as Marlowe did; Shakespeare does so to raise the question of "whether such scares could be falsely raised . . . for political or political-religious reasons" (184). As for a possible symbolic identity of Edgar/Tom o'Bedlam, she writes that "there was a living survivor of the Spenserian dream whom this description would pretty exactly fit—John Dee" (184), who had been cast off and accused of demonic possession, and claimed to be descended from kings. Shakespeare's portrayal of King Lear reads as highly sympathetic at this point, and if Edgar does indeed represent Dee, then the play would likely raise sympathy for the banished conjurer as well. The oblique reference could help Shakespeare elude directly provoking the disapproval of James I, who certainly would have disapproved of Dee and his conjuring.

There is some debate surrounding whether *The Tempest* (1623) was Shakespeare's last play or whether he co-wrote another with John Fletcher after this, but in Asquith's view it was indeed his last play, and it is at any rate the last one Yates analyzes. Interestingly, it was the first to appear in the First Folio and the one given the position of author's prologue. Asquith notes that the play must have been considered important if Shakespeare's peers (who published the Folio posthumously) gave it this role (Asquith 265). Of all of Shakespeare's plays (with the possible exception of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), this one most associates itself with magic

and conjuring. It was played at the wedding festivities of the Protestant Elector Palatine and James's daughter Elizabeth, who was "associated in the public mind with the late queen of the same name as another pure Protestant heroine" (Yates 187). *The Tempest* belonged to what Yates titles "the Elizabethan revival in the Jacobean age" (187). Prospero shows white magic triumphing over black magic and winning the day; just as with the magic of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "the emphasis on chastity" in the play shows that the magic is white, particularly in Prospero's advice to his daughter's lover (187). The play contrasts Prospero's white magic with the black magic of the evil witch Sycorax and her son, which latter magic Prospero "overcomes and controls" (Yates 187); furthermore, Yates makes the important and convincing connection that Ariel is mentioned as one of the spirits in Agrippa's book (187). Focusing on the specific imagery of the play, Yates notes that "Shakespeare's language in *The Tempest* is infused through and through with spiritual alchemy and its theme of transformation" (190). She sees this particularly in such places as "Full fathom five thy father lies / Of his bones are coral made" (*The Tempest* I.2.397-398), in which Ferdinand's father's bones are claimed to have been transformed, as in alchemy, into coral by the salty solution of the sea. For Yates, every part of the play is infused with respect and nostalgia for the old magic of the Elizabethan era.

Yates would not be the only scholar to argue the theory that in this play, Shakespeare also seems to be presenting himself as a magician, making Prospero an offshoot of himself. Asquith hypothesizes that it was meant to be Shakespeare's most autobiographical play, a farewell to his devoted English following before retirement (Asquith 265). Yates calls Shakespeare "a magician, master of the spell-binding use of words, of poetry as magic. This was the art in which he was supreme and which Prospero symbolizes" (190). Yet the ending of *The Tempest* seems unpromising for the future of magic. Prospero drowns his book and vows to give up magic, and

his final epilogue, an appeal to the audience to set him free, has a melancholy tone to it. The days of the pure imperial reform had passed, fruitless. Jones writes that "The hopeful vision of a world ruled by magic had faded into the reality of the Elizabethan police state, although Shakespeare was not going to risk his life by saying so" (404). By this interpretation, Shakespeare is looking back upon the utopia of pure imperial reform and seeing it as, instead, a dystopia of corrupt imperial control.

Yates's scholarship occurred, of course, before the twenty-first century shift towards the perception of Shakespeare as Catholic. She wrote towards the very end of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first, but the two decades subsequent to her book on *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* have seen immense amounts of scholarship on Shakespeare—much of it inspired by her work—and on new threads of English history, and among many scholars the tide has started to change, as Friedman noted. Asquith's book was published eleven years after Yates's, with the benefit of much new information which Asquith herself acknowledges.

Asquith again suggests that *The Tempest* contains a coded element of pro-resistance meaning (xiv), while at the same time it advocates religious tolerance in England (270). An appendix in her book *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* contains a glossary of terms she and, in some cases, other scholars have found to be symbolic of certain ideas in Shakespeare and other Elizabethan writers. She explores some of these associations in her analysis of *The Tempest*, beginning with the title; she argues that Shakespeare "repeatedly conjured up the image of the Reformation in the shape of a tempest"

(266) and notes that the use of the image was not unique to him,[12] but a widespread metaphor for the Reformation (299). In her reading, Ariel and Caliban continue Shakespeare's trend of writing plays with a "fair" character and a "dark" one (266), a tendency so pronounced in his body of work that it has led scholars to hypothesize Shakespeare wrote parts specifically for a short dark actor and a tall fair one (32). Asquith believes that rather than referring to two specific actors, the terms, as noted before, represent the "fair" Catholics, with their emphasis on outward beauty (292), and "dark" Protestants, associated with black print and sober dress (291). In this play, particularly, the fair is Ariel, who represents both the higher aspects of Shakespeare's soul—his intellect and creativity—and the Bard's "command of the English stage" (266); he is composed of "air" (*The Tempest* V.1.21) and apparently of fire, for he can "flame" and "burn" on the ship in the opening tempest (I.2.199-200). Air and fire evoke lightness, brightness, and fairness. The dark, on the other hand, is Caliban, representing the lower animal faculties of the soul and simultaneously the dark side of the ruling regime (which late in Shakespeare's life suppressed drama) (266); he is a "monster" (*The Tempest* II.2.142-144) called "thou earth" by Prospero (I.2.314) and associated with water by being mistaken for a fish (II.2.25), and of the four elements, these two elements associate themselves with darkness. Prospero, meanwhile, represents Shakespeare's "commanding self" or will, and Miranda is both Shakespeare's soul and the spiritual essence of England, nearly overcome in the rape attempt by Caliban-as-animal-soul and Caliban-as-abuses-of-regime (266). From this starting point, Asquith goes on to build an interpretation of the play as being about play-making and Shakespeare's experience as a playwright caught in the middle of the politico-religious struggles of England.

[12] Specifically, Asquith mentions Petrarch's use of "a ship in the tempest as an image of the threatened church; Spenser takes up the theme," and adds that many Protestant writers used a ship "as an image of the Catholic 'bark of Peter'" (299). In the twenty-first century, Daniell uses the term "tsunami" to describe the Reformation (Daniell 32).

If one chooses to look at the play through Asquith's lens, one can indeed find passages inviting an interpretation of hidden meaning. Asquith notes that Sycorax, associated as she is with the moon, seems to represent Queen Elizabeth (267). One can continue Asquith's ideas using her glossary of terms, interpreting portions of the play that she herself doesn't closely examine in the book. For instance, Caliban, son of Sycorax, says to Prospero and Miranda, "As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed / With raven's feather from unwholesome fen / Drop on you both!" (*Tempest* I.2.321-323). Asquith's glossary says Shakespeare uses 'fen' to indicate the reform, which spread from the Low Countries along England's east coast (292); if such is the case, then this passage could be construed to indicate Elizabeth's spreading of the new religion through the island of England and even her enforcement of its practice upon the English people, who are represented by Prospero and Miranda. The island itself, which could represent oppressed England, does not make a very good impression upon several of its visitors; the "breath" of its air strikes Sebastian and Antonio as "rotten" and "perfumed by a fen" (*Tempest* II.1.47-49), while it is a desert and lacks "means to live" (II.1.51). Trinculo finds "neither bush nor shrub" to protect from the weather, which continues to storm (II.2.18-19), and in general the island seems inhospitable and unpleasant. One could interpret this as Shakespeare's portrayal of England as desolate and harsh, because of the constant turbulence of the religious and political struggles, and as a country deprived of much of its richness and life. The island's barrenness may even refer to the stripping of religious ceremony and tradition after the suppression of the Catholic religion. Again, this is a picture of dystopia, not the promised utopia of the reforming party.

If the tempest represents the Reformation, then, utilizing Asquith's system of interpretation (although she herself does not say this), the sailors trying to keep the king's ship afloat in the beginning of the play could represent the Catholic recusants resisting the reform.

The boatswain chides the king's party for not helping to keep the ship afloat; he exclaims, "if you can command these elements to silence and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more . . . if you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready . . . for the mischance of the hour, if it so hap" (*Tempest* I.1.22-27). In this interpretation, the "peace" he speaks of refers not only to settling the tempest in the play, but the one in England; if the men cannot take an active role in peacemaking, he bids them be prepared for death, which was common enough in England at this time through execution for political and religious crimes. Further, Gonzalo calls the boatswain's complexion "perfect gallows" and says that therefore he will not drown (I.1.29-30). Religious dissenters in England were frequently hanged; Gonzalo's observation about the boatswain could apply to religious dissenters also, who would die on the gallows rather than give in to the storm and be "drowned" in the tempest of the reformed faith. This idea is reinforced near the end of the play, when the boatswain makes a reappearance and Gonzalo comments, "Now, blasphemy, / That swear'st grace o'erboard, not an oath on shore?" (V.1.218-219). While the line ostensibly refers to the seaman's tendency to swear at sea, the use of the word "oath" would surely have brought to mind the Oath of Supremacy that English people were required to swear under Elizabeth and her successors, renouncing the authority of the Pope and declaring Elizabeth as the head of the Church of England. The line could be a subtle reference to the boatswain's refusal to swear the oath as a recusant and dissenter.

A final and more direct piece of evidence hinting at Shakespeare's recusant sympathies lies in the epilogue of the play, spoken by Prospero directly to the audience. One could interpret it as an appeal couched in strikingly Catholic terms, ending with the line "Let your indulgence set me free" (*Tempest* Epilogue 20)—using the inflammatory word which sparked Martin Luther's initial break with the Roman Church, and evoking the association of freeing souls from

Purgatory. Prospero says the audience's prayers relieve him from despair, assaulting "Mercy itself" and freeing "all faults" (Epilogue 15-18); if Prospero represents Shakespeare, this seems a strikingly defiant move on the part of the Bard to ally himself with the Catholic resistance.

In her comments on the epilogue, Asquith observes that Shakespeare might also be telling his loyal followers in this speech that he had been given the choice to stay in the world of drama and stick to harmless subjects, rather than his typical politically-charged drama—"I must be here confined by you" (*Tempest* Epilogue 3-4)—or to leave—Prospero says he is going to Naples (Asquith 272). Given that this is Shakespeare's last play, he informs the audience in code that he has made the choice to leave rather than remain and be silent. But Asquith emphasizes that while he may have been sympathetic to the resistance, Shakespeare did not advocate an inversion of the situation in England, in which Catholics took the upper hand and severely repressed Protestantism. Rather, he allows equal dignity "to the finest elements in both Lutheranism and the old faith, while deploring England's callous policy of repressing its native religion and abusing and enforcing the new" (270). She sees the chess game in Act 5, a game between dark and light pieces, as representing this.

How does one reconcile the several pro-Catholic interpretations of Shakespeare with Yates's observation that he apparently allied himself with Elizabeth through espousing the occult philosophy and the idea of pure imperial reform? A possible solution that suggests itself is that Shakespeare was attempting to achieve two things at once: maintain political safety by espousing a politically favorable subject such as alchemy, but at the same time encode a position of support for the dissenters. The richly symbolic language and imagery Shakespeare chooses in this play open the door to manifold interpretations, and the plausibility of these varied interpretations, given the evidence in the play, showcases the Bard's versatility. Perhaps Shakespeare's intention

in *The Tempest* was a combination of both interpretations: he saw the playwright and specifically himself as a sort of alchemist, one whose life-giving elixir, purified and distilled from the world's realities through the art of the play, is a message for the audience, one important to politics and religion alike. If the play has room for both interpretations, perhaps it is another indication of Shakespeare's belief that there was room in England for Protestants and Catholics alike, rendering *The Tempest* a plea for tolerance in his strife-torn English isle.

Some additional viewpoints on Shakespeare's faith may be found in the series of essays in the book *Shakespeare's Christianity*, edited by Batson. While opinions in the book argue for both Protestant and Catholic sympathies, the preponderance of evidence seems to point toward a Catholic predilection in Shakespeare.

The second essay of the book, by Daniell (after the first essay by Milward, quoted earlier), is the only one which claims Shakespeare outright as a faithful Protestant. It looks at both Spenser and Shakespeare, and the analysis of Spenser does seem to support the conclusion that "Spenser can be shown to share the militant Protestantism of the high-born circle in which he moved" (Daniell 22). Daniell also brings his readers' attention to the new knowledge which has been recently unfolding about Shakespeare when Daniell compares the earlier belief that Shakespeare had little learning with a contrasting belief that has arisen from modern developments in Shakespeare studies. Now, he writes, "At the start of the twenty-first century he [Shakespeare] is allowed to be both learned and thoughtful. His sources are manifold"—going on to list classical sources in Greek and Latin, folklore, alchemy and astronomy (Daniell 27). As may be seen, much has recently been uncovered regarding the life of the famously mysterious playwright. While Daniell believes that Shakespeare was Calvinist and shows a Calvinist understanding in his plays (29), some of his reasoning is weak and seems unconvincing. For

instance, his acknowledgement that the Calvinist theology of the sixteenth century drew heavily on St. Paul (Daniell 28), and his detection of themes of St. Paul's epistles in Shakespeare (29), do not necessarily combine to form his conclusion that Shakespeare must have been Calvinist—not even if the Tyndale Bibles are "easily Shakespeare's most-referred-to biblical books" (Daniell 31). Catholics also treat the epistles of St. Paul as inspired Scripture, and at the time, the Tyndale Bible may have been the only translation available to Shakespeare for reference; the Catholic version, the Douay-Rheims Bible, was banned from England by the Elizabethan regime. The (written in 2018) introduction to the 1582 English translation of the Rheims New Testament recounts the fact that "[i]ndividuals in Britain found in possession of copies of the Catholic English Bible were liable for imprisonment. Torture was applied to those who sold or otherwise circulated it" (Hoffman). The introduction acknowledges the Catholic suppression or interdiction of Protestant versions, but notes that because the Rheims Bible was "so obscure," many contemporary historians "can, with impunity, overlook the fact that it was banned at all." While it is almost certainly true that "everyone" now knew the Bible in English, "especially the Gospels" (Daniell 31), and that the Bible version was likely the Tyndale version, this knowledge of Scripture in English could have been utilized by the Catholics just as much as by the Protestants—and through the Tyndale version for lack of an alternate translation. In further arguing for Shakespearian Protestantism, Daniell writes that "it is suffering and poverty that are interiorised by Shakespeare" (33), that his plays are full of individual people and their subjective perspectives as opposed to the focus on art of the Renaissance humanists. (31). Yet this argument is not fully convincing that Shakespeare's focus was therefore Protestant; the immense "tsunami" (Daniell 32) of the Reformation that shook the Catholic world turned the structure of the Catholic Church upside-down, and as has been seen, in England the Catholics were indeed

separated from their larger church structure and forced to take care of themselves lest they be found out—thus forced into a more individualistic mindset. Further, they suffered and were reduced to poverty under the penal laws. Hence, Shakespeare's focus on suffering and poverty, rather than being an ideological expression of Protestant worldview, could certainly be instead a concrete representation of the state of recusants in England.

In the same collection of essays, Robert Lanier Reid detects a Catholic influence on Shakespeare's mind in his analysis of self-love present in Shakespeare's plays. Augustine and Plotinus, he notes, along with many medieval and Reformation thinkers, exhort caution in self-love: they urge "that love focus on the rational and virtuous self" (Reid 39). On the other hand, Aquinas and Aristotle advocate self-love, including love of one's body, as "natural and vital to ethical well-being" (39). Even though Augustine was suspicious of self-love, Reid makes sure to mention that he believed in the possibility of "true self-love" only if allied with the communal well-being and only if one "prays for divine grace to restore the sense of oneself as *imago dei*" (40). However, many Protestant Reformation theologians denied that good self-love was possible "without intervening grace," and Reid quotes Martin Luther's analysis of self-love as being good only when one hates oneself, but loves oneself through one's neighbor (41). Aquinas called self-hate the result of false self-love, and said it undermined the true good. Reid argues that Shakespeare disagrees with the leading Reformation theologians on this, for "despite" their "insistence on original sin, Shakespeare could find theological support for a proper, thoughtful glorying in the goodness of oneself and one's offspring, thus appreciating creation and imitating the Creator" (42). Reid then goes on to argue that Shakespeare's "most admired characters"—Beatrice and Benedick, Antony and Cleopatra, Falstaff and Bottom, Prince Hal and Portia—"show self-love's most complex and engaging face," allowing audiences to "delight" (45). He

argues that in Shakespeare's plays, many of the protagonists—at least, the tragic ones—show a self-love that "need not exclude neighbor-love," and "exemplify the paradox noted by Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas *that self-love is fulfilled in loving others*, especially when the conscience of those loved reflects the will of God" (Reid 46). He portrays Prospero as a reformed Faustus who controls his self-love and stresses "his reliance on the love of others, his audiences, and on divine grace and forbearance" (55), a quality particularly seen in Prospero's final epilogue to his audience after surrendering his magical powers and drowning his "book" (*Tempest* V.1.57). Reid concludes by saying in the "eloquent self-glorying" of Shakespeare's "consummate players . . . which so intensifies the being of others, we witness Shakespeare's most suggestive mirroring of God: an unlimited creative and loving power that springs from self-love" (56).

The subsequent essay, by Robert S. Miola, discusses the role of prayer, Providence, and free will in *Macbeth*. He notes that "both Catholics and Protestants agree on the essential necessity of prayer and its nature," though "both sadly accused the other side of lip-labor" (60). The question raised by the justice of Macbeth's apparent damnation (*Macbeth* I.7.4-12) is whether or not his crimes could have been avoided, whether or not he could have repented. Miola sets forth the classic Catholic position in contrast to that of Protestant reformers: the Aquinas-based belief that heaven does not cause every action—for if it did, "free will would be destroyed . . . and there would be no justice" (67), and Calvin's argument that God's will determines whether one goes to heaven or hell, bolstered by Luther's "emphatically" denying the existence of free will (67-68). Miola explains that while to many *Macbeth* has seemed to reflect Protestant convictions about predestination and reprobation, he believes Shakespeare "here adopts a Catholic view of the action and theology of free will by emphasizing . . . the sheer gratuitousness . . . of the evil freely chosen" (69). Shakespeare has changed the history from his

source, Holinshed, by erasing the element of Duncan's weakness and of a conspiracy to kill him, endowing the king instead "with an aura of sanctity" (69), which seems significant; it emphasizes Macbeth's deliberate choice to commit evil, and Macbeth himself "emphasizes his own responsibility and autonomous agency" (69). So Shakespeare here adopts a Catholic perspective on the free-will debate—a perspective which indicates that he was sympathetic to the Catholic faith.

Grace Tiffany argues in her essay for the influence of the Protestant aural theater tradition on Shakespeare, but makes no claims on Shakespeare's faith. She simply believes and shows that because Shakespeare was surrounded by this tradition and it was his "inheritance" (74), "echoes of Protestant moral views are found in his greatest tragedy" (74)—which is, of course, *Hamlet*. The particular Protestant moral train of thought which she emphasizes is the suspicion of theatrical show and appeal to the eyes; many Reformers instead championed "an alternative, virtue-inspiring aural theater" (75). Her essay is cogently argued and convincing concerning Hamlet, although one wonders how she would interpret the *highly* visual and spectacle-filled 'play about a play,' *The Tempest*, which is filled with Prospero's masques. (For an argument regarding Prospero's magic displays as masques, see Barbara Traister's *The Magician in Elizabethan Renaissance Drama*.)

John W. Mahon discusses the role of divine providence in *Julius Caesar* (1599), something which both Catholics and Protestants could appreciate, and his ultimate conclusion is that "evidence of Shakespeare's leaning toward either Protestantism or Catholicism is not apparent; yet the presence of both is undeniable" (110). He does, however, bring up the role of "Rome-as-hero" in the play, with providence moving it toward the "strong rule of empire" in which "Christianity grows and eventually becomes accepted" (102). To Elizabethan audiences,

however, the reference to Rome may have elicited quite a different reaction, for Rome was the seat of the Papacy and hence of the "popish" religion of Catholicism. Thus, the references to Rome as the heroic seat of the action may have held an undercurrent of subversion and Catholic sympathy which was not quite overt, but nonetheless not quite pleasing to Protestant audiences.

Finally, Maurice Hunt brings up the fact that in retelling the history of Julius Caesar, Shakespeare changes the number of wounds given to Caesar from his source, Plutarch. While Plutarch records the number of wounds as 23, Shakespeare gives it as 33—the supposed age of Christ when he died (Hunt 111-112)—showing that Shakespeare had "an awareness of the legendary association of Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ" (112). It may be inferred from this that Shakespeare inserted a certain religious subtext into this play, and Hunt argues that Shakespeare continues to positively associate Caesar with Christ through the use of a pun on cobbling: cobbling "souls" as well as "soles" (112-113). Caesar "precipitates soul-cobbling" (112), or mending of souls, since the cobbler and his customers are all putting wear on their shoes as they go out in the street to see Caesar's victory procession (*Julius Caesar* I.1.29-31). In the sixteenth century, the English associated "cobbling and the Christian priesthood" (Hunt 114). The cobbler makes a second pun on living by the "awl/all," the first of which meanings could be taken to be an obscene pun—awl being an Elizabethan phallic reference—but since he immediately disclaims this interpretation by saying he "meddles with no . . . women's matters" (*Julius Caesar* I.1.21-22), Hunt argues that he means he lives by "an all-encompassing principle that infuses his life with meaning" (115). This, he argues, is the matter of priesthood, particularly after the cobbler's disclaimer concerning women. Catholic priests, in particular, were required to remain celibate, whereas Protestant ministers were permitted to marry; while perhaps the cobbler means not celibacy but simply that he does not live a promiscuous life, one does wonder whether

Shakespeare here intends to bring the Catholic priesthood particularly to mind.

Conclusion

Other scholars have commented on a hidden message within Shakespeare's works. As Asquith writes, the parallels between the repressed history and the literature of the day are so precise that "in many cases it is now impossible to miss them: Curtis Breight is one historian who uses Shakespeare's 'hidden' plays to illustrate his [historical] thesis" (xvi). Asquith's view is strengthened by the fact that her inspiration came from personally witnessing plays performed under a repressive, censorious regime: Communist Russia. There, she writes, the plays were often based on old and well-known stories that would get past the censors, but which were filled with "occasional allusions that gave a risky contemporary angle to the otherwise familiar stories" (xiii). The audience picked them up, but many of them were too subtle to be perceived by the KGB operatives who were present. Hiding messages in plain sight, so to speak, is a well-known tactic of those living under oppression or participating in secret activities, as is dramatized countless times in spy novels, fantasies, and adventure tales. Western audiences need make no leap of faith to believe that they are hidden in the works produced under well-known oppressive systems such as Communism. Yet it may come as a surprise to them to hear that in their very own heritage, in the origins of modern society, their English forefathers experienced a similar oppression. The revised historical record has led to revised literary interpretations, and those literary interpretations, in turn, have led to increased interest in the history. Chiefly history scholars, a relatively small audience, would be interested in the purely historical aspect of the revised account of Elizabethan history. As soon as one brings a universally known and admired player such as Shakespeare onto the world stage to argue for the history, however, suddenly the attention of the world is captured.

Shakespeare and his compatriots did succeed in encoding a history in their plays. And especially through Shakespeare's ingenious work, though the record lay dormant for centuries, five hundred years later that gambit is now paying off: historical researchers are turning to the men who captured a cultural imagination for proof that their recent theories are indeed true. These theories propose that while the empire of Elizabeth was supposed to be a utopia bringing peace and prosperity over the merry old land of England, its reality—as with so many proposed utopias—devolved into a dystopia in which almost nobody was at peace. The playwrights may not have succeeded in turning the tide of English history; too many odds were stacked against them, and a human will is a difficult thing to turn—particularly that of a monarch. But they nonetheless continued to communicate their dissident positions, perhaps feeling that the overflow of a suppressed and vital passion must be expressed for their own sake as much as for their audience's. Indeed, reading the plays of Shakespeare through the decoding lens of Milward, Asquith, and other scholars adds a layer of emotional depth and poignancy that brings the playwright closer to readers as a man who truly threw himself into his work by representing himself therein. Not only his immense genius and knowledge of human nature made his plays human, but also his constant awareness of the situation of his compatriots and himself—both Catholic and Protestant—who were suffering in the turbulence of that time. A battleground, a culture war, is encoded in these dramas, which revolve around political intrigue, shattered monarchies, betrayal, and civil conflict—strange subject-matter for a time that was supposed to be so peaceful.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries had the advantage of a fairly homogenous society for their audience, one which was educated in a more or less uniform manner and so would be likely to pick up allusions efficiently because such allusions would be well-known. In a modern

and diverse society, such a method might no longer be effective for the communication of a hidden message, unless it were tailored to a specific group. But nonetheless, many things in modern times are recognizable icons and symbols, and quick, blink-and-you-miss-them allusions frequently occur in movies and television shows. In an age where information is monitored and arbitrated by enormous technology companies who often have a political agenda, the question of truth and censorship is becoming predominant and pressing. Modern society is very different from Elizabethan society, but human nature has not changed, and where people feel oppressed and silenced, they will try to make their voice heard. Should modern or future writers ever feel the need to hide a message in their work to allow it to escape censorship, they have a new precedent from whom they may learn: Shakespeare and his contemporaries of Elizabethan drama. Thus in this way, as Prince Edward says in *Richard III*, even were history not recorded, "Methinks the truth should live from age to age, / As 'twere retailed to all posterity, / Even to the general all-ending day" (III.2.75-78).

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