William Shakespeare's Sacramental Vision

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S SACRAMENTAL VISION

by

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Under the Direction of Committee Chair Dr. Paul J. Voss, PhD

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ABSTRACT

The plays Shakespeare produced in the second half of his career, from *Hamlet* (1600) through *The Tempest* (1611), offer a way to see the world through the poetics and action on stage so as to effect an essential apprehension of God. That is, 1) how the divine inhabits the elements of the natural world which draw sustaining life from their creator, 2) how divine providence controls—shapes, orders, corrects—the actions of men and political institutions, and 3) how peace and human fellowship lie in the answered call to the Gospel’s shared way of life.

The playwright reinvigorates a traditional vision of the immanent sacrality of the material world with such compelling *topos* as the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the power of faith in *Lear*, the conjured infestation of evil in *Macbeth*, and Prospero’s adumbration of divine omnipotence and sacrificial humility in *The Tempest*. The selected plays, as they represent the body of Shakespeare’s later works emblematically respond to a desacralizing English Christian culture that variously embraces or endures the combined impact of both the Italian Renaissance and the English Reformation. The plays alert their audiences to the advent and effects of the secular world’s irradicable encroachment on England’s venerable religious heritage, the climactic phase of which ripened during Shakespeare’s 20-year career on the London stage.

Seen in light of the sacramental poetics I analyze herein, the plays reveal memorial testaments that speak to not only the erosion of inherited traditional English faith culture but to the erosion of religious engagement altogether. Shakespeare stands, in context, as a distinctive, powerful, and admonitory witness to those in his traditional Christian audience “with ears to hear.”

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S SACRAMENTAL VISION

by

JOSEPH L. KELLY

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Office of Graduate Studies
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July 2021
DEDICATION

My graduate studies would not have been possible without the love and many sacrifices of my wife and two sons who have so generously supported me in this endeavor and to whom I owe so much. I also wish to acknowledge special mentors Dr. Kenneth Boa (Atlanta Christian Lawyers Forum) and Joseph R. Hope and Robert S. Edmunds, Jr. (Friday Morning Fellowship), all of whom encouraged my work on this project and invited me to share occasional presentations on Shakespeare’s Christianity within their respective forums.
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1. INTRODUCTION—*The Reformation Sea Change: The Fading Culture of Faith and its Way of Seeing*

“Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9)

Precisely how Reformation politics manifest in Shakespeare’s life and work stands as a perennial subject of voluminous commentary and claims. Some seize upon presumed, life-long Roman Catholic sympathies formed as a youth in Reformation resistant Warwickshire; others see an assumed Protestant conformity throughout his 20-year London career that began as a provincial emigré to become an established poet and public theatre playwright. Still others declare his confessional loyalties simply unknowable. However, the recent body of revisionist Reformation historiography, together with related cultural scholarship, prompts a larger theological perspective—way of thinking about the later works that implicates the playwright’s resistance to the desacralized Christianity wrought by the English Protestant Reformation.

The provocative point of entry into the mystery of Shakespeare’s religious proclivities lies with a mid-career “sea change” in the substance of his plays. Beginning in the year 1600, Shakespeare offers a distinctively different kind of drama that evokes a way of seeing the world—of understanding reality—that the Protestant English reformers labored to crush out of the devotional life of a traditional English religious culture that had remained undisturbed for over a thousand years.¹ I borrow the term “Old Faith” to describe this undisturbed pre-Reformation English religious culture that nurtured a young Shakespeare and that yet remained in the mind and memory of the audience for whom he wrote.²

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¹ Eamon Duffy, *Reformation Divided*. p. 4.

² I use throughout the commonplace term “Old Faith” to refer to the traditional English fealty to the ecclesiology of the Roman Church, first established in 6th century Britain. The term originated with John DeGroot’s *Shakespeare*
This study contends that William Shakespeare’s later works dramatize the stress of the continuing displacement of a common understanding of the nature of God and witness to the consequential cultural shift in the once shared way of comprehending reality. It might seem that the origins of this altered conception of the divine, incubated by the scholastic debates within late medieval universities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, could not be more remote from the traditional Christianity as understood in Shakespeare’s sixteenth century Warwickshire. However, notwithstanding the millennium of undisturbed English Christian practice, with its inherited understanding of the divine nature, the underlying assumptions about God’s place and purpose in the world had become the subject of profound ontological dispute with the advent of popular Church reform that swept Europe in the sixteenth century. How Shakespeare’s plays fall within this disputed perspective lies neglected, if not obscured, by an assumed confessional equivalence manifest in the Reformation divide between mandatory obedience to the reformed Church of England, albeit complicated by a roiling cacophony of competing Protestant claims.

*and the Old Faith* (1946) in his then radical reexamination of Shakespeare’s religious heritage. While Eamon Duffy prefers the equivalent term “traditional religion,” the term “religion,” as well as the modern “Catholic,” as this study argues, is somewhat anachronistic and anticipates the period of secularization, fragmentation, and privatization of piety and practice. I contend that much of the meaning of Shakespeare’s later works reflects the playwright’s adverse response to this onerous trend. For a discussion of the significance of this cultural change. See generally, Eamon Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege & Sedition* (2012) and C. John Somerville, in his *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (1992). I adopt John Henry deGroot’s term “Old Faith” throughout this study to identify what Eamon Duffy refers to as the “religion of the conservative majority . . . [to describe the] “forms and belief-system of late medieval Catholicism” (*Stripping*, 3-4).

My specific reference herein to “later works” refers to the series of plays that begin with *The Tragedy of Hamlet* (1600) and extend through *The Tempest* (1610).
on the one hand,⁴ and surviving, albeit hidden, loyalty to the traditional Roman church, on the other.

Yet, amid this sea of contention, within an ostensibly secular performing art
entertainment activity chartered by the Crown and supervised by the Master of Revels,
Shakespeare’s plays became thematically invested in two overarching questions, the answers to
which had become unmoored from common underpinnings in pre-Reformation Christianity, but
now stood suddenly vexed and subject to competing claims. First, what is the nature of the
divine and how is it known? Second, does God any longer have a place in the workings of the
world? Shakespeare’s later works prompt his audience toward rediscovery of answers to these
questions in that they offer a way to see the world *through* the poetics and action on stage to an
essential apprehension of 1) how the divine inhabits a natural world which draws sustaining life
from its creator, 2) how divine providence controls—shapes, orders, corrects—the actions of
men and political institutions, and 3) how peace and human fellowship lies in the answered call
to the Gospel’s shared way of life—and, conversely, how destruction inevitably follows its
disruption or denial.⁵

Received historical accounts provide the credulous term “religious change” to partially
describe the political fact of the English Reformation. However, Shakespeare’s later works
focus on the decisive turn in the traditional Christian conception of reality wrought by the

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⁴ For a comprehensive summary of the “cacophony” of Protestant claims, see e.g., Felicity Heal, “Experiencing

ultimate defeat of logical *realism* which denied the existence of universals “in the mind of God.” Moreover, everything in the natural world participates in, and derives its essence from, God’s Being.⁶ However, *nominalism* takes the philosophical position that so-called “universals” are simply names; objects have no intrinsic meaning outside of that assigned; and understanding of natural phenomena derives from empirical investigation.⁷ Over time the aggregation of forces alive to newly discovered classical heritage, which became known as the “Renaissance,” resulted in the subordination, and even dislocation, of God’s role in nature and the concomitant elevation of man’s predominant place in the material world.

While consensus holds that the form and character of Shakespeare’s plays changed with the turn of the seventeenth century—the customary demarcation between “earlier” and “later” works—commentators pay little attention to either the characteristics or cause of the change. This study argues that the attempt to frame answers to the foregoing overarching questions suggests important contexts through which to appreciate what amounts to a mid-career metamorphosis—a distinctive “sea change” in his later work.

These later works reflect the depth and magnitude of the profound underlying cultural shift or reorientation in the once shared understanding the divine—of seeing reality. Notwithstanding its medieval scholastic roots, this reoriented understanding in the English religious experience—variously termed by recent Reformation historiography as a “watershed”

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⁶ Robert Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*. p. 3. Weaver derives the term “logical realism” from the Platonic notion of “forms,” further developed by Augustine and Aquinas as “ideas in the mind of God.”

⁷ Detailed discussions that compare *realist* and *nominalist* philosophical are various and include Louis Dupré, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture*, pp. 17-28; and Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Reweaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*, pp. 70-81.
matured to a point of no return during Shakespeare’s lifetime. This exigent moment in English cultural history forms an essential element for understanding Shakespeare’s purpose, however remote from the modern mind. The works the playwright provides invite his audiences to reflect upon how a once common understanding of the divine nature derived from scripture, classical philosophy, and early church tradition in place for centuries became subject to an entirely different conception of the workings of the world and God’s place within it. This study finds compelling purpose in the playwright’s later works as these plays both reflect the contention spawned by the English Reformation at the same time they proclaim the immanent place of the divine in human affairs.

As examples, I select four plays which span the second half of Shakespeare’s playwriting career—Hamlet (1600), King Lear (1605), Macbeth (1606), and an epilogue that covers The Tempest (1611)—that reveal a “sacramental vision” rooted in late medieval Christianity. In support thereof, this study examines the tectonic shifts in English religious culture and ideology as key avenues of critical inquiry into the continuing puzzle regarding Shakespeare’s personal religious loyalties and the location of Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics along the Reformation divide.

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8 An important historical and cultural distinction in terminology lies between the “sacramental” experience of the world in medieval Christendom and the common modern understanding of the terms “sacrament/sacramental,” which remain confined to special rituals, i.e., baptism, communion, and the range of the Catholic sacramental system wherein “God’s grace is present in a particular way, effecting a real transformation on those participating in it.” (Rod Dreher, The Benedict Option, pp. 23-24. See also Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, pp. 22-23; Hans Boersma, Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry, pp. 24-25.)
1.1 HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: *The Paradox of Experience*

_But look, the morn in russet mantle clad_
_Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill._
_The Tragedy of Hamlet 1.1.166-67)⁹_

The term “sacramental vision” as used herein refers to the medieval ontological understanding of the divine wherein everything in the material world derives meaning and value from its participation in the Creator.¹⁰ This pertains not only to created realities, but to the scriptural understanding of the events of history and to Time itself.¹¹ Shakespeare saturates his later plays with the late medieval world’s sacramental ontology where the world stands infused with God’s Being.

To appreciate the “sacramental vision,” in evidence throughout these and other of his later plays, one must first broaden the field of inquiry. The plays contend with a disputed conception of reality itself, i.e., the nature of the divine and how it is known. The long arc of this ontological clash originated, not as confessional difference as between Catholic and Protestant, but rather as the result of philosophical changes rooted in the scholastic debates of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Eventually, these changes in the conception of the divine, when adopted by Protestant reformers, did alter England’s inheritance of the early church understanding of the nature of God. Second, contrary to current bias, Shakespeare, the playwright, stands a great more theologically astute than customarily recognized.¹² For those in

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⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all cited quotations from Shakespeare’s plays follow _The Necessary Shakespeare_, edited by David Bevington.

¹⁰ Hans Boersma, _Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry_ (22-23).

¹¹ Ibid (39, 125-26). See also Augustine’s _Confessions_, Bk XI, Ch. 17-21.
his audience “with ears to hear,” the later works abundantly reveal a fundamental Biblical understanding of the nature of the divine and how it is known.

The ideological and aesthetic bases for Shakespeare’s bold countercultural response to which Eamon Duffy refers as “the Protestant repudiation of a sacramental understanding of the material world” stand conjoined upon the theological ground of the Old Faith and the aesthetic ground of indigenous religious drama, both of which Shakespeare integrates into his plays in form as well as substance. Helen Cooper, and Emrys Jones before her, contend that Shakespeare’s work “emerges from the deep structures of medieval culture” and thus appeals to “old habits of thought [that were] not so easily swept away” by the drive to reform the “embedded culture” of late medieval Christianity which yet remained during Shakespeare’s lifetime. For playgoers in this twilight period imbued with continuing vitality of habits of mind inherited from a culture then under siege, Shakespeare’s later works offer salutary response to the ongoing effort to forcefully reconfigure long-standing tenets of Christian piety and worship. However, it is important to note that these tenets, to the forceful reconfiguration of which Shakespeare responds, stand inevitably rooted in an understanding of the very nature of the

13 Duffy argues that the Protestant Reformation’s sharp distinction between the realms of matter and spirit and its hostility to scholasticism, ended more than a thousand years of Christianity as a framework for shared intellectual life in the Latin West. (Duffy, Divided, p. 4, Gregory, p. 95). See also, Holifield, Covenant Sealed: “Reformed sacramental doctrine thus rested on the supposition that matter and spirit were fundamentally antithetical, a conviction that rendered problematical any profound sacramental understanding of Christian religion” (2).

14 Helen Cooper, Shakespeare and the Medieval World, pp. 2-3; See also, Emrys Jones, The Origins of Shakespeare, p. 33. Jones cautiously describes Shakespeare’s medieval heritage as “his cultural hinterland, that mental world which was his natural inheritance” (5).
divine—of reality itself—not merely an attack on idols or customs or confessions, but rather on the existential basis of being.

Late medieval traditional religion inherited the Christianity of the church fathers who understood reality as that from which the material things of the created world derive meaning and sustenance from an ongoing, present participation in the Creator. From the secular modernity side of the cultural divide, commentators often refer to this sacramental ontology—this understanding of God’s immanent habitation in the created order—with either wonder or condescension, as the so-called “enchanted” world. However, as Andrew Greely defines the term, that which is sacramental reveals the invisible presence of God (6-7).

The “reformed” view shifts spiritual emphasis to the transcendent, non-material “word," and categorically rejects the notion that “corporeal elements and visible actions could convey spiritual life and grace.” The Old Faith’s sacramental view sees a created world saturated in immanent spiritual reality capable of apprehension through the senses in material form or

15 See discussions of Max Weber’s concept of “disenchantment” (Entzauberung) at Charles Taylor, pp. 19-21; 37-42; and Brad Gregory, p. 10; and, Carlos Eire, p. 751.
16 E. Brooks Holifield, The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, p.2. Holifield further opines that reformed sacramental doctrine’s “supposition that matter and spirit were fundamentally antithetical . . . rendered problematical any profound sacramental understanding of the Christian religion” which supposition stands encapsulated by the early radical Protestant counter-claim “finitum non capax infiniti” (“the finite cannot contain the infinite”), p. 2; accord, Eamon Duffy, Reformations Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England, p. 4. Margaret Aston’s England’s Iconoclasts: Laws against Images remains the most thorough and succinct chronicle of the contemporary debate among England’s post-Reformation theologians and ecclesiasts, both Anglican and Catholic, regarding divergent views of the extent to which the material can confer grace.
“image,” the paradigm of which is God’s incarnation in Christ. The term “sacramental ontology” or “vision,” as used herein, describes this unreformed way of seeing. Chapter Two (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured”) summarizes the foundational heritage of this way of seeing where the material things of Creation stand rooted in a participatory relationship with God’s Being, as understood and experienced in the analogical mind of many in Shakespeare’s audience.

The playwright’s “sacramental vision,” purposefully in evidence in his later works beginning with *Hamlet*, displays that pervious convergence where the natural world points to the supernatural. Selected scenes in the subject plays illustrate how the staged delivery of Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics echo the medieval notion that the material world stands as an on-going manifestation of God’s being, thus reinforcing the “belief that everything in the created world [is] interconnected, . . . infused with meanings for humans to interpret” (Cooper 20). As illustrated in the following chapters, the poetics thus employed serves as the vehicle by which to metaphorically collapse the distance between God and creation. In other words, by way of Shakespeare’s metaphorical integration of the natural and supernatural, the plays frame the action *sacramentally* so as to reveal the invisible presence of God.17

Shakespeare’s sacramental vision distinguishes his later works, beginning with the *Tragedy of Hamlet* and concluding a little over a decade later with his last solely authored work, *The Tempest*. The plays at issue, as they represent the body of work Shakespeare produced in the second half of his career uniquely stand as emblematic responses against a desacralizing English Christian culture, the climactic phase of which was the rapid consolidation of the English Reformation that ripened during Shakespeare’s career under the successive reigns of Elizabeth I

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17 *See* Greely, pp. 6-7; *See also* Taylor, p. 122 and Dreher, p. 24.
(1559-1603) and James I (1603-1629). Seen in light of the sacramental poetics analyzed herein, the plays stand as memorial testaments that speak not only to the suppression of the inherited Old Faith but to a general erosion of religious engagement altogether.

As illustrated in detail in Chapter Three, the often overlooked brief but eventful opening scene in *The Tragedy of Hamlet* frames the action sacramentally via the metaphorical (poetic) integration of the natural and supernatural, where the former points to the latter, and invites the audience to a hermeneutical act of witness that pervades the entire play. In like fashion, each of the later works discussed in this project unfolds material events which point to an immanent but unseen reality that informs and subsumes the material world. The dynamic staging and poetics of Shakespeare’s later plays work against the grain of increasingly secular divisions between the natural and supernatural, matter and spirit, and the mutable and eternal, so as to render these porous and permeable, and therefore to expose meanings accessible to those in Shakespeare’s audience with “ears to hear.”

1.2 MID-CAREER METAMORPHOSIS: *Meaning Behind the Mystery*

> Nothing of him that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.

*(The Tempest, 1.2.399-402)*

In the year 1600, at the mid-point of William Shakespeare’s 20-year playwriting career, at the moment he and the principals of his acting company became resident owners of the newly constructed Globe Theatre, the playwright abruptly altered the form and subject matter typical of his previous work. The theretofore successful fare of comedies and histories of which he was

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18 Matthew 11:15.
clearly master gave way to a deeper, darker, and very different menu of tragedies, dark comedies, and epic romances. While in many ways foreshadowed by earlier work, these new plays not only dramatically contrast with Shakespeare’s own previous work in form, content and dramatic style, but they also stand substantially different from the works that a new generation of professional playwrights began to produce for the lucrative public theatres.

For example, Russ McDonald states the conventional division between the roughly ten year phases of Shakespeare’s career, i.e., the first ten years feature primarily pastoral comedies and histories, the second ten, tragedies, “dark comedies,” and “romances” (80). Peter Alexander offers a similar phased delineation that surveys explanations for the “apparently sudden shift in Shakespeare’s interest” at the turn of the century. The shift commenced with the opening of the Globe Theatre in May 1599 and produced his great tragedies as one that reflected variously a “mood of gloom and misanthropy” or “disillusionment and pessimism” or perhaps “Shakespeare’s infection with the spirit of the new age” (xix). Some, including Stephen Greenblatt, identify personal circumstances, such as the death of his only son, the nine-year-old Hamnet in 1596 or the death of his father, John Shakespeare, in 1601; others identify the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and its retributive aftermath. James Shapiro concurs with the drastic change in repertoire, but suggests the impetus for the extraordinary depth and power of the works Shakespeare began to write in this phase of his career lies in artistic development and autonomy, indicated by his part ownership in the Globe as well as his rank as a “sharer.”

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19 After highlighting this fact in his 2007 book, 1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, James Shapiro describes at length the watershed year for Shakespeare and the realm, but otherwise leaves unnoted the contours of this remarkable dimension of Shakespeare’s playwriting career.
What motivated this “sea change” has never been adequately explained. Indeed, while commentators occasionally remark in passing on the significant reorientation in Shakespeare’s dramatic output, the contours of this remarkable dimension of Shakespeare’s professional career remain otherwise unnoted.

The above named selection of plays that span this second half of his career—Hamlet (1600), King Lear (1605), Macbeth (1606), and The Tempest (1611)—show the playwright’s purposeful appeal to his audience’s still viable sacramental perspective rooted in late medieval Christianity. My analysis of each play both reveals Shakespeare’s attitude toward a still viable, albeit fading, traditional religious culture and implicates a poetic resistance if not counterstatement to the ever more aggressively desacralized religious perspective rooted in the English Reformation. Elizabeth I’s longevity eroded hopes for yet another abrupt change in the monarchy accompanied by religious change similar to that which occurred under the short reigns that followed Henry VIII. Edward VI’s reign (1547-1553), albeit under a Regency Council first led by Edward Seymour, First Duke of Somerset, then by John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, ushered in a radical Protestant reframing of liturgy, confiscation of parish Church personal property, along with a program of destruction of Roman Catholic material culture that exceeded that of the Byzantine Iconoclasm of 726-789 and 814-842. At Edward’s death in 1553, Mary Tudor restored Roman Catholicism as the religion of the realm and reinstalled the exiled episcopacy until her death in 1558. Upon her sister’s death, Elizabeth I commenced her eventful 45-year reign as Queen of England with a determined effort to keep religious contention at bay by crafting a via media between the influential elite of radical reformers and the majority of English people who remained to some degree loyal to the traditional religion. In the few short years beginning with the 1590s, the seemingly intractable
consolidation of Protestant authority through the Church of England overwhelmed the hope of return to the Old Faith traditions. 20

The strength of the majority population’s loyalty to the Roman Church through its persistent effort to sustain the traditional provincial culture within which Shakespeare was nurtured, educated, and grew to adulthood, began to weaken to the point of existential jeopardy. Eamon Duffy cites to a moment near the end of John Webster’s play *The Duchess of Malfi* that illustrates the Protestant narrative which celebrates church reform as new life, a superior present that must supersede a moribund past.21

Antonio: I do love these ancient ruins:

... .

But all things have their end:

Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men

Must have like death that we have. (5.3. 9, 17-19)

By end of the 1590s, it became increasingly clear to Shakespeare and his audience that there would be no institutional pendulum swing to restore the Old Faith. What remained for the

20 *Shakespeare and the Old Faith* (1946); Duffy, *Stripping*, pp. xv-xvi.

21 See, Eamon Duffy, *Saints, Sacrilege & Sedition*, pp. 234-35. Note that at least two other major Reformation historians cite to the same passage, C. John Somerville, in his *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith*, p. 26; and, Margaret Aston, “English and English History: The Dissolution of the Sense of the Past,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* v. 36, 1973, pp. 231-255, 233. They both see the *Duchess* passage similarly as either a “contemplation of mutability” (Aston 233) or “sense of historical consciousness . . . a break with the past” (Somerville 26) and seem to gloss over the harsh claims of the “supersessionist” Protestant model of a religion that is no longer viable, notwithstanding the concerted effort to smother a viable and long-lived religious culture, as Duffy emphasizes.
Elizabethan public theatre’s unique and gifted playwright was to stir the cultural memory that could still see the hidden fabric of immanent spiritual reality from a lost world.

1.3 CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The plays explored in this study invite the spectator into sacramental worlds that parallel, inform, and interact with the visible world of nature as enacted on stage, all ultimately controlled and guided by unseen divine providence where at the end of a given dramatic narrative, God puts everything right, Creation is restored, the project is completed, and life goes forward with a wary sense of restoration and renewal. The plays elicit the understanding of ultimate reality that, through the murderous rampages of a Macbeth, or the vexed resolutions of a Hamlet or a Lear, however incomplete or unsatisfied in earthly terms, one learns to await the truly “promised end.”

Chapter One, “Review of Criticism,” briefly surveys the history of various influential approaches that speculate on Shakespeare’s religious orientation and offers pertinent interdisciplinary studies that bear directly on the religious change experienced by the audience for whom Shakespeare wrote. Beginning immediately after his death in 1616, Shakespeare’s confessional loyalty has remained a subject of persistent interest, perennially invigorated by new perspectives on accumulated evidence. These include fresh inferences drawn from the variegated combination of spectral biographical references and contemporaneous official records, critical trends that increasingly integrate the burgeoning public theatre business with then current politics and personalities, and the host of apparent clues creative commentators find in the plays—all of which help fuel continued speculation regarding an issue that most agree will

22 The Tragedy of King Lear, 5.3.265.
remain unresolvable. However, I confine the focused survey herein to three main avenues of critical inquiry. First, Shakespeare’s religious orientation, vel non, variously perceived by succeeding generations, reveals a useful genealogy of inherited criticism that explains how the received thought and biases of today came to be. Second, recent interdisciplinary Reformation historiography helps place Shakespeare’s later works within a much larger and more compelling cultural context than previously credited. English culture during Shakespeare’s life-time stood at a cross-roads of religious [philosophical, theological,] and political change of a magnitude deserving of such terms as “watershed” and “paradigm shift.” Third, a related aspect the contextual forces that shaped the playwright’s testimony in these later works, concerns his response to the unanticipated consequence of the English Reformation, namely, the rising tide of secularity. Thus, the relatively new field of contemporary “secular studies” in literature provides useful perspective to the matter near its inception.

Chapter Two, “Religion and Reality Reconfigured,” summarizes the ideological basis for the late medieval sacramental understanding of the material world and the Protestant repudiation thereof, with the resulting program of “desacralization” which expunged the material culture of the Old Faith. What began as a jurisdictional matter between Henry VIII and the Roman Church, with the dissolution of the monasteries and seizure of church lands, ultimately became massive iconoclasm and direct attack on a unified structure for understanding reality, specifically God’s relationship to Creation. This chapter briefly traces the displacement of the foundational heritage of a participatory relationship with God’s Being as manifest in the material things of Creation and attempts to summarize the conceptually complex, but highly consequential strains of thought that form the ontological basis of this tectonic shift from the foundational concept of
realism to nominalism which change, over time, affected the common understanding of human purpose, the nature of the divine, and the role of institutional religion itself.

In Chapter Three, “Hamlet at the Crossroads,” worldviews collide in the in parable form as Hamlet, the ‘disinherited son,’ contends with his uncle’s assumption of his deceased father’s throne, marriage to the widowed queen, and consolidation of secular court authority all of which appear salubrious and proper for the common good in a moment of succession crisis. The familial usurpation of Hamlet’s birthright and the violence of his uncle’s secret dispatch of Old King Hamlet and the head-to-head contention between conceptions of reality, between the real and the nominal, present in microcosm the contending elements in the religious politics of Elizabethan England. The parable presented resolves through Hamlet’s resistance and struggle for justice, in a message of new found humility and persistent hope for fulfilment of the providential purpose.

Chapter Four, “King Lear and Macbeth,” profiles the altered political landscape with the passing of Elizabeth and advent of James I and discusses how new circumstances affect the playwright and his company. Part One: “A Voice from the Whirlwind: the Afflicted Realm of King Lear,” discusses how Lear and Gloucester, through their respective existential ordeals, both hounded by their antagonists’ cruelty, while yet aided by the love and mercy supplied by providentially supplied benefactors, become at last truly alive so as to touch that which lies beyond the power of death. Each protagonist confronts his impetuous pride: Lear denies his one loyal daughter, then purports to command the elements, but only reaps the whirlwind; the deceived Gloucester improvidently denies his one loyal son. Finally, broken to the painful truth, each casts aside their spiritual blindness. The play moves from an apocalyptic to a prophetic
vision by the redemptive elements of human bonding, familial love, and the suffering through which the foolish become wise.

Part Two, in contrast to Lear’s epic sweep that works ultimately against the grain of dark tragedy, “Macbeth: Casualties of Spiritual Warfare—The Devil’s Foothold in the Human Heart” chronicles the narrow road to damnation. The play commences with earthly rebellion, in which its soon-to-be demonic protagonist prevails, but soon reveals the insidious spiritual battle in the protagonist’s mind that finally disjoints the realm and renders the usurper Macbeth little more than a soulless, sleepless, remorseless casualty of spiritual defeat.

Finally, this study concludes with an Epilogue, “Creation, Redemption, and Re-Creation,” that relates the foregoing analyses to Shakespeare’s last solely authored play, *The Tempest*. Long seen as a culminating work, the play contains a persistent theme of apocalypsis in the sense of unveiling, of bringing into the light that which has been hidden, as well as a grand vision of the path to salvation. In an imagined Edenic island world, the attributes of humility, forgiveness, and compassion infuse the characters during an orchestrated ordeal which burns off pride and invites redemption, transformation, and renewal that fulfill the ultimate promise of participation in a new heaven and a new earth. The play creates a new world and “ends with an invocation of the Last Judgment” which must be rendered by the spectators (Cooper 195). Working providentially through Prospero’s exile and privation from his former station in life, God ultimately purposes to bless, not curse, Prospero along with his family, as God’s very instrument of justice in action.
2 REVIEW OF CRITICISM

Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest
Lend less than thou owest,
Ride more than thou goest,
Learn more than thou trowest,
Set less than thou throwest;
Leave thy drink and thy whore,
And keep in-a-door,
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score.

The Tragedy of King Lear, 1.4.118—127

While impossible to adequately review the volume of literature on the subject, this survey will highlight representative works from major critical approaches both past and current. Two principal factors sustain the long history of popular interest in Shakespeare’s religious affinities. First, the plays contain a unique abundance of significant religious elements—including ecclesiastical characters, Christian themes, echoes of Catholic ritual and practice, numerous biblical analogues, and scriptural allusion—all of which suggest the playwright’s interest if not commitment to religion at some level. Although, with a few notable exceptions discussed below, current consensus holds that interpretations of the verbal artifacts found in the plays neither reliably nor consistently reflect a discernable confessional bias. Second, the long and virulent history of official British anti-Catholicism, dating back to the reign of Henry VIII and continuing well into the 19th century, has prompted steady reinforcement of Shakespeare’s cultural identity as an appropriately patriotic Anglican. Yet, notwithstanding the mandatory, albeit unevenly enforced, parish church attendance, virtually no evidence survives of Shakespeare’s association with any church parish. Indeed, while duly licensed to marry by the Worcester Bishop’s Court, the exact parish church where the ceremony took place in 1582 remains unknown. He likely attended his brother’s funeral at Southwark’s St. Savior’s Church in December of 1607, and lies
buried at Stratford’s Trinity Church as of April of 1616. In context of the few formal intersections with the established church it is worth noting that Shakespeare’s Last Will and Testament is a consistently Anglican document.23

However, two additional factors have recently amplified and deepened the search for Shakespeare’s religious sympathies, beginning with a wider sweep of biographical facts construed from extended family lineage supplemented by evidence of confessional affiliations of friends, associates, tutors, critics, and other identifiable associates, whether documented, rumored, or inferred, along with analogies drawn from contemporaneous witnesses to the professional life of Shakespeare’s own acting company and its competitors.24 The other lies with a significant revision of received English Reformation history which, among other things, recalculates the timing of England’s “religious change” from majority Roman Catholic to majority Protestant.25 The grudging, even belated, discovery that the timing of such climactic

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religious change substantially coincides with Shakespeare’s origins as a poet and dramatic artist inevitably generates substantial attention, not to mention speculation, as to the pervasive impact of the English Reformation in direct relation to Shakespeare’s life and work.

As recent historians have virtually re-written the received intellectual history of the English Reformation, current literary commentary has begun to correlate more closely both the plays and the playwright with the contemporary cultural context. The reappraised historical narrative discards the artificially well-defined, if not altogether orderly, English transition from Roman Catholic-to-Protestant in favor of a religious change that for decades remained ambiguous and fluid as well as uneven and local, not to mention difficult and occasionally violent. However, the timing and methodology at work in effecting such change bears decisive, yet easily overlooked, factors in shaping the testimony of these later works. Historian Eamon Duffy draws attention to the impact of a stunning reversal. How was it, he asks, that in a remarkably brief period, an indigenous religion, practiced peacefully for close to a millennium

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27 Continuing inquiry offers ongoing ever more granular, but subjective, subtlety. For example Kristen Poole (SQ 83 (2020) 102-106) offers one set of significant contrasts in recent criticism as between “ambiguity” [e.g., James D. Mardock, “Intro.,” *Stages of Engagement* (2014)] and “ambivalence” [e.g., Peter Iver Kaufman *Religion Around Shakespeare* (2014)].
was made to appear alien to the culture? The contours of trauma and response to the Reformation shift that profoundly disrupted and forcefully dismantled an English Christian faith culture that had flourished undisturbed for nearly a millennium have only recently come into view.

Nonetheless, others, including Patrick Collinson, take a position beyond the hard edges of the “bottom up” or “top down” debate by pointing to outward manifestations of acquiescence to, if not outright acceptance of, religious change. In other words, while acknowledging the material machinations of the royal prerogative in promulgating religious change, Collinson draws upon the “bottom up” factor to reinforce an answer to Eamon Duffy’s nagging question of how the ingrained elements of a long established structure had been reformed in a relatively short time. Collinson suggests that a form of populist inevitability must of needs be at work.

However, abundant documentation suggests that a great deal of the seeming popular acceptance of the “religious change” resulted from a variety of coercive efforts on the part of the monarchy.

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28 Eamon Duffy’s extensive scholarship, beginning with *Stripping of the Altars*, Yale UP (1992), documents the drastic, and somewhat baffling, cultural transformation wrought by the Reformation in England. His reflection in *Reformation Divided: Catholics, Protestants and the Conversion of England*, Bloomsbury (2017), is typical: “it does seem to me that Protestantism in Late Elizabethan and Jacobean England must be judged, by any rational standards, a runaway success. I am struck by the extent to which, within two generations, England’s Catholic past was obliterated . . . .” (379).

from the wholesale confiscations and destruction of the material culture under Edward VI through the Elizabeth’s subtler parish level catechistic programs.\textsuperscript{30}

On the literary side, vigorous scholarship continues to engage Shakespeare studies within the broadening perspective of a more clearly understood history of the English Reformation. No longer the isolated artist or solitary genius, Shakespeare stands fully invested in the religious, social, political, and cultural forces that roiled Elizabethan/Jacobean London during his career. Yet, at the same time, current studies often avoid the aforementioned underlying shift in the very meaning of religion itself, in which Reformation theology moved traditional Christianity from “religious culture to religious faith.”\textsuperscript{31} Once a matter of lived “culture” experienced through shared ways of living and thinking, including ritual practices that provide ongoing access to the supernatural, religion in the age of the English Reformation gradually became a matter of

\textsuperscript{30} For a comprehensive survey of how the monarchy worked its will at the parish level, see Margaret Aston, \textit{England’s Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images} (1988), especially “Idols of the Mind” (452-60); Alexandra Walsham, \textit{Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity, and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England} (1993) for documentation of financial penalties and forfeitures imposed upon non-attending Catholics resulting in “grudging conformity, not “rapid conversion” (7); and Eamon Duffy, \textit{The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-1580}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (1992).

\textsuperscript{31} C. John Sommerville, \textit{The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith}. (1992) (9); \textit{accord}, Keith Thomas, \textit{Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England} (1971). Both of these English cultural historians agree that religion as a belief rather than a practice stands alien to the popular Catholicism of the Middle Ages—“a medieval peasant’s knowledge of Biblical history or Church doctrine was . . . usually extremely slight” (Thomas 76).
confessional “choice” adopted by “faith,” that is, by belief in and confessional assent to, doctrine.\textsuperscript{32}

The preponderance of current Shakespeare studies in the Reformation context instead takes to heart the contemporary utterance of John Croke, Speaker of the House of Commons, in 1601, to wit: “If a question should be asked, What is the first and chief thing in a Commonwealth to be regarded? I should say religion. If, What is the second? I should say, religion. If, What the third? I should still say religion.”\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, while the significance of “religion” in Shakespeare’s London, with its many competing confessions\textsuperscript{34} and continuing intrigues related to both covert and overt Catholic resistance, the designation carries but nominal significance.\textsuperscript{35} The generous use of the mere term “religion” in Shakespeare’s time, as reflected in the foregoing quotation, without due regard for the aforementioned ontological “shift,” must inevitably be understood in a political sense of material order and royal power. The “religion” to which John Croke refers, is not that which Shakespeare evokes in his plays.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. p. 9.

\textsuperscript{33} Quoted in David Scott Kastan, Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion (2014), 3.


\textsuperscript{35} Alexandra Walsham, Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England (1993); Antonia Fraser, Faith and Treason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot, 1996.
Such “revisionist” Reformation history, as produced in the last two decades,\(^{36}\) not only reveals the period of Shakespeare’s lifetime as a “crucible of religious change”\(^{37}\) in Reformation England but discovers a playwright much more astutely engaged in the operation and effects of that change than previously supposed. Ironically, as the religious change that affected the audiences for whom Shakespeare wrote becomes better understood, commentators have not only become less willing to derive personal religious loyalty of any kind from the plays, but have redoubled the fond, but ultimately anachronistic, notion that Shakespeare stands as an inspired prophet of secular modernity.\(^{38}\) In any case Harold Bloom, along with George Santayana and Anthony David Nuttall, dismiss the effort to interpret Shakespeare through the lens of

\(^{36}\) Peter Marshal’s definition of this now common reference to “revisionist v. post revisionist” is typical:

“Revisionist” refers to the historiographical revision from the “Whig” version of a popularly received English Reformation to a “top-down” effort by the monarchy and its established Church of England to crush a vibrant, resistant, but ultimately vanquished, Catholic piety. “Post-revisionism” recrafts the narrative to provide for a surviving Catholic sensibility through either cloaked practice or nostalgia, which remained a significant, albeit underground, presence. “Choosing Sides and Talking Religion in Shakespeare’s England.” *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, edited by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore. pp. 40-55.

\(^{37}\) Joseph Pearce credits G.K Chesterton for inspiring his use of the “crucible” metaphor which I find apt in light of the extent of the profound coercion on a way of life, thought, and worship effected by the institutional authorities, beginning with Henry VIII’s Act of Supremacy in 1534. *Quest for Shakespeare*. p. 21.

contemporary history insofar as it serves to create distracting anecdotal parallels to the poetry at hand in the plays for which no such supplementation is necessary.\textsuperscript{39}

While it is tempting to credit the influential “New Historicism” of the 1980s for the newly energized discussion of intersection of Shakespeare and religion, the preponderance of New Historical criticism remained largely aloof, preferring instead a materialist approach to literature as cultural expression and often viewing the past through the lens of the present.\textsuperscript{40} However, to be fair, the New Historicist approach deserves credit for its role in bringing Shakespeare studies more securely within his historical milieu, as described in Hamlet’s advice the players “the very age and body of the time [with its] form and pressure” (3.2.23).\textsuperscript{41} Claire McEachern critiques New Historicism’s treatment of religion as “an ideological mask for

\textsuperscript{39} Deconstructive perspectives suggested by Richard Levin (“The Relation of External Evidence to the Allegorical and Thematic Interpretation of Shakespeare.” Shakespeare Studies (1980), pp. 1-30), Anthony Nuttall (Shakespeare the Thinker); and Harold Bloom (Invention of the Human) hold that the plays’ ironies merely illustrate that human existence lacks any organizing principle other than coincidence.


\textsuperscript{41} Hamlet 3.2.23; Jackson and Marotti point out that a now preferred identifier for “New Historicism” is “cultural studies” that tends to emphasize political, social and economic factors in literary analysis. Significantly, what New Historicists offer as an “interdisciplinary” approach appears to subordinate religion as a “cultural” determinate in the surrounding ideology of the early modern period in favor of familiar modern social and political philosophies (Marxist, Feminist, Queer Theory, and the like) which, by definition, derive from a secularity unknown in early modern England. Ibid., pp. 167-68.
realpolitik . . . [which stands] merely among . . . [the] culture’s containment mechanisms.” For the New Historicists, Shakespeare’s theatre is emphatically secular, the religious characters, scriptural allusions, and the like, merely grace notes to the production of mass entertainment. Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti’s ground-breaking 2004 article “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies” points to Jeffrey Knapp’s Shakespeare’s Tribe to illustrate how, despite the burgeoning critical interest in how Christian ideals shaped Shakespeare’s plays, such attention often rests in an overt secularity freighted with “social, economic, and political language [that] involves religion only as a political model for social harmony” that leaves little room for “any transcendent desires, any personal relationship with God, any mysticism” (168, 173). This incisive observation reflects the growing twenty first century critical awareness that of the significance of non-material dimension in Shakespeare’s works.

The aforementioned Jackson and Marotti journal article documents an initial stage (now often referred to as the so-called “first wave”) in the recognition of traditional historical religion as an aesthetic, if not ontological, experience that structured meaning and identity in early modern culture. Some suggest the “first wave” commenced with Stephen Greenblatt’s Hamlet

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45 Ibid., 169. See also, John D. Cox who continues to identify leading scholarship with his review essay, “Was Shakespeare a Christian, and If So, What Kind of a Christian Was He?” Christianity and Literature. 55 (2006) 539-
in Purgatory (2001). Others, including Jackson and Marotti, acknowledge predecessor pioneering work by Debra Shuger some ten years earlier who “more than anyone else, has forced professionals in the field to take seriously religious beliefs, ideas, and history” beginning with her 1990 study, Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion Politics, and the Dominant Culture.\textsuperscript{47}

In any case, the first wave witnessed a resurgence of recognizing Shakespeare’s identity with Catholicism and the growing awareness of a continuing stubborn vitality of what Eamon Duffy describes as the “traditional faith.”\textsuperscript{48} John D. Cox avers that Alison Shell’s Shakespeare

\textsuperscript{46} Mardock, “Introduction” 7. Despite Greenblatt’s detailed display of the thought and iconography that accompanied the fraught Catholic-to-Protestant transition, his approach in Hamlet in Purgatory assumes a settled religious climate that has relocated the “evacuated” substance of Catholic ritual to a substitutionary form of shadow play of the theatre, without regard to any appeal to surviving ontological habits of thought in his audience. Notwithstanding its concentration on the conundrum of religious change, Purgatory elaborates on an earlier theme in his Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England (1988). That is, the Elizabethan theatre served as an instrument of materialization and demystification.

\textsuperscript{47} Jackson and Marotti, 167. Subsequent examples of Shuger’s prodigious work in the field include Sacred Rhetoric: the Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance (1988); Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England; the Sacred the State in Measure for Measure (2001).

\textsuperscript{48} Duffy adopts the term “traditional religion” which both avoids the anachronism of identifying the Roman Christianity which the Reform movement sought to supplant as “Catholic” and emphasizes the venerable and undisturbed tradition of English worship dating from the sixth Century. Eamon Duffy, Stripping of the Altars (3).
and Religion (2010) “effectively marked the end” of this first wave of the religious turn in that it reflects Shell’s “declining enthusiasm for the Catholic Shakespeare” for which she had advocated in her earlier studies.49

By contrast, the “second wave” shifts from the attempt to construe the faith commitment of the playwright to the question of whether and to what extent the religious politics and culture of Reformation England influenced the content of Shakespeare’s plays.50 The resulting new perspectives on the timing, depth, and magnitude of England’s “religious change” demand fresh answers. Both “waves” make common cause between them and with this study insofar as each seeks to understand of Shakespeare’s works as artifacts that testify both to the intrinsic mind and motivations of the playwright as well as to Shakespeare’s extrinsic response to the shifting world view of his age wrought by the English Reformation.

From Context to “Frame of Reference.”

Yet, while the current scholarly efforts to unearth the mystery of Shakespeare’s religious loyalties lay claim to an ever more authentic context, the offered contextual elements too often imply a stability in the social and religious environment which the “revisionist,” and now “post-

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But see, John D. Cox’s variation of “traditional faith” in his article “Was Shakespeare a Christian?” (559, n. 1), which I decline to follow in that the variation, however unintended, is quite significant and potentially misleading given the this study’s approach to religious change as reflected in the title of John D. Sommerville’s magisterial study The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith (1992).

49 Cox, Afterword (264); See Shell’s earlier studies that saw a more robust Catholicism in Shakespeare particularly with Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660 (1999).

revisionist,” historiographers, demonstrate remains unstable, ambiguous, and therefore more of an impediment to the continuous reach for evermore comprehensive insight. I suggest “frame of reference” as the better, and more accurate, not to mention modest, term for the universe of constituent influences that bear upon Shakespeare’s mind and work, which importantly includes not only Shakespeare’s contemporary culture, but also the inherited distant past. As the following discussion reflects, current commentary remains influenced by present-day cultural biases, which impede an understanding of the frame of reference that reveals how the mind of the playwright, manifest most profoundly in the later plays, responds to the desacralization of early modern English life and culture. Nevertheless, the effort to “pluck the heart out of [the] mystery” remains obscured by three principal impediments.

The first of these impediments that obfuscate the understanding of that frame of reference lies with variations of binary confessional readings that either too often strive to locate Shakespeare somewhere along the Protestant - Catholic Reformation divide, or conversely, apply

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51 Pace Craig Bernthal, whose Trial of Man asserts that “Christianity is the single most powerful and pervasive frame of reference for the English of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Bible was the central piece of cultural equipment for making sense of the world . . .” (xv). My use of the term also contemplates the bitter contention over both interpretation and verity. The Holy Bible’s prominence as a bone of contention hampered its use as a preeminent source by which to frame a common understanding of the divine.

52 Hamlet 3.2.357.

53 I adapt Brad Gregory’s concept of “barriers” to a proper understanding Reformation history, of which he identifies two: 1) the customary divisions of academic labor prevent useful interdisciplinary approaches and 2) biases against the inheritance of the past, or “supersessionism.” In Gregory’s view, both of these serve to obscure a “genealogical” perspective that views the past as a series of contingent events, in favor of a “teleological” or goal oriented progression which tends to deny survival of an embedded past in the present.
a secular bias against any hint of the transcendent. This manifests in readings of the plays that reveal Shakespeare as either Protestant or Catholic or merely an artful purveyor of a hybrid amalgam of Christian commonplaces that reflect his nimble embrace of Renaissance humanism toward what James D. Mardock refers to as the secular “repurposing of the religious dramatic tradition.” Others, among the contributors to *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, see Shakespeare’s theatre more purposefully engaged with “religious controversy” as either an “agent of Protestant reform” or “coded site of Catholic resistance” or as simply “an essentially secular institution” providing an “oasis in the midst of religious strife” voicing a common Christian culture.

The second impediment to an adequate understanding of a frame of reference for the later works lies in the *bias against the past*—the failure to integrate late medieval-early Tudor drama in favor of a secular Elizabethan public theatre that purportedly shed virtually overnight almost two centuries of performance conventions and audience habits of mind. This manifests in two related ways: a) the willingness to deny the inheritance of late medieval indigenous religious drama, and b) neglect of cultural influence of the “traditional religion”—the sacramental vision

54 Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti in their groundbreaking article, “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern Studies” critique the presentist shortcomings of much of the voluminous recent literature on Shakespeare and religion on the grounds that it comes freighted with “social, economic, and political language” that leaves little room for “any transcendent desires, any personal relationship with God, any mysticism” (*Criticism* 46 (2004) 167-190; 167, 173).


embedded in English Christianity to which Shakespeare’s later work is heir. The artificial division between the late medieval culture and the desacralized early modern world inherently discards the sacramental view of reality with its roots in scholastic theology and ushers in an encroaching ontology that alters the nature of God and God’s relationship with the natural world.

The third impediment lies with what Gregory calls the “customary division of labor” among academicians that results in the artificial isolation of the disciplines. For the purposes of this study these would include early modern literature, drama, history, theology, and philosophy, each of which tend to pull in their respective directions with little of the integration or synergy that such interdisciplinary approach could logically offer to integrate the materials at hand into a single coherent frame of reference. Except for claimants that identify a clear either Catholic or Protestant bias or outright confessional commitment, all three of the foregoing impediments support a form of “secularization thesis” which, as this study of Shakespeare’s later works bear witness, must stand anachronistic.

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57 As used in this study, Duffy’s term “traditional religion” is synonymous with “Old Faith.”

58 See Gregory, “Secularizing Knowledge.” The Unintended Reformation (300-303) for discussion of the secularizing barriers to integration of knowledge fostered by the intractable academic divisions of labor. The word “interdisciplinary” can be slippery and at odds with the purpose of unearthing the religious significance in Shakespeare as witness the announced purposes of the Group for Early Modern Cultural Studies quoted in Jackson and Marotti’s “Turn to Religion” that proclaims the “need for an interdisciplinary organization [to explore “issues such as race, class, gender, the body, sexuality, science, nationalism and imperialism” in addition to “a variety of disciplinary fields and theoretical approaches” none of which, as Jackson and Marotti point out includes “religion” (166-67).

59 The “secularization thesis” as discussed below (at n. 91) originates with the work of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Karl Marx who postulated variously that religion inevitably declined with the rise of modernity. While current
This study’s interdisciplinary approach to the compelling frame of reference to which these timeless works attest shifts the artificial binary of the first named impediment and expands the narrow boundary of the second, so as to arrive at the inherited sacramental poetics wherein all creation points to the Creator. With respect to the third named impediment, without preference or regard for one or another isolated academic subdivision, one may see meaning and purpose in the plays which, through Shakespeare’s “sacramental vision,” lay hidden in plain sight.

2.1 CONFESSIONAL READINGS

2.1.1 Shakespeare’s Christianity.

Critical interest in Shakespeare’s religious orientation commenced in earnest only with the beginning of the 20th century. According to Roy W. Battenhouse, Henry Sebastian Bowden’s The Religion of Shakespeare (1899) stands as the first serious commentary on the subject. Early examples also include, John Henry de Groot’s The Shakespeares and “The Old

philosophers, such as Charles Taylor (A Secular Age) provide important caveats to the notion, the consensus holds that the seedbed of secularization in the west lies in the models of “paradigm shift” (Eire, Reformations) or “watershed” (Gregory, Unintended Reformation) variously applied to the respective historical analyses of the Reformation era.


Roy W. Battenhouse, “Introduction.” Shakespeare’s Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary (1994) 2, 4-5. Several studies on Shakespeare’s use of Biblical allusion in his plays predated Bowden’s afore mentioned commentary, beginning with Bishop Charles Wordsworth’s Shakespeare’s knowledge and Use of the Bible (1864); See also Thomas Carter, Shakespeare and Holy Scripture: With the Version He Used (1905).
Faith” (1946) and Heinrich Mutschmann and Karl Wentersdorf’s Shakespeare and Catholicism (1955). These provocative studies grounded Shakespeare in the Old Faith and helped initiate a more general interest Shakespeare’s religion. Later 20th century commentators divide along confessional lines between Shakespeare as either loyal Church of England Protestant or agnostic, on the one hand, and the growing insistence that the plays reflect the Old Faith Catholicism of Shakespeare’s youth, on the other. Battenhouse himself emphasized the plays’ more classical Christian inheritance as both author of Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Christian Premises (1964), a magisterial treatise that emphasizes the high tragedies, and as editor of Shakespeare’s Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary (1994), a wide ranging collection of essays which firmly situates the plays from a Christian perspective. The former remains a classic, if challenged, in its scholarly exploration of how the Gospels, Pauline theology, together with the writings of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, coalesce to form a theory of Christian tragedy. The latter compiles essays from no less than ninety-four scholars ranging from G. Wilson Knight and Lily B. Campbell from 1930s to Peggy Muñoz Simonds from the 1990s, excerpted from the authors’ major treatises that explore Shakespeare’s “Christian dimension” that serve as enduring commentary on the subject.62 Others, such as Roland M. Frye, dispute the substantive importance of such Christian dimension in Shakespeare, insisting that theological analyses of the plays amount to nothing less than “blatant abuses of criticism,” the Christian doctrine therein being non-essential to the artistic merit of

Shakespeare’s art. Just as Battenhouse and others amply debate the case for and against Shakespeare’s commitment to the tenets of a broad-based Christianity, so did the more confessionalized debate sharpen as to which side of the Reformation divide Shakespeare stood as between Protestant or Catholic.

2.1.2 Catholic Shakespeare.

Following the aforementioned efforts of John Henry deGroot, and Mutschmann and Wentersdorf, Shakespeare’s putative Catholicism gathered momentum in the late twentieth century articulated by a host of literary commentators led by such formidable Catholic scholars as Peter Millward, S.J., *Shakespeare’s Religious Background* (1973), and David N. Beauregard, O.M.V., *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare’s Plays* (2008), who vigorously argue, based on considered evidence drawn from the plays that Shakespeare remained loyal to his Catholic faith. Others, such as Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion, and Resistance* (2004), go further to contend that the plays form a coded message of solidarity and hope to loyal Roman Catholics.

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63 Roland M. Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (1963). Frye insists that “not a thread of religious polemic can be found anywhere in Shakespeare’s plays, concluding that “the mirror Shakespearean drama was held up to nature, and not to saving grace” (120-21 and n. 21).

64 See also two recent studies by Joseph Pearce—*The Quest for Shakespeare* (2008) and *Through Shakespeare’s Eyes: Seeing the Catholic Presence in the Plays* (2010). See also Clare Asquith, *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* (2005). The so-called “code cracking” interpretations of Shakespeare’s purported Catholicism as displayed in the plays, which “cued” Catholics into Shakespeare’s sympathies, stand expressly disputed by recent commentary such as Peter Iver Kaufman’s *Religion Around Shakespeare*, discussed below.
In addition to the several studies that generally mine the plays for hints of Catholic doctrine and practice, commentators rely on developing inferences drawn from known biographical facts of Shakespeare’s Warwickshire youth, kinship, and associations to strengthen the circumstantial approach to the confessional conundrum as between Protestant and Catholic, so as to promote Shakespeare, if not a practicing Catholic, than one imbued with deeply ingrained Catholic sympathies. The ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, sympathies the plays reflect stand counter-balanced by substantial evidence of Shakespeare’s upbringing and family ties, which can fairly be inferred to support loyalty to the traditional Roman Catholic faith. Michael Wood’s *Shakespeare* (2003) offers thoughtful linkages between Midlands culture and Shakespeare’s mature works, Bart Van Es’s *Shakespeare in Company* (2013) provides a recent addition to the “nuanced” division between Shakespeare’s Catholic youth in Stratford and a more agnostic maturity as a London playwright, as does Stanley Wells’s edited collection of essays, *Shakespeare’s Circle* (2015) and Jean Christoph Mayer’s *Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith: History, Religion and the Stage* (2006). Robert Miola, in his *Early Modern Catholicism: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, succinctly summarizes the categories of accumulated evidence for both the formative Catholicism in Shakespeare’s life as well as the continuing vitality of that background as reflected in selected passages from the plays. While Miola modestly avers that “there is no conclusive evidence for Shakespeare’s own religious convictions,” the Shakespeare-Arden

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65 For the authoritative Shakespeare biography, as best can be documented, see Park Honan’s *Shakespeare: A Life* (1998), together with Samuel Schoenbaum’s *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975). E.A.J. Honigmen offers an intriguing, albeit speculative, account of a key segment of Shakespeare’s formative years as a dramatist, partly in the substantial home of the Lancashire recusant Alexander Houghton in his *Shakespeare: the ‘lost years’* (1998).

family Stratford ties to known infamous recusants, his Catholic grammar school teachers, early patrons from Catholic families, and sympathetic manifestations in the plays that include Catholic characters, doctrines and practices, not to mention “an emphasis, particularly in the late plays, on penance, miracles, shrines, ceremonies and theophany,” all afford significant weight to the claim (353).

The “slow pace of the English Reformation,” combined with the known fact that Shakespeare did not relocate to London until his late twenties further suggest that his religious perspective had been well established in the provincial Midland strong-holds of Warwickshire and possibly Lancashire (Beauregard, *Catholic Theology* 22). Interestingly, Gary Taylor, in his influential 1994 article “Forms of Opposition” bases his case for Shakespeare’s Catholic loyalty on the certain evidence of same via Shakespeare’s Catholic upbringing on the one hand and the purposeful absence of such evidence in the plays, on the other (297-98). Notwithstanding the welter of biographical speculation, pieced together by circumstance and inference, and odd strains of Catholic theology and practice uttered or enacted by Shakespeare’s characters, little “Catholic Shakespeare” commentary addresses the question of what influence Shakespeare’s purported Old Faith loyalty exerts on the thematic content of the plays.

2.2 Protestant Shakespeare.

In response, others point to numerous examples of the plays’ Protestant themes to support the time-honored claim that England’s national poet remained safely within the ambit of the Church of England. These include essays by Jennifer Rust, “Wittenburg and its Melancholic

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67 The persistent claim of a sojourn the Catholic Lancashire household of Alexander Hoghton as reported by Park Honan in *Shakespeare: A Life* (60-82), and as reconstructed in detail by E.A.J. Honigman’s volume devoted to the subject, *Shakespeare: The Lost Years* (1998).
Allegory: The Reformation and Its Discontents in *Hamlet,*” and R. Chris Hassel, Jr.’s “The Accent and Gait of Christians: Hamlet’s Puritan Style.” As cited above, Roland M. Frye’s *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (1973) directly responds to those that proffer any serious Christian content whatsoever, whether it be symbolic, analogical, or allusive, admitting to only a generalized established Protestant view contained in the plays. Protestant advocates also include Alan Sinfield, who in his *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660* (1983), follows the Patrick Collinson line of “populist inevitability,” which concentrates solely on the “ubiquity and acceptance” of Protestantism even while laying the groundwork for how the strain of its disintegration appears in the literature of the period as a harbinger of secularization (3-5, 159). Huston Diehl’s *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (1997), challenges the Collinson claim that “the drama of early modern England is a wholly secularized art form” and argues instead “that Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights invent a new form of theater, one that is, in the broadest sense, Protestant” (Collinson, *Birthpangs* 66, 114). However, again, as in the commentary advocating for Shakespeare’s Catholicism, the Protestant claim on Shakespeare stems for the most part from the plays’ reflections of doctrinal ambiguity and religious uncertainty rather than affirmation of specific Protestant doctrine.

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69 See also, two works by Alan Sinfield—*Literature in Protestant England (1560-1660)* (1983), 1-17, and *Faultiness: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (1992).
2.1.4 No discernable religious loyalty (“Secularization Thesis”).

The third alternative of equally long standing holds that Shakespeare either had no religion or that genuine religious commitment simply did not dispositively manifest in the plays.70 George Santayana articulates the former position,71 reinforced by A.D. Nuttall in Shakespeare the Thinker (2007) who boldly proclaims that “[n]either the Reformation nor the shock waves it produced in the counter-culture of Catholicism—the Council of Trent [1545-1563]—make any palpable impression on the plays” (17). Harold Bloom and Peter Ackroyd, for their part, expressly scoff at claims of any confessional or even religious loyalties whatsoever.72 The latter view argues that abundant religious (including ecclesiastical, scriptural, liturgical) references claimed by either side of the Catholic-Protestant debate may simply manifest the compelling commercial necessity that a playwright appeal to an audience that could see, recognize, and perhaps be titillated by edgy religious references in the plays, but which reveal no personal “tells” of the author.73

70 Harold Bloom, Western Canon (1994), 58.


72 Peter Ackroyd in his Biography (2005) boldly asserts that “[j]ust as [Shakespeare] was a man without opinions, so he was a man without beliefs” (474).

Commentators such as Anthony B. Dawson maintain a countervailing view that at least as of beginning of the seventeenth century the religious references and characters in the plays simply draw upon a commonplace vocabulary of imagery and allusion that no longer contained serious substance for the secularized Jacobean public theatre audience—in short, “the [early modern] theatre is a secular and secularizing institution” (Dawson, “Secular Theatre” 240, 243-45). Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt attributes the characteristic “traces of Catholicism” in the plays in general to “sly displacement and appropriation” that demonstrate Shakespeare’s absorption of “Catholicism for his own poetic purposes” (Will 112-113). Richard Levin concludes that no recorded evidence exists for religious significance in the plays worthy of remark among Shakespeare’s playgoers, notwithstanding that at least two contemporary theatre critics from opposite value perspectives, Thomas Heywood and Stephen Gosson, describe the public theatre as a potent form for transmission of thought and experience with the purpose to influence and transform the viewer.

2.1.5  Inconclusive.

Still others provide that, although Shakespeare may well have had his religious convictions, he assiduously avoided revealing these in any coherent manner in a medium in which the avoidance of controversy, at least to the eye of the Master of Revels, was paramount.

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Hence condemnations of poets that denied their faith, as underscored by Alison Shell reinforce the poet Robert Southwell’s implied critique of his “cousin” Shakespeare who simply turned his back on heritage and personal beliefs to serve the public theatre’s commercial interests.\textsuperscript{76} Hence, rather than hide his true confessional loyalties, as suggested by Gary Taylor by assiduously absenting religious references therefrom, Shakespeare’s jumble of Catholic, Protestant, pagan references form a broad-based appeal calculated to entertain.\textsuperscript{77} For example, the “hybrid” of Jean Christoph Mayer’s \textit{Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith: History, Religion and the Stage} (2006) emphasizes the significance Mayer gives to the invocation of witchcraft and the potpourri of religious custom and practice all entirely consistent with historical accounts and traditional practice and serves as grist for the playwrights’ mill as foci of contemporary interest as no more than simply titillating stage devices.\textsuperscript{78}

2.2 “Abstracts and . . .chronicles of the time” (\textit{Ham. 2.2.524})

Thus does significant criticism put aside the question of Shakespeare’s personal confessional loyalties in favor of a paramount reception perspective. That the playwright has

\textsuperscript{76} Alison Shell, in her \textit{Shakespeare and Religion} offers a fascinating perspective on the Catholic critique of Shakespeare, e.g., “Shakespeare being identified by some contemporary Catholics, rightly or wrongly, as a fellow-traveler—well-affected enough to rouse hope, uncommitted enough to disappoint. . . . his authorial ethics deeply offended those Catholics who approached the literature of their time in a spirit of recusancy” (105). See also the famous letter authored by the martyred Jesuit poet Robert Southwell, tantalizingly addressed “To his loving Cosin”, later reprinted with the title “To my worthy good cosen Master W.S.” which lovingly rebukes the younger poet recipient for “abusing [his] talent” for “the vanity of men” rather than “the authority of God.” \textit{The Anchor Anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse}, v. 1, ed. Louis L. Martz (1969), 3.

\textsuperscript{77} Allison Shell, \textit{Shakespeare and Religion} (2010).

\textsuperscript{78} Jean Christoph Mayer, \textit{Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith: History, Religion and the Stage} (2006).
freighted the plays with significant religious and theological content suggests how deeply matters of late medieval religious culture remained embedded in the life, culture, and thought of the English people. Thus, beneath the surface, religious themes in these later works—contentious, variegated, and full of what Eamon Duffy refers to as ironies and resistance—inevitably lay in the minds and lives that made up the audience for whom Shakespeare wrote as well as the playwright himself.\textsuperscript{79} R.V. Young categorically declares that “[n]o thinking, educated man in England during this time could avoid the necessity of an intimately personal response to the religious crisis.”\textsuperscript{80} While the circumstantial evidence may well remain ambiguous as to Shakespeare’s confessional loyalties, a consensus seems clearly to have fallen away from the notion Shakespeare’s absence of religious thought.

Nonetheless, current trends have worked toward a revised narrative that reconciles Shakespeare’s significant religious references in the plays with the apparent absence of consistent authorial confessional bias. Leading recent scholarship postulates Shakespeare’s disinterest with respect to any personal religious testimony in the plays in favor of inventive deployment of religious elements that could appeal, variously, to a broad range of interests within his theatre-going public. Thus, such recent studies by distinguished scholars such as Graham and Colinton, ed. (Shakespeare and Religious Change, 2009), Alison Shell (Shakespeare and Religion, 2010), Brian Cummings (Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity &

\textsuperscript{79} Eamon Duffy, Saints, Sacrilege & Sedition (2012), 236-42.

\textsuperscript{80} R.V. Young “Donne’s Catholic Conscience and the Wit of Religious Anxiety” Ben Jonson Journal 24 (2017) 57-76; 58; accord, Peter Thomson, Shakespeare’s Professional Career: who, with reference to Measure for Measure also scoffs at the notion that “Shakespeare . . . was removed from the religious and political discourse of his day” (165).
Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture, 2012), David Scott Kasten (A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion, 2014), David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, eds. (Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion, 2015), and Peter Iver Kaufman (Religion Around Shakespeare, 2013) as the titles suggest, explore various views that either seek to explain or rationalize Shakespeare’s artistic choices for the plays as products of the effort to appeal to popular, albeit variegated, cultural taste of the public theatre audience. These commentators give due regard for the contemporary importance for what Peter Iver Kaufman refers to as the “fierce internal debate” that beset the established church, but avoid concluding that the playwright sought to use the religious references in the plays for any purpose other than to satisfy and entertain his audience’s interest in that debate (1). Alison Shell offers the common theme, if not consensus, among recent commentators that “Shakespeare’s beliefs are probably irrelevant to his works” (9). Similarly, David Bevington notes that notwithstanding Shakespeare’s greatness as a dramatist, “drama is not for him primarily a vehicle for propounding moral, religious, and ethical values” (“The debate about . . .” 23). This approach keeps Shakespeare above the fray and preserves a comfortable neutrality of the dramatist’s art in the face of contentious contemporary cultural change, preferring instead to celebrate enduring universal elements of the playwright’s stagecraft and poetic invention as to which Bevington’s This Wide and Universal Theater (2007) provides a distinctive recent example.

Absent definitive evidence of specific doctrinal loyalty, the critical focus tends to default toward the view that the religious references in the plays manifest a casual assimilation of aspects of Catholicism that, as Beatrice Groves suggests, most likely indicate “neither the coded proof of papist playwright nor evidence of a charisma that has been entirely devalued in its transfer to a secular field” (33). Groves reflects the broader view of Shakespeare’s “religious
engagement” in the plays beyond “simply . . . evidence of his own doctrinal affiliation” (32). In short, these commentators tend to shift the focus from Shakespeare’s personal religious commitment to a larger frame that describes how the “religious change” wrought by the Reformation might influence the manner in which Shakespeare crafts the plays so as to sound themes that could appeal to an audience prone to romanticized unified, plangent past, signified by the familiar appellation “merrie Old England,” rooted in pre-Henrician Reformation culture. Chief among these is residual nostalgia for the fading but fondly imagined Old Faith heritage.

The unkindest cut of all, in lock-step with the grudging recognition of recent studies’ interest in the pervasive religious concerns of the period, amounts to “dumbing down” Shakespeare when it comes to reflection of religious matters in the plays, in an apparent effort to reconcile the variegated confessional clues in the texts.81 The claim confidently expressed, and tacitly agreed to by many commentators, holds that “Shakespeare was an entertainer, not a theologian.”82 Shakespeare, so the argument runs, simply draws the “religious” elements into the plays from the ambiguous, albeit contentious, woof and warp of the time as so much material of contemporary interest that serves the dramatic moment. In other words, the religious references in the plays, from scriptural analogues to ecclesiastical characters stand as little more than “stage

82 Maurice Hunt, Shakespeare’s Religious Allusiveness; Its Play and Tolerance (2005); (558-59); accord, R. Chris Hassell, Shakespeare’s Religious Language: A Dictionary (2007) (xxi); See also Eric Scott Mallin, Godless Shakespeare (2007) which claims to be the first Shakespeare commentary “from an atheist perspective.”
furniture,” merely such stuff as may titillate the contemporary audience with edgy sympathetic inclusion in a given play of Catholic clergy or doctrine or practice.83

2.1.7 Idle Nostalgia or Dream of Awakening.

In her exhaustive Arden survey, Shakespeare and Religion (2010), Alison Shell analyzes Shakespeare’s religious orientation alongside the vast current scholarship on the subject. I agree with the consensus that sees Shakespeare’s language “saturated with religious discourse” even to the point of suggesting a pro-Catholic sentiment, and his dramaturgy “attentive to religious precedent,” but must disagree with her conclusion that such allusion and discourse at best amount to nostalgia for the Catholic past (3, 16-18). Shell goes even further to opine that for Shakespeare, “as for few of his contemporaries, the Judeo-Christian story is something less than a master-narrative” (3). Shell’s work provides a richly textured religious profile of contemporary Elizabethan and early Stuart London culture, but confines the “religion” under discussion in Shakespeare’s works to either a passive elicitation of sympathy for the Old Faith or a tepid didacticism, in terms of “his lack of moral directness” which distances him substantively from his late medieval predecessors” (85-89; 174). In this and an earlier essay, promisingly entitled “Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Imagination 1558-1660,” Shell offers many incisive and useful observations about religious context in which Shakespeare wrote. But ultimately these remain ensnared in speculation that either reject or subordinate doctrinal loyalty or interest.

2.2 BIAS AGAINST THE PAST: “The Supersessionist Dilemma.”

A second impediment to a full understanding of what I refer to as the sacramental in Shakespeare’s later works that implicates both creation and reception lies with a bias against the genealogical inheritance of late medieval indigenous religious drama to the extent that the flowering of Elizabethan public theatre in the mid-16th century simply erased over 150 years of tradition. Two biases militate against the recognition of the inheritance of late medieval drama. First, the “secularization thesis” adopted and argued in the early 20th century by A.C. Bradley, and reinforced in the early 21st century by Anthony B. Dawson, supports the reformulation of religion in the theatre for secular ends. Second, according to Emrys Jones, an early advocate for the influence of indigenous religious theatre on Shakespeare, an outright academic cultural prejudice dismisses origins and continuity out of hand because the two traditions appeared “incommensurate” with each other.

In his 1977 study *The Origins of Shakespeare*, Jones laments that, at least as of the date of his study, Shakespeare criticism had largely found the cycle plays not to have influenced the Elizabethan stage. He emphatically opines that a “major obstacle in the understanding of Shakespeare’s drama” lies in the “failure to bring [Shakespeare’s plays] into relation with the great body of dramatic writing known as the mystery plays” of the late 14th and 15th centuries.

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84 *Ibid.* Anthony Dawson insists that “the theatre is a secular, and secularizing institution” (240).

85 This bias seems inexplicable in that Shakespeare demonstrated the influence of the mysteries, via numerous references discussed elsewhere herein, e.g., Macbeth’s Porter and Hamlet’s “out Herod Herod” remark. Also, Emrys Jones ascribes the neglect of the mysteries to an over simplified schematization fostered by the Reformation “victors,” which held the abrupt division between Catholic England in the first half of the sixteenth century and the Protestant reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth in the second half. *The Origins of Shakespeare*. Clarendon P, 1977. 32-33.
(31). Again, such a view stood happily consistent with critics eager to apply the “secularization thesis” to an English culture safely within the ambit of a secular world.  

Notwithstanding the several references in the subject plays to mystery cycle scenes, characters, and phraseology (to which I refer below) Jones criticizes the view, still held by many today, that “the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries belonged to quite different dramatic species . . . as if Elizabethan dramatists really had made a fresh start” (32). The reason for such neglect, according to Jones, lies with the unrealistic division between the predominantly Catholic earlier part of the 16th century and “the later more or less Protestant part” covered by the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I, asserting that the “inward mental habits . . . would survive as forms and patterns of thought and feeling, a largely unconscious and unfocused inheritance from pre-Reformation England” (32-33). Jones draws the difficult to substantiate inference that what I call the “sacramental vision” of Shakespeare’s mature tragedies appealed to that which Helen Cooper and W.R. Elton would later call an inherited “habit of mind” which survived the Henrician and Edwardian iconoclastic injunctions and Elizabethan uniformity (33; Cooper 108; Elton 17-18 ).

Despite Anne Righter’s distinction between the medieval and the Renaissance playgoer’s experience based on her dubious monolithic assumption that the entire sensibility of the audience

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86 Although its deep background lies with Enlightenment thinkers, the nineteenth century’s burgeoning study of sociology propounded a “secularization thesis” which held that as society became more scientifically and materially advanced, belief and interest in religion and its authority to account for fundamental questions human origins, purpose, and ultimate destiny would diminish. Max Weber may be the most well-known of several proponents of this “secularization thesis” as reflected in his treatise The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905), trans. Talcott Parsons. Routledge, 2001.
shifted with the Reformation, her 1962 study, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* helps establish important elements of the communal even ritualized experience of the indigenous religious drama fostered by stagecraft and conventions that survived into the Elizabethan public theatre from which Shakespeare advances and innovates.

The key to the debate on the relevance of inherited traditions of Medieval drama on Shakespeare’s theatre lies not in the remoteness of the language or style or stage conventions, but rather in the habits of thought that yet survived in the London public theatre audiences for whom Shakespeare wrote. Recent scholars such as Lawrence Clopper (*Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* [2001]), and Helen Cooper (*Shakespeare and the Medieval World* [2010]) lend new life to a growing line of critical inquiry that seeks to connect Shakespeare and *his audience* to late medieval religious drama, texts of which became generally available only in the mid-20th century. That continuing scholarship, in connection with revised historical perspectives on the English Reformation, offers a heretofore unexplored direction in making sense of Shakespeare’s extraordinary turn of both provocative theological substance and innovative dramaturgical form at the beginning of the second half of his playwriting career, that evokes a “way of seeing” or “habit of mind” common to the reception of indigenous English drama by those nurtured in the traditional religion.

The lure of such indigenous drama, particularly the mystery cycle plays, as an influential precursor to Elizabethan stage conditions and genre affinity, remains a major and relatively venerable concentration, dating at least from S. L. Bethell’s trailblazing study *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944). That study offers a perspective on the very different mind of the Elizabethan audience, vital to understanding Shakespeare’s works, that more comfortably exhibits late medieval habits of thought, chiefly reflected in the mystery cycles and
morality plays (4). To Bethell, the Elizabethan audience’s love of paradox, for example, stood entirely consistent with the late medieval culture of Christianity that saw unity and harmony even among disparate things by virtue of the common relationship to the creator. In what appears now as far-sighted criticism, Bethell believed misguided A.C. Bradley’s influential psychological approach in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* (22-23). The same critique could well apply to the insistent modernist claims of Harold Bloom in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999). Yet, the psychological character concentration won out for reasons that have been reinforced and recrafted by scholars in the tireless search for the “self” as the root of modernity.

While one cannot fault this drive to find the anticipatory or even prophetic Shakespeare in his art that stands temporally astride both the modern and medieval worlds, the medieval world, both as living presence and cultural memory, remains neglected. While extensive

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87 See e.g., commentary by David Bevington *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (1962); Edmund Creeth *Mankynde in Shakespeare* (1976); Craig Berenthal *The Trial of Man: Christianity ad Judgment in the World of Shakespeare* (2003); Robert Weimann *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (1978); and, Irving Ribner *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* (1969). This last study offers a perspective on the very different mind of the Elizabethan audience, vital to understanding Shakespeare’s works, that more comfortably exhibits late medieval habits of thought, chiefly reflected in the mystery cycles and morality plays (4).

88 See, e.g., Charles Taylor’s description of the “Christian imaginary” that regards everything in the world as part of a harmonious whole ordered by God (*A Secular Age* 15-17).

commentary eagerly ascribes to Shakespeare the prophetic anticipation of future sensibilities and values, it is nevertheless the past that renders intelligible the contemporary world for whom Shakespeare created his works.90

To that point, recent scholarship argues for the continuity of aesthetic tradition and influence. Janet Dillon’s *Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre* (2006), for example, purposely elides over the artificial boundary between the late medieval and the early modern, and thus argues the case for the contiguity (if not continuity) of theatrical expression from 1350 to 1642 (xi). Drama in both eras expressed a common understanding of the Christian myth; an ontology of shared understandings that shaped the human experience in relation to the ineffable word beyond the physical senses, informed by scripture, folklore, and superstitions that serve as witness to the incarnational reality of the non-material. The artificial division between the late medieval playwriting and stagecraft and the Elizabethan public theatre draws upon “supersessionist” assumptions about the audience’s habit of mind which ascribe a radically different reception between the two audiences.91 Yet, understanding the habit of mind with respect to matters of “religious” perspective, or more properly the residue of the late medieval

90 See Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare the Medieval World* (2010) 1-28. Cooper explains that Shakespeare and his audience understood their world only in reference to the known past, the material architectural elements of which remained as a “theatre of memory for what had been lost,” not in terms of an unknown and unknowable future.

91 [define per Gregory (and others).]
“culture of faith,” stands crucial to the nature and meaning of Shakespeare’s later works, the revised cultural context of which I discuss in Chapter Two.

Helen Cooper’s *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* (2010) adds significant additional scholarship and analysis to the view that sees continuity rather than division of aesthetic vision between the two theatres. Cooper devotes a great deal of attention to the dual problem: first, physically locating both Shakespeare and the future Elizabethan public theatre audience members for whom he later wrote at the scene of the cycle play performances, the last of which occurred at Coventry in 1579; second, fleshing out the medieval heritage as asserted by Cooper as well as W.R. Elton among others, that endowed the early modern theatre-goer’s analogical habit of mind with the “way of seeing” or the sacramental vision with which to experience the plays.

However, rather than the perspective that simply analogizes Macbeth to Herod or that which treats Macbeth’s porter as a parody of the Hellgate porter, I argue that Shakespeare’s sacramental vision invites analogical imagination of the spectator into a world that renders visible the invisible, hence the borrowing of the term “incarnational aesthetic.” Commentators employ the term “incarnational aesthetic” variously, and often loosely, throughout much of the criticism to which I refer herein. Some use the term to distinguish English medieval theatre’s “acted action” from the continental rhetorical dramatic aesthetic. Others yoke the term to

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92 Helen Cooper explains that classical drama converted its action into a rhetorical construct “with almost all its action, and especially violent action, converted into spoken report. By contrast, medieval and Elizabethan drama offered an “incarnational aesthetic . . . mediated not only through speech but through the body in performance, in battles and dumb shows, staged rituals, embraces and kisses, on-stage deaths and blood” (*Shakespeare and the Medieval World* 48). For detailed description of the deep cultural intersection of sacramental and social space in the
specific Eucharistic notions of Shakespeare’s Catholicism from a doctrinal perspective (Groves 39-43). Still others see the action as sometimes forming *exempla* of moral conduct to be emulated (Shell 2). In any case, the concept never fully arrives in the arena of the sacramental nature of Shakespeare’s theatre—where the audience participates in, and derives experiential meaning from, the enactment of dramatic art, which is where the term has a specific meaning within this study. The plays at issue here, as they represent the body of work Shakespeare produced in the second half of his career, prompt the collaboration of the audience in creating the experience, even if it be for the “two hours traffic,” of the play, a way of seeing that embraces and makes visible the continuum of being that exists between nature and the supernatural, between matter and spirit, and even between life and death.

The revised historical understanding of the English Reformation has renewed and deepened the persistent effort to connect Shakespeare with the cycle plays, not only as precursors to Elizabethan stage conditions and genre affinity, but also as the source of direct analogues to the plays such as the keeper of hell-mouth as a type for Macbeth’s Porter in the scene that adumbrates the *Harrowing of Hell* cycle play as noted in Glynne Wyckham’s *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Heritage* (214-16). Michael O’Connell offers the figure of Mors in the N-town *Slaughter of the Innocents* as an analogue for Banquo’s ghost with Herod, from the same play, as analogue for Macbeth whose intended victim likewise escapes and thus “shadows a relationship” between the two tyrants (“Vital Practices” 159-60). O’Connell goes so far as to assert that the Coventry cycle stands as “the missing link between Shakespeare’s theatre and the whole

tradition of the *Corpus Christi* stage*” (157). That may overstate the case somewhat in that only a single Coventry cycle play survives, namely the *Shearmen and Taylors Pageant* in which Herod “rages in the pagond and in the street also” (Cooper 64, n.65), but it shows at least a persistent, memory of a significant, even iconic, cultural artifact and “suggest a tradition that lies with a kind of mythic authority behind events within the contemporary world” (157). The infrequent, but vivid references to the mysteries in the plays convince Michael O’Connell that Shakespeare saw the Coventry cycle as a boy.

The unique appeal of the subject plays when first performed served a larger purpose than Old Faith nostalgia or as a barometer or litmus test on the penetration of Protestant ideology in early modern England. Arthur F. Marotti himself stands conflicted when, for example, he suggests that Shakespeare’s motive may have been “to salvage for a post-Catholic English culture some of those emotionally powerful features of medieval Catholicism . . . in a

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93 Hamlet’s advice to the players (“Out Herod Herod”); Claudius at prayer (Cain’s deed “smells to heaven”); Cain and Herod references in *Merry Wives*; Clown-gravediggers’ colloquy over “Adam digg’d” in *Hamlet*; Macbeth’s Porter’s monologue recalls the porter off Hellgate in the Harrowing of Hell mystery play); Macbeth’s Banquet adumbrates Mors with Herod; *Mac*. The murder of innocents at McDuff’s castle recalls the massacre of the innocents in the cycle play; similarly the escape of Fleance in Macbeth recalls Christ’s escape to Egypt. Richard II reflects on the ominous “all hail” in the play that echoes the same greeting that precedes Christ’s arrest in the mystery play.

94 O’Connell postulates that “the [Coventry Corpus Christi] play is the missing link between Shakespeare’s theatre and the whole tradition of the Corpus Christi stage” (“Vital Cultural Practices.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999): pp. 149-68, 157. He also reinforces his claim that the young Shakespeare witnessed the Coventry Mystery Cycle (*The Idolotrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theatre in Early-Modern England*. Oxford UP, 2000) p. 87.]Note, however, that Louis Montrose in his *The Purpose of Playing* stands at odds with “O’Connell’s recuperation of the Shakespearean theatre for an aesthetic of late medieval Catholic spirituality” with an emphatic secularist perspective on sociocultural change (p. 32, n. 21).
rehabilitation of magic and the visual elaborated in the Stuart Court masque” (232). However, the more likely lens with which to view the depth and complexity of the “form and pressure” of cultural change to which Shakespeare holds a mirror lies with the liminal world of Elizabethan theatre hypothesized by Catherine Belsey in her The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama (1985). The audience sees and experiences the characters with the older “emblematic” view, where the playwright directs the audience’s attention toward a universal truth represented by the actor, and the “illusionistic,” where the individual character himself becomes the finite focus of audience attention. 95

2.2 CUSTOMARY DIVISIONS OF LABOR: Artificially Isolated Disciplines.

Shakespeare’s life and works sit within a crucible of cultural change, the depth and complexity of which is only now coming into view. Uniquely situated as a gifted poet-dramatist and sharer, owner, and impresario for London’s’ premier acting company during an unprecedented outpouring of popular theatre, William Shakespeare stood witness to that climactic moment in the long arc of secularization in the west where historical, cultural, and religious changes coalesced around the Protestant Reformation. Recent historical and cultural commentary continues to bring Shakespeare’s life and works into relation with the compelling conditions of Reformation politics.

The study of the distinctive meaning and purpose in Shakespeare’s later works must inevitably draw upon external factors which include both the circumstances of an extended

Warwickshire family with presumed traditional faith background, and the Crown’s continuing effort to unify the entire country under a reformed religion which inevitably requires the displacement of the Old Faith. Such displacement forms the heart of the long accepted historical assumptions of how the loyalty to a reformed religion commenced, evolved, and worked its way into the English population exemplified by A.G. Dickens’s *The English Reformation* (1964). These assumptions underwent a profound revision These pioneering “revisionists,” beginning with J.J. Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy, and Christopher Haigh, among others, focus, first, on how the English people at large actually experienced the English Reformation, rather than as witnessed by the documented aspirations of the monarchy and the Church of England episcopacy and, second, on a reassessment of the timing as to when the population of England went from majority Catholic to majority Protestant.

With respect to both the nature of the audience experience and the timing of the change in the way of seeing rooted in the traditional religion, two seminal works bear mention: Margaret Aston’s *England’s Iconoclasts* (1988) and Alexandra Walsham’s *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity, and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (1993). Aston describes the mechanics of the fraught drive to compel unity of thought and worship. The principal instrument of such compulsion employed the relentless application of a unique interpretation of the Second Commandment’s prohibition against making or venerating of “graven images” to justify the

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systematic destruction of the material culture of the traditional religion. Following the virtually complete destruction of the material culture during the brief reign of Edward VI, the continuing campaign under Elizabeth I sought to expunge the inner idolatry, that is, thoughts of inherited mental pictures. As William Perkins opined, any such, “a thing feigned in the mind by the imagination, is an idol.” Walsham provides a comprehensively documented study of the substantial numbers of “church papists,” Catholics that conformed to Church of England injunctions that required attendance, yet remained loyal to the Catholic faith before and after Shakespeare’s career. Walsham’s useful distinction between the more notorious minority of outright recusants, those who absented themselves from Church of England services altogether, on the one hand, versus the more ubiquitous, but less recalcitrant “church-papists” on the other, who, while conflicted by conformity to mandatory Church of England attendance could remain free from fines or forfeitures for recusancy and indeed comprised an influential segment, if not a majority of England’s population at least into the early 1590s.

Altogether, the revisionist historians, along with Aston and Walsham, help establish that the cultural vitality of the traditional faith survived well into Shakespeare’s career on the London stage and therefore offer crucial insight into the mind of the audience for whom Shakespeare

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98 Exodus 20:4-5; See especially Aston England’s Iconoclasts at “Images before the Law” (245-57), and “Idols of the Mind” (452-59, 453, quoting Perkins, Warning against Idolatrie of the last times (107.8).

99 A frequent practice among the landed gentry in the Midlands and the north of England provided for the papist husband of the household to attend church services, thus protecting the family’s property and reputation while his recusant wife assumed “a more energetic role in safeguarding [the household’s] spiritual integrity” (Walsham 88-81, nn. 35-36).
wrote, a mind that could perceive and discern matters that remain remote from the modern, secular mind.

His later works stand witness to a climactic moment in the long arc of secularization in the west. Charles Taylor (A Secular Age [2005]), Brad Gregory (The Unintended Reformation [2012], Carlos Eire (Reformations 1450-1650 [2016]), and Eamon Duffy (Reformation Divided [2012]; The Stripping of the Altars [1992]) among others, help revise the received historical and epistemological framework within which to locate Shakespeare’s theological response to the contentious but inexorable tide of the English Reformation. The title of Duffy’s Saints, Sacrilege & Sedition (2017) succinctly states the themes—disruption of hitherto undisturbed traditional faith; iconoclastic attack on the material culture promoted by the landed, titled beneficiaries of the cascade of divestitures of church property beginning with the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 and 1539; and, resistance or even non-conformity deemed treason against the crown.

Whether seen in hindsight as “watershed” or “paradigm shift,” most would concur with Carlos Eire that the Protestant Reformation constituted “a metaphysical and epistemic revolution, 

101 Brad Gregory adopts the term “watershed” in his Unintended with which to emphasize a dramatic divide in late medieval religious practice and perception in the West between late medieval thought and culture and the Reformation “revolution.” Carlos Eire’s preference for the concept of “paradigm shift,” borrowed from Thomas Kuhn’s 1962 treatise The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, suggests displacement of a dominant paradigm by discovery or adoption of new information. Both terms imply logic to the historical record which the analyses of both historiographers belie. Gregory, for example, frequently reminds his reader of the contingent nature of ultimately determinative events with his genealogical versus teleological approach, which holds that “... the
a new way of interpreting reality and of approaching the ultimate…which changed the world … profoundly and irreversibly” (Revolutions 746). Distinguished recent studies by philosopher Charles Taylor, historiographers Brad Gregory, Carlos Eire, and Steven Ozment expertly revise the received history of the Protestant Reformation. Cultural historians Eamon Duffy, Keith Thomas, R.N. Swanson, and C. John Sommerville offer vital insight into a revised perspective of the English Reformation without which meaningful comprehension of early modern cultural heritage remains obscured. Theologians Hans Boersma and E. Brooks Holifield explore the scholastic roots of Church doctrine that bears directly on this study’s exploration of Shakespeare’s sacramental ontology. These support and amplify the aforementioned work of such literary scholars as Michael O’Connell, Helen Cooper, and Regina Schwartz who measure the depth and extent of disruption of material culture and devotional practice of the English Reformation. Taken together a picture emerges from these respective disciplines of the historical intelligibility of the past in no sense implies the inevitability of the present” (12). For his part, Charles Taylor combines the “shift in the conditions of belief” with the “zigzag” nature of historical change (A Secular Age 90-95).


ontological shift which form the groundwork for the Reformation’s fragmented divide on the fundamental question of how one conceives of God.

In so doing, recent interdisciplinary scholarship provides an important epistemological framework within which to locate Shakespeare’s artistic response to the contentious but inexorable tide of the English Reformation. That artistic response becomes a dominant element in his later works, beginning with the *Tragedy of Hamlet* and concluding a little over a decade later with his last solely authored work, *The Tempest*. The playwright’s distinction as creator of the great monuments of English poetic drama must go hand in hand with his demonstrated, though rarely acknowledged, concern for not only the erosion of inherited theological truth of traditional English religion but also the erosion of religious engagement altogether.

2.4 CONCLUSION to REVIEW of CRITICISM.

Because the frame of reference is both admittedly vast and subject to ongoing reexamination and revision, the contemporary cultural, political, and religious influences on the plays receive short shrift, but not without justification. For generations, commentators have held that the phenomenon of literary achievement within the received canon, without more, transcends the woof and warp of Reformation politics. Ben Jonson’s commenced the dissociation from history with his iconic initial assessment: “He was not of an Age, but for all time” (“Prefatory Poems,” *First Folio* 1623). S.T. Coleridge famously declared Shakespeare’s independence from contemporary cultural influence.\(^{105}\) However, apart from the apparently insatiable curiosity that compels examination of Shakespeare’s attitude toward religion during a period in which the Reformation divide influenced every aspect of society—rank, wealth,

influence, and opportunity—any fair analysis of the surviving poetry requires an understanding of the ways in which the historical milieu influenced the creative process and shaped the poetry, however remote it might appear to the modern mind 400 years after the dissipation of the context from whence it came.

Such re-examination of cultural history produced in the last two decades not only reveals Shakespeare’s period in history as a time that Joseph Pearce suggests amounted to “a crucible” of cultural change in Reformation England but discovers a playwright much more astutely engaged in the operation and effects of that change than previously supposed. In addition, Shakespeare’s plays, particularly in the latter half of his career reflect an astute connection with scholastic theology, grounded in fundamental tenets of late medieval Christianity, to which the playwright boldly witnessed in his later works. The vigor of that witness, as further discussed below, also belies a related unfounded bias: that Shakespeare was somehow aloof from the social, political and religious concerns and controversies of his day. To the contrary, the plays reflect that Shakespeare was quite engaged. Through his art, propelled by the substantial resources at his disposal—established theatre company, distinctive performance venue, and popular following—he pulled his considerable audience into the conversation.

For example, historian Peter Lake’s *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays* (2016) masterfully relates how the epic sweep of the “history” plays, far from being remote patriotic chronicles of medieval England, pertain directly, event urgently, to the proleptic anxiety of the succession crisis and related problems. Far from aloof, Shakespeare relentlessly engages a close and opinionated involvement with a number of conflicts all related to “religious division and confessional conflict,” including

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succession issues (the so-called “Elizabethan exclusion crisis”) and war on the continent (chiefly with Spain) (14). The political change emphasized in the familiar canon of history plays of the 1590s stands inextricably bound to the religious change that stirs “anxieties about the social, gender, and cosmic orders” (14-15).

Lake’s recent study both illustrates the pervasive nature of religion in early modern England and underscores Shakespeare’s topical engagement with matters of immediate concern to the early modern audience which inevitably include religious concerns even in his earlier plays. The focus on historical kings and queens also call forth “parallel sets of concerns and beliefs about . . . the proper relation between God and his creation, between providence and human agency . . . .” (14). However, with the turn of the century, anxiety over the succession crisis diminished as did the immediate concerns about continental war. The plays that Shakespeare produced in the second half of his career, beginning with the Tragedy of Hamlet (1601), reflect the confluence of an additional set of accumulating factors that directly pertained to the consolidation of the change in England’s religious culture, which fostered what I refer to as a mid-career “sea-change” in Shakespeare’s later works.
3. REALITY and RELIGION RECONFIGURED:
Shakespeare’s Sacramental Vision and the Analogical Habit of Mind

*Is this a dagger which I see before me,*  
*The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.*  
*I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.*  
*Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible*  
*To feeling as to sight?*  

Macbeth 2.1.33-37

Over the arc of his playwriting career, astride the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, Shakespeare’s plays reflect a world ineluctably bending toward a new “social imaginary,” but one which must be adequately understood from the perspective of the distant past. As Charles Taylor defines the term, the altered experience of one’s “social surroundings” occurred within a generation in Reformation England. The change affected inherited shared cultural practices and common understandings maintained for a millennium by communities of ordinary people as well as the long legacy of holidays, feast days, rogation days, pilgrimages in veneration of saints’ shrines; processions, wakes, and special masses in for the dead and dying. 107 Therefore, this Section’s point of beginning must attempt to appreciate ideas

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107 Charles Taylor’s concept of “social imaginary” describes “that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” through how “ordinary people imagine their social surroundings . . . as carried in images, stories, legends, etc. “ . . . (A Secular Age, pp. 171-72). This helps Taylor characterize the epistemological transition from a broad cultural embodiment of generally unified European medieval apprehension of reality, governed by the “porous self,” toward a multiform range of subjective choices through an understanding of reality, largely governed by interest in the individual, or “buffered self” (Ibid, pp. 35-43). See, R.N. Swanson in his *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (1989) for a compelling profile of institutional support, including guilds, confraternities and other community structures, for the shared spiritual ethos (pp. 276-84). See also, Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe*, p.435).
that originate in a distant past that can transformatively influence subsequent institutions and ways of thinking to effect a significant alteration of the present.

The consequences of a compelled reformed “social imaginary” recurs throughout Shakespeare’s later works. The effects of such compulsion penetrate more deeply into the fabric of community life than simply the abrupt curtailment of community festivals and feasts might suggest. The imaginary of pre-modern England could “see the sensual, material world . . . as embodiments or expressions . . . or as signs of a higher reality which cannot be directly seen” (Taylor 324). The Reformation attack on the pre-modern sacramental mindset augured a radical reconfiguration of a traditional understanding of reality—the common understanding of both human purpose and the nature of the divine—and the rise of the concept of “religion” as separate from daily life.108

The later works selected for this study, *Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth,* and *The Tempest,* reflect the playwright’s increasingly fraught assessment of the consequences regarding the apparently inexorable alteration in the “social imaginary” in three related particulars: desacralization; secularization; and, primacy of individual over the shared life in community. Religious change ushered into the social surroundings of Shakespeare’s England the experience of first, desacralization—a new doctrine of nature alienated one from the spirit world via embrace of the material so as to reject the logical realism that regarded tangible things “as embodiments or expressions of . . . signs of a higher reality which cannot directly be seen” (Taylor 324). Second, secularization—the alienation of “religion” as traditional habits of piety

108 See C. John Somerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England* (4-15). Documents the evolution from a unified religious “culture” to a choice one makes to adopt a particular religious “faith” from among several; from “something one does . . . to something one thinks about.” pp. 9, 14-15.
and practice pulled away from the fabric of everyday life in a manner separate from *sacramental* understanding of God’s immanent habitation of the world, to that which is *secular* in nature.

Third, **primacy of the individual**— “the growth and entrenchment of a new self-understanding of our social existence . . .which gave unprecedented primacy to the individual” (Taylor 146). The importance of institutional “religion” to the crown, through its Established Church, seemed paramount, but only if desacralized from idolatry of the Roman church and operating as a secular, instrument of the monarchy that valorized the individual parishioner’s political allegiance to the crown, as manifest in compulsory parish church attendance.

Far from simply competing for confessional loyalty, religious reform demanded nothing less than the reconfiguration of reality itself. Hence, for an audience “with ears to hear,” Shakespeare’s later works contain thematic counterstatements to such “reconfiguration(s)” that comprise the rapid process of “desacralization” to which Shakespeare’s later works respond. To borrow from Carlos Eire’s formulation, “desacralization,” sundered the link between matter and spirit, nature and super-nature, and the living and the dead (748).109 However, the institutional attacks on these staple points of late medieval convergence between temporal life on earth and

109 Carlos Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World 1450-1650* (2016). Eire distinguishes between the terms “secularization” and “desacralization.” The former focuses on the “reshaping of Christian beliefs and rituals” where the latter reflects “a process of subtraction from within, . . .reducing the scope of the supernatural on earth” by dematerializing its presence through enforced elimination of images, prohibition of sacramental signs, and gestures and the like. pp. 747, 747-54. See also Eamon Duffy’s discussion how destruction of the material culture fostered the “reduction of sacramental life.” *Saints, Sacrilege, and Sedition*, p. 34. C. John Sommerville, illustrates “desacralization” by analogizing Henry VIII’s seizure and secular grants of monastery lands to the repurposing of the Young Men’s Christian Association to a non-sectarian social service organization (*The Secularization of Early Modern England* p. 5).
the supervening reality of the eternal constitute but the visible symptoms of a profound reconfiguration of the early Christian understanding of reality inherited by the English Old Faith.

The rediscovery of the Greek and Roman classical worlds of thought and learning, together with the growing perception of a world defined on its own earthly terms, fostered the emergence of humanism which, when coupled with the challenge to the universal authority of the medieval church by the Protestant Reformation, drew the scholastic debate over the nature of God’s being away from the rarified metaphysical discourse among university scholastics and toward the epistemological underpinning for what became, as Brad Gregory subtitles his treatise, [A] Religious Revolution that Secularized Society.” 110 This chapter attempts to summarize the conceptually complex, but highly consequential, strains of thought that form the ontological basis for this tectonic disjuncture within what had remained a unified structure for understanding reality in the west, specifically God’s relationship to Creation, and suggests how Shakespeare manifests and comments upon such disjuncture in his later works.

3.1 Iconoclasm and Religious Change—Political or Theological Calamity?

The sacramental relationship of the divine to the natural world, as a matter of tradition and practice, remained largely undisturbed during the 1,000 years of Old Faith’s existence in the British Isles until Henry VIII initiated the fateful process of “desacralization.” In a consequential exercise of political power, to which I refer in the Introduction, the English monarchy unseated

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the universal ecclesiastical authority of Rome, itself in thrall to secular power politics, and dissolved the kingdom’s monastic institutions the effect of which expropriated to the crown the vast land holdings and the wealth thereof. Just as the divorce from Catherine of Aragon was a matter of the Henry’s assertion of political jurisdiction appropriate to the stewardship of his kingdom, so too the disposition of valuable lands and the human operations thereon as the king pleases stood as a matter of the commonweal, unmixed with matters pertaining exclusively to the Established Church. Yet, while confiscatory expropriation of land wealth stood arguably within the legal scope of sound asset management for the fiscal good of the kingdom, it foreshadowed a fundamental tenet of the coming “religious change.” The Henrician dissolutions recast vast tracts of land, with improvements thereon, from sacred to secular purpose and displaced hundreds of resident regular clergy, together with ancillary personnel who, in addition to administrations of their holy offices, provided goods and services to surrounding communities in accordance with their mission to provide a practical example of a community dedicated to caritas living.

111 Unlike his earlier papal permission for Henry to marry his brother Arthur’s widow, Pope Clement VII, found himself unable to act in favor of Henry’s divorce in that Catherine of Aragon was sister of Charles V of Spain who at the time held the Vatican virtually under siege.

112 The 1534 Act of Supremacy made Henry Supreme Head of the Church in England, and separated England from Papal authority. Acts of Suppression of 1536 and 1539 allowed the successive dissolution of first the “lesser” and then the “greater” monasteries and religious houses, pursuant to which the crown confiscated and, over time, sold off monastic land and buildings to families who sympathized with Henry's break with Rome. These included monasteries, priories, convents and friaries in England, Wales, and Ireland. Originally intended to supply income for the crown, much of the property was liquidated to fund military campaigns in the 1540s. See, Geoffrey Baskerville, English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries. Yale UP (1937).
The crippling seizures of substantial church assets, the displacement of many hundreds of attached staff and clergy, and the reorientation of the core surviving parish church under the interested and absolute rule of secular authority, met with concerted objection in the form of outbreaks of armed rebellion.113 While significant, these failed to mount substantial threats to the crown or its objectives. The redistribution of seized assets among the elite beneficiaries through royal grants helped blunt widespread opposition. Nevertheless, rebellions indicated more widespread undercurrents of serious opposition among the provincial nobility and landed gentry grounded in the summarily altered character of the property seized from sacred to secular. The contention with the continuing encroachment of the royal prerogative upon the sacred to the point of sacrilege from the Old Faith perspective continued unabated under subsequent Protestant reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I.114

However, Henry’s actions under the above mentioned 1534 Act of Supremacy remained in the realm of political power, principally the exercise of royal jurisdiction to the exclusion of papal authority. While the doctrinal reform that brought the matter of religious change more squarely within the theological realm waited for the accession of Edward VI, the devotional place of images in traditional worship provided an opportunistic avenue for the Protestant factions that sought to incrementally steer the king toward doctrinal reform. Henry’s issuance of the Ten Articles in 1536 (“to stablish Christian quietness and unity among us”), while it affirmed

113 Yorkshire Rebellion, also known as the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536-1537); Bigod’s Rebellion (1537).
114 Rebellion continued under Edward VI with the Prayer Book Rebellion (1549). Eire, p. 331. Early in her reign, Elizabeth suffered the Revolt of the Northern Earls, the avowed purpose of which was to depose Elizabeth and install Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots on the English throne, and thus return England to Catholicism (1569). Eire, p. 349-50.
the Traditional Sacraments, began to undermine the devotional use of images. The first of the “Articles Related to Ceremonies” held that “images are useful as remembrances, but are not objects of worship.” Although Henry bent to the importuning of his Protestant courtiers late in his reign, the otherwise Catholic Henry maintained the Old Faith’s liturgy and core sacramental rituals as fundamental to the Church of England of which he stood as head. However, all that changed quite rapidly at Henry’s death in 1547. The die had been cast by the impunity with which the crown had seized, sold, and/or repurposed vast tracts of working church property together with the substantial improvements thereon. The profound disregard for inherent sacrality of material things consecrated to divine purpose came to terrible fruition with the iconoclasm carried out under the short reign of Edward VI (1547-1553). By the time of Henry’s death and the accession of his son to the throne in 1547, all legal structures stood in place to affirm and enforce the Protestant repudiation of a sacramental understanding of the material world for which the Old Faith’s material culture served as the physical point of attack.

Upon the coronation of Henry’s son, Edward VI (1547-1553), full-scale iconoclasm, which encompassed destruction of all devotional images—including shrines, stained glass, paintings, statues, monstrances, any object of veneration located in the parish church—

115 Quoted in Aston, England’s Iconoclasts, p. 222.


117 Henry’s expropriation and redistribution of church real property beginning with monastery dissolutions of 1536 and 1541 set the pattern for the massive destruction, seizure, and confiscation of tangible church property during the succeeding reign of his son, Edward VI.
commenced in earnest. Following intense ecclesiastical debate between radical and conservative
reformers over the proper construction of the second commandment’s prohibition on the worship
of “graven images,” the radical Protestant position prevailed so as to interpret the Biblical
injunction against the fashioning and worshipping of false idols as a prohibition against any
devotional images.\footnote{Exodus 20:3-5.}

Crowned King at the age of nine years, a Regency Council supervised the conduct of
Edward’s reign throughout his short life.\footnote{Edward’s uncle, Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset, first led the council was first led by (1547–1549), followed by John Dudley, 1st Earl of Warwick (1550–1553), who from 1551 served as Duke of Northumberland.} Although young, the precocious Edward became
fully invested with the cause of the radical Protestants that comprised his Council and promptly
effected the systematic destruction of material culture on which the vast provincial population
centered parish level piety and devotional practice of the Old Faith.\footnote{While not without precedent, the destruction of images during the reign of the nine-year old Edward VI, as effected by his regency councilors, first Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, then John Dudley, Earl of Warwick (later Duke of Northumberland), far exceeded the scope of the Byzantine Iconoclasms of 726-787 and 814-842, which resolved with what became the post-schismatic Eastern Orthodox Church.} His Injunction 28 made
clear the standard of image proscription meant not merely taking down or removal, but rather
“utter extinction” of images, and with that a habit of mind, “so that there remain no memory of
the same . . . and they [the clergy] shall exhort all their parishioners to do the like within their
several houses.”\footnote{Aston, England’s Iconoclasts. “The language of Injunction 28 clearly provides that all shrines, paraphernalia, and glass windows are forbidden and to be destroyed” (256). Note the application standard of “utter extinction”—“obliteration was the order of the day” (256-57). See text below at “Idols of the Mind” re: the confusion in:} The Edwardian destruction, which exceeded the Byzantine iconoclasm of
the eighth and ninth centuries, the adamant Protestant objection to the regard of material images or objects as having any power to manifest or confer divine grace. Edward’s coterie of determined reformers insisted that finitum non capax infiniti—the finite cannot contain the infinite.

The series of injunctions against liturgical practice, the radical disestablishment of economically significant church institutions, together with the continuing desacralization of what remained of the entire monastic as well as secular material culture, established a working framework within which to estrange, within the space of a generation, a native religion peacefully practiced since the 6th century.

Margaret Aston recounts in her comprehensive study England’s Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images, that this estrangement of an entire public faith culture famously included not only all manner of material artifacts associated with traditional English piety, from statuary to enforcement of image removal (versus eradication) per Injunction 28, as amended. This seems to have moved the conversation away from the sacramental significance of the material artifacts (visible manifestation of invisible grace) to one of abject nihilism, essentially an aggressive denial of access to grace. This dictated to the faithful a radical change in the efficacy of worship, the way they had been taught to experience God. See also Eamon Duffy, Saints and Sacrilege, Ch. 11, “Bare ruin’d choirs: remembering Catholicism in Shakespeare’s England,” pp. 233-53. See generally, Aston, “The Byzantine Precedent.” England’s Iconoclasts. p. 5.

stained glass windows to crucifixes, down to every manner of personal “apparatus” in common use among the Old Faith adherents, such as rosary beads, it also included public display of non-material physical or verbal gestures (e.g., making the sign of the cross; recitation of the “Hail Mary,” and the like). 124

a. Altered practice; smothered piety.

For centuries the Old Faith remained nurtured and guided by long-standing customs and liturgical practice which organized every aspect of daily life from the formality of church rituals conducted by ecclesiastical authority to the quotidian habits of everyday life. These practices and ways of thinking did not change overnight. However, much that formed the common routines of a unified culture suffered from continuing Protestant efforts to discredit, censure, or nullify rituals, practices, customs and holidays that, as Steven Ozment summarizes in his Age of Reform, held together “a host of traditional beliefs, practices, and institutions that touched directly the daily life of large numbers of people” that included

. . . mandatory fasting; auricular confession; the veneration of saints, relics, and images; the buying and selling of indulgences; pilgrimages and shrines; wakes and processions for the dead and dying; endowed masses in memory of the dead; the doctrine of purgatory; Latin Mass and liturgy; traditional ceremonies, festivals, and holidays; monasteries, nunneries, and mendicant orders, the sacramental status of marriage, extreme unction, confirmation, holy orders, and penance. (435)

In other words, from the everyday prayers for divine blessing to the periodic articulations of life—e.g., birth, death, marriage, which in all cases sought access to immanent spiritual forces that shape human conduct for good or ill—the reformers forcefully rejected the notion that

124 Aston, pp. 238, 345; Thomas, p. 29.
material elements, including both tangible artifacts, as well as church rituals or communal religious activities, could provide such access. Rather, the efficacy of Protestant religious perspective lay solely in mental assent, or faith, in a reformed doctrine.\textsuperscript{125}

But then, at Edward VI’s untimely death in 1553 the official religion in England abruptly reverted to Roman Catholic as Henry’s daughter by his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, acceded to the throne of England according to the order of succession established in Henry’s will. Mary worked to replace the Protestant episcopacy and restore forms of Roman Catholic worship as best she could, meanwhile punishing by fiery and public immolation reformers and perceived threats to her crown as heretics, by which program she earned the name “Bloody Mary.” Similar to the unfortunate end of her brother’s reign, Mary’s short reign ended at her untimely death in 1558 followed by accession to the throne of her Protestant sister Elizabeth. Thus, it was only within Shakespeare’s lifetime that Protestant reformers could bring to bear the full weight of reformed ecclesiastical apparatus toward systematic doctrinal reform through Royal control of the ecclesiastical structure of the established Church of England and otherwise to work in earnest to crush out of the majority of the population the English folk piety—the specific habit of mind, the way of seeing—fundamental to late medieval religious culture. And even then, Elizabeth determined that it would take a generation to fully wean the English from the traditional Catholic faith. For indeed, at Elizabeth’s accession to the throne and for at least a quarter of a century

thereafter, the population of England remained majority Catholic, notwithstanding official iconoclasm, royal injunctions, and reformed catechizing.\textsuperscript{126}

\textbf{b. Political exigencies and the doctrinal shift.}

This was slow going. However, a fortuitous series of political exigencies, namely unforeseen threats to the national political interests, both internal and external, substantially aided the slow, persistent program of theological indoctrination. These began with the Papal Bull \textit{Regnans in excelsis} in 1570, which absolved the Queen’s subjects from loyalty to the crown. Rome inspired the organized incursion of Jesuit missionaries in 1580, both to minister to England’s Catholics and to evangelize non-Catholics. Various assassination plots against Elizabeth followed, with a final the thwarted attempt at invasion and overthrow by the Spanish Armada in 1588. The foregoing ironically reoriented Elizabeth’s initial irenic policy that expressly abjured the “wish to open windows into men’s souls” toward more punitive mechanisms to unify the kingdom under a single religion.\textsuperscript{127} Such now became a purely secular necessity: not to enforce doctrinal compliance, \textit{per se}, but rather to promote loyalty to the crown.

\textbf{c. Mental idolatry: images in the mind.}

The relentless efforts of the unfettered radical reformers under Edward VI, aided by his Regency Council, largely effaced the Old Faith’s material culture and curtailed its devotional practice before Mary Tudor’s short-lived reign (1553-1558) attempted to restore Roman


\textsuperscript{127} Quoted in Eire, p. 340.
Catholicism in England. However, Elizabeth I’s accession to the throne re-commenced the continuing effort toward the ultimate goal stated in Injunction 28, promulgated under Edward VI’s equally brief reign. That Injunction to expunge “the memory of [the Old Faith],” clearly reflects the intent to eliminate not only practices and artifacts but to also eliminate preoccupation with images formed in the mind, including intimations of the immanent presence of the divine in the natural world. Elizabethan policy against “images” adopted an altered Decalogue:

The text of the commandments taught to English . . . children of reformed faith was different from that used by Catholics, and the textual change hinged on the importance attributed to idolatry. (Aston 344)

Instead of the worship of “graven images” as integral to the first commandment that prohibited “other gods before me,” i.e., the worship of images as gods, the Protestant reformers read the prohibition to forbid “not so much as false worship as the very process of imaging” (391).

Radical Elizabethan reformers such as William Perkins (1558–1602) railed against mental idolatry. Perkins held that to merely visualize God stood as “the prime offense against the prime commandment” and declared that “[a] thing feigned in the mind by the imagination, is an

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128 Mary’s attempt at restoration was limited to the conduct of liturgy and the appointment and structure of episcopal offices. The monastery and convent lands and buildings having been long divided, redeveloped, and scattered among the estates of private nobility and landed gentry, as well as to the secular governing entities.]

129 “William Perkins explained how the English believer should try to free his or her thoughts of inherited mental pictures: ‘The mind of man, when it is not illuminated with the Spirit of God, nor governed by the scripture, it imagineth and feigneth God to be like unto the imagination and conceit of his mind, and not as the scripture teacheth. When this vanity or fond imagination is conceived in the mind, there followeth a further success of the ill. ‘A thing feigned in the mind by the imagination, is an idol.’” Perkins, Early Writings at 318; Aston pp. 436-37.
idol.” Perkins and others built on earlier radical Protestant ecclesiasts, of which John Hooper (1495-1555) was the most influential in his argument that famously condemned “the faculty of the mind’s eye” as the root and origin of idolatry.

HAMLET. My father—methinks I see my father.

HORATIO. Where, my lord?

HAMLET. In my mind’s eye, Horatio. (1.2.184-185)

Given the relentless Protestant concern for freeing one’s thoughts from the inherent corruption of “mental pictures” and the vigorous contemporaneous anti-theatricalism, Hamlet’s distracted reference can hardly be coincidence.

In light of the purported danger of mental images, and if the of iconoclasts’ ultimate goal sought purification beyond the burning of material images to the burning of the house of imagination, how then did Shakespeare purpose to assay this seemingly intractable cultural prohibition on the deeply embedded routine habits of divine evocation? This predicament would

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132 Sources for the deep and long-lived tradition of “anti-theatrical” animus span the 14th century roots in Wyclificate hostility set forth in Sharon Aronson-Lehavi’s, Street Scenes: Late Medieval Acting and Performance (2011) to Michael O’Connell’s extensive discussion of the Puritan campaigns against the Elizabethan public theatre in his The Idolatrous Eye; Iconoclasm and Theatre in Early-Modern England (2000).

133 Not an unfamiliar trope with Shakespeare, as witness his Sonnet 113: “Since you left me my eye is in my mind” (l.1). See also Sonnet 43: “When I most wink then do my eyes best see, / For all the day they view things unrespected” (ll. 1-2).
have appeared even more fraught given the apparent shift of the English population in the early 1590s to majority Protestant.

However, as the reformers discovered, elimination of the Catholic Mass, destruction of material iconography, and denigration of the vast institutional structure that supported a unified community of the living and the dead is more easily accomplished than extirpation of the sacramental habits of the imagination, which lingered notwithstanding the systems of mental indoctrination and catechism marshalled to supplement and bring into alignment the systematic destruction of the material culture.

These aspects of profession and practice of Old Faith piety, from the material to the mental, although subject to divestiture and prohibition by a host of royal injunctions related to ecclesial practice and worship, were neither easily displaced nor forgotten and thus vividly remained in the cultural memory of many in Shakespeare's audience. While not without contention and outright resistance, these measures over time reinforced the gradual, shift already underway in the common understanding of the nature of the divine, initiated by thirteenth century scholasticism, reinforced by ‘Renaissance’ and the ‘juridisizing” of the Church, and

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134 Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*: “[T]he dominant living theatrical experience of . . . a large number of the playgoers of the 1590s was religious drama carried forward from the Middle ages [which] . . . survived the Reformation long enough to become part of the cultural memory of Shakespeare and his audiences” (p. 55, n. 36). Michael O’Connell also forcefully argues this point in his “Vital Cultural Practices: Shakespeare and the Mysteries,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999), pp.149-168.

135 Hans Boersma describes the root of the contention with the Roman Church led to the Protestant break, which primarily centered on the church’s exercise of worldly power, with which the Papal See “juridicised” and centralized secular power in the human institution rather than rather than concentrating on the exercise of divine authority.
realized by the Reformation. An appreciation for the scope of the cultural bewilderment that accompanies that shift stands vital to an understanding of Shakespeare’s later works.  

From this study’s perspective, the subject plays form a counter-statement against the Protestant repudiation of the medieval sense of a sacramental, or ontological, experience of the divine as manifest in the material world. Such experience exceeds the limited modern understanding of “sacramental” that pertains to special rituals that purport to convey God’s grace focused principally on the Eucharist—the instantiation of Christ’s physical presence in the transubstantiated elements of during celebration of the Mass (Dreher 24; Taylor 22-23). In short, Shakespeare, along with his considerable London audiences with similar provincial backgrounds, stood heir to values anchored in living memory and the medieval heritage that understands “sacramental” with a

a much broader and deeper meaning . . . . [A]ll things that existed, even time, [were] in some sense sacramental. [i.e.,] . . . God was present everywhere and revealed Himself . . . through people, places, and things, through which His power flowed. . . the only reason the material world had any meaning at all was because of its relationship to God. (Dreher 24)

Medieval man experienced God’s power as an immediate, present reality throughout the regularities of the created order, as well as in the operation of miracles, but also in sacred places and in the relics of saints (Taylor, A Secular Age 12). The medieval world view


136 See Taylor, MacIntyre, Gregory who respectively offer that important keys to understanding the past are never lost but rather lie “sedimented” in the present. Taylor, Secular Age, p. 29; Gregory, Unintended p. 9.
understood the eternal frame for all human existence and that all history—past, present, and future—takes place *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the aspect of eternity (Eire, *Reformations*, 753).

With a few notable exceptions previously mentioned, commentators often neglect the abundant evidence of Shakespeare’s medieval heritage in favor of his celebration as an innovating harbinger of the “modern.” This study finds that, far from a harbinger of the modern secular world, Shakespeare stood as an importunate witness to his world’s eroding faith in an early Christian understanding of that which holds all things together. Inherited from Christianity of the church fathers, England’s Old Faith perceived existence through the experience of a created world that derived meaning and sustenance from an ongoing, present participation in the Creator.

Renaissance humanism spurs man to realize himself more fully. But, in combination with a new doctrine where nature no longer imperfectly imitates a transcendent reality, but rather, contains the observable principles of its own constitution and behavior, the question inevitably arises of whether a source of truth higher than man exists. Instead of a natural world conceived as a book designed to express realism of divine meaning (Cooper, *Medieval World* 25), now all relevant knowledge about the natural world may be derived from sense experience, *nominalism* having provided that “the physical is the sole determent of what is” (Weaver, *Ideas* 152). As described in the following section, defeat of logical realism, to which I previously refer,

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137 See, e.g., Acts 17:28 (“For in Him we live, and move, and have our being . . . for we are also his offspring”); and Colossians 1:17 (“And he is before all things, and by him all things consist”).

established the conditions for the subtraction of the immanent God of scripture from the world of increasingly self-confident human endeavor for which the Reformation served as both a catalyst and accelerant for the growing distance and disengagement from the Old Faith to which Shakespeare’s later works stand witness. In combination with the divisive claims spawned by reform this paradigm shift in the conception of reality speaks to the erosion of religious engagement altogether and inevitably soon raises the question with which the plays under discussion confront: “does God any longer have a place in the workings of the world?”

However, the contemporary common understanding of “religious change” for Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre audiences at the dawn of the seventeenth century remained ambivalent. For the vast majority, notwithstanding compliant church attendance, sermonizing and thinking theologically were new. Against a heritage of liturgical worship, parishioners were hard pressed to assimilate alien doctrinal precepts via scripture encapsulated by preaching. The central points of indoctrination that touched the lives of the population at large centered on prohibitions against idolatry, which had been brutally realized with the Edwardian destruction of the Old Faith material culture. The near total expungement of devotional images, artifacts, and rituals, together with the aforementioned continuing efforts to expunge the “idols of the mind,” remained a work in progress. Yet, the relentless iconoclasm successfully deprived the faithful of visual manifestations of the holy that focused the imagination on the sacramental experience of a present sacred reality.  

Transmission of piety through preaching and catechizing, together with compulsory church attendance enforced by fines, rendered worship cerebral and alien. Difficulties if not

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outright resistance to the hoped for acceptance, if not embrace, of the Protestant tenets, as promulgated by the Church of England, became compounded by a roiling cacophony of confessional diversity in “Shakespeare’s Metropolis,” which followed. Keith Thomas, quoting the historian Lawrence Stone, describes the Elizabethan period as “the age of the greatest religious indifference before the twentieth century” (172). In short, the systematic dismantling of a faith culture that organized English life for centuries, together with open contention among rival confessions, led not to the Reformation promise of a reinvigorated faith in the spirit of the Apostolic age, but rather to a palpable and abiding detachment from religion altogether.

By the end of the sixteenth century the programs of desacralization on the one hand, and the substituted secular iconography on the other (e.g., Queen Elizabeth assumes iconographic place of the Virgin Mary) along with continuing indoctrination from the substituted missal in the form of the Book of Common Prayer together with the “39 Articles,” served to gradually inform a new “social imaginary” that disengaged people from “religion” as formerly conceived. At the very least, the abrupt, and as yet unexplained, alteration in the form and

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142 Schwartz, pp. 30-31.

143 Discussed above at p.69 and n. 108, Charles Taylor uses his term “social imaginary” to describe a broad cultural embodiment of how “ordinary people imagine their social surroundings . . . as carried in images, stories, legends, etc. . . . that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (A Secular Age 171-72).
subject matter typical of Shakespeare’s previous decade of work, as noted in the Introduction, inevitably reflects disappointment and diminished hope for revival of the Old Faith and survival of its time-honored “social imaginary.” However, more importantly from this study’s perspective, these plays compellingly measure the intractable divide between the inherited pre-Reformation understanding of the created order’s sacramental unity, on the one hand, and the burgeoning confessional cacophony that roiled Shakespeare’s London, on the other.  

### 3.2 Deep Roots

However remote from modern understanding and experience of the world, one can at least follow the argument of philosopher Charles Taylor and historian Brad Gregory that seek to understand current thought from the perspective of both “[l]ong term historical trajectories with origins in distant past” and “sedimented” influences from the distant past that remain influential in the present.  

They both point to Robert Weaver’s claim that the most consequential philosophical change in western thought occurred with the aforementioned defeat of logical realism which, while often overlooked as an influential determinant of subsequent thought, undermined the inherited early Christian conception of God and thus the conception of reality itself (*Ideas Have Consequences* 2-5). How could such remote-in-time historical/

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145 Taylor, p. 29; Gregory, pp. 10-12.

146 I adopt Weaver’s term “logical” realism instead of the currently more common “metaphysical” realism, both being synonymous for the purposes of this discussion.
philosophical assessment relate to Shakespeare’s later works? Or, more broadly, how does it help us to understand Shakespeare’s world or our own for that matter?

Accordingly, consistent with the spirit if not the letter of fashions in literary criticism, specifically “New Historicism” and “Cultural Studies” (Parker 218-239), a more complete understanding of the Reformation context of Shakespeare’s later works and how it bears on the meaning and the reception thereof requires that we look beyond the received commonplace of political enforcement of religious change in England; beyond the divestiture of the material culture from the fabric of traditional worship; beyond the disruption in the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, and the concomitant breakdown of common bonds of parish unity: and, even beyond the attempt to catechize antipathy toward devotional images. These material facts that emanate from institutional imperative and royal command do not explain the apparent magnitude, speed, and ultimate success, however harsh and uneven, of the English Protestant Reformation. The answer lies nested within a theological reconceptualization of the inherited biblical notion of the nature of the divine and the ongoing relationship of God to Creation originally understood by the church fathers—as explained in the writings of St. Augustine and later St. Thomas Aquinas—and intrinsic to the medieval common understanding. That early Christian understanding turns on the means, drawn from scripture and the natural world, by which the divine nature can be known.147 The roots of the profound change in understanding that abandoned the Platonist-Christian concept of “universals” emerged from the metaphysics and scholastic theology as argued in the new universities in England, Italy, and France during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.148

With few exceptions cited in Chapter One (“Review of Criticism”), the underlying philosophical and theological bases for both the aforementioned “paradigm shifts,” articulated by Carlos Eire, and the “watershed” described by Brad Gregory, together with the apparent ease by which the English monarchy and nobility reoriented a millennium of popular devotional culture, remain largely overlooked. These lie nested in a consequential reformulation of the inherited early church understanding of the nature of the divine and the relationship of God to creation. Long prior to Henry VIII’s Act of Supremacy, and over time, the scholastic thinkers and academicians in the new universities of England, France and Italy during the 13th and 14th centuries influenced a substantial alteration in common understanding of metaphysical reality. The effect of this philosophical change limited, if not precluded, God’s ontological intimacy with the natural world. 149

The early church understanding of the divine nature inherited by St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.), and as further articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), witnessed to the immanent presence of the divine in all creation. Early Christian thought, beginning with St. Augustine, synthesized classical Platonism with the divine nature of the immanent creator God revealed in scripture. 150 All material things capable of apprehension by the senses imitated imperfectly transcendent models or forms—often referred to as “universals” or “transcendentals”—the existence of which, as sourced in the divine, is thus conceived as real, hence realism. Aquinas describes a material world originating as “ideas in the mind of God,” 151 and thus postulates a

149 Ibid.

150 See e.g., Augustine, Confessions, Book VII, chapters 1,9,11,15.

151 Aquinas, Summa, Question 15, “Of Ideas”; see also Dupré, Weaver, et al.
source of Being that transcends the experience of the material world. That is, all things in the natural world exist by reason of direct participation in God’s being, hence the Platonic notion of immutable “essences.” Aquinas further held that the natural world testified to divine purpose of an indwelling creator God, the dependable knowledge of whom derived from his creation in a manner that witnessed to God’s potentia ordinata in the sense of God’s existing ordained or established power. Thus, through human observation of the regularities of the natural world one derives knowledge of the divine nature.

Subsequent thinkers in the scholastic debates in the new universities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, led by John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) and William of Ockham (1285-1347) denied that universals had any substantive existence, but were rather constructs originating in the human mind, which began to alter the Christian-Platonist conception of a reality grounded in eternal “forms” or “universals” that transcend material existence in favor of simply supplying a name (nomen) according to physical form and function, hence nominalism. The new doctrine of nature emerged with the gradual abandonment of Christian metaphysical realism, which posited “a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man” in favor of nominalism, which “posits as reality that which is perceived by the senses.”

Thus, unlike the medieval view that regarded nature as a “book designed to express divine meanings,” a new doctrine of nature emerged, which held that nature did not point exclusively to the Creator, but rather stood open to study as a rational, self-operating mechanism without the need to construe divine meaning.

For Scotus and Occam, God reveals himself in scripture, not nature. They deemed Aquinas’s realist view too limiting of God’s potentia absoluta. God’s absolute power cannot be

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152 Ibid.

153 Weaver, p.3; see also Gregory, pp. 57, 64) and Dupré, pp. 5-16.
confined or limited in any way, including the existence, and observed behavior of, natural world predicates in his creation. Thus the understanding that ultimately began to prevail among scholastics postulated a distance between God and Creation, not the ever-present invigoration of the natural world by divine immanence. This significantly altered the inherited classical-medieval concept of reality.

Consequently, the common understanding of reality began a gradual shift away from manifestations of God’s sustaining immanence toward a view of the natural world as a concatenation of independent natural causes. Thus, human observation yields authority of empirical evidence only. As a result, each material element of the natural world need have only an assigned extrinsic or “nominal” meaning, rather than an intrinsic or “real” existence derived from its participation in God’s Being, which new understanding of reality obviates the need to sacramentally consider God’s immanent presence in all of Creation.

a. Reformation theology and denial of logical realism. Most commentary fails to consider how the philosophical alteration in the early Christian concept of the divine, which originated in the scholastic debates of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, profoundly influenced the conceptual bases for the reformed theologies manifest in the Protestant Reformation. The practical result banished the reality perceived by the intellect and posited reality that which is perceived by the senses. In his classic work Ideas have Consequences, Ricard Weaver considers the resulting “defeat of logical realism [as] . . . the crucial event in the history of Western Culture” in that the denial of the real existence of transcendentals enabled

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154 [See Dreher, Boersma, et al].
155 [Dreher, Benedict Option, explanation and ref. to Chas. Taylor, A Secular Age.]
man to “realize[] himself more fully” (3). Weaver analogizes the abandonment of belief in
universals to Macbeth’s fateful encounter with the Wyrd Sisters—the new concept of reality
promised that Renaissance man could aspire to realize himself more fully (4).156 Shakespeare
features the bitter irony of this illusory trade-off as a principal and persistent theme in the later
works to which the modern mindset remains obscure.

Nominalism, the prevailing position in western metaphysics, by the sixteenth century
served as the theological lynchpin of state imposed church reform. The gradual acceptance of
nominalism allowed it to cordon off the church ethic of sub specie aeternitatis,157 that is, life on
earth governed by divine providence and lived according to prescriptions found in scripture,
rather than governed by earthly concern: wealth, power, fulfillment of human potential.
However, the echoes if not strains of metaphysical realism, as articulated by Augustine and
Aquinas, survived in large swaths of England’s Old Faith adherents, who, albeit disenfranchised,
bereft of material culture, stripped of public identity, and under continuing siege as somehow
“alien,” remained “sedimented” as a persistent presence in the English imagination.

Beneath the tumult of the institutional religious change to which Shakespeare bears
witness, the consequential shift in the apprehension of the divine nature served as a deep and
abiding undercurrent. As previously noted, early Christian heritage understands all creation as
an integrated whole that derives existence and meaning from God’s immanent and ongoing
presence in and through the material world which reveals the intrinsic nature of the divine. The
shift in the apprehension of the divine manifest in Hamlet confronts the foregoing ontological

156 Gregory, p.57: “awaiting imprint of human desires.”
157 Literally “under the aspect of eternity,” employed by Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) onwards, as
an honorific expression describing what is universally and eternally true, without any reference to or dependence
upon the temporal portions of reality.
understanding with an epistemological understanding where meaning in nature is *extrinsic*, that is “imposed from the outside by God—and accessible to humans by faith in Him and His revelation alone” (Dreher 28). Nevertheless, the early Christian conception of the Biblical creator God in whom all things inhere\(^{158}\) remained as a persistent anchor for the medievals’ experience of reality where God’s being sustained the existence of everything in the created order, notwithstanding the gradually predominating *nominalist* strain of scholastic thought reinforced by the newly-discovered classic philosophy from which emerged a competing conception of God based upon scripture and revelation alone independent of, and unbound by, predicates found in the natural world. However, the late medieval perception of God’s immanent habitation in the natural world, once thought by later cultural historians to have been displaced by a confidently modern anthropocentric model, now appears sufficiently unsettled, adventitious, and persistently obdurate to survive into the 17th century as a potent competing world view which Shakespeare prominently displays in his later works beginning with *The Tragedy of Hamlet*.\(^{159}\)

**b. The playwright responds.** Shakespeare’s leaves little doubt about his attitude on the matter—the abandoned *sacramental* vision that infuses the plays, the later works in particular, points to God’s being as the anchor of intrinsic reality by which all things are sustained. The underlying positive force of Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics evoke the “*real*” or “essential”—the higher reality sourced in the eternal immutable “*forms*” intrinsic to God’s being.

\(^{158}\) See e.g., Colossians 1:17 (“And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.”).

\(^{159}\) Herbert Butterfield in his 1931 monograph *The Whig Interpretation of History*, pioneered the classic response to the supersessionist historians that assume a teleological bias in historical narrative.
Shakespeare’s irony often reinforces the sacramental view in the form of disdain for a character’s earthbound *nominalism*. The pathos wrung from the pitiful Richard II offers such an example and ridicules Richard’s hapless *nominalist* perspective. Richard II’s extrinsic, or *nominalist* thinking illustrates the Protestant rejection of medieval sacramentality where, without regard to the intrinsic reality to which all things in the natural world point, the material world can only be understood in earthbound terms as external or nominal symbols. Hence, on the cusp of deposition, the essence of kingship escapes Richard. He first seizes on the “name of a king” before moving to the mutable material symbols of kingship—competing artifacts to which he clings for identity, and to which he pitifully assigns shallow and ultimately futile extrinsic meanings—jewels, palace, apparel, and the like:

….Must he lose

The name of king? ‘a God’s name let it go.

I’ll give my jewels for a set of beads,

My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,

My gay apparel for an almsman’s gown,

My figured goblets for a dish of wood,

My scepter for a palmer’s walking staff,

My subjects for a pair of carved saints,

And my large kingdom for a little grave,

A little little grave, an obscure grave—

(*Richard II*, 3.3.144-54)

In her study of secularism and sacramental poetics, Regina Schwartz observes how in this speech, Shakespeare’s Richard associates his kingship with property, the loss of which, in his
mind, stands for loss of his kingdom. Richard’s extrinsic, or nominalist thinking illustrates the Protestant rejection of medieval sacramentality where, without regard to the intrinsic reality to which all things in the natural world point, the material world can only be understood in earthbound terms as external or nominal symbols.

By contrast, in his later play, The Tragedy of Hamlet, Shakespeare shows a similarly agonized King Claudius. Confronted by Hamlet’s apparent knowledge of the secret crime, the King’s attempted prayer voices the existential dilemma between the nominalist and the realist perspectives that weighs the material elements of his kingship against the destiny of his soul so as to find some means of escape from both honest repentance and ultimate judgment.

... But, O, what form of prayer

Can serve my turn? “Forgive me my foul murder”?

That cannot be, since I am still possess’d

Of those effects for which I did the murder--

My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

... .

In the corrupted currents of this world,

Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice,

And oft ‘tis seen the wicked prize itself

Buys out the law. But ‘tis not so above:

There is no shuffling; there the action lies

In his true nature, and we ourselves compell’d,

Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,

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To give in evidence. (*Ham.*, 3.3.51-55; 57-62)

Here mere accidental nominal accessories, Claudius declares essential. The material entitlements to his kingship for which he “did the murder” take on incriminating significance. God’s divine reality will not be “shoved by” with the customary worldly instruments of avoidance and excuse; no “shuffling” can stand in the eternal face of “his true nature.”

In *King Lear*, Gloucester and his bastard son, Edmund, dramatize the tension between the a pre-modern sacramental mindset in which everything in the material world points to, and participates in, greater realities from which one may derive a knowledge of God and the view that sees the natural world as consisting of no more than external or nominal symbols. Edmund’s father, the realist Gloucester, sounds the early Christian sacramental understanding of a cosmos that points to the divine, its existence infused by God’s ineffable being. To his mendacious son Edmund, Gloucester reflects on the ordinance of cosmic unity whereby the “late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us” in that these signs reflect like disjuncture in human behavior, as witness such successive ruptures as Lear’s abdication, Kent’s banishment, and Edmund’s brother’s purported sudden violent animus (1.2.102-106). Privately, the nominalist Edmund sneers at such notion, sarcastically confiding in soliloquy:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeits of our own behavior—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforc’d obedience of a planetary influence, and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

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An admirable evasion of a whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the change of a star! (1.2.121-31)

Often praised as an anticipatory expression of modern cynicism, this passage stands rather as a sardonic critique of the loss of a sacramental vision. 162

Later in the play, Shakespeare ironizes the abandonment of the sacramental view that the created order maintains its eternal origin in God with a related Ockham concept known as the principle of parsimony, later referred to as “Ockham’s razor.” Sheltered with fellow outcasts in the abandoned peasant’s hovel, Lear inquires of “this philosopher,” nominally “Poor Tom” but actually Gloucester’s wrongfully accused son, Edgar—“What is the cause of thunder?” The very statement of the question suggests an inability to recognize the created order as anchored in the being of a transcendent God that manifests in and through the material world. Rather, the person of “this learnéd Theban,” to whom the mad Lear directs his question, and from whom he receives no answer, satirically suggests the limitations of nominalist empiricism by the ironic absence of what might otherwise be a self-evident answer to the question (3.4.153). Ockham’s principle of parsimony, as understood in Shakespeare’s desacralizing world, provided that if a natural phenomenon can be explained on its own terms, God is not needed—no need for two explanations (science and God) when one will do. 163


163 “Ockham’s Razor,” a term later formulated for the concept attributed to William of Ockham, refers to distinguishing between two hypotheses either by "shaving away" unnecessary assumptions or cutting apart two similar conclusions. The closest expression of such hypothesis found in any of Ockham's writings, may be Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate (“Plurality must never be posited without necessity”), which
c. **Primacy of individual over community.** Commentators suggest that dominance of *nominalism* and the defeat of metaphysical *realism* not only enabled the “paradigm shifts” of the Protestant religious revolution but also served to incubate a Renaissance sense of individualism that subverted the medieval sense of human community insofar as it “was predicated on the notion that each person was . . . . a self-subsistent entity, whose being was, in principle, unrelated to the being of other persons” and logically followed from the weakening medieval sense of the unity of all creation.164 At the beginning of his villainous career, the scheming Richard of Gloucester abjures the sacramental unity of Creation as he famously declares that “I have no brother, I am like no brother / . . . . / I am myself alone,” he (3H6 5.6.80, 83 [Riverside]). In the end, his conscience as the now Richard III denies his nominalist effort fails to re-shape the reality of judgment:

> My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
> And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
> And every tale condemns me for a villain. (*R3*, 5.3.193-95)

This fits well with the embrace of a new cosmopolitan rush of “this-worldliness” that fostered the same nominalist “extrusion” of God from the natural world that also inaugurated the

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164 Boersma, p. 89. See R.V. Young’s discussion in “‘How drie a Cinder this world is’: Dissociation of Sensibility Redux,” re: Charles.Taylor’s “‘buffered self’ as opposed to the pre-modern ‘porous self,’ open to the influence of magical forces, spirits, and demons of the ‘enchanted world’.” Young, p. 164; Taylor, *Secular* p. 37.
Renaissance shift “from the glory of God to the glory of man.” Of this shift also, Shakespeare took due regard. Early in Hamlet the playwright parodies the credulous Renaissance optimism exemplified by Pico Mirandello’s famous words: “We can become what we will”—the aspiration itself a resounding echo of the Greek philosopher Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things.” Already with ample cause for personal frustration, Hamlet frames a trenchant and deeply ironic riposte to the sense of giddy Renaissance anthropocentrism personified by the frivolous secularity of his schoolmates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Following his florid discourse that likens the natural world, “this goodly frame, the earth,” to a sterile promontory and the heavens to a “foul and pestilent congregation of vapors”—shocking apostasy from a realist perspective, but entirely consistent with the nominalist view (2.2.299-300, 303-304)—which I argue Hamlet satirizes by drawing philosophical circles around his treacherous friends as he continues in mock celebration of the Renaissance ideal:

165 See Gregory’s discussion of the domestication of God’s transcendence and the extrusion of his presence from the natural world via nominalism’s heuristic principle of parsimony. p. 38; see also Dreher, p. 30 and generally, Louis Dupré, Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture. pp. 6-10.

166 Quoted in Dreher, The Benedict Option. p. 30.

167 Not unlike Hamlet’s dissembling manners to those that seek information for the king, the classic set piece, quoted here, often seen as an expression of a Renaissance humanist ideal, not only mocks his friends, but, consistent with the claims of this study, stands for the opposite—an Edenic ideal, the capacity for attainment of which has become lost in the secular malaise of Elizabeth’s Reformation London. E.M.W. Tillyard begins his The Elizabethan World Picture with an excerpt of the quoted speech followed by the comment that “it is in the purest medieval tradition: Shakespeare’s version of the orthodox encomia [a formal expression of high praise] of what man, created in God’s image, was like in his prelapsarian state and of what he is still capable of being.” p.3.
What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.296-309) (emphases supplied)

Hamlet’s seemingly self-deprecating “and yet, to me . . .” that follows the exalted picture of valorized man brings his discourse full circle to the pretensions of the isolated self, and parodically recalls the forgotten scriptural truth of man’s dependence on God’s Being for existence. For all of his impressive “accidents,” the essence of man is no more than dust animated and sustained by God’s breath of life, as reported in Genesis. 168 Note the wry departure from the eternal frame understood to encompass all human existence—all history, past, present, and future, takes place sub specie aeternitatis (under the aspect of eternity) governed by divine providence.

The narratives of the succeeding subject plays, together with the poetics and action on stage, castigate the widening gap between traditional Christian proclamation and performance, deepened and exacerbated by theological contention and confessionalization loosed by the English Reformation. Four years after Hamlet’s wry parody of his feckless schoolmates, to dampen their surfeit of Renaissance optimism and opportunism, Shakespeare’s “frame” metaphor becomes a figure of hegemonic extreme in Macbeth. Macbeth chooses to forcefully defy, rather than to recognize the essence of immutable reality, preferring to:

168 Genesis 2:7 “The Lord God also made the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed in his face breath of life, and the man was a living soul.” God reiterates this essential concept after the Fall in Genesis 3:19: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth: for out of it wast thou taken, because thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou return.”
Let the frame of things disjoint. Both the worlds suffer,

Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep

In the affliction of these terrible dreams that shakes us nightly. (Mac. 3.2.18-21)

Gregory argues that the proliferation of fissiparous Protestantism not only revealed the weakness of traditional Christian tenets of faith, but augured the failure of Christianity itself.169

### 3.3 Shakespeare Against the Grain: Recovery of Sacramental Vision

Among the playwrights of his time, Shakespeare distinguished his later works by an “incarnational aesthetic,” which, in the collaborating mind of an audience culturally disposed to understand the world “analogically,” displays three distinctive aspects of what I call Shakespeare’s “sacramental vision.” First, the plays embody the narrative action (as opposed to rhetorical description), where a kiss or stabbing or blinding occurs onstage in real time with very little backstory.170 Second, “staging the unstageable”171 via corporeal manifestation of things supernatural or invisible (e.g., Old King Hamlet’s Ghost, Banquo’s Ghost, Ariel—the “airy spirit”). Third, interaction between the character and external aspects or “essences” that comprise or affect his own malignant self (Lear’s furious ripostes to the tempest which adumbrates his own elemental self-oppression: “Blow winds, and crack your cheeks!” [3.2.1]; Macbeth’s “dagger of the mind” [2.1.38]). These aspects of “incarnational aesthetic” could

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169 *Ibid.* pp. 44-46. In contrast to modern secularity, the “doctrinal controversies” that emerged in the 16th century carried profound and consequential “social, moral, and political effects . . . to the point where Christianity itself became the central bone of contention” p.45.

170 [Bloom? Cooper? Goldman?]

171 Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World.* p. 31
successfully appeal to an older, traditional “habit of mind” that yet survived in Shakespeare’s substantial audiences of the period.172

The plays Shakespeare produced in the second half of his career, from *Hamlet* (1600) through *The Tempest* (1611), reflect three ways by which to see the world sacramentally through the poetics and action on stage so as to effect an essential apprehension of the divine grounded in the aforementioned fundamental tenets of the Old Faith. In the course of his analysis of the theological causes and consequences of the Reformation, Brad Gregory summarizes these tenets as “Three Ways of Knowing,” which form a common understanding, or Christian “imaginary,” which I find amply reflected in the plays. That is, 1) that the immanent presence of the divine operates in and through the natural world, the elements of which draw sustaining life from the creator’s being, 2) that divine providence controls—shapes, orders, corrects—the actions of men and political institutions, and 3) that peace and human fellowship lies in the answered call to the Gospel’s shared way of life—and, conversely, that destruction inevitably follows its disruption or denial.173 Gregory argues that these “three ways of knowing [God],” which formed the foundations of traditional Christian thought and teaching, had collapsed—first in the failure of late medieval Christendom to practice the inherited principles of Christ’s teaching, and second in the failure of the Reformers’ attempt to restore the apostolic faith that resulted in the contentious confessional fragmentation that followed.174 The failure of promised reform to cure these

173 Ibid., pp. 41-42, 133-36, 307-308. See n. 58, above.
174 Ibid.
shortcomings of the medieval church, in turn, augured the failure of Christianity itself.¹⁷⁵

Shakespeare’s later works witness to the Old Faith sacramental vision of the divine in Creation that yet survived in fading cultural memory.

This study shows that each play discussed herein fashions from the inherited medieval world view a way of seeing the nature of God Being as revealed through all creation, including political institutions and human community. That is, albeit tarnished by failures of the late medieval institutionalized Church and under siege by reason of contentious and divisive reform, these later works embody appeals to bolster the fading cultural memory of Shakespeare’s public theatre audience that yet survived.

_Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, and The Tempest_ each dramatize the three avenues, summarized above, by which the nature of the divine can be known, as embedded in the traditional faith understanding of Christianity. Each play variously forms a positive declaration that explores the nature of God’s Being in the natural world, how God relates to His creation as understood by the Old Faith now under attack by the Reformers, and how people are to live together in community, each of which I summarize below.

a. **Staging Sacramental Realism.**

Shakespeare employs sacramental poetics that point to and materialize the porous continuum between the visible and invisible. The metaphorical integration of natural and supernatural frames the action _sacramentally_, as illustrated by the initial scene in _Hamlet_, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Three (“Hamlet at the Crossroads”). Among other things Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics collapse the distance between nature and super-nature, the scene on the battlements also improbably pairs Old King Hamlet’s Ghost with the Holy Ghost,

¹⁷⁵ [“failure of Christianity”/ Ref. to “call into question what Christianity was (Gregory) _et. al._.”]
the latter seen only by the players as the spirit manifest in the dawn “walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill” (1.1.167). Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics also collapse the distance between God and his purposes in all creation. The fury of the storm on the heath adumbrates the raging chaos in Lear’s mind (“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!”) as the tumult and cleansing deluge resolve into a salving epiphany wherein Lear recognizes creation’s unity in his human kinship with all who stand as but “[p]oor, naked wretches,” all common participants in God’s Being (3.2.1; 3.4.28).

The full purchase of Shakespeare’s sacramental vision must of course occur in the analogical mind of his audience. These plays indicate how Shakespeare draws upon older traditional forms of artistic expression in a way that stirred the audience’s capacity to serve as imaginative collaborators in the plays’ sacramental vision—one in which the audience effectively experiences the interpenetration of the material and nonmaterial worlds in the course of the players embodiment in ritual performance. For example, such figures as Macbeth’s “dagger of the mind” soliloquy (2.1.38), pictures the interpenetration of the worlds where, in the incarnational aesthetic of Shakespeare’s theatre, the invisible becomes visible to the playgoer if only through reported impressions of Macbeth’s “heat oppressed brain” (2.1.39) just as the tormented mind of Lady Macbeth clearly sees the inculpatory “damn’d spot” that relentlessly returns to haunt (5.1.35).

In decisive moments of sacramental invocation, Shakespeare’s characters utter the words that seek to bring about the actual physical effect invoked. As Andrew Greely defines the term, that which is “sacramental” not only reveals the invisible presence of God but also the corresponding conflict between the divine and the demonic (6-7). Lady Macbeth summons

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176 See Taylor at 122 and Dreher at 24]
unseen demonic spirits: “Come you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,” (1.5.40-41) as Macbeth similarly commands unseen demonic powers to “[c]ancel and tear to pieces” God’s baptismal bond with him (3.2.49). To Shakespeare’s contemporary audience, these words are not merely rhetorical, but sacramental in nature. As Sarah Beckwith characterizes dramatic use of sacramental language: “words that ‘do’ rather than words that merely ‘mean’.” However, within the field of Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics these are words that compel the act or condition, such as Hamlet’s “’Tis now the very witching time of night / . . . Now I could drink hot blood” (3.2.387, 389) or Lear’s “Blow winds, crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!” (3.2.1). Again, in light of William Perkins’s dire warning that “[a] thing feigned in the mind by the imagination, is an idol” these poetic intimations, of many similar examples, would seem figures of some daring currency

In contrast to utterances that would assume the divine or usurp the divine will, Shakespeare’s last solely authored work, The Tempest, demonstrates how such use of sacramental language operates both instrumentally to effect change in others and reflexively to conform one’s own self to the divine will. Prospero draws upon the constituent elements of the island’s natural world to express divine meaning, as justice, tempered with mercy, becomes sacramentally manifest to those chastised and humbled on the isle of The Tempest. In the end, Prospero delivers for himself his own sacramental invocation of humility and surrender before the unseen immanent presence of the divine:

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,

And ye that on the sands with printless foot

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177 Sarah Beckwith, Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness, p. 28.

178 See, Perkins, Warning against Idolatrie of the last times, p. 107.8, quoted in Aston, p. 453.
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and so fly him

When he comes back; . . . . (5.1.33-36)

Notwithstanding his privileged powers by which he “bedimmed \[\text{the noontide} \text{sun, [and] called forth the mutinous winds,}” (40-41), Prospero applies the same penitential humility he has wrung from his usurpers to himself as he not only “abjures . . . .this rough magic” (50-51) but divests himself of his potent instruments of power:

I’ll break my staff,

Bury it certain fadoms in the earth,

And deeper than did ever plummet sound

I’ll drown my book. (54-57)

The characters, symbols, situations, and language of the plays purposely invite imaginative participation in the spiritual reality to which these elements point. The spiritual reality invoked by the plays is a function of the integration of the metaphorical language and the acted action of the actor’s bodies in the physical space of the stage which the audience can sacramentally experience through their analogical “habit of mind.” This way of seeing or “sacramental ontology,”\(^{179}\) invests the plays with their unique power and provide insight into Shakespeare’s innovative turn to the types of plays produced in the second half of his career.

a. Staging God’s Providential Presence and Eschatological Purpose. [“The Project is Going Somewhere”]

Along with staging God’s immanent presence within and through the material world via the porous continuum between the visible and invisible, “[h]istory too—including the biblical history of redemption—was sacramental in character” (Boersma 39). In each of the subject plays the purposeful, unseen hand of divine providence pervades and subsumes the action as an

\(^{179}\) [See Boersma’s use of term]
overtaking providence that controls and ultimately resolves the matter. The plays evoke the sacramental model of God’s doings in history both as reported in scripture and as repeated in human aggregation of political action and behaviors in the material world, which stands as God’s analogical predication of his presence and purpose in the past, present and future.  

For example, the provenance of scriptural history amplifies the magnitude of Hamlet’s usurping uncle’s murder of old King Hamlet, as Claudius identifies the act in his attempt to pray as having “the primal eldest curse upon’t / A brother’s murther,” (3.3.37-38) as reported and punished in the Genesis story of Cain and Abel. Macduff correlates the bloody visage of the murdered King Duncan to the Apocalypse as “the great doom’s image” (2.3.8); likewise the killing of Macduff’s children recalls the Gospel account of the Slaughter of the Innocents, recounted in Matthew 2:16-18. Similarly, commentators note the analogy between the torture and blinding of Gloucester in Lear and the buffeting of Christ as dramatized in the mystery plays.

The plays’ narratives stand as microcosms of the eschatological sweep of God’s doings in history, inherited from indigenous religious theatre, especially the cycle plays, and serve to draw the audience in to “emotional engagement with [biblical] patterns of fall and redemption, judgment and salvation.” Each play’s conclusion results from a divine inevitability, woven

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180 [Integrate Milligan Abstract Notes at 6-8); cf. “God is implicated in the very existence of society” chap. 1 p, 7 + Thomas; ADD AV, 174-176]

181 According to Michael O’Connell the specific reference originates not from the Biblical text but from “vivid Mystery Play enactment.” The Idolatrous Eye. p. 87.

182 Ibid. at 88; See also Beatrice Groves ”‘Now wole I a newe game begynne’: Staging Suffering in King Lear, the Mystery Plays and Grotius’s ‘Christus Patiens’.” pp. 136-150.

183 [FIND THIS QUOTE ? at 286? ]
into the fabric of the story. In addition to the foregoing specific references, examples include, in *Hamlet*, Claudius’s fall and fruitless pursuit of redemption; and, in *Macbeth*, the infestation of evil that fosters refusal to carry out God’s purposes in history.

### a. Staging the Gospel’s model of charity in community:

Shakespeare employs the most easily understood avenue toward sacramental understanding of God’s purpose and plan for human life in a way that promotes goodness of the Gospel’s shared life in community. C.S. Lewis’s “medieval model” provides for a communal notion of social identity which, as Alisdair MacIntyre explains, derived from an earthly community which stood as the material analogy to the heavenly community represented on earth by the Church. Each play at issue, whether comedy or tragedy, resolves with a proverbial conclusion that either heals the disordered community or demonstrates the inevitable consequences of purposeful rupture. The providential elements of trial, ordeal, and mortal conflict in the plays discussed in the foregoing “Staging God’s Providence” section, also support the usually painful peregrination from a condition of individual human isolation to self-

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185 The phrase “wisdom beyond mere knowledge,” quoted by Gregory, p. 308, is proverbial, e.g., Michel Moorcock “We have a force greater than reason! We have a wisdom beyond mere knowledge. We have the Holy Grail itself”; *The Dragon in the Sword* (1986) Book 3, Ch. 2. p. 642.

186 Lewis, *Discarded Image*. p. 222; Alisdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*. pp. 172-73: “The individual carries his communal roles with him as part of the definition of his self, even unto his isolation” p.173. See also Eamon Duffy reinforces the collapse of Old Faith’s order of the human community and the magnitude of the Reformation’s attack on the doctrine of Purgatory as “an attempt to redefine the boundaries of human community . . .to limit the claims of the past, and the people of the past, on the people of the present.” *Stripping of the Altars*. p. 8.
correcting *metanoia* by way of sudden recognition of, and reconciliation with, a community united by divine love.

The later plays provide ample evidence that the irony of the hypocritical disjunction between Christian principle, as promulgated by Church teaching, and the practice of Christians was not lost on Shakespeare. It would seem that the “participatory experience and related holiness rooted in shared Christian life,” would surely stand as fundamental to the purpose and meaning of Christ’s instructions on how to live as recorded in the Gospels, and be available to all regardless of education or erudition (307). Yet, in Brad Gregory’s formulation, the failure of medieval Christians to adhere to Gospel prescriptions for shared life in community only intensified with Reform. As discussed above, dissolution of long shared traditions of communal worship in place and practice, the roiling confessional conflict in Shakespeare’s London, complicated by both royal injunctions that sought to enforce conformity with the Church of England and antagonism from abroad, stood witness to the collapse of not only the shared structures that bound communities together, but to religious engagement altogether. Against this decline, Shakespeare’s sacramental poetics provide dramatic images of Christian charity’s transforming power.

Humbled by the “pelting of this pitiless storm,” Lear’s conscience shames his self-absorbed arrogance that prompted his willful abdication so as to experience in full the essence of biblical kingship of which he had remained aloof:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,

That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,

... .

O, I have ta’en

Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (3.4.28-29; 32-36)

Yet even in this dark tragedy, Shakespeare’s provides characters who, in the face of the existential cruelty manifest in the play, steadfastly demonstrate love and compassion, both hard-won and determined, even at their own risk, such as Cornwall’s servants’ provision poultice for Gloucester’s wounded eye sockets; Kent’s and Edgar’s disguised service to the raving Lear, and blinded Gloucester, respectively stand as two of more examples.

Just as Hamlet’s, Lear’s, and Gloucester’s respective metanoia prompt healing forgiveness, reconciliation, and ‘common unity,’ Macbeth dramatizes the full purchase of the dehumanizing cost of isolation from community which renders him as little more than a soulless, sleepless, remorseless casualty of spiritual defeat. The outcomes driven by the themes of redemption and forgiveness within each narrative transform the entire community. For example, Hamlet ultimately purges the rot of the Danish Court; the respective ordeals in King Lear purge the infection of public pride to yield the sense of common humility; the Scottish kingdom of Macbeth both survives its ordeal of a murderous tyrant’s reign and restores peace in an enlarged Christian community; and The Tempest reconciles the shipwrecked usurpers with their exiled but powerful victim and his island family.
3.4 Innovations in Aid of Sacramental Vision

The following discusses three innovations that bear substantial freight of the Shakespeare’s sacramental vision. Along with the abrupt change in the theological orientation of his later works Shakespeare distinctively adapts contemporary theatrical and literary conventions that provide instrumental means by which to convey the sacramental vision woven throughout the plays. The chapters that follow discuss these techniques in context. However, by way of illustration, Shakespeare’s innovative use of three different literary and dramatic conventions, common to the plays under discussion, bear mention here. The following brief summary suggests the range of innovative poetic and dramatic techniques and suggests how these innovations evoke Gregory’s “three ways of knowing” [God] in the traditional medieval understanding. These innovations aid the delivery of themes that exemplify both the Old Faith aspirations and the encroaching indifference toward, first, understanding the metaphysical nature of the divine; second, adherence to biblical models of human organization; and third, sustaining the goodness of the Gospel’s shared way of life in community.

a. Soliloquies.

Shakespeare’s innovative use of the soliloquy, as developed and advanced in his later works, enhances delivery of his sacramental vision. Often regarded as a variation of the rhetorical device of “direct address,” inherited from Roman drama of Terence, Plautus, and Seneca and manifest across mystery cycle and Tudor morality plays, the soliloquy remained a primary component of the Elizabethan/Jacobean drama of Marlowe, Jonson, and many others. Shakespeare’s own early works include distinctive examples of conventional soliloquys in Titus
Andronicus (circa. 1588) and Richard III (1594), which utilize conventional forms of direct audience address. However, modern commentary regards Shakespeare’s use of the soliloquy beginning with Brutus’s agonized contemplation in Julius Caesar as qualitatively different in kind from customary rhetorical style of self-directed speech. In keeping with modern emphasis on individual character in Shakespeare, commentators eager to psychologize such dramatic moments often insist that Shakespeare intended his characters’ soliloquies to capture the actual process of thought or meditations emanating from the inner most “self” to which the actor gives voice. However, as an instrument for delivery of Shakespeare’s sacramental vision, the soliloquy assumes a vital significance beyond that of merely the psychologized notion of self-contained “rumination,” in that it often forms a sacramental bridge between the material and non-material worlds.

The device is firmly rooted in an ancient rhetorical form. The term “soliloquy” derives from Augustine’s Soliloquia where he engages in dialogue not with his modern psychological “self” but rather in the neo-Platonic sense with personified concepts, more akin to the morality

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187 [re Tit. Comment on date, cite to soliloquys of Tit. And Aaron; R3, celebrated as clever adaptation (echo) of conventional “vice” character, see, e.g., Bernard Spivak’s (1958) Allegory of Evil for redirection of how WS’s characters function (107).]

188 [NOTE James Shapiro, 1599, re: Brutus]

189 [cite to Brutus sol. “It must be by his death.” (2.1.10-34).]


191 Bradley (1904) set the tone of psychological interpretation of Shakespeare.
play heritage of psychomachia where human impulses originate in “forms.” Augustine’s
dialogue with self serves as a device with which to reveal important (mis)understandings about
the Divine.

Shakespeare also adapts the soliloquy as a device with which to sacramentally bridge the
material and non-material worlds. He accomplishes this via the use of personification or
apostrophe, such as Lear’s “Blow winds crack your cheeks” (3.2.1); Lady Macbeth’s “Come you
spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts” (1.5.40-41); or Macbeth’s “Come, seeling night” (3.2.46).
These serve as effective undercurrents in the larger narrative that personify aspects of the human
mind and that sacramentally bridge the gap between nature and the supernatural. In the plays, it
is as if the character stands sacramentally accompanied by entities or “essences” that, like
Macbeth’s dagger, have crossed over from the world beyond the senses into visual apprehension
in a manner that directly bears on the material world of the play.]

Other solo speech appears in the form of Augustine’s *Soliloquia*, as a puzzling over a
problem in the form of dialogue within oneself, but actually voice and aggregated influences on
human knowledge and destiny, such as Macbeth’s “If it were done when ‘tis done, then t’were
well \ It were done quickly” (1.7.1-2); or any one of several among those in *Hamlet*. Despite the
appearance of isolated speech Acts, these often reflect a multivocal “conflict of essences”193— At
first blush, Hamlet’s significant speeches seem naturally enough to reflect and comment on the
oppression of immediate circumstances. Yet, on closer examination, the mercurial Hamlet
appears to converse with an array of competing and cooperating forces, inclinations, agencies

192 See generally, Otto Pfleiderer, *Philosophy of Religion*.

193 “Metaphysical conflict of essences between light and dark, the son of God and Satan.” (Otto Pfleiderer, The
Philosophy of Religion: on the Basis of its History, v. 4, p. 18.)
regarding the conundrum with which he believes he is tasked. The acute nature of Hamlet’s “conflict of essences” gives him the oft remarked-upon fragmented “wild and whirling” character, which his put-on “antic disposition” does not entirely explain.

b. *Providential Irony.*

As a second innovation, the unfolding dramas reveal how the scriptural model of God’s actions in history sacramentally govern the secular narrative. In aid thereof, Shakespeare adapts the literary device of dramatic irony into what I call *providential irony.* The term contrasts God’s ongoing providential sovereignty over his creation with the unknowing conduct of his human creatures who often stand oblivious to the nature of God’s supervening providence until through the course of the play—for better or worse—they learn the truth. These plays’ dramatic narratives reveal to both characters and audience the unseen hand of the divine in the affairs of men. A principal ironic theme in each often reveals that even when the characters think they act to control events, they do not. The failure to apprehend the nature of God’s providence often reveals the bitter irony of their presumptuous disregard. Often, the audience sees truths that remain hidden from, or misapprehended by, the characters on stage, only to witness the characters’ ultimate recognition of the governing role of the divine in their human affairs.

As cross-currents of plot and counterplot in *Hamlet* culminate, Laertes, with poignant irony laments that his and the king’s “foul practice / Hath turned itself on me” (5.2.320-21). *King Lear*’s cascade of punishing providential ironies begins with the king’s impetuous division of his kingdom, which ironically fosters the disinheritance of his one loyal daughter and rewards the feigned love of her sisters which in turn yields not the careless kingly fantasy life but rather the

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194 I am indebted to Anthony Esolen, whose study *Ironies of Faith: The Laughter at the Heart of Christian Literature* (2007) inspired the term “providential irony” used herein and on whose work I base that concept.
chaos and ruin of civil war. Likewise, the loyal Gloucester bases hasty condemnation of his faithful son, Edgar, upon the plotting perjury of his villainous son, Edmund. Both Lear and Gloucester ultimately learn the awful truth. The battle heroics that commence Macbeth, only deepen the irony with which Macbeth seizes the Wyrd Sisters’ prophetic blandishments, which turn out as Banquo warned, “truths that . . . betray’s” (1.3.124-25). ¹⁹⁵ Events reveal that the Sisters’ words actually import the opposite of what Macbeth hears them to purport. The Tempest weaves providential ironies throughout, beginning with the catastrophic shipwreck of the tainted governing elite of Naples and Milan, upon the very island where Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan, and his young daughter Miranda had landed after being set adrift by the very same usurpers and left for dead. Notwithstanding their miraculous deliverance and alien circumstances, the undercurrent of human sin in the usurpers remains irrepressible. As the agent of divine providence, Prospero thwarts their subtle plots to restore moral order to the governing elite and the chastened Prospero himself to his former life. All the while, the two shipwrecked comic plotter-servants, Trinculo and Stephano, in league with Prospero’s would be usurper slave, Caliban, adumbrate and underscore the ironies of their usurping masters’ futile plots and perspectives. Yet, in the end the audience stands witness to these characters’ apprehension of sin and recognition of God’s supervening and painful providential truth.

c. Common-unity: The Stage Clown re-Imagined: “Wisdom beyond mere knowledge”

“God chose what is foolishness in the world to shame the wise.” (1 Cor. 1:27)

A third innovation shared by the plays recrafts the stock Elizabethan clown character as a personified thematic focus for the value of the shared way of life in Christian community as

commanded by Jesus’s Gospel teaching, as amplified by the above quotation from St. Paul. — which did not stand unanswered in the substantial surviving canon of countervailing treatises in defense of the Roman church survived in underground circulation. While attendees at Elizabethan-Jacobean public theatres were unlikely students of doctrinal controversy, the politics of religion in Shakespeare’s time were unavoidable. Despite the novelty of theological thinking, the fundamental questions regarding earthly efficacy and eternal consequences of social conduct remained a subject for which post-Reformation ecclesiastical guidance, via mandatory church attendance seemed remote, even alien, if not problematic, but in any event uncertain.  

Among Christianity’s failures Gregory takes to task lies this “third way of knowing” [God], namely the collapse of a belief in the value of “the Gospel’s shared way of life as embodied in Christian practices” (307-308). The “participatory experience and related holiness rooted in shared Christian life” stands as a source of knowledge of God available to all regardless of erudition (308). Accordingly, the significance of Shakespeare’s mid-career innovative use of an otherwise classic “stock” clown character role is worth noting, particularly in light of the radical and unexplained turn-of-the-century personnel change. Concurrently with the move to the Globe Theatre, Will Kemp, an original company member, sharer, and the mainstay clown mysteriously parts ways with the Chamberlain’s Men, and yet pursues other public performing  

196 Secular moral guidance remained problematic in Elizabethan England. Individuals bringing attention to that condition include John Stow among others cited in Cooper; Thomas: “religion offered a ritual method of living”(76), which included litany of relational sin & aspirations, confession, absolution, punishment, reward, eternal life. Protestantism dispensed with supernatural assistance in the endeavor of life, instead referred the individual to “the unpredictable mercies of God” (77) and counseled reliance on the individual’s own resources and techniques (78-79).
opportunities. Kemp, to whom critics attribute the creation of such iconic roles as Dogberry (*Ado*), Peter (*Rom*), Costard (*LLL*), Bottom (*MND*), and, of course, Falstaff (*1&2H4*), boasted a well-established on-stage personality and popular reputation that pre-dated his time with the Chamberlain’s men, which affected both audience delight in his on-stage improvisation and audience banter, and Kemp’s willingness to satisfy crowd expectations. While James Shapiro comments at length on the fact of Kemp’s departure from the company “when his fame was at its height” he relegates the sudden, unexplained, and perhaps “less than friendly” separation to a generalized notion of Shakespeare’s move toward “more naturalistic drama” (*A Year in the Life* 38-40).

However, Bill Alexander distinguished director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, offers a theory that more specifically reflects the depth and meaning that Shakespeare integrated into the context of his later works, indicated by the by the much more subtle and emotionally complex role of Falstaff which may well have proven unsuited to crowd pleasing improvisations of clowns in the mold of Kempe or his famous predecessor, Richard Tarlton. Thus, Alexander’s theory makes sense when Shakespeare integrated the clown specialist into key elements of meaning. The precursor of the new clown role for which Shakespeare began to write, may well be the iconic clown role with unprecedented emotional depth and dimension he initiated with the tragic figure of Falstaff, a role for which the stock conventions of crowd pleasing improvisation simply would not work.

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197 Kempe's success and influence was such that as of December 1598, while he remained one of a core of five actor-shareholders in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (since 1594) alongside Shakespeare and Richard Burbage, he abruptly parted company with the group.

Shakespeare replaced his inherited *boffo* knockabout clown that served as an independent entertainment vehicle, with one fully integrated in the play and that provided a key to substantive/thematic content. Bente Videbaek claims that Shakespeare, “is the only playwright of the time who explores the possibilities of the clown part and uses it to the fullest . . . as a major contribution to the understanding of the play . . . [serving] as audience’s looking glass” (1, 40).

The “new” clowns that appear in each of the subject plays, play a key role in the overall framing of the plays’ thematic trajectory *vis a vis* foolishness of God and wisdom of men (1 Cor. 27). These include, e.g., “grave diggers” in *Hamlet*, 5.1; the Porter in *Macbeth*, 2.3; and Lear’s Fool, and the group of Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano throughout *The Tempest*. In short, Shakespeare’s new clown constitutes “wisdom beyond mere knowledge” (Gregory 308). The change in Shakespeare’s clowns underscores the asserted significant change in aesthetic trajectory in the later works. Far from comic relief, Shakespeare’s new clown/fool reveals the *gravitas* of the given play’s theological orientation and provides substantive insight into each play’s sacramental vision.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

ACCORDINGLY, a more complete understanding of the Reformation context of Shakespeare’s later works and how it bears on the meaning and the reception thereof requires that we look beyond the received commonplace of political enforcement of religious change in England; beyond the divestiture of the material culture from the fabric of traditional worship; beyond the disruption in the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, and the concomitant breakdown of common bonds of parish unity, and even beyond the attempt to catechize antipathy toward devotional images. The material facts which emanate from institutional imperative and royal command do not explain the apparent magnitude, speed, and ultimate success, however harsh
and uneven, of the English Protestant Reformation. The answer lies nested within a theological reconceptualization of the inherited biblical notion of the nature of the divine and the ongoing relationship of God to Creation originally understood by the church fathers—as explained in the writings of St. Augustine and later St. Thomas Aquinas—and intrinsic to the medieval common understanding. That early Christian understanding turns on the means, drawn from scripture and the natural world, by which the divine nature can be known.199 The roots of that profound change in understanding emerged from the metaphysics and scholastic theology as argued in the new universities in England, Italy, and France during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.200

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200 See, e.g., Louis Dupré’s *Rise of Modern Culture*, Ch. 1.
4. **HAMLET AT THE CROSSROADS**

    *Our indiscretion sometime serve us well,*  
    *When our dear plots do pall; and that should learn us*  
    *There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,*  
    *Rough-hew them how we will—*  
    (Hamlet 5.2.8-11)

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*\(^{201}\) distinctively initiates the playwright’s phase of theologically penetrating works. With this play, Shakespeare begins to more openly craft the poetics and action on stage so as to appeal to the cultural memory of an eroding pre-Reformation understanding of the nature of God: 1) the divine habitation of the natural world, each element of which draws sustaining life from the Creator’s Being; 2) God’s providential place in the workings of the world; and 3) how peace and human fellowship flourish in the answered call to the Gospel’s shared way of life.

\(^{201}\) Originally entered on the Stationer’s Register in July 26, 1602 as *The Revenge of Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s play later adopted its “tragedy” designation. Despite subsequent title designation as “tragedy,” beginning with the First and Second Quartos of 1603 and 1604, respectively, and the later 1623 *First Folio*, several critics remark on the radical departure from the received generic formula in favor of a more logical designation of “problem play.” These include Frederick S. Boas (*Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, 1910) 345; E.M.W. Tillyard (*Shakespeare’s Problem Plays*, 1951) 118-138; Harry Levin (*The Question of Hamlet*, 1959) 4. David Bevington (*This Wide and Universal Theatre: Shakespeare in Performance Then and Now* 2007) carries on the “problem play” identity of *Hamlet* as the first among that specific series of plays that commence a “new and experimental direction” (105). While the canon’s designations were at best fungible, e.g., the respective “Tragedies” of *Richard II* and *Richard III* appear in the *First Folio* classed as “histories”; *FF* designates the “History” of *Troilus and Cressida* but places it among the “Comedies,” where it remains. The association of *Hamlet* with “tragedy” bears mention because it reinforces the long line of credulous reception that fosters misapprehension of both the play’s title role as a “tragic hero” in the classic sense, and the meaning of the play itself.
Hamlet draws Shakespeare’s audience into a narrative that engages and supports the struggle to preserve the memory of Old Faith values and traditions against the intractable tide of religious change in England. By the end of the sixteenth century, in the space of little more than a single generation, the English Protestant Reformation had systematically uprooted the public practice of those traditions.

Hamlet’s “role” in the play, like the uprooted culture he embodies, must contend at an overwhelming material and legal disadvantage, bereft of resources and position, with his wits as his only weapons, compelled to endure court ceremony, and to suffer scolds of the newly converted to conform to the now prevailing rule. Accordingly, while critics often note the fragmented and discontinuous nature of the role—by turns brooding, bloodthirsty, jocular, contemplative, “wild and whirling,” and self-defeating—they fail to note how the logic of survival at Elsinore demands Hamlet’s variety of extrinsic roles, on the one hand, and concealment of intrinsic purpose, on the other. Hamlet’s “discontinuous” role stands fundamental to the meaning and essence of the play because it reflects the bewildered Old Faith response to compelled cultural change.\textsuperscript{202} The role’s roiling agglomeration of improvised roles

\textsuperscript{202} Numerous commentators regard the role as a dramatic defect. For example, T.S. Eliot regards Hamlet’s initial emotions as “in excess of the facts” so as to exceed the “objective correlative,” which results in a role disproportionate to the play (“On the Value of Hamlet,” 100, 103); for Harold Bloom, the role assumes an almost mythical dimension and renders his fellow characters “Lilliputian by comparison” (Invention of the Human 384). Others, by contrast, such as Rebecca West cite to Hamlet’s rash, brutal, even blood-thirsty acts and stated intentions as anti-heroic even villainous (The Court and the Castle: Some Treatments of a Recurrent Theme 18; 30); likewise, Eleanor Prosser sees Hamlet’s actions as a “descent into savagery” (248); still others, such as Francis Barker, bluntly argue that Hamlet’s inauthentic exterior belies his assertion of an authentic inner reality (The Tremulous Private Body, pp. 36-37); similarly, Rhodri Lewis regards the role as little more than that of a poseur, bereft of meaning or
reaction, rhetoric, and plot, while virtually surrounded by duplicitous intimates eager to know his mind, invites the audience to relate, analogically, to the plight and possible response to the involuntary displacement of English Christian traditions practiced for over 1,000 years.

Chapter One of this study (“Review of Criticism”) surveys how recent Reformation-era scholarship in history, culture, and literary art finds crucial roots in the profound metaphysical change in Western thought that originated within the scholastic philosophical debates in the new universities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Chapter Two (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured”) briefly summarizes how the consequential philosophical change wrought by the defeat of logical realism and the ascent of nominalism—often overlooked as influential determinants of subsequent thought—undermined the inherited early Platonist-Christian conception of God and thus the English Reformation’s understanding of reality itself. In Part I of this Chapter Three (“Hamlet at the Crossroads”) I argue that the foregoing forms the basis of the credibility altogether (Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness, p. 9). Catherine Belsey agrees that the role of Hamlet stands as the “most discontinuous of Shakespeare’s heroes,” but she avoids the trap of mimesis and relocates the play’s aesthetic entirely. Rather than the foregoing fault-finding varieties of flawed character, she suggests that the playwright purposely crafted the role in a manner that echoes the Tudor Morality Play, neither as a character in the naturalistic sense, nor as an allegorical figure to be decoded (The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama, p. 41).

203 For example, Richard M. Weaver, among a growing consensus of intellectual historians, regards the “defeat of [metaphysical] realism” as “the crucial event in the history of Western culture” (Ideas Have Consequences, p. 3); see also Brad Gregory, The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Revolutionized Society, pp. 30-32; Hans Boersma, Heavenly Participation: the Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry, pp. 75-76; Carlos Eire, Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650, pp. 81-84; and Luis Dupre, Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture, pp. 5-16.
play’s critique of England’s newly-established desacralized religion. Part II shows how in The Tragedy of Hamlet Shakespeare fashions a “parable” of cultural contention where the aforementioned freshly relevant competing metaphysical ideologies—realism and nominalism—collide at an auspicious tipping point of England’s religious change.\textsuperscript{204}

4.1 “OUTWARD SHOW” (versus) “THAT WITHIN”

The philosophical ascent of the scholastic doctrine of nominalism over the early Platonist-Christian conception of logical realism lies at the root of how the once immanent God of England’s Old Faith religion had receded from the life and thinking of Shakespeare’s world. As Richard Weaver observes, that recession originates from the decision to repudiate “the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses” (3). Absent the critical perspective on such a momentous “paradigm shift”\textsuperscript{205} away from the

\textsuperscript{204} For C.H. Dodd the parable has the character of an argument in that it draws the listener into it as a participant, and entices the hearer to a “judgment on the matter at hand” (The Parables of the Kingdom, p. 21). See also Robert Funk, Language Hermeneutic, and Word of God, pp. 133-34.

\textsuperscript{205} Launched into widespread analogical use in the second half of the 20th century by Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), the term “paradigm shift,” describes “a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions.” The term became a staple with which to more accurately describe the history of scientific discovery, not as a logical progression or necessarily “cumulative process,” but rather as “episodic” in nature. The concept directly relates to revisionist Reformation historiographers’ understanding of history as genealogical and contingent, rather than teleological. See, e.g., Brad Gregory’s concept of a Reformation “watershed” in which man’s conception of reality itself suffered revolutionary change in the effort to restore the original Christian Church resulted in unintended radical pluralism. Unintended Reformation, pp. 2, 53, 94-95, 327. Carlos M.N. Eire applies the term in his more narrowly targeted historical analysis specifically to three major doctrinal shifts in thinking “that Protestants brought to the relationship between human beings and God”; however, importantly in the English
conception of the divine based upon logical *realism*, the contemporary religious references to which scholars often point in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* appear as little more than a reimagined effort to steer the cultural reading toward the more familiar adversarial climate of Protestant-Catholic confessional conflict. But as it happens, the play’s first two scenes prominently illustrate the respective antithetical philosophical frames of reference—between *realism* and *nominalism*—that actually govern the contention at the heart of the play. This contention manifests an endemic form of “cognitive dissonance” in the social anxiety found within the cultural clash between the “extrinsic” and “intrinsic”; between “appearance” and “reality”; between “outward show” and “that within”; between that which “seems” and that which “is.”

Reformation context, “the older interpretations can survive, or even thrive, alongside the new ones . . . [so as to] bring about the existence of a rival interpretation of reality.” *Reformations 1485-1650*, pp. 744-45, 751.

206 See generally commentary cited at Chapter One “Review of Criticism,” nn. 7-10; also David N. Beauregard, *Catholic Theology in Shakespeare’s Plays* and Peter Milward, *Shakespeare’s Religious Background*.

207 The term, derived from Leon Festinger’s *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), describes the anxiety caused by a compulsion to maintain cognitive consistency, the stress from which serves as a catalyst for dissonance reduction by whatever means. In the period under discussion, compelled loyalties enforced by dissimulation, deception, and surveillance prompted by inconsistency between what one believes and how one behaves led to conduct calculated to relieve this tension by rejecting, explaining away, or avoiding new information related to reformed cultural imperatives, thus contributing to the rapid secularization of English culture and the consequent turn away from religion altogether. Lake and Questier also adopt the term to explain the underappreciated “anxieties and insecurities” caused by the “cognitive dissonance between ideals of the social, political, religious order . . . and the reality of contemporary experience.” *Antichrist’s Lewd Hat*, p. xxvi.

208 Margreta deGrazia notes *topos* of hypocrisy throughout the play (*Hamlet without Hamlet* pp. 162-63); Michael O’Connell locates the play’s “central metaphor” in the role of Hamlet with his “intense consciousness of the distinction between what seems and what is.” *Idolatrous Eye*, p.134.
Hence, this recurring trope in *Hamlet*, born of the English Reformation’s steady but coercive drive toward religious uniformity. Claudius’s enforced demand for compliant, albeit inauthentic, appearance correlativey fosters a culture of deception and surveillance, which in turn compels precarious concealment of “that within” by “outward show.”

The play stands impressed with the playwright’s determination to speak to his time. He invites his audience into the play’s “contention,” dramatized by the play’s multifaceted title role. The highest “purpose of playing” manifest in Hamlet’s struggle to “hold . . . the mirror up to nature” (3.2.20, 22) exists not to reflect a mimetic likeness, but rather to expose the seemingly inexorable tide of cultural deception that exalts the new-claimed hegemony of man in the material or nominal world of the physical senses so as to leach out the real from England’s heritage, thought, and religion. The play offers a glimpse of how the English Reformation’s desacralized world weakens bonds of family, friendship, and community, conflates confessional fidelity with loyalty to the secular state, and opens a breach between appearance and reality where habits of dissimulation, deception, and dishonesty thrive.

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209 Indicative of Elizabeth’s vaunted reluctance . . . “to make windows into men’s souls,” reception of the Eucharist never became the legal standard for creedal consent during her reign. The queen famously rejected early efforts of her bishops and members of parliament “to delve beyond ‘the externall and outward shewe’ to ‘the very secretes of the harte in God’s cause.’” *Quoted in* Alexandra Walsham’s, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England*, p. 12.

The playwright weaves throughout the play this most compelling but unresolved philosophical conundrum of the age, made newly relevant by the spirit of radical religious reform: “whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man,” or whether reality consists solely of that which can be perceived by the senses and its essence derived by human reason.211 Key examples from the play that follow illustrate these competing world views rooted in how one understands the nature of the divine at the consequential “crossroads” contention between the conception of God based on metaphysical realism espoused by such influential scholastic theologians as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and John Wyclif, and the nominalism of William of Ockham. From its very beginning the play sounds the clash of the foregoing dissonant themes in the context of competing, but as yet unsettled, confessional loyalties of the audience to whom Shakespeare addressed The Tragedy of Hamlet. Neither the play’s thematic ‘prologue’ of Hamlet’s first two scenes, here discussed at length, nor the play’s uneasy final resolution leaves little doubt about either the playwright’s core religious sensibility pertaining to the ultimate source of truth for “those with ears to hear,” or his desire to bolster the weakening tenets of Christianity itself.

4.1.1 World Views in Contention.

Following her accession in 1558, Elizabeth I determined to avoid religious strife by doctrinal compromise. At the commencement of her reign, while requiring church attendance, she famously declared that she ‘would not open windows into men’s souls’ by compelled

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211 Weaver, Ideas, 3; See also, Gregory, Unintended 57, 64.
affirmations of Protestant doctrine. The “39 Articles [of Faith],” the centerpiece of the “Elizabethan Settlement,” purport to prescribe the Church of England’s doctrinal principles actualized in the reformed liturgy, its wording purposely vague so as to balance two imperatives. On the one hand, while “religious change” clearly rejected the efficacy of the Roman church’s sacramental system, the outward show of the reformed established church’s derivative liturgy affected a familiar semblance thereof. On the other, congregants need not orally confess affirmation of doctrinal belief nor actually receive the offer of Protestant communion. Rather, mandatory attendance at weekly parish church service alone satisfied the principal tenet of the religious compromise, namely, uniform secular loyalty to the crown.

However, the compelled adoption of repurposed liturgical forms intended to foster estrangement from the Old Faith inevitably provoked an unintended and pervasive consequence reflected throughout the play—concealment of thought and motive by dissimulation. Endemic

212 J. B. Black suggests that the Queen’s remark that she did not wish to “make a window nor to force their consciences” may well derive from oral tradition perhaps originating in a letter drafted by Nicholas Bacon (Reign of Elizabeth 1558–1603, 19).

213 Elizabeth’s Via Media, commemorated in her Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1562, finalized 1571) reflected her general policy of calculated accommodation theoretically gave both sides cover to interpret the ceremonial rites in a manner capable of being regarded as consistent with one’s beliefs. However, as Patrick Collinson notes, “The church of the Elizabethan Settlement was a ‘constrained union’ of papists and Protestants” doctrinally positioned as “a church somewhat of the middle way, essentially Protestant but not so nakedly Protestant as to alienate confused Catholics, of whom there were many.” “William Shakespeare’s Religious Inheritance and Environment,” pp. 219-252, 229.

214 Elizabeth rejected parliamentary and ecclesiastical efforts to make reception of communion the legal standard for creadal consent. Church attendance remained the sole test of conformity. Walsham, Ibid. p.12. See n. 9, supra.
deception becomes the principal *modus operandi* of Hamlet’s uncle, King Claudius, and his enablers with whom Hamlet must contend. Hence, within the recurring trope of “outward show” that manifests compliant, albeit inauthentic, appearance, lurks pernicious instrumental opportunities for spying, lying, and misdirection—all calculated to achieve public advantage.

a. Disputed Claims Staged.

[Hamlet] . . . *Remember thee?*

*Yea from the table of my memory*

*I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,*

*All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past*

*That youth and observation copied there,*

*And thy commandment all alone shall live*

*Within the book and volume of my brain*

*Unmixed with baser matter.* *(1.5.98-105)*

Shakespeare crafts a radical exposition of oppressive contemporary religious circumstances through the idiom of a reworked popular Elizabethan revenge play, now lost, known only as the *Ur-Hamlet*. Set in medieval Denmark, the familiar source material, safely distanced by both time period and location,215 also contains elements borrowed from at least two other contemporaneous plays that also derive from the source play.216 However, with

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215 The significance of the play’s setting and approximate time period lies with Hamlet’s university study at Wittenberg, Saxony, in the Holy Roman Empire (now Germany) and well-known to Shakespeare’s audience as the birthplace of the Reformation where Martin Luther purportedly posted his 95 Theses on the Castle Church door on September 31, 1517.

216 Naseeb Shaheen avers that the *Ur-Hamlet* included elements from such contemporaneous works as John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge*, which features a son’s visitation by his father’s Ghost who fears his widow will
Shakespeare, the events of the re-told medieval Nordic tale of usurpation and revenge become something quite different from its predecessor source or its related contemporaries. Shakespeare’s relatively simple plot assumes substantial combined metaphorical and metaphysical freight. As to the plot, its latent congruence between stage fiction, on the one hand, and contemporary personalities and issues, on the other, reflect a conventional appeal to the Elizabethan “analogical habit of mind” (Elton 17). As to the latter, the recurrent metaphor of the elusive distinction between appearance and reality reflects a material world “out of joint”—unmoored from the divine.  

The gap that opens between “that within” and “outward show” leaves fertile ground for a “culture of deception” in all its variety—whether calculated or accidental.

The elements of the story in Shakespeare’s retelling contain sufficiently analogous circumstances and relationships by which one may perceive the repressive circumstances and conflicted relationships with which England’s Old Faith adherents must contend. Indeed, Shakespeare fashioned a play that captures analogically the contemporary dilemma of vast

marry the murderer and urges revenge; Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* also features a revenge seeking Ghost, as well as a play within the play used to trap the murderer. *Biblical References*, pp. 534-35.

217 That events force cosmic elements to misfit appears in Hamlet’s exclamation following the Ghost’s disclosure of uncle Claudius’s usurpation by murder of Old King Hamlet: “the time is out of joint . . .” (Ham. 1.5.197); see also Macbeth’s similar import following Duncan’s murder: “But let the frame of things disjoint” (Mac. 3.2.17).

218 Historian Peter Lake asserts that the Elizabethan Settlement “would settle nothing at all,” because coupled with the policy of tolerance for mere church attendance, inevitably “a gap opens up between the inward and the outward, the real convictions of a person and his or her outward behavior, a space [within which] which it seemed to many contemporaries could explain all sorts of dissimulation and pretense by the faithless and unscrupulous (“Religious Identities in Shakespeare’s England,” p. 64. See also, Michael O’Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye*, pp. 132-34.
numbers of Old Faith adherents at a time of religious transition and uncertainty compounded by the twilight of Elizabeth’s reign for whom some hope for religious comity, or at least tolerance, remained. 219 The foregoing contextual factors when taken together with the play’s poetics, plot, and the grim perseverance of its flawed hero, suggest the playwright’s principle purpose—to encourage the survival of cultural memory embedded in England’s sacred pre-Reformation heritage. Shakespeare’s recrafted plot invites analogical comparison of Prince Hamlet’s abrupt disininheritance with the divestiture of a millennium of traditional Christian culture. Hamlet’s actions in the course of the play, however inartful, encourage clever fortitude, if not outright resistance, against the tide of religious change in England. It appears that Shakespeare found a source story and a vehicle safely beyond suspicion of subversive motive through which he could both speak to, and be heard by, an audience for whom he intended a vital and exigent message.

Despite the relentless efforts at conversion, Elizabeth’s religious ‘settlement’ stood only partially settled as of the turn-of-the-century, the auspicious mid-point of Shakespeare’s career at which he produced Hamlet. The deep roots of abiding contention within the now maturing English religious revolution lay deep within the consequential philosophical turn or paradigm shift in Western thought that gradually redefined the concept of reality and commenced the slow, but inexorable and perplexing impact on the surviving late medieval “cosmic imaginary,” i.e., the late medieval conception of the divine which held that: God’s sustaining Being exists in and through all Creation; God’s continuing presence and active influence on all human social and

219 Peter Lake’s How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage, offers a refreshingly fraught portrait of anxieties that accompanied the end of the century over which “religious division and confessional conflict,” both domestic and foreign, loomed large compounded by intensification of the “Elizabethan exclusion crisis” and religious implications thereof pertaining to succession, continuity, and dynastic security. pp.14-17.
political institutions; and, fidelity to God’s biblical prescriptions fosters the abundant life in community.

I argue that the controlling philosophical interest in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* lies in how the *nominalist* view of reality forcefully usurps the common cultural understanding of an Old King Hamlet to embrace a new “social imaginary,” one more condign to a desacralized world firmly grounded in the secular, the material, and the anthropocentric. As previously noted, such world view posits that “reality consists solely of that which can be perceived by the senses and its essence derived by reason” (Weaver 3). While the hindsight of subsequent historiography affords an ultimately settled picture of the Protestant case decided, the cultural contention in the mind of the Elizabethan public theatre audience of 1601 remained very much unsettled and undecided for the reasons discussed both here and in the Introduction (“The Fading Culture of Faith and Its Way of Seeing”) and the previous Chapter Two (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured”).

220 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Taylor primarily relies on the sociological concept of “social imaginary” [cf. “cosmic imaginary” at 323] to characterize the progression and illustrate the contours of a secularizing European society and how these manifest in significant changes to common thought and understanding, which in turn alter shared values and reshape societal institutions. Taylor usefully defines the concept adopted here at pp. 171-76. *See also*, this study’s discussion at Chapter Two (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured”), pp. 4-5 and n. 6.

221 Distinguished contemporary Reformation historians continue to produce innovative scholarship beginning with A.G. Dickens’s magisterial work *The English Reformation* (1964), as substantially revised, with subsequent fresh perspectives from Christopher Haigh, Eamon Duffy, *et al.* However, the idiom of cultural analyses remains all too often confined both by time period, narrowly defined as beginning with Luther (1517) through the 30 Years War (1648), and by material circumstances confined to institutional, political, and social structures. The radical shift in the apprehension of the divine from the early church Christian-Platonist perspective of Augustine and Aquinas, who
Sources of Discord: The Play Ridicules Rejection of the Real.

The first two scenes of Hamlet employ scenic contrast and antithesis of mood to provide often overlooked thematic settings within which to strike the fundamental keynotes that inform the action of the play. The unlit dark of night outside on the Elsinore castle battlements (1.1) contrasts with the lurid bright interior lights of royal court (1.2). This scenic contrast accompanies the abrupt antithesis of mood between the respective scenes—from contemplative awe among the sentries and Horatio on the castle battlements to contentious bluster of the royal court in council; from a mood “of purity and watchfulness,” albeit animated with prophetic insight, to pragmatic administration of court business (Garber 480). From within this introductory contrapuntal conjunction of scene and mood, a welter of dilemmas emerge that tests the divergent ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of the divine that remained contentiously embedded in English Reformation culture.

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posited a sacramental or participatory relationship between God’s being and his creation, to that which emerged from the scholastic debates in the new universities of the 13th and 14th centuries led by Duns Scotus and William of Ockham who argued the concept of an external or nominal relationship as exclusively determined by God’s will, or voluntas. As Hans Boersma summarizes the separation that underlies secular modernity: “The foregoing implies a distinct supernatural order, strictly separate from the natural order” and set the stage for the Protestant Reformation (Sacramental Tapestry, pp. 76-79); See also, Gregory, Unintended, pp. 30-38).

222 Stephen Booth also notes the purposeful contrast between the first two scenes. However Booth emphasizes dramatic continuity from the perspective of the accumulation of information, rather than as statements of metaphysical antitheses, which I contend inform the play (On the Value of Hamlet, p. 147).
The stark poetic contrast between the initial scene on the “Battlements” and the immediately following court, or “Council,” scene\(^{223}\) insinuates the altered thinking, cultural conflict, and rapid consolidation of the English Reformation at the beginning of the 17\(^{th}\) century. The scene on the Battlements voices examples of things once commonly considered fixed and of eternal significance. But as the Council Scene reflects, these had become malleable and mutable; common standards applied to thought, word, and deed had become equivocal. Virtually every scene that follows in the play in some way either implicates the dilemma of uncertainty as to apprehension of ultimate reality or openly displays the disconnection between inward thoughts and outward show; between the *intrinsic* reality, on the one hand, and mere *extrinsic* appearance, on the other.

The first scene of *Hamlet* prepares the playgoer for the breadth of paradox, both physical and metaphysical, that pervades the play’s experience—set in Denmark’s bitter cold on Elsinore castle’s battlements under cover of darkness, yet played in the Globe theatre’s temperate clime in broad daylight.\(^{224}\) At just over a mere 180 lines, the scene masterfully encapsulates elements of a “sacramental vision,” delivered by poetic imagery and physical stagecraft, that establishes a sacramental marker by which to mock the ripening altered concept of reality made manifest in the immediately following “Council” scene.

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\(^{223}\) For ease of reference, I follow Harry Levin’s identification of key scenes and soliloquies as follows: Council Scene (1.2.); Nunnery Scene (2.2.); Play Scene (3.2.); Prayer Scene (3.3.); Closet Scene (3.4.); and, Graveyard Scene (5.1.). Levin numbers Hamlet’s several Soliloquies from the First through Seventh (*The Question of Hamlet*, pp. x-xi).

\(^{224}\) S. L. Bethell offers early helpful insight on the ability of Elizabethan audiences to keep in mind two opposite aspects of a situation and “conscious delight in paradox.” *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition* (1944), pp. 21-22.
c. Sacramental poetics.

This scene on the Battlements melds sacramental poetics—dramatic verse that exposes the continuum between the visible world and invisible world—with stagecraft that enables the actors to evoke the unseen. Together these stir the analogical imagination of an audience whose habit of mind could indeed perceive the interpenetration of the worlds so evoked. Rich with discursive narrative, sacramental poetics, and supernatural interruptions, along with the actors’ mood changes, rapidly alternating between anxious foreboding and contemplative repose, the scene establishes an initial sacramental perspective against which the balance of the play unfolds.

Two separate ghostly figures haunt the battlements at Elsinore. The sentries, Marcellus and Bernardo along with their invited “scholar,” Hamlet’s university schoolmate Horatio, attempt to confront the first of these—a spectral presence whose visible appearance suggests the ghostly spirit of the deceased Old King Hamlet. Immediately following that brief first appearance, Horatio invokes the providential context from recent past—the consequential battle joined between Denmark and Norway that, as he surmises, reverberates in the present as “some strange eruption to our state” (1.1.68). Horatio shares with the sentries his conceit that the past stands sacramentally predicate to the present and harbinger to the future. His continuing discourse also encompasses providential events from the distant past, as he analogizes the apparition to portents that accompanied the death of Julius Caesar, as reported in Plutarch’s

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225 See, W.R. Elton on the vital importance of the surviving “analogue habit of mind” that existed for Shakespeare and his audience. (“Shakespeare and the Thought of His Age,” p. 17). Helen Cooper, elaborating on Emrys Jones’s insights in his Origins of Shakespeare (1977) at pp. 32-33, similarly cautions the modern scholar that despite the rigor of Reformation polemic, “old habits of thought . . . of thinking by analogy . . . were not so easily swept away as were specific points of doctrine” (Shakespeare and the Medieval World, pp. 1-2; 20).
Lives, upon which Shakespeare based his 1599 play.\textsuperscript{226} However different in degree of magnitude the respective signs may be—the Ghost on the Battlements by comparison merely a “mote to trouble the mind’s eye”\textsuperscript{227}—such comparison evokes the unity and harmony of all creation, and points to both the spatial and temporal immanence of the divine operating in and through the created order and Time itself—the classical past analogized to the contemporary present. Horatio’s speech expressly invokes images of an apocalyptic union of heaven and earth, aspects of which the Ghost’s appearance may well portend for Denmark’s immediate future:

A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,

The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As, stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse;
And even the like precurse of fear’d events,
As harbingers of preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climatures and countrymen. (1.1.112-124)


\textsuperscript{227} The first of several Biblical analogues in the scene, here Luke 6:42 (“let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye”). All cited scriptural references herein are from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted.
Images of divine interaction expressed through a dizzying array of elements in the natural world and beyond suggest the “sacramental vision” that informs the play. At its most basic, that which is “sacramental” refers to visible signs that point beyond themselves to the reality behind the appearances available to the physical senses—material things that reveal the invisible presence of God and the corresponding conflict between the divine and the demonic. Horatio’s excited discourse vaults forward from the distant past to an eschatological future that imagines a point beyond earthly existence with an image of resurrection of the dead, which heralds the Second Coming at “doomsday” itself, to the transubstantiation of the common evening moisture into “dews of blood,” and finally to frightening disruptions in the night sky (“stars with trains of fire”) and alterations in the moon’s regulation of tides. This vision of divine power as “heaven and earth together demonstrated” points to the Creator’s immanent and providential presence throughout the temporal and the material as He wills.

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228 For a general understanding of “sacramental” in the historical context, see Hans Boersma (Heavenly Participation, p. 21); Charles Taylor (A Secular Age, pp. 12, 25-26); Rod Dreher (The Benedict Option p. 24). For a more specific discussion of “sacramental poetics,” see Mara Regina Schwartz, (Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World, pp. 6-7).

229 Matt 27:52: “[at the crucifixion] the graves did open . . . and many. . . . which slept, arose.”

230 Horatio’s speech with its striking sacramental understanding of reality does not appear in the First Quarto, an apparently unauthorized 1603 printing which suggests that the playwright considered the speech sufficiently important to add to the scene for the later version. Despite claims that Q1 is a bowdlerized version of the play, imperfectly remembered, consensus holds that the actor who played “Marcellus” (one of two sentries to whom Horatio addresses his speech) likely ‘bootlegged’ the script for printing, because his scenes are the most accurately rendered when compared with the later authorized printing of Q2.
As the sentries hoped, Horatio makes scholarly sense of the “strange eruptions to our state” (1.1.73) manifest by the ghostly appearance of “the King that’s dead” (1.1.45). Horatio voices the medieval sacramental understanding that signs in the book of nature point beyond themselves to God.\textsuperscript{231} By analogizing past events to the present, Horatio affirms God’s temporal participation that gathers “past, present, and future together into one,” so as to exist simultaneously in God’s time, that is, in an eternal present.\textsuperscript{232} That “people from different historical eras can participate or share in the same event” sacramentally attests to the immanent habitation of the divine both in all material earthly creation and in all human time (Boersma 124).\textsuperscript{233}

As the Ghost whom they believe to be that of Old King Hamlet re-enters, the trio haplessly confront it as if the importunate natural flesh were somehow of the same nature as the supernatural spirit.

HORATIO. . .Stop it, Marcellus.

MARCELLUS. Shall I strike it with my partisan?

HORATIO. Do, if it will not stand. (1.1.139-41)

\textsuperscript{231} See, e.g., Cooper, \textit{Ibid}, p. 21.; \textit{see also} C.S. Lewis’s \textit{Discarded Image} where he describes the analogical concept of God where everything exists by reason of a shared participation in the Creator p. 25.

\textsuperscript{232} Taylor (55-56); \textit{see also} MacIntyre: while the movement toward the good is temporal in nature, it must necessarily involve new understandings drawn from past history. \textit{After Virtue}, p. 176.

\textsuperscript{233} Both Taylor and Boersma draw upon Augustine’s concept that time is not a succession of unrelated events, but rather participates in the eternity of God’s life of time (\textit{Confessions}, Bk. XI, Ch. 18.); \textit{See also} Yves Congar, \textit{Tradition and Traditions}, p. 259.
The cock’s crow interrupts their effort as the silent specter “start[s] like a guilty thing / Upon a fearful summons” (1.1.146-47) and then quickly vanishes. Marcellus voices his sudden insight into the salving stillness wherein nature itself venerates the Christian God:

Some say that ever ’gainst that season comes
Wherein our saviour’s birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm.
So hallow’d and so gracious is the time. (1.1.156-62)

At the very moment this affirmation restores a sense of order, the witnesses perceive a supervening presence of a very different kind—the Holy Ghost in the classic medieval metaphor for the risen Christ heralded by the cock’s crow at dawn, at the sight of which Horatio exclaims,

But, look, the morn in russet mantel clad
Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill. 234 (1.1.172-73)

234 While largely lost to the modern audience, the metaphorically significant quoted lines evokes a symbolic tradition familiar to Shakespeare’s audience exemplified by the image with which Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-c. 410) begins his influential Cathemerinon liber: “The bird that heralds day forewarns that dawn is at hand; now Christ, the awakener of our souls calls us to life. ‘Away,’ He cries, ‘with beds that belong to sickness, sleep, and sloth. Be pure and upright and sober and wake, for now I am very near’” (Prudentius, “A Hymn for Cock Crow.” Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds, pp. 304-306; 305). This often overlooked moment illustrates David Ball’s theory that in things that elicit a strong audience response, we discover what the playwright considers important (Backwards and Forwards, 36). See also Stephen Booth, “On the Value of Hamlet,” pp. 137-176, 143.
Majorie Garber remarks on the significant tonal contrast to the terror previously wrought by the Ghost. Thus, the play’s brief but eventful first scene resolves on a note of “purity and watchfulness,” with a sacramental promise of redemption that hovers throughout the play and waits patiently to be received (480). Although often overlooked by modern readers, this scene invites the audience to a hermeneutical act of witness that pervades the entire play and which establishes the sacramental benchmark with which to measure both the balance of the play and the contemporary world in which Shakespeare’s audience resides. The play’s first scene displays striking examples of sacramental poetics that express the intrinsic unity of all creation, even among disparate things, as severally illustrated first by Horatio’s historical discourse (1.1.116-129), then followed by Marcellus’s veneration of nature (164-170), and finally by Horatio’s vision of the divine presence (171-73).

The immediately following Council Scene abruptly shifts from spiritually alert quiescence to the bright lights and brash bluster of the Danish royal court that disrupt the sense of piety and repose with which the first scene concludes. The intrinsic divine in nature, witnessed in the scene on the Battlements, stands juxtaposed to an extrinsic world of outward show with meanings assigned to fit human need and situation. Instead of the Thomist idea of the autonomy of nature, where signs and symbols drawn from Creation reveal the essence of the divine that begins the play, the scholastic thinking of Duns Scotus and William of Occam, coupled with the burgeoning recoveries of classical philosophy that celebrate “man as the

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235 Marjorie Garber in her Shakespeare After All may well be the only commentator to have drawn attention, albeit in passing, to this significant juxtaposition.
measure of all things,” 236 fully manifest in the scene that follows. Charles Taylor describes the new found place of “Renaissance” man as an “agent . . . of instrumental reason, working the system effectively in order to bring about God’s purposes; because it is through these purposes and not through signs, that God reveals himself in his world” (97-98). 237 Claudius in the Council Scene personifies the philosophy that expands man’s agency in the cosmos.

Significantly, from their first appearance in the Council Scene, the play’s principal antagonists, Claudius and Hamlet, expressly embody competing underlying scholastic metaphysical ideologies—realism and nominalism—as they warily contend with each other. With unmistakable irony, Shakespeare shifts his audience’s view from the realist understanding of the world that emanates from the mind of God as intimated on the Battlements to that of the earthbound nominalist world of the Council Scene within which Hamlet’s usurping uncle Claudius holds forth. In other words, an unseen, but transcendent realism haunts the play’s first scene on Elsinore’s ramparts—only to be brought into jarring contrast with determined nominalism in the form of crass superficiality on display in Claudius’s court in the Council Scene. The dramatic effect of such contrast holds up the nominalist view to ridicule.

d. A New Doctrine of Nature.

King Claudius first grandly valorizes with “outward show” matters of otherwise sacramental significance, namely his assumption of kingship upon the death of his brother, an...
anointed king, and his nearly contemporaneous marriage to the widowed queen. Such untoward succession of events might otherwise appear scandalous, even vulgar. Yet, his blithe gestures to grief and decorum serve solely to support the business at hand. He brushes aside *intrinsic* sacramental significance in favor of *extrinsic* values as he frames earthly exigencies with “a new doctrine of nature” (Weaver 4). He reinforces the new notion of man as an agent of “instrumental reason,” who works the system effectively to bring about God’s purposes. Instead of a natural world consisting of imperfect imitations of transcendent forms that point to the Creator, this new doctrine regards the natural world as a complete, a self-operating mechanism that supplies sufficient “sense data” for human agency to bring about results so as to serve rational human desires (4-5).

The Council Scene’s caricature of the “new doctrine” begins with Claudius’s perfunctory gesture to the passing and replacement of his brother, and Hamlet’s father, Old King Hamlet:

> Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature

> That we with wisest sorrow think on him

> Together with remembrance of ourselves. (1.2.5-7) (emphasis supplied)

Claudius’s “discretion” flourishes here through a grotesque bouquet of dissonant rhetorical figures that parody the sacramental poetics from the previous scene. In the first scene on the Battlements, both Horatio’s aforementioned meditation on the ancient signs in nature that reveal omens of providential purpose, along with Bernardo’s present anthropomorphic vision of the risen Christ appearing in the dawn, evoke the intrinsic unity of creation. By stark contrast, Claudius evokes *disunity* in a series of absurd images, with which he breezily celebrates his incestuous union with his deceased brother’s wife—a circumstance that inevitably recalls Henry

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238 See also Taylor (pp. 97-98) and Eire (p. 81).
VIII’s marriage to his older brother’s widow and the cascade of consequential desacralizing events that followed, including the break with Rome, Dissolution of the Monasteries, and establishment of the king as head of the English church. 239

Claudius’s nominalist ethic stands aloof from the sacramental significance of death and marriage. He flagrantly consolidates his grip on the reins of power by promptly taking the royal widow to wife, notwithstanding that “[t]he memory . . . of our dear brother’s death . . . be green” (1.2.1-2), then pompously proclaims to his court,

Therefore . . . .

Have we as ‘twere with a defeated joy—

With an auspicious and a dropping eye,

With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,

In equal scale weighing delight and dole,

 Taken to wife; nor have we herein barr’d

Your better wisoms, which have freely gone

With this affair along. (1.2.8, 10-16)

239 Arthur, Henry’s older brother and heir apparent the throne, dies in 1501, five months after his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry sought special dispensation from Pope Clement VII to marry his brother’s widow in what would otherwise be considered an incestuous union prohibited by biblical prescription (Lev. 18:16) which was granted in 1509. After the marriage’s failure to produce a male heir, Henry’s subsequent petition for annulment based on the “Leviticus curse” that provides marriage to the brother’s wife would remain barren (Lev. 20:21).

Ironically, Pope Clement VII denied the petition partly because inconsistent with the prior grant and partly because for reasons of continental politics, namely the potential antagonism of the Catherine’s nephew, Charles V of Spain whose army currently occupied the Vatican. Henry resolved his “Great Matter” by terminating the authority of Rome over the English church, in essence initiating what eventually became the English Reformation.
However, his presumed attempts at clever paradox stand merely oxymoronic. One paired term neither inheres in, nor modifies, the other nor suggests some hidden truth. The glib juxtapositions in the quoted passage equate “defeat” with “joy”; “auspicious [eye]” with “dropping eye”; “funeral . . . mirth” with “marriage . . . dirge”; and, finally, “delight” with “dole”—each matched term claims an absurd equivalent to the other “in equal scale.”  

Rather, and significantly for this moment in the play, the tropes are ones of cancellation that reduce the catalogue of each named circumstance to a displaced jumble which renders the meanings of “funeral” and “marriage” in nominal and external, rather than real or intrinsic, terms so as to leach out the sacramental significance that might otherwise point to the Creator.

Claudius concludes his above-quoted introduction with a rhetorical sleight of hand—“Your better wisdoms . . . have freely gone with this affair along” (15-16)—that tellingly hints of the Machiavel as Claudius casually affirms the unvoiced (but assumed) approval of the assembled court.

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240 Stephen Booth observes that Claudius describes his marriage to Gertrude with the smooth rhetoric of “double understanding” which “makes unnatural connections between moral contraries . . . as gross and sweaty as the incestuous marriage itself” (“On the Value of Hamlet,” pp. 137-76, 149). Cf., Frank Kermode’s close reading of the speech that finds it “full of paradoxes and oxymorons . . . that emphasize the conjunction of what is ordinarily disjunct; he has married his brother’s wife . . . .” (Shakespeare’s Language, p. 103).

241 Similar to the First Quarto’s absence of Horatio’s speech in 1.1 (see, n. 30, supra.), Claudius’s speech in 1.2, with its awkward parodies of metaphorical comparisons that appear to misunderstand analogical reality, also does not appear in the First Quarto, where the same scene commences with the dispatch of Voltimand and Cornelius on their diplomatic mission to Old Norway in respect to his son Fortinbras. The absence is noteworthy. Along with the parodic elements discussed, the speech also introduces the King and Queen, and acknowledges the presence of the assembled court, before he gets to the business of his diplomats. Although “Marcellus” the player some suggest
Claudius’s “discretion,” which in this context means, his untrammeled “freedom to act as
one sees fit,”\textsuperscript{242} prevails in his “[fight] with nature” (1.2.5). As previously noted, in the inherited
understanding of medieval Christianity, “nature” constituted a book by which to read divine
purpose (Cooper, \textit{Shakespeare and Medieval World}, 21). By contrast, in \textit{nominalist} terms, the
exercise of human “discretion” provides the necessary tool of instrumental reason with which to
not only effect God’s purposes but also deflect inordinate concern for the “\textit{real}” as might
otherwise manifest in “a universe of ordered signs in which everything has meaning” because of
the ongoing sustaining relationship to God’s immanent Being (Taylor 98).

e. Sacramental Time.

After the glib dispatch of funeral and marriage, Claudius engages yet another
sacramentally significant element made subject to human measure and control over which to
exercise “discretion,” namely Time. With a burst of ministerial efficiency, Claudius deftly
orchestrates the tactical valences of the court with competence and ingenuity so as to serve the
purposes of power and, above all, “to get things done!”\textsuperscript{243} The nominalist Claudius bustles
busily into the future in contradistinction to Horatio’s affirmation in the previous scene of God’s

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\textsuperscript{242} SOED def. 4.

\textsuperscript{243} Taylor: “Time itself becomes desacralized and remote from the divine presence by the drive to ‘measure and
control’” (\textit{A Secular Age}, p. 59).
temporal habitation that simultaneously gathers together “past, present, and future.”

Having secured the tacit approval of the Danish court for both his succession to the crown and immediate marriage to the dead king’s widow, Claudius’s diplomacy forestalls a military threat to Denmark by the Norwegian King’s nephew, Fortinbras. He grants leave to his minister’s son, Laertes, for return to university in France. But here the scene’s momentum stops. Worldviews collide as Claudius turns his attention to his brooding nephew, the deceased king’s seemingly grieving son, Hamlet.

Horatio’s realist poetics from the previous scene on the Battlements portrays Time as a living, continuous sacramental reality that participates in the eternity of God’s life “where past, present, and future become one,” where indeed “earthly events become sacraments of eschatological mysteries.” Shakespeare reinforces the continuing influence of living heritage in the present by the identically named principal father-son pairs—Hamlet and Fortinbras. By contrast, Claudius and his Queen, Hamlet’s mother Gertrude, promote their shared nominalist dictum regarding Time as but a succession of unrelated events. Therefore, by definition, the past cannot carry ongoing value into the present and must therefore stand bereft of sacramental

\[\text{\textsuperscript{244} Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{245} I use the term “seemingly” advisedly in that Hamlet’s grief at the death of his father stands as the conclusion to which his mother and uncle arrive for Hamlet’s sullen demeanor. However, as discussed below, Hamlet enters the play understandably grieved by his catastrophic reversal of fortune, which becomes increasingly apparent beginning with his First Soliloquy only to intensify with the Ghost’s disclosures on the Battlements.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{246} Boersma, \textit{Heavenly Participation}, pp. 125-26; See also St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, Book XI, Ch. 17-21.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{247} Emma Smith notes the divergence from Shakespeare’s sources in which neither deceased fathers’ nor living sons’ names stand thus doubled: “In none of the sources is the burden of the past, the psychic overlap between the two generations, so stressed as in the play” (\textit{This is Shakespeare}, p.164).}\]
significance. Nonplussed at what they perceive as Hamlet’s mourning, they hector the grieving prince:

CLAUDIUS. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

....

GERTRUDE. . . . cast thy nighted color off,

....

Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know’st ‘tis common, all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET. Ay, madam, it is common.

GERTRUDE. If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee? (1.2.66; 68; 70-75)

In dramatic contrast to Horatio’s affirmation of God’s sacramental temporal presence that gathers past, present, and future into an eternal present, Claudius and Gertrude vigorously promote the nominalist perspective that diminishes the scope of divine habitation in Time to an emphatic “here and now.”

In addition to its display of the ethos that subordinates veneration of family heritage, the Council Scene echoes the broader cultural distortion of “reformed” Time. The traditional pre-Reformation liturgical calendar witnesses to the dependable regularity of God’s presence in Time as the faithful celebrate prescribed reenactments of recorded events in the life of Christ. Prescribed feast days and sacramental rituals marked in the Roman liturgical year all distinctively pull against the nominalist concept of time because “[a]t the pilgrimage centre on the saint’s feast day, it is the time itself which is hallowed” (Taylor 58). As Marcellus observes
from the Battlements, Christmas stands by definition “hallowed” as a “gracious” time wherein “no planets strike, no fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm” (1.1.168-70). Thus, hallowed Time itself (here, the celebration of the savior’s birth) forms a sacramental window into the eternal.

Likewise, the celebration of the Eucharist in the Mass draws the moment of crucifixion forward in time so as to actualize Christ’s sacrifice in the eternal present in a manner that stands outside the linear experience of chronological time. In dogmatic contradistinction thereto, Reformation doctrine largely dismantled the constellation of hallowed events that ordered sacred Time, at the central focus of which stood the transubstantiated presence of Christ’s flesh and blood in the celebration of the Mass. The reformers replaced the instantiation of Christ’s continuing presence on earth in the Eucharist with a “seeming” likeness thereof in a communion ritual expressly confined to remembrance, memorial, and commemoration.

By trenchant comparison, Shakespeare takes his audience from the realist witness on the Battlements, which reflects the regular rhythms of God’s dependable and recurring presence that pervade human history, to the nominalist linear concept in the Council scene, which confines history to a path upon which man leads Time from point to point, not stopping to apprehend the Creator in creation but rather “passing through nature to eternity” (1.2.73). This latter perspective envisions earthly life as a linear journey, as by carriage or coach, so as to conceive

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248 In opposition to the radical protestant position, Luther’s concept of “real presence” remained somewhat closer to Roman Catholic theology and practice. Popularly known as “consubstantiation,” although Luther never adopted that term, preferring instead “sacramental union,” the congregant receives the elements at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the bread and wine become sacramentally united to the body and blood of Christ. Efforts to resolve the differences, such as in Luther’s famous “Colloquy” with Ulrich Zwingli at Marburg Castle in 1529, came to naught.
“eternity” as an actual place where one might arrive. “Nature,” both here and elsewhere in the scene, refers to a ‘faux’ nature, not a manifestation of God’s being, but incidental, an earthly concept, the existence of which serves man, and which only “seems” connected with the eternal Logos. If, as I argue below, Hamlet stands as a figure of the disenfranchised Old Faith English, nominalist discretion demands he be confined “to the cheer and comfort of our eye” (1.2.116).

Taken together, both the fractured family heritage witnessed in the Council Scene and the disruption to the cosmic order to which Horatio refers on the Battlements form the “prologue to the omen coming on” and indicate the profound disruption in Time via supernatural intervention. In the meantime, as Charles Taylor suggests, once Time falls away from “eternal paradigms of order, . . . more disorder” inevitably results (58). As Hamlet soon fully apprehends, disorder has indeed occurred in that “[t]he time is out of joint” (1.5.197). “The King that’s dead” has not arrived at his ultimate destination in remote eternity. In other words, sacramental Time for all the actors in the drama remains in suspense, awaiting completion of unfinished business.

f. The Living and the Dead estranged; Matter and Spirit dissevered.

Shakespeare’s intra-family colloquy in the Council Scene displays a divergence of Old Faith and Reformation world views so profound that members of the family unit, ostensibly engaged in earnest discourse, can only talk past each other. Hamlet’s mother offers the nominalist contention which holds that the observation and experience of the material world stands as “the sole determinant of what is” (Weaver 173). Thus Gertrude makes perfect sense to condescendingly admonish Hamlet’s futile attempt to “seek for [his] noble father in the dust” (1.2.71). Just as with the altered concept of sacramental Time, Hamlet contends with the reformers’ denial of a sacramental bridge between the material and non-material worlds.
Often mistaken for a brooding prince’s petulant reply to his mother’s concerned entreaty,—“Why seems [your father’s passing] so particular with thee?” (1.2.75)—Hamlet’s immediate riposte voices resistance to the blandishments that diminish the sacramental significance of his father’s (and her husband’s) unexpected demise.

HAMLET. Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not “seems.”

‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good Mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief
That can denote me truly . . .

But I have that within which passes show;

These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.76-79; 82-86)

Hamlet attempts to articulate what he intuits – a real world exists “within” and beyond the material manifestations available to the senses which are but imitations, “trappings” of the unseen divine order. Tangible objects participate in a reality beyond, and independent of, simple apprehension by the senses in that they point to the Creator. Gertrude is unable to see “that within” in Hamlet’s “forms, moods, shapes of grief” (1.2.83, 85). Her sense of reality, bound to the material world, likens the futility of spiritual communication with the deceased Old King Hamlet as a fruitless search through insubstantial dust (1.2.71). She clearly abjures the time-honored sacramental link between the living and the dead. This exchange appears intended to denigrate, if not insult, the communio sanctorum, the communion of saints, reinforcing King Claudius’s exclusive nominalist focus on a sense of reality confined to the material world.
At this early point in the play, Shakespeare provides Hamlet with only an intuitive rebuttal against the broad form of the reformers’ hegemonic denial of sacramental significance in artifact, apparatus, and material symbol. To the faithful, the divine lurks “within,” notwithstanding the efforts of the Elizabethan Settlement to offer in the liturgy of the established church merely the “outward show” of traditional Roman Catholic ritual. Despite the effort at ambiguity and compromise, the carefully crafted confessional statement contained in the Thirty-nine Articles could not disguise the unambiguously reformed substance thereof.249 Thus, England’s Old Faith adherents’ grudging acceptance by outward show, not unlike Hamlet’s grudging acceptance of Claudius’s appeal to family ties, served as the path of least resistance. These Old Faith adherents remained a substantial portion of the population as of the date Shakespeare’s play first appeared.250

249 The 39 Articles of Religion, the confessional prescriptions of faith for the church adopted in 1571, stood as the center piece of the Elizabethan Settlement, the via media that attempted accommodation and compromise which, along with liturgical practice, retained much of the “outward display of Catholic ritual” to the point of including the accoutrements despised by radical reformers (Eire 339). However, while crafted to contain some doctrinal ambiguity, the Articles explicitly condemn idolatry, “superstition,” and all doctrines and practice related to purgatory, including all intercessory invocations directed to saints (Art. XXII). The Articles recognize only the sacraments of baptism and communion, and expressly reject the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Lord’s Supper (Art. XXVIII).

Claudius chimes in to bolster the queen’s argument that Hamlet’s mourning for his father’s death stands unnatural as he reiterates his initial nominalist perspective that uncouples nature from the divine. Instead of the realist view of nature as an imitation of a transcendent, or supernatural model, the material manifestations of which point to the Creator, man’s knowledge and control of nature now derives from the experience of observable “principles of its [nature’s] own constitution and behavior,” not from divine purpose (Weaver 4). Claudius’s “new doctrine of nature,” discussed above, implies the rhetorical question: which is more “natural”—to seek for a father in the dust, or to forget and move on? This attitude must have appalled many in the audience for whom the communio sanctorum remained a bedrock Old Faith tenet.251

CLAUDIUS. . . . But to persever

In obstinate condolment is a course
Of impious stubbornness. ‘Tis unmanly grief.  
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven . . . (1.2.92-95)

. . .

Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie, ‘tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd; whose common theme
Is death of fathers . . . (100-107)

251 Among his three “paradigm shifts” that mark the essential Reformation reconfigurations of reality, Carlos Eire notes the special ferocity of the two-fold Protestant attack on the doctrine of Purgatory and its communio sanctorum—first on an episcopacy that financially exploits lay belief with the falsehood of continuing relationships with the dead, and second on an ‘other world’ distraction from unfettered focus on this world (Reformations pp. 745-48).
As Emma Smith observes, Claudius “is not merely callous . . . [but rather] articulates a quite different worldview, a different understanding of teleology.” 252 Once the dead have arrived in “eternity,” they must have no continuing life or power in the present, nor can they be reached affectively by the living. This adumbrates the reformers’ concept of communion as a remembrance or memorial rather than the actualization of Christ’s sacrifice in sacred time. Claudius cajoles Hamlet toward the nominalist logic that expressly avoids concerns of intrinsic, sacramental, or metaphysical reality in favor of reasoning bent to achieve the material good.

. . . .we pray you throw to earth
This unprevailing woe and think of us
As of a father; for let the world take note
You are the most immediate to our throne,

. . . .

And we beseech you bend you to remain
Here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.  (106-109; 115-117)

Thus Claudius reiterates the dictum with which he began the scene—that nature exists subject to man’s “discretion,” in the sense of autonomous mastery and control. Claudius aims to control both Hamlet’s identity and the measure of his role by the ascriptive power of such names, or nomen, indicated by his dissimulating appeal to “our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.” Therefore, it follows that Hamlet must remain in Elsinore, that is, to suffer under his uncle’s watchful eye as a captive appendage to the Danish court. As a further indignity, while Claudius

252 Emma Smith explains Claudius’s teleological concept that the movement of history conforms to a design indicating purpose, “surely authored by divine Providence and executed by enlightened human agents to move humankind to a higher state of fulfillment or realization” (This is Shakespeare, pp. 166-67).
dispatches Laertes—his minister’s son and Hamlet’s contemporary—to return to his university abroad, he unctuously presses Hamlet “to remain / Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,” reinforced by his mother’s plea to “stay with us, go not to Wittenberg” to resume university student life (1.2.115-16; 119). This unexpected royal fiat provides the first inkling of the routine surveillance praxis within the Danish court, the proliferation of which will soon dominate the motivations and situations in the play.

With a condescending appearance of magnanimity, Claudius dismisses Hamlet with the soon to be fatally ironic “Be as ourself in Denmark . . . / This gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet / Sits smilingly to my heart” (122-24). For the moment, Claudius’s triumph is complete. He resolves potential problems by public validation of his self-confirmed succession, his marriage, his military diplomacy, and his placating designation of Hamlet as “most immediate to our throne” (109).

The main Council Scene concludes with triumphal cannonade as Claudius and his retinue sweep from the court to public celebration of his throne, his queen, and Hamlet’s ostensible accord. Flummoxed by his spiritual and material impoverishment, together with the combined blandishments of his uncle and mother, Hamlet stands suddenly alone, reeling from the bruising clash of competing world views, which culminates with the unexpected and unwelcome royal mandate to remain confined to Elsinore.

Such culmination amplifies the bitter irony of Hamlet’s plight in context in his role as the embodiment of cultural trauma suffered at the hands of eager reformers, who were politically powerful, impatient, and uncomprehending. The misapprehension of Hamlet’s apparent grief, which his puzzled uncle and mother credulously attribute to his irrational response to the fact of his father’s death (“Why seems it so particular with thee?” [1.2.75]), passes over the full scope of
the sudden, glaring reversal of fortune for which he has ample cause to display “. . . all forms, moods, shapes of grief” but nevertheless must keep “that within which passes show” (82-86). 253 From the outset, from even before the play begins, Hamlet learns that his royal father’s sudden death also means the loss of access to his mother, his crown, and his fortune, all of which ironically now devolve to his uncle. At the height of his hastily consolidated power, King Claudius enjoys the spoils of what amounts to Hamlet’s disinheritance.

g. The First Soliloquy sets the stage for Hamlet’s ensuing ordeal.

As noted above, the dialogue on the Battlements reflects a world haunted by the Old Faith in the spectral form of Old King Hamlet: “In the same figure like the King that’s dead” (1.1.45). Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus witness to “a comprehensive biblical view of reality in which the transcendent God manifests . . . in and through the natural material world” including time itself (Gregory 41). By contrast, the Council Scene, over which Denmark’s reigning king presides, openly displays ascendant contemporary values of an anthropocentric world, the origin, understanding, and experience of which lies grounded only in that which is available to the senses. Between the Battlements Scene’s sacramental poetics and the Council Scene’s ‘buffeting of Hamlet’ by his royal uncle and mother, Shakespeare dramatizes in broad outline the underlying clash between ways of seeing—between the real and the nominal—which, in turn,

253 Shakespeare uses Hamlet’s antagonists’ puzzled lack of empathy to reinforce the nominalist/realist philosophical divide, beginning with Claudius’s patronizing critique of Hamlet’s grief for the death of his father, as discussed, and continuing with the bafflement of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who remain unable to discern the cause of Hamlet’s “distemper”; see, e.g., their report to Claudius at 3.1.1-10 (“. . . he feels himself distracted, / But from what cause ‘a will by no means speak” (5-6); and later to directly to Hamlet “. . . what is the cause of your distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend” (3.2.335-37).
informs the pervasive religious contention manifest in the Reformers’ prevailing drive to desacralize traditional English culture. In other words, throughout this auspicious beginning, hints emerge of a play that will daringly relate to the contemporary philosophical conflict over the nature of the divine and how it is known, which comes to tormented expression in Hamlet’s First Soliloquy.

(i) “O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!” (1.2.129, 130)

Unexpectedly repressed by circumstances, a demeaned and dejected Hamlet appears to yield to the dominant “new doctrine of nature” as he laments: “O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!” (1.2.129-30). 254 Whipped by Claudius’s nominalist concept of a natural world that serves human desires, Hamlet sees the very flesh of

254 A favorite textual “crux” lies with perennial the correct authorial choice among textual variants modifying “flesh”: “sullied,” “sallied,” or “solid.” See, e.g., Harold Jenkins’s detailed discussion in “Longer Notes,” Hamlet, 2nd ed. (Arden 1982) pp. 436-38. While interesting, these variants and interpretations thereof stand irrelevant to the principal philosophical conceit which bears on the disputed nature of God’s relationship to the created order. The opening line of this First Soliloquy offers an image of Creation inevitably prone to corruption by doctrine which posits that earthly objects possess their own being separate from nature’s sacramental participation in God’s being, (Boersma, p. 75). The puzzling image of flesh that can be made to alter its ordained elemental certainty by ‘melting’ then ‘thawing’ and finally atomizing into substance-less air stands antithetical to Aquinas’s conception of God’s potentia ordinata which holds that a comprehensible creation, as ordered by God, reliably reveals Him within it. Rather, Shakespeare shows Hamlet extravagantly resigned to the contra view, offered by Scotus and Ockham and absorbed into Protestant theology—that of God’s potentia absoluta, absolute power, expressed solely through voluntas, or the divine will, in no way bound by Creation. Once separated from reason, nature becomes fundamentally unintelligible resulting in “thorough-going skepticism,” pp. 75-79; see also Louis Dupre, Religion and the Rise of Modern Culture, p. 22.
humankind as separate from God’s Being—it’s existence defined by what man makes of it. In this case, Hamlet makes of himself not the reflection of divine image, but rather that of a non-entity, reduced to nothing more than “a dew”—chaffing at the “canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (130-32). A beaten Hamlet woefully capitulates to the nominalist ethic of “reasoning bent to achieve the material good,” as he complains “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world” (Emma Smith 167; 1.2.133-34, emphases supplied). In other words, in this newly prevailing nominalist ethic, things of the created world must exist to usefully serve and profit man or else be discarded.

This First Soliloquy introduces the spectator to the first of what becomes an unprecedented number of distinctive dramatic monologues by which the central figure, Hamlet, may exclusively disclose to the audience information that further reveals the purpose and meaning of his role. The Soliloquy finds Hamlet at the “nadir” of his fortunes, confounded by coercive pressure of competing ideas in evidence in the Council Scene, which originated with the above noted paradigmatic shift in the conception of reality, and which dramatize the emotional trauma of religious change. This First Soliloquy articulates a defining point of spiritual

255 Although all of Hamlet’s soliloquys hold popular attention and interest, the most potent soliloquy in the play, both dramatically and thematically, belongs to Claudius in the Prayer Scene (3.3.36-72), discussed at length in Section II of this Chapter.

256 A telling controversy arises over what constitutes Hamlet’s “nadir” (that is, the lowest point of his fortunes). Thompson and Taylor argue that this occurs at the cusp of his enforced exile from Denmark to England at 4.4 (“How all occasions do inform against me . . .” 33-67) in preference to the more commonly identified Fourth Soliloquy (“To be or not to” 3.2.57-89) (“Introduction,” Arden Hamlet, pp. 18-19). While the sea voyage of Act 4 is a set-back, Hamlet’s purpose is clearly undeterred. Hamlet’s “To be” blatantly misleads his eavesdropping antagonists. However the First Soliloquy marks an all-important dramatic “nadir” for it is at that point of
desolation that indulges grievance in his mother’s present failure of faith and voices a determined
spirit of invective against his uncle that soon materializes in the compelling action of the play.

(ii) “’Tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed” (1.2.135-36)

Despite Claudius’s attempt to indoctrinate Hamlet to his “new doctrine of nature,”
Hamlet sees himself in an anti-type of Edenic “garden,” a corrupted world from which God
stands remote. Contrary to Claudius’s vaunted nominalist claims for human agency, Hamlet
finds that the “discretion” to bend nature to man’s desires actually corrupts nature. In a potent
extended metaphor Hamlet surmises that the material “’Tis an unweeded garden / That grows to
seed. Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (135-37; emphasis supplied). In this
conceit, contrary to the realist notion articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, which holds that study
of nature’s physical appearances yields insight into the ineffable Creator’s Being, Hamlet here
concludes that such corrupted nature cannot point to the Creator. Rather, nature’s material
elements, being subject to man’s “discretion” must inevitably point to, and assume, the
corruption of fallen man.

In the Council Scene, Shakespeare employs the business of state and family to critique
the consequential alteration in the conception of reality where over time nominalism gradually
displaces metaphysical realism which essentially set the table for the Protestant Reformation
(Gregory 38). Now, by Shakespeare’s time, sense perception determines the common
conception of reality rather than that “perceived by the intellect” (Weaver 3). As the physical
“garden” appears to the senses, so must be the totality of its essence, without regard to its
perfection in the mind of the Creator.

articulated despair, loss, and hopelessness from which Hamlet can see the path upward and toward justice for
himself, his hastily married mother, and deceased father.
What has grown to seed? The Old Faith lies untended and undernourished, starved by reason of neglect and lack of cultivation by the faithful. Why? Like Hamlet’s mother, a once pious English population, instead of giving life and nourishment to the culture at large has resigned to the path of least resistance, to the easier choice of material security in exchange for outward show of religious loyalty.

(ii) “That it should come to this! . . . / Let me not think on’t; frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2.137, 146)

Notwithstanding his passing reference to the harsh tutorial on the nature of the divine, Hamlet consumes fully two-thirds of his First Soliloquy with Gertrude’s seemingly fickle turn from the memory of her all too briefly mourned husband (“so excellent a King”) to marriage with his uncle—no more like Old King Hamlet than “Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.139-40). The ease with which she has substituted the “Hyperion” for the “satyr” reveals his mother’s shallow faith and exposes the depth of her hypocrisy. Just as Gertrude did “post / [w]ith such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (156-57), so had the pious English faithful, suddenly bereft of the structure of the Old Faith, made the best of the matter and turned to accept union with a counterfeit of the traditional church. Hamlet, the pouting offspring, insensitive to the real world dilemma of the widowed queen, uncharitably resents what he regards as the all-too-easy exchange of the real for the nominal, the sacramental for the material, so as to simply move on. The nominalist approach holds that the past is past. No continuing meaning lies with the past; rather, present meaning resides in the succession of events unconnected with the past. In other words, Hamlet’s mother represents the pious Old Faith English who, in fealty to the newly reformed regime, chose to trade tradition and faith of their fathers in exchange for material security and survival.
(iv) “[She] married with my . . . father’s brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules.” (1.2.151-53)

Hamlet’s harshest judgment falls upon the perceived weakness of his mother, the widowed Queen, who gave in to her self-interest for survival and wealth retention. But the question remains in all this, where was her son Hamlet? He eventually confronts Gertrude to make this very argument in the “Closet Scene” (3.4). Yet, as explained above, in the first instance Hamlet also failed the faith in his own way. The intellectual who knew better stood distracted by the world, specifically by his studies in the Protestant stronghold of Wittenberg. His absence left his father, a figure for the traditional English Church, prey to the abrupt succession and substitution by a “reformed” counterfeit version of the traditional English church, figured in form by his brother Claudius, which managed to supplant the Old Faith. As the audience soon learns, Claudius contrived the usurpation by forced demise, i.e., assassination.

(v) “But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.” (1.2.159)

The Council scene reveals the “mighty opposites” that preoccupy the play’s action: two flawed adversaries, Hamlet and Claudius, whose contention assumes a parabolic dimension that initially presents itself as a series of dilemmas, problems to be solved. Faults and perils plague both sides. Initially, Claudius demonstrates competent kingship, domestic reasonableness, and the appearance of accommodation in contrast to Hamlet’s petulance and abrasive disrespect. Outmaneuvered in discourse with uncle and mother, Hamlet continues to chafe at the divergent conceptions of how the divine is known and understood. Hamlet stands as an embodied figure of the abruptly disinherited faith, with its roots in the distant English past. Not only do circumstances compel him to physically remain under his uncle’s watchful eye (1.2.116), but not unlike his mother, circumstances also compel his silence. As newly installed sovereign,
Claudius stands as the “new man,” eager to herald an instrumental view of a reality that resides in the material world, subject only to man’s desires.257

vi) “. . . . Foul deeds will rise, / Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes.” (1.2.262-63)

Hamlet no sooner concludes the First Soliloquy than the three witnesses from the previous scene on the Battlements, Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo, suddenly interrupt his despairing *stasis* with startling testimony of his recently deceased father’s nocturnal ghostly presence.258 The news of the supernatural manifestation of “[his] father in arms” serves as a tonic for the brooding prince. From the moment of his friends’ excited disclosure, the forces at work in the play quickly catalyze from the acrimonious conflict of idea and identity between Hamlet and his uncle Claudius to one more nakedly focused on the deadly confrontation between the filial heir to the throne of Old King Hamlet and the murdering usurper.

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The plays’ first two scenes, together with those that immediately follow, also begin to populate the play with the actors and circumstances that analogize the conditions of compelled uniformity and “fractured rituals” intended to hasten the cultural collapse of surviving Old Faith

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257 Claudius adumbrates the celebrated emergence of the “new man,” free from old hierarchies so as to “reinvent himself . . . through the pursuit of classical ‘this worldly’ ideals,” for the principal purpose to permit man “to realize himself more fully” (Bates, *Soul of the Age*, pp. 67-68 and nn. 36, 56). See also Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, pp. 3-4; along with Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 97-98 and Eire, *Reformations*, p. 81.

258 A potent element of Shakespeare’s dramatic technique described in David Ball’s theory of “stasis and intrusion.” The Soliloquy’s recapitulation of the inherent *stasis* of his onerous circumstances render Hamlet incapable of changing anything until the *intrusion* of first the news of the Ghost’s appearance, after which the Ghost’s disclosure launches the action of the play (*Backwards and Forwards*, pp. 19-21.)
tradition. By this early point in the play, Shakespeare efficiently 1) provides a philosophical frame of reference; 2) sets the thematic agenda; and 3) establishes a parabolic narrative that holds up a mirror to the audience’s world, wherein the final outcome is yet to be rendered.

For those in the audience “with, ears to hear,” the story not only frames the consequential contention between divergent views about the nature of reality, but also boldly presents an analogical framework for the confused circumstances of compelled religious uniformity. Ironically, the standard of uniformity that demands merely “outward show” amounts to no genuine uniformity at all. While such meretricious framework plunges Hamlet into a world of dissimulation and surveillance, it also offers at least a glimmer of hope for relief from the fraught spiritual condition that results therefrom.

4.1.2 The Culture of Dissimulation, Deception, and Surveillance.

Hamlet bears witness to the accelerating processes of secularization impelled by 1) political exigencies, as in Claudius’s worldly compulsion “to get things done!” and 2) the

259 See Sarah Beckwith’s detailed discussion the of how the medieval inheritance suffered a “fracturing of ritual,” centered on the Eucharist controversy, which altered the role of role of the sacraments and opened a divorce between appearance and reality, words and thoughts, together with a litany of examples set forth in her review of “Stephen Greenblatt’s Hamlet and the Forms of Oblivion,” pp. 262-280.

260 Note the distinction between the first two terms within the play: “dissimulation” simply means pretense; the concealment of one's thoughts, feelings, or character, e.g. Hamlet dismisses that which “seems” in favor of the authentic, but vague and undefined “that within”; also, his First Soliloquy ends with the resolve to “hold my tongue” that is, to conceal his wounded and hostile feelings revealed in the Soliloquy, which attitude remains a through-line as he thwarts his spying friends, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern (2.2.223-312). “Deception” on the other hand, indicates the affirmative act of deceiving another, as in Hamlet’s running trope of his “antique disposition” (1.5.181) put on to convince his antagonists of his fictional mental infirmity.
systematic desacralization of a material world that once bore the signs of God’s grace and derived existence and meaning from participation in God’s Being. Inevitably, these conditions combine to weaken traditional bonds of human community through which seep the corrosive poisons of dissimulation, suspicion, and mistrust that pervade the play. The resulting culture of deception undermines the reality prescribed by the inherited medieval Christian conception of the call to peace and human fellowship by the Gospel’s shared way of life.

By the end of the Council Scene the playwright analogically situates the characters, with their actions and predicaments, as cooperating agents within a metaphorical landscape that displays the cultural consequences and human cost of the systematic program that seeks to expunge the immanence of God from Reformation England’s cosmic imaginary and the inevitable resulting corruption of its social imaginary.\textsuperscript{261}

The following examples illustrate the by now unremarkable forms of calculated instrumental dissimulation designed to bring about a result that serves the agent’s material ends. In each case, the real, as essential truth, becomes nominally redefined, constructed or corrupted. The sense of human community inevitably suffers as otherwise traditional understandings of common motives and objective truths rooted in the divine now routinely serve secular ends.

\textbf{a. Corruption of Temporal Power.}

An important intervening scene (discussed below) holds in abeyance the promised

\textsuperscript{261} The matter of “social” and “cosmic” imaginaries stand inextricably related. Once the latter is destabilized, the binding agents of the former come into question as “one of many” ways to look at whether \textit{sub specie aeternitas} usefully exists to guide human life. Note Jonathan Bates’s discussion of John Donne’s “Anatomie of the World” where “new philosophy calls all in doubt . . . .This is the world’s condition now . . . .” (ll. 205, 219) \textit{Soul of the Age}, pp.60-61
action following the *stasis*-breaking news of Hamlet’s ghostly father as the eager witnesses resolve to meet again that evening “upon the platform twixt eleven and twelve” (1.2.257). Immediately thereafter the play’s action returns to the first scene’s liminal world on the Battlements where Hamlet’s nocturnal encounter with the purported Ghost of his father reveals the play’s undercurrent of political corruption—endemic deception emerges as the new Danish court’s means of doing business.

The Ghost’s entire discourse confirms Hamlet’s suspicions that appearance belies reality, beginning with the false news “given out” of how Old King Hamlet met his untimely death: “The whole ear of Denmark / Is by a forged process of my death / Rankly abused” (1.5.36, 37-39). Moreover, as the Ghost avers, Claudius wins his widowed Queen, Hamlet’s mother, “[w]ith witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-- / O, wicked wit and gifts, that have the power / So to seduce! “ (1.5.44-46). In the event, Hamlet himself becomes seduced, intoxicated with his own admiring appropriation of the tactics of both instrumental dissimulation and deception as countermeasures against his uncle’s control. As Margreta DeGrazia astutely observes, after the Ghost’s harrowing appearance and disclosure of his uncle’s ghastly ambush and murder of his father, Hamlet notes down only one aphorism in his newly wiped copy book, to which he refers as “the table of my memory” (163, 1.5.99):

> . . . meet it is I set it down

> That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.

> At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark. (1.5.108-110)

Hamlet’s own adopted deception tactic promptly takes active root with his resolve “[t]o put an antic disposition on” by which tactic he abjures the ethic that one’s outward actions should cleave to essential truth (1.5.181). Instead, in the dangerous pursuit of revenge, he “became what
Hamlet mockingly turns the Danish court’s nominalist ethic into an instrument calculated to deceive, specifically to bait his antagonists to name him, not for who he is, but rather for what he appears. And sure enough, his hastily conceived and crudely performed “antic disposition” serves to establish among his credulous nemeses the misleading play-length running trope of “Hamlet’s madness.”

In a culture of deception one cannot be sure of anything. Indeed, as Hamlet soon applies the same presumption of inauthenticity to the Ghost in his Third Soliloquy where he questions the veracity of the Ghost’s disclosure: “The spirit I have seen / May be the devil, and the devil hath power / T’ assume a pleasing shape” (2.2.599-601). That suspicion spawns further deception whereby Hamlet invites the King and his court to a performed entertainment. However, Hamlet secretly designs this seemingly innocuous entertainment, as a trap through which he, by surveillance, intends to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.606). If successful, “the play’s the thing” to publicly expose Claudius’s guilt.

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262 Employed by modern anthropology to describe the behavioral phenomenon found with indigenous people where totemic power or knowledge from material objects transfers to the worshiping beholder. The phrase derives from William Blake’s *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion,* Chapter II, Plate 32: “All that beheld him fled howling and gnawed their tongues / For pain: they became what they beheld . . .”. However the concept originates in the ancient near eastern religions, and may be found in Old Testament scripture in the ridicule of idol worship. See, e.g., Ps. 115. However contemporary use of both the phrase and the concept emerged as a popular reference to the modern media as extensions of human senses and the seductive power thereof, specifically television in McLuhan and Foire’s *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967); McLuhan colleague Edmund Snow Carpenter coincidentally employs the phrase for the title of his study of indigenous visual media within tribal art and culture, *They Became What They Beheld* (1970).
b. Corruption of Family.

The playwright pauses the building anticipation of Hamlet’s encounter with the Ghost with yet another pattern in the play’s universal tapestry of deception. Immediately following Hamlet’s mood change upon the news of his father’s Ghost, the scene abruptly shifts to a moment of domestic conversation, first between Ophelia and her departing brother Laertes, then joined by the King’s minister, their father Polonius. The “few precepts” Polonius earnestly delivers to his son conclude with an emphatic call to authenticity:

> And this above all: to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Farewell. My blessing season this in thee! (1.3.78-81)

The scene ends with Laertes’s departure followed by Hamlet’s above-described encounter with the Ghost and concoction of his misleading “antic disposition” tactic, as to which Hamlet emphatically swears Horatio and sentries to secrecy. A second domestic scene follows that mirrors Polonius’s previous farewell to Laertes, but which ironically combines dissimulation with surveillance, which tactic becomes increasingly prominent in the ensuing plot.

This time, the king’s minister similarly dispatches for travel his “man,” Reynaldo. However, the “advice” that accompanies this farewell, by contrast to his pious counsel to his son, Laertes, for candor to self and fellow, constitutes a detailed lesson in the art of subterfuge. Under the appearance of delivering funds to Laertes, Polonius instructs Reynaldo precisely how to effect his actual purpose, namely to spy on his son: “Before you visit him to make inquiere / Of his behavior” (2.1.4). He explains how the dissimulating air of familiarity lent by the acquired information may then be used to prompt Laertes’s sundry casual acquaintances to
affirm Reynaldo’s *suggested* indiscretions. This perversely echoes Polonius’s above-quoted sanctimonious conclusion to his earlier advice to his son and similarly declares the enduring instrumental value of the dissimulating principles offered. He assures Renaldo that:

   Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
   And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
   With windlasses and with assays of bias,
   By indirections find directions out.
   So by my former lecture and advice
   Shall you my son. (2.1.64-67)

In this caricature of *nominalist* ethic, virtues possess no objective reality nor principles capable of universal application, but rather stand unmoored from divine *reality* subject to the same discretion that Claudius applies to nature, becoming instead simply fungible tools to instrumentally serve the needs of man.\(^\text{263}\)

c. Corruption of “Friendship.”

Hamlet’s peculiar “antic disposition,” his response to the Ghost’s shocking disclosure of his uncle’s act of regicide, prompts a great deal more royal surveillance than merely Hamlet’s involuntary retention at court might otherwise suggest. He clearly abandons his initially stated tactic following his First Soliloquy: “I must hold my tongue” (1.2.159). The “antic” stratagem would appear somewhat inapposite to the Danish source story plot where the child Amleth felt compelled to feign madness to divert the usurping uncle’s suspicion from the likelihood of the boy’s plot to revenge the public murder of his father. Shakespeare’s Hamlet is an adult and the
murder occurs in secret. The peculiar stratagem adopted could have only one logical aim: to unnerve his usurping uncle Claudius, perhaps to provoke a misstep or an unguarded admission. Indeed something of the desired effect occurs—Claudius and Gertrude secretly procure and dispatch Hamlet’s schoolmates, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to engage in the very form of surveillance Polonius earlier outlined to Renaldo: “To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather / So much as from occasion you may glean,” specifically, to report back what confidential information they may “glean” so as to uncover Hamlet’s hidden motives for his “transformation” (2.2.5, 15-16).

At first pleased to encounter his “[g]ood friends,” Hamlet quickly recognizes their dissimulation and purpose and they reluctantly admit to their summons by the King and Queen (2.2.222-379). Not only is good natured candor among schoolmates out of the question but Hamlet seasons his dissimulating conversation with his unfaithful “friends” by an ominous aside: “I have an eye of you.” (2.2.291). Hamlet pretends to satisfy their now discovered mission with his own brand of subterfuge which consists of a generalized melancholia that begins: “I have of late but wherefore I know not lost all my mirth . . .” (2.2.297). As the pair later report to an unsatisfied King Claudius:

Rosencrantz: He does confess he feels himself distracted,

But from what cause ‘a will by no means speak.

Guildenstern: Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,

But with a crafty madness keeps aloof . . . (3.1.5-8)

In the event, his friends corrupt quickly. They become ever more in thrall to the royal court and strive to do its bidding as they go from “fortuitous” reunion with their university friend to the King’s eager agents.
d. Corruption of Social Rank

Two irony-rich scenes farcically display the most elaborate of the play’s dissimulation/deception schemes and surveillance traps with a dizzying array of complex plot and counterplot that reinforces the play’s simple “central metaphor” (between what “seems” and what “is”). Because the agents in the analogical world of the Danish court stand bereft of objective standards rooted in immutable reality, they cannot distinguish authentic from inauthentic, reality from appearance. Thus the deceivers are as likely to be deceived as the object of their deceptions.

Claudius’s ease and confidence in his kingship, marriage, and control of Hamlet, manifest in the Council Scene, rapidly fades with the onset of Hamlet’s “antic disposition” tactic, which in turn stirs Claudius to secretly ascertain its cause. His above-described first effort to suborn confidential disclosure through secret summons of Hamlet’s school-mates yields nothing.

Hamlet previously launches his “antic disposition” off-stage to his erstwhile lady friend, the credulous Ophelia, who promptly relates the bizarre encounter to her father, the King’s minister Polonius, who in turn concludes that his own previous command to his daughter to terminate her relationship with Hamlet “hath made him mad” (2.1.2.1.76-121). With his daughter in tow, Polonius breaks into court business and presents to Claudius and Gertrude both diagnosis and cause of Hamlet’s “madness,” complete with documentary evidence in the form Hamlet’s quoted love letters to Ophelia (2.2.92-151). However, while eager to confirm that Hamlet’s “madness” results from frustrated love, rather than suspicion of the secret regicide, Claudius nonchalantly inquires: “How may we try it further?” to which Polonius offers a variation on his “bait” instructions to Reynaldo in 2.1, above: “I’ll loose my daughter to him / Be
you and I behind the arras then” (2.2.159; 162-163). The king seizes upon Polonius’s offer and proceeds to stage Ophelia’s ‘accidental’ encounter, with a prayer book supplied, and plots to eavesdrop on the erstwhile, but estranged, lovers. Polonius sets the bait with plausible appearance within the same orbit: “Ophelia, walk you here… / We will bestow ourselves. Read on this book, / That show of such exercise may color / Your loneliness” (3.1.43-46). Royal instructions summon Hamlet to a place within the orbit of surveillance: (Claudius to Gertrude): “we have closely sent for Hamlet hither” (3.1.29). With unintended irony, Polonius casually muses upon how often the false display masks subterfuge as he tellingly reflects on the contrived dissimulation and surveillance:

We are oft to blame in this—

‘Tis too much proved—that with devotion’s visage
And pious action we do sugar o’er
The devil himself. (3.1.46-49)

For those with “ears to hear,” these words grimly relate to those compelled to false devotion and pious action under mandatory church service attendance and the prescriptions of the established church’s reformed liturgy.

Not the least bit fooled at the clumsy subterfuge, Hamlet, in soliloquy for the benefit of his eavesdroppers, manages an imitation *quodlibit* worthy of a clever university student weaving threads of metaphysical ruminations, consisting of eloquent tergiversation: “To be, or not to be, that is the question: / Whether ‘tis nobler . . . to suffer / . . . / Or to take arms. . . / . . . To die, to sleep / . . . / . . . perchance to dream . . . / . . . / Must give us pause” (3.57-69). 264 However, once he

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264 The famous speech, a virtual cliché for admiring thespians, has become a contextual orphan, separated from a rich and subtle context. Rather than the often assumed soul searing self-reflection, the playwright provides Hamlet
engages the “loosed” Ophelia and sees that her purpose concerns “remembrances of [his]” she “has longed to redeliver,” fury gets the better of him as he excoriates Ophelia’s masquerade of appearance and pretense (3.1.104-130).

Of course, having been “closely sent for,” Hamlet knows full well that Claudius and his minister must hear his every word. Shakespeare turns Hamlet’s seeming excoriation of the weak and hapless Ophelia into full-throated denunciation of endemic dissimulation, deception, and oppressive surveillance of the royal court that directs a veiled threat to Claudius, as if to repeat the earlier warning to his similarly disloyal spying friends: “I have an eye of you.” 265 In a moment that begins the series of aggravating circumstances, Claudius determines to radically reverse his earlier unctuous pronouncement that Hamlet “remain / Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye” (1.2.115-116). Rather, in the wake of Hamlet’s veiled but ominous Fourth Soliloquy,

with something perhaps expected from an intellectually pretentious university student. Walter King sees the soliloquy in the well-recognized form of “dubitation,” that overtly parodies the university quodlibit exercise in the rhetoric of disputatio. Hamlet’s Search for Meaning, pp. 67-70. In the classic Augustinian solilquia, one puzzles over a problem in the form of dialogue within oneself. Here Shakespeare amplifies the parodic nature of the “dubitation” by its being offered to credulous eavesdroppers apparently unaware that Hamlet has good reason to know of their concealed presence. In his examination of the dubitative process, King cites Willima Hecksscher’s discovery of a 16th C. Cambridge University student disputatio text that begins “esse aut non esse, haec est quaestio” by way of suggesting the familiarity with examination of Being and Non-being which may have been idiomatic, even clichéd to educated segments of Shakespeare’s audience (p. 70, n. 2).

265 Toward the end of Hamlet’s berating of Ophelia, with the king and Polonius “bestowed . . . seeing, unseen” (3.1.33), with his ire obviously building with the repeated “Get thee to a nunnery,“ he stops short with a telling non-sequitur: “Where is your father?” Ophelia’s mendacious reply “At home, my Lord” accelerates Hamlet’s torrent of abuse, concluding with “I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already—all but one—shall live . . . “ (3.1.149-51).
followed by his castigation of Ophelia as a sacrificial surrogate, Claudius senses Hamlet’s pretense of ‘madness’ as a threat that demands measured but decisive response.

    . . .There’s something in his soul
    O’er which his melancholy sits on brood,
    And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
    Will be some danger; which for to prevent,
    I have in quick determination
    Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England
    For the demand of our neglected tribute. (3.2.169-73)

Thus the world view Claudius so confidently sets forth in the Council Scene, in keeping with his instrumental extrinsicism and disregard for the real, begins to destabilize as the false foundation of his constructed and ill-gotten order.

e. The Play Scene: Surveillance Reimagined

    Murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
    With most miraculous organ. (2.2.594-95)

The loss of Platonist-Christian realist knowledge of the nature of God inevitably leads to the diminished social facility with which to discern the verity of human actions with any more than a subjective nominalist perspective. The play’s actions progress precariously through the path of habitual disjuncture between appearance and reality where the real, that is the authentic, lies easily hidden, prone to concealment aided by practiced habits of dissimulation, deception and dishonesty which in turn induce acceptance and substitution of the extrinsic so as to further a materially desirable end.

The fortuitous arrival at Elsinore of the “Tragedians of the City” provides the form of a ‘sacramental instrument’ with which to point to an immutable truth, a reality behind the
appearances available to the physical senses—in this case, the hidden fact of Claudius’s usurpation of the crown by murder. In the actual Play Scene, the King’s common dissimulation/surveillance stratagem turns about with enactment of Hamlet’s scheme first envisioned by the Third Soliloquy, where he resolves to “have these players / Play something like the murder of my father \ Before mine uncle” (3.1.595-96). Of a piece with the surveillance of the contrived encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia, Hamlet’s dissimulation lures the King and court to a contrived theatrical performance at which Hamlet intends the fictional dramatic performance to prompt a visible shock of recognition and thus elicit incriminating evidence of Claudius’s culpability for the murder of Old King Hamlet. Hamlet’s recrafted play-within-the-play—*The Murder of Gonzago*—also confronts Claudius with Hamlet’s apparent knowledge of his secret crime.

The Play Scene broadly models how potent hidden truths lurk beneath material appearance. Climactic and compelling, the Play Scene decisively shifts the dynamics of the contending parties’ positions, and palpably reinforces the proximity of the real manifest in both the poetics and the accelerating pace of the play’s contentious narrative. The Play Scene reveals to Claudius his own worst fears—somehow Hamlet knows the details of the assassination of his father. Claudius also knows that Hamlet knows that Claudius knows. However, in keeping with Shakespeare’s presentation of a contemporary world focused solely on the individual self and that which can be perceived by the senses, Claudius’s crime remains secret from everyone else. The cascade of rapidly intervening events expressly threatens the very survival of Claudius’s ill-gotten order, and compels him to rework his nephew’s errand to the English Court into a farcically over determined plot for Hamlet’s murder.
f. Sea Voyage and Return

The shock of Claudius’s recognition of his peril abruptly interrupts the “play-within-the-play.” For the balance of the play, Shakespeare sends the principals through a series of episodes that broadly accentuate the hapless incapacity to distinguish appearance from reality to the point of morbid farce.

To Hamlet, amid his hurried summons to his mother’s closet, Claudius *appears* to pray and so defers his otherwise prime revenge to a “more horrid hent” (3.3.88) to ensure damnation, but *in reality* Claudius cannot pray. Moments later, the King *appears* secreted behind the arras in his mother’s closet, but *in reality*, Hamlet mistakenly stabs to death Polonius. Claudius *appears* to safeguard Hamlet from public retribution for Polonius’s death with a mission to England, *but in reality* orders Hamlet “by letters sealed” executed upon arrival (3.4.209). During the voyage, Hamlet discovers, then recrafts, the order into a Bellerophonic letter that provides for his escorts’ execution instead.

The play recapitulates the competing surveillance strategies in Acts Two and Three with a climactic concatenation of deception, dissimulation, and contrivance that begins upon Hamlet’s improbable return to Denmark. Claudius and Laertes arrange what *appears* as a fencing contest, *but in reality* they plot to wound Hamlet with an unbated and envenomed foil which *appears* unremarkable, *but in reality* a scratch from the tip of which brings instant death. Claudius *appears* to invite Hamlet to toast to his mid-contest success with a valuable pearl placed within what is *in reality* a poisoned cup from which an unsuspecting Gertrude rashly drinks. Likewise, Laertes *appears* to successfully strike Hamlet according to plan, *but in reality* a simultaneous accidental exchange of foils allows the unknowing Hamlet to requite the deadly strike with the same envenomed foil. The dying Laertes reveals Claudius’s role in the gruesome plot behind the
scheme, the likewise dying Hamlet at long last takes his revenge. As a the farcical coda to the carnage that ends the play, the two Ambassadors from the Council Scene burst in to announce triumphantly “That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead” (5.2.372). Thus do all the concocted threads of appearance stand confounded by the immutable reality of death.

4.2 THE PARABLE of the DISINHERITED SON

And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out. (2.1.65-67)

Section One of this chapter framed the cultural clash over the nature of reality wrought by Reformation politics as embodied in the philosophical “contention” between Hamlet and his usurping uncle Claudius. It explored the play’s competing philosophical underpinnings—the Old Faith’s logical realism usurped by “reformed” understanding of the divine grounded in nominalism—as a means by which to portray the basis of cultural contention at the turn of the century in terms of deep roots in scholastic philosophy that remained influential in the Elizabethan present. The circumstance within which the antagonists contend stands as an emblem of the confessionally contentious world of Elizabethan England. Section Two shifts focus from the philosophical origin of the religious contention that emerges from the paradigm shift in understanding the nature of reality to the Shakespeare’s down-to-earth rendering of a familiar revenge tragedy as a form of parable story or narrative that all can understand. The play invites the hearer to experience the irradicable nature of the divine which shapes the play’s unfolding problems into the image of divine purpose.

This Section Two of this chapter explores how the playwright reshapes the familiar Danish tale of justice and revenge into a classic form of a parable, the meaning and affective purpose with which, unlike nuances of scholastic philosophy, England’s still vital Old Faith
community would more readily identify. Woven throughout the play’s parabolic narrative, the metaphorical presence of an immanent and active God serves to critique the profound cultural change wrought by the institutional reconfiguration of English religious life. Although well under way for half a century, that continuing compulsion toward confessional change now roils Shakespeare’s London with increased intensity—coincident with his *Hamlet* as bellwether of a mid-career “sea-change” and the foreseeable end of Elizabeth’s 40-year reign. Shakespeare’s “Parable of the Disinherited Son” provides a subtle rouse for ‘those with ears to hear’ toward preservation of cultural memory—what England’s past, in short, could offer its future.

4.2.1 *Elizabethan Imagination in Context: Perception by Analogy.*

Elizabethan public theatre audiences expected analogical correspondences between stage fiction and contemporary circumstance. Broadly construed, the attributes of Prince Hamlet’s circumstances easily analogize to the religious condition of England in 1601. The silent Ghost of the murdered Old King Hamlet haunts the battlements. The usurping successor to his throne, the impatient “new man,” in the person of his brother Claudius, stands eager to discard the past and exercise human agency upon the future.\(^{266}\)

However, Shakespeare develops the inherited simple plot—the aggrieved son discovers, then resolves to avenge, his usurping uncle’s assassination of his royal father—to the point that it teems with complex philosophical, ethical, and cultural challenges not unlike those borne by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. The play’s opening two scenes, discussed in Section I, metaphorically dramatize the contemporary material conditions of religious change, within

\(^{266}\) For a discussion of the intellectual claims that spawned contemporary embodiments of the “‘new man’ who emerged in tandem with the ‘new philosophy’” in playwriting as well as poetry, see Bates, *Soul of the Age*, pp. 65-66.
which the role of Hamlet serves as a composite of the English people trapped in a difficult, if not untenable, position: isolated from material inheritance and birthright; importuned by both the Old Church (in the person of his father’s ghost) and the new reformed Church (in the person of his usurping uncle Claudius, who has taken to wife his weak and easily seduced widowed mother, Gertrude); and, cut-off from independent spiritual authority of Rome by the secular English monarchy. The new King and Queen urge Hamlet to accept the comfort and privilege of a new identity within the new regime. By contrast, his ghostly father soon incites him to reclaim his identity from the usurping uncle that abruptly ended his life.

The enduring affective appeal of Shakespeare’s adaptation of the Nordic tale, resides in the playwright’s having retold the story as a form of complex *parable*, a genre which provides the audience with more than merely simple analogy to situations and relationships that correlate to current conditions. But, as in the classic *parable* genre, the dramatic narrative or story contains a moral argument or ethical dilemma the divinely inspired solution to which “comes alongside” to offer resolution. Gifted, but flawed, Hamlet embodies a surviving, but abruptly disinherited, ancient English culture whose dilemma ultimately resolves in recovered sacramental awareness of the active divine presence in the material world. Indeed, in Shakespeare’s hands, from beneath the surface of the popular “revenge” scenario, ostensibly about Hamlet the injured Danish prince, emerges a deeply contextual meditation on the nature of

267 As parable scholar C. H. Dodd explains, “the parable has the character of an argument, in that it entices the hearer to a judgment upon the situation depicted, and the challenges him, directly or by implication to, to apply that judgment to the matter in hand” (*Parables of the Kingdom* p. 21). (emphasis supplied).

268 The word “parable” derives from Greek and Latin roots that together mean “to throw” and “alongside,” signifying a comparison or a parallel in which one thing illustrates another (*SOED*, def.1).
the divine and how the divine can be known in a world unmoored from traditional English religious culture.

In parabolic fashion, the philosophical, yet deadly, contention that defines the respective protagonists’ competing world views outlined in Section I forms the backdrop to Hamlet’s subsequent plotting and pursuit of revenge in the material world. Shakespeare’s previously discussed sacramental poetics also distinctively reinforces what Northrop Frye calls the parable’s “two dimensional” perspective (*Double Vision* 78). As applied to the play, a larger conceptual vision attaches to the material stage action. In like manner, C. H. Dodd’s analysis of the Biblical parable also applies to the play in that he distinguishes the literary device of mere analogy, or comparison, to that arising from an “inward affinity” between the action on stage and the existential order to which it refers (*Parables of the Kingdom* 21). From the beginning scene on the Battlements, the play entices the spectator beyond the surface perspective of plot to a larger experience of the divine in parallel with human existence that informs and ultimately subsumes the material world of the play. Most importantly, the story’s parabolic narrative invites the hearer to place himself within the story, to enter into the play’s “problems” so as to induce reflection and apply a judgment on the situation presented.269

Shakespeare invites his audience into the story’s “two-dimensional” experience where the “human, historical, temporal world” forms a metaphorical framework which, when seen and understood, enables a transformation of the real world to take place (TeSelle 632-33). Above the onstage action, driven by tyranny, oppression, hypocrisy, revenge, and frustration of purpose, the play evokes intimations of the real—an invisible divine presence that directs the resolution.

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Such intimation postulates the overarching question Shakespeare weaves throughout the play: “whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man,” or whether reality consists solely of that which can be perceived by the senses and its essence derived by reason.\textsuperscript{270}

The play analogically dramatizes the stress of competing truth claims of 1601 Elizabethan England’s unsettled religious contentions and offers to reshape the audience’s present expectations in a manner that preserves past memory, invites future hope, and imagines an attitude of response. In no small measure, the response Shakespeare sought to enkindle turns upon the play’s challenge to, and critique of, his contemporaries as embodied in the play, led by Hamlet—sullen, dissatisfied, but whose initially compelled compliance develops into a dangerous resistance.

Similarly, the outwardly compliant English majority population suffered the stress of inconsistent obligations. There were those whose reformist loyalty stood persuaded by material incentives derived from the spoils of royal expropriations of church wealth, beginning with the successive dissolutions of the monasteries, conflated with appeals to patriotic loyalty. However, the significant majority of England’s population, neither nobility nor landed gentry, simply took the path of so-called “church-papists,” who grudgingly acceded to mandatory church attendance.

The audience could easily find Hamlet in the position of the latter— the abruptly disinherited son, presented with little choice but to accept the authority of his uncle’s counterfeit regime and the material culture which assumes a traditional “show” but denies the source of the reality “within,” that is, the sacramental habitation of the divine in the natural world. That significant portion of Shakespeare’s audience, now relegated to liturgical forms of worship

\textsuperscript{270} Weaver, Ideas, 3; See also, Gregory Unintended, pp. 57, 64, and this chapter, n. 9, supra. See also Section 2 (“Reality and Religion”) at nn. 63-64.
prescribed by the secular state—notwithstanding their provincial origin, inherited piety, and heritage of traditional religious practice—could well understand a fictional “Elsinore” which, like England’s Established Church, bore elements of sacramental appearance but lacked “that within.”

Yet, the story Shakespeare adapts to the parable form of Hamlet’s near intractable dilemma also questions whether the valorized pre-Reformation Old Faith had itself become shallow and overly reliant on the elements of material culture for spiritual sustenance which, when these fell away, the immanent ineffable presence of an active Creator God could not hold. Therefore, when seen through the genre of parable, the play more clearly critiques the failing fidelity to Christianity itself with the aim to challenge its audience to capture and reinvigorate a late medieval “cosmic imaginary” so as to recover its eroding tenets that include the existential certainty that 1) the elements of the natural world draw sacramental sustenance from the indwelling Creator God, and 2) a providentially active God controls the institutions and actions of men.

4.2.2 The Role of Hamlet.

a. Embodiment of Cultural Trauma.

Hamlet: Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass . . . ’Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? (3.2.362-66; 368-69)

The role of Hamlet inhabits the play with a strange dynamic tension. From his first appearance, he exudes alienated resistance, rejection of authority, even hostility to the blandishments of the Danish court. Yet, in addition to the sheer size of the role, Hamlet remains
throughout the single-minded focus of the action. The motivations of every ancillary role in the play revolve around Hamlet—reacting to what he knows, what he thinks, what he intends, what he does. Except for Horatio, these ancillary roles stand in willing service to King Claudius and in support of his claims for Hamlet’s best interests via his conformity to the prevailing new order. All the while, as previously explained, Claudius secretly plots to rid himself of Hamlet’s apparent witness to his secret crime, to which Hamlet secretly counter-plots. When one or the other of their respective assassination attempts fail, they simply plot another.

Within the parable construct, Shakespeare posits the role of Hamlet as a defender at the crossroads of the compelling cultural clash between the inherited Old Faith realist understanding of the divine, inherited from the Platonist-Christian notion of “universals,” where the real existence of things resides in eternal Forms or Ideas in the mind of God, and the gradually prevailing nominalist understanding, which denies that universals have real existence, but rather exist as mere names man assigns to particular objects for convenience. The latter stood confirmed in the formal Protestant theology adopted by the Church of England and applied to the restructured liturgical practices that fostered radical suppression of Old Faith material culture. But while the role of Hamlet embodies the predicament and trauma of vast numbers of English people suddenly uprooted from a religious faith in place and undisturbed for a millennium, the role also reflects an attitude of response if not resistance to the institutional reconfiguration of deeply held tradition, custom, and practice. Although the role imperfectly examples such

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271 The role of Hamlet consumes some 1400 lines in the play. By way of comparison, the next largest role in the canon is the Duke/Friar in Measure for Measure at 820 lines (McDonald, Bedford Companion, pp. 78-79).

273 Weaver, p. 3; Boersma, p. 80.
response, it implies that such response must in some way remain incumbent on the substantial numbers of remaining English Old Faith adherents, so as to preserve not only cultural heritage and memory, but a pre-Reformation conception of reality, sourced in God’s immanent Being.

Accordingly, the role necessarily combines a conscious cascade of constructed character parts or “personations,” attitudes, and dispositions intended to deflect attention, to conceal Hamlet’s mind, to expose the hypocrisy of others. At the same time, the playwright leaves room for a genuinely human Hamlet in conversation with the sentries in Act 1, in his easy banter with the First Clown in the Graveyard scene near the beginning of Act Five, and in his uncontrived civility with Horatio throughout. Even Claudius stays his hand because “[Hamlet’s] loved of the distracted multitude” (4.3.4). These attributes suggest the range of dissatisfied English pulled into the involuntary cultural reconfiguration of religion, practice, piety, thought, and the apprehension of reality itself. The multiplicity of Hamlet’s “discontinuous” character facets, purposely put on and otherwise, stands as a larger analogical response to the Elizabethan regime’s encroaching audacity to control and reshape the English “social imaginary” to which I refer above, as well as its cultural imagination.

274 The term “personation” originally employed by the “anti-theatricalists” to dismissively label theatrical performance as inherently deceptive, a counterfeit concocted with the sinful intent to deceive. This is precisely Hamlet’s stated objective, beginning with his “antic disposition,” and continuing with his satirical interaction with Polonius as a “fishmonger” (2.2.172-217) and continuing with his oddly affected Fourth Soliloquy quodlibet (3.1.57-89) followed by his philosophical fury at the innocent Ophelia (3.1.104-141), all for the benefit of eavesdropping Claudius and Polonius, followed by the adolescent impertinence and ribaldry at the Play Scene, and his flippant sacrilege as teases Claudius about where he has placed body of Polonius (4.3.17-40).

The personality and plight of the play’s principal role invite a wellspring of diverse and idiosyncratic interpretations in performance. Likewise, academic commentators also find little common ground. A few entertain specific focus on how the role reflects the playwright’s concerns and audience interest in the larger context of cultural change and institutional Reformation. Virtually none consider how the fundamental shift in the understanding of the nature of the divine remained a source of contention manifest at the “crossroads” of William Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of Hamlet*.

**a. The Hamlet Problem: “Mirror up to Nature.”**

*Hamlet: . . .the purpose of playing, whose end, . . . was and is to hold as ’t were the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (3.2.20-24)*

Hamlet’s several displays of “distemper,” both as reported and witnessed onstage, all amalgamate into what Michael O’Connell sees as the play’s central controlling metaphor—in addition to the metaphysical reference to the divine, such displays demonstrate the ease with which the prevailing contemporary ethic of extrinsic appearance passes for intrinsic truth. If, as my study claims, the play parabolically frames a philosophical crossroads where contending

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concepts of the divine clash, how does the role of Hamlet serve that purpose? As the foregoing suggests, commentators’ multifarious claims for the role of Hamlet within the play—which range from incoherent to psychologically paralyzed, to villainous—appear mutually inconsistent, even irreconcilable.

With the exceptions of his interactions with Horatio, the Players and the Sexton, each of Hamlet’s several displays serve a compelling instrumental purpose, the majority of which are unseemly if not downright unpleasant, laced with mockery, ridicule, sarcasm, invective, and caricature. He is by turns, rude, vulgar, insolent, or ribald. He sulks in the Council Scene, fantasizes Claudius’s dismemberment in his Second Soliloquy as he imagines his uncle having “fatted all the region’s kites / with this slave’s offal” (2.2.579-80). He savagely humiliates Ophelia following his Fourth Soliloquy and imposes numerous vulgarities from the audience at the Play Scene. As the players and audience sweep from the room at Claudius’s command (“Give me some light. Away!”), Hamlet dances a jig! (“Why let the strucken deer go weep . . .”[3.2.267, 273-76]). With barely a beat, Hamlet barrels down the hall to find Claudius at prayer, whereupon he resolves to dispatch his uncle with the “execrable utterance” so terrible as to be cut from performances for over a century. “Now I could drink hot blood and do such bitter business that the day/ Would quake to look on” (3.2. 389-91). He remorselessly dispatches

277 Hamlet sings in its entirety a popular song set to a jig tune, “Why Let the Strucken Deer,” the music and words of which, with commentary, appear in Duffin’s Shakespeare Songbook, pp. 463-64.

278 Prosser quotes from the “first extended criticism of the play,” the anonymous Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet (1736) that decries as unjustified the “desire to destroy a Man’s Soul . . . by cutting him off from all hopes of Repentance” (Hamlet and Revenge, p. 244). For two centuries producers cut from performances the lines which Samuel Johnson declared “too horrible to be read or uttered”; Edmond Malone simply ascribed it to “the crude sensibilities of [Shakespeare’s] times.” De Grazia, Hamlet Without Hamlet, pp. 158-60.
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by forged letter and finally unctuously delivers a false excuse to Polonius before fencing match that blames “his madness” for Polonius’s death (5.2.235).

Therein lies the crux of Hamlet’s baffling discontinuity and “distemper” and the key to an ingenious and sophisticated literary presentation Shakespeare covertly fashions for those with ears to hear. In parable fashion, it falls to the playgoer to discover method and meaning in the mystery of Hamlet’s “character” that seems to have remained a puzzle to later generations. Just as Hamlet takes on the cultural deception inherent in the suppression of Old Faith witness to the immanence of the divine, so he mocks the apparent loss of identity, and disconnection from God, when “that within” must be denied.

Typically celebrated for its description of contemporary professional acting standards, Hamlet’s advice to the players (3.1.1-44) supplies Shakespeare’s audience with an emblem of the larger thematic purpose through which to understand the play in terms of the metaphysical realism in contention. Often misunderstood to exalt the player’s art as mastery of verisimilitude—the precise imitation of an action with the fidelity of a reflected image in a looking glass. However, the word “mirror” used here means something more than a mere superficial reflection of an image. Rather, the image “mirrored” here reflects an ideal, a model,

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279 Aristotle’s Poetics rests on the notion that the purpose of art is the imitation of nature, which imitation came to be regarded as “a realistic portrayal of life, a reproduction of natural objects and actions” (Harmon & Holman Handbook, pp. 270, 320. To the untutored ear, that might indeed seem to be the import of Hamlet’s “advice.” But on deeper reflection one may see that Hamlet charges the Players to be stewards of truth in the sense of eternal verities, rather than adept at verisimilitude, the mere appearance of truth.
or supreme example. Hamlet exhorts the “Tragedians of the City” to be stewards of authentic expression—whether of virtue, scorn, or human nature—the essence of which originates in the divine. Shakespeare reminds his audience that the “purpose of playing” is nothing less than to test claims of human virtue against a divine model of excellence, revealing either congruity therewith, or corruption thereof.

The “advice” also reminds Shakespeare’s audience that the play’s unfolding story applies to the turn-of-the-century conditions in Elizabethan London, where the continuing “form and pressure” of profound cultural change remained inexorably at work on “the very age and body of the time” (3.2.23-24). No mere abstractions within Hamlet’s witty pedantry, these hendiadys hint of urgent relevance in the looming shadow of the Elizabethan” succession

280 “mirror (n.) supreme example, paragon, model of excellence as in H5 2.6 where the chorus describes King Henry as ‘the mirror of all Christian kings’ (Henry Fifth, 2 (cho.) 6.” (David Crystal & Crystal, Shakespeare’s Word, p. 282.

281 By comparison, in a wry but telling moment in his earlier Richard II, Shakespeare makes clear this distinction between one’s superficial extrinsic reflection in a looking glass and an image of the ideal that captures or “mirrors” the intrinsic essence of human nature. At the moment following his abdication, Richard calls for a “mirror”:

An if my word be sterling yet in England,

Let it command a mirror hither straight,

That it may show me what a face I have,

Since it is bankrupt of his majesty. (4.1.265-68)

Bolingbroke curtly orders one to “fetch a looking glass” (269) (emphasis supplied). So with Hamlet’s description of the highest purpose of playing.

282 For a discussion of “hendiadys” as a unique Shakespearean device, see, Frank Kermode, Shakespeare’s Language, p. 105; James Shapiro, A Year in the Life: 1599, pp. 287-88. See also George T. Wright, “Hendiadys and Hamlet.” PMLA 96, pp. 168, ff.:“The device can induce unease and mystery into an expression.”
crisis” with its unknown implications for both the monarchy and its church. Cast in the imagined setting of early sixteenth century Denmark, analogous contingencies arise in the fraught transition from the reign of a medieval era Old King Hamlet to the “new man” in the person of his brother, Claudius, leaving the logical heir, the old king’s accomplished son, Hamlet, dangerously unaccommodated.

Inevitably, the logic of survival at Elsinore demands Hamlet’s variety of extrinsic roles and concealment of intrinsic purpose. In a candid moment of pique, he berates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.” (3.2.369-71). Thus, Hamlet’s actions must be shaped by instrumental necessity which inevitably manifests an elusive and “fragmented” role that confounds his on-stage antagonists and the play’s academic critics alike.

4.2.3 The Play as Parable: “. . . revenge upon the revenge tragedy.”

As in the classic genre of parable, the import of the various levels of the play’s analogical figuration lies not “through the decoding of the various elements of the story,” nor is it confined to delivery of a moral lesson. Shakespeare exploits his audience’s analogical familiarity with contemporary circumstance for a key dramatic purpose. The events of the play offer more than passive reception, but rather prompt the audience’s encounter with the divine. In its propensity to draw the hearer into the narrative, the play’s dynamic stands consistent with

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283 The first sentence of Harold Bloom’s paean to the play declares: “Hamlet is part of Shakespeare’s revenge upon the revenge tragedy, and is of no genre” (Hamlet: Poem Unlimited, p.3). Bloom delights in Shakespeare’s having frustrated the play’s easy categorical assignment by, among other things, generic misdirection: “Hamlet is scarcely the revenge tragedy that it only pretends to be . . . previous tragedies . . . are very different . . . in spirit and in tonality.” Invention of the Human, pp. 383-84.
the distinctive reception affect claimed for the parable, that is, to involve the reader or hearer in
the experience enacted as a participant—to weigh the equities on all sides, and “to provoke
unexpected insights by revealing tacitly an extraordinary transcendent reality” that determines
the outcome.284

The typical bias holds Hamlet innocent and Claudius guilty. However, within the
analogical circumstances of contemporary England, although ripe for judgment at the outset,
their roles soon become complicated with ironies that temper easy description. The weight of
customary reception finds it easy to empathize with, and even valorize, Hamlet as the
embodiment of the disenfranchised English faithful—oppressed, humiliated, and reviled by the
forcibly imposed new order. It appears likewise easy to vilify Claudius, who supplants the Old
Faith to promote a “New Doctrine of Nature” that needs recognize no higher reality beyond that
available to the senses. Indeed, per Hamlet, the usurping Claudius introduces an ethic dominated
by appetite and corrupted by lust—the stated contrast being one of “Hyperion to a satyr” (Garber
489; 1.2.140).

However, rendered as parable, a more complicated picture emerges that pertains to the
ongoing paradigmatic change in the tenets of contemporary religious culture discussed in Section
One of this chapter. Significant elements of that change include an eroding traditional
understanding of the divine nature and the loss of certainty as to whether God any longer has a
place in the workings of the world.

Dodd, Parables of the Kingdom, pp. 16-21; See also Robert W. Funk, Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God,
pp. 133-34.
Framed by the compelling sacramental poetics on the Battlements, Section One of this Chapter describes how Shakespeare inserts an arresting moment that, in contrast to the unnerving image of the ghost of Old King Hamlet, elicits the immanent presence of the Divine in the anthropomorphic image of the breaking dawn as it “[w]alks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill” (1.1.173). The importance of that anomalous and dramatically significant image becomes clear as the divine with increasing frequency “comes alongside” to intervene at key points in the action. The providential pursuit of Claudius’s crime comes subtly but inexorably alongside the prince’s often “wild and whirling” effort to confirm the Ghost’s claim.

a. “It cannot come to good” (1.2.158).

As noted previously in this chapter, Hamlet claims the attitude of the disenfranchised English faithful—he bristles at a world that exalts “outward show” as a substitute for “that within.” Yet, in his first moment of candid reflection—his First Soliloquy—Hamlet relates his concept of the divine with personal grievance over his circumstances. The hyperbole of Hamlet’s First Soliloquy conforms to Claudius’s earlier scold of Hamlet’s “impious stubbornness” (1.2.94). He harps on the futility of faith: God stands at best remote if not dead; the Edenic Garden lies unweeded, producing things “rank and gross.” For him at this moment, God has no apparent purpose in the world except to perversely deny Hamlet the one relief he would otherwise seek—having “fixed / His canon ‘gainst self slaughter” (1.2.131-32). Extreme self-pity mark complaints of compelled obedience to the Crown and sullen disbelief at his mother’s surrender to the new order and perhaps furnish an important key to Shakespeare’s message.
embedded in the unfolding problematic role of the “disinherited son.” If Hamlet embodies the English people in a disinherited condition of religious change, he seems to have abandoned his heritage. Instead of drawing spiritual strength from the displaced heritage for which he mourns, Hamlet stands unabashedly reliant on himself, with no hint of outreach for divine aid, inspiration, or guidance, his self-narrated search for justice stands entirely bereft of Scriptural foundation.

To the contrary, Hamlet follows the Ghost’s disclosure with a continuing litany of exaggerated self-reflexive claims which, for emphasis, I render the repeated personal pronouns in bold typeface below. These emphasize the absence of any appeal to the divine and affirm the Protagoran Renaissance ideal that “man is the measure of all things.”

b. “I was born to set it right” (1.5.198).

At the Ghost’s hint of Claudius’s crime, Hamlet implores, “Haste me to know ‘t that I . . . / May sweep to my revenge” (1.5.30, 32). To the daunting odds, he avers, “O, cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.197-98). Hamlet exults in his clever devise whereby “[t]he play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.605-606). He abruptly defers his advantage as he sees an unaware Claudius at prayer, perhaps in an undeserved state of grace, to scowl rhetorically, “Am I revenged” (3.3.84). Upon the unintended slaying of Polonius in his mother’s closet, he glibly assumes the privilege of a righteous agent:

For this same lord,

\[I\] do repent but heaven hath pleased it so

To punish me with this, and this with \[me\].

That \[I\] must be their scourge and minister. (3.4.179-182)

That there exists a will greater than his own at work begins to dawn on Hamlet after he, with unhesitant celerity, stabs Polonius to death expecting that it is the king concealed behind the
arras in Gertrude’s closet. The highly consequential irony here of mistaken purpose prompts Hamlet’s first intimation of the providential manner in which his enterprises have gone awry. Here Hamlet first considers the possibility that he serves as an unwitting instrument to some wider mission, although the present consequence of Polonius’s death will be his immediate exile from the court “with fiery quickness” and away from Claudius, the object of the Ghost’s command.

Now escorted out of Denmark, Hamlet ponders the irony of his situation in his Seventh Soliloquy. How does it happen, he muses, with all of his planning and scheming, together with his superior “capability and god like reason” along with the justice of his cause, that all occasions inform against him in the pursuit of his revenge (4.4.32, 38). God prepares Hamlet to see what the audience has already seen: the presence of a divine power that far exceeds his own and a providential plan that comes alongside, operating in parallel, to accomplish ends much larger than simply the revenge killing of Claudius (Reed 152-53).

However, at this moment of his exile, Hamlet remains confined to a world in which a disinterested God stands remote from human affairs. Hamlet remains ignorant of the apparent divine will at work that comes alongside to supplant the revenge narrative, the aims of which Hamlet naively believes to be his sole responsibility, even as he reaffirms his self-determination affirmation at his departure: “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or nothing worth” (4.4.66-67).

Indeed, at this late point in the play Hamlet still exhibits the impious stubbornness of which Claudius accused him in the Council Scene: bereft of humility; unfamiliar with appeals to the Divine; and oblivious to God’s concurrent pursuit of his nemesis, King Claudius. The key parabolic attributes of Hamlet’s role would still appear as Pride conjoined with Ignorance.
c. “O, my offence is rank!” (3.3.36).

Hamlet and Claudius are more than simply antagonists, or even philosophical foils for each other. Aside from their competing conceptions of metaphysical reality, they exhibit telling commonalities, which the play presents variously and in paradoxical juxtaposition. For example, consider the contrast between Hamlet’s foregoing claims of exclusive self-sufficiency and Claudius’s prayerful display of woeful humility. Viewed from the larger and more problematic parable perspective of the “contention” discussed in first section of this chapter, one sees that it is Claudius, not Hamlet, who exhibits an understanding of the immanent nature of the Divine, of God’s interest in the world, and of God’s proximity to human endeavor.

Following Hamlet’s bold claim on the Battlements to effect retributive justice on his uncle, the audience learns that Claudius’s concern for Hamlet’s possible suspicion of his crime stands quite subordinate to the more drastic reality of God’s relentless pursuit of Claudius in the form of the King’s unabated guilt since the date of the murder. Margreta De Grazia observes that, unknown to Hamlet, far from the avuncular king, Claudius suffers as a “guilt ridden murderer” (162) as he reflects in a previously noted aside, which witnesses to the unseen pursuit of the divine:

Claudius (aside): O, ‘tis too true!

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!

The harlot’s cheek, beautified with plastering art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

Than is my deed to my most painted word.

O, heavy burden! (3.1.50-55)
God’s continuing pursuit of Claudius follows the disrupted Play Scene where Hamlet’s version of “something like the murder of my father” (2.2.596-67) appears to leave Claudius “struck to the soul” (2.2.592-93). Desperate for God’s forgiveness, Claudius prepares to deliver heartfelt prayer as Hamlet, upon summons from his mother, utters his Fifth Soliloquy as he storms toward Gertrude’s closet, demonically possessed with the certainty of Claudius’s guilt:

’Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. (3.2.387-391)

In the Prayer Scene, and in stark contrast to the supremely confident monarch presiding over the Council Scene, Shakespeare sends Claudius his knees to contend, as best he can, with which of the competing “ways of seeing,” will prevail. Upon which vision of divine reality shall he rely to receive his agonized repentance? Which conception of the divine may grant the forgiveness that he seeks?

Here lies the primary Reformation era conundrum. The Reformers rejected the Roman church’s sacramental system, offering instead a derivative liturgy that, while it affected a calculated outward semblance thereof on display at the mandatory Established Church services, such semblance remained confined to narrow extrinsic nominalist formalities that lacked recognition of God’s immanent presence in and through the natural world.285 But now the audience sees that the confident Claudius from the Council Scene well knows that without the Old Faith ritual and apparatus, these efforts at appearance fail. In fact these amount to little more

than, as Polonius admits, “devotion’s visage / And pious action [that] do sugar o’er / The devil himself” (3.1.47-49). For all his prior proclaimed insistence for moving on from the past in the Council Scene, Claudius understands the real nature of Time manifest in the eternal present that bears the sacramental heritage of “the primal eldest curse . . . A brother’s murder” of which he stands heir (3.3.37-38). At his attempted prayer in soliloquy, Claudius also reveals an understanding in harmony with Hamlet’s disdain for “show” against “that within.” In the Prayer Scene, Claudius’s “most painted word” evaporates to reveal an essential truth, that no amount of nominalist gilding can “shove by justice” for a deed that “smells to heaven” so as to avoid the full import of God’s inexorable judgment (3.3.36, 58). Ironically, Claudius’s nominalist confidence gives way to the realist apprehension of God. This scene provides a powerful and intimate parabolic focus on how divine reality comes alongside to impel Claudius’s remorse.

Claudius voices the existential dilemma between the nominalist and the realist perspectives that weigh the material elements of his kingship—“those effects for which I did the murder / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (3.3.54-55)—against his futile effort to escape the demands of both honest repentance and ultimate judgment, in short, to “be pardoned and retain th’offense” (3.3.56). Trapped in the material nominalist world of avarice—defined solely by crown, ambition, and queen—he remains unable to assay the Gospel’s offer of redemption through repentance which demands public divestiture of “those effects for which [he] did the murder” (3.3.55). Claudius cannot relinquish those things even in peril of his soul. Although short lived, his deep humility bears witness to the specter of accountability at the hands of an ultimate reality—higher than and independent of man, beyond that which can be perceived by the senses, and that suffers no tricks of appearance or show.286

286 Weaver, Ideas (3); See also, Gregory (57, 64); and Section 2 (“Reality and Religion”), nn. 55-58.
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compell’d
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence. (3.4.61-64)

The Soliloquy concludes with Claudius’s grim apprehension of a divine judgment that has already fallen upon him, and which he appears unable to mitigate by attempted repentance frustrated in prayer: “What then? What rests? / Try what repentance can. What can it not? / Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?” (64-66). Desperate to reconcile by force of will the division between inner spiritual reality and his outward material desires, Claudius verbally commands his extrinsic physical body to assume a “form of prayer” so as to achieve intrinsic repentance: “Bow stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, / Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!” (51, 70-71). He concludes the Soliloquy with a plaintive “All may be well” (72). Lily B. Campbell notes the deeply ironic message Shakespeare discloses to the audience by the spectacle of the tormented but yet unrepentant Claudius. Nevertheless, despite Claudius’s own “outward show” in the Council Scene the inherited “true nature” of the divine remains with Claudius in a manner common to those that acceded to the reformed theology of the Established Church. Albeit in the privacy of his prayer closet, Claudius in common with his nephew, bears a surviving undercurrent of the cosmic imaginary that postulates both God’s

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287 Campbell opines that “though God’s vengeance is slow, there is no doubt in the mind of any reader of Hamlet that the King has suffered punishment from the moment when he committed his crime . . . . Nor can any reader doubt that the eternal vengeance of God is to fall upon the King.” Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion. “Grief that Leads to Tragedy.” 109-147, 146.
immanence and intimate interest in the actions of men. However, once released from the cosmic imaginary of his prayer closet Claudius’s extrinsicism prevails. Henceforth, that reality known by the senses becomes all that matters.

Not unlike Richard II on the cusp of deposition quoted in Chapter 2 (“Deep Roots”), Claudius clings to the mutable material symbols of kingship—competing metonymic material elements of kingship that encompass his identity: “My crown, mine own ambition and my queen” (3.3.55). Unlike Richard’s shallow embrace of jewels, palace, apparel, and the like (R3, 3.3.144-54), Claudius’s Prayer Scene soliloquy stakes Claudius’s much harsher assessment in his continuing embrace of “those effects for which I did the murder” (3.3.53). These extrinsic attachments—inculpatory signs and symbols—fatally encumber his reach for salvific repentance and witness to his ultimate damnation.

d. Thematic caesura at the Graveyard: Let “the water come to him . . .” (5.1.18).

At the beginning of Act Five’s Graveyard Scene, prior to Hamlet’s and Horatio’s entrance, Shakespeare reveals the metaphorical key to Hamlet’s understanding of the role of the divine in human ends. The fury of the play’s action suspends for what might be called a thematic caesura. Both antagonists have plotted with increasing intensity to terminate the life of the other. Both have adhered to a self–righteous philosophical path by which to vindicate and protect matters they deem of existential significance, the execution of which demands decisive and ruthless autonomy without reference to any source of truth higher than an independent

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288 Q1 presents more explicitly the image of God as the principal avenger in opposition to the usurper that clings to the effects of kingship, where the soliloquy’s final couplet reads: “My wordes fly vp, my finnes remaine below, / No king on earth is fafe, if Gods his foe” (Q1 1441).
notion of prerogative, birthright, and justice. But here the contentious linkage between what Hamlet refers to as “two mighty opposites” (5.2.62) begins to divide with Hamlet’s ascendant consciousness of, and witness to, the [providential interest of the] divine in the workings of the world [and how that understanding . . .].

Hamlet soon describes to Horatio the fortuitous if not miraculous interdiction of the sea voyage to England and completion of Claudius’s secret plot that called for Hamlet’s execution upon arrival. In the event, which he calls “heaven ordinant,” Hamlet discovers, then recrafts, the Commission (5.2.48). The sea-fight that follows results in Hamlet’s capture and subsequent return to Denmark to the company of his loyal university friend, Horatio to whom Hamlet confides a series of what Walter King refers to as “providential speeches” which build on the practical lesson and suggest at least the beginning of a solution to Hamlet’s puzzle of “[h]ow all occasions do inform against me” (Hamlet’s Search 147-65; 4.4.33).289

However, bear in mind that import of Shakespeare’s message to the contemporary audience contained in the play, as *parable*, does not valorize Hamlet as a figure of the disenfranchised English, nor chronicle his reinvigorated path to enlightenment. Rather the *parable* invites the hearer to experience the irradicable nature of God’s active interest in, and influence over, the workings of the world which shape the play’s unfolding problems into the image of divine purpose. The sacramental presence of the divine draws the creature to knowledge of the Creator, and thus to reinforce an Old Faith understanding of an immanent and providential God in the face of an inexorably changing “cosmic imaginary.”

289 The principal ”speeches” to which King refers are woven through Hamlet’s dialogues with, first, the Gravediggers at 5.1.183-193; 208-216; then with Horatio alone at 5.2. 8-10; 73-74, 217-222, to both of which I make reference below.
A prior moment of reflection that prefigures the humble homily that emerges from the conversation in the church yard between workmen preparing a fresh grave occurs with the Player Queen in the performance of “The Murder of Gonzago”: “Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown; / Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.” (3.2.209-211). In other words, a certain futility inevitably lies in the attempt to master human destiny the ends of which are “none of our own.” Likewise the humble sexton utters a key lesson to which Hamlet has gradually learned over the course of the play.

Gravedigger
Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she willfully seeks her own salvation?

Other
I tell thee she is; therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath set on her and finds it Christian burial.

Gravedigger
How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence?

Other
Why, ‘tis found so.

Gravedigger
Give me leave. Here lies the water; good. Here stands the man; good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes—mark you that; but if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life. (5.1.1-8, 15-20)

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290 Both are identified in the Quartos and the First Folio as First and Second Clowns. The Arden edition renames the First Clown as “Gravedigger,” self-described in the text as the sexton, and the Second Clown as “Other,” who in this scene appears to be the sexton’s helper.
In the course of the play, Hamlet learns the hard way not to *willfully* seek his own salvation. Instead of taking arms “against a sea of troubles,” he learns to let “the water come to him”: to let God’s will be done (Hunter 125).

Through his ordeal, Hamlet learns in the end that God does the work; man’s job is to trust. Shakespeare’s Parable of the Disinherited Son moves the hero from a condition of despair to redemption and, in the end, reveals the story he charges Horatio to tell. Hamlet sees that God is faithful and, while he may “leave [this earthly life] betimes,” his story ends in triumph, not tragedy. The Parable of the Disinherited Son concludes with the son’s mission completed, his redemption fulfilled, and judgment upon the corrupted court of Denmark accomplished as a providential God makes “all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

4.3 CONCLUSION

This study contends that despite the metaphorical dimension and thematic importance of the role of Hamlet, the play is not primarily about Hamlet the injured prince, or an analog for contemporary secular conditions, on which grounds the struggles for property, power, and political loyalty play out. Rather, the fundamental dispute in the play takes place at the crossroads of rival views about the nature of the divine, where the contention lies with how one

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291 I credit Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911) for the phrase from which I derive this aphorism that succinctly expresses Hamlet’s epiphany at the end of the play, to which he alludes in his “providential speeches” of Act Five, and to which I refer in Chapter One at notes 27-29, below. In the first chapter of her 1875 classic, *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*, she writes: “man’s part is to trust and God’s part is to work.”

292 Hamlet, mortally wounded, interdicts Horatio’s attempt to drink from the poisoned cup and admonishes his friend: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicity awhile, / . . . / To tell my story” (5.2.353-56).
can understand the nature of reality itself in a world firmly grounded in the material, unmoored from traditional English religious cultural heritage that understood the existence of everything in the material world in terms of the active, ongoing participation in God’s Being.

The play’s underlying message suggests that the struggle to resist the world ushered in by the English Reformation will remain costly. However, by play’s end, a spiritually changed Hamlet embraces the call to metaphysical realism within which lies true salvation and peace and harmony with God. His nemesis, Claudius, a determined nominalist remains mortally bound by the material. Shakespeare’s Christian message is neither kerygmatic nor dogmatic—but rather parabolic in that it invites its audience into conversation, argument, and finally revelation. [metanoia; spiritual conversion]

For the many in Shakespeare’s audience, bridled to silence by “the compelled uniformity of religious worship under a newly established national church,”293 His usurping uncle Claudius’s restraint on Hamlet’s freedom and involuntary redirection of Hamlet’s goals stands as a direct analogy for contemporary conditions that leach out the real and bar access to divine grace. With Hamlet’s reluctant and restless compliance, Shakespeare sets the baseline analogy for continuation of an underground existence of a fractured Old Faith tradition which, while under siege from instruments of the new Established Church, yet survives in memory.

The parabolic shape to Hamlet’s “tragedy” offers hope for survival. The play’s formal elements alone suggest the monumental effort Shakespeare poured into the project at this auspicious moment in the contentious Reformation drive to perfect “religious change.” In addition to those just mentioned, these include the sheer length of play, magnitude of leading

role, unique juxtaposition of initial scenes, unprecedented number of soliloquies, the principal role’s complex mutability, and the strangely covert but deadly conflict between the two protagonists, to name a few. These further support the playwright’s conscious awareness of his play’s distinctive significance, not only as a monumental milestone of his career, but as a cultural statement of existential significance.

As previously noted in Chapter One (“Review of Criticism”), recent historical revision inevitably draws interpretations of Shakespeare’s works into the arena of religious change that roiled the London of his time. However, at its core, the message of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, reaches beyond the fraught climate of competing confessional loyalties into a deeply contextual rendering of the larger cultural crossroads at issue, namely the weakening foundational assumptions of Christianity itself.294

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294 Brad Gregory argues that drive toward secularization fostered by the reformation weakened the traditional tenets of traditional religion and augured the failure of Christianity itself. *Unintended*, pp. 44-46.
5. King Lear and Macbeth

And new philosophy calls all in doubt
....
‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.
This is the world’s condition now.

John Donne, “Anatomie of the World (205-207; 213-219)

5.1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION.

As I argue in Chapter Two, the fundamentally altered conception of the divine that emerged from the scholastic debates of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries lies at the root of the cultural contention at work within England’s loosely described “religious change.” Few trace this development from its late medieval scholastic origin to the divisive confessional politics of Shakespeare’s London. Yet, cracks and fissures in existential assumptions about life, being, and the afterlife deepened in Shakespeare’s time.295 As I previously note, royal fiat established jurisdiction over an independent English Church. However, convincing the English people to

295 Historian L. Stone, among others, calls the Elizabethan period “the age of greatest religious indifference before the twentieth century.” Elizabethan Historical Review 77 (1962) p. 328. While Keith Thomas in his Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971) suggests that “this may seem an exaggeration, it is certain that a substantial proportion of the population regarded organized religion with an attitude which varied from cold indifference to frank hostility” (172), he nevertheless documents what he calls “endemic skepticism” borne of the humanist influence, together with self-conscious rejection of religious dogma in combination with “the incalculable forces of worldliness and apathy” (171-72). More recent scholarship continues to validate the rapid growth and effect of secularism. See, e.g., R.N. Swanson, Church and Society in Late Medieval England (1989) and C. John Sommerville, The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith (1992), and Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (2007).
accept a reformed Protestant church with the English sovereign at its head was another matter. The inheritance of a thousand years of piety and practice could not so easily be displaced. Institutional displacement and material culture expropriation that followed Henry VIII’s break with Rome failed to engender wholesale acceptance of the new reformed theology, partly due to the damaged credibility of the crown’s motives for its secular claims to sacred authority, but mostly due to underlying theological disruptions that stemmed from the alteration of a deeply embedded, albeit fading, traditional conception of the nature of God. In one of the great ironies of Western thought, Protestant reformers rallied to the cause of church reform with their virulent campaign to restore the original purity of apostolic church. Yet, the insistent claim of *sola scriptura* effectively disengaged Protestant theology from the scriptural bases for the original metaphysical Platonist-Christian- conception of the immanent divine, articulated by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, where every material thing in the world had meaning because it participated in the life of the Creator (C.S. Lewis, *Discarded Image* 222). William of Occam’s *nominalist* conception of divine reality turned out to be much more suitable for the anthropocentric Renaissance world.

These inherited traditional values could not be simply “left behind” by the English Reformation, but promised a staying power, albeit damaged, anchored in both traditions of living memory as well as in an extant medieval Roman church structure that showed little sign of collapse, but rather retrenchment in the form of Counter-Reformation. With Henry’s passing,

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297 As both its institutional and doctrinal response to the Reformation, the Church constituted the Council of Trent 1545-1563. See Brad Gregory’s summary at *Unintended*, p. 155.
the Church of England shed its Roman Catholic elements to fully embrace the magisterial theological bases for the continental Protestant revolution of the early 16th century. However, the determined effort to induce wholesale acceptance of the new forms of worship by the general population could only begin in earnest with the 1559 accession of Elizabeth I to the English throne. At that time, coming on the heels of her Catholic sister Mary’s short reign, the majority of the English population remained Catholic, notwithstanding prior drastic efforts applied by her predecessor, Edward VI, and his coterie of radical reformers, along with the episcopacy of the established Church, to alter confessional loyalties. These included systematic destruction of material culture, and prohibition of all liturgical, votive, and venerative practices therewith. In short, the Crown’s determined effort to desacralize the Old Faith culture wiped clean both the quotidian material indicia of reality that sacramentally embodied the immanent presence of the divine, as well as shared common cultural participation in holidays, pilgrimages, rogation days, saints’ days, and the like.

However, as part of a more benign program to effect religious change, the pervasive influence of the English monarchy on the kingdom’s culture and particularly on its public theatre cannot be overemphasized. London’s public theatre with its mass audience came into

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298 Carlos Eire summarizes the scope of the short lived, but decisive, transition from the Henrician maintenance of Catholic ritual to the extreme iconoclasm and replacement of the episcopacy led by magisterial Protestants under Edward V (1547-1553). *Reformations*, pp. 329-332.

prominence with purpose-built venues during the reign of Elizabeth I.300 Despite objections of varying intensity from both municipal and church authorities, both the popularity and the perceived utility of the early public theatre companies fostered royal support. The fiction for continuation of royal subsidy and protection pertained partly to the maintenance of acting companies available to provide occasional entertainment for the Queen and her court, and partly to help mobilize a “protestant political nation” by equipping a capable instrument to represent the face of the governing monarchy as it traveled to, and performed in, the provinces (Lake, Politics 22).301

The Chamberlain’s Men, the acting company Shakespeare served as actor, member, and playwright, stood as one of two such companies officially chartered by the Crown, occupied as tenant the largest venue in London and therefore, the realm, known simply as “The Theatre.”302 Neither the company’s preferred charter status nor the substantial audience capacity of its performing venue changed with its relocation from Shoreditch to the Southbank’s newly constructed Globe Theatre in 1600. As before, the company duly submitted its works for public performance license to the Master of Revels. The occasional printing of plays, as all other

300 Constructed by actor-manager James Burbage1576 in London’s Shoreditch, the Elizabethan playhouse known simply as “The Theatre,” was the first permanent theatre ever built in England for the sole purpose of theatrical productions. Van Es, Shakespeare in Company, pp.1-2, n.1.

301 Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth McClean’s study The Queen’s men and their plays (Cambridge, 1998) postulate the Queen’s Men’s creation in 1583 and continuing royal subsidy promoted extensive travel in the provinces, the purpose of which was to extend the reach of royal influence . . . and “to engender support for the (protestant) monarchy” (quoted in Lake, Politics 23).

material printed for public sale, required licensure by the office of the Stationer’s Register. In short, the entire apparatus for licensure of public theatre performance and sale of printed material had come into existence during the reign of Elizabeth. As of 1603 that reign of over four decades, along with the Tudor dynasty, came to an end, with an agreed-upon but altogether different successor—James IV of Scotland. That often neglected circumstance bears mention in no small part due to the obvious desire of the newly installed king, now James I, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, to promote his own policy and vision for unified British kingdom, as well as the ongoing perfection of the English Protestant Reformation. These policy matters bore significant influence on how Shakespeare shaped his continuing response to a climactic phase in England’s Reformation by what I refer to in the “Introduction” as his mid-career “sea change.”

5.1.1. **Prevailing Pluralism.**

According to Protestant polemic, the shortcomings of Medieval Christianity lay principally in its failure, as Brad Gregory suggests, to bring its proclamation and practice into alignment (20-21). However, the promise of church reform for which the German Augustinian monk Martin Luther served as catalyst, fared no better. Without the single unified voice, however imperfect, which spoke for the Gospel, established universal liturgy, and resolved doctrinal conflicts, the English Reformers’ aspiration to revive the more authentic religion of the

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303 Long before its doctrinal acceptance by the Church of England in the waning years of Henry VIII’s reign, Martin Luther and his 95 Theses of 1517, which pertained to papal abuses in selling of Indulgences, captured imagination of many controversialists in the English Church and quickly focused popular public protests against Roman abuses in general which included inordinate accumulation of material wealth and corruption resulting therefrom as well as doctrinal deviation from Biblical prescription.
apostolic age foundered in rivalries of competing claims, conflict, and contention. Instead of unity, Protestantism produced an unprecedented pluralism both within the practice of worship and the traditional conception of God as promoted by a new class of theological elites dedicated to verbal teaching and preaching to a people for whom thinking theologically remained novel and not well understood. Some might argue that James’s accession with his insistence upon, and enforcement of, uniformity in worship, in combination with the growing rivalry among pluralistic confessional orientations, paradoxically fostered an even more widespread consensus regarding the perceived attenuated condition, value, and authority of institutionalized religion in England as these relate to everyday cultural practice and belief. Then too, the pressure to assimilate Protestant ideology, devoid of image, ritual, and practice focused on the celebration of the Mass and its sacramental engagement with Christ via the Eucharist, contributed to turning away from the traditional place of religion within the culture and may well have contributed to the disengagement from religion itself.

5.1.2 The New Regime.

James’s predecessor, Elizabeth I, determined to avoid confessional divisions aggravated by the immediately preceding reigns, offered her Thirty Nine Articles of Religion as a via media, or “middle way” designed to effect a modicum of liturgical compromise. In addition, as a

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304 Confessional identities remained vague and uncertain, particularly for those from Old Faith heritage. The habit of thinking theologically was new. The surfeit of literature, preaching, and proselytizing that promoted Protestant doctrine spoke to the elite, not the masses.

305 See discussion of Taylor’s “social imaginary” at Chapter 2 (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured,” p. 5, and n. 6.

gesture of toleration—and over strong ecclesiastical objection—she refused to enforce religious loyalty beyond the requirement of regular Church attendance.\textsuperscript{307} After Elizabeth’s forty-five year reign, expectations intensified with the advent of a new monarch, with new aspirations, new goals, and new formulae with which to determine the future of the realm. However, instead of a more generous measure of Catholic toleration for which many had hoped, James came to the throne with a more ambitious program of unity: unified religion in a unified realm and an image of kingship that formed a unified, almost mystical, bond between king and realm through which to accomplish this.\textsuperscript{308}

Five short years elapsed since \textit{The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark} (1600) cautiously proffered a formula, or at least an example, with which to contend for the preservation of cultural memory at a perilous cultural crossroad. However, the social behaviors, the political perspectives, and the religious thinking to which Shakespeare now witnesses in the tragedies of \textit{King Lear} (1605) and \textit{Macbeth} (1606) presently augur the end of an uneasy truce among advocates for competing conceptions of God. These plays reflect the exigent moment in English cultural history where the experience of religious change ripened inexorably to a point of no return, as did the long term effects of the defeat of logical \textit{realism}, the Platonist-Christian conception that “universals” have real existence, which I discuss in detail in the preceding chapters. One bears in mind that, over time, the denial of the existence of “universals” helped set the stage for the English Protestant Reformation. Concurrently, the aggregation of ideas alive to

\textsuperscript{307} Eire, Reformations, pp. 337-41.

the newly discovered classical heritage, known now as the “Renaissance,” energized the predominating ascent of man in the material world and hastened the concomitant subordination, and even dislocation, of the once shared conception of God’s immanence in the material world and nature’s ongoing participation in God’s Being. The nominalist thinking which banishes “the reality . . . perceived by the intellect . . . to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses” anticipates the fundamental principal of “empiricism” where all credible knowledge derives from sense experience (Weaver 3). This becomes crucial in understanding forces at work in King Lear.

While careful to avoid either the excesses of Edward VI and Mary, or the measured tolerance of Elizabeth, James nevertheless dogmatically insisted on conformity in worship as well as in word. Just as Elizabeth enjoyed a series of fortuitous events, which culminated in the Spanish Armada of 1588, that consolidated the Protestant effort by stirring patriotic unity against Catholic challenges to her throne,309 James benefitted from an unexpected, but similar, critical point of inflection with the infamous Gunpowder Plot (“Plot”) of November 5, 1605.310 The Plot

309 Pope Pius II’s papal bull Regnans in Excelsis (“Reigning on High”), issued as of February 25, 1570, excommunicated Queen Elizabeth absolving English Catholics from duty of loyalty to the English sovereign, the most onerous effect of which encouraged a series of assassination plots against Elizabeth. These included the Rodolfi Plot of 1571, the Throckmorton Plot of 1583, and the Babington Plot of 1586, all of which involved the attempt to place Elizabeth’s sister, Mary, Queen of Scots, on the throne.

310 For detailed discussions of the context of the Plot and, its planning and aftermath, see Antonia Fraser, Faith and Treason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot; Alice Hogge, God’s Secret Agents: Queen Elizabeth’s Forbidden Priests and the Hatching of the Gunpowder Plot; James Sharpe, Remember, Remember, Remember: A Cultural History of Guy Fawkes Day. Gary Wills offers a detailed literary discussion on how the Plot informs Shakespeare’s Macbeth in Witches and Jesuits. Wills focuses particularly on the Plotters’ soiling of the Catholic cause, and Shakespeare’s
and its long juridical aftermath, reinvigorated the king’s chief minister, Sir Robert Cecil, Son of Elizabeth’s minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who saw his mission as nothing less than “to extinguish the Catholic religion in this country” (Haynes 100). To ensure loyalty to royal authority over the Church of England and its assets, as opposed to the authority of the Holy See of Rome and its friends, particularly Spain, James insisted that “the [forfeiture] laws must be enforced” (Beckwith, Grammar of Forgiveness 24). James’s Privy Council determinedly broadened Elizabeth’s more measured approach, declaring that nonconformity persists not as a matter of conscience, but rather treason against the state.

Eager to shed the Tudor heritage, and to embrace the new age and new ethic of the “new man,” James stood firmly committed to the primacy of the state in all matters of Church governance. At the same time, James saw religion as a critical element in the exercise of royal authority, so long as it firmly stood in service to the secular state. The established Church provided an indispensable instrument to further the image of a united kingdom, governed in a manner consistent with his view of the place and authority of religion, as witness his doctrine of the “Divine Right of Kings.” This demanded not only the continued erasure of all things Catholic—James’s determined uniformity brooked no tolerance for “church papists”—but also the consolidation of a

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312 James’s Basilikon Doron (1597-98), advocated the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. Written to edify his four year old son, Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, on the duties of a good king, the treatise affirmed that God’s ordination made the king accountable for the benefit of his people. The description of a king’s duties persistently presents the image of the relationship of a father to his children.
unified Church of England exclusive of pluralistic claims of Puritans, dissenters, and the numerous Protestant variants, both magisterial and radical, each of which professed authentic apostolic interpretation of scripture and understanding of the divine. In contrast to Elizabeth, James required actual reception of communion in addition to mandatory church attendance. In short, the door was closing on Old Faith adherents’ ability to maintain a semblance of tradition. However, the subject plays show no interest in resolving matters with an offer of confessional equivalence or confederation or compromise: Protestantism for Catholicism. Rather, by the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare’s plays reflect a picture much larger than contention over mere confessional identity. Beginning with Lear, the plays seriously question the efficacy of broad-based engagement with traditional tenets of Biblical Christianity given the current understanding of religion as promulgated by institutional prescription, in thrall to the secular state.

5.1.3 The Present Predicament.

While unclear whether Shakespeare completed his Lear with the Plot in mind, Macbeth contains many references to the Plot and its aftermath. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the entire story of the Plot in context signifies that, as of November 5, 1605, there remained a significant welter of radical Old Faith adherents, disappointed with the now apparent intolerance of James, and further discouraged by the loss of foreign political support by reason of the peace

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313 The dating of Lear remains problematic with respect to its composition in relation to the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot of November 5, 1605. The available evidence suggests that at the earliest Shakespeare finished the play, sufficiently for review by the Master of Revels in late December 1605, with the finished play staged at the Globe during “the early months of 1606” (Shapiro, Lear 307), although Frank Kermode convincingly argues for a significantly earlier date, prior to May 8, 1605, at which time the by now well-worn existing source play, The True Chronicle of King Leir and his daughters, so as to capitalize on the success of Shakespeare’s new play, The Tragedy of King Lear. G. Blakemore Evans, Gen. Ed., Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd ed. “Introduction.” 1297-98.
agreement with Catholic Spain, but now willing to turn their sympathy and disappointment into action. This primarily took the form of continuing concealment of itinerant Catholic priests and distribution Catholic literature, among other things. The Crown responded to the Plot in the form of increased efforts to discover of practicing Catholics (via commission of pursuivants) and prosecution of what became dangerous activities under laws enacted for the purpose of continued suppression of public profession of the English Old Faith along with eradication of the remaining material vestiges thereof.

In short, with the accession of James, Shakespeare and his company now operated in a new era. Hamlet demonstrates inchoate resistance to the pull of philosophical nominalism. By dint of persistent, but covert, faithfulness, and demonstrated steadfast loyalty to tradition among the coterie of Catholics, the preservation of Old Faith tradition remained possible. However, by the time of Lear, and continuing with Macbeth, conditions for preservation of Old Faith heritage worsened; the opportunity for subtle inspiration toward resistance appears extinguished. Instead of a heroic Hamlet’s vigorous demand for justice in a revenge tragedy, King Lear’s own selfish error sets in motion the cascade of fatal events which bleakly culminate in grudging reconciliation and forgiveness. By further contrast, Macbeth’s violent end provides welcome relief for the spectacle of a polity so isolated from reality as to feed on itself.

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314 Peace Treaty of London (1604) resolved long running antagonism between Protestant England and the Catholic Spain, which began in 1585 with an English expeditionary force into the Spanish Netherlands led by Robert Dudley, and resolved between the new King James I of England and Phillip III of Spain. The Treaty cut off further incentive for Spanish support for English Catholics.

315 For a description and brief history of the content of “An Act for Better Discovering and Repressing of Popish Recusants,” including the promulgation of the mandatory Oath of Allegiance, see James Shapiro, Year of Lear, pp. 210-223.
The radical pluralism fostered by the wave of reform unseated the Roman church as the sole authority to guide, answer questions about, and ascribe meaning to, life on earth as originating in and sustained by the divine.\textsuperscript{316} In its stead, the ensuing confessional contention offered a cacophony of claimants, each vying for authority to speak for the Christian faith. Instead of positive compromise or sustained constructive dialogue, the contention’s antipathy somehow managed to call the tenets of Christianity itself into question. Inasmuch as Christianity purports to prescribe universal cultural standards for knowing God and for living in community with others, the failure to live by such prescriptions, in preference to the image of man “as the measure of all things,” and the related nominalist claim that nature exists to serve the desires of man, augured the failure of Christianity itself. This is the gravamen of King Lear.

5.2 \textit{KING LEAR} and Shakespeare’s England: “Tares among the Wheat”

5.2.1 Setting and Sources: Disguising the Attack.

Set in an ostensibly “pre-Christian” world of “pagan” Britain, the play’s fictional setting provides license for a narrative blatantly bereft of Christian virtues, ethics, or morals. However, it is soon apparent that the setting stands as a form of disguise calculated to awaken the audience to the present predicament of impelled religious detachment. The familiar legend of the historical “King Leir and his three daughters,” variously recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s \textit{History of the Kings of Britain} (1136); Raphael Holinshed’s \textit{Chronicles of England, Scotland,}

and Ireland (1577), and Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596), sets the story in mid-eighth century B.C. However, based both on the numerous similarities in plot, character, and action, together with an early 1605 Stationer’s Register that suggests a printed version became available a few months prior to Shakespeare’s production, James Shapiro surmises that Shakespeare’s most immediate source lies with an anonymous old Queen’s Men’s play, first staged in 1590, entitled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Three Daughters* (*Year of Lear* 15-16). Jacobean theatre fashion, as well as dramatic necessity, prompted Shakespeare’s addition of the double plot— the story of the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons derived from Philip Sidney’s *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* (1593). The most glaring plot difference from the contemporaneous source play lies with Shakespeare’s radically different ending—in *The True Chronicle*, Lear and Cordelia survive and resume their sovereign roles in the kingdom; in Shakespeare’s tragic ending both succumb to brutal villainy.

While the venerable narrative draws the audience into a familiar story which purports a legendary ancient British setting, the action within the story carries significant indicia of contemporary English society and its serious flaws in desperate need of amendment. As with the *Ur-Hamlet*, *The True Chronicle* remained popular public theatre fare virtually until Shakespeare’s play opened. However, for the purpose of this study an otherwise unremarkable textual adjustment to the source play sheds significant light on the playwright’s purpose. In addition to the one glaring adaptation of plot previously mentioned, Shapiro also notes that the source play, despite its ancient time period, conspicuously contains numerous explicit Christian references (56-57), notably absent from Shakespeare’s rendition, with its frequent breezy
evocation of the “gods.”  

This stands in contrast to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which contains significant, albeit occasional, references, to Christian clergy, custom, and ritual. Perhaps Shakespeare chose the “pagan gods” over conventional but anachronistic Christian references to better conform to James’s prohibition—now more strict than that of Elizabeth’s—against the utterance of any oath or name of any person of the Holy Trinity in any form. However, I believe the better assessment, one more flagrantly underscored by the pretentious piety of the play’s frequent appeal to the “gods,” lies with Shakespeare’s purpose to mock the contemporary quotidian religious reference to the Christian deity that had devolved into meaningless idolatry.

Given the policy preferences of the King’s Men’s new royal sponsor, the play also reflects James’s aforementioned interest in the promotion of religious and political unity, which included not only the cultural unification of Britain—England, Scotland, and Ireland—but also James’s ideal in the vertical expressions of social order—unity of king with his people.

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317 James Shapiro distinguishes the source play from Shakespeare’s *by*, among other things, Cordelia’s persistent “holier than thou” attitude toward her sisters, one example of which is her remark to her sisters that “I will to church and pray unto my Saviour, / That e’er I die, I may obtain his favour” (*King Lear*, 4.1.31-32; quoted in Shapiro at 59). For a detailed exposition of the contrast with the “Christian language and theme of *Leir* with the ‘pagan’ diction of Shakespeare’s *Lear*, citing numerous such references by multiple characters in the play, see John L. Murphy’s *Darkness and Devils: Exorcism and King Lear*, “From *Leir* to *Lear*: No Death Though Some Come Near it,” pp. 119-134. *See also*, William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods*, pp. 63-71.

318 The gravedigger/”clowns” at the beginning of Act 5 argue over whether the deceased merited burial in hallowed ground. Laertes rebukes the accompanying Priests for the limited scope of ritual performed at Ophelia’s burial (“what ceremony else?”) in that “her death was doubtful” and thus undeserving of full funeral rites, e.g., “her virgin crantz.” Hamlet dilates both in soliloquy and with Claudius about Christian theologies related to the destiny of the human soul.

319 *See* n. 23 re: “An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players”; *see also* discussion at Shapiro *Year of Lear* pp. 216-218.
However, the play digs much deeper than James’s pious claims for ideals of religious or political “unity.” To many, these aspirations stood as little more than brute demands for doctrinal allegiance under circumstances where, in James’s view, resistance to doctrinal cohesion indicates not religious preference, but rather an affront to the King’s person. Under cover of the reworked strains of the recorded legend, Shakespeare uniquely deviates from *The True Chronicle*, his existing popular contemporary source familiar to his audience, to engage a full-scale critique of the decadent cultural enterprise that England had become.

5.2.2 Brief Critical History.

While recent critical consensus considers *King Lear* Shakespeare’s finest work, the play suffered from a checkered post-Restoration performance life, hampered by changing aesthetic preferences. As Shakespeare’s canon moved indoors from the large-scale popular outdoor environment of the Globe Theatre to the more intimate indoor, scenery-filled Restoration stage, picture-framed by the proscenium arch—audiences became more gentle, more learned, and more attracted to the new-found sense of the rational and tidy. Consensus held, then as now, that the play as written reveals Shakespeare at his most sublime. R.A. Foakes’s introduction to his edition of the play states unabashedly that “*King Lear* stands like a colossus at the centre of Shakespeare’s achievement as the grandest effort of his imagination” (2). However, when enacted story and narrative combined in performance, it seemed for the majority of its post Restoration history as unduly burdened throughout with unremitting human cruelty and betrayal which, even at the last, denies redemption to the king and his devoted daughter. Not a pleasant evening at the theatre.

Thus, as of 1681, Nahum Tate’s cheerily reworked version of Shakespeare’s play for the Restoration stage restored the *True Chronicle’s* happy ending where Lear lives and Edgar and
Cordelia marry. The “Tatified” version prevailed for a century and a half until, “Edmund Kean reinstated the play’s tragic ending in 1823” with William Charles McReady in 1834, performing the “unaltered original for the first time since it was played by Shakespeare’s company” (Bloom, Ages 53). This altered version satisfied the expectations of a paying audience familiar with the iterations of the original story, and of course the producers whose commercial success relied on audience satisfaction.

Nonetheless, Dr. Samuel Johnson, the canon’s first editor, professed that he could bear to read the play but once prior to work on his 1765 edition of Shakespeare’s Plays, where in his “Introduction” he voiced concern over the “troubling lack of poetic justice in the play” (quoted in Cooper Medieval 165). For his part, William Taylor Coleridge saw in the play’s text a soaring romantic vision with the awesome dimensions of implacable nature enfolding capricious mankind.

Once staged as written, the play’s depth and complexity brought forth renewed acknowledgement of Shakespeare’s dramatic genius. Modern commenter A. C. Bradley waxed grandiloquent as he honored the play with place of pride as a literary masterpiece with psychological depth that could draw the late nineteenth and early twentieth century producers, actors, directors and their audiences under the spell of the play’s poetics. However, with Bradley’s scholarship, Christian metaphysics returned to the heart of the play. In addition to the novel psychological insight the influence of the work of Sigmund Freud and his progeny brought

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320 Johnson was also famously squeamish over Hamlet’s “execrable utterance,” where the prince reconsiders his physical advantage over an unaware Claudius at prayer in favor of a more propitious time for spiritual damnation in the after-life. Hamlet 3.3.88-95.

to the play, Bradley also brought the great reassessments of faith in light of a new secularity prompted by an expanding scientific revolution. Bradley thus saw the play as a contest between belief and non-belief. His alternative title for the play reflects his view of Shakespeare’s portrait of an ultimate reach for the salvific: “The Redemption of King Lear.”

As the play came further into the light of the twentieth century’s age of anxiety over modernity, war, existential doubt, and pessimistic contemplation of human purpose and destiny, obvious questions emerge that pertain to whether any positive religious orientation, guidance, or meaning resides in the play, or does it stand for the hopelessness and ultimate failure of belief in transcendence of any kind. On the one side, some commentators, quick to brush aside the fiction of a “pagan” and pre-Christian setting, declare the play overtly allegorical in its Christian dimension. Others note an apparent contemporary philosophical engagement, while not doctrinally embedded in established Christian theology, nevertheless summons the play’s profound meditation on the existence, vel non, of comprehensible cosmic order within which humankind has a rational place. Still others see the play, despite occasional display of Christian elements, as a purely “secular tragedy.” Jonathan Dollimore, also dismissive of insinuated Christian metaphysics, argues for a materialist reading of the play focused on “power, 

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322 The following works reflect the range of views that advocate for Shakespeare’s rendition of the ostensibly pagan Lear story in terms of Christian allegory, beginning with G. Wilson Knight’s, Wheel of Fire (1930). Others to varying degrees of Christian theological commitment include Irving Ribner’s Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy (1969) and Maynard Mack’s, King Lear in Our Time (1965).


324 Herbert R. Coursen, Jr., Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare’s Tragedies (1976), pp. 237-313; But see David Scott Kasten’s suggestion that Lear challenges the very idea of God’s immanence in his Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion (1970).
property, and inheritance” indicated by Edmund’s unvarnished, albeit cynical, truth of the human condition: “Men are as the time is” (197, 201; 5.3.31-32). Finally, R. A. Foakes notes in the “Introduction” to his fine edition of the play that a few post-modern critics practically revel in the play’s virtual nihilism as “a progression towards despair or mere nothingness” (2).325

5.2.3 Sense behind the Savagery.

The several post-modern commentaries that imbue the play with ultimate hope, rather than despair, suffer from a common paradox. To varying degrees, these typically rehearse the play’s relentless display of cruelty and oppression and the consequences thereof, but then shift the focus so as to abstract and universalize the conduct and thereby derive some generally positive notions of the human condition. However, the heart of Lear’s cruelty and oppression lies not in its allegorization as somehow endemic to the “human condition.” Rather, the playwright’s focus centers on the agency, purpose, and ideology that foster the cruelty and oppression rather than merely inevitable damage caused by depraved humanity.

For example, G. Wilson Knight observes “we see humanity suffering” (195). Indeed, as I suggest, the critical commonplace appears as an admiring, but passive look at Shakespeare’s portrait of mankind’s cruelty and absence of redemptive ethics. Is suffering, then, somehow an ennobling tonic? (196). Does the playwright wish mankind to celebrate an uneasy truce with despair? But, what is the source of the suffering? Why must it occur? What, as the play asks repeatedly, is the cause? And what then should be the cure? When seen and understood in context, the play offers answers to these questions that implicate Reformation England’s religious change, as discussed in previous chapters. Shakespeare indeed reflects a darkening

325 Jan Kott finds in the play’s numerous grotesque motifs an avant garde absurdist flavor as discussed in his Shakespeare Our Contemporary chapter entitled “King Lear or Endgame,” 127-68.
vision, of religious conditions in his country. However, contrary to the pagan/Christian/nihilist confusion of the play’s imagery, the root cause stands not simply endemic to human nature but rather with the willful and determined abjuration of God fostered by an English Reformation, induced, sponsored, and now politically accelerated by the monarchy. In one way or the other, the preponderance of critical comment focuses on the unavoidably damning feature of the play’s savagery, which some, I believe correctly, analogize to contemporary conditions of Shakespeare’s England. Yet, behind the abundant display of the play’s loss of humanity lies a culture of disengagement from the Christian religion altogether. To inspire recognition of the cause and implicate the cure for a condition to which people surrendered, adapted, or accommodated the best they knew how, Shakespeare employs the blunt force of withering satire as the primary instrument.

While the shocking behaviors and violent acts are made to seem routine, Maynard Mack among others, never fully address the question of the cause of these serious social defects, a question which reverberates through the play such as expressed in Lear’s incredulous: “is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” (3.6.76-77). Lear prefaced the question with a mechanistic answer in the same breath: “Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds bout her heart” (75-76). While the symptoms of abandonment of Christian ethics appear manifest, commentators derive little in the play as to the cause. Mack avers that meaning in causation lies embedded in the primitive melding of personification and personality (78). However, that conclusion leaves the answer to Lear’s question about the cause for the kingdom’s corruption wanting. Without either accepting or understanding the root cause of moral turpitude, one is left, as are the players here, to view the moral state of Jacobean English culture as simply the result of too many “tares among the wheat.”
The first two scenes of the play provide a naked display of the root cause of the kingdom’s corruption even more exaggerated than that found in the corresponding scenes in *Hamlet*, which expose the bitter fruit of the recession of objective reality. Here, the end of the first scene finds Lear’s kingdom exchanged for nominalist flattery; virtue becomes exiled; havoc arrives. By the end of the second scene Gloucester has abruptly banished his real son Edgar by reason of the untested fictional claims of his nominal son Edmund, which soon results in his own banishment and disfiguring blindness. Both Lear and Gloucester become casualties of their initial failure to distinguish between the transcendent real and the deception prone nominal. Both ultimately see the costly truth.

5.3 The LEAR WORLD

This study’s thesis, grounded in Shakespeare’s countercultural sacramental vision, together with the aforementioned public theatre limitations on matters touching on religion, draws an obvious inference that the playwright purposely exploits the True Chronicle’s surface similarity so as to “wrap” or “veil” the radical nature of his message within the apparent adaptation of an existing stage property. The subject matter of Shakespeare’s source material lent a metaphorical landscape to the recrafted play that safely distances the specific attack from the playwright and his company so that such attack may remain unnoticed by the Crown or its established Church, but received by “those with ears to hear.”\(^{326}\) However, the playwright’s more serious challenge lies with audience members that over time have become unable to comprehend the nature of the religious defects at issue. As of 1605, the year of *King Lear*’s first

public theatre performance, the long-in-process dissipated condition of England’s Old Faith religious tradition has rendered the London theatregoer unable to easily understand, or to distinguish between, the transcendent real and the deception prone nominal in a manner that reveals, rather than obscures, the immanent sacramental presence of the divine. Accordingly, as in Hamlet, the playwright must initially teach the playgoer how to apply these metaphysical concepts to the unfolding action of the play and to the state of the contemporary world in which one lives.

5.3.1 Apophasis.

In the play’s artful balance between both policy approbation and moral critique, Shakespeare offers a view from “an odd angle of the Isle” (Temp. 1.2.224), one that is “apophatic’ in nature. That is, instead of positive promotion of political unity, the play portrays the dreadful consequences of division. Instead of celebrating visions of social unity, Shakespeare provides a range of truculent Jacobean types, to wit, “the mighty King, the household Fool, the Machiavel or “new man” Edmund, the supple [servant] Oswald, the Bedlam beggar” not to mention the cruel and conniving sisters, Goneril and Regan, all of whom vie to satisfy personal desires, rather than serve interests of the realm (Mack, Our Time 77). Maynard Mack hints that the play manifests a social critique that would have been sufficiently apparent to the contemporary audience to induce “a shudder of self-recognition” (108). The critique comes not only through the character types themselves but also through what the play reveals of the maddening “gulf between medieval social ideals and contemporary actualities” emblazoned in radically stark portraits of dissolute values, virtues, ethics, and morals among characters, without so much as a hint of belief in, or loyalty to, a higher power independent of their own appetites (108).
Shakespeare’s *Lear* takes social critique through a back door. His decision to leach out Christian references in favor of a syncretistic pastiche of reference to the “gods” provides the playwright free reign to castigate the moral cesspool of his time by satirical attack directed at the vapid condition of contemporary religion. The subtle mockery exhibited by the shallow invocation of mythic pagan deities—Jupiter, Juno, Apollo—stands as an ironic trope which emphasizes these as simply nominalist expressions, “non-entities” at best; or, at worst, the type of “idols” mocked in Psalm 115. 327 Kent explicitly upbraids Lear on this: “Thou swear’st thy gods in vain” (1.1.163). Together these reinforce the absence of authentic belief in efficacious gods in the *Lear* World, the godlessness of which analogically stands for the similarly godless world of Shakespeare’s London.

a. “Otherworldliness.”

The action of the play takes place within an isolated form of inverted “green world.”328 Unlike the customarily constructed separate world through which, after adventure and ordeal, the players find themselves renewed with new perspectives with which to return to their familiar world, in *Lear* the players neither physically depart from, nor return to, the familiar world of civilization. Instead, the play’s mythic realm, the *Lear* World, drawn loosely from ancient British

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327 “7 They have hands and touch not: they have feet and walk not: neither make they a sound with their throat.

8 They that make them are like unto them: so are all that trust in them.” Ps. 115:7-8.

328 A literary concept popularized by Northrop Frye’s, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) describes the “Green World” as an alternate world, that performs "the archetypal function of . . . visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from ‘reality,’ but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate" (183). Examples in Shakespeare include Illyria in *Twelfth Night*’s or the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. 
history, itself becomes estranged in the course of the play. The characters find themselves thrust into a progressively “defamiliarizing” world initiated by the King’s peculiar abdication of his sovereign role to his daughters and their husbands. Shakespeare employs the separate world of ancient Britain as a projection or “mirror” of the contemporary present in a manner fully intended to shock the contemporary audience with unvarnished depiction of the “very age and body of the Time.” Maynard Mack convincingly describes his view of the “homiletic

329 Wolfgang Kayser distills the essential elements of grotesque literature, in his authoritative study, which describe Shakespeare’s ancient Britain setting for the play precisely. These include the appearance of an “estranged world . . . in the vision of a daydreamer” (186). This sense of “otherworldliness” occupies the storm and hovel in Act 3; Gloucester’s journey to cliffs to Dover led by Poor Tom; and his encounter with Lear in Act 4.

330 Similar to his other plays of the period—*Hamlet, Troilus & Cressida, Measure for Measure, Coriolanus*—Shakespeare tests the genre expectations of his audience and sends it in new directions. Of the foregoing plays, *King Lear* offers the more extreme genre-bending in ways that reveal how the playwright purposes to shape the reception of the play. To borrow Victor Shklovsky’s term, I suggest that in *Lear* Shakespeare first engages his audience in an exercise in defamiliarization with respect to expectation. Once stripped of comfortable expectation, a form of refamiliarization draws the audience into a fundamentally unexpected outcome and therefore meaning of the work. As Maynard Mack’s *King Lear in Our Time* observes, Shakespeare’s Jacobean audience finds the appeal of *King Lear* more comfortably situated within the tradition of biblical parable, mystery cycle, and morality play.

331 Quotation from Hamlet’s advice the players in 3.2.23-24. Influential literary examples include, *Utopia* (Sir Thomas More, 1516); *In Praise of Folly* (Disiderius Erasmus, 1511); Edmund Spenser’s, *Faerie Queene* contains many satiric moments directed to both decadent court business and the Catholic Church. Picaresque works, such as *The Unfortunate Traveller or Life of Jack Walton* (Thomas Nashe, 1594) while noted for ribaldry and, sardonic comment on contemporary life, generally remain unregarded as satire per se. Late medieval anti-fraternal satire finds rich expression in William Langland’s *Piers Ploughman* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which
structure” of the play which “bathes the literal event in figuration” as the frequent recapitulation of speeches and events that “reflect backward and forward on each other like the images in a succession of Platonic mirrors which are supposed to guide us from appearances to truth” (Our Time 72). Indeed, the uncomfortable truth lies within Shakespeare’s lurid picture of the play’s “chaos, savagery, and self-devouring violence, not to mention the stripping off of title, property, clothing and dignity to come” (94). Extremities of conduct and circumstance thrust the merely “homiletic” into the world of satire with the all the force of moral outrage that the tools of the satirist can engender. Consistent with what classic satire aims to achieve, Shakespeare’s portrait of the play’s Lear World would seem intended to move the actual world of contemporary London toward amendment through the process of recognition, then rehabilitation, and finally restoration.

As I suggest above, the world Shakespeare constructs for the play fits the “green world inversion,” a world dislodged from common understanding of social order, wrenched from its foundation—as Lear describes it: “wrenched my frame of nature / From the fixed place” (1.4.267-68). Lear’s antagonists, Edmund, Goneril and Cornwall, and Regan and their enablers, stand on the same philosophic plane as Hobbes’s “essential model of (contemporary) English humanity” characterized by “appetite, the ‘universal wolf’” (Danby 38-39), consumed with material greed and sensual satisfaction.
b. “Shakespeare Sets the Stage for Satire.”

To such an extent considered a bleak, even hopeless, picture of humankind, the play was not professionally performed for a period of 157 years.\textsuperscript{332} Such perceived pessimistic view and persistent focus on gratuitous depravity typically do not reflect the customary understanding of satirical comedy nor do commentators treat the play as satire or even as containing satirical elements with at least two notable exceptions. To his credit, Mack raises the feature of satiric ridicule in the previously mentioned display of contemporary caricatures in the persons of “the mighty King, the household Fool, the Machiavel ‘new man’ Edmund, the supple Oswald, the Bedlam beggar” (\textit{Our Time} 77). G. Wilson Knight devotes an entire chapter to “\textit{King Lear} and the Comedy of the Grotesque,” which meticulously sets out the many examples of the comic, incongruous, absurd, and “macabre humoresque,” but never relates these elements into a direct critique, much less castigation, of contemporary English social or religious mores (\textit{Wheel of Fire} 160-76; 170). Nevertheless, as discussed in detail below, the play contains substantial indicia drawn from the genre of Juvenalian satire.\textsuperscript{333} While the sheer magnitude of the play exceeds such \textit{per se} generic claim for \textit{Lear}, the type of conspicuous satirical particulars contained in the play often appear as standard commonplaces in similar complex efforts. However, the sheer accumulation of these elements in \textit{Lear} bear significant meaning for the expression of the playwright’s damning moral critique. These include such recurrent staples as exaggeration, ridicule, parody, hyperbole, sarcasm, caricature, analogy, incongruity and grotesquerie to name

\textsuperscript{332} The time elapsed from Nahum Tate’s 1681 redaction to Macready’s 1838 Restoration a gap of 157 years in which WS’s play was not seen. \textit{See} foregoing discussion this Chapter at p. 15.

\textsuperscript{333} Charles Allen and George Stephens provide the standard definition: “Juvenalian satire evokes contempt and moral indignation at the vices and corruptions of men.” \textit{Satire Theory and Practice}. p. 44.
but a few weapons in the satirist’s arsenal which Shakespeare deploys to combined effect in *Lear*. The last two of these, *incongruity* and the *grotesque*, stand as play’s the over-arching satirical motifs that govern the *Lear* World.

I discuss several examples within the masterful multi-pronged array of elements found in conventional literary satire which, in the course of the play, become harsher, more extreme, and more sharply directed to the moral corruption of the *Lear* World in a manner that at least equals or exceeds the similarly applied conventions of the innovative contemporary stage satire (Sutherland 2). I discuss in detail below how these devices, set within the arrangement of event and situation in *Lear*, bear significant freight of Shakespeare’s message. The playwright’s satiric message primarily targets the dire effects of England’s rejection of its traditional religious heritage, the establishment of religion as a purely secular enterprise, and the consequent disengagement from the traditional cultural role of religion altogether.

5.3.2 The First Two Scenes.

a. “Issues and images.”

Typically within his plays’ initial scenes Shakespeare prepares his audiences with crucial thematic keys with which to understand the ensuing action. In the previous chapter, I discuss at length how the first two scenes of *Hamlet* expose the contention between competing world views that inform the balance of the play. Similarly, as Marjorie Garber remarks, the opening two scenes of *Lear* “pose[] almost all of the issues and introduce[] almost all the images that will serve to focus the play” (660). *Hamlet* begins with subtle markers of competing views of reality and understandings of divine purpose manifest in the inherited notions of *realism* and *nominalism*. By the time Shakespeare addressed the story of *Lear* the deepening discord
wrought by the legacy of the paradigm shift that abjured logical *realism*\(^{334}\) deserved even more emphatic treatment. Each of *Lear*’s first two scenes begin with unsettling incongruities—unexpected disturbances of rational order—and both conclude with the *grotesque* in full stride.

The first two scenes of *Lear* display a smothering array of corrosive social defects that appear customary within the grotesque instrumental logic from which the moral values of the *Lear* World derive. Each scene introduces principal characters of plot and sub-plot, respectively. Each involve family conversations which settle into presumptions of seeming normality before such presumptions turn terribly awry. In the first, the King presides over a special royal court session that chiefly pertains to allocation of the kingdom among his three daughters; in the second, the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons engage fraught, intimate, but separate conversations and soliloquies. From these, the playwright prepares his audience for this unusual *Lear* World motif of *incongruity* tending toward the *grotesque* within which the play’s otherworldly narrative unfolds, and upon which the play’s potent satire builds.

b. (1.1.) “Lear Divides the Kingdom: Transcendentalts Abrogated.”

The play’s consequential first scene proper, where King Lear presides at court, stands peculiarly prefaced by a discrete conversation of some thirty-three lines primarily between the Earls of Kent and Gloucester, during which the latter introduces his bastard son, Edmund. The second sentence of the exchange, where Kent refers to the impending “division of the kingdom,” contains the seed that progressively invades every level of existence in the *Lear* World (1.1.4). Unforeseen consequences of “division” almost immediately breed discord, that lead to denial of

\(^{334}\) See detailed discussions of roots and legacies of the pertinent philosophical systems of late medieval scholasticism in Chapter Two (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured”) and Chapter Three (“*Hamlet* at the Crossroads”), with particular reference to *realism* and *nominalism.*
God, family, fellowship, and finally of one’s own identity. The ensuing incongruity that seizes the Lear World soon drives a desperate Lear to ask: “Does anyone here know me?” (1.4.223); and motivates Gloucester’s legitimate son’s instrumental self-abnegation: “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.21).

David Bevington notes that these few opening lines between Kent and Gloucester also prepare the audience for the many divided meanings in words that follow. Gloucester, of his bastard son: “His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge” (1.1.9), meaning either or both that Edmund’s conception resulted from his libido and/or Edmund’s care proceeded at his expense. Similarly, Kent replies “I cannot conceive you,” meaning he does not understand. Gloucester responds in the first sense: “this young fellow’s mother could” (that is, conceive), followed by: “Do you smell a fault?” which refers to either a sin or the loss of scent by hounds in a hunt (1.1.12-13, 16; Bevington, Necessary, “Lear” notes, at p. 630). Almost immediately, King Lear and retinue sweep onto the stage whereupon the King announces that “we shall express our darker purpose” (1.1.36)—another oddly ambiguous construction—“darker” meaning either or both “unannounced” or “sinister.”

Thus does the rash concept of “division” portend jarring discord, where people, things, and ideas appear incongruous, irrational, wrenched from the realist “frame of nature” that reflects God’s dependable and recurring presence in the cosmic order. Lear does not merely abdicate, he dismembers the kingdom. No sooner does he declare his “fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age” in order that by such division “future strife / May be prevented now” (1.1.39, 44-45), than relentless strife breaks out, staunched only by the climactic carnage that concludes the play.
However, with abiding irony from which the play never recovers, after Lear declares his considered purpose of division, the King then newly conditions his prospective conveyance of specific separate thirds of the kingdom. These thirds shall be, in order of preference, ranked according to the daughter that “shall we say doth love us most” (1.2.51). Cordelia, Lear’s favorite daughter, declines to enter her sisters’ meretricious mode of exaggerated flattery. Her plain-spoken measured love for her father draws a sudden measure of fury from Lear. Rather than simply downgrading Cordelia’s share relative to her flattering sisters, Lear delivers a cosmic curse whereby he disowns and disinherits Cordelia, altogether:

*Lear:* For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,

The mysteries of Hecate and the night,

By all the operation of the orbs

From whom we do exist and cease to be,

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

Propinquity, and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold thee from this forever. (1.1.110-116)

The Earl of Kent, Lear’s trusted friend and ally, pleads against the folly:

*Kent:* . . . Reserve thy state,

And in thy best consideration check

This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment,

Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,

Nor are those empty hearted whose low sounds

Reverb no hollowness. (1.1.150-54)
Lear again erupts with the selfsame curse “Kent, on thy life, no more. . . . Out of my sight!” (155, 158). Kent replies, “Thou swear’st thy gods in vain” (1.1.163), a riposte that echoes throughout in the foolish idolatry that provides a rich target for the play’s religious satire.

Lear disowns and disinherits his “favorite” Cordelia; he banishes his only trusted counselor, Kent. By his determined abrogation of the real, he has no cosmic coordinates by which to steer: “Once Lear has banished true love and true service in the persons of Cordelia and Kent, it is only to be expected that he will have trouble with false service and false love in a variety of forms” (Mack 103). However, Lear’s most telling abrogation of transcendent reality comes as he resolves to “retain / The name and all th’addition to a king,” that is, keep the name and privileges, but none of the duties. In other words, he will exalt the nominal appearance but discard the real substance (1.1.52). As a crowning iteration of “re-trading” the deal, he adds yet another unanticipated condition—that his unexpected “reservation of an hundred knights” be housed and fed at his two older daughters’ estates “by due turns,” travelling in rotation, with his own royal estate apparently abandoned to a condition of desuetude (1.1.133-36).

Lear’s folly unfolds precipitously here at the outset: division of realm, abdication of sacred duty, retention of “appearance,” rejection of the real, repudiation of Cordelia, and banishment of Kent. Thus begins Lear’s cascade of tragic consequences, fostered by his stubborn dissociation from the real, manifest by the broken connection to transcendent ideals in form of family, fellowship, and kingship, which renders him easy prey to the nominalist blandishments of his two older daughters and the promptings of his own vanity. By the end of this initial scene in the play, Lear’s accumulated misperceptions, fostered by his abrogation of the real stand as glaring incongruities, both palpable and absurd.
c. (1.2) “Gods and the Grotesque: Edmund Stakes His Claim.”

Scene Two confirms the religious satiric method and purpose seen throughout the play’s patina of pagan god references, first introduced by the previous scene’s palpably careless and insincere casual expressions. The play’s second scene immediately reinforces a concept of “gods” as both merely names with which to support oaths, but also as convenient non-entities to which one may pretend to supplicate. In the first of his three Scene Two soliloquies, Gloucester’s bastard son Edmund, introduced in Scene One’s strange preface, establishes the role of the “gods” in the Lear World. He begins with a pious and personal apostrophe: “Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound” (1.2.1-2). As with the previously mentioned “apophatic” device employed to emphasize and comment on the absence of political and social unity, this, along with both previous and subsequent declarations by Lear and other characters, confirms the actual absence of the pagan “gods” invoked throughout. G. Wilson Knight observes that these stand in context as strictly man-made (188) and bear no semblance to a pious “pagan” or “pre-Christian” setting for the play. Rather, as Edmund so abundantly demonstrates, these refer to the “gods” of appetite and materiality worshipped by the secularized post-Reformation English society and which in turn help form the object of Shakespeare’s religious ridicule.

Shakespeare’s stark portrayal of corrupted values, virtues, ethics, and morals woven throughout the play commence with Edmund’s comic declaration of a ghastly apophatic void, in his sense of the above-quoted “Nature” to which his “services are bound.” The declaration soon appears patently absurd given his contemporaneous and unprovoked divestiture of the birthright of his older brother, Edgar, through a premeditated scheme of forgery, defamation, and fraud.

Edmund’s forged letter falsely implicates his older brother Edgar in a plot against their
father. The oddly gullible Gloucester not only swallows the false plot for truth without question, but conflates the offered hearsay with Lear’s disinheritance of Cordelia and banishment of Kent from the previous scene, to which the letter bears no resemblance, so as to ascribe unified cosmic significance to the events, with which he begins: “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us” (1.2.106-107). Upon Gloucester’s departure following his credulous causal attribution to astrological convergence, Edmund sneers:

This is the excellent foppery of the world . . . . we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion . . . . An admirable evasion of a whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the change of a star! (1.2.121, 123-25, 129-31)

For his part, Edmund’s older half-brother Edgar, as does their father, swallows whole Edmund’s false tale of their father’s puzzling animus and promptly absconds to await word of conciliation.

Edmund here departs from mere incongruity to demonstrate the very spirit and image of the grotesque, by which characters typically appear “either physically or spiritually deformed and perform abnormal actions” (Harmon 244). The accumulation of unremitting grotesquery lends an edge to the play’s satire as the grotesque amplifies mere incongruity to emerge as a central dramatic trope in the play which in turn drives the play’s bitter moral outrage.

5.3.3 Love, Loyalty, and Honor Banished: Otherworldliness Embraced

These eventful scenes establish the moral poverty of Lear World where the King in his court, on the one hand, and Gloucester’s bastard son in his father’s estate, on the other, appear to share the same ethic. Framed by their same illusory nominalist notion of “gods,” they both respectively confirm that material motivations and tokens for self-gratification will dominate the Lear World, while intrinsic matters of realist substance founder. Indeed, those that rebuff such
philosophy—Cordelia, Kent, Edgar—find themselves shunned, brutally cast out into isolation. However, all three find ways to both circumvent their rejections and strive to repair the damage.

The play’s frequent babble concerning the “gods” carries significance beyond that of mere “man-made” inventions. It goes to the heart of the “radical empiricism” that reduces “all being to what is perceived” and denies intelligibility to the real, “conceiving of God himself only as a Protean figure impossible to comprehend” (Bouyer 184-85). Accordingly, the grotesque becomes an inevitable condition of the inability to perceive the real, the inability to apprehend the divine form within material things in the natural world, including relations within the human community, as derived from participation in God’s Being. Rather, in the underlying analogy of Lear World to the rapidly changing ethos of Shakespeare’s England, when sense experience becomes the sole indicium of reality, material things become “instantiations of independent phenomena, fully equipped to act without special divine assistance,” each with its own independent, nominalist, characteristics available for use and manipulation by man (Dupré 177). In short, in the appetite dominant ethic of Lear World, Creation merely serves as a resource for man to exploit and enjoy for its own sake “separate from the inherent relationship in God’s Being” (Boersma 82-83). Hence, the Lear World models an extension of the prevailing ethos of Jacobean England. Lear purposely fragments the Kingdom, rejects honest love and loyalty in favor of flattery, and eschews his ordained duty in order to indulge an hedonic lifestyle; Edmund’s deceits impoverish his brother in order to enrich himself while Gloucester’s credulity prompts unjust estrangement from Edgar. The two scenes enact the loss of logical realism which render people disconnected from reality—that is, from each other and from God.

The chilling, abrupt, and unnatural incongruities with which these first two scenes conclude, begin to form the sense of “otherworldliness” with which Shakespeare imbeds the
play. The play continues to open out into a disordered social landscape where the perception of nature becomes increasingly more incongruous, mysterious, remote, and unintelligible.\textsuperscript{335} To compound the effect, despite its legendary claim to ancient Britain, the play’s actual physical setting appears eerily nonspecific. Susan Snyder remarks that with a single exception, the “kingdom” lacks designated places, specific towns, or named sites; when dividing the kingdom Lear refers simply to “natural features” (“Modern Perspective” 289). The single exception repeatedly names “Dover” as a “kind of magnet site to which every major character except the Fool is drawn in the latter half of the play” (289). This featurelessness that gathers to a single focus contributes to the unsettling and abrasive tension that inhabits the play’s formal components to compound the sense of the eerie and otherworldly. While Shakespeare presents his audience with an ostensibly logical narrative, nothing within it seems to fit harmoniously together. Except for the touching ienic moment when a humble Lear awakes in the presence of Cordelia in 4.7, the Lear World exists in a state relentless, jarring discord. Mack catalogues the numerous times tempers flare within “exceptionally contentious” circumstances (88).

The play’s motif of the irrational grotesque displays the effects of the loss of logical realism which renders the material world unintelligible. The play’s purposeful portrayal of the

\textsuperscript{335} The exaggerated dissociative condition of Shakespeare’s Lear World analogizes the effects of Reformation England’s fundamental religious change that separates nature from God’s eternal reason, and denies “a participatory or real bond with the eternal Word of God . . . . [Accordingly] if there is no sacramental participation of creation in God’s being, created objects have no inherent relationship to each other or to God” (Boersma, Heavenly Participation 83). For detailed discussion of the how the nominalist legacy of reform obscures the pre-Reformation conception of the divine and renders real relations among God and creation unintelligible, see Louis Bouyer, The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism (184-85).
inability to recognize what constitutes *reality* inevitably results in *incongruity* and dislocation among people and ideas. However, as I suggest in the introduction to this section, the playwright must address a crucial problem that lies with an audience unable to fully understand, much less to articulate what has happened—how the loss of logical *realism* dislodged the traditional Christian understanding of sacramental unity in the world and how this came to be. This loss, or disconnection of people from *reality* manifests in *Lear* at best as endemic *incongruity*, (e.g., Lear abdicates his duties but “retain[s] / The name and all th’ addition to a king” [1.1.135-36]); and at worst as outright *grotesque* (e.g., Cornwall and Goneril cruelly blind a bound Gloucester in response to his wish not to “see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes” [3.7.59-60]). The playwright/satirist works to expose the cast of mind that impedes comprehension of *reality* and thus excludes divine ordinance in preference to a radical empiricism which confines all knowledge and value to that available to the physical senses.

The playwright ridicules this distorted way of thinking, this secular ‘social imaginary,’ as a means to foster recognition and amendment. Shakespeare lampoons the materialist perspective through ridicule and parody of recognizable Jacobean character types, along with their behaviors, for whom satisfaction of appetite must reward their endeavors. As Lear ignores his sacramental or *real* relationship to family, friendship, and Kingdom, chaos reigns—and the *grotesque* becomes routine. For Edmund, nature exists to serve his material desires, the fulfillment of which he effects *via* the cynical sacrifice of his own kin without compunction. Both Lear and Edmund enact the shift from the late medieval “absolutes of God and society, to the single absolute of the individual” (Danby 64). Hence, the satirical portrait of an anointed king who suddenly abnegates his sacred duty in favor of traipsing about the country with a coterie of
‘vanity’ knights; or Edmund’s casual, cruel, and remorseless sacrifice of father and brother for material advancement and to curry political favor.

The play’s first two scenes prepare the audience to reflect on the socially disabling inability to situate the traditional Christian pre-Reformation relationship to, and understanding of, the divine. Each expresses the same thematic perspective: in the absence of sacramental participation in God’s Being, “created objects have no inherent relationship to each other or to God” (Boersma 83). To capture the general ethos that informs the metaphysical microcosmic mirror of Jacobean England, Shakespeare organizes the play’s elements so as to metaphorize the incongruity, the out-of-placeness wrought by the newly evolving social imaginary or common understanding. This in turn creates a world infested by metaphysical grotesquery in form of intellectual and cultural deformity.

5.3.4 Incongruity and the Satiric Grotesque.

Incongruity serves as a figure for misshapen social and moral order. Key to the meaning of the play’s unremitting theme of incongruity lies with the manner in which people and things become thrust out of place. The struggle to restore one’s place dominates the action of the entire Lear World. Following the fateful initial scenes, neither King nor Earls returns home. Instead, Lear’s and Gloucester’s ensuing compelled peripatetic journeys with their respective grotesque encounters parody the late medieval quest genre.

336 Lear contentiously commences the

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336 Consistent with the “otherworldliness” of Lear World, Shakespeare applies a deeply ironic generic trope to each principal of the respective ‘double plots’: “In the high medieval scheme a central genre is the tale of a quest or journey. Man is essentially in via. The end which he seeks is something which if gained can redeem all that was wrong with his life up to that point” (MacIntyre 174-75). Here, Lear’s quest to regain his discarded kingship ends in military defeat, incarceration, and death; Gloucester, blinded, cruelly cast out of doors to “smell his way to Dover,”
prescribed rotation with his century of knights in train between his two daughters, who compel the train’s reduction (1.3; 1.4). After the train soon reduces to nothing, Lear rages out into the storm (3.2), then sheltered in the hovel with his Fool (3.4, 3.6), then without the Fool toward Dover. Gloucester’s concurrent initial pursuit to aid Lear precipitates his practical eviction by Cornwall and Goneril from his home, perversely employed for his own interrogation and torture. Rendered blind and then cast out, accompanied by Poor Tom, he too begins the journey toward Dover (3.3). Tragedy lies in the soon apparent fact that incongruity, the dislocation of people, things, and ideas from their fit places within orderly human community, cannot be entirely repaired. Likewise, the frequent, fruitless invocations to the “gods” illustrate the apophatic nature of the play’s religious satire and testify to the absence of any deity with apparent purpose or demonstrated interest in creation.

The spiritual dysfunction of the grotesque Lear World requires abnormal actions. Having abdicated his Kingship and divested his Kingdom, now forced to shed his reserved coterie of knights, Lear stands fundamentally out of place. Gloucester’s suborned wrath drives Edgar out of his place in the family home, forcing his disguise as Poor Tom. Lear banishes Kent from the kingdom to force his disguise as the yeoman Caius. Each event of displacement and disorientation compels its own abnormal actions, which in turn prompt further contention and abnormal actions in such others as Lear’s two daughters, their respective husbands, Edmund, and Goneril’s household steward Oswald and Cornwall’s First Servant, from which actions the entire disjointed Lear world suffers. Moral distortions stand endemic to Lear World: Lear’s imperious cruelty to Cordelia mutates into Edmund’s devious cruelty that fraudulently stirs his father befriended by a deranged beggar (his disguised fugitive son, Edgar) who leads his quest to the verge of a Dover cliff where he may end his life.
against his brother Edgar; Regan cruelly humiliates Kent by compelling his overnight placement in the stocks; Cornwall hideously blinds Gloucester for aiding Lear’s escape toward Dover; Goneril plots her husband Albany’s murder; Goneril and Regan savagely compete for Edmund’s affection. Taken together these enact Albany’s dire prophetic warning:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offenses,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (4.2.47-51)

The poetics of Lear World offer a strong portrait of a social order in perpetual conflict. Such dysfunction serves the play’s satiric purpose as the characters’ motives and actions anticipate Albany’s declaration with persistent images of humanity feeding on itself.

a. “Critics on the Grotesque in Lear.”

Three distinguished critics in particular amply set forth the general conventions and characteristics of the grotesque language and action in Lear. G. Wilson Knight dedicates an entire chapter of his Wheel of Fire to the subject—“King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque” (160-76). Knight draws specific attention to the motif as a profoundly distinctive element of the play’s tragic tenor: “In no tragedy of Shakespeare does incident and dialogue so recklessly and miraculously walk the tight-rope of our pity over the depths of bathos and absurdity” (168). Knight emphasizes the notion that the primary focus of the play’s grotesquery stands as a reflection of Lear’s mind (172). However others take a more inclusive view. Willard Farnham’s Shakespearean Grotesque remarks on the intensive use of beast imagery in the play to analogize the viciousness, predation, and devouring qualities of human conflict (107). However, with few
exceptions, commentators rarely associate the *grotesque* with purposeful critique of contemporary circumstances. As quoted above, Maynard Mack postulates that the play’s audience at the Globe could easily identify a range of Jacobean character types among the *dramatis personae* (77). Although confined to prose works, Neil Rhodes’s *Elizabethan Grotesque* discusses the explicit link between the *grotesque* in Elizabethan literary use and satire (18). Wolfgang Kayser’s seminal study, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, encapsulates both the playwright’s aesthetic vision in *Lear* and its application to what Shakespeare sees in the moral and ethical climate of contemporary London, declaring that “[t]he world of the play is a madhouse” (61).

b. “The Instrumental Grotesque.”

I choose two incidents, among several in the play, to illustrate how the inability to recognize intrinsic *reality*, the sacramental habitation of the divine in all creation, produces a world subsumed by the *grotesque*: first, Lear’s rage on the heath (3.2); and, second, the truant Lear’s meeting with the blind Gloucester on the heath (4.6.80-187).

i. “Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!” (3.2)

The playwright frames the grotesquerie of Lear’s mocking invective directed at a furious storm, with the earlier scene where his two daughters combine to humiliatingly hive off his “reservation of knights”—the last material vestige of his royal identity. Lear stands in comically pitiful disbelief as the sisters unite in diminishing the number of knights by degrees, until, willing to accept the limitation of his hundred knights to fifty, Goneril interjects:

*Goneril:* 

Hear me my lord:

What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,

To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

*Regan:* What need one? (2.4.261-65)

The comic and tragic painfully merge with Lear’s wounded expression of spluttering impotence as he threatens his daughters:

*Lear:* No, you unnatural hags,

I will have such revenges on you both

That all the world shall—I will do such things—

What they are yet I know not, but they shall be

The terrors of the earth. You think I’ll weep;

No, I’ll not weep.  [*Storm and tempest.*] (2.4.280-285)

When he next appears, shelterless and exposed to a ferocious storm, Lear likewise castigates cosmic elements with both a tour de force of *prosopopoeia* and a searing satirical declaration of nature conceived as disconnected from God’s being. Lear absurdly perceives nature’s hostility as a personal affront, analogous to the unwarranted cruelty suffered at the hands of his daughters. Here Shakespeare offers the satiric point that disconnected from God the perception of nature becomes mysterious, remote, and unintelligible (Boersma 83; Bouyer 184-85). The inhabitants of Lear World lack, as Jacobean England has lost, the ability to recognize the sacramental habitation of the Divine Being in nature to which all things stand connected and from which all things derive their existence:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;

I never gave you kingdom, called you children.
You owe me no subscription. Then, let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,
A poor infirm, weak and despised old man,
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engendered battles ‘gainst a head
So old and white as this. O, ho! ‘Tis foul! (3.2.14-24)

The expression of disconnection of Nature from God’s Being gives rise to Lear’s foolish self-centered inference that the storm colludes with his daughters’ intentional harm.

ii. “Reason in madness! . . . I will preach to thee. Mark.” (4.6. 175-180)

The most poignant moment in the play occurs as the blind Gloucester led by Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom the Bedlam Beggar, encounters the ‘escaped’ Lear at 4.6. Paradoxically, from this confluence of deformity—of the physically grotesque—emerges a quiet and thoughtful moment of rational order. Here, Lear’s empathy for the recognized Gloucester waxes with rational ruminations rich with the satiric voice, tempered with sardonic reflections on their respective plights which reveal a Lear now fully aware of his role within the world’s corruption for which he stood as an enabler. Now, himself a victim, Lear can newly empathize with the victimhood of others, by virtue of the arduous journey of awareness he first began in soliloquy before he enters the hovel after his fury at the storm:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (3.4.28-36)

Perversely, within the madness of Lear World, Lear can “preach” ironically that Gloucester’s blindness helps, not hinders, discernment of the truth. Lear poses, then explains, the apparent paradox of how even the blind “can see how this world goes . . . with no eyes. Look with thine ears” (4.6.147-48; 150-51). “[Y]ou don’t need eyes” Lear tells Gloucester, when justice and thief stand virtually interchangeable (4.6.151-52). Outward appearances routinely deceive: “Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks” (4.6.165-66). Lear employs the satirist’s distortion of reality in order to get at the truth (Kernan 23): “Get thee glass eyes, / And like a scurvy politician seem / To see things thou dost not” (170-72). In other words, Lear from his years of experience entertaining self-serving petitions and specious arguments from the throne can well assure the disabled Gloucester that eyesight merely impedes the business of getting on within a world governed by self-interested claims and assertions, rather than facts—not unlike the favor seekers around the burgeoning bureaucracy in James’s court.

But what is one to do? Lear indeed preaches to Gloucester the costly lesson he himself has learned since his imperious impatience at the play’s initial scene which continued through his humbling experience in the storm where his kinship with essential humanity requires that he “[e]xpose [himself] to feel what wretched feel” (3.4.35).

Thou must be patient. We came crying hither.
Thou know’st the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.

. . . .

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (4.6.178-80, 182-3)

His poignant testimony validates the humiliated Lear’s role as an authentic on-stage satiric voice, one which feeds the satiric muse to which focus I now turn.

5.3.5 The Play’s Satiric Muse: Religious Change (and its Dreadful Folly).

Lear stands variously as a different kind of tragedy, unique in the Shakespeare canon. Shakespeare would not return to the double plot. Likewise, as Hamlet exhausted the playwright’s interest in the revenge theme—whether retribution completed or justice achieved—Lear resolves with themes of personal reconciliation, restoration, and rededication to public duty.

However, the most profound difference in form lies in its combination of incongruity and displays of the grotesque operating in an otherworldly environment underscored by the several techniques of dramatic disguise—those of place, time, and character types. All of these provide the adapted story of Lear a framework within which to mount an effective line of satirical attack on the social and moral consequences of “religious change” in Shakespeare’s England. As previously noted, grasping, brutal Jacobean character types, disguised as ancient Britons, preside over the play’s social and moral chaos: Edmund the conscienceless Machiavel masquerading as the “new man”; Goneril and Regan, the cruel acquisitive sisters; Oswald, the smarmy opportunistic steward; Gloucester, the credulous aging squire, perhaps a type of “slipper’d
pantaloon,” and of course the mad King Lear, selfish, obdurate, but ultimately humbled to the
damage he caused. Abruptly dispossessed, Lear’s daughter Cordelia accepts exilic refuge with
the King of France. Likewise, Lear precipitously banishes his trusted Earl of Kent. Edgar, by his
father falsely accused, and forced to hide, the sudden subject of a manhunt. Kent and Edgar
adopt contemporary disguises to become key commoner components of the story (as the itinerant
Caius and the Bedlam beggar Poor Tom, respectively). Throughout, the time honored literary
devices of satire, within the above discussed trope of grotesque, drive the classical satirical
purpose—to inspire amendment or reform of the behaviors and circumstances attacked.338

a. “Shakespeare Marshals the Conventions of Satire.”

During the period between 1590 and 1615, among its many other literary innovations, the
English Renaissance provided the testing ground for “a distinctly non-medieval type of satire”
(Kernan 36). The London literary scene of the 1590s established the conventions of flourishing
verse and epigrammatic satire, together with polemical prose works. These works exhibited
abuse and invective directed toward objectionable behavior of individuals so as to damn, deflate,
and ultimately destroy the perceived iniquity. Thomas Nashe, in verse, and the anonymous
authors of the Marprelate tracts, in prose, serve as examples of the bitter indignation for which
Juvenal stood as the classical father figure (Campbell 22-23). The Bishop’s Ban of 1599, drove
the popular spirit of satire to the more commercially propitious environment of the public theatre

337 Pantaloon; Term for Elizabethan character type Shakespeare borrows for As You Like It as the seventh age of
man (AYL 2.7.157).


stage. After Jonson, Marston, Nashe, and Chapman drew sanctions for stage works that cut too closely to recognizable individuals with ties to the English throne, more measured and less personally particular forms of stage satire emerged. In the conventions of the new English theatrical satire, the stage play continued to present a picture of society meant to render the *hic et nunc* (Kernan 6). Seizing on the fashion, Shakespeare followed with *Troilus & Cressida* (1602), which Campbell relates as Shakespeare’s nod to the “satire” fashion. Satirical touches appear in the caricatured puritan Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (1601) or as on-stage satirists such as Jaques in *As You Like It* (1601) and Domitius Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), among others. However nothing in Shakespeare’s canon comes close to full-on satirical attack on the moral corruption of his world as *King Lear*. Among the conventions Shakespeare adopts in *Lear* include an onstage satirist voice, often a character commentator on whom the audience can rely to upbraid, ridicule, chide, or otherwise deflate the pompous pretensions of the conduct under scrutiny.

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339 As of June 1, 1599, the Court of High Commission, prompted by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, ordered the burning of a number of satires, including those by Nashe, John Marston, and others, “and prohibited the further printing of satire without specific license” (Campbell 1). The Ban remained aimed at the distinctive genre of English verse satire, the numerous staged satires guardedly emerged, some of which ran afoul of the Elizabeth’s monarchy, the notable example of which is Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe’s *The Isle of Dogs*. Jonson collaborated with John Marston and George Chapman on the 1605 production of *Eastward Ho!* which drew sanctions from James I by reason of its anti-Scottish satire. However, Jonson adapted, and avoided particularization of the objects of satire with his later successful works performed by Shakespeare’s acting company, which include *Volpone* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1610), and Bartholomew Fair (1614). Meanwhile, as Campbell explains, Shakespeare already included measured conventions of satire as a primary instrument in his *Troilus & Cressida* (1602).

340 Oscar James Campbell, *Comical Satyre and Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida* (1938).
In addition to the above-described distinctive moment where Lear himself assumes that role, the banished Earl of Kent, disguised as Lear’s yeoman “Caius,” (where he appears) is always indignant, dedicated to truth, pessimistic, and caught in a series of unpleasant contradictions. For example, as Kent, he mocks Lear’s improvident decision to disown Cordelia for her honest but unembellished expression of filial love, relative to the meretricious claims of her sisters with an exasperated sarcasm: “Kill the physician and the fee bestow in the foul disease” (1.1.166-166-67). In a later scene, as the loyal Caius, he physically trips-up Goneril’s steward Oswald for lack of deference to Lear (1.4.85) and still later upbraids the hapless steward with a long string of colorful invective (2.2.14-39).

However, the task of the onstage satirist in Shakespeare most often falls to the clown role, such as the aforementioned Jaques in As You Like It; Feste in Twelfth Night; and Pompey in Measure for Measure. The Porter’s satirical speech in Macbeth distinctively reaches beyond the stage to lampoon contemporary targets. However, as an onstage satirist, Lear’s Fool knows no equal. For this Fool Shakespeare provides an ingenious microcosm that subtly, slyly, and cleverly employs the entire panoply of satirical tools—ridicule, parody, hyperbole, sarcasm, caricature, analogy, incongruity, and grotesquerie—in relentless pursuit of the prime objective of the satirist—to serve as the satirical goad to amendment and reform entirely concentrated on his master, King Lear.

Following Lear’s division of the kingdom in 1.1, while in the period of his first contentious residence at the home of Goneril and Cornwall, the Fool mercilessly engages his program of relentless satire. Edgy even for an “all licensed” fool, the Fool proceeds to satirize and upbraid Lear for his self-serving and improvident disruption of kingdom and family with a train of indirect and elliptical speech. For example, with Lear present, the Fool cautions Lear’s
new hire, Caius (as the disguised banished Kent), with a mocking analogy to Lear’s improvident banishment of Cordelia:

There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow has banished two on ‘s daughters and did the third a blessing against his will. If you follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb. (1.4.98-102).

When Lear cautions, “Take heed, sirrah—the whip”, the Fool boldly replies:

“Truth’s a dog. Must to kennel. He must be whipped out when the Lady Brach may stand by the fire and stink” (1.4.108-111).

The Fool incessantly turns the chatter back to Lear’s folly: “Dost thou call me a fool, boy?” “All other titles thou has given away; that thou wast born with” (1.4.146-147). The Fool unsparingly harps on the role reversal—Lear as the fool—with such sarcastic verse, analogy, and song, as:

. . .thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav’st them the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches,

[Sings] “Then they for sudden joy did weep,

And I for sorrow sung,

That such a king should play bo-peep

And go the fools among.” (1.4.169-76)

The Fool’s persistent satirical theme answers Lear’s critical identity question: “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” to which the Fool answers ominously “Lear’s shadow” (1.4.227-28).

The Fool’s patient and persistent goad, which continues albeit necessarily less stridently, through the end of the Hovel scene at 3.6, achieves, and witnesses to, amendment and reform on Lear’s thinking with respect to the foregoing critical question, as revealed in the truant Lear’s encounter with the blinded Gloucester (“Reason in madness”), discussed above. Once Lear amends his
thinking about “Who I am,” sheds his old self, and reconciles with Cordelia, the Fool disappears from the story.

b. “Shakespeare Deploys the Staples of Satirical Attack.”

The play contains a surfeit of distinctive beast imagery.341 Lear describes Goneril’s treatment of him as “[m]ore hideous . . . / Than the sea monster!” and her as a “[d]etested kite . . . , [whose ingratitude stands] sharper than a serpent’s tooth” (1.4.258-61, 287), and again, “Sharp-toothed unkindness, like a vulture, here [points to his heart]” (2.4.134), the latter a reference to the cruel fate of the mythological bound Prometheus. Gloucester defends his protection of Lear to forestall Goneril’s intent to “rash boarish fangs . . . [i]n his anointed flesh” (3.7.61). Albany describes his wife Goneril and her sister Regan as dog-hearted, “[t]igers, not daughters” (4.2.41), “each is an adder to the other” (Muir 36-37). Kent likens Regan’s steward Oswald to the class of “smiling rogues [who] like rats, oft bite the holy cords atwain” among other epithets (2.2.75).

Caroline Spurgeon provides a noteworthy profile:

In addition to savage wolves, tigers and other animals, there are darting serpents, a sharp-toothed vulture and detested kite, stinging adders and insects,… the bated bear, as well as whipped, whining, barking, mad and biting dogs. All this helps to

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341 A.C. Bradley specially notes that “the incessant references to the lower animals . . . are scattered broadcast through the whole play as though Shakespeare’s mind were so busy with the subject that he could hardly write a page without some allusion to it” (Shakespearean Tragedy 206).
create and increase an unparalleled atmosphere of rapine, cruelty and bodily pain.

(Spurgeon, *Shakespeare’s Imagery* 342)

These images analogically ascribe the natural predatory savagery to the unnaturally savage conduct of Lear’s and Gloucester’s antagonists portrayed as menacing, feeding, and engrossing.

At their first encounter in the hovel, Edgar, as Poor Tom, also assumes the role of “satiric voice” in his response to Lear’s question as to Poor Tom’s former life, “What hast thou been?” Edwin Muir observes that Edgar’s lengthy response of his fictionalized dissolute former life (“curled my hair, wore gloves in my cap, served the lust of my mistress’ heart”) actually describes the Jacobean accoutrements of his brother Edmund, as “False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, in in prey . . .” (3.4.91-93) (Muir, “The Politics of King Lear” 48). Similarly, but in a fiendishly cruel and self-satirizing manner, Regan cynically ascribes animal traits to the blinded Gloucester: “Go thrust him out at gates and let him smell / His way to Dover” (3.7.95-96). Albany reflects on the scope of his wife’s and sister-in-law’s disheartening cruelty: “Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep” (4.2.49-50). In other words, untempered savagery must inevitably turn against itself in a world unmediated by honest adherence to tenets of traditional Christian faith. Thus the *Lear* World’s persistent portrayal of a social order at war with itself, answers the question most frequently asked in *Lear*: What is the cause? As events amply demonstrate, where reason stands disconnected from God’s Being, the social fabric suffers. The world of *Lear* has

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342 Muir quotes Spurgeon’s catalogue of the play’s beast imagery at length, concluding: “. . .the soul of all the beasts in turn seem to us to have entered the bodies of these mortals; horrible in their venom, savagery, lust, deceitfulness, sloth, cruelty, filthiness” (*Essays*, “The Politics of King Lear” 37).
ceased to recognize its creator, has ceased to recognize God in the natural world, and instead conceives of nature disconnected from God’s Being.

A telling apophatic moment occurs in the hovel, to which shelter Gloucester has led Lear and the storm drenched company. In a brief exchange between Lear and the newly encountered Poor Tom the deluded Lear, imagining Poor Tom as an Athenian philosopher whose self-proclaimed study resides with “[h]ow to prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin” (3.4.157), poses the question: “What is the cause of Thunder?” (3.4.153). In the exchange, which McGinn calls “the most overtly philosophical passage in King Lear” Poor Tom offers no answer because “Philosophy had nothing useful to say” (133). Accordingly, “thunder,” being beyond all but aural sense perception must remain philosophically inexplicable.

5.4 Lear and Religious Change: “Men are as the Time is” (5.3.31).

Lear’s perception of increasing incongruity of the world in what he perceives as defiance by his family, his court, the apparent incongruity becomes amplified by even the hostility of nature. Lear resents such unwarranted estrangement. But through the accumulation of events he ultimately learns as Kent admonishes, “to see better, Lear!” Once convicted of his direct culpability for the onerous state of affairs, he can now “preach” to the helpless Gloucester what he has learned. This new spiritual insight allows him to accept judgment, and to offer, as best he can, his signs of reconciliation and atonement.

Upon the French powers landing at Dover, Cordelia dispatches an urgent search for her disoriented father who struggles to meet her, whose body she describes as besieged by invasive growth of life-depleting weeds—like the wicked “tares” of the Biblical parable (Matt. 13:24-30):

Crown’d with fumiter and furrow-weeds,
With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckooflow’rs,

Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow

In our sustaining corn. (4.4.3-6)

A relieved and tearful Cordelia receives the humbled Lear, whose accumulated contrition stands anchored in the now deeply regretted “division of the kingdom” scene where Lear rashly disowned his favorite daughter:

Lear: Be your tears wet? Yes faith. I pray weep not

If you have poison for me I will drink it.

I know you do not love me, for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not.

Cordelia: No cause, no cause.

... .

Lear: You must bear with me

Pray you now, forget and forgive.

I am old and foolish. (4.7.73-78)

For all the parody, ridicule, and mockery to which I refer above, Shakespeare encapsulates the play’s most absurdly withering portrait of moral depravity in Edmund’s few lines in Act 5, which stands as a kind of summa of the godlessness that infests the Lear World, in its analogic identity with Jacobean England. Throughout, the play displays a Hobbsian social order perpetually at war with itself, on which Albany elaborates in the above quoted comparison
to “monsters of the deep” perpetually preying upon, as in eating and engrossing, their fellows. Instead of a beacon of peace and human fellowship, religion in the Lear World amplifies the running paradox that haunts Shakespeare’s world marked by the chasm that separates ideals proclaimed by Gospel Christianity and the realities of professing Christians’ actual practices (Gregory 20-21). Here, Shakespeare’s a fictional pagan Lear World, mirrors the godless values of Jacobean England.

Following the battle between the French and British armies, Edmund orders the defeated Lear and Cordelia held “[u]ntil their greater pleasures first be known / That are to censure them” (5.3.2-3), that is, until the wishes of those in command, namely the Duke of Albany, be made known. Cheerily resigned to their incarcerated fate, Lear muses that “[w]e two alone will sing like birds in’ the cage” (5.3.9). Upon their departure, Edmund hands his Captain a prepared order, “take thou this note,” which, as soon revealed, contains instructions to effect the immediate death of Cordelia by hanging in her cell.345 Edmund cynically instructs the Captain to

343 Thomas Hobbes borrowed the Latin phrase bellum omnium contra omnes (“war of all against all”) in his Leviathan (1651) to describe the human compulsion to exist in a state of perpetual societal conflict.

344 See also, Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear, whereby John F. Danby argues the play elaborates opposing views of mankind, the one reflected by Richard Hooker (Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, 1584); the other by Thomas Hobbes (Leviathan, 1643). While reflective of opposing philosophical views of man and how these manifest in Renaissance society, these views also stand reflective of the profound change, or paradigm shift, in the medieval understanding of the divine and of the ordained relationships among man, society and God.

345 Edmund reveals with his dying breath the origin and literal content of the paper the Captain bears:

He hath commission from my wife and me

To hand Cordelia in the prison and

To lay the blame upon her own despair,
“write [on the paper the word] ‘happy’ when th’ hast done” (5.3.27, 36). Edmund waxes homiletic, as he declares to his Captain by way of aphorism the moral standard that both informs his instruction and touches every aspect of the Lear World: “Know thou this: that men / Are as the time is” (5.3.31-32). The Captain’s exit line affirms his moral satisfaction at the task with the macabre reflection: “I cannot draw a cart, nor eat dried oats; / If it be a man’s work, I’ll do’t” (5.3.39-40), which callous expression hearkens to the pervasive beast imagery discussed above.

The Duke of Albany promptly arrives with Lear’s two daughters. However, Edmund in pernicious defeat of Albany’s intended mercy, promulgates the falsehood of the prisoners’ supposed retention for a formal hearing the following day. All the while Edmund’s Captain proceeds to effect the bloody offstage crime. A distant trumpet blast prescribed by the disguised Edgar constitutes a summons that signals his brother Edmund to a challenge combat with judgment that initiates the play’s final resolution. Edgar defeats Edmund, whose dying attempt to salve his evil conscience by countermanding his order of execution comes too late to prevent the death of Cordelia. Lear’s grief stricken death follows.

Goneril and Regan enact the certainty of Albany’s earlier dire prediction of how untamed “vile offences” presage that by which “[h]umanity must perforce prey in itself, / Like monsters of the deep” (4.2.49-50). Their deaths culminate in the violence with which they lived. Incident to her plot to kill her husband Albany and marry Edmund, Goneril secretly poisons her rival, Regan, then, in the fury of both her adulterous exposure and the defeat and death of her illicit lover Edmund, Goneril stabs herself to death. The grotesque torrent of immolation prompts the mortally wounded Edmund’s wry comment: “I was contracted to them both. All three / Now marry in an instant” (3.232-33).

That she fordid herself. (5.3.257-60)
The classic satirical plot lacks a conquering hero that vanquishes the evildoers and restores righteousness. Instead, the ultimate targets of the satirical attack—the purveyors of corruption, fraud, and moral turpitude—prosper until, in the end, evil falls of its own weight (John Snyder 103). The principal devouring appetites in the persons of Edmund, Goneril, Regan and Cornwall, and Goneril enjoy untrammeled success throughout the play. As noted in discussion of the play’s second scene Edmund articulates the philosophical underpinnings of the Lear World within which nature exists to serve the individual’s material desires. He subordinates the sacramental nature of unified community, thus diminishing the inherent relationship among family, friendship, and kingdom. Such a world, steadfastly devoid of rational order and meaning, precludes that over which a beneficent deity might preside. That ethos prevails virtually through to the end, where the heralded, but ironically untimely “champion,” Edgar, arrives too late to save Lear’s virtuous daughter, Cordelia, from the gratuitous hanging, or to forestall the resultant death of Lear himself. In the end, the survivors, Edgar, Albany, and Kent, self-identified as “we who are young,” redeem royal power from the wicked but nonetheless inherit a broken world. They acknowledge the consummation of their respective spiritual journeys and reflect upon their own prospective journeys with an attitude of humility and atonement that forbids either celebration or despair.

5.5 CONCLUSION.

With the advent of the Stuart monarchy and the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, Shakespeare’s work reflects crushed hope for spiritual revival. King Lear portrays an England from the perspective of the Reformation’s critics—a country that has uprooted its spiritual source. The play reveals an England that shamefully mistreats its most loyal subjects and betrays itself into the hands of a group of amoral opportunists.
Near the end of the play, Lear’s loyal daughter, Cordelia (a nurturing symbol of the Old Faith), dispatches an urgent search for her father, the disoriented Lear (a symbol of the spiritually diminished England). She describes his body besieged by invasive growth of life-depleting weeds—like the wicked ‘tares’ of the Biblical parable (Mt. 13:24-30):

\[
\text{Alack, } \text{'tis he! Why, he was met even now}
\]

\[
\text{As mad as the vex'd sea; singing aloud,}
\]

\[
\text{Crown'd with fumiter and furrow-weeds,}
\]

\[
\text{With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flow'rs,}
\]

\[
\text{Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow}
\]

\[
\text{In our sustaining corn.}
\]
The subject matter of the *Tragedy of Macbeth*, even more directly than *Lear*, also appears calculated to curry favor with the King’s Men’s royal patron, James I. Instead of *Lear*’s apophatic message of support for unification of Britain through an adverse portrait of division, *Macbeth*, produced some eight to ten months later, not only features the prophetic presence of James’s ancestor Banquo, with emphasis on that character’s direct lineage to the present reigning King of England, but also appeals to James’s interest in witchcraft and the occult as reflected by his 1597 treatise, *Daemonologie*. In addition, as James processed to St. John’s College, Cambridge in the summer of 1605, he was reportedly greeted by a street masque performance that featured three sibyls. The ivy clad players not only dramatized the legendary encounter with Banquo which foresaw the Stuart dynasty in his offspring, but also saluted the present King with prophesies of a united Britain (Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 332-33). Stephen Greenblatt speculates that this event may have inspired Shakespeare’s elaboration of the “Wyrd Sisters” as a plot through-line. The Wyrd Sisters’ prophecies Macbeth demands at the beginning of Act Four culminate with chronological display of future kingships, which progression concludes with a symbolic vision of James himself.

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346 I borrow G. Wilson Knight’s incisive observation from his chapter entitled “*Macbeth* and the Metaphysics of Evil”: “Fear is the primary emotion of the Macbeth universe: fear is at the root of Macbeth’s crime” (*The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy*, 150). The latter phrase grasps at once the paradox of Macbeth’s evil displayed in the play—where craven origins foster bloody deeds.

347 I choose the term “wyrd” as a more authentic descriptive term assigned to the role in the play. Spelled “weyward” in the First Folio, the term derives from the Anglo-Saxon “wyrd” meaning “fate” or “destiny.” J.R. Clark Hall. *A Concise Anglo Saxon Dictionary* 1960. p. 427.
For the source story, as with Lear, Shakespeare relied primarily on Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). Aside from the elaborated role of the “Wyrd Sisters” Shakespeare’s most striking departure from Holinshed offers a valorized version of James’s ancestor Banquo. The Banquo of the play, per Emma Smith, appears a “whitewashed recuperation of Banquo (from whom King James traced his own family tree)” (250). In the Holinshed account from which Shakespeare drew the pertinent 12th century history of Scottish Kings, Banquo actually conspires with Macbeth in the murder of King Duncan.348

Then too, consistent with the *Chronicles* account, the play’s repeated suggestion of supernatural agency may well be a false flag—a form of mockery by which the playwright essentially debunks the notion of independent supernatural agents loose in the world. Rather, in the play Macbeth himself plays the agent of evil, aided by the indomitable catalyst of temptation. Conspicuously bereft of the divine, the world of the play provides a fertile autonomous medium for the breeding of man’s unmitigated sinful nature, one which profiles the fallen human condition unmediated by comprehension of the divine. Shakespeare continues his portrayal of progressive suppression of England’s Old Faith—first with *Hamlet*, followed by *King Lear*. *Macbeth* provides a further iteration of the long shadow of desacralization cast upon a thriving Christian culture by Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries and expropriation of Church lands, the effects of which I outline in Chapter Two: “Reality and Religion Reconfigured.” 349

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During the six decades since commencement of the destruction, expropriation, and adaptation of the sacred material culture, the much slower but equally inexorable erosion of pre-Reformation magisterial understanding of the nature of God—the immanent sacramental habitation of the divine in and through the natural world, and God’s providential place in the workings of human community—continued inevitably apace. Following the brief return to Roman Catholicism under Mary Tudor (1553-1559), the English Reformers resumed determined expungement of rituals, customs, practices, icons, artifacts, not to mention devotional and testamentary texts that served both to reinforce the cultural memory of the outlawed Old Faith, and the destinal perfection of one’s eternal soul.

By the advent of the Stuarts, beginning with James I in 1603, the altered understanding of “religion” and the legacy of religious change from traditional Roman faith practice to an established reformed English Protestant church served primarily as indicia of sectarian politics. Political divisions and conflicts had become functionally defined, if not consumed, by the exercise of power and influence devoted to secular conflict both within and without the kingdom. By the time of James’s accession to the throne, the monarchy now fully equated loyalty to the established church with loyalty to the crown. Open rejection of either mandatory parish church attendance or the “Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith” amounted to treason against the state.

350 Many of the forbidden texts bore directly on salvific matters which, in the absence of sacerdotal support, relied on alternative means of compliance with Roman piety related to welfare of one’s eternal soul. John Shakespeare’s “Spiritual Testament” believed authored by Charles Borromeo, Cardinal Archbishop of Milan in 1580 for translation distribution to England’s Catholic faithful. Workmen discovered a signed handwritten copy in the attic of Shakespeare’s Stratford birth home in 1757. Joseph Pearce’s The Quest for Shakespeare (“His Father’s Will”) details how this and the few similar surviving examples represent the influx of thousands of similar instruments brought to England by Jesuit missionary priests in the 1580. pp. 30-38.
However, as discussed in detail in the previous chapters, a much more significant alteration in the common understanding of metaphysical reality lay at the root of religious change underway in the life of Shakespeare’s England, one which rendered the prospect of recovery and restoration of traditional culture increasingly further out of reach. Determined “this worldliness” of a Renaissance England in the dawning of a new century, along with the advent of a new monarch, freely embraced the Protagorean apothegm which holds that “man is the measure of all things” from which Pico della Mirandola derived the giddy aspiration: “We can become what we will.”351 Yet, at its root the contention falters for want of a lost integral element in the common understanding of reality which, over time, had now become unintelligible—incapable of comprehension. The discarded concept of “universals,” to which I previously refer, eliminated the existence of a source of truth higher than and independent of man.352 With notions of objective reality shed, such universals as love, truth, beauty, the cardinal and theological virtues, had become malleable concepts in service to worldly endeavors.353 The medieval mind regarded human life sub specie aeternitatis—under the aspect of the eternal—by which one lives life on earth in contemplation of the next. By contrast, Renaissance thought

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351 See Section 2 (“Reality and Religion”), n.56 and Section 3 (“Hamlet at the Crossroads”), n. 36. In short, in contradistinction with medieval thought, the Renaissance foregrounds the human element in this life, the autonomy of the individual, unconstrained by class/occupation/ birth, or the Church; therein lies the emphasis on the earthly pleasures, such as education. I.e., ‘Man is free to make of himself what he will.’ See also at Italian Renaissance Pico della Mirandola (1463-94); Rod Dreher on the Renaissance shift from “glory of God to glory of man” (30).

352 Richard M. Weaver, Ideas have Consequences, p. 3.

foregrounds man’s autonomous claim to enjoy the material pleasures, ambitions, and achievements of this life.

As the English Reformation swiftly desacralized the material culture and its ancillary elements—the physical structures and supporting practices that reinforced the long-standing traditional elements of the Roman Catholic faith in England—the effort at doctrinal re-education proceeded more grudgingly, if at all. However, as Eire explains in brief, the very concept of religion itself became something altogether different—“something strictly for the living, something much less hieratic and otherworldly and therefore more pragmatically focused on this world” (754). Hence, with the character of Macbeth, whose valor and loyalty the king “hath honored of late,” Shakespeare intractably carries to a logical extreme of moral corruption the ethos of the contemporary English Renaissance “new man” previously embodied in Hamlet’s Claudius and Lear’s Edmund.\(^\text{354}\)

The wrong at the heart of Hamlet (1600) at first indicates to the prince that he “was born to set it right” (1.5.198), until he learns, the hard way, that “there’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.10). In Lear (1605), chaos results from the king’s abdication of his place in the divine order, but forms of spiritual restoration and redemption emerge from his humbling ordeal that yields salving repentance. However, by Macbeth (1606) Shakespeare conspicuously offers to his audience a grim warning in the tragic fate of its “hero”—those determined to renounce the real

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squander their humanity along with their hope of redemption. Dissociation from the divine easily invites infestation of evil within the host, whereby, as happens with Macbeth, the demonic ultimately supplants the human.

5.6.1 The Darkening Mirror

After the fashion of Hamlet and Lear, Shakespeare holds up a progressively darker mirror to his age—one that again reflects a world that has abandoned belief in objective realism in favor of the nominalist view that nature exists for man’s use and enjoyment separate from any troublesome relationship to the divine. As the play cautions, human existence can easily devolve, as Macbeth reflects on his predicament, into a “way of life [that] / Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf” (5.2.22-23). With Macbeth Shakespeare dramatizes disconnection from the real at an even further remove from the self-deception of Lear.

In Hamlet, the nominalist ethic obscures Claudius’s connection to divine discipline to do that which he must to expiate his crime, but his desperate effort to preserve crown, ambition, and queen stymies the repentance for which he yearns (Ham. 3.3.36-71). Meanwhile, through a form of spiritual conversion, his willful nephew, Hamlet, becomes acquainted with a will greater than his own. In the end, Hamlet’s virtual twin, Fortinbras, comes to steward the common weal. At the core of Lear’s problems lie the faltering sense of human identity and his role within the created order. He has forgotten who he is, if he ever knew—(Regan: “Yet he hath but ever but slenderly known himself” [1.1.296])—with resulting waste to kingdom, friends, and family. Awash with suffering and ordeal, the play resolves tragically, but with restoration of Lear’s long-sought human identity. At the same time, survivors among the ruins ask wearily: “Is this the promis’d end?” (5.3.268). Macbeth also centers on disregard of divine reality and steadfast dedication to self-determined spiritual blindness at the human core. The story of Macbeth’s
misdirected belief that he can flourish unmoored from the Creator chronicles the desiccation of his soul to the point where no redemption, express or implied, will lie.

Shakespeare designs Macbeth’s thought and consequent actions as an extreme but relatable study of a world that has discarded not only Gospel teachings, but also the faith instruments by which to comprehend intrinsic intelligibility, being, and purpose beyond the experience of the senses. At the same time, popular interest in witchcraft and the occult—as witness the interest of King James himself—inevitably questioned what mechanisms remained that could reliably counter the mischief and evils of the spirit world, given the theological disinterest of the Established Church.

In contrast to Lear’s epic sweep that works ultimately against the grain of dark tragedy, Macbeth chronicles the narrow road to damnation. The play commences with earthly rebellion, in which its soon-to-be demonic protagonist prevails. Immediately, an insidious spiritual battle erupts in the mind of Macbeth and his wife that finally disjoins the realm and renders the usurping King little more than a soulless, sleepless, remorseless casualty of spiritual defeat. The battle heroics that commence Macbeth only deepen the irony with which Macbeth seizes the Wyrd Sisters’ prophetic blandishments. In much the same way do the promises of religious reform turn out as Banquo warned, “truths that . . . betray’s” (1.3.124-25). Thus Macbeth learns that the Sisters’ words actually import the opposite of what Macbeth hears them to purport.355

How does this happen? What disabling factor so easily conceals reality so as to prompt misdirection and incur delusion? Robert Weaver in his seminal study, Ideas have Consequences,

355 William Empson’s influential Seven Types of Ambiguity which similarly illustrates that “things are often not what they seem, that words connote at least as much as they denote.” (quoted in Cuddon Dictionary of Literary & Literary Theory (Penguin 1998), p.30.
maintains that the “defeat of logical realism in the great medieval debate was the crucial event in the history of Western culture” (3). Weaver analogizes Macbeth’s encounter with the prophesying “Wyrd Sisters” on the heath to the profound paradigm shift in the common conception of God, which he traces to the decision grounded in the late fourteenth century to abandon “belief in the existence of transcendentals.” Macbeth’s bargain provides a fatal quid pro quo, an exchange: if one unburdened himself of the notion of transcendental, or “universal” objective reality, one may realize oneself more fully. After all, if “man is the measure of all things” and the experience of the senses, not the intellect, is king, then that which transcends human experience can have no bearing on human endeavor:

The witches spoke with the habitual equivocation of oracles when they told man that by this easy choice he might realize himself more fully, for they were actually initiating a course which cuts one off from reality. (Weaver, Ideas 4)

In the dangerous world of early 17th century London, with its confusing cacophony of Protestant claimants vying for the loyalty to traditional forms of piety and practice, while the traditional means of ecclesiastical certainty and protection remained outlawed, the unseen world of dangerous enchantment opened out.

5.6.2 Fear.

From the moment Macbeth entertains the “suggestion / That doth unfix [his] hair / And make [his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs / Against the use of nature” (1.3.135-38), fear forms a pervasive motif. The emotion stands so pervasive in the play that G. Wilson Knight identifies fear as not only “the primary emotion of the Macbeth universe [but] fear [lies] at the root of Macbeth’s crime” (150). From the characters’ fear, and description and acknowledgement thereof, the cascade of malignant actions and consequences emerge. Fear forms the lubricant on
the slippery slope that hastens deployment of deception, disguise and self-delusion which undergird the *hubris* of entitlement to the fruit thereof.

The play’s poetics convey the emphatic critique of England’s religious change by Shakespeare’s application the *apophasic* as a compelling means by which to analogize Reformation England’s decline into religious uncertainty. As in *Lear*, Shakespeare employs the device to emphasize an absence of Christian values, virtues, ethics, and morals as between the Macbeths whose conduct remains principally driven by both their fears and their efforts to extinguish fears. A principal theme in scripture, notably the Psalms, lies with numerous declarations of God’s protection from fear, as in a typical verse: “The Lord is with me; therefore I will not fear what man can do to me” (Ps. 118:6). The Gospel accounts also stand rich with admonitions against fear, e.g., “Let not your heart be troubled, nor fear (John 14:27).

Yet, in the course of the play the characters utter the word “fear” no less than fifteen separate occasions with the unnoted emotion itself expressed at least an equal amount, e.g., Lady Macbeth: “My hands are of your color, but I shame / To wear a heart so white” (2.2.68-69); Macbeth: “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife” (2.2.68-69). Religious uncertainty cannot but foster at least a modicum of unrelieved fear which, like the breaches of the social fabric in *Lear* World tends to amplify, replicate, and infect all around.

**Irony, Paradox, Oxymoron, Ambiguity, Paralipsis.** To indicate the common culture’s intrinsic unintelligibility, Shakespeare’s language often contains hidden meanings which purposely elude common understanding. These stand couched in abundant irony—discrepancy between expected and actual state of affairs; paradox—contradictory circumstances that ultimately reconcile; oxymoron—succinct contradictory statement that conceals a truth;

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356 *See also*, e.g., Psalms 27:1,3; 56:4, 11; 112:7-8.
ambiguity—statement or action that contains more than one meaning; and, paralipsis—omitted matter that reveals a truth.

The play begins ominously with a brief, twelve-line dialogue among the Wyrd Sisters that foretells their imminent encounter with Macbeth “upon the heath” and concludes with the oxymoron: “Fair is foul and foul is fair” (1.1.6, 11). The scene abruptly shifts to the victorious King Duncan’s reception of his bleeding Captain’s stirring battle-field paean to the rebellion-quelling bravery of Macbeth, the loyal Thane of Glamis. Ironically, from this pinnacle of reported valor, the same Macbeth appears with his fellow thane, Banquo, in the scene immediately following and at once begins his tragic descent toward a nadir of spiritual defeat. Thus, in addition to the literary device of “paradox”—an apparent contradiction which upon close inspection contains a truth that reconciles conflicting opposites—these brief opening scenes also set the stage for the fundamental structural device of “irony” which, among its many forms in the play, reveals that the Sisters’ words import the opposite of what Macbeth hears them to purport. Irony and paradox, which the playwright often uses in tandem, supplemented by oxymoron, ambiguity, and elliptical speech, will come to dominate the means by which Shakespeare delivers his dire warning that a culture detached from the received fundamentals of Christian faith inevitably fosters a poverty of morals in its people and a self-destructive loss of humanity.

357 Gary Wills in his Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare’s Macbeth, discusses at length the context of contemporary expressions, frequently from the pulpit and in popular theatre and literature, regarding providential deliverance from the Gunpowder Plot of November 5, 1605 of which “the idea of the fifth as a foul day that God turned back to fair was a common one” (254).
5.6.3 “Nothing is but what is not” (1.3.143).

Macbeth’s fateful encounter with the Wyrd Sisters at the commencement of his narrative follows Shakespeare’s typical pattern of initial thematic display of that which informs the entire play. In this case, the scene’s emphasis lies not with the facts and circumstances that typically prepare the audience for the ensuing action, but rather with the mind and imagination of Macbeth. Indeed, this relatively brief scene “upon the heath,” specifically in an aside that follows the news confirming the Wyrd Sisters’ seeming prognostication of his newly acquired title as “Thane of Cawdor” (1.3.128-43), not only reveals Macbeth’s sudden pernicious regicidal fantasy, but it also witnesses to the onset of his extraordinary on-stage transformation from a celebrated loyal battle hero to a murdering usurper.

G. Wilson Knight identifies Macbeth’s aforementioned aside as a “microcosm of the Macbeth vision: it contains the germ of the whole” ([*Wheel of Fire* 153]). For Knight, the crucial nature of the speech resides with its “central human theme—the temptation and crime of Macbeth” (152). However, Knight’s generalized observations overlook innovative elements in this scene that establish 1) Shakespeare’s dramatic methodology by which the figure of Macbeth, detached from the received Christian faith, will undergo a series of *metamorphoses* that mimic an inevitable process of dehumanization; and 2) the innovative fear-driven distortions of language and its comprehension (through paradox, ambiguity, oxymoron, elliptical speech) that shape thought in Macbeth’s self-made dystopian world where “nothing is but what is not.”

a. “fair is foul and foul is fair” (1.1.11)

(i) The Wyrd Sisters utter this oxymoron as the play opens which makes perfect
sense in a world bereft of realist discernment where nominalist extremes must apply under circumstances perceived by the senses, not the intellect. Indeed the distinction between what is “fair” and that which is “foul” easily obscure as the objects of perception, both material and spiritual, must “[h]over through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.12). It also forms one of the plays’ recurrent leitmotifs: thematic repetitions that reflect the common proclivity to perceive distorted reality. Macbeth repeats the Sisters’ words upon his entrance, with syntax reversed: (to Banquo): “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38).

(ii) As the Sisters first foretold, they greet Macbeth and Banquo with seeming intimations of things to come. No sooner do they greet Macbeth, already the Thane of Glamis, as “Thane of Cawdor,” and “king that shalt be hereafter” (1.3.48-49), than news arrives, already known to the audience, of King Duncan’s award of Cawdor’s title to Macbeth, which Banquo with unknowing credulity exclaims: “What, can the devil speak true?” (1.3.107). To spur his own prognostication, Banquo implies that the Sisters “can look into the seeds of time” (1.3.58), to which they obscurely render Banquo’s destiny relative to Macbeth with elliptical oxymorons: “Lesser . . . and greater”; “Not so happy, yet much happier”; “Thou shall get kings, though thou be none” (1.3.65-67).

(iii) This moment unseats Macbeth’s ability to comprehend the fundamental framework that contains sacramental reality, that is, signs that point to the prescriptions of divine order. Instead, his mind becomes prey to chimerical nominal illusion made “real” simply by naming the object of human desire—“Macbeth that shall be king hereafter” (1.3.50)—whereupon “fear” enters in. The sudden perversity can hardly be overstated as the now compliant subject of “supernatural soliciting” accedes to his own fearful logic of prophetic fulfillment. The imagined murder of King Duncan, while unnerving, appears an unshakeable
image in Macbeth’s unfettered mind. The table is set, Macbeth accepts the bargain in principal, now negotiation can begin.

b. “Cannot be ill; cannot be good.”

The play perversely shifts from anxiety over loss of certainty, to uncertainty as the sign of alternative theories of reality. Accordingly, Macbeth shapes the perfunctory “ill or good” paradox, into prophecy of present entitlement, with the question tentatively posed of whether this may or may not require his participation for its fulfillment. “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (1.3.144-45); but, on the other hand, why this “earnest of success?” (1.3.133), and what do these “horrible imaginings” portend? (1.3.139). In the end, negotiations in Macbeth’s mind as to meaning conclude as “function is smothered in surmise” (1.3.141). That is, these “fantastical,” albeit “horrible imaginings,” snuff out the predication of functional reality.

c. Man’s measure within the Moral Frame.

Macbeth’s response stands deeply ironic on its face. The Sisters do not “prophesy” anything. Moreover, they neither compel nor suggest the assassination of King Duncan. The players, the audience, all except Macbeth and Banquo, heard King Duncan in the previous scene confer the title, “Thane of Cawdor,” on Macbeth in absentia. Simple coincidence of the later arrival of the official news made the Sisters’ earlier announcement seem prescient. They exploit that existing fact by the stated anticipation of an aleatory, but not illogical, fact: Macbeth will be king “hereafter.”

Nevertheless, the question persists as to whether the audience should apprehend a larger picture here with specific reference to issues of causality and culpability related to the Sisters’ role in the play’s subsequent crimes. Susan Snyder concludes that Macbeth’s own actions,
which he freely recognizes as wrong, stands as the sole source (Wayward Journey 178). 

However, she admits that A.C. Bradley complicates this perspective with his view that notes Macbeth’s curious lack of incentive, or expectation of glory, to be derived from killing Duncan (Shakespearean Tragedy 358). Nevertheless, the question remains of the Sisters’ precise role in the meaning of the play. Snyder offers that the Sisters reflect a “different perspective” that suggests “radical instability” in the social environment (Wayward Journey 171). That possibility suggests Shakespeare’s comment on the contemporary social conditions, where the Sisters with their slippery language and appeal to selfish motives hint at a weakness of moral “frame” that permit, and even encourage, men to act upon morally deviant aspirations. Or, simply that the prevailing social ethic provides license to that which one can get away with.

Another theory sees Macbeth as an infection in the moral universe within which the Sisters serve a purpose: “They show us an organism purging itself of infected matter and regaining healthy equilibrium” (174). From that perspective, Macbeth “encloses [his] individual chaos within a larger moral order” which, as the action demonstrates, isolates Macbeth and expunges the “infection” (171). Another theory analogizes the process by which the sin of Adam and Eve leads to redemption to the final outcome of the play where “Malcolm institutes good rule, Banquo’s line will triumph” (174-75).

On the other hand a quite different interpretation derives from the three “Hails!” incident to the acknowledgement of Malcolm’s accession to the kingship, that echo the Sisters’ “Hails!” as they greet Macbeth and Banquo at the beginning of the play. 

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358 Lady M.’s eloquent and bruising exhortation and abetment play a vital dramatic role, but not in the instigation of the act nor for direct culpability in the act.

359 First Witch: All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
unless somehow broken, the cycle of tyranny likely continues *ad infinitum*. I argue that in Shakespeare’s darkening vision to which I allude above, the play’s message is anything but salvific. A spiritually bankrupt moral order has produced Macbeth within its fertile ground for “moral chaos.” One remembers the treason of the original “Thane of Cawdor.” As I discuss below the key to Shakespeare’s positive message to his time lies in the recovery of a lost sacramental vision where man practices humility in the face of his Creator. In other words, to the favored Renaissance apothegm, “Man is the measure of all things [in Creation],” the play’s message might rejoin, “All things in Creation measure man.”

d. *Usurpation—of Kingdom order; of Cosmic order*

Macbeth’s bold usurpation of the Scottish throne mimics the even bolder above stated Renaissance claim of man’s centrality in the cosmos, as not only the pinnacle of Creation but also its master. Man’s employment of nature’s elements in service to man’s desires purport to effect God’s purposes. By the take-over of their earthly domain, Macbeth and his wife mimic a similar virtual take-over of the Cosmic Domain. Despite momentary hesitations, Macbeth, in hegemonic commanding intimacy marshals a unified cosmos to his service with a potent litany of personifications and strategic manipulation of the elements of witness, beginning with “stars”

Second Witch: All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter! (1.3.8-10)

. . .

Macduff: Hail, King! For so thou art . . .

. . . .

Hail, King of Scotland!

All: Hail, King of Scotland! (55.8.54, 59-60)
and proceeding to the purposeful disconnection among the eye, the hand, and the mind as the regicide resolves to his purpose:

Stars hide thy fires;

Let not light see my black and deep desires.

The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.50-53)

Lady Macbeth in similar personified terms declares the audacious discretion to deny access to divine witness while also marshaling the elements, beginning with “night,” with which to coordinate the contemplated murder:

Come thick night,

And *pall* thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark

To cry “Hold, hold!” (1.5.50-54)

In order for this “prophecy” to be fulfilled, both invoke the powers of darkness, that their secret crime remain somehow concealed from Heaven. These utterances contain less of incantatory significance than a declaration of an utter spiritual void, the profound erasure of God created humanity. Compelling raw poetics exalt the ancient Luciferian pride that supplants the Creator, so as to usurp of God’s sovereignty over life and death.

5.6.4 “A deed of dreadful note” (3.2.47).

Inevitably these “partners in greatness” discover that man is not the measure of all things. Rather, similar to Claudius’s guilt-ridden misery in *Hamlet* that follows his assassination of Old King Hamlet, divine retribution sets in upon the Macbeths. After the confusion and chaos of the
night of the murder, they discover the lingering curse of sleeplessness augured by the unseen voice that warned: “Macbeth hath murdered sleep . . .Macbeth shall sleep no more” 2.2.39-47).

a. “Nought’s had, all’s spent”

The heady orchestration of cosmic elements in pursuit of the anticipated triumph devolve instead into bitter irony. Act Three, Scene Two begins with the once strident Lady Macbeth in solitary reflection:

Nought’s had, all’s spent,

Where our desire is got without content:

‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy

Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (3.2.6-9)

Macbeth arrives. Unknown to Lady Macbeth, he has dispatched assassins in the attempt to bolster his kingship. Mindful of the Sisters’ prophecy that Banquo will get kings, “though he be none,” he orders the murder of Banquo and his son Fleance before the evening’s state banquet. He bursts out in frustration:

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,

Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep

In the affliction of these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,

Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie

In restless ecstasy. (3.2.18-24)

b. “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck”

Macbeth concludes the scene with a chilling invocation that again appears to marshal elements to his will similar to those previously cited of he and his wife, prior to Duncan’s
assassination: “Stars hide thy fires” (1.4.50); “Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts” (1.5.40-41); “Come thick night” (1.5.50). However, in this case, Macbeth’s more personal and deadly sacramental invocation stands unabashed in its renunciation of the sacrament of baptism—a ritual which, in its traditional formulation, strives to exorcise the devil out of the infant. In the baptismal formula one renounces the devil and all his works. Here, Macbeth renounces that renunciation: he asks the powers of darkness for nothing less than to relieve his “torture of the mind” by reversing the sacrament of baptism:

Come seeling night
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale. Light thickens,
And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
While night’s black agents to their preys do rouse. (3.2.49-56)

Macbeth suffers under the continuing hold by which the sacrament keeps him “pale” (enclosed, surrounded, encompassed or fenced in) by virtue of the power of the commitment and the pain caused when his bloody deeds pull him from that commitment. Thus he renounces the Baptismal renunciation.

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360 Gary Wills’s *Witches & Jesuits* provides a convincing portrait of the new covenant in baptism that replaced the old covenant in circumcision (59-61). Its renunciation is an essential element of the devil’s compact, one to which Iago refers when he convinces Cassio of Desdemona’s power over Othello to the extent that he “renounce his baptism” (2.3.337).

c. “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.

The final line in the scene illustrates the characters’ extreme divergent trajectories since first beginning their “enterprise” by their use of the word “ill,” meaning “evil”—the glue that holds their “enterprise” together. In Act One Lady Macbeth worried that her husband was “not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it” (1.5.19-20). In the final lines of this scene, after having assured his wife that although “Banquo and his Fleance lives . . . there shall be done / A deed of dreadful note” (3.2.40; 46-47). As a measure of how far he has come since Act One, he concludes with the paradox:

Thou marvel’st at my words, but hold thee still.

Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill. (3.2.57-58)

5.7 “. . . th’ equivocation of the fiend . . .” (5.5.43)

(“A deed without a name”4.1.49)

The welter of events that launch Macbeth’s violent usurpation of the Scottish crown, and that sustain his fraught exercise of tyranny thereunder, propagate from a vague claim by three “Sisters” who stravage the countryside and claim that “Macbeth shallt be king hereafter” (1.3.50). Their fortuitously acquired advance knowledge of Macbeth’s appointment as Thane of Cawdor provides an unwarranted appearance of seeming prescience. Almost immediately Macbeth magnifies the suggestion of kingship into a destinal certainty—for the immediate assumption thereof.

I return to the puzzlement over Macbeth’s motivation. For that matter, what is the Sisters’ purpose in confronting Macbeth? What is Macbeth’s purpose in his violent grasp at the throne, especially when he voices no “positive longings” for doing so (Snyder 178). These questions
underscore Bradley’s comment on the assassination: “The deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory” (358).

Shakespeare provides a profile of the weakened condition of post-Reformation man, one unmediated by the intervention or support of a traditional unified Christian faith. The secularizing world of Jacobean London, one that embraces this world to the exclusion of the “hereafter,” that denies metaphysical reality in favor of strictly empirical reality must inevitably live subject to a religiously fissiparous world prone to distortion and delusion. Thus, the source of alienation from the real lies embedded in a language rife with elliptical speech. This renders language, the means of communicating from a common understanding of metaphysical reality, slippery and confused.

I credit Professor Susan Snyder for reminding me that the dilemma of Macbeth’s delusion and alienation and inability to recognize the real beneath the surface of proffered language that “lies like truth” originates in the Garden of Eden. Notwithstanding clear instructions to the contrary, Adam and Eve believe they can better themselves if they believe the Serpent: “You will not die!” (. . . at least not right away, but eventually); “Your eyes will be opened!” (. . . but to the body’s shame and weakness); and, “You will be like God, knowing good and evil!” (. . . but as subject, not master) (174).

The analogous circumstance and situation finds a fatal match in Act Four (4.1.48 ff.) after Macbeth demands to be told that which will secure his throne. He receives the Sisters’ prophesies and finds himself subject to the same willful misapprehension of reality. The Sisters counsel “Beware Macduff” (Mcduff’s absence thwarts his murderous solution which falls on his innocent family); “You will remain king until Birnam Wood come to Dunsinane” (“wood” may refer to forest/grove, and the like or to the actual material, i.e., wood, which the English army
utilized to conceal their numbers as they attack Dunsinane Castle); “None of woman born shall harm Macbeth.” (As Snyder observes, a baby isn’t “born” if taken from womb by cesarian section) (174-75).

One by one each purport reveals a concealed import until finally confronted by the nemesis he must beware but yet remains protected. Although Macbeth empirically sees the folly, he steadfastly rejects to the last responsibility for denial of the real:

MACBETH. Thou losest labour.

As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.
Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;
I bear a charmed life, which must not yield
To one of woman born.

MACDUFF. Despair thy charm:

And let the angel that thou still has serv’d
Tell thee Mcduff was from his mother’s womb
Untimely ripp’d.

MACBETH. Accursed be the tongue that tells me so,

For it hath cow’d my better part of man;
And be these juggling fiends no more believ’d
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope! (5.8.8-22)
5.8 CONCLUSION

The play presses an apprehension of physical reality subject to distortion and delusion, precisely as the illusory beacon dagger encourages Macbeth to fulfill his desires by the exercise of his autonomous will. Notwithstanding that Macbeth’s intellect surmises it is a “false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain” (2.1.39-40), his senses nonetheless derive meaning from the name assigned to the constituent elements of his nominalist concept of reality. Thus does the playwright affirm the play’s central trope—“Nothing is but what is not”—upon which Macbeth feeds with ‘delusional certitude’ until the very end of the play.

With the abnegation of logical realism, first seeded in the scholastic debates of the fourteenth century, the material world gradually loses intrinsic intelligibility, being, and purpose beyond the experience of the senses. As the play masterfully demonstrates, extrinsicism inevitably subjects the material world to the deception of language where “function is smothered in surmise.” Where, paradoxically, the mind’s “imaginings” in the service of desire, ambition, self-fulfillment or, as in the case of the Macbeths, of perceived entitlement, one’s surmise, or supposition of reward, easily elaborates by outward conduct the truth or authenticity of an invented or counterfeit reality. In other words, the Macbeths freely transport themselves out of the realm governed by divine realism to the nominalist realm of Shakespeare’s contemporary Reformation England where they make of themselves what they will, limited only by an imagination unmoored from divine reality.
6. **EPILOGUE--The Tempest: Recognition, Reconciliation, and Recovery**

(“In an odd angle of the isle”)

*But this rough magic*

*I here abjure, and when I have required*

*Some heavenly music— which even now I do—*

*To work mine end upon their senses that*

*This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,*

*Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,*

*And deeper than did ever plummet sound*

*I’ll drown my book.*  (5.1.40-57)

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6.1 **INTRODUCTION.**

An “epilogue” in the strict classical sense connotes a “gathering” in the form of “a short restatement . . . of things already said.”\(^{362}\) However, against the grain of what I have implied in discussion of the previous three works, I offer my reading of *The Tempest*, as a form of *Epilogue* to this study of Shakespeare’s sacramental vision. Admittedly the following exceeds the standard of “short restatement,” nor does it simply reiterate, culminate, or continue Shakespeare’s insight into the cultural effects of Old Faith decline over the span of the previous works discussed. Rather, this last of Shakespeare’s solely authored works, while firmly rooted in the *ethos* of his time, fundamentally reframes a larger perspective wherein the playwright envisions at least the possibility that a New Faith, like the New World, along with the best of the New Man can ultimately emerge to form a New Culture of Faith within which practice conforms to proclamation.

My analysis of the previous plays—*Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth*—follows a declension narrative. The plays reflect a worsening spiritual dissolution in a way of seeing grounded in the metaphysical unity of all creation which sustained an *undisturbed* English culture of faith until

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disturbed by a confluence of influential ideas, to which I refer in previous discussion. First, ultimately transformative ideas about the nature of divine and the philosophical conception of reality; second, adoption of newly discovered classical thought and a new conception of the nature of man (in relation to God); and, third, the ideas that originated and prosecuted England’s Protestant Reformation.

I argue that the narratives in *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* reflect a progressively darkening vision of a fragmented world losing its relationship with the inherited unifying conception of God and thus becoming unable to fully comprehend the immanent nature of the divine as previously conceived. The paradigm shifts that redefined that relationship so as to segregate matter and spirit, the natural and supernatural, the living and the dead left a spiritual vacuum in a popular culture uprooted from an established culture of piety and practice to one that demanded mental assent to prescribed beliefs. For the majority of English people in Shakespeare’s lifetime, “thinking theologically was new.” For the vast majority of the English people the unfortunate result of the “religious change,” which promised a reformed faith, one purer and more consistent with the original foundations of the Christian faith, was wholesale indifference to Christianity itself.

363 Carlos Eire’s formulation to which I refer frequently in the foregoing chapters supplies the conceptual basis for the Reformation’s cultural desacralization. *Reformations*. pp. 747-752.

364 [thinking theologically was new]

365 Eamon Duffy draws the distinction between the majority of uneducated poor on the one hand and the “townsmen and rural elites on the other,” and avers hostility, resistance, and “at best indifference” to Protestantism substantially resulted from its being “of the book and therefore province of the literate” (*Reformation Divided* 347-48).
This study attempts to comprehend Shakespeare’s later works in the context of an often neglected heritage, one that takes due regard of the enduring effects of Henry VIII’s and Edward VI’s dissolutions and confiscations on the English nation, together with the sporadic rebellions under Henry and Elizabeth, to which I briefly refer in Section Three (“Reality and Religion Reconfigured”), not to mention the persecutions of Protestant heretics under Mary Tudor. These events cumulatively amounted not to resistance in the English population, but rather to religious indifference of a kind that brought into question the efficacy of Christianity as fundamental to an understanding of human existence and purpose.

Between the ambiguities of religious loyalties and precise assessment of how much of a practicing Old Faith remained, a growing consensus holds that as late as the early 1590s England remained, at least nominally, majority Catholic, but barely.\footnote{See generally, Eamon Duffy, “The Long Reformation.” Reformation Divided, pp. 379-79.} The striking “sea change” in the canon to which I refer throughout, concerns the manner in which Shakespeare began to shape his plays to convey an urgent message to his early seventeenth century audience. That message bore directly on the unrecognized philosophical origin and the unappreciated consequences of England’s institutionally established, if not altogether accepted, “religious change.” That change, established and enforced by royal decree, together with the eager and indiscriminate cultural embrace of Renaissance humanism, altered the conception of the divine and of man’s relationship to the natural world, which, broadly stated, replaced the primacy of God with the primacy of man.

However, by the year 1600, the majority of the English population, however grudgingly, could agree that the die was cast in the image of a Protestant Church of England. That year, beginning with his \textit{Tragedy of Hamlet}, Shakespeare employed his dramaturgy, his poetics, and
his new Globe Theatre as instruments with which to reflect his country’s current religious befuddlement at the same time that he explored its origin, and considered the future consequences of a loss of sacramental vision—the once active, but now fading ability to see the immanent presence of the Creator in all of creation.

By contrast, the reframed narrative of *The Tempest* seeks to restore a sense of the divine source of reality in a way that could be reimagined and understood anew. Instead of the Renaissance humanist image of an anthropocentric universe in which nature serves man’s desires, *The Tempest* offers an image of man as inseparable from Creation, as a humble beneficiary of God’s providence, and as a vigilant steward of the goodness Gospel’s shared way of life.

*The Tempest* suggests a medieval narrative structure that also manifest in the subject plays discussed, that is of a quest or journey, the object of which is redemption. In such narrative, as MacIntyre observes, the object, “if gained, can redeem all that was wrong with [the hero’s] life up to that point” (175). Hamlet’s labyrinthine quest to bring his father’s murderer, the otherwise untouchable King of Denmark, to public justice; Lear’s and Gloucester’s respective ordeals of contrition that seek, and ultimately achieve, forgiveness; even Macbeth’s atrocities conclude with hard-won recognition of ultimate truth. Similarly, each resolves with climactic combat that provisionally redeems good from evil and restores an ordered, albeit damaged, community.

Thus, in contrast to the contention of *Hamlet*, the costly price paid by the respective principles in *Lear*, and the irredeemable folly recounted by *Macbeth*, from *The Tempest* emerges a completed message of reconciliation and hope, with the emphasis on the mythic story of return, of going home, that follows recognition, the acquisition of some new insight or
spiritual conversion (*metanoia*), which springs from **reconciliation** with that which was unresolved in self, others, or in the world, so as to **recover** knowledge of one’s purpose in the universe—where one stands in relation to God and in relation to others in community. All the while, one remains mindful of one’s own humanity, as well as the humanity of others, with all flaws and *residua* of the common fallen state, notwithstanding pious prophylaxes religion offers to minimize the human proclivity to disobedience. Therefore, the work of human perfection must always remain in a state of becoming, striving for divine grace, but all the while knowing that in his life one’s conformity to the divine image remains unfinished. Therefore, *The Tempest* concludes with a sense of balance—the best for which one can hope: that man in community with others, and mindful of God’s provenance, can recognize and control flaws of human nature sufficient to maintain a tolerant if not loving community that conforms to the goodness of the Gospel’s shared way of life.

As discussed in Section Three (“Religion and Reality Reconfigured”), the deep roots of England’s religious change, nurtured by influential scholastic debates about the nature of God in the new universities during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, posited a different conception of the divine than that inherited from the early Platonist-Christian synthesis. The advent of the Protestant revolution decisively altered the inherited understanding of the divine and loosed a cascade of changes to Christian practice, which chiefly bore on the sacramental presence of God in the natural world and on the view of the material world that encompassed much more than merely the seven sacraments. But of those surviving conceptions of God’s immanence, and the veneration thereof, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine in the administration of the Eucharist became the focus of supreme importance. Therefore, the conception of the habitation
of the divine in the natural world, its instantiation in the communion elements, stood as subject of contention in Hamlet; of confusion in Lear; and becomes outright rebellion in Macbeth.

6.2 Sources and Backgrounds.

As Shakespeare’s last solely authored play, commentators stand eager to read into The Tempest (1611), a personal farewell to both his audience and to his celebrated stage career as playwright, actor, and impresario. On the other hand, that Shakespeare subsequently wrote other plays, albeit in collaboration with playwright John Fletcher, suggests that he may not have intended it as the final gesture for which it remains fondly remembered. Nonetheless, the popular identification of Shakespeare with the play’s exiled, scenario-creating magician, Prospero, together with the series of the magician’s speeches that signal intended finality to both his elaborate orchestration of events and the graceful retirement of his own compelling powers, further favor a stylish and profound personal envoi worthy of its author.

Of the several unusual textual aspects of The Tempest at least two formal elements stand noteworthy, if not entirely unique. First, the assertion that Shakespeare relies on no known source story, unlike other plays in the canon, stands generally correct. However, strictly speaking, the same could be said for Midsummer Night’s Dream and Merry Wives of Windsor (McGuire 182). Second, Shakespeare uncharacteristically observes the unities of time, place, and action, although the same could be said of one of his earliest known plays, Comedy of Errors.

While no single conventional source narrative exists, Shakespeare employed an unusual

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367 King Henry VIII, or All is True (1612); Cardenio (1613)(a lost play); Two Noble Kinsmen (1613).
combination of “sources”—a *farrago* of incidents, adventures, and encounters drawn from authorities both classical and contemporary. The former include Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, as well as Montaigne’s essay “On the Cannibals” (McGuire 182-83).368

As for the latter, notwithstanding the lack of a conventional source story, growing interest in exploration of North America inspired circulation of several contemporary reports and stories thereof. These provided abundant material from which to originate the plot. Geographical references to countries of origin in the play suggest a Mediterranean venue, as does the implausibility of father and daughter surviving a trans-Atlantic crossing in an open boat, hardly matter. Jerry Brotton contrasts the familiar European, specifically English, contact with Mediterranean with growing fascination with the strange world of the Americas. The North American “new world” easily served a more inviting story than the more likely Mediterranean island venue.369 The incipient rise of fresh English New World exploration and colonial development in preference to a subordinated presence in the Mediterranean offered an imaginative framework which, in fact, loomed on the horizon for an England whose attempts to explore and colonize had already been underway since the Elizabethan charters granted to Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585 (Brotton 34-38).

Tony Tanner describes several contemporaneous sea-voyages of the English sailing crews,

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368 McGuire suggests that Prospero’s long speech at 5.1.33-57 appears derived from Medea’s speech at *Metamorphosis*, Book VII, ll., 199-214. Similarly, Gonzalo’s aspirations of “commonwealth” speech at 2.1.142-78 echoes that of Montaigne’s “Cannibales,” pp. 232-233.

369 Jerry Brotton, “‘This Tunis, sir, was Carthage’: Contesting Colonialism in *The Tempest.*” *Post Colonial Shakespeares.* pp. 23-42.
storm-driven onto desert islands proximate to the New World, which narrate tales of exotic venues and the dynamics of human survival under the circumstances (794-802). The Elizabethan era impetus for settling North America began with Richard Hakluyt, the elder’s, publication of his *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America* (1582). In 1585, Sir Walter Raleigh sent out an expedition to establish a colony in Virginia, the failure of which met with continuing exploration and similar efforts. This eventually attracted the interest of King James I and the consequent founding of the more stable and successful Jamestown in 1607. In addition to published voyage reports, a wealth of information regarding embryonic colonial activity, natural life, and indigenous inhabitants continued to flow back to the increasingly interested English population.

However the most comprehensive and notorious account of the excitement, potential, and peril of England’s destinal significance in the globe came with William Strachey’s now celebrated long letter, “*A True Repertory of the Wracke and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates . . . the Ilands of the Bermudas: his coming to Virginia, and the estate of that Colonie . . . .*” The letter contained an account of the 1609 voyage of a ship bearing supplies to the colony of Virginia, which escaped destruction of a storm to beach safely in the Bermudas. After repairing the wrecked vessel on an uninhabited island, the crew continued the voyage to Virginia and finally returned to England to tell the tale (Tanner 794-801). In addition, and in advance of the belated 1627 publication of the “*True Repertory,*” the incident produced a number of immediate

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370 Far in advance of practical exploitation or settlement, the very existence and accessibility of this New World inspired the English, who now, instead operating on the geographical periphery of a well-established European system trade structure, England now found itself situated at the center of a newly developing world, strategically located between Europe and the Americas.
pamphlets and additional accounts, of which two bear special mention. Sylvester Jourdain’s *A Discovery of the Barmudas, otherwise called the Ille of Divels* (1610), describes the island in terms of its enchantment, wealth, and wonder, which stood in shocking contrast to the “misery and misgovernment” found when the crew finally reached the Jamestown colony (Tanner 796-97). An anonymous pamphlet entitled *The True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie in Virginia* (1610) described in lurid detail the dissention found at the Jamestown colony fostered by the apparent preference for self-gratification, and the absence of commitment to cooperation in community (799). Both McGuire and Tanner join numerous others in the virtual certainty that Shakespeare, having “many friends on the Virginian Council, for whom the [‘Strachey] letter was written” read the letter in advance of its 1625 publication. The 1610 pamphlets mentioned were publicly available in that year. Tanner’s extensive quotations from all of these accounts bear striking resonance to the special moral, ethical, and religious problems that plague the human interaction within *The Tempest*.

### 6.3 Brief Critical Survey.

Within the seeming simplicity of its structural elements, the play’s wealth of analogue, allusion, and reference, both classical and contemporary, create an exceedingly complex field from which to harvest a wide variety of interpretations. For purposes of illustration, I highlight a few contrasting approaches below. However, my primary purpose in this “epilogue” remains confined to how *The Tempest*, consistent with the plays previously discussed, reflects Shakespeare’s perspective on the contemporary cultural impact of religious change as manifest in this, his “final” play.

Views diverge on virtually every aspect of the play. I outline a few principal approaches.
In theological terms, David Beauregard finds four distinctly Catholic doctrines in the play’s “Epilogue” from intercessory prayer to indulgences (151-54). While admittedly “non-explicit” and “cleverly ambiguous” (146), his explication bears directly on but some 20 lines at the end of an entire play. Although powerfully consistent with Christian themes of penitence, humility, and grace, Beauregard’s admittedly suggestive Catholic doctrinal references nonetheless occupy a subordinate place within the overall framework.

A more promising critical avenue, and one consistent with the culminating view of the work, lies with the persistent theme of apocalypsis in the sense of unveiling, of bringing into the light that which has been hidden, particularly that of good or evil, as well as a grand vision of the assured, albeit disputed, path to salvation. Christopher Hodgkins argues that Prospero’s several “farewells” contained near the end of the play stand as apocalyptic harbingers of a new beginning (154). Steven Marx sees a structural parallel to the Book of Revelations in the play’s restoration theme. He interprets the contours of the play as a revelation of creation absorbed back into the Creator—of a return to Eden where history is concluded. In that scenario Prospero stands as a self-referential “creator and destroyer, punisher and deliverer, that defines the biblical God [but] demeans himself after the fashion of the prophets and of Jesus speaking the words of God” (127-28). Yet, commentators stand attracted to the eschatological with mixed success.

Along the same line, Robert Grams Hunter argues that the attributes of humility, forgiveness, and compassion infuse the play’s characters during an orchestrated ordeal which burns off pride and invites redemption, transformation, and renewal that fulfill the ultimate promise of participation in a new heaven and a new earth (244-45). Helen Cooper contends that the apocalyptic heart of the play lies with the dramatist’s achievement of a special relationship with the audience. In her view, the play creates a new world and “ends with an invocation of the
“Last Judgment” which must be rendered by the spectators (195). By contrast, Cynthia Marshall’s study, aptly subtitled, *Last Things and Last Plays*, shares with others an eschatological focus, as witness her particular emphasis on “death, recapitulation, and summation” (5). Her eschatological approach seizes upon a colonial perspective, analogizing contemporary Jacobean interest in, and burgeoning knowledge of, the New World to a new Eden, closely aligned with a vision of renewal within the context of a paradisiacal destiny (86-89). Marshall devotes the better part of four chapters to aspects of eschatological issues in *The Tempest*, with her main focus in the chapter entitled “*The Tempest* and Time’s Dissolution” (86-106). However, while dramatic, undue emphasis on the apocalyptic and eschatological tends to vitiate the force of the play’s movement and ultimate message.

James Walter also weighs in on mythic Creation and Re-creation with a particularly striking allegorical analysis grounded in the play’s language with specific reference to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. Shakespeare’s allegorical attack draws from Augustine’s emphasis on the infirmity of the reliance on “signs such as sacraments, miracles, and verbal pronouncings” for a sound approach to God (64). For Walter, the allegorical significance of *The Tempest* lies in Shakespeare’s focus on the “poet’s ability to redeem a world degenerated in the imaginations of the degenerate” (64). Harold Bloom, as one might expect, insists that the play is neither “a discourse on colonialism nor mystical testament” (662). Masque-like and fundamentally plotless, the play stands as Shakespeare’s “wildly experimental stage comedy” (663), with the “nadir of the poetry” in the form of the masque that celebrates the betrothal of Miranda and Sebastian (679). Despite his generally jaded view, Bloom finds distinctive merit in the suggestive nature of the characters, which, despite the play’s “plotlessness,” generates
considerable interest from the juxtaposition of “a vengeful magus who turns to forgiveness, with
a spirit of fire and air [Ariel], and a half –human of earth and water [Caliban]” (666).

In her lengthy Penguin edition “Introduction,” Ann Barton also disputes notions
of the transcendent or metaphysical. Instead, her analysis promotes the aforementioned
autonomy of man. She declines to ascribe the play’s story of success to the triumph of Christian
virtue, or to providential favor on Prospero’s endeavors, notwithstanding that Prospero credits
his and Miranda’s survival to “Providence divine” (1.1.159). She specially ridicules Gonzalo’s
pious, but “obtuse” gratitude to heaven for the happy outcome when he joyfully declares, “I have
inly wept / . . .Look down you gods / . . ./ For it is you that have chalked the way . . .” (41;
5.1.200-204). With some cynicism, Barton opines that Gonzalo’s “confident ascription of a
fortunate outcome” to heaven’s benevolence would inevitably seem “to the better-informed
theatre audience hasty and ill-formed judgement” (41). To Barton’s aggressive secular critique,
Gonzalo lives in a world of complete naiveté, when actually the “better informed audience”
knows that the outcome results entirely from “Prospero’s guiding hand on the action during the
last four hours” (41). Contrary to Beauregard and others, Barton also, adopts a jaundiced view
of Prospero’s speech of tempered forgiveness to his brother, castigating it as “scarcely the
pardon of a Christian [inasmuch as] . . .contempt breathes through it [reflecting an] . . . inability
to forget and put aside, not genuine mercy” (38): “For you most wicked sir, whom to call brother
/ Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive” (5.1.130). I cite Barton at length here because her
substantial analysis illustrates determined divorce from the traditional conception of the divine,
no doubt consistent with the very types of Jacobean “new men” Prospero forgives in the play.
Rather, she sees Prospero as a “self-moulded” man—a Renaissance ideal, who through his own
efforts “has come to partake, at least to some extent, of the divine” (43). Barton concludes that
somehow Prospero “is in the end incomplete” in the sense of his mission falling short: “In the end, he must give it up, must accept his own humanity and its most painful and inevitable consequence: the fact of his death” (44). Instead of a fulfillment of mission and achievement that restores hope and a future, she views the result as one of material loss in that Prospero gives up his magic and his position as rightful Duke, in favor of his daughter and son-in-law.

Barbara Mowat’s perspective offers an incisive contrast to Bloom and Barton. She sees the play as a spectacular complex of layered thematic, dramatic, and rhetorical elements, such as the embedded references to mythological voyages—Jason and the Argonauts, Voyages of St. Paul, accounts of contemporary voyages to the New World—contrasted with physical constraints of time and limited geography of the island (188-89). This reach back in time and legend and reveals a woven fabric that purposely forces the players and audience to apprehend the authentic present, which moves sacramentally in and through the past and present to shape, form, and impel the future, as surely as any ineffable compelling command that emanates from the divine. Each player carries past history, determinative of the present, as both past and future converge on the present. Accordingly, Shakespeare creates “a detailed and complex narrative,” in which man’s duel natures contend—Gonzalo’s aspirations for the ideal state, on the one hand (2.1.150-70); or simply the repetition of self-serving crime on the other—Sebastian seizes power as Antonio has done, on the other (2.1.254) (188). Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban perform a comic parody of the latter with their plot against Prospero (3.2. 87-90) (188-90).

The foregoing suggest the variety of approaches this unusual play inspires. As previously discussed, the play stands dramatically unique in several particulars, not least of which is its occurrence on a single day with exhaustive and exhausting linkage of purportedly isolated groups of scattered individuals through a continuous series of interactive adventures, encounters,
and labors, amplified by significant discursive information imparted by back-story histories and speculative aspirational expression.

Finally, G. Wilson Knight in his essay “Shakespearean Superman” assembles an impressive array of corresponding analogues from virtually the entire canon in the fashion of a grand artistic *summa*. He argues that Shakespeare’s “late plays” tend to recraft plot features and poetics from earlier plays into “more purposeful conclusions, impregnated with a far higher order of dramatic belief, a tendency which *The Tempest* drives to the limit” (204). For example, Knight includes among the litany of Prospero’s forebears such victims of usurping siblings as the banished Duke Senior in *As You Like It* (205) and the King in *Hamlet* murdered by his usurping brother’s hand. Other likely models include the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, as to whose neglect of duty Prospero admits (207). The prescient wisdom and wizardry of Theseus and Oberon, respectively, in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* compound in Prospero (208). Likewise, themes of betrayal of trust in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and that of filial ingratitude in *King Lear* (205), combine in virtual recapitulation of Lady Macbeth’s incitement to murder a sleeping King Duncan with Antonio’s similar enticement of Sebastian’s assassination of Naples’s King Alonzo (212; *Tmp.* 2.1.278-92).

Knight concludes with general reference to the range of universal meanings in the play as Shakespeare’s conscious effort at “myth creation,” but quotes extensively from Colin Still’s allegorical treatment of the play, which he praises as a “most careful and important study” of *The Tempest* to date, that being Still’s 1930 study *Shakespeare’s Mystery Play* (226).

6.4 GATEWAY TO THE REAL.

Shakespeare’s isolated island setting provides an exotic and dramatically rich stage environment, yet with a captivating currency related to prospective English exploration of a New
World now at hand. Marooned, with no immediate departure possible, the scattered shipwrecked human cargo, chiefly the ruling elite of Naples and Milan, must encounter and ultimately contend with the island’s host, one Prospero, who suffered deposition from his role Duke of Milan some twelve years before at the hands of these very castaways. Along with his young daughter Miranda, the usurpers set them adrift, likely to perish at sea. With the aid of Prospero’s now perfected magical powers, an unanticipated reckoning awaits the stranded wrongdoers and their company. The foregoing brief critical survey suggests the broad range of interpretive perspectives that derive from this unusual play, seemingly intended as the playwright’s culminating gesture of his twenty-year career on the London stage. Previous Sections discuss how, beginning with the turn of the century, Shakespeare’s plays began to assume a heightened degree of care and concern for England’s declining morals, ethics, and social civility for which the long, peaceful, and uninterrupted pre-Reformation English religious tradition once supplied the binding agent.

However, within Shakespeare’s lifetime, the unwinding of the “Old Faith” traditions and habits of thought continued apace. In his mid to late 20s, the fully mature young poet, nurtured by an Old Faith Stratford heritage in recusant-rich Warwickshire, relocated to the burgeoning London public theatre scene. There, with the eye of a promising and gifted dramatist, he could witness first-hand the breadth of cultural change wrought by the English Reformation and its relentless “desacralization” of England’s religious life. The continuing enforcement of religious reform reached a point of general consolidation, if not total uniformity, during the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first decade of the seventeenth—roughly the compass of Shakespeare’s playwriting career. Over the span of that career, the image portrayed of England’s surviving Old Faith religious heritage, reflected poignantly in the three previous plays discussed,
regressed from the challenging to the dire. However, with The Tempest, emerging at the end of his career, some six years after Macbeth, Shakespeare’s message adapts to the current cultural circumstances while at the same time it promotes the core religious values of late medieval Christianity. The traditions so long preserved by the old institutional English church were no more, as were the habits of piety and practice formerly fused into way of life of provincial close-knit community culture.

The playwright’s later works tend to reflect on his culture’s loss of its traditional understanding of the sacramental nature of the divine in ways that are often apophatic, satirical, or ironic. The narratives in Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth reflect a progressively darkening vision of a fragmented world losing its relationship with the inherited unifying conception of God and thus becoming unable to understand nature of the divine and, consequently, of reality itself. For Hamlet’s uncle Claudius, nature exists in service to man’s purposes; Gloucester’s bastard son Edmund’s identity stands bound in appetite; Macbeth suffers delusory confusion of language. All three embrace a nominalist view of the world where perception of reality resides with the senses. But with The Tempest, Shakespeare seats the sacramental message in the playgoer’s imagination so as to materialize something of a transcendent reality that lies beyond the experience of the senses. The play teaches, in short, the source of objective truth that is higher than, and independent of man, can be known and experienced and that reality consists of more than what can be perceived by the senses and its essence derived by human reason.371 Such bedrock fundamentals as truth, beauty, love, honor, hope materialize in a positive and profound epiphany within The Tempest. In the course of three scenes described below, Shakespeare reveals in microcosm the divergent conceptions of human purpose. While Shakespeare now

371 Weaver, Ideas, 3; See also, Gregory, Unintended 57, 64.
exhibits wary recognition of the persistent moral flaws in post Reformation English culture, he also acknowledges man’s concurrent capacity to aspire to and embrace the experience of objective ideals. While these may well exceed the power of contemporary religion to repair or even address, the concepts can be understood and applied in a way that offers insight into the nature of God.

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6.5 CONCLUSION--New Beginnings: “All things made new.”

The play constitutes a form of ‘unveiling’ revelation, an apocalypse, which resolves the confused cacophony of the fraught and fractured attempt at a new beginning compounded by the passionate resistance thereto. Attempts on English soil at “reform” or new beginning both conceptually grafted onto either lost or damaged rituals, or in new practices, alien and incomprehensible, give way to a genuinely new beginning, where the Old Faith values accommodate to life in a New World, in which the genuine New Man can thrive. Therefore, the play shows, a starting over—new eyes (Miranda and Ferdinand), tempered by old wisdom (Prospero and Gonzalo) open to enlist God’s immanent presence against the blandishments of the world, whether the coaxings of friends or the jeers or threats of enemies. Prospero’s fanciful and miraculous story shows a way for the religiously discouraged to look forward, to renew a Biblical faith, to start fresh in an Edenic world within which its temporary inhabitants become transformed by an authentic way of seeing.
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