

Shakespeare's Terrible Neutrality

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores what I term Shakespeare's *terrible neutrality*, a comprehensive and impartial stance that pervades his complete works. Drawing on a close reading of Shakespeare's plays, as well as on the critical tradition from Keats, George Steiner, and contemporary Shakespeare scholars, I argue that Shakespeare's terrible neutrality lies in his refusal to take a definitive stance (and at times even in his deliberate violation of poetic justice). This neutrality enables him to gain a comprehensive understanding of the world and human experience, particularly when considered across his entire oeuvre. Through a sustained engagement with four major themes—religion, politics, love, and law—this thesis demonstrates how Shakespeare repeatedly revisits similar scenarios, motifs, and dilemmas, adjusting variables such as character traits, social contexts, and narrative structures to create a world in which both positive and negative elements coexist, while readers can clearly discern right from wrong. Causal relationships cannot be reduced to a single predictable or explanatory framework, yet events unfold in ways consistent with reality and logic, and a greater diversity of characters and narrative developments becomes possible precisely because of this terrible neutrality.

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INTRODUCTION

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, after Hamlet follows the ghost, he and Horatio have an intriguing exchange:

HORATIO O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.

HAMLET And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
(*Ham.* I.v.165–67)

Horatio is not the first to see the ghost, that would be the sentinels Marcellus and Barnardo, but he sees it before Hamlet does, and he is also present when Hamlet sees it for the first time. When Horatio first hears from the sentinels that they have seen the ghost, he appears sceptical. Since he has not yet witnessed it himself, he assumes the ghost to be nothing more than a product of their imagination; Marcellus says that Horatio thinks the ghost is “but our fantasy” (I.i.23). Horatio even confidently claims, before seeing it, that “’twill not appear” (I.i.29). When the ghost does appear before his eyes, he is shaken and admits:

HORATIO Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.
(*Ham.* I.i.56–58)

Although Horatio sees the ghost, he still struggles to accept its reality. Despite the visual evidence, his knowledge system tells him that such a thing should not be possible. His rational mindset resists accepting what contradicts established understanding. Hamlet, however, urges Horatio to welcome it “as a stranger” — to receive it with an open mind, as one would a guest from an unfamiliar land. Horatio should not be confined by the limits of his own learning, but instead adopt an open and expansive attitude toward understanding a broader world.

Hamlet's view that Horatio should acknowledge his own insignificance, accept his identity as a stranger to the unknown, and recognise that there is a broader world beyond his understanding, speaks for one of Shakespeare's greatest dramatic gifts: his *terrible neutrality* — “terrible” because the neutrality or impartiality that Shakespeare consistently betrays seems uncanny, even transcendent. The ghost, insofar as it is a presence in *Hamlet*, excluded from all systems of rational cognition, nonetheless exists. It cannot be ignored, nor can anyone simply pretend it is not there. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality allows him to register a wider range of value systems and human behaviours — bright or dark, rational or unfathomable – and grants him an imagination expansive enough to create a universe where multiple realities, whether familiar or unfamiliar, hopeful or despairing, find their place.

Since 2019, I have independently organised close-reading courses of Shakespeare's complete works through my website, *BunnyLiterature*. Each year, I lead an online community in reading all of Shakespeare's plays and poems, and by 2025 we will have completed the full cycle for the seventh time. There are over 200 regular participants and around 4,000 occasional readers. Sometimes we read by thematic threads, sometimes in chronological order. Through close reading and in-depth discussion, we bring different plays into dialogue with one another. This long-term practice has shaped my own “complete works thinking”. In this thesis, I examine what I am calling Shakespeare's terrible neutrality from a comprehensive perspective, covering his entire corpus as well as focusing on the internal terrible neutrality within individual plays, both poetry and plays from all dramatic genres. I focus on four representative themes — religion, law, politics, and love — and, within each theme, I explore specific subtopics that highlight different aspects of this neutrality.

The term “terrible neutrality” was coined by William Christie in response to George Steiner's criticism of Shakespeare in his W. P. Ker lecture of 1986, “A Reading against Shakespeare”, and the idea is further elaborated in his journal article ““Whaur's Yer Wullie Shakespeare Noo?": Literary Influence V”. Steiner's phrase to describe Shakespeare's stance is “the dispassionate neutrality of sunlight or of wind”:

Both Cordelia and Iago, Richard III and Hermione are instinct with the same uncanny trick of life. The shaping imagination which animates their spectacular presence is beyond good and evil. It has the dispassionate neutrality of sunlight or of wind.¹

¹ George Steiner. *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*. Faber & Faber, 1996: 124.

Steiner argues that it is Shakespeare's neutrality that enables him to create characters who are utterly evil as well as others who are resolutely virtuous. This "dispassionate neutrality" allows Shakespeare to remain emotionally detached, refusing to give any character preferential treatment based on moral or aesthetic standards. Steiner, however, is uneasy with this Shakespearean feature. Christie, by contrast, values it. Christie interprets the "dispassionate neutrality" as a form of "terrible neutrality", one that is disturbing enough to provoke in Steiner a "Continental horror at Shakespeare's apparent unconcern with a 'philosophy or intelligible ethic'".² Christie quotes John Keats's famous comment on Shakespeare to further elaborate: "What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er", wrote Keats, "delights the camelion [sic] Poet".³ Steiner, Christie, and Keats are all impressed by Shakespeare's moral neutrality – his apparent unconcern with ethical judgment and his ability to represent negative moral behaviour and thoughts with vivid imaginative power. This neutrality, often criticised by moralists or "virtuous philosophers" like Samuel Johnson, allows Shakespeare to depict the full range of human experience without moral prescription or what Steiner calls an "intelligible ethic".

A closer look into John Keats's "Negative Capability" helps to illuminate more about Shakespeare's terrible neutrality. In a letter of December 1817 to his brothers, George and Tom, Keats writes:

several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. (*Letters of John Keats* 1:193-4)

Keats argues that "Negative Capability" is a defining quality of literary greatness, exemplified by Shakespeare. It refers to the ability to accept human life in all its complexity and contrariness without trying, reductively, to push for intelligibility. Had Coleridge embraced those brilliant yet isolated flashes of insight afforded by "Christabel" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", instead of rejecting

² William Christie. "'Whaur's Yer Wullie Shakespeare Noo?': Literary Influence V." *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association*, vol. 21, no. 1999, pp. 65-92, at 79.

³ John Keats. *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*. Edited by Robert Gittings, Oxford University Press, 1970: 157.

them for their elusiveness and struggling to justify the ways of God to man, his work could have reached even greater heights, suggests Keats.

In *Keats and Negative Capability*, Ou Li contends that Keats's Negative Capability is not just a passing thought, but a sustained literary principle to which he faithfully adhered throughout his life. By examining Keats's complete work, Ou Li presents a more comprehensive understanding of Negative Capability, one that echoes the concept of Shakespeare's "terrible neutrality" which I intend to explore. I find Ou Li's method particularly helpful, so I will now present the other two relevant excerpts from Keats's letters. The first is from Keats's letter to Benjamin Bailey of 22 November 1817:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their Sublime, creative of essential Beauty—. . . I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning. (*Letters of John Keats* 1:184-5)

The poet's imaginative power — not rationality — is the true source of artistic creation and a poet's work should strive to create beauty and truth through imagination, not logical reasoning.

Having seen how Keats identifies Negative Capability as enabling the creative pursuit of beauty and truth, we return to his letter to George and Tom Keats: "[T]he excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth — Examine *King Lear* & you will find this exemplified throughout" (*Letters of John Keats* 1:192). Here Keats makes a crucial connection between Negative Capability, beauty, truth, and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. From the perspective of its critical history, *King Lear* had often been seen as containing too many shocking or "disagreeable" elements. Lear and Gloucester suffer from pain, privation, and violence that they do not deserve, but they are sinners in their own regards; the selfless, unblemished Cordelia, on the other hand, dies in the wrong hands and unnecessarily — there is no poetic justice. How can stories of bad people winning over good people be considered beautiful and true? Keats concedes there are moral shocks or disagreeables in *King Lear*, but they are transformed by poetry and insight into a beauty and truth that derive, in Steiner's words, from a dispassionate neutrality, as impersonal and morally indifferent as sunlight or wind; from (in Christie's words) a terrible neutrality. As Ou Li concludes, Keats's Negative Capability

is marked by its allowance for a full-scale human experience that is too copious and diverse to be reduced to a neatly unified or conceptualized system. To be negatively capable is to be open to the actual vastness

and complexity of experience, and one cannot possess this openness unless one can abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge, safely guarding the self's identity, for a more truthful view of the world which is necessarily more disturbing or even agonizing for the self.⁴

There is no particular political, religious, or ethical stance on the poet's part that offers a comprehensive view of the human world. Negative Capability is the ability to accept those parts of the world that are incompatible, irreconcilable, and incomprehensible — an openness that requires one to leave the comfort zone and dissolve the boundaries of one's own identity.

Allan Bloom, a scholar of Western philosophy deeply rooted in reason and rationality, seems at first glance to stand in stark contrast to Romantic natural supernaturalism. Indeed, he openly disapproves of many of the Romantics' core features. Yet in this case, Bloom surprisingly aligns with Keats's Romantic view of Shakespeare. In *Love and Friendship*, without referencing Keats or the concept of Negative Capability, Bloom turns to the idea of "nature" to extol Shakespeare's genius, as critics have done persistently since the beginning of Shakespeare criticism in the seventeenth century. Part Two of Bloom's book is titled *Shakespeare and Nature*, and in the introduction he clarifies how Shakespeare differs from the Romantics, and what he means by Shakespearean "nature":

Shakespeare did not consider himself the legislator of mankind. He faithfully records man's problems and does not evidently propose to solve them. It is not accurate to describe him as a genius or a creator. He is too much immersed in the wonders of nature to focus on himself as the most important being in it. He does not try to create as did the Romantics; he tries to record nature.⁵

Bloom believes there is no lesson in Shakespeare, only a faithful record of human experience and nature, without any intention of providing solutions. In his reading of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Bloom resists the position of readers who judge from the moral high ground and praises instead Shakespeare's honest observation of the highs and lows of human nature.⁶

A similar tension between reason and insight can be found between William Christie and George Steiner, and between Ou Li and Keats. Steiner, as a philosopher and linguist grounded in rational inquiry, and Christie, as a scholar of Romanticism, nonetheless both accede to Shakespeare's neutrality (though Steiner remains deeply ambivalent about it). Keats is a Romantic poet, while Ou Li is a literary theorist and critic trained in logical frameworks. Yet even Ou Li succeeds in articulating an

⁴ Li Ou. *Keats and Negative Capability*. Continuum, 2009: 2.

⁵ Allan Bloom. *Love and Friendship*. Simon & Schuster, 1993: 269-70.

⁶ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 396-97.

anti-rational insight within a rational system – an understanding of Shakespeare’s paradoxical, yet unified and nearly unanimous appeal: his works resonate with readers holding vastly different, even diametrically opposed, worldviews.

If we look at Shakespeare criticism before the rise of academic criticism, we can see a similar pattern. While most scholars since the Second World War have tended to champion Shakespeare, before that we can find considerable reservations. Whether in praise or in censure, their focus often seems to touch on qualities related to Shakespeare’s neutrality. In *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), John Dryden denies that Shakespeare was learned — a claim refuted by many modern Shakespeare scholars — but sees this deficiency compensated by Shakespeare’s genius for easily drawing “all the images of Nature”.⁷ Dryden thus recognises Shakespeare’s gift for capturing the vast variety of the world, a gift that stems from his neutrality. In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, Samuel Johnson thinks the reason why Shakespeare is above all writers is because he “holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life”,⁸ breaking the unities of time and place to make drama “credible”.⁹ His first and major defect, however, is a lack of morality — allowing evil to triumph in his plays and characters.¹⁰ Samuel Johnson also acknowledges Shakespeare’s neutrality, enabling him to paint pictures of life and behaviour faithfully, but at the same time this neutrality is the genuinely terrible one of Shakespeware’s lacking morality that Johnson was so afraid of. The plays are devoid of moral guidance.

Unlike Johnson, Coleridge regards Shakespeare’s works as moral, noting that there are “no innocent adulteries” and no vice “clothed in the garb of virtue”.¹¹ I strongly agree with Coleridge’s view, and will elaborate on it later. When discussing Shakespearean tragedy, A. C. Bradley emphasises the concept of *moral order* and argues that tragic outcomes inevitably arise from evil. In this sense, the *moral order* in Shakespeare is not *poetic justice* but “a necessity or law which of course knows no exception and is as ‘ruthless’ as fate”¹² — a view similar to George Steiner’s idea of dispassionate

⁷ John Dryden. “An Essay of Dramatick Poesie.” *William Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, Volume 1 1623-1692, ed. Brian Vickers, vol. 1, Taylor & Francis, 1974: 119.

⁸ Samuel Johnson. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Peter Martin, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011: 355.

⁹ Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 365.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 362.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. “From ‘Lectures on the Characteristics of Shakespeare’.” *Romantics on Shakespeare*, edited by Jonathan Bate, Penguin, 1992: 130.

¹² A.C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1937: 36.

neutrality but with a different emphasis. Although George Bernard Shaw can be seen to admire Shakespeare, Shakespeare irritates him in many ways and two of these are particularly revealing. As Edwin Wilson notes in the introduction to *Shaw on Shakespeare*, unlike many who regard Shakespeare as a genius of nature and human character, Shaw criticises the inconsistency and lack of realism in many of Shakespeare's characters.¹³ This criticism, I suggest, reflects Shaw's own strict expectations of psychological coherence in characterisation, a standard rooted in modern psychology and his own dramatic ideals. Precisely because of this, Shaw refuses to concede Shakespeare's extraordinary breadth of human understanding, stemming from his radical neutrality. Shaw also claims that Shakespeare "never thinks about anything high or noble or heroic" – that, unlike Bunyan, Shakespeare never stirs the blood, never makes one feel "blood running through a man's finger".¹⁴ This, too, can be read not as a failure of Shakespeare's imagination, but as a consequence of his terrible neutrality. Shakespeare refuses to inspire in the Puritan sense. He can depict rousing rhetoric — Antony's and Brutus's speeches in *Julius Caesar* are sufficient to inflame any crowd — but his dramaturgy ensures that the audience's fervour is momentary and that the characters' actions are incommensurate with their rhetoric. Just as the blood begins to rise, Shakespeare cools it down. The stirring is real enough, but it is never permitted to dominate. In this way, Shakespeare does not fail to move us, but he is more interested in "unmoving" us.

Leo Tolstoy, famously, could not tolerate Shakespeare – *King Lear* in particular, with its many "illogical" plots and character inconsistencies intolerable to a late nineteenth-century literary realist. What Tolstoy truly could not accept, however, was Shakespeare's terrible neutrality: his refusal to take a moral or religious stance in his work.¹⁵ This evasion of moral commitment lies at the heart of Tolstoy's discomfort. He demanded that art should serve truth and goodness, and found Shakespeare's indifference to moral instruction deeply troubling. I will return to this in detail in the *religion* chapter, where I analyse *King Lear*.

Before the explosion of academic Shakespeare criticism in the late twentieth century, many critics, especially during the Romantic period, offered concepts that resemble the idea of Shakespeare's "terrible neutrality". Coleridge on Shakespeare's "myriad-mindedness", for example, or Hazlitt's idea

¹³ Bernard Shaw. *Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw's Writings on the Plays and Production of Shakespeare*. Ed. Edwin Wilson, Cassell, 1961: xvii.

¹⁴ Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare*, 223.

¹⁵ Leo Tolstoy. *Tolstoy on Art*. Ed. Aylmer Maude, Oxford University Press, 1924: 452.

of Shakespeare's *disinterestedness*, which strongly parallels Keats's concept of Negative Capability — indeed, as Edward Hirsch notes, Keats was influenced by Hazlitt's lectures on Shakespeare.¹⁶ Later in the century, Edward Dowden argues that there is an “aloofness or disengagement” in Shakespeare, suggesting that he observes human life, its joys and sorrows, from a panoramic and elevated perspective, with a “clear and solemn vision”.¹⁷ Dowden attributes this quality to Shakespeare's romances in particular, and I myself am especially drawn to the romances, but the concept is closely aligned with Negative Capability and can be extended to encompass Shakespeare's entire body of work.

There are also similar ideas among those contemporary Shakespeare scholars who endeavour to describe the characteristic features of Shakespearean drama. Stephen Greenblatt and Jonathan Bates inspired me to investigate the reasons why Shakespeare adopts such “terrible” stances. Greenblatt explains that what appears terrible in Shakespeare is not truly terrible, but rather a deliberate strategy, one that allows him to unfold a world of greater depth and complexity. Greenblatt finds that “Shakespeare's work had long been wryly skeptical of official explanations and excuses—the accounts, whether psychological or theological, of why people behave the way they do”.¹⁸ Greenblatt thinks the behaviour of Shakespeare's characters “inexplicable and irrational”, not in a factitious but in an entirely human way. Greenblatt argues that it is Shakespeare's scepticism of the world that is responsible, and that Shakespeare uses “strategic opacity” as a technique to express this scepticism – a strategic opacity that creates a partial obstruction of the truth, but also contains familiar, reassuring explanations. In the case of *Hamlet*, many critics, including Shaw, Tolstoy, and T. S. Eliot, criticise as incoherent the shaping of Hamlet's character or the plot of the play. But Greenblatt argues that the strategic opacity in *Hamlet* only makes the character and plot superficially incoherent, while the play reaches to something “immeasurably deeper”. Greenblatt's theory of a “hiding scepticism” is convincing, but not comprehensive. Scepticism is certainly there, but it does not dominate the entire canon. Scepticism means doubting everything, which is very different from negatively embracing everything without taking a moral position.

Jonathan Bate identifies Shakespeare's terrible complexity and interprets it as a form of elusiveness rooted in dualism. Bate thinks Shakespeare's elusiveness is caused by his “double vision”,

¹⁶ Edward Hirsch, in his introduction to *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats*. Edited by Jim Pollock and Edward Hirsch, Modern Library, 2001: xxv.

¹⁷ Edward Dowden. *Introduction to Shakespeare*. Blackie & Son, 1893: 53.

¹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004: 324.

or “double quality”, or “doubleness”, because he lives in both the country and the city, experiences both Catholicism and Protestantism, is both playwright and actor, can identify with both men and women, and so on. For Bate, Shakespeare’s “doubleness” is against the “singularity of logic”.¹⁹ It is an irony for Caliban when his old world becomes “a new world”;²⁰ it is manifest in one character’s having a counterpart in a play (the Fool and Cordelia in *King Lear*);²¹ it is manifest in a compulsive “equivocation” (the use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth or to avoid committing oneself);²² it is manifest in a set of ideas (philosophy and death in *Hamlet*),²³ or of opposite ideas (“natural” as both “foolishness” and “truth of nature”: the “Foolosopher”).²⁴ An elusive doubleness is a feature of Shakespeare’s drama, but it cannot show Shakespeare’s comprehensiveness.

Claire Hansen uses complexity theory to explain these and other heterogeneous characteristics of Shakespeare’s plays and argues that the parts of a play are dynamically interconnected, forming a complex system.²⁵ After listing the thirteen characteristics of complex systems, Hansen analyses the imagery of letters in Shakespeare’s plays with respect to the characteristics,²⁶ which demonstrates her full recognition of Shakespeare’s practice of repeatedly experimenting with the same imagery and incidents across different scenarios. Hansen points out that complexity theory is not meant to be used in isolation, but works well alongside other research methods and can be regarded as a supplementary tool for scholars, rather than a foreign framework that supplants established theories.²⁷ This perspective also aligns well with my proposed concept of terrible neutrality. In the chapter on religion, I use confessionalization; in the chapter on law, I use the purposive approach to law; and other methodologies are applied in turn to better demonstrate why and how Shakespeare embodies his neutrality.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bate. *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*. Random House Publishing Group, 2009: 89.

²⁰ Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 129.

²¹ Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 370.

²² Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 324.

²³ Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 387.

²⁴ Bate, *Soul of the Age*, 360-61.

²⁵ Claire Hansen. *Shakespeare and Complexity Theory*. Routledge, 2017: 13.

²⁶ Hansen, *Shakespeare and Complexity Theory*, 8-13.

²⁷ Hansen, *Shakespeare and Complexity Theory*, 32.

Shakespeare's neutrality, which extends across all themes and all his works, does not mean that he abandons morality or fixates on the darkest distortions of human nature. In fact, when viewed across his complete works, Shakespeare does not dwell on dark or twisted themes, especially when his works are compared with other literary traditions. What he offers is a more balanced and, in many ways, healthier view of human nature and human affairs. Compared to his fellow Renaissance dramatists, Shakespeare appears remarkably measured. Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587-1588) and *The Jew of Malta* (1589-1590) often indulge in hyperbolic violence and feature charismatic, but morally extreme protagonists. Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy*, helped popularise the genre of revenge tragedy with a focus on psychological torment and theatrical bloodshed. While Shakespeare was influenced by violent spectacle during his apprenticeship, he quickly moved beyond it. Thomas Middleton shares certain stylistic similarities with Shakespeare, yet plays such as *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Women Beware Women* are filled with sexual entanglements that often feel shallow and sensational rather than psychologically complex, let alone profound. Looking backward to Greek drama, one finds disturbing stories such as Medea's vengeful murder of her own children, a grotesque act presented with unnerving justification. Looking forward, the grotesqueries in the tales of the Marquis de Sade or even Edgar Allan Poe or the moral indifference in the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater reveal what is arguably a much darker or more fragmented view of the world. None of these extremes is present in Shakespeare. Across his plays, one senses not a lack of moral concern, but rather a disciplined refusal to impose one system of judgment – an understanding, sympathy, and ethical restraint that allow a fuller, more complex humanity to emerge.

In other words, Shakespeare's terrible neutrality does not mean that he lacks principles. His characterisation may reveal black, grey, and white, but Shakespeare does not confuse white with black. Shakespeare's fundamentally healthy and humanistic worldview is frequently raised with my online readers during our readings of the plays. Two striking examples come from our readings of *Henry V* and *Richard III*. One reader claimed (as other critics have) that *Henry V* portrays the ideal king, and that all his actions are justified, including the execution of surrendered enemies in Act IV, Scene VI. I firmly disagree. While *Henry V* may be one of Shakespeare's most capable monarchs, he is by no means flawless. The execution of prisoners has long been condemned in critical history and is indefensible by common moral standards. Henry V may evoke the audience's or reader's sympathy through his display of vulnerability (he carries the heavy burden of his father's usurpation), but Shakespeare's sympathy does not imply total approval. As a healthy humanist, Shakespeare could not

fully endorse acts such as the execution of prisoners or the legitimacy of usurpation. Instead, he crafts Henry V as a flawed, psychologically burdened king.

Another reader interpreted *Richard III* as a celebration of success through ruthless power and argued that Richard's atrocities were portrayed as necessary and effective. Again, I spent some time refuting this. Shakespeare is not a Machiavellian ideologue; he does not glorify tyranny. Richard's acts are not admirable, but horrifying, and the play constructs a tyrant rather than endorsing one. While the abuse Richard III suffers, even from his own mother, may evoke sympathy or help to explain his twisted psyche, it does not excuse his behaviour and he is never portrayed as a good man. Allan Bloom notes that readers and scholars often see in Shakespeare only what they want to see, but I believe certain traits in Shakespeare are objectively present, otherwise we risk misreading him entirely. This is why I repeatedly stress to my readers the idea of Shakespeare's terrible neutrality, a neutrality that does not arise from moral blindness or moral indifference, but from a refusal to oversimplify or sentimentalise human behaviour. Shakespeare offers the full range of human experience, without retreating into either cynicism or idealism.

I have said that Shakespeare's *terrible neutrality* is evident across the entire body of his work. In the beginning of his career, with plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry VI*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Comedy of Errors*, his sustained interest in major themes like religion, politics, law, and love had already emerged, along with certain structural habits. In addition to returning to these large themes, Shakespeare repeatedly returns to smaller dramatic patterns, motifs, or emotions, such as internal debate, jealous behaviour, the father-son relationship, and patterns of royal marriage. In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, Samuel Johnson remarks that Shakespeare did not hesitate to recycle the same jokes across different scenes, or to reuse the same "knot of complexity" in different plots, though he adds that this can be forgiven.²⁸ In contrast, I see this not as professional pragmatism or laziness but as a deliberate artistic strategy. It is precisely his neutrality that compels him to revisit the same dilemmas and situations, while altering key variables — character traits, social contexts, or plot structures — to generate entirely different outcomes.

As Harold Bloom has pointed out, Shakespeare delighted in inventing distinct human personalities — "the invention of the human" — and letting those personalities interact with recurring dilemmas, thereby exploring how different personalities respond to similar conditions. The character of

²⁸ Johnson, *Selected Writings*, 377.

Hamlet, for example, was not formed all at once, but evolved as part of this ongoing experimentation. Earlier characters already show signs of the internal conflict, intellectual anxiety, and performative self-awareness that would culminate in Hamlet. Proteus in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, for instance, already displays a disturbingly fluid sense of loyalty and identity: he shifts from sincere lover to betrayer and back again. Richard III shares Hamlet's theatricality and tendency to speak directly to the audience, while Brutus in *Julius Caesar* grapples with moral doubt and political idealism that prefigure Hamlet's famous indecision. Henry V appears as a proto-Hamlet, driven by a call to action and ambitious for success, yet equally burdened by introspection and the psychological toll of his own, and others', deeds. Even *Titus Andronicus*, though far less subtle, presents characters caught between duty, revenge, and a collapsing world. In this light, Hamlet can be seen not as a sudden stroke of genius, but as a character shaped by a long process of dramatic trial and error, a product of Shakespeare's increasing interest in the complexity and contradictions of human nature.

Many scenes in *Hamlet* appear to echo earlier plays by Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*, for instance, was performed in 1600, while *Hamlet* was likely written in 1599. In *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 1, we find striking similarities with *Julius Caesar*, particularly in Horatio's description of the strange weather the night before Caesar's assassination. In both plays, unnatural weather is unanimously interpreted as a sign of political upheaval. Yet the characters respond in markedly different ways: Horatio confronts the ghost with rational courage; Casca is awed and fearful; Cassius, in contrast, sees the chaos as a sign that the heavens approve of Caesar's murder. In *Hamlet*, the ghost's appearance does not herald a national crisis, as the sentinels initially believe, but instead signals a personal call for revenge. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality utilises narrative devices from earlier works which, when reintroduced, never feel merely repetitive; instead, each recurrence brings variation.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia is abandoned by Proteus; in *Hamlet*, Ophelia is similarly cast aside by Hamlet. The situation in *Hamlet*, however, is far more complex. Hamlet does not, like Proteus, fall in love with someone else — rather, his capacity for love is overwhelmed by the more urgent demands of revenge. The misogynistic Hamlet, moreover, is trying to deal with what he sees as his mother's betrayal of his father. He verbally humiliates Ophelia, even instructing her to get "to a nunnery", while Proteus never directs such harsh language towards Julia. Proteus eventually returns to Julia and reaffirms his love, Hamlet expresses the depth of his love for Ophelia only after her death, in a moment of grief and despair. It is hard to say which is more emotionally devastating: an abusive yet loyal love, or the betrayal of love. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality is at work here. This

contrast is just one example of how Shakespeare reworks an earlier pattern of romantic betrayal, and complicates and deepens it.

As early as *The Comedy of Errors* (performed 1594), Shakespeare was already experimenting with crude metaphors of the female body. In Act 3, scene 2, Dromio of Syracuse and Antipholus of Syracuse describe Luce's body as a distorted map of the world, using bawdy and objectifying language: Ireland is "in her buttocks" (106), Belgium and the Netherlands are located "so low" (124), and other countries are similarly mapped across her body in a crude geographic satire. A similar but more striking instance occurs in *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2, where Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, and Hamlet engage in a darkly comic exchange about the goddess Fortune. What begins as a comment on social status morphs into a profane joke about dame Fortune's body, culminating in Hamlet's declaration that "she is a strumpet":

GUILDENSTERN Happy in that we are not over-happy; on Fortune's cap we are not the very button.

HAMLET Nor the soles of her shoe?

ROSENCRANTZ Neither, my lord.

HAMLET Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favours?

GUILDENSTERN Faith, her privates we.

HAMLET In the secret parts of Fortune? Oh most true, she is a strumpet. What news?
(*Ham.* II.ii.220-27)

The imaginary map in *Hamlet* shifts the target of the obscenity from a mortal woman in *Errors* to a divine figure. Hamlet respects Horatio and speaks to him in honourable and sincere language; in contrast, when addressing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he deliberately uses irreverent and bawdy language, fully aware of their sycophancy and moral decay.

In Act 3, Scene 4, Hamlet relentlessly condemns his mother's behaviour, even after she pleads for him to stop. Gertrude, overwhelmed, protests:

GERTRUDE O Hamlet, speak no more.
Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

HAMLET Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

(*Ham.* III.iv.88-95)

This scene is emotionally painful and psychologically intense: Hamlet's moral revulsion manifests as verbal assault, and Gertrude becomes a figure of deep discomfort and distress. The dynamic here — of one character punitively pushing speech to excess, while the other withdraws in protest — appears earlier in *1 Henry IV* (1597-8), but takes on a completely different tone. In *1 Henry IV*, the same structure plays out comically between Worcester and Hotspur, where Worcester tries to speak reasonably, while the impulsive Hotspur drowns him out with irrepressible ranting:

WORCESTER You start away,
And lend no ear unto my purposes.
Those prisoners you shall keep –

HOTSPUR Nay, I will. That's flat!

...

WORCESTER Hear you, cousin, a word.

HOTSPUR All studies here I solemnly defy

...

WORCESTER Farewell, kinsman. I'll talk to you
When you are better tempered to attend.

(*IH4* I.iii.214-32)

Though structurally similar to Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude, the Worcester-Hotspur exchange in *1 Henry IV* is shaped by exuberance rather than psychological torment. Hotspur's outburst, though obstinate and disruptive, carries a kind of manic charm; his emotional volatility and theatrical vehemence render him less threatening than irresistibly comic. His refusal to listen makes him exasperating, but never alienating — a portrait of youthful impulsiveness and endearing bluster.

One striking example of Shakespeare's neutrality lies in the question of succession in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare lived in a culture dominated by primogeniture, in which the eldest son inherits the crown, and his earlier history plays, especially *Henry IV* and *Henry VI*, repeatedly emphasise the catastrophic consequences of usurpation. This naturally predisposes readers to assume that Claudius has seized a throne that rightfully belongs to Hamlet, since Hamlet says he wants to be king:

HAMLET Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon

He that hath killed my king, and whored my mother,
Popped in between th'election and my hopes.
(*Ham.* V.ii.63-65)

But *Hamlet* does not follow the logic of primogeniture. Instead, it presents a system of elective monarchy: Claudius is clearly elected by the court, a system more reminiscent of the tanistry²⁹ in *Macbeth* than the rigid hereditary line in the histories. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality sets a trap and lures the misled audience into trusting Hamlet's unreliable narrative.

The echoes between *Hamlet* and earlier plays are abundant, even within the first three acts. The ghost of Hamlet's father, for instance, blames only his brother Claudius and spares the Queen, a gesture reminiscent of Henry VI's indulgent, indiscriminate loyalty to his wife, though the two kings are vastly different in temperament. In *Henry VI*, powerful lords overshadow the king; in *Hamlet*, Polonius is likewise a powerful minister, yet he is rendered almost in the mode of a court fool. I have chosen *Hamlet* as a focal play in this introduction because it demonstrates how Shakespeare revisits earlier dramatic situations and themes, reshapes them through the lens of a terrible neutrality and alters key variables to produce radically different outcomes.

* * *

The thesis considers four major themes and is divided into five chapters: religion, politics (in two chapters), law, and love. These four themes aim to demonstrate the breadth of Shakespeare's engagement with different subjects. Each chapter explores Shakespeare's terrible neutrality through three to four subtopics and examines each subtopic in the context of all the plays. For each theme, the analysis identifies what it takes to be the most representative plays in the Shakespeare canon and applies the most appropriate approaches and perspectives to investigate Shakespeare's terrible neutrality: comprehensive, impartial, neither partisan nor one-sided, inclusive of both the moral and the immoral, yet remaining healthy and humanistic. By not automatically siding with any theme, Shakespeare's terrible neutrality enables him to test both the limitations and the possible value of each

²⁹ *Tanistry* was a Gaelic system of succession, historically associated with Scotland and Ireland, in which the ruler was not succeeded by his eldest son but was elected from among the adult males of the ruling kin-group, typically on the basis of fitness to rule rather than strict heredity. Shakespeare alludes to this elective principle in *Macbeth*, where Macbeth, without being Duncan's eldest son, is able to be king and, after Duncan's death, has opportunity to be elected as king.

thematic position. Shakespeare's neutral stance also enables him to construct similar topics and scenarios around shared themes, which in turn allows him to generate contradictory outcomes and examine the variability of character traits across similar dramatic situations. Together, the five chapters seek to cover as many plays and poems as possible so that the study may achieve a genuinely comprehensive perspective.

In Chapter 1, I discuss Shakespeare's terrible neutrality in relation to religion, where it is manifest in two layers of scepticism in religion and its function. In the first instance, many religious figures in his plays exploit religion to achieve their worldly purposes — in other words, Shakespeare's neutrality with regard to religion is revealed in his exploration of its secular function. Secondly, the cruelty of the gods inspires awe in human beings. The first section is examined through the method of confessionalization — the techniques developed by both Protestants and Catholics to persuade believers — in order to analyse the ways in which Shakespeare's characters employ religious language for secular ends. In plays after 1604, such as *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well* (1603–6), *Pericles* (1608), and *The Winter's Tale* (1611), certain characters (especially women) do precisely this. We cannot ascertain whether or not they are truly pious, but they succeed in achieving their goals through religious discourse, and Shakespeare's portrayal of them is largely positive. For the second layer of scepticism, I turn to the tragedies *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*, which are set in pre-Christian societies, where the indifference and cruelty of the gods engender tragedy: there is no salvation, only helpless suffering. Shakespeare's portrayal of religion or divine beings is terrible in tragedies, but this is the nature of tragedy.

The third part of this first chapter will discuss how Shakespeare explores religion's function in meeting psychological needs. Returning to the romances, Shakespeare expresses a partial affirmation of religion: it is not merely a social or political tool, but possesses certain merits, particularly in offering a psychological consolation superior to the patience enjoined by Stoicism, which represses inner suffering in silence. Shakespeare's neutrality in religion is reflected not only in his both positive and negative stance on the function of religion, but also in the way he locates religion's consolatory power outside religion itself; literature, for example, offers an alternative source of solace.

In chapters 2 and 3, I investigate Shakespeare's terrible neutrality in politics from three angles. The first angle (chapter 2) concerns Shakespeare's questioning about whether political theory can truly guide political practice. This will be developed in two sections. The first section considers royal marriages — mostly those of Edward IV, Henry VI, and Henry VIII — to examine how marital

alliances in royal families function in theory and practice. The second section studies the political decisions of kings — mostly of Henry VIII, Richard II, and Henry VI — whose similar strategies lead to drastically different outcomes. Both sections aim to show the way these monarchs stumble over political principles in theory, yet achieve paradoxical results in practice, and this demonstrates Shakespeare's terrible neutrality as a reflection of the unpredictabilities and uncertainties of political reality. The second angle (chapter 3) investigates the incompatibility between politics and morality through the life and political career of Henry V. Politics requires continual action, measured by the maximisation of interest. This means that even the most successful king is flawed: he is compelled to sacrifice particular loyalties and moral claims so those interests that can be maximised, whether it means executing prisoners of war, severing friendships, or bearing profound psychological wounds. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality is revealed through reflections of and on the very essence of politics.

A third angle (also chapter 3) explores the defects inherent in every form of government, especially in the *Henry IV* plays and the Roman plays. Shakespeare's neutrality is manifested in a scepticism toward monarchy, senatorial rule, republicanism, democratic-leaning polities, transitional mixed regimes, as well as in his distrust of extreme forms, such as absolutism and anarchy. None is flawless. But Shakespeare does gesture towards a humanistic, moderate solution: with a virtuous ruler, even an imperfect polity may achieve relatively good outcomes.

Chapter 4 examines Shakespeare's terrible neutrality in relation to law. His neutrality here lies in the question of whether legislative justice and procedural justice can truly realise substantive justice — an inquiry into the very essence of law. Shakespeare creates in each play a distinctive legal world, with embedded flaws in legislation and procedure shaped by politics, religion, and other agendas. His neutrality is expressed through his purposive approach, probing how far the goals of law can achieve fairness for all groups. In some plays, by dramatising elements of injustice, Shakespeare asks whether legislation, procedure, and enforcement are just, with different combinations yielding different outcomes: legislative justice with procedural injustice (*Measure for Measure*); legislative injustice with procedural justice (*The Comedy of Errors*); legislative justice, procedural injustice, with just officials (*Much Ado About Nothing*); legislative and procedural justice undermined by unjust officials (*The Merchant of Venice*). Shakespeare's neutrality in law enables him to transcend the legal confines of his own age and engage with legal theories across different eras. It allows him to apprehend the core of law, in which legislation and procedure serve humanism and the dignity of the individual.

In the final chapter (chapter 5), I discuss Shakespeare's terrible neutrality regarding romantic love. Romantic love was not the highest form of love in Shakespeare's age, since religious love stood above it. Renaissance sonneteers, when writing about romantic love, often subordinated it to divine love. Shakespeare's neutrality lies in his refusal to sanctify or idealise romantic love: he accepts human imperfection within it. This chapter has three parts. The first addresses inconstancy, the characters' changes of heart. It focuses on *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality is evident in the way he writes the most beautiful love poetry for the faithless Proteus, and even defends the proverbially unfaithful Cressida's inconstancy while deeply aware her inconstancy cannot be romanticised or beautified). The second part is concerned with jealousy without self-knowledge, considers the various 'Othellos' across Shakespeare's canon, comparing Othello with figures such as Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Iago in *Othello*, Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Posthumus in *Cymbeline*, and Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. All these men are jealous yet lack self-knowledge. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality allows him to rework the same model across different characters and situations to achieve a comprehensive understanding. The third part turns to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Although Shakespeare cannot alter the historical fact of Antony and Cleopatra's defeat, he deeply admires this couple. They calculate against each other, yet love profoundly. Their relationship epitomises Shakespearean terrible neutrality at its most engaged: at once realistic and supremely romantic. Shakespeare does not let Octavius defeat them; only their own love for each other can defeat them.

It is precisely this refusal to take sides or to define that enables Shakespeare to take the side of all and to define all. He embraces the world in its full complexity — its variety, its paradoxes, its imperfections, and its beauty. Just as, in the Introduction, I quote *Hamlet* to exemplify Shakespeare's terrible neutrality, in the Conclusion I turn to the late plays and its relationship to his earlier plays to demonstrate, one final time, how this terrible neutrality echoes throughout Shakespeare's career.

CHAPTER ONE – RELIGION

It is not so with Him who all things knows
As 'tis with us that square our guess by shows;
But most it is presumption in us when
The help of heaven we count the act of men.
(*AWW* II.i.149–52)¹

In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena criticises the king for refusing the treatment she has to offer — pleading that he see her as one sent by God to save him. In refusing her, the king symbolically would be refusing God. Her speech moves him to accept her help, precisely because his faith makes him responsive to the idea of divine intervention through her. However, if any character in Shakespeare's early plays — in the Henry VI tetralogy, for instance — were to speak these lines, no reader would expect the language to enter the other characters' souls and change their lives. Religious language in the early plays is never as powerful or as meaningful as it becomes with Shakespeare's first endeavour under the reign of James I, *Measure for Measure* (1604), in which Isabella tries to persuade Angelo using an emotional religious language. Then in *All's Well That Ends Well* (1603-6), Helena manages to persuade a reluctant king to embrace her treatment by taming him with someone even greater than he is. These two plays are, after all, or at least have been since the late nineteenth century, considered to be *problem plays*. As the name suggests, they are the embodiment of Shakespeare's terrible neutrality — the kind of deliberate neutrality that allows him to raise troubling questions without offering complete resolution.

The problem with religion in the early plays is that it has no meaningful function, either in personal life or in the workings of the state. In the tragedies, religion is remarkable by being absent when it is most needed and offers no solace to tragic characters who interrogate the failure of divine beings to bring justice. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality reaches its culmination in the way he treats religion in the tragedies — where it is simply useless, leaving the characters high and dry. Later, in the romances, where comedy supervenes upon tragedy, Shakespeare explores the possibility of replacing religion when religion is impotent or malign. Shakespeare's neutral stance with regard to religion allows

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Shakespeare quotations follow the New Cambridge Shakespeare editions.

him to explore religion comprehensively — not theologically, but its role in the lives of men and women: to acknowledge and distrust its socio-political function; to acknowledge and fear its psychological function; even to find a replacement in theatre. All the while, he justifies men and women who both believe and do not believe.

Shakespeare's attention to religion intensified as he forayed into the tragedies at the end of Elizabeth's reign. By 1604, one year after James I's accession to the throne in 1603, Shakespeare eventually dived into religion, hoping to investigate the extent to which religion could solve human problems. Though the Elizabethan era offered him ample opportunity to observe religion, religion did not assume a leading role in Shakespeare's drama until the Jacobean era. Shakespeare was born in 1564, thirty years after Henry VIII was declared Head of the English Church by the Acts of Supremacy (1534), eleven years after Mary I's restoration of Catholicism (1553), and six years after Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne and resumed the Protestant Reformation (1558) — two reformations and a restoration that had seen the prosecution of *both* Protestants *and* Catholics.² Though Shakespeare was born and retired in a Protestant England, in other words, his parents' generation had been born Catholics and forced to convert to Protestantism, before becoming Catholics again, then Protestants again.

It is hardly possible that the Counter-Reformation efforts of the Elizabethan era and the older generation's fear of betraying their religious allegiances did not affect Shakespeare. In the year of his birth, his father, John Shakespeare, as a chamberlain of Stratford-Upon-Avon, had workmen whitewash the local Catholic church, The Gild of the Holy Cross, defacing its frescos. Though a public servant obliged to put the transition to Protestantism into practice in his town, John Shakespeare may well have embraced the opposite faith. A document signed by John alleging his Catholicism was discovered by Shakespeare scholar Edmond Malone, though he later doubted its authenticity.³ One way or another, the older

² The historical details in this chapter are based on Robert Bucholz. *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

³ According to Stephen Greenblatt, the six-leaf manuscript was found by a bricklayer who retiled the house of Shakespeares in the eighteenth century. It was sewn together and secretly kept between the tiling and the rafters. It reached Edmond Malone, who published it but doubted its authenticity because of its handwriting and spelling. Greenblatt thinks that, though Malone doubted it, the manuscript is likely genuine because its source—a formulary written by Cardinal Carlo Borromeo—was later discovered, and the Jesuits Campion and Parsons, who stayed with Borromeo in Milan, could have obtained the text directly from him. The manuscript is linked to Shakespeare's family through the Midlands network of Catholic sympathizers: Campion might have distributed copies in Lapworth, near Stratford, at the home of Sir William Catesby, a relative by marriage of Shakespeare's mother's family, the Ardens (101). Greenblatt argues that not only John Shakespeare but also William

generation's traumatic experience may well have led to Shakespeare's reluctance to invoke religion in his early plays.

James I's ascension to the throne gave Shakespeare a signal that the future England would remain Protestant, and the 1604 and 1606 Hampton Court Conferences and the 1605 Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot may have accelerated Shakespeare's quest in religion.⁴ During the Hampton Court conferences, James I watched sermons, debated with puritans, and proposed the King James Bible during the day, while watching plays in the evening. He hated extremism and resisted the policies the puritans attempted to impose upon him, preferring to "resolve outstanding religious differences".⁵ It is not my intention to establish a direct, cause-and-effect relationship between history and Shakespeare's plays, but it is clear that James I's religious policies find resonance in the two characters in *Measure for Measure*, Isabella and Angelo, who suffer from their respective extremist religious positions. The more neutral, rather than extremist, stance shared by Shakespeare and James I does not mean that Shakespeare followed James I in every step, however. The other main character, the Duke, is a parody of monarchs who take advantage of religion for political purposes. As James Shapiro observes, Shakespeare's decision not to write highly profitable court masques suggests that he was unwilling to ingratiate himself with power or to make compromises for worldly gain.⁶ In this light, his choice to compose a play in 1604 that, while skeptical towards religious extremism, implicitly admonishes James I aligns coherently with an independent stance. From this play on, Shakespeare can be seen to have embarked on his journey searching for the meanings and functions of religion.

The first section of this chapter is about "religious language": how characters use religious language for secular purposes in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*. However shocking it may appear to us, the use of religion for non-religious purposes was a normal socio-political practice. The origins of religious language can be found in the

Shakespeare held the Catholic faith. I take a different view that William Shakespeare represents all faiths in his work and it is difficult to determine his personal beliefs. Stephen Greenblatt. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.

⁴ Barnaby and Wry contend that *Measure for Measure* responds to James I's 1604 Hampton Court initiative by dramatizing the dangers of using religious rhetoric to legitimize secular political power. Andrew Barnaby and Joan Wry, "Authorized Versions: *Measure for Measure* and the Politics of Biblical Translation," *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1998, pp. 1225–54.

⁵ James Shapiro. *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*. Simon & Schuster, 2016: 101.

⁶ Shapiro, *The Year of Lear*, 4.

shared doctrinal territory of Catholicism and Protestantism and in the ambiguous social and religious status of women in early modern England. Just as Catholicism and Protestantism created their own religious languages for communal, doctrinal, and textual use, Shakespeare created his religious language for dramatic, interpersonal use. The way the characters create their own religious language bypasses the doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism and exploits their similarities. In *Measure for Measure* (1604) and *All's Well That Ends Well* (1603-6), there are comparable uses of religious language by the characters to get what they want. Helena in *All's Well*, created after Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, is already a more refined version of religious character in her religious language and religious tricks. All the religious characters in the two plays are controversial, with some corrupt male characters like Angelo and, arguably, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, but Shakespeare presents in an overall positive light the women and their use of religious language as a means to achieve their individual aims.

The second section in this chapter is religion's function in satisfying psychological needs, and it also traces back to a Stoic word that frequents Shakespeare's early plays: patience. Many of Shakespeare's characters use this word, and in many cases it expresses their response to a world of slings and arrows, suggesting that Stoicism was a common means for early modern Britons to find inner peace. As early as the start of Shakespeare's career, we can see minor characters struggling to find patience. In *Henry VI, Part 2*, Gloucester goes to visit his wife Eleanor while she is humiliated in a public cage and they have this conversation:

GLOUCESTER Be patient, gentle Nell; forget this grief.

DUCHESS Ah, Gloucester, teach me to forget myself!
(*1H6* II.iv.26-7)

Gloucester is an embodiment of patience in Shakespeare's works, but Eleanor does not believe in patience. Shakespeare offers an ephemeral sketch of a minor character's inability to console herself in the face of grief. Later, in Shakespeare's tragedies, Shakespeare becomes obsessed with the human confrontation with grief. There, stoic patience never works for leading characters like Timon and King Lear, in their pre-Christian settings.⁷ They

⁷ For stoic patience, Helen Hackett's interpretation echoes Shakespeare's idea here. In *The Elizabethan Mind*, Helen Hackett devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of Stoicism and Neostoicism. She defines Stoicism as a discipline that seeks to separate the mind from the body and worldly materials, through which one may attain inner peace by cultivating stoical patience. For Hackett, this reflects an early modern engagement with classical

explosively express their sorrow and curse the heavens for the injustice they suffer, but heaven never answers to their interrogation and agonies. The assumption of these tragic figures is that religion should bring them justice, and they are driven insane because religion fails to meet their psychological needs. Tragedy as a genre is irreconcilable with divine providence, and Shakespeare's concern is with the "wheel of fire" to be endured by the tragic characters.

The third section resonates with the first two: where characters in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* deploy religious language for individual purposes — such as medical remedies, marriage, and legal matters — characters in the romances rely more heavily on miracles and divine providence for a more urgent aim: redemption. Shakespeare's tragic characters find no consolation or solution in religion, but those in his romances discover a glimmer of hope, which brings psychological peace. Across the four romances, though, reliance on the divine gradually shifts toward a reliance on human agency in achieving redemption, and reconciliation with religion remains inseparable from theatricality.

Section 1: Religious Language

Measure for Measure

Measure for Measure is the story of a reigning Duke, Vicentio, leaving the state for his deputy, Angelo, to manage, especially to deal with the problem of his people's unruly sexuality. But the puritanical Angelo fails in his duty in seeking to seduce the novitiate or nun-to-be Isabella in exchange for her brother's life. When Isabella refuses the proposal, willing to let her brother die, the Duke camouflages himself as a friar to intervene.

Shakespeare's sources come from G. B. Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565) and George Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), and in both sources the "Angelo" characters offer the bed deal, but Isabella's equivalent characters are not novitiates, neither are the Duke's equivalents fake friars. The "Isabella" characters in the sources both agree to give themselves to the "Angelo" characters, whereas Shakespeare's Isabella refuses to sleep with

philosophy as a means to restrain emotional turbulence. She observes that, in the Elizabethan period, many writers explored this Stoic method to suppress passion and unruly impulse, yet most of these attempts ultimately ended in failure. Helen Hackett. *The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty*. Yale University Press, 2022: 70-76.

Angelo for religious reasons. With a puritanical deputy, a nun-to-be, and a fake friar played by the Duke as its central characters, *Measure for Measure* has a strongly religious-political theme, with human sexuality as the strategic nexus of politics and religion. We hear resonances of this in all the critical editions of the play. Arden editors A. R. Braunmuller and Robert N. Watson, for example, describe marriage in early modern England as both a church sacrament and a major component of the social order, the means by which sexuality is translated and contained by society.⁸ In the same vein, Norton editor Katherine Eisman Maus investigates the austere social and religious roots of “celibacy” in the play.⁹

In *Measure for Measure*, sexuality is important to both religion and the state because it is the product of confessional techniques and reflects directly on the notion of the body politic. For Michel Foucault,¹⁰ in the recently published fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality*, subtitled *Confessions of the Flesh* (2018), the combination of sexuality and power is a Christian epistemological paradigm (épistémè). In the early Christian period, according to Foucault, controlling sexuality – overcoming the problem of the flesh – was a vital ethical issue which received intense examination and manipulation.¹¹ The basic discipline of controlling one’s problematic flesh required that “one should work on oneself” [*exercice de soi sur soi*]. As the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* demonstrates, Christianity mandated the interrogation and disciplining of the individual’s most private life: his or her sexual life. The motivating idea behind medieval asceticism had been that, if one could not control one’s body, the state, too, would fall apart.¹² Asceticism proscribes all forms of physical indulgence, and psychologically requires the technique of confession:¹³ thus

⁸ William Shakespeare. *Measure for Measure: Third Series*. Edited by A.R. Braunmuller and R.N. Watson, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020: 26.

⁹ Katharine Eisman Maus, in her introduction to *Measure for Measure*. William Shakespeare. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al., Third edition. ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2016: 2172-75.

¹⁰ Much *Measure for Measure* scholarship warns against Foucauldian theories and historicism, because the play is not all about power. I do not believe the play is all about power, either. In *Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure*, Debora Kuller Shuger considers using Foucault but in the end thinks that Foucault only examines 18th century sexuality so his theories don’t apply to early modern England (174). *The History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh*, however, addresses Kuller’s concern about the anachronistic application of Foucauldian theory because the book studies the history of all Christian eras, including the early modern period. Thus *The History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh* is historically more suitable for investigating the relationship between sexuality, religion and politics.

¹¹ Sverre Raffnsøe. “Foucault’s Confessions of the Flesh. The Fourth Volume of the History of Sexuality.” *Foucault Studies*, 2018, pp. 393-421, doi:10.22439/fs.v0i25.5593, at 402-03.

¹² Raffnsøe, “Foucault’s Confessions”, 401.

¹³ Raffnsøe, “Foucault’s Confessions”, 403.

Foucault argues Christian confession starts with confession of the flesh, or self-vivisection about sexuality, in order for the church to carry out its intense inquisition and manipulation.

Moreover, scrutiny about the flesh became a technique not only of the church, but also of the state. Especially for Jacobean England, where the king was the head of both the church and the state, to control and discipline sexuality meant restoring order to society, and failure to do so would reflect the state's incompetence. In *Measure for Measure*, this link between the individual body and the collective state leads to the Duke's worry that his people's unruly sexuality will ruin the state, so it is not difficult to see why the secular head of state camouflages himself as a friar to hear his subjects' confessions of their innermost, sexual secrets. Foucault's theory elucidates Shakespeare's perceptiveness in singling out sexuality to stage his play on religion and politics.

Debora Kuller Shuger provides a significant account of the differing attitudes of civil and ecclesiastical law toward sexuality in *Measure for Measure*. She observes that the surveillance of sexual behaviour represents the most extreme form of intrusion and control over the private lives of citizens. According to the *ius commune*, state authorities should not possess unlimited rights to pry into their citizens' private lives, nor do they have the jurisdiction publicly to adjudicate matters of a sexual misconduct. In canon law, the canonists believe that, while the public punishment of sexual offences belongs to the "external forum" of judicial procedure, confession, understood as a form of "self-incrimination", belongs instead to the "penitential forum", where the priest has the authority to hear it.¹⁴ I argue that, in *Measure for Measure*, precisely because the right of surveillance lies with the Church, the Duke, as head of the state, seeks to appropriate that ecclesiastical privilege. Shakespeare disapproves of both the state's and the Church's treatment of sexuality, as represented by Angelo and the Duke. When Church and State merge, the resulting concentration of unrestrained power inevitably produces disorder and controversy.

In *Measure for Measure*, the one problem resulting from this union of religion and the state is that the politicisation of religious language is liable to betray the aims and aspirations of genuine religion. Although it is essential for Protestant England to blend religion into everyday language, one side-effect is that language containing religious ideas and symbols

¹⁴ Debora Kuller Shuger. *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure*. Palgrave, 2001: 105.

may undermine religion. Isabella and Angelo take advantage of biblical concepts when trying to persuade each other, not to exalt their God or enforce their piety, but to serve their own selfish purposes. Isabella resorts to the strong Christian term “mercy” to persuade Angelo that, if he were to release her brother Claudio, his exhibition of mercy would show the greatest grace:

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

(*MM* II.ii.64)

On his part, Angelo invokes the stronger Christian ideas of “charity” and “redemption” when cajoling Isabella into giving up a small part of her body to redeem her brother:

ANGELO Might there not be a charity in sin
To save this brother’s life?

(*MM* II. iv. 63-4)

In both cases, biblical theology is pragmatic – even cynical – rather than spiritual, and religion reduces to emotional and political games between Angelo and Isabella. Religious language here is just rhetoric.

The fact that the same technique of using religious language for secular ends is exercised by a Catholic novice and a Puritan politician betrays the similarity between the communal techniques of Protestants and Catholics in the early modern period. According to Foucault, the “confession of the flesh” is not just a Catholic practice, but a Christian practice more generally, one that radiated more widely through Christians’ social lives. Twentieth-century German historians Ernst Walter Zeeden and Wolfgang Reinhard, both of Catholic background, and Heinz Schilling of Protestant background, agree that all the different churches created their own language or discourse in order to persuade, control, and exclude. The term in German historical scholarship is “confessionalisation”, a word introduced by Thomas Betteridge to Shakespeare’s Elizabethan world.¹⁵ In Helen Hackett’s study of the Elizabethan search for the self, she illustrates the two churches’ similar approaches to

¹⁵ Thomas Betteridge. “Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316779224.001>.

“writing passions”: both Protestant and Catholic churches required their followers to turn inward and renew their bond with God through self-scrutiny, inner struggle, sighs, and tears.¹⁶ According to Hackett, the technique of “writing passions” in devotional poetry also found its way into secular poetry, where poets dwelt on inner sadness for erotic or political purposes. Despite religious poets like Robert Southwell advocating for a return to religious realm, it was impossible to prevent secular literary genres from taking the exercise to the next level.¹⁷

The fact that Isabella's and Angelo's use of the religious language is not religiously motivated does not mean that their language is not dramatic, suggestive, and aesthetically appealing. In the much-quoted series of conversations in *Measure for Measure* in which Isabella arouses Angelo's sexual desire,¹⁸ she questions his authority by invoking "merciful heaven" to mock his sublunary power:

ISABELLA ...but man, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep, who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.

(*MM* II.ii.121-3)

Isabella's eloquence unbalances their conversation and renders Angelo speechless: "Why do you put these sayings upon me?" (II.ii.137). Isabella points out the truth that merely human intelligence can never appraise God-given imperatives,¹⁹ so Angelo can never know how far the "measure" he metes out to her brother Claudio violates God's will.

The erotic effect of Isabella's religious language is acknowledged by her brother Claudio, who sends his sister to Angelo knowing her ability to "move men":

CLAUDIO in her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect
Such as move men

¹⁶ Helen Hackett. *The Elizabethan Mind*. Yale University Press, 2022.

¹⁷ Hackett, *The Elizabethan Mind*, 95.

¹⁸ G. Wilson Knight calls the sequence of conversation the pivot of the play's movement. G. Wilson Knight. *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*. Routledge, 2001: 82.

¹⁹ A. D. Nuttall. "Measure for Measure: Quid Pro Quo?". *Shakespeare Studies (Columbia)*, vol. 4, 1969: 240.

(MM I.ii.163-5).

Anatomising his inner self, Angelo reveals the intimate relationship between religious language and erotic feelings:

ANGELO Oh fie, fie, fie,
What dost thou or what art thou, Angelo?
Dost thou desire her foully for those things
That make her good?

(MM II.ii.176-9)

Angelo feels aroused by the piety conveyed by her beautiful religious language, not to mention by the thinly veiled erotic passion of the Christian martyrdom she conjures:

ISABELLA were I under the terms of death,
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame.

(MM II.iv.99-104)

Harold Bloom jokingly remarks that Angelo's heaven would be a nunnery,²⁰ which is only half true — for while Angelo's problem lies in his confusion of religious admiration with lust, not all nuns speak as seductively as Isabella. It is hard to imagine religious language of any rhetorical value working in the same way in Shakespeare's early plays. When the citizens of Angier in *King John* deny being subjects of either the French or the British king by saying "A greater power than we denies all this" (II.i.368), both the audience and the characters know the two kings will remain unmoved by this cliché about divine power and the citizens resemble what Blanch describes in Constance: "The Lady Constance speaks not from her faith, /But from her need" (III.i.210-1). Angelo's reaction in *Measure for Measure*, however, suggests that Shakespeare has discovered religion and religious language can bring about real change.

The seductive beauty of religious language draws attention to another problem in *Measure for Measure*: the irreconcilable tension between religion and humanity. Angelo translates his admiration for Isabella into rape and betrayal, not into love letters or a marriage proposal. The transformation of Angelo's extreme celibacy into extreme erotic behaviour suggests that the strict sexual denial mandated by religion is only likely to provoke sexual

²⁰ Harold Bloom. *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human*. Penguin Publishing Group, 1998: 366.

excitement,²¹ as the absolutism of religious practice denies basic human needs like sexuality. Absolutism also leads Isabella down the path of violence. When Claudio begs her to sleep with Angelo to save his life, she curses him:

ISABELLA Oh, you beast!
Oh faithless coward, oh dishonest wretch! . . .
Die, perish. Might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.

(*MM* III.i.136-47)

Her reaction is Shakespeare's innovation; the "Isabellas" in Cinthio and Whetstone, as I said, agree to sleep with Angelo. This shocking anger and cruelty toward her brother have received harsh criticism, which drags her down to the moral level of Angelo. Julian Lamb thinks that, in Isabella's and Angelo's presenting themselves as morally blameless followers of principle, both show themselves morally indifferent to the specific circumstances of their actions.²² Brian Gibbons calls her "immature", too "absolute",²³ and other critics (in the words of Norton editor Katherine Eisman Maus) think her language "chilling and selfish".²⁴ Isabella's reaction signifies the classic paradox of religion and humanity: she chooses to remain chaste and abandon her brother's life.²⁵

Throughout the history of extreme religious movements, countless believers have been urged to betray or forsake their loved ones for the sake of faith. In such moments, religion no longer guides life but devours it. John Parker reminds us that, even as early as the first scene, Isabella flouts the rules of the convent by desiring even stricter restraints. Being an extremely

²¹ Maus (ed.), *Measure for Measure*, 2174.

²² Julian Lamb. "Finding the Remedy: *Measure for Measure*, Puns, Rules." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2017, pp. 374-92, doi:10.1353/shq.2017.0041, at 386.

²³ Brian Gibbons, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Measure for Measure*. Edited by Brian Gibbons, Cambridge University Press, 2006: 27.

²⁴ Maus (ed.), *Measure for Measure*, 2175.

²⁵ Molière employs sharp satire in his comic farce *Tartuffe* to portray figures like Isabella, who do not mind sacrificing their families in the name of so-called truth:

ORGON I've learnt from him, the truth is clearer in my eyes.
He's taught me to reject the things I used to prize.
The people that I thought I loved, I now deny,
And I could watch my mother, children, wife all die,
And, shall I tell you what? I just couldn't care less. (*Tartuffe* I.v.275-79)

Maya Slater (ed.). *Molière: The Misanthrope, Tartuffe, and Other Plays*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

strict nun, her plea for her brother for forgiveness looks hypocritical, and her subsequent violence to her brother makes her not hypocritical enough for her two suitors.²⁶ Thus, whether she is seen as hypocritical, extreme, or both, Isabella remains a deeply ambivalent, profoundly controversial figure.

From the cases of Isabella and Angelo, it seems that Shakespeare has no sympathy for religious extremists, much like James I, who hated both the pro-Catholic Gunpowder plotters and the Puritans who pressured him at the Hamilton Court Conference. But Shakespeare differs from the king on whether religion should be integrated into politics. For James I, being both the head of the Church and the head of the State necessitated the integration of religion and politics. For Shakespeare, however, the two are incompatible, and the king himself must bear responsibility for the dilemma created by this incompatibility. The Duke is successful, and, as his name *Vincentio* suggests, he “conquers” all citizens of Vienna through his intricate machinations.²⁷ Yet, though one of the few ‘successful’ rulers in Shakespeare’s plays, he nevertheless cannot escape scrutiny — for even the most accomplished Shakespearean rulers tread a path to success that is far from unblemished.

If we put the Duke under scrutiny, we find him “practically risky and morally dubious”.²⁸ The major success of the Duke is in saving Claudio’s life, unveiling the hypocrisy of Angelo, and finding himself a wife who represents the virtue of religion. The way to his political success is not through acting as a Duke, however — in fact he runs away from his duty — but by camouflaging as a friar. I agree with Jennifer Rust that, in the play, no other character confounds political and religious authority so thoroughly.²⁹ He performs his political duty as a confessor who pries into people’s innermost secrets: their sexuality. Consequently, he persuades everyone to do morally controversial things that are too risky to guarantee an ideal outcome. The Provost faces severe punishment by not following the order and executing someone else. The reputation of both Isabella and Mariana is at risk because they both “lose” their virginities. The Duke even keeps the heartbroken Isabella from the

²⁶ John Parker. “Antinomian Shakespeare: English Drama and Confession across the Reformation Divide.” *Shakespeare and Judgment*, edited by Kevin Curran, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 175-94, at 190.

²⁷ Carolyn Sale. “‘Practis[Ing] Judgment with the Disposition of Natures’: *Measure for Measure*, the ‘Discursive’ Common Law, and the ‘Open Court’ of the Theater.” *Shakespeare and Judgment*, edited by Kevin Curran, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 115-38, at 124.

²⁸ Gibbons (ed.), *Measure for Measure*, 37.

²⁹ Jennifer R. Rust. “Religious and Political Impasses in *Measure for Measure*.” *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*. Ed. Hannibal Hamlin, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 184-99, at 184.

knowledge that her brother is still alive, nearly to the last minute of the play. Marcia Riefer goes so far as to argue that the Duke's manipulation of Isabella is even more troubling than Angelo's overtly sexual intentions toward her.³⁰ By manipulating others under the guise of a Friar, the Duke shows how religion takes a perilous detour into power. In Act 5, Scene 1, Angelo compares the Duke with God:

ANGELO When I perceive your grace, like power divine,
Hath looked upon my passes.

(*MM* V.i.362-3)

What Angelo does not know is that the Duke achieves the appearance of divinity by doing the very opposite of God: he tempts Angelo into sin. When Isabella decides not to save her brother, she determines to refuse Angelo's proposal at any cost — there is no chance of Angelo sleeping with Isabella. Who, then, enforces the completion of Angelo's act of crime? Angelo's monologue searches for the answer, too: "The tempter or the tempted, who sins most, ha?" (*MM* II.ii.168). Angelo is in a state of temptation, not action. But with the Duke's scheme, Angelo walks into two crimes. He sleeps with "Isabella" and betrays their deal by executing Claudio. If the Duke is Angelo's tempter and leads Angelo to crime, is the Duke God or devil? According to Harold Bloom, the play is Shakespeare's evasion of Christian belief and Christian morals.³¹

The male characters in the play all seek inner peace in a safe religious environment, but the efficacy of the practice remains ambiguous. The Duke does not give any clear instruction to Angelo or Escalus before he goes in Act 1, Scene 1, but in Act 1, Scene 3, he shares all his plans with a real friar. In the conversations between the Duke and the real friar, the friar seldom speaks but to encourage the Duke to confide all his political plans: "May your grace speak of it?" (*MM* I.iii.7). The confessional setting must have created a non-judgmental space for the Duke to talk, so he gladly pours out the whole story, even his Machiavellian plan to examine Angelo. During the talk, the Duke is even afraid that the friar gets bored by his long speech and requires interactions:

DUKE. Now, pious sir,
You will demand of me why I do this.

³⁰ Marcia Riefer. "'Instruments of Some More Mightier Member': The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1984, pp. 157-69, doi:10.2307/2869924, at 76.

³¹ Bloom, *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human*, 359.

FRIAR. Gladly, my lord.

(*MM* I.iii.17-9)

The Duke enjoys self-scrutinizing and confiding in the friar, and he knows that other characters will do the same. The Duke's confession is a form of self-indulgence, because it is unnecessary for him to disclose the entire story to the friar. This enjoyment is morbid. John Parker argues that this kind of confession invites people to linger on their sins for the sake of pleasure, while the friars merely perform a pay-to-play service that the Reformation sought to abolish.³²

But the Reformation repeated the practice in another way. Self-scrutiny, as an important technique in Catholic confession, is also found in Angelo's self-confiding, in which he repeatedly confesses his own sins:

ANGELO When I would pray and think, I think and pray
To several subjects: heaven hath my empty words
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel. Heaven in my mouth
As if I did but only chew his name,
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
Of my conception.

(*MM* II.iv.1-7)

Angelo's religious practice is typically Protestant. Instead of talking to a friar, Angelo confesses straight to God, dwelling on his inner struggles and turmoil, a technique later imitated by Catholics.³³ Angelo creates a space similar to Catholic confessional settings to confide and cleanse himself, though as I suggested earlier the extreme suppression of passion only leads to mental breakdown. The soliloquy from which I have just quoted ends with his seeing Isabella and proposing the bed deal to her. Likewise, after confessing to the Duke as friar and telling him that he "seek[s] to die" and can in this way "find life" (III.i.42-3), Claudio begs his sister to save his life with a Hamlet-like speech explaining how he fears death: "Ay, but to die and go we know not where... 'tis too horrible" (III.i.118-28). The easily over-turned confessions of Claudio and Angelo parallel the easily over-turned celibacy of Angelo. Both celibacy and confession are religious practices, and their fragility leads to scepticism about the actual efficacy of religion. It is also worth remarking, however, that

³² Parker, "Antinomian Shakespeare", 175-76.

³³ See Helen Hackett's *The Elizabethan Mind*, Chapter 3.

religious language does help the three characters' short-term psychological needs, and a short-term effect is still an effect.

If confession serves any political function within the Dukedom, it does so only when the Duke assumes the guise of a priest. In the sources of Whetstone and Cinthio, the Duke is a "lofty and remote figure",³⁴ one who does not intervene or design storylines. In Shakespeare, however, the Duke turns into a confessor, and gets all his information by inviting Isabella and Claudio into his "confessional". Echoing Foucault's philosophy in *Confessions of Flesh*, the Duke is well aware that he is using confessional settings to pry into others' sexuality and manipulate them for entirely secular purposes. It is very hard for Claudio truly to show the guilt of his licentiousness to any man in private unless he does so to a friar before his death. The Duke intervenes in Claudio's case knowing that, while the law can only take away Claudio's life, it is religion that can cleanse his soul. The Duke's new identity also grants him access to Isabella, who would never talk to any man about the bed deal unless that man were a friar.

When the Duke persuades Isabella and Mariana (Mariana's storyline happens offstage) into the bed trick, it is only halfway through the play — Act 3, Scene 1. From this point on, the power of religion weakens and the Duke will find it difficult, in his identity as a friar, to accomplish the tasks of saving Claudio's life, executing another prisoner (Barnardine), and unveiling Angelo. Shakespeare invents Barnardine, who refuses to talk to the Duke and leaves, to frustrate the Duke:

BARNARDINE I swear I will not die today for any man's persuasion.

DUKE But hear you -

BARNARDINE Not a word. If you have anything to say to me, come to my ward, for thence will not I today.

Exit

(*MM* IV.iii.51-4)

Both Paul Yachnin and Virginia Lee Strain argue the Duke should not have pardoned Barnardine simply on hearing Barnardine's refusal to die that day.³⁵ However, in this case,

³⁴ Gibbons (ed.), *Measure for Measure*, 36.

³⁵ See Virginia Lee Strain. "Preventive Justice in *Measure for Measure*" *Shakespeare and Judgment*. Edited by Curran Kevin, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 21-44. See also Paul Yachnin. "The Laws of *Measure for Measure*." *Shakespeare and Judgment* (ed. Curran), pp. 139-56.

the Duke remains passive, while Barnardine takes the active role. Disguised as a friar, the Duke fails in his duty to persuade Barnardine to pray. Without prayer, Barnardine cannot die, for the Duke is not acting as the head of state enforcing the law, but as a friar bound by spiritual law. Barnardine's refusal to pray downplays the function of confession, and his refusal to listen renders the Duke's religious language impotent. Barnardine thwarts the existence of religion, and even takes advantage of religion, by refusing to die: if he has not prayed, he cannot die. And Shakespeare creates a second character to frustrate the Duke, Lucio, who has 111 speeches, next after the Duke and Isabella, and whose lines comprise 11% of the total lines of the play. (Angelo speaks the same number of lines as Lucio but only has 83 conversations.³⁶) Lucio is a worse version of *Henry V*'s Williams. He is the one who makes the Duke realise that slanders will be aimed at him when he conceals his title. Act 5 gives the impression that everyone submits to the Duke, and Isabella offers no resistance to his proposal of marriage — no one dare challenge him publicly. Shakespeare's *neutrality* deliberately leaves the many moral and political and religious problems of this *problem play* suspended, unresolved.

All's Well That Ends Well

In *Measure for Measure*, religion is used by the monarch politically for the rule of the state, but in the plays afterwards it is the monarchs themselves who are being manipulated. Shakespeare's neutrality lies not only in variations in shaping the characters, but also in his refusal fully to condemn characters who exploit religion for secular purposes; instead, he often acknowledges, even admires, their intelligence and ingenuity. Helena in *All's Well* exhibits a passion for religion that is utilitarian, transforming her life in significant ways. As a low-born family physician's daughter, Helena persuades a stubborn king to accept her miraculous treatment, cures his incurable disease, and obliges him marry her to Bertram, an arrogant young count she deeply loves. Then Helena controversially wins her unwilling husband's agreement by fulfilling two other miraculous tasks.

Joan of Arc in *Henry VI*, acknowledged by the French and later by the Catholic Church for having performed miracles, has a notorious reputation in Shakespeare's plays as a malicious witch, while Helena, who can also perform miracles, is a saint. To many characters

³⁶ See RSC Shakespeare Introduction to *Measure for Measure*. In William Shakespeare. *The RSC Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Edited by Jonathan Bate and Rasmussen Eric, 2 ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022.

in the play, these accomplishments are without doubt miracles. Helena's religious language serves as her tool to convince and intimidate others by shaping herself as an agent of God. Before she performs the first miracle, her mistress, the Countess, is doubtful of the outcome, but Helena relies on her faith in a supernatural power, rather than on the power of her medical skills:

HELENA Inspired merit so by breath is barred.
It is not so with Him that all things knows
As 'tis with us that square our guess by shows;
But most it is presumption in us when
The help of heaven we count the act of men.
(*AWW* II.i.144-8)

She even threatens the king with natural disaster if he refuses to believe in the miracle she can create:

HELENA great seas have dried
When miracles have by the greatest been denied.
(*AWW* II.i.136-147)

In the source,³⁷ curing time is a cautious eight days, but here it is reduced by Helena to a miraculous forty-eight hours, which also suggests to characters like Lafeu the “very hand of heaven” (II.iii).³⁸

The treatment, however, is in exchange for something decidedly unreligious: a husband. The resistance of Bertram also raises the question of whether divine powers can be invoked to constrain a third party and bend his will. Bertram fights against the marriage by forcing Helena into another two seemingly impossible tasks: to get pregnant with his baby

³⁷ The original story comes from “Giletta of Narbon”, the ninth tale of the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Giletta, the daughter of a family physician, falls in love with Count Beltramo. The storyline is broadly the same, yet Shakespeare makes several crucial adaptations that render Helena more resourceful and devout, but also more morally ambiguous and risk-taking. For example, in Boccaccio's version, Giletta cures the King's disease, and it is the King who proclaims her a divine agent; in *All's Well That Ends Well*, however, Helena's claim to divine power is self-authorized. Whereas Giletta wins her mother-in-law's affection by managing the household after marriage, Helena's mother-in-law supports her from the very beginning. Moreover, while Giletta smoothly conceives, compensates the widow's daughter, bears children, and later appeals to the King for justice, Helena, already pregnant, undertakes an arduous journey with the widow's daughter to seek out the King, but their first attempt ends in failure. This added layer of physical and emotional hardship makes Shakespeare's version far more precarious, intensifying the reader's anxiety over whether Helena will eventually succeed. For the whole introduction of the story of the ninth tale of the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, see the New Cambridge William Shakespeare. *All's Well That Ends Well*. Edited by Russell A. Fraser and Alexander Leggatt, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

³⁸ John Dover Wilson, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *All's Well That Ends Well: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*. edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 2009: xi.

and get his ring. To get pregnant without a husband is to imitate the Virgin Mary, and virginity is another attribute making Helena a saint-like figure; the keywords “virgin”, “virginity”, “Dian” are constantly repeated in her speech to fashion her characteristic purity. The process of performing this “miracle”, however, is morally controversial: Helena must convince a virgin to “sleep” with Bertram. In the original story, the virgin’s mother never expresses any objection to or doubt about Helena’s plan. In Shakespeare’s adaptation, however, the mother of the virgin (Diana) thinks it is a dirty business which risks their reputation:

WIDOW Though my estate be fall'n, I was well born,
 Nothing acquainted with these businesses,
 And would not put my reputation now
 In any staining act.

(AWW III.vii.3-6)

It is characteristic of Shakespeare to see the complexity and dark side of the plots he adapts. In *Troilus and Cressida*, he famously alludes to the moral disaster behind the Trojan War: “all the argument is a whore and a cuckold” (II.iii). Here in *All’s Well*, Helena’s saint-like reputation is stained by the mere plan itself: asking a virgin to seduce a womaniser and thus endangering her virginity.

The scenario closely mirrors the sacrificial loss of reputation endured by Isabella and Mariana in the bed trick with Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, revealing the way Shakespeare repeatedly tests the same moral motif in different dramatic contexts. Here in Helena’s case particularly, as Michele Osherow remarks, Helena embodies two contrary aspects of the biblical tradition: both the mothers of manipulation, deception, and sexual trickery and the pure Virgin Mary.³⁹ Osherow argues that Shakespeare follows this biblical tradition and shows how Shakespeare neutralizes the terrible and the divine sides of Helena, tricking Bertram into bed and becoming pregnant as if reenacting Christ’s miraculous conception.

The tension between Helena’s miraculous image and her controversial methods is obvious even from the beginning, where her tears for her father’s death turn out to be tears for the absent Bertram:

HELENA I think not on my father...

³⁹ Michele Osherow. “She Is in the Right: Biblical Maternity and *All’s Well That Ends Well*.” In *All’s Well That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, edited by Gary Waller, Routledge, 2007, pp. 155-68, at 155.

What was he like?
I have forgot him: my imagination
Carries no favour in't but Bertram's...
(*AWW* I.i.81-5)

Her indifference to her recently deceased father is serious filial impiety, and looks even more offensive when she pours all her heart into Bertram's departure. It is interesting to note the way Bertram's disdain for her status as "a poor physician's daughter" mirrors her own intentional whitewash of her low status by forgetting her father and turning to a narrative of supernatural order. The "miracles", both explainable and inexplicable, seemingly both supernatural and artificial, not only sanctify Helena but at the same time paradoxically arouse suspicions about her sanctity.

While in her actions, Helena fashions herself into a controversial saint, her religious language is self-contradictory, too. Helen Wilcox and Suzanne Gossett argue that the religious expressions in Helena's language cannot be taken seriously, since Helena's interpretative strategy is of a reversible nature.⁴⁰ Wilcox and Gossett compare two opposite aspects of Helena's religious doctrine in Acts 1 and 2. In Act 1 she asserts:

HELENA Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven.
(*AWW* I.i.212-3)

Since free will is heaven sent, she resolves to stick to her will and go after Bertram. In Act 2, however, she reprimands the king because his wilful decision to abandon his treatment is blasphemous: "it is presumption in us when / The help of heaven we count the act of men" (*AWW* II.i.149-52) — two interpretations of an "awkwardly reversible nature".⁴¹ Or, as Susan Snyder concludes, the doctrines are grounded in psychology, rather than religion.⁴²

When it comes to Helena's love for Bertram, however, readers will find it baffling. In order to marry him, she manages to secure not his, but his mother's and the king's allegiance, an arguably arrogant move that objectifies him and offends his dignity. The seemingly pure

⁴⁰ Suzanne Gossett and Helen Wilcox, in their introduction to William Shakespeare. *All's Well That Ends Well: Third Series*. Edited by Suzanne Gossett and Helen Wilcox, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018: 143.

⁴¹ Helen Wilcox. "Shakespeare's Miracle Play? Religion in *All's Well, That Ends Well*." *Shakespearean Criticism*, vol. 122, 2009, pp. 1-91, at 56.

⁴² Susan Snyder. "*All's Well That Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Helens: Text and Subtext, Subject and Object." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1988, pp. 66-77, at 76.

and divine Helena can be frustratingly aggressive and self-centred. Helena expresses her desire (if not love) for Bertram from the beginning, but when Bertram leaves her for France, she stops speaking and focuses on action.⁴³ Is she still in love with Bertram, or does her resentment turn her quest into a loveless competition to save her reputation? Readers never quite know. Bertram, on the other hand, never loves her or anyone else throughout the play. His willingness to marry either Helena or Lafeu's daughter is rather a reluctant submission to authority than it is love, and his love affairs in France are merely passing desires. When fashioning herself into a saint with medical skills, virginity, and religiosity, Helena fails to sanctify her love for Bertram – if, indeed, it is love at all.⁴⁴

Helena's plan to win Bertram's love turns out to be a plan to get him to admit her identity as his wife, the usual ending of most Shakespearean comedies,⁴⁵ but with her devotional effort and religiosity, the ending is more ambiguous and at the same time more intriguing. The title "*All's Well That Ends Well*" suggests that all is not well *except* the ending. With already controversial self-fashioning tricks, in love and on the route to success, Helena is a figure with both saintly and secular qualities. Susan Snyder rightly thinks the play deliberately shows the difficulties and conflicts of imagining a woman as an active, desiring subject,⁴⁶ but James Kuzner also rightly contends that Helena subverts the law (of patriarchy) through her submission.⁴⁷ Shakespeare's terrible neutrality operates here to complicate Helena's path toward success in a world governed entirely by men. He admires Helena, while acknowledging that, for most women, success comes only through the experience of shame, risk, and uncertainty. In *All's Well*, religion collaborates with an aspiring female agent to propel the plot and solve her problems. By solving her personal problems, Helena

⁴³ Susan Snyder also finds the same pattern, in which she "keeps us close to her feelings and motives" but then strangely remains in "a deafening silence". Snyder, "*All's Well That Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Helens", 69.

⁴⁴ For more of Shakespeare's terrible neutrality on love, see the Chapter on Love.

⁴⁵ Kathryn Schwarz claims that "Helena's intervention does not invert patriarchal hierarchies but seeks and claims their restoration" (227). I take this as a form of praise for Helena, rather than a criticism of her simply because she does not wholly resist patriarchy. In that patriarchal age, a woman who wished to achieve anything had to act intelligently within the system rather than against it. By adhering to patriarchal structures, Helena is able to manipulate them and ultimately secure what she desires. I will continue to develop this argument in the remainder of this chapter and in the chapter on love. Kathryn Schwarz. "'My Intents Are Fix'd': Constant Will in '*All's Well That Ends Well*'." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2007, pp. 200-27, doi:10.1353/shq.2007.0028, at 227.

⁴⁶ Snyder, "*All's Well That Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Helens", 77.

⁴⁷ James Kuzner. "*All's Well That Ends Well* and the Art of Love." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2017, pp. 215-40, doi:10.1353/shq.2017.0027, at 219.

incidentally helps with the state problem, the health of the state relying on a low-born woman's will to love.

Section 2: Religion and Human Psychological Needs

1604-1606 not only saw the creation of *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*, but also the tragedies of *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*, where Shakespeare delves into religion in a different genre and a different era: the non-Christian era.

Timon of Athens

When we enter into Shakespeare's late non-Christian plays, it is salutary to realise what freedom they grant Shakespeare. As far as morality is concerned, the portrayal of classical gods differs between the Renaissance and classical thought systems. As Renaissance movements brought about a heightened cultural acknowledgement of classical gods, early modern literature began to focus on the gods' positive qualities, rather than on their immoral sides. For instance, the virginity of Diana and the valour of Mars are revered in *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Similarly, in Spenser's *Epithalamion* and *Prothalamion*, the god of marriage, Hymen, is invoked to bless married life. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which classical gods are invoked to promote or perform immoral actions, unless the invoker is a villain, like *King Lear*'s Edmund, who seeks to gain power illegitimately with the help of nature, or *Henry IV*'s Falstaff, who seeks the blessings of the goddess of night, Diana, to aid thieves. There appears to be a consensus that divine beings ought to be loving and just, and cannot be cruel, partial, or condone immoral behaviour. In classical texts, on the other hand, humans are mostly seen as the gods' agents. In Homer's *Iliad*, the gods support those who serve them best, but the actions they support are not always morally justifiable. At the outset, Zeus helps the Trojans because they serve him best; he lies to Agamemnon because Achilles' mother implores him to do so and, in the end, abandons the Trojans under pressure from the other gods. The classical gods in classical contexts in no way resemble the Christian God, who is all loving and just.

When Shakespeare wrote the Roman plays, he may have been mindful of the shortcomings of the classical gods within classical contexts and known that the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of theatres-imposed restrictions on blasphemy against biblical

figures, rather than against the classical gods. “God” was wiped out of the text of *Measure for Measure* due to the Parliament’s 1606 Act to Restrain Abuses of Players,⁴⁸ while *Timon of Athens* (1604-6), in which “god” and “gods” altogether appeared 29 times, remained unaltered. In *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-1607), dated approximately one to two years after *King Lear* and *Timon*, the gods abandon their followers, and they are invoked to do immoral deeds, mocked and complained about. Cleopatra’s maid Charmian and Iras invoke the goddess Isis to let Alexas marry unfaithful wives and become cuckolded by them all (I.ii.57-67). In contrast, the Christian God will not be mocked or enlisted to support injustice, or challenged the way Cleopatra vents her anger towards the hurtful gods:

CLEOPATRA It were for me
To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods.
(*AC IV.i.80-1*)

When Antony loses the battle at sea, the second Soldier interprets the music in the air as the gods abandoning Antony:

2 SOLDIER ’Tis the god Hercules, whom Antony loved,
Now leaves him.
(*AC IV.iii.21-2*)

Shakespeare’s classical gods, with their cruelty and indifference, echo the angry God of the Old Testament,⁴⁹ not the benevolent and caring God of the New Testament.

In *Timon*, there is no god, though the word “god” is prevalent. Here religion works with retribution, not divine providence, and philosophy cannot replace religion in satisfying humans’ psychological needs. Where *Measure for Measure* warned the new King James I to be aware of the confusion of combining religion with politics, *Timon of Athens*, according to

⁴⁸ Since the Parliament’s 1606 *Act to Restrain Abuses of Players* required the expurgation of profane and blasphemous language, scholars have found that words such as “heaven” often replaced “God.” Because *heaven* has two syllables while *God* has one, many lines that originally contained *God* were altered from regular iambic pentameter (ten syllables) to lines of eleven syllables. See William Shakespeare. *Measure for Measure: Third Series*. Edited by A.R. Braunmuller and R.N. Watson, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. The Arden Shakespeare. The new Cambridge editor Gibbons even thinks that there are 44 heavens in the play that are likely to be substituted for “God”. See Gibbons (ed.), *Measure for Measure*, 208.

⁴⁹ *Measure for Measure* is a great example of the God of the Old Testament. In the analysis in the previous chapter, I compare how the Duke shapes himself as a God, but the Duke is morally dubious. In the Old Testament, where the test for Abraham to sacrifice his son is conducted, God is morally dubious, too. What God does to Abraham is no different from what the Duke does to Isabella—testing them with a picture of traumatic death. If not for the removal of the word “God” from the original text of *Measure for Measure* due to the 1606 *Statute to Restrain the Abuses of Players*, the image of the Duke would be more “divine” and would certainly “abuse” the Bible even more.

Coppélia Kahn, might have contained a harsh warning about the king's unnecessary or unconditional gift-giving, which already had created an outstanding debt.⁵⁰ The underlying connection between bounty and religion is divine providence. The Poet describes the power of Timon's bounty as magic:

POET Magic of bounty, all these spirits thy power
Hath conjured to attend.

(*Timon* I.i.6-7)

Just like magic, which conjures all spirits, Timon's bounty attracts all guests to attend his banquet. Timon gives away his fortune to help or please his friends and naively expects them to help him in return. Unfortunately, his bounty results in his bankruptcy and none of his friends helps him, until Timon goes mad and exiles himself. As his servant Flavius comments: "bounty, that makes gods, do still mar men" (IV.ii.41). Divine providence, in the world of Timon, can be translated as the gods' bounty, invoking people's sense of gratitude, but it is not compulsory for people to feel grateful because the god-human relationship is not reciprocal.⁵¹

Oxford editor John Jowett cites several scenes to argue that Timon is Christ-like: he offers himself to be consumed, echoing the Last Supper, at his first banquet in Act 1, Scene 2, and at his second banquet, in a 'reverse miracle', he translates the bread and wine into stone and water. Also in Act 1, Scene 2, like the Messiah, he expresses a wish for an ideal society in which social ills are ended by loving generosity (34-35). When Timon avenges his guests at the false banquet, the action of sprinkling water again suggests Jesus Christ. Jowett also argues that because, in Aristotle's *Politics*, a man wanting to live alone away from company is either a beast or a god, Timon's self-expulsion places him between god and beast (29-30). In *Timon*, though the gods are invoked 29 times, there is no god available to create an ideal society of love and giving. Instead, Shakespeare creates the demi-god, Timon, to test people's

⁵⁰ Coppélia Kahn. "Magic of Bounty": *Timon of Athens*, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1987, pp. 34-57, doi:10.2307/2870400, at 42.

⁵¹ Generally speaking, in all religions, people turn to gods in prayer for what they desire. More specifically, however, it is intriguing to examine the particular logic of individual religions. Christianity, for instance, as Ken Jackson observes, contains a profound contradiction: God demands unconditional submission that transcends ethical boundaries, while believers secretly assume that, by putting faith in God, they will receive greater rewards in return. I think this paradox — between divine expectation and human calculation — reflects a tension that aligns with Shakespeare's terrible neutrality in depicting Timon, who proclaims himself a god and expects others to repay him, yet no one ever does. See Ken Jackson. "'One Wish' or the Possibility of the Impossible: Derrida, the Gift, and God in *Timon of Athens*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2001, pp. 34-66, doi:10.1353/shq.2001.0009.

gratitude. When Timon is impoverished, the recipients of his bounty are all ungrateful, and only when they hear Timon has become rich again do they return to flatter him. The experiment with love and caring to shape a good society fails.

If in *Timon*'s world, a godlike hero's providence fails to win respect, what, then, *can* win people's respect? Shakespeare creates another hero, Alcibiades, to represent divine retribution, something opposite to divine providence, and finally punish this corrupt society. When in Act 5, scene 4, Alcibiades, with Timon's gold, marches back to Athens to avenge himself for his expulsion, the senators beg for mercy and surrender his enemies for the sake of peace. Alcibiades is a god-like figure when he possesses military power: "Soldiers should brook as little wrongs as gods" (III.v.115). Chosen by Shakespeare from Plutarch's *Lives*, Alcibiades is not only a successful version of Coriolanus, who is also wronged and manages to avenge himself, but is the great philosopher Socrates' lover. According to Daryl Kaytor, Timon of Athens echoes Socratic warnings against flattery, sophistry, and uncivil philosophy.⁵² Shakespeare's classical plays revisit major events in classical history: Homer's foundational *Iliad*, the death of Lucrece which ends monarchy, and the death of Caesar which ends republicanism. With all these significant events, it seems only natural that Shakespeare would also turn to classical philosophy and the towering thinkers whose ideas continued to resonate in his own time. Shakespeare's 'Socrates', however, is ironically something between a fool and a philosopher, to whose ideas and warnings no one listens. Shakespeare's treatment of Socrates resembles his notorious treatment of the Homeric heroes in *Troilus and Cressida*, where sarcasm and disbelief are manifestations of his terrible neutrality.

The tragedy of Timon lies in the fact that there is nothing that can give Timon solace. Acting as a god himself, Timon only invokes the gods to bestow bounty on or to punish others. He never asks the gods for help or illumination as to why he is so miserable. As a result, the psychological function of religion that Lear and many other tragic characters seek never occurs to him.

King Lear

⁵² See Daryl Kaytor. "Shakespeare's Political Philosophy: A Debt to Plato in *Timon of Athens*." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2012, pp. 136-52, doi:10.1353/phl.2012.0005.

King Lear is the cruellest play of Shakespeare's portfolio. The tempest scene and Cordelia's death are two of the most tragic in Shakespeare's plays, not because the stories themselves or the events they represent are the most extreme. The character of Timon, created nearly at the same time as Lear, also rages in the wilderness, but we see little of the tragic element in Timon. In the more grotesque and violent incidents of the much earlier *Titus Andronicus*, Titus faces the deaths and ravishment of his children, and himself loses an arm, and there are worse weathers behind worse incidents in the late romances — in *The Winter's Tale*, where baby Perdita is abandoned in the snow and a bear eats people alive, and in *The Tempest*, in which Prospero is abandoned for years by his enemies. Lear, on the other hand, is only abandoned for a few hours after his daughters refuse to accommodate his inflated needs. By comparison with Cordelia's death, there are arguably worse incidents in, for example, *Hamlet*, in which the innocence of Ophelia is also sacrificed, and the hero not only loses his father, but watches the wedding of his mother and his father's murderer. The emotions and language in *King Lear*'s tempest scene and Cordelia's death scene, though objectively less catastrophic, can easily evoke the audience's most tragic feelings.

There is also critical consensus as to the cruelty of *King Lear*. In *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1905), A. C. Bradley finds in *King Lear* a monstrous power and gratuitous, cureless evil that filled Shakespeare's soul with horror, and perhaps forced him into misanthropy and despair.⁵³ Wilson Knight calls the play "the most fearless artistic facing of the ultimate cruelty of things in our literature" in *The Wheel of Fire*.⁵⁴ In the introduction to a selection of critical studies of the play in 2007, Harold Bloom thinks it is the tragedy of tragedies, risking a more complete and catastrophic dénouement than anything in the genre before or since.⁵⁵

The feature that makes *King Lear* a great tragedy is also what has made the play controversial. The play's cruelty is underscored by its stage history: the fact that, as noted by Stanley Wells, editor of the Oxford *King Lear*, Nahum Tate's 1681 version with its comic ending replaced Shakespeare's tragic one on stage for nearly 150 years, until the original ending was restored in 1838.⁵⁶ In his introduction to the New Cambridge *King Lear*, editor

⁵³ A.C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan and Co., 1937: 330.

⁵⁴ G. Wilson Knight. *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy*. Routledge, 2001: 197.

⁵⁵ Bloom, *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human*, 198.

⁵⁶ Stanley Wells, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The History of King Lear: The Oxford Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 2008: 39.

Jay L. Halio called the play's stage history "an extreme instance" of Shakespeare's plays being consistently and radically altered.⁵⁷ Such attempts to tone down the play's cruelty by changing the genre from tragedy to tragi-comedy suggest an unwillingness to admit the play's poetic injustice and thus to avoid the essential theme that Shakespeare explores: Lear's expectations and disillusionment with religion. Shakespeare intentionally transformed tragi-comic materials (the notable tragi-comedy of the anonymous *King Leir*) into a serious tragedy to expose the "ultimate cruelty" humans experience in the world. Religion is more theologically correct in the comedies,⁵⁸ whereas, in the tragedies, religion must fall short of human expectations. *King Lear*'s cruelty inheres specifically in its lack of divine providence and poetic justice.

Does *King Lear* lack poetic justice? Although for over four centuries critics have been acknowledging the play's shocking cruelty, there have been opposing evaluations, especially of this issue of poetic justice. Some see the cruelty as deriving from an arbitrary or wilful denial of poetic justice, while others view it more positively as an admirably clear-eyed exploration of humanity's agonies. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson, strongly influenced by a narrow, neo-classical idea of literature's moral function, in his "Preface to Shakespeare" rejects the death of Cordelia and claims that Shakespeare "seems to write without any moral purpose": the function of literature should include "social duty" and Shakespeare should "think morally".⁵⁹ For the Romantics of the early nineteenth century, on the other hand, *King Lear* is not just the consummate tragedy, but the consummate work of art. As mentioned in the introduction, John Keats makes *King Lear* the prime example of his most important critical attribute: negative capability. In a letter to his brothers George and Tom, negative capability is characterised as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason". *King Lear*'s existential "doubts", regarded as "without any moral purpose" by Samuel Johnson, are regarded by

⁵⁷ Jay L. Halio, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Edited by Jay L. Halio, Cambridge University Press, 2005: 35.

⁵⁸ How genres shape the nature of religion has often been discussed. As Claire McEachern observes, Shakespeare's tragedies derive their power from the insistence that human life and loss command our attention in themselves. In contrast, while comedy offers the audience a God's-eye view from which to observe the characters and their conflicts with a sense of ironic distance, tragedy reveals the sorrowful dimension of religion: our greater knowledge becomes a source of intense and often painful involvement. See Claire McEachern. "Religion and Shakespearean Tragedy." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*, edited by Claire McEachern, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 89-109, at 93.

⁵⁹ *Samuel Johnson- Selected Writings: A Tercentenary Celebration*. Ed. Peter Martin, Harvard University Press, 2009: 221.

Keats as morally superior to any “irritable reaching after fact & reason”, human or divine. Unmoved by Johnson’s insistence on the “morality function” of literature, Keats thinks that *King Lear* is the archetype of perfect art: its “intensity” the “the excellence of every Art”, and able to make “all disagreeables evaporate” (*Letters of John Keats* 1:193-4).⁶⁰ Johnson’s neoclassical conviction and Keats’s romantic exaltation comprise the two major camps or poles of Lear criticism, one refusing the cruelty while the other welcomes it.

When Leo Tolstoy raised similar if not more vehement neo-classical objections to *King Lear*, he directly raised the subject of religion. In “Shakespeare and the Drama”, written in the early twentieth-century, Tolstoy chooses *King Lear* as exemplary of why he finds Shakespeare’s works repulsive and tedious.⁶¹ Tolstoy first does a detailed analysis to prove that the play is in every way a chaotic farce. What particularly irritates Tolstoy is the way that Shakespeare arranges Lear’s redemption. When he retells the plot of Act IV, scene 7, where Cordelia visits and talks to Lear, Tolstoy quotes Lear’s apology and recognition of his sin.⁶² What Tolstoy cannot face in this first Lear-Cordelia reunion scene is that Lear famously refuses reconciliation and redemption by saying

LEAR You do me wrong to take me out o’th’grave.
Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

(*KL* IV.vi.42-4)

Lear acknowledges Cordelia and her kind behaviour, but according to Tolstoy prefers (self-indulgently) to stay “in the grave”, drowning in pain and suffering. The reconciliation and redemption of the original *King Lear* clearly fascinate Tolstoy and he complains that there is nothing approaching the original in the equivalent scene in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.⁶³ Like Tate and Johnson, Tolstoy cannot accept Cordelia’s “unnecessary death”, as if Shakespeare’s turning the tragi-comedy of *King Lear* into a tragedy is itself a form of poetic injustice. Obviously, Tolstoy thinks that there should be redemption in *King Lear*. As René Weis puts it in the first sentence of his “Introduction: King Lear 1606-2009”: “The reception of *King*

⁶⁰ *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*. Edited by R. Gittings, Oxford University Press, 1970.

⁶¹ Leo Tolstoy. *Tolstoy on Art*. Ed. Aylmer Maude, Oxford University Press, 1924: 394.

⁶² *Tolstoy on Art*, 414-15.

⁶³ *Tolstoy on Art*, 427-28.

Lear from 1606 to the present day is one of coming to terms with the play's desolation and its stubborn refusal to offer solace".⁶⁴

After analysing Shakespeare's works, Tolstoy theorises that the problem of Shakespeare's drama relates to the original function of art, which for Tolstoy is to serve religion. Shakespeare's plays fail in this purpose.⁶⁵ Tolstoy's definition of "religion" is not doctrinal, but general, and he thinks religious drama should be serious, contain truth and what is highly important to men: "man's relation to God, to the universe, to all that is infinite and unending".⁶⁶ I agree with G. Wilson Knight's defence that Tolstoy's definition of religious drama is exactly what Shakespeare's play has to offer, and that it is also where Shakespeare "eluded Tolstoy". Tolstoy does not understand Shakespeare's religiousness.⁶⁷ Knight ends this essay, "Tolstoy's Attack on Shakespeare", with a recognisably romantic sentiment, saying that the chaos, agonies, mysteries, joys, and griefs of Shakespeare's works are all melodies in the music of a great religious drama.⁶⁸ General as Tolstoy may think his religion is, both Tolstoy's puritanical religion and Knight's more universal religion are based on the same precondition: that drama should serve religion. In the case of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for Knight it substitutes for religion.

Knight's definition of religion as an all-embracing synthesis is a good starting point for investigating *King Lear*'s attitudes towards religion. Knight's and Tolstoy's religions are metaphoric, but it is illuminating to consider another expression of religious sentiment: direct invocation. In extreme situations, the characters invoke the gods for their various reasons. Edmund is the first one to call on the gods — in his case, with bitter irony, to bless his villainy. In the monologue in Act 1, Scene 2, he unveils his evil plans by starting with the invocation, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" (I.ii.1), and ending with the invocation: "Now gods, stand up for bastards!" (I.ii.22). Edmund's monologue unfolds two aspects of divinity, its utilitarian function and its jurisdiction: gods should help human beings and they should be

⁶⁴ René Weis. "Introduction: *King Lear* 1606–2009." *King Lear: A Critical Guide*. Edited by Lisa Hopkins and Andrew Hiscock, Continuum, 2011, pp. 1-25, at 1.

⁶⁵ *Tolstoy on Art*, 452.

⁶⁶ *Tolstoy on Art*, 457.

⁶⁷ Knight, *Wheels on the Fire*, 334-35.

⁶⁸ Knight, *Wheels on the Fire*, 336-37.

impartial to both legitimate children and bastards alike, to evil plans as well as to good deeds.⁶⁹

If the impartiality of the gods helps evil characters, the gods offer not providence but torture to their chosen victims — in Gloucester’s savaged eyes, for example: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’gods; /They kill us for their sport” (IV.i.36-7). The arbitrarily cruel version of “the gods” in this line still resonates with audiences. Before blaming the gods’ wantonness, Gloucester longs for providence, praying to the gods and wishing them to bless his elder son and forgive his follies:

GLOUCESTER O, my follies! Then Edgar was abused.
Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him.
(*KL* III.vii.90-1)

But this prayer occurs in Act 3, Scene 7, at the very moment that he finds himself betrayed by Edmund, having wronged Edgar and had his eyes plucked out. One scene later, in Act 4, Scene 1, when he calms down, he is no longer calling the gods “kind”, but “wanton”.

Earlier than Gloucester, Lear invokes the gods, too, but Lear never asks for providential aid. While Edmund and Gloucester (for brief moments) invoke the divinities for help, instead of praying, Lear vents to the gods, for he does not expect anything from them. He speaks to them only to condemn them:

[illegible]

⁶⁹ Falstaff Marry then, sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon. And let men say we be men of good government, being governed as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal. (*IH4* I.ii.19-24) In this speech Falstaff claims that thieves are the followers of the goddess Diana, suggesting that Diana's protection is morally neutral rather than restricted to the virtuous. See William Shakespeare. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. edited by Jay L. Halio, Cambridge University Press, 2005. The New Cambridge Shakespeare.

In what William Elton calls his “ironically reversed prayers”,⁷⁰ Lear thinks, like Gloucester, that the gods are ruthless and take the side of evil, condemning the gods for being his two elder daughters’ accomplices in torturing him. Also like Gloucester, Lear thinks the gods, by abusing people, can attain a “horrible pleasure” – the agonising cruelty that centuries of audiences have witnessed in *King Lear*.

Why do Lear and Gloucester both have this idea of cruel gods killing and torturing people for fun? In the introduction to *King Lear* in Norton Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt offers a suggestion: “the Renaissance father increasingly styled himself ‘a little God’”.⁷¹ The patriarchs, Lear and Gloucester, have thought of themselves as gods to be obeyed (compare Timon who assumes himself a god to be worshipped). While assuming divine authority, they do horrible things to their children. Lear orders his daughters to make a public show of their love for him, disinherits one daughter for a minor disobedience and curses another for the same reason. Gloucester, on the other hand, insults his bastard son in public and disinherits the other because of rumours. Their children suffer more than they deserve, their situations paralleling Lear’s sufferings later: “I am a man /More sinned against than sinning” (III. ii. 57-8). Maybe the fathers enjoy the privilege of “horrible pleasure” first, until more “horrible pleasures” are inflicted upon them.

But the story of fathers torturing children and getting retribution is not the core tragedy of *King Lear*, because retribution or repayment is never simple and never equal, not even for an innocent character like Cordelia. It is always hard for readers and critics to accept the extent of the cruelty in *King Lear*. Ideas of providence and retribution touch upon Christianity, but *King Lear* is in many ways anti-Christian. Shakespeare not only extends the time scale of his original material, changing the Christian background to an earlier, pagan era, but also kills off Cordelia, having created the teasing possibility of her being rescued, exacerbating its tragic ending. There is no final redemption in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. As well as the one and a half centuries of its adaptation from tragedy to tragi-comedy, much Victorian and early twentieth-century *King Lear* criticism was notably shaped by a redemptive Christian optimism — so much so that, as early as 1988, William Elton could write criticising the phenomenon on the assumption that “despite its Christian allusions,

⁷⁰ William R. Elton. *King Lear and the Gods*. The University Press of Kentucky, 1988: 282.

⁷¹ Stephen Greenblatt, in his introduction to *King Lear*. William Shakespeare. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al., Third edition. ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2016: 2307.

[*King Lear*] is intentionally more directly a syncretically pagan tragedy”.⁷² In recent authoritative Shakespeare versions such as Oxford, New Cambridge, Norton, and Arden, it is gratifying to see that the insistence on Christian optimism is gone.

But the stubborn denial of the original intention of Shakespeare in *King Lear* reveals one thing: people expect to find in literature the positive affirmation of something else — in Tolstoy’s opinion, literature should substitute for religion, and in Samuel Johnson’s opinion, for morality. Neither religion nor morality is compatible with the genre of tragedy. In Shakespeare’s other tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, justice is served by the deaths or punishment of villains or protagonists, who are measured by their wrong doings and their culpable humanity. But there is never a simple moral equation between sin and punishment. So it is in *King Lear*: besides an ending in which many people die, there is not enough justice, providence, or redemption to go around.

“Is this the promised end? / Or image of that horror?” (V.iii.261–62). Near the end of the play, Shakespeare offers this rhetorical question, as if he foresees future criticism and responds to it: this is the end, can you stomach it? As mentioned in the Introduction, George Steiner marvels at the brutality of the ending of *King Lear*, inventing the phrase “dispassionate neutrality” to characterise Shakespeare. William Christie’s interpretation of this terrible neutrality is illuminating: “The question is not whether or not Shakespeare’s drama is true and moral, but rather the ancient one of whether or not there is a realm of truth and morality irreducible to the abstractions of philosophy or theology”.⁷³ Christie’s question is a fundamental one that is often overlooked: drama represents the tangible realities of life, which cannot be abstracted into philosophical or theological dogmas. Shakespeare’s art embraces the multiplicity of the world; it is necessarily neutral, refusing to take sides with any particular theology or philosophy. I thus conclude that Shakespeare’s neutrality lies in his refusal to pander to the convention of substituting religion, morality, or politics for literature. In *King Lear*, this neutrality reveals the cruelty born of human foolishness, blindness, and madness. There are no divinities involved.

⁷² Elton, *King Lear and the Gods*, 338.

⁷³ William Christie. “‘Whaur’s Yer Wullie Shakespeare Noo?’: Literary Influence V.” *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association*, vol. Vol. 21 (1999), no. Vol. 21 (1999), 2012, pp. 65-92, at 84.

Section 3: The Miracles of the Romances

I believe that if Shakespeare had lived longer, he would have continued to explore the possibilities of religion — as well as all other major themes — across a wider range of literary genres. As it turned out, the genre he chose for the final phase of his career was later called by critics “romance”: *Pericles* (1608), *Cymbeline* (1610), *The Winter’s Tale* (1611), and *The Tempest* (1611). Like *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*, these plays are set in contexts far removed from the Protestant Christian world. Unlike his tragedies, however, the latter halves of these romances shift from the tragic to the comic, and the presence of divinities remains central to their resolution. Though Shakespeare’s romances have their own distinct features, there are many traces inherited from the romance tradition: a setting in a distant time and place; women’s roles far less subordinated; sinned or wronged protagonists in the first half of the play; a second half involving reconciliation assisted by divine providence.⁷⁴ Shakespeare’s divine providence differs from that of the romance tradition in mixing supernatural with artificial phenomena. Shakespeare chose romances — a secular scripture, as Northrop Frye calls it — to explore how far the divine plays an indispensable part in rescuing individuals from suffering, and how individuals react to suffering while waiting for divine intervention. Like the first section on “Religious Language”, this section focuses on female characters. The difference between this section and the first section, however, is that the characters in the *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well* instrumentalise the divine for their own advantage, whereas here the characters seek deliverance: they require divine aid to be saved, or they create a sense of the divine, by means of which they attempt to save themselves. They are deeply immersed in grief and suffering; both their individual circumstances and their inner lives demand restoration.

In this section, I will look briefly at the four romances chronologically, because Shakespeare’s recognition of human capacities that resemble divine intervention — and that enable characters to save themselves — steadily increases over the final plays. *Pericles*, an apprentice-phase work, adheres closely to the romance tradition: divine power outweighs human agency. *Cymbeline* belongs to a more mature phase: although the divine still appears, human action far surpasses divine assistance. In *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*, even

⁷⁴ For the definition of romances, see Helen Cooper. *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 2008: 1–41.

though the plays contain gestures toward the divine, the characters resolve their crises entirely through their own abilities and achieve their own forms of self-redemption.

Pericles

According to Helen Cooper, *Pericles* is the most popular among Shakespeare's romances because it is most romance-like (14), but I regard it as Shakespeare's apprenticeship to romance, given the way he handles divine providence. Divine providence in *Pericles* functions as a *deus ex machina*, but unlike the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who temporarily assumes a god-like role to expose villains and resolve conflicts, this is a genuine *deus ex machina*. The goddess Diana suddenly appears to help Pericles and Marina reunite with Thaisa. However, the plot development remains somewhat unsatisfactory; rather than allow the characters' actions to lead naturally to the final reunion, Shakespeare relies on Diana's abrupt intervention to conclude the story — without her appearance, Pericles and Marina would never encounter Thaisa. The family of Pericles never try to find each other. It is understandable that Pericles gives up searching for Thaisa and Marina because he thinks them dead, but there is no reason why Thaisa and Marina should give up seeking a family reunion. As the queen and princess of the Kingdom of Tyre it is not impossible for them to go home. Though inactive in locating family members, Thaisa and Marina are not at all inactive in their lives and in their beliefs. Thaisa devotes her life to Diana as a nun. Marina fights her way out of a brothel and establishes her own reputation as a pious virgin. She persuades the governor not to sleep with her, and their conversation ends in prayers:

LYSIMACHUS And the gods strengthen thee!

MARINA The good gods preserve you!⁷⁵

(*Pericles* IV.vi.108-9)

Facing imminent harassment, Marina evokes gods and scares the Bawd away:

MARINA Hark, hark, you gods!

BAWD She conjures: away with her!

(*Pericles* IV.vi.148-9)

⁷⁵ The quotations from *Pericles* are from the Cambridge Dover Wilson version: William Shakespeare. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*. Edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

The audience may wonder whether it is farfetched that Thaisa and Marina are more concerned with their own piety than in returning to their husband and father. Marina's religious strategy, however, does not succeed with everyone. The Bawd and the Pander insist that they have invested in her and demand that she prostitute herself to repay their costs. Roger Warren, the Oxford Shakespeare editor, notes that Marina avoids this fate, not by persuasion alone, but by paying for her escape with the money she receives from Lysimachus, and he comments that "This unromantic, hard-headed pragmatism, both of the dramatist and the heroine, is one of the finest things in the play".⁷⁶ Warren is fascinated by Shakespeare's neutrality, which allows Marina only a limited religious influence. Marina resembles Helena, although she is less controversial in her use of religious language for self-rescue and the public benefit. Shakespeare even creates an analogy between Marina and the puritans: she "would make a puritan of the devil, if he should cheapen a kiss of her" (IV.vi.8–10). This analogy clarifies the intense religious devotion that characterises both Thaisa and Marina, and recalls Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. The Pericles family partially live their own parallel lives, until Diana decides when the time comes and whom to rescue.

I describe the Pericles family as partially living their own parallel lives because there is a degree of human effort in their self-rescue. Richard McCoy argues that the happy ending in *Pericles* relies less on the *deus ex machina* than on human virtues, since it is Marina's virtue that opens the previously silent Pericles' heart, so that Pericles asks himself "who to thank / Besides the gods for this great miracle" (V.iii.58–9).⁷⁷ The reunion between father and daughter may not have been entirely orchestrated by Diana, but the Pericles family are saved by the gods in the end, though the cruelty they confront darkens the audience. *Pericles* and *King Lear* share a comparable emotional intensity throughout most of their narratives and it is only at the end that the two plays diverge: Pericles is saved, whereas Lear faces an irredeemably tragic conclusion. The cruelty originates from divine intervention delayed and withheld, respectively.

⁷⁶ Roger Warren, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Oxford University Press, 2003: 48.

⁷⁷ Richard McCoy. "Awakening Faith in *The Winter's Tale*." *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 214–30, at 215.

Cymbeline

In Shakespeare's second romance, *Cymbeline*, it is individual effort that drives the play toward reunion, while divine providence merely completes the final moment. Posthumus's family apparitions appeal to Jupiter for justice in order to obtain divine support. Jupiter promises them that all will be fine, but the god offers no aid towards Posthumus's restoration, nor for the reunion of *Cymbeline*'s two sons, nor for the reconciliation of Imogen with her father. The resolution evolves, step by step, out of human action: Belarius must reveal the true identities of Guiderius and Arvirargus to save their lives, and Imogen and Posthumus join the Roman army, fall captive, and arrive at the British court, ensuring that they reunite and expose Iachimo's deception. Everything reaches its conclusion in *Cymbeline*'s court, and Britain's victory provides the occasion for all characters to confront one another face to face. It is difficult to claim that a divine power initiates this war and directs each character into battle, instead every person secures salvation through individual effort.

Among all the acts of human self-rescue, Imogen's stands out. The Victorian critic, Anna Jameson, calls Imogen "the most perfect" woman among all of Shakespeare's heroines.⁷⁸ Jameson feels that Imogen is not limited to her conjugal virtues and readers "feel as if we had known and loved her before she was married to Posthumus".⁷⁹ The reason she is loved by both the other characters and by readers may be that, as Bonnie Lander suggests, Imogen is more than a princess or a woman, she habitually dismantles artificial social constructions and places her trust in happiness and virtue rather than in rank.⁸⁰

Imogen's superiority is apparent in two scenes, one is when she decides to explore the world outside Britain in Act 3, Scene 4, another when she survives the horrifying night lying in the tomb together with her "lover's" body in Act 4, Scene 2. A traditional woman of Shakespeare's time, faced with her husband's abandoning her and her family's hunting after her, would think of suicide. Desdemona, facing Othello's domestic violence and suspicion,

⁷⁸ Anna Murphy Jameson. *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical: Exploring Femininity through History and Literature*. Edited by Cheri L. Larsen Hoeckley, Broadview Press Ltd., 2005: 226.

⁷⁹ Jameson, *Characteristics of Women*, 230.

⁸⁰ Bonnie Lander. "Interpreting the Person: Tradition, Conflict, and *Cymbeline*'s Imogen." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2008, pp. 156-84, doi:10.1353/shq.0.0005, at 179.

sings the willow song and prepares herself for death, but Imogen leaps out of the cage of tradition and looks to the world beyond Britain:

IMOGEN Where then?
Hath Britain all the sun that shines? Day, night,
Are they not but in Britain? I'th'world's volume
Our Britain seems as of it, but not in't;
In a great pool a swan's nest. Prithee, think
There's livers out of Britain.

(*Cym.* III.iv.133–9)

There are many excellent geopolitical readings of this speech. The New Cambridge editor, Martin Butler, cites it to determine where Shakespeare stands on the issues of Britain's isolation from Europe and whether the ancient Britons were barbarians.⁸¹ The problem with geopolitical readings of this speech is that they ignore the character who says it, and the plot it resides in. Imogen's detachment, grace, and bravery effect a sea-change in a short time, and, with a fresh start, she is aloof from all the miseries her marriage and family impose on her. Then, in Act 4, Scene 2, waking up in a dark tomb with her lover's beheaded body lying beside her, Imogen manages to survive what Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* cannot survive. In Shakespeare's Roman plays, it is always honorable to suicide, so Imogen has a better excuse than Juliet has in Catholic Italy, but for Imogen it is more honourable and takes more courage to keep going. Regaining and regenerating life,⁸² the two incredible scenes portray the perfect image of a resilient woman.

The Winter's Tale

The Winter's Tale continues to weigh individual effort against a reliance on divine intervention to solve problems. Here, the analogy of religion changes from divine providence to divine retribution. The Sicilian queen Hermione and a noblewoman Paulina survive the sufferings caused by Leontes and stage an artificial miracle to perfect the family reunion with a grace that is not at all controversial, as Isabella's and Helena's was in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*. Leontes' misery begins the moment he is convinced that the death of his son, Mamillius, is punishment by the gods for wronging his wife:

⁸¹ Martin Butler, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Cymbeline*. Edited by Martin Butler, Cambridge University Press, 2005: 44-45.

⁸² Lander, “Interpreting the Person”, 181.

LEONTES There is no truth at all i'th'oracle.
The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood.

[*Enter servant*]

SERVANT My lord the King, the King!

LEONTES What is the business?
Servant. O sir, I shall be hated to report it.
The Prince your son, with mere conceit and fear
Of the Queen's speed, is gone.

LEONTES How? gone?

SERVANT Is dead.

LEONTES Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves
Do strike at my injustice.
[*Hermione faints*]

How now, there?

(*WT* III. ii. 136-144)

Later, for Leontes, for the whole kingdom and for us, the audience, queen Hermione also dies. Leontes feels the rage of the gods and spends sixteen years repenting his sins. The magic of the gods in *The Winter's Tale* works differently from that in the previous two romances: it causes suffering rather than relieving it.

Just as in the criticism of *Cymbeline*,⁸³ criticism of *The Winter's Tale* prefers the male perspective, focusing on Leontes, who is neither as able as the female characters nor as long-suffering. Carol Thomas Neely's "The Winter's Tale: The Triumph of Speech", for example, in analysing Paulina's speech, leans toward a male perspective.⁸⁴ Instead of illuminating how Paulina triumphs in controlling Leontes, most of the analysis concerns Leontes. However powerful Paulina is in the play, in Neely's eyes, she is secondary to Leontes. Nevil Coghill, in his seminal work on "Six Points of Stage-Craft in *The Winter's Tale*", points out bluntly that the play is "about a crisis in the life of Leontes, not of Hermione, and her restoration to

⁸³ Pericles' sufferings and quest are among the mainstream topics of *Cymbeline* critical discussion.

⁸⁴ Carol Thomas Neely. "The Winter's Tale: The Triumph of Speech." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1975, pp. 321-38, doi:10.2307/449675.

him . . . is something which happens not to her, but to him”.⁸⁵ Coghill’s focus on Leontes is rightly condemned by the New Cambridge editor Curren-Aquino for being “at the expense of Hermione”.⁸⁶

Male-centred criticism overlooks the fact that women are at the centre of the romances. Here in particular in *The Winter’s Tale*, overlooking the women characters risks ignoring the human endeavour to remedy suffering in the absence of divine justice. The women in *The Winter’s Tale* are all personable and strong. Hermione and Perdita both have their elegance and grace, but my focus will be on Paulina who does all the ‘dirty work’: confronting and influencing Leontes, and staging the final reunion. Stephen Orgel describes Paulina as the “stage manager” of Hermione’s striking scene in Act 5,⁸⁷ but I think Paulina is also the stage manager of the whole play. Anna Jameson sees Paulina as one of the best supporting actors of main female characters in Shakespeare’s plays, though her character obtains little critical remark.⁸⁸

Being as brave and strategic as that other powerful stage manager, Helena in *All’s Well*, Paulina is further exalted by a willingness to die: the readiness to sacrifice her life fighting against injustice makes her comparable with Emilia from *Othello*.⁸⁹ Paulina’s confrontation of the still mad Leontes, like Kent’s confrontation with King Lear, shows more courage than strategy. With the baby Perdita in her arms, regardless of Leontes’ anger and death threats, she calls Leontes “jealous”, “mad”, “rotten”, “tyrant”, “scandalous”, and the male advisors useless cowards. What strikes us most is the way she manages to influence Leontes against all other male advisors for the next sixteen years. In Act 5, scene 1, touched by Leontes’ transformation, Cleomenes perceives in Leontes the “saint-like sorrow”, “more penitence than done trespass” and entreats him to forget his evil and forgive himself. On the

⁸⁵ Nevill Coghill. “Six Points of Stage-Craft in *The Winter’s Tale*.” *Shakespearean Criticism*, vol. 7, 1988, pp. 367-516.

⁸⁶ D.T. Curren-Aquino, in her introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Winter’s Tale*. Edited by Susan Snyder and D.T. Curren-Aquino, Cambridge University Press, 2007: 40.

⁸⁷ Stephen Orgel, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Winter’s Tale*. edited by Stephen Orgel, Oxford University Press, 1996: 67.

⁸⁸ Jameson, *Characteristics of Women*, 212,

⁸⁹ Emilia is willing to die to expose her husband’s conspiracy to the public, but her flaw lies in her complicity—she stole Desdemona’s handkerchief and gave it to her husband—so her courageous death carries an element of atonement.

contrary, Paulina presses Leontes to think otherwise, calling Hermione “she you killed”, which raises Leontes’ trauma to the next level:

LEONTES I think so. Killed!
She I killed! I did so; but thou strik’st me
Sorely, to say I did. it is as bitter
Upon thy tongue, as in my thought. Now, good now,
Say so but seldom.

(*WT V.i.16-19*)

Though the male lords and Leontes all complain about Paulina’s harshness towards him, there is an obvious reason why Leontes adopts a saint-like repentance and remains that way for sixteen long years: his own guilt, kept alive by Paulina’s persistence and language skills. When Dion, representing the other male advisors, implores Leontes to remarry and produce a male heir to rescue the future of the kingdom, Paulina remains the only one resolutely opposed to the idea, for two reasons. Firstly, Leontes, according to the oracle, is to have no heir until the ‘lost child’ be found:

PAULINA For has not the divine Apollo said,
Is’t not the tenor of his oracle,
That King Leontes shall not have an heir
Till his lost child be found?

(*WT V.i.37-40*)

Secondly, the kingdom would not be unstable if a king without issue were to choose a worthy successor, as Alexander the Great did:

PAULINA Care not for issue;
The crown will find an heir. Great Alexander
Left his to th’worthiest; so his successor
Was like to be the best.

(*WT V.i.46-49*)

The persuasiveness of the two reasons does not cover up the radical challenge they offer, so no one else supports Paulina and she proposes to wait for an impossible oracle to come true. If that does not happen, her advice is for Leontes to change the polity of his country from monarchy and republicanism. Leontes agrees with her. We know only later that behind Paulina’s insistence is Hermione’s being still alive and waiting for the “lost child” the oracle promised, but the fact that Paulina manages to navigate Leontes for sixteen years is itself marvellous.

The divinities are cruel. For a long period of time, Hermione, Paulina, and Leontes are obliged to live in patience and suffering. While the women in *The Winter's Tale* are all victimised, they at least survive. Two of the male characters lose their lives in this game of god's wrath: Paulina's husband Antigonus and the little prince Mamillius. Antigonus stands up for Paulina (albeit modestly) during her confrontation with Leontes. He refuses Leontes' request to silence her and swears on his life that he will do anything to save the little princess:

LEONTES ...what will you adventure
To save this brat's life?

ANTIGONUS Anything, my lord,
That my ability may undergo,
And nobleness impose – at least thus much:
I'll pawn the little blood which I have left
To save the innocent – anything possible.
(*WT* II.iii.161-166)

Leontes cunningly traps Antigonus into abandoning the princess in a winter wilderness. Despite his failure to counter Leontes, Antigonus's kindness should not be rewarded with his body being torn apart by a bear.

The other victim, Mamillius, triggers more indignation in both criticism and the theatre. The play begins with the miraculous image of the child. In Act 1, scene 1, the two lords call Mamillius "an unspeakable comfort" and "the greatest promise"; the old will not "be content to die" till they "see him a man". Sadly, the old people of Sicily are not the only ones watching the promising child, for the gods are lurking behind him, too:

LEONTES There is no truth at all i'th' oracle.
The sessions shall proceed. This is mere falsehood.

[*Enter* SERVANT]

SERVANT My lord the King, the King!

LEONTES What is the business?

SERVANT O sir, I shall be hated to report it.
The Prince your son, with mere conceit and fear
Of the Queen's speed, is gone.

LEONTES How? Gone?

SERVANT

Is dead.

LEONTES Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves
Do strike at my injustice.

[HERMIONE *faints*]

(*WT* III.ii.136-44)

From Leontes' perspective, not only does Mamillius die, but his wife Hermione dies as well, and their deaths are punishments by the gods. The play ends with the restoration of Perdita and Hermione, but Mamillius is not restored to them. Stephen Orgel feels that Mamillius's not being restored to Leontes is problematic, but his explanation that the "Renaissance tolerated a much higher degree of ambiguity and opacity than we do" undermines the principle of poetic justice.⁹⁰ We cannot deny that Shakespeare creates the perfect child only to have him killed. According to R. S. White, Mamillius falls into the category of Shakespeare's innocent victims, who possess a quality of "great beauty, a desire for harmony, justice and truthfulness in human dealings"; their "fictional deaths are not futile but instructive and ennobling".⁹¹ Mamillius is the only innocent child victim in a Shakespearean play who is killed by the gods rather than by villains. What, then, does his fictional death mean? Following White's thought, Shakespeare is determined to evoke anger from the audience against the injustice of gods.

In her introduction to New Cambridge *The Winter's Tale*, Curren-Aquino observes that in several stage productions the actors playing Mamillius either played Time or took over Time's role.⁹² Rose Wardlaw played both Mamillius and Time in Shakespeare's Globe's production of *The Winter's Tale* by Blanche McIntyre in 2018.⁹³ In the Folger Theatre Aaron Posner's *The Winter's Tale* (also 2018), Daven Ralston played both Perdita and Mamillius.⁹⁴ In Cheek by Jowl's *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Declan Donnellan in 2017, Grace Andrews played both Time and Emilia. The merging of the Time and nanny roles stirs the emotions when at the end Mamillius's ghost appears to say goodbye to Leontes, and exits

⁹⁰ Orgel (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, 6.

⁹¹ R. S. White. *Innocent Victims: Poetic Injustice in Shakespearean Tragedy*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001: 6.

⁹² Curren-Aquino and Snyder (eds), *The Winter's Tale*, 37.

⁹³ Blanche McIntyre. "The Winter's Tale". The Globe Theatre, 2018.

⁹⁴ Aaron Posner. "The Winter's Tale". Folger Theatre, 2018.

with the Time-nanny. It is as if the final scene fulfils a collective wish that Mamillius's ghost should appear and be looked after, or the reunion is not complete.⁹⁵

However, the assumption of the cruelty of the gods rests on shaky ground; we cannot be certain that the tragedies of *Antigonus* and *Mamillius* are caused by the gods. The ambiguity behind the cause of their deaths helps to explain how and why the statue scene works, and how Shakespeare sees religion's function. The play deals with the secular and the divine to an extent that the distinction between them is blurred, especially the way they feature in inexplicable events: the oracle; *Antigonus*' dream about *Hermione*; *Mamillius*'s death; *Perdita*'s return; *Hermione*'s reappearance. In multiple authoritative introductions, Shakespeare's editors endeavour to commend his art of confounding the artificial and the wonderful. New Cambridge editor Curren-Aquino isolates the divine elements of the scene — the chapel, the music, the words like "awake your faith" — to demonstrate Shakespeare's skill in creating artificial miracles. Norton editor Jean E. Howard's introduction is saturated with words suggestive of divinity — "miracle of forgiveness", "the wonder that the endings...evoke", and so on — all suggesting that the divine is a metaphor of stage illusion.⁹⁶ RSC editor Jonathan Bate is explicit in attributing the magical power of life-giving art to theatre itself.⁹⁷ From *Leontes*' perspective, of course, the statue scene is a real miracle, rather than a staged one. Miracles enjoyed a controversial reputation long before Shakespeare's age, in that, because their limited knowledge made it difficult to distinguish the natural from the supernatural, miracles always had an ambiguous status. Miracles also threatened to reduce the gods themselves to a controversial position: on the one hand, showing a bias on the occasions they did intervene; on the other, being unable to work miracles on all occasions. The result of the problem of miracles, as Thomas Dixon demonstrates, is that "The theologian seems to have to choose between a capricious, wonder-working, tinkering God and an absent, uninterested, undetectable one. Neither sounds like a suitable object for love and worship".⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Tom Rowan. "The Winter's Tale". Theater Ten Ten at Theater Ten Ten, 2002.

Nicholas Hytner. "The Winter's Tale". Royal National Theatre, 2001.

Adrian Noble. "The Winter's Tale". RSC, 1992 (on tour in US 1994).

⁹⁶ Jean E. Howard, in her introduction to *The Winter's Tale*. William Shakespeare. *The Norton Shakespeare*. edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al., 3 ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2016: 2873-2881.

⁹⁷ Jonathan Bate, in his introduction to *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare, William. *The RSC Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Edited by Jonathan Bate and Rasmussen Eric, 2 ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022: 688.

⁹⁸ Thomas Dixon. *Science and Religion: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2008: 41.

The determination in *The Winter's Tale* to reconcile the undetectability of the gods, while at the same time exploiting their authority to effect social ends, leads to Shakespeare's characteristic solution. The audience knows that the gods might not exist, but the characters in the play do not. From the perspective of Leontes, as well as of most of the other characters in the play, fate is remotely controlled by the gods. Both Leontes and Mamillius are the gods' puppets, subject to the gods' just or unjust punishment. The tragedy of the Sicilian court, though initiated by jealousy and tyranny, reaches an irretrievably tragic point when the gods engineer Mamillius's death.

It may be that this "divine retribution" inspires Paulina to manufacture her own "miracle": the human one of bringing a "statue" to life. The retribution of gods punishes and intimidates, while the miracle of Paulina reconciles and comforts. The statue of a queen which can move and has warm skin is Shakespeare's own invention. Bate reads the scene as a reverse engineering of Ovid's Pygmalion.⁹⁹ From Talon, the bronze giant in Greek mythology, to Ovid's Pygmalion, and from Shakespeare's Hermione to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the dream of creating human(-like) creatures in literature seems ubiquitous. Here in *The Winter's Tale*, the statue apparently satisfies Leontes' rapturous love-sickness, even before it moves:

LEONTES Let no man mock me, For I will kiss her.

PAULINA Good my lord, forbear:
The ruddiness upon her lip is wet;
You'll mar it, if you kiss it; stain your own
With oily painting. . . . Shall I draw the curtain?

LEONTES No! not these twenty years.

PERDITA So long could I
Stand by, a looker on.

(*WT* V.iii.79-84)

Only Leontes suspects that the "magic" of the event is illegal, but he completely embraces it and merges himself in the exhilaration. Theatre has a way of persuading beholders to believe in illusions. Here, the miniature theatre convinces Leontes of something seemingly impossible: the beholder must accept his or her own active participation in the play, one that

⁹⁹ Bate (ed.), *The Winter's Tale*, 688.

requires an awakening of faith in illusion.¹⁰⁰ For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writing many years later in the *Biographia Literaria*, it meant transferring “from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith”.¹⁰¹ In the last act, Shakespeare appears to abandon the idea of miracles, religion, and the gods, to focus on human’s emotional needs.

In the case of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, the moving statue is neither scientifically nor supernaturally miraculous, but theatrically and humanly effective; not reliant on outer forces, but on inner motivation. Like the ending of *All’s Well That Ends Well*, it is what Gary Waller calls a “deliberately staged, self-consciously theatrical moment”.¹⁰² *The Winter’s Tale* can be understood as the climax of Shakespeare’s identity as a humanist who recognises religion’s psychological function and seeks alternatives to that function during the absence of religion, or even when faced with the caprice or malice of religion.

The Tempest

In the conclusion of the thesis, I return to *The Tempest*, discussing it for its sense of finale. From the point of view of religion, we can see *The Tempest* as Shakespeare’s essay in creating a fictional world in which the supernatural beings are mastered by human beings. In other romances, the supernatural beings are off-stage, so to speak, but here, they inhabit the island. As Jeffrey Rufo says, Prospero’s power over Ariel is at once synonymous with, and the product of, human art; Prospero is the artist and Ariel is the art, being Prospero’s stage manager enacting his conception.¹⁰³ Prospero’s ‘tragedy’ originates in his indulgence “in secret studies” (I.i.77) and in trusting his dukedom to his usurping brother, Antonio. Being

¹⁰⁰ Richard McCoy. “Awakening Faith in *The Winter’s Tale*.” *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*. Edited by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 214-30, at 229.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. *Biographia Literaria, Chapters, I-IV, XIV-XXII. Wordsworth, Prefaces and Essays on Poetry, 1800-1815*. Edited by George Sampson, Cambridge University Press, 1920: 52

¹⁰² Gary Waller. “From ‘the Unfortunate Comedy’ to ‘This Infinitely Fascinating Play’: The Critical and Theatrical Emergence.” *All’s Well That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*. Edited by Gary Waller, Routledge, 2007, pp. 21-76, at 50.

¹⁰³ Jeffrey A. Rufo, “New Directions: ‘He needs will be Absolute Milan’: The Political Thought of *The Tempest*,” in *The Tempest: A Critical Reading*. Edited by Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 149. Compare E. M. W. Tillyard, “The Tragic Pattern: ‘*The Tempest*’,” *Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, reprinted in *The Tempest*. Edited by Harold Bloom and Neil Heims, Infobase Publishing, 2008: 152.

exiled to the island, Prospero becomes a magician governor who uses magic to achieve utilitarian ends, but at the same time remains sceptical that magic alone can contribute to the well-being of the society. *The Tempest* is not simply a story in which Prospero's magic fails on the continent but succeeds on the island; rather, the play traces the more important transformation that occurs on the island, where Prospero learns to move from his earlier obsession with magic to relinquishing it. Magic power is not constant, either, being heavily dependent on books whose destruction even Caliban can easily precipitate.

Prospero's relationship with Ariel also entails a certain step towards his renunciation of magic and reconciliation with his enemies. When Prospero asks Ariel about the situation of Alonso and his followers, Ariel asserts that they are so miserable that even the vengeful Prospero will pity them:

ARIEL Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.

PROSPERO Dost thou think so, spirit?

ARIEL Mine would, sir, were I human.

PROSPERO And mine shall.
(*Tempest* V.i.17-20)

Ariel's poetical sketch of his enemies' emotions rescues Prospero from his hatred and completes his self-education and transformation from a vengeful magician into a noble humanist. Critics who read the play through the lens of imperialism, see Prospero as a coloniser and Caliban and Ariel as aboriginal figures, describing Prospero's art as "manipulative", but Prospero and the supernatural beings are engaged in a more interactive, evolving (educational) dynamic. In this highly original play, Shakespeare can allow Prospero his hubristic human nature, aspiring to be a god able to control supernatural beings and oppress his enemies, while at the same time humbling Prospero and arming him with sympathy and benevolence. Prospero's mercy moves Alonso, and Alonso gives him back his dukedom and begs for pardon. Alonso's reaction echoes Leontes' reaction: they are both overwhelmed by theatre and, as a result, repent sincerely. Alonso's spontaneous willingness to apologise moves Prospero, transforming what would otherwise be cold retribution into something gentler and more genuinely forgiving.

The personification of human kindness reaches its fullest expression in his daughter, Miranda. Miranda is not a perfectly innocent woman who has been sheltered from the world; rather, she belongs to that category of women who are, by nature, inclined to believe in the world's goodness and beauty. The hardships she has endured are insignificant compared to those of other women characters in the earlier romances, but Shakespeare invests in her a deep affirmation of humanity. What she represents is a belief in human beings as capable of bearing suffering, of healing, and of perceiving the world's beauty — the strongest weapon against psychological despair. With it, nothing is beyond cure; neither religion nor magic can rival its power. In *The Tempest*, humanity saves itself, rather than relying on the divine; Prospero actively manages the divine in the process. Multiple factors contribute to this self-redemption: enemies and family alike participate in rescuing and healing Prospero. In Prospero, Shakespeare presents a figure opposite to Pericles and Leontes and explores how a human being attains psychological comfort by taking control of his or her own life.

Conclusion

Matthew Dimmock's article on "Shakespeare's Non-Christian Religions" opens with the sentence: "It has become almost proverbial that one searches in vain for non-Christian religion in the majority of Shakespeare's dramatic corpus",¹⁰⁴ implying that the vast majority of the religion in Shakespeare's plays is Christian. Scholars from the Christian world tend to regard all religions other than Christianity as "pagan", and even then focus mainly on Islam and Judaism. The more "Eastern" or "other" these religions are, the more they are seen as strange, sometimes cruel. Even the gods of classical culture are often grouped into this category.¹⁰⁵

However, for a reader like me, who grew up in a non-Christian culture, religion in Shakespeare reflects the commonalities across all religions, rather than being confined to Christianity. I think Shakespeare allows readers of any religious background, as well as non-believers, to engage with the issues of religion without necessarily knowing or believing in Christian doctrine. My own religious background (Buddhism and Taoism) illuminates this

¹⁰⁴ Matthew Dimmock. "Shakespeare's Non-Christian Religions." *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 280-99, at 280.

¹⁰⁵ Dimmock, "Shakespeare's Non-Christian Religions", 281-284.

understanding of Shakespeare's neutral stance in religion: although Buddhism and Taoism are entirely different religions, they do not occupy the same oppositional position to Christianity as Islam or Judaism in Shakespeare, or in modern scholarship. From a Chinese cultural perspective, people conceive of divine providence and divine retribution similarly across all religions. One respects all deities, believing that they can protect, punish, or provide spiritual comfort. Therefore, a Chinese reader encountering Shakespeare's plays would not automatically interpret them as "Christian" or assume that Shakespeare constantly demonises non-Christian religions. Perhaps this comparative religious sensibility that non-Christian readers bring to Shakespeare allows me, in a cross-cultural religious reading, to explore the shared structures of religion: believers have faith, worship deities, receive protection, moral guidance, and spiritual support. Some people use religion for political purposes. Sometimes religion does not work. These features are common to all religions and do not require specialised Christian knowledge to understand.

Having established the commonalities of religions, let us revisit Shakespeare's theatrical strategies: some dramatic effects require Christianity as a medium or an escape from it. The religious language of *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* needs the language of Christianity specifically as its vehicle. Readers who know the Christian context can understand how the characters manipulate religious language, but readers without the requisite knowledge can also learn the Christian context from Shakespeare himself, and work out that religious language is being exploited for secular ends. In the second section of this chapter, tragedies represent an escape from Christian dogma — because tragedy and Christian redemption are opposed. Tragic characters die, making salvation impossible. While a narrow sense of redemption — the original sin-salvation model — can be explained as Christian doctrine, the broader concept of redemption — the hope of being saved after wrongdoing — is a function common to all religions. Shakespeare's literature is grounded in flesh-and-blood reality, full of imperfections, showing that religion cannot always succeed and that humans cannot place all their hopes in religion.

The third section discusses the late romances, which not only completely escape the Christian context but also feature miracles, something forbidden in Shakespeare's Protestant England. Shakespeare does not carry over the negative aspects of religion from tragedies into the romances — because religion naturally has both negative and positive aspects and only a neutral stance allows one to perceive the full spectrum of religion's effects. Shakespeare's

romances differ somewhat from traditional romances: in the latter, characters are saved by divine intervention, whereas in Shakespeare, the characters also exert great physical and emotional effort to save themselves. Their capacity for self-rescue often surpasses that of the divine. This logic — that human intervention can be more reliable than the gods' — can be described as shocking from religious perspective, but it also reflects Shakespeare's recognition of religion as a source of spiritual comfort, and his belief that theatre and human action can compensate for religion's limitations. Regarding the comfort and salvific power of theatre, humans, and the divine, Shakespeare's stance is neutral.

CHAPTER TWO – POLITICS (I)

Introduction

In Shakespeare's time, various political theories shaped the intellectual landscape. These political ideas could be contradictory, with some being overly idealistic while others lacked morality. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), a Christian humanist, believed that rulers should govern based on Christian principles of charity and wisdom. *Utopia* by Henry VIII's counsellor, Thomas More (1478–1535), published with the help of Erasmus, envisions an ideal society based on justice, equality, and moral governance. Both Erasmus and More critique the corruption of their time. *The Boke Named the Governour* of Sir Thomas Elyot (1496–1546), dedicated to Henry VIII, focuses on the moral responsibility of rulers, on wise, virtuous governance and the importance of education in shaping leaders. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), through *The Prince*, introduced the concept and recorded the practice of pragmatic, often ruthless political strategy, controversially emphasising that rulers must be willing to use any means necessary to secure and maintain power. Jean Bodin (1530–1596), in *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, argues for absolute sovereignty, asserting that only a ruler with undivided authority could ensure political stability. Francis Bacon (1561–1626), counsellor to Elizabeth I and James I, in his legal and political writings, supports the idea of a strong, centralised monarchy, advocating a rational approach to governance and the importance of knowledge in political decision-making.

While predominately rooted in the Christian and classical traditions, these political ideas also incorporated modern elements, such as Machiavelli's realpolitik, Bodin's absolute sovereignty, and Bacon's advocacy of empirical governance, paving the way for modern political thought. It is clear that the political ideas of Machiavelli and Bodin contradict those of Erasmus and More. These political ideas and practices are to be found everywhere in Shakespeare's history plays, where they clash with one another and where the central plots revolve around how kings and nobles balance, challenge, and check each other politically.

Shakespeare wrote the majority of his history plays (all except the co-authored *Henry VIII*) under the reign of Elizabeth I. Throughout her life, Elizabeth I faced many political challenges in her court: marriage, the succession, Mary Stuart, reformation and puritanism, the Catholic threat, foreign aggression, and an endless struggle with her counsellors, who always seemed to pull in

opposite directions.¹ It became a pattern for Elizabeth and her counsellors that on those issues on which she wanted to take action – to curb the Puritans, for example, or to marry the duke of Anjou — her counsellors responded with dismay and alarm. With regard to the issues on which her counsellors wanted action, on the other hand — curbing the Catholics, or executing Mary Stuart — she wanted to delay. As a result, political decisions either stalled or proceeded at a snail’s pace.² Both the Puritans and the Catholics thought all the nobles around the Queen were Machiavellian politicians,³ which likely contributed to her mistrust of her own counsellors, exacerbating the typical monarch-counsellor tension.

During the later years of Elizabeth I’s reign, the years during which Shakespeare composed his history plays, the political landscape in England was bleak. Behind the celebrated defeat of the Spanish Armada lay heavy taxes to sustain military campaigns, along with forced loans, parliamentary subsidies, and local levies. The consequent crushing burdens on the lower orders, combined with bad harvests and plagues, led to widespread unrest: in 1596, starving workers rioted in Oxfordshire; in 1597, a Norfolk grain barge was seized by the populace, and in Canterbury, carts loaded with grain for export were hijacked. Elizabeth I’s ability was questioned, as always, and the struggling economy seemed to serve as strong evidence of her reign’s incompetence. The Earl of Essex even dared to challenge her occupation of the throne in an episode which reflected Elizabeth’s many years checking and balancing the nobles and their different factions at court.⁴

Amid these political upheavals, Elizabeth took measures to maintain national stability. What directly concerned Shakespeare’s career was the Master of the Revels, the censorship body reviewing all plays. Shakespeare had to be extremely careful not to provoke political trouble in his plays. His near escape for praising Essex in *Henry V* proved to be an exception in an otherwise prudent and cautious career in which he avoided direct commentary on topical events to steer clear of unnecessary trouble. His setting his plays hundreds of years before the Tudor dynasty cleverly avoided controversial topical events and the risk of touching on political taboos. According to Peter Lake, when he did boldly discuss politics with his contemporary audience, moreover, he got virtually everything wrong. It is not necessary to be politically correct, or correct about politics,

¹ When this chapter refers to religion, it addresses only its political dimensions; broader discussions of religion can be found in the chapter on religion. My account of the political context of Shakespeare’s England draws primarily on general studies of early modern politics, including Andrew Hadfield’s *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, Peter Lake’s *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, and C. W. Brooks’s *Law, Politics and Society in Early Modern England*, together with broader historical surveys such as Robert Bucholz’s *Early Modern England 1485–1714*.

² Peter Lake. *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays*. Yale University Press, 2016: 20.

³ Stephen Greenblatt. *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*. W. W. Norton, 2018: 12.

⁴ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 16.

however, to write plays that last.⁵ There is, however, one piece of political propaganda that Shakespeare felt obliged to subscribe to: the Tudor myth – the way past histories led to and endorsed the present dynasty – if he had not done so, he would have suffered under the suspicion of his not recognising the legitimacy of the Tudor dynasty.

To say that Shakespeare was not interested or accurate in portraying topical political events does not mean he was indifferent to politics in general. Where there are people, there is politics. Therefore, it is essential to define the scope of politics discussed in this chapter. The politics I examine here is not bound by specific historical events, but focuses on politicians' human nature and moral choices in the context of universal political tactics – especially, though not exclusively, of monarchs — as well as on the health of the state and the well-being of its people, rather than merely on the rise and fall of specific dynasties (e.g., Plantagenet, York) or the historical evolution of state governance (e.g., medieval, feudal). The political problems of monarchs typically involve political marriages, foreign policies or wars, conflicts with counsellors, and issues of succession. John Palmer argues that Shakespeare's characters interested him primarily as men; it is an accident that they happen to be men prominent in public affairs or aspiring to be so.⁶ It is certainly true that, in order to understand the politics of Shakespeare's history plays, Elizabethans as well as modern readers need to start with the issue of their human nature.⁷ But they are not merely historical figures by chance, and Shakespeare put considerable effort into reading historical materials when transforming these figures into fully realised characters. So the chapter will constantly compare the historical materials available to him and Shakespeare's changes to them.

I will dedicate four sections to discussing what I am calling Shakespeare's 'terrible neutrality' in politics. The first section will examine royal marriages, focusing on the marriages of three kings and the counter-intuitive political outcomes of these royal unions. The second section will explore the similar political tactics of different kings and their dissimilar consequences. The third section will focus on Shakespeare's most successful king, Henry V, and the controversial qualities required to become a politically successful king. The fourth section delves into the different politics in Shakespeare's complete plays and Shakespeare's neutral stance in assessing them.

First and foremost, Shakespeare's 'neutrality' derives from his mistrust of the compatibility between politics and humanity. In Shakespeare's view, being a good and certainly an effective

⁵ Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, 603.

⁶ John Palmer. *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. Macmillan, 1962: vi.

⁷ Robin Headlam Wells. *Shakespeare, Politics and the State*. Macmillan, 1986: 5.

politician often requires violating virtue and conscience, and maintaining a stable polity also necessitates sacrificing the benefits of some groups for the advantage of others. This neutrality is immediately apparent in his attitude toward political marriage. While marriage in its romantic sense is about love and mutual commitment, political marriage disregards these values and instead focuses on the consolidation of power and wealth. Building on the controversial nature of political marriage, Shakespeare further examines the way kings in his history plays violate this rule without incurring any punishment for doing so. This highlights the tension between political rules and practical reality: the two are often vastly different. Political rules may be idealised, but the reality of politics often diverges from these rules due to the personality of monarchs, along with many other unpredictable factors. Counsellors may be bound by these rules, leading to conflicts with their monarchs. Shakespeare also exposes the way the same political strategy, when employed by different monarchs, can lead to vastly different outcomes.

Discussing the marriages of Henry VIII, Henry VI, and Edward IV in the first section, I explore how in Shakespeare's plays circumstances can turn seemingly bad marriages into good ones. On the surface, these marriages appear problematic — perhaps the nobles oppose them out of self-interest or state governance concerns, or they conflict with traditional political marriage rules, such as the trade in social rank and wealth. The historical record may have a negative view of these marriages or Shakespeare may see them as problematic at certain moments. However, Shakespeare's overall evaluation sometimes runs counter to traditional political views and the audience's expectations, the nobles' opinions, and even the historical record, creating a dramatic turn that often leads to a revision of established views. Events may not follow the causal relationships suggested by conventional political wisdom, as seemingly bad beginnings do not necessarily lead to disastrous outcomes. Shakespeare's neutrality is evident not only in his depiction of individual marriages — such as those of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Henry VIII, which turn out to be not as disastrous as the nobles imagine — but also in his comparison of these marriages. Lineage and wealth are not as important as they are often assumed to be in traditional political thought.

The second section explores the political tactics of three monarchs — Henry VIII, Richard II, and Henry VI — and the contrasting outcomes of otherwise similar behaviours and strategies. Henry VIII, despite embodying traits that had led to the downfall of previous monarchs, successfully establishes the prosperity of his kingdom. In contrast, Richard II, who also exploits his nobles and his people, faces political failure. Henry VI, despite his apparent virtues, faces political failure because of his indecisiveness and inability to assert authority. In short, some political manoeuvres scorned by traditional political thought will fail for certain kings but succeed for others.

There is no universally applicable doctrine of political governance, nor can the success or failure of any given method be predicted.

The third section focuses on the development and triumph of Henry V and explores the interplay between politics, human nature, and ideal leadership, and the apparent irreconcilability of morality and politics. Through Henry's rise from riotous Prince Hal to the formidable King Henry V, Shakespeare demonstrates how political education, experience, and maturation shape an effective ruler. Henry acquires his political training in language and tactics both from his father, Henry IV, and his erstwhile father, Sir John Falstaff, but he abandons the friendship with Falstaff to become an exemplary king. The apparent ruthlessness of abandoning his friends is the first lesson he learns on the incompatibility of politics and morality. His ruthlessness and tactics help him to deal effectively with Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey, but when he orders the execution of the prisoners of war from the battle of Agincourt so his army can fight more efficiently, he leaves a notorious image in subsequent history and further evidence of the incompatibility of politics and ethics. The responsibility of leadership frustrates and depresses him, a side effect of being a king. Shakespeare depicts the development of a politically successful king who shoulders the burdens of office and, in order to be successful, is obliged to betray his conscience and his friends. The political path for kings is akin to Dr Faustus's pact with the devil: to gain power, one must sacrifice something significant.

The fourth section compares Shakespeare's exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of different political systems, especially monarchy in *Henry V* and republicanism in *Coriolanus*. In both plays, other political systems are also examined, such as anarchy — depicted in Falstaff's dream, in which thieves go unpunished — and absolutism: two extreme failures of governance.⁸ In the *Henry VI* plays, the short-lived peasant revolution is similarly disastrous. In the Roman plays, republicanism is hindered by the power of self-serving tribunes, absolutism becomes a form of tyranny, and empires require cold-blooded leaders capable of waging war and unifying kingdoms. Shakespeare's neutrality in exploring political systems lies in his unwillingness to promote any particular polity, instead suggesting that no system is flawless, but there are relative goods. A polity is considered good when the people who govern it are relatively skilled at doing so and the people governed are civic-minded and patriotic.

Section One: Royal Marriage and/as Politics

⁸ Andrew Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014: 8.

With the successive royal marriages of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Henry VIII in Shakespeare's history plays, Shakespeare depicts a decline in the nobles' insistence on queens of high birth, contrasted with an improvement in the political results of the marital alliances. Shakespeare's Henry VI, defying the advice of his lords to form a politically more advantageous match, chooses to marry Margaret of Anjou out of personal affection and prompts the lords to lament the kingdom's fate. On the contrary, the historical Henry VI, as it happens, married Margaret of Anjou out of political interest rather than personal affection. In history, Edward IV did humiliate France and Warwick by breaking his promise to marry Bona, Princess of France, instead marrying the less noble widow, Elizabeth Woodville, but Edward IV secured England for the Kingdom of York in the Wars of Roses, which was not prevented by his 'bad' marriage with Elizabeth. Shakespeare seems to love dramatic upheaval in the history of Edward IV and makes events more dramatic in his narrative. Shakespeare's Henry VIII divorces a perfect political alliance in Katherine of Aragon to marry her maid, Anne Bullen, yet it was well-known that Anne played a pivotal role in encouraging the Protestant Reformation and boosting the nation's economy. These three kings in Shakespeare marry against conventional norms and expectations, making the outcomes of their royal marriages appear strange and counter-intuitive. Had Margaret not led Henry VI to secure his crown, the kingdom would have gone to grief much earlier; the underestimated Elizabeth Woodville survives the war with Edward IV; the unremarkable Anne proves instrumental in advancing the Tudor dynasty's political, economic, and religious prosperity.

The disjunction between public expectation and political outcome in these marriages manifests Shakespeare's neutrality: 'good' royal marriages may not have good consequences, nor the 'bad' royal marriages bad ones. The standard of 'good' and 'bad' in royal marriages was deeply rooted in the cultural contexts of Renaissance England. Social and political consensus in Renaissance England regarded royal marriages as instruments of statecraft rather than expressions of personal affection. According to Susan Doran, the councillors of the unmarried Elizabeth I vehemently and constantly exhorted her to utilise marriage as a political weapon. In 1559, 1563, 1566 and 1576, Elizabeth I faced repeated pressure from the Privy Council to marry, primarily to produce an heir and resolve the succession issue. As she grew older and childbirth became less feasible, the emphasis shifted toward securing a political alliance with France, which could offer protection against Mary Stuart's supporters, the Guises, and Philip II.⁹

Not only did the Renaissance equation of the sovereign's body with the national body alter the queen's or king's identity from being a personal one, but historical practice also constrained

⁹ Susan Doran. *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I*. Routledge, 1996: 3-4.

their ability to marry freely.¹⁰ In the Tudor dynasty, Henry VIII cemented ties with Spain through his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, while Mary Tudor's union with Philip II of Spain aligned England with Habsburg interests and reinforced territorial ambitions. Doran charts the political challenges that shaped Elizabeth I's marital negotiations: Elizabeth I's 'illegitimacy', declared by the 1536 Succession Act, diminished her value in dynastic alliances and led Charles V to reject her as a potential bride in 1538.¹¹ In 1541, Francis I of France initially considered her for his son, the Duke of Orleans, but withdrew his proposal upon learning of her legal status, famously stating that legitimacy should be prioritised over noble lineage.¹² Even within England, Henry VIII's will restricted Elizabeth's ability to marry without Privy Council approval,¹³ reflecting the way historical precedent made royal marriages matters of state rather than personal choices.

The royal marriages of Shakespeare's history plays, such as Henry V's alliance with Catherine of Valois, Richard II's marriage to Isabella of Valois, King John's union with Isabella of Angoulême, and the heiress of Brittany Constance's marriage to Geoffrey, son of Henry II, all seem to illustrate this. Each serves a strategic purpose in the broader context of dynastic politics. The political practices of royal marriages were based on one of two related historical views: the functional view that royal marriage was a tool or the teleological view that a good political marriage conduced to stability. The dramatic turn in the royal marriages of the three kings Henry VI, Edward IV, and Henry VIII proves that Shakespeare does not take these two views of history at face value and does not think there is a causal relationship between a politically contrived marriage and the success and well being of the kingdom.

Henry VI

In depicting Henry VI's marriage, Shakespeare sets a trap for the audience by first convincing readers to side with the nobles in their vehement opposition to Henry VI's choice of a wife on the grounds that it will cause the ruin of the kingdom. Gloucester, on reading the article of the contracted peace between England and France (historically, the Treaty of Tours), realises that

¹⁰ The theory of the king's two bodies is a widely recognised concept that originated in legal discourse and later extended into many other spheres of life. It distinguishes between the monarch's political body and natural body, and politicians frequently invoked this distinction to support their own arguments. For example, in legal practice, the theory was used to defend the deceased Henry VII in the third year of Elizabeth's reign in the case of *William v. Berkeley*, and by contrast, the same idea was later deployed against King Charles I (see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton UP, 1970). Elizabeth I was likewise criticised by politicians who claimed that, because she possessed what they regarded as a flawed woman's body, her kingdom would be correspondingly weak; therefore, she ought to exercise particular caution in her decisions (see Helen Hackett, *The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty*, Yale UP, 2022: 273).

¹¹ Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 13–14.

¹² Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 14.

¹³ Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 15.

Main and Anjou shall be given back to France, and cannot help but let the paper fall.¹⁴ Gloucester laments that many years of tears and blood shed by Henry V and all English noblemen in fighting will be sacrificed by this 'bad' marriage:

GLOUCESTER O peers of England, shameful is this league!
Fatal this marriage, cancelling your fame,
Blotting your names from books of memory,
Razing the characters of your renown,
Defacing monuments of conquered France,
Undoing all, as all had never been!

(2H6 I.i.96-101)¹⁵

There are two reasons behind this severe accusation. First, Henry breaks a betrothal with a more powerful candidate: the daughter of the influential Armagnac.¹⁶ Second, it is Suffolk who, sacrificing the national interest to his own purely personal interest, orchestrates the match between Margaret and Henry knowing it to be less advantageous. According to Oxford editor Roger Warren, there is also a hidden historical context here: Gloucester and Henry hold opposing views on dealing with France – Henry advocates a peace treaty, while Gloucester favours war.¹⁷ This fundamental political divide is the true source of Gloucester's anger. However, Shakespeare deliberately shifts the focus onto disputes over marriage rather than political differences.

Though in both history and Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 1* and *Part 2*, Henry VI breaks his betrothal to the daughter of Armagnac and, in marrying the dowerless Margaret, loses money by hosting the wedding alone, Shakespeare radically alters the way Henry VI makes his decisions. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, Shakespeare creatively distorts history by making Henry incredulously fall into a trap set by Suffolk. Before meeting Margaret, facing Armagnac's offer, Henry is indifferent to love

¹⁴ GLOUCESTER ...Item, That the duchy of Anjou and the county of Maine shall be released and delivered to the king her father'—

[lets the paper fall]
KING Uncle, how now?
GLOUCESTER Pardon me, gracious lord;
Some sudden qualm hath struck me at the heart,
And dimmed mine eyes, that I can read no further.
(2H6 I.i.49-53)

¹⁵ The quotations of *Henry VI Parts 1, 2* and *3, King John* are from Cambridge Dover Wilson editions.

¹⁶ GLOUCESTER Besides, my lord, the sooner to effect
And surer bind this knot of amity,
The Earl of Armagnac, near knit to Charles,
A man of great authority in France,
Proffers his only daughter to your grace
In marriage, with a large and sumptuous dowry.
(1H6 V.i.15-20)

¹⁷ Roger Warren, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Henry VI, Part Two*. Oxford University Press, 2003: 35.

and marriage. He explains that he is still young and needs to focus more on study and books rather than “wanton dalliance with a paramour” (V.i.23). But after Suffolk embellishes Margaret’s beauty and virtue, Henry changes from a celibate youth to a melancholic lover. He is “astonished” by Margaret’s beauty; her virtue and gifts “breed love’s settled passions” in his heart and he would rather “suffer shipwreck” to arrive in her harbour of love (V.v.1-9). In regards to the political influence and the dowry of the two candidates, Gloucester, Exeter, and Suffolk debate the subject in Act 5, Scene 5. Gloucester advises that Armagnac has political influence and is also the French King Charles’s near kinsman (44-45). Suffolk, however, retorts that Margaret’s father, Rene, is a king, a title superior to Armagnac’s earldom, giving Rene more influence in France (39-43). Exeter says that, inasmuch as the influence of Rene and Armagnac are equal, Armagnac can offer a decent dowry, whereas Rene is bankrupt (46-47). Suffolk eloquently argues that a king must not choose wealth over personal affection:

SUFFOLK A dower, my lords! disgrace not so your king,
That he should be so abject, base and poor,
To choose for wealth and not for perfect love.
Henry is able to enrich his queen,
And not to seek a queen to make him rich.

(1H6 V.v.48-52)

Henry VI was not the first to spend money on marrying a French princess; Shakespeare’s *Richard II* records a similar circumstance in which Mowbray explains to Bolingbroke that the king owed him a debt for when he “went to France to fetch this queen” (I.i.131). Just as the Oxford editors of *Richard II*, Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin, note that, in 1395, Mowbray and Aumerle organised Richard’s marriage to Isabel, the French king’s daughter, and incurred significant expenses in the process of negotiating the union.¹⁸ Richard’s fall in the play, however, has nothing to do with his marriage expenditure.

Suffolk’s romantic declaration regarding the king’s freedom to choose his wife appears admirable but is, in fact, untenable when examined through the lens of the socio-political conventions governing royal marriages and the functionalist and teleological frameworks that should guide a lord’s counsel to the king. In *Henry VI, Part I*, Shakespeare invents a scenario in which Henry asks Suffolk to increase taxes to pay for the imminent wedding (V.v.93). Driven by passion (V.v.82), Henry even urges Suffolk to agree to any conditions from France in order to marry Margaret (V.v.88). Shakespeare’s embellishments include the lords’ heart-wrenching cries, turning Henry VI into a figure driven by personal affection and compelling the audience to side with the

¹⁸ Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin in their introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare: Richard II*. Edited by B. Dawson Anthony and Yachnin Paul, Oxford University Press, 2011: 141.

lords in believing that Henry VI has married poorly and that his wife will be the chief culprit in England's downfall.

In the facts shown in the history, while Henry VI may have lacked judgment in choosing a wife, the marriage proves not entirely unfavourable. Margaret's father does have a certain level of influence and can facilitate a peace treaty between England and France. In this respect, the Rene family is comparable to the Armagnac family. The only difference is that the Armagnac family does indeed have slightly more influence, and more wealth. According to Susanne Saygin, in history, the French King Charles did not favour an alliance between the Armagnac family and Henry VI, because a powerful union could threaten his reign, so it was logical that the French King would rather arrange a marriage for Rene than for Armagnac¹⁹ – which consequently created additional impediments for the Henry VI-Armagnac alliance. Elisabeth Waugaman argues that “the brief reference to Armagnac's daughter serves to illustrate Henry's tragic flaw — his indecisiveness and his suggestibility”.²⁰ Yet even if Henry had married the daughter of Armagnac, the tragic flaw remains unchanged. Shakespeare deliberately sets a trap for the audience: he offers the possibility that an alternative marriage might have altered the course of events, but Henry's flaw ensures that either marriage brings its own political loss to France. Even had the marriage taken place, it is unlikely that an alliance with the more powerful Armagnacs could have prevented Henry from doing something less harmful for British rights than signing the Treaty of Tours. What he needed was a strong-willed queen, which Margaret could provide, something that the Armagnac daughter might not have been able to.

In the Henry VI trilogy, Shakespeare shrewdly conveys his understanding of the political world shaped by Henry VI's marriage choice, in which Margaret consistently represents the weak king's interests and acts on his behalf. After the marriage, several political factions remain intact: Gloucester and Winchester, though both associated with the Red Rose camp, are two independent and powerful opponents; the White Rose clan represented by the House of York, the only difference is that Queen Margaret and Suffolk throw in their lot with the faction and strengthen Henry VI's power. Margaret's appearance will not extinguish the long-standing feud of the Red Rose and White Rose camps, but, as a catalyst, she will accelerate the power dynamics and the civil war, being always on the side of the weak Henry VI. In Act 1, Scene 4, of *Henry VI, Part 3*, it is Queen Margaret who defeats York's army and executes York (though cruelly), and in the whole play it is Margaret who always leads the charge, while Henry VI hides behind. Though Henry fails to marry a

¹⁹ Susanne Saygin. *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (1390-1447) and the Italian Humanists*. Brill, 2002:117.

²⁰ Elisabeth Waugaman. “A Reassessment of Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI*.” *The Oxfordian*, vol. 27, 2025: 111.

more powerful and affluent wife, he does marry a noble princess willing to fight for his crown. Anna Murphy Jameson argues that Margaret does not look like a Shakespeare character because he would never have created such a powerful female figure without infusing her with poetic grace. Her analysis of Hall's praise of Margaret, and of how Shakespeare transforms it into a fierce and violent image of a revenge machine, is illuminating.²¹ Yet both her sense of the abnormality of this character and Shakespeare's rewriting of his source material point to Shakespeare's neutrality at work: he portrays Margaret as a "she-wolf," while simultaneously implying that she is also a great queen. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality turns the so-called 'bad' marriage into a good choice for Henry, though the transformation is subtle and unnoticed.²² There is no causal relationship between the marriage of Henry VI and the downfall of the kingdom.²³

The blessing-in-disguise marriage of Henry VI alone cannot constitute the whole story of Shakespeare's neutrality on the issue of royal marriages. The declining expectations and backgrounds of the three queens taken together offer a more holistic view. Edward IV's marriage with queen Elizabeth causes problems for the Tudor myth, too. In *Henry VI, Part 3*, the news of the marriage reaches the French court while Warwick is asking for the hand of Princess Bona on behalf of Edward IV. Humiliated, Warwick is consumed with hatred and vows to dethrone Edward IV with the army of Margaret and the French King:

WARWICK I came from Edward as ambassador,
 But I return his sworn and mortal foe:
 Matter of marriage was the charge he gave me,
 But dreadful war shall answer his demand.
 (3H6 III.iii.256-59)

Warwick's explanation of his frustration betrays a pattern of thinking similar to Gloucester's over-exaggerated laments. The wilful match ruins everything that the Warwick family has sacrificed for the House of York in the civil war:

WARWICK King Lewis, I here protest, in sight of heaven,
 And by the hope I have of heavenly bliss,
 That I am clear from this misdeed of Edward's,
 But most himself, if he could see his shame.

²¹ Anna Murphy Jameson. *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical: Exploring Femininity through History and Literature*. Edited by Cheri L. Larsen Hoeckley, Broadview Press, 2005: 330-32.

²² Henry VI's marriage forms an important component of the Tudor myth. If Henry VI and his marriage are to appear as a mistake, then Henry VII's accession becomes more legitimate. This may explain why Shakespeare is expected to treat Henry VI's marriage as a delicate matter and cannot openly praise the advantages of that marital union.

²³ It does not mean that the downfall of the kingdom is necessarily caused by other factors, either. In section two of this chapter, I argue there is no causal relationship between the political factions or Henry's personality and the downfall of the kingdom.

Did I forget that by the house of York
 My father came untimely to his death?
 Did I let pass th'abuse done to my niece?
 Did I impale him with the regal crown?
 Did I put Henry from his native right?
 And am I guerdoned at the last with shame?
 Shame on himself! for my desert is honour:
 And to repair my honour lost for him,
 I here renounce him and return to Henry.
 My noble queen, let former grudges pass,
 And henceforth I am thy true servitor:
 I will revenge his wrong to Lady Bona
 And replant Henry in his former state.

(3H6 III.iii.184-98)

In fact, previous attempts to build the Kingdom of York cannot be undone by one marriage. Warwick's rhetorical exaggeration leads to one substantial consequence: out of passion, he breaks with Edward IV. With equal passion, he marries his daughter to the Prince, the son of Henry VI and Margaret, pledging to restore the prince to the English throne through war. Shakespeare presents one inflation after another: humiliation leads to an eruption of emotions, which in turn generates an irrational excuse for treason. The political alliance of Warwick and Margaret is reached in haste. In Act 3, Scene 3, of *Henry VI, Part 3*, Warwick gets angry at line 184, then only after 20 lines the French King agrees to support Margaret and Warwick in war and, after only another 40 lines, the Prince agrees to marry the daughter of Warwick. The Prince's dramatically hasty decision regarding his marriage casts doubt on the functionalist nature of royal marriages. On hearing Margaret's persuasion and replying "Yes, I accept her, for she well deserves it" (249), the Prince is shaped by Shakespeare as a state machine, devoid of humanity.

There are two other purely political marriages elsewhere Shakespeare's plays, in *King John* and *Henry V*, and Shakespeare's neutrality tests them both in slightly different ways. In *King John*, a similar political alliance between Princess Blanch of Castile and the Dauphin Lewis echoes the same irony Shakespeare employs on the purposes of royal marriages. In Act 2, Scene 1, the English and French armies are fighting for the city of Angiers, but the citizens propose that the marriage between Princess Blanch and the Dauphin Lewis can settle the conflicts between the two countries. Blanch and Lewis, initially enemies coming to fight, are advised to become wife and husband, and they agree immediately:

LEWIS I do, my lord, and in her eye I find
 A wonder, or a wondrous miracle,
 The shadow of myself formed in her eye,
 Which, being but the shadow of your son,
 Becomes a sun, and makes your son a shadow;

I do protest, I never loved myself,
Till now infixed I beheld myself,
Drawn in the flattering table of her eye.
(*KJ* II.i.496-503)²⁴

Lewis sees in Blanch's eye his own image gilded with power. He is transformed from "but a shadow" to "a sun". He protests that he never loved himself so much until his shadow in Blanch's eye fascinated him. Lewis does not love Blanch; rather, what he loves is the union with Blanch that elevates his status. Blanch is also satisfied with the union as an obedient daughter willing to sacrifice herself to a political cause: "My uncle's will in this respect /Is mine" (510-11). Both Lewis and Blanch are driven by the prospect of political alliance, not by personal affection. King John even offers a generous dowry, including "Anjou, and fair Touraine, Maine, Poictiers, /And all that we upon this side the sea" (487-88) to maintain a truce between the two countries. Ironically, when Henry VI offers Anjou and Maine in exchange for marriage, it becomes unforgivable to Gloucester and the lords. Although Henry VI's cession of Anjou and Maine and King John's offering them as a dowry are not the same matters, Shakespeare's neutrality does offer a brilliant exposé of the ironies of royal marriage in identifying the two places in both plays. The political marriage of Blanch and Lewis suffers for its expediency, too. In Act 3, Scene 1, of *King John*, the newly-weds' marriage becomes meaningless when France and England break the peace under the stress of Pandulph, the messenger of the Pope. Blanch bemoans that "Whoever wins, on that side shall I lose" (335).

Henry VI's mother, the French princess Catherine of Valois, was fortunate not to have lived long enough to witness her son's suffering amid the conflicts between France and England. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare presents her (as Katherine) and Henry V as akin to Blanch and Lewis – married for political alliance, that is, rather than love. Henry V has remained celibate since his days as Prince Hal in the *Henry IV* plays, where his only interests lie with Falstaff and accumulating experience in the civil wars. By the time he ascends the throne, he is a king wholly devoted to politics and war. In Act 5, Scene 2, his love-suit to Katherine thinly veils the reality that he marries her, not for personal affection, but for France itself. Henry asks Katherine to love him, but she hesitates:

KATHERINE Is it possible dat I sould love de enemy of France?
(*H5* V.ii.171-72)

²⁴ William Shakespeare. *King John: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*. Edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Henry's reply makes it clear that his love is not for Katherine as an individual but for her as a political entity. His devotion lies with France, and through marrying her, he secures his claim to France:

KING HENRY No, it is not possible you should love the enemy of France, Kate; but, in loving me, you should love the friend of France: for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it; I will have it all mine: and, Kate, when France is mine, and I am yours, then yours is France, and you are mine.

(*H5* V.ii.171-78)

The intriguing phrasing blurs the distinction between “I” and “you”, implying that what Henry truly desires is the prospect of ruling both kingdoms, so there will be no distinction between France and England, and their offspring will inherit the throne of both England and France. His language, along with his audacious proposal to kiss Katherine upon their first meeting, is not an expression of romantic love but a political proclamation of his dominion over France. Princess Katherine is not particularly romantic either. Her playful practice of English with her maid suggests an eagerness to meet and marry Henry, who is in the process of defeating the French army on French soil. She is fully aware that Henry is the enemy, yet she also desires to marry him. While the marriage benefits France by securing a peace treaty with England, it also serves her personal interests by elevating her status above that of her brother, the Dauphin. Unlike her brother, who can never be king, nor can his son inherit the French throne, Katherine's son, Henry VI, will rule both England and France. From the perspective of the whole play sequence, however, the seemingly perfect political union in *Henry V* proves fragile in the long run in the *Henry VI* plays: Henry VI neither rules the two countries nor possesses the capacity to do so, a development that aligns with Shakespeare's sense of the “terrible neutrality” of political history.

Back to *Henry VI, Part 3*, Warwick passionately betrays Edward IV and hastily builds bonds with Margaret with a political marriage between his daughter and the Prince, while Edward's marriage to Elizabeth, Lady Grey, is less expedient and more personal. Shakespeare creatively depicts a scenario in which Edward falls in love with Elizabeth. At first, Edward only wants her to be his lover, but she wisely shifts the dialogue toward virtue and legitimacy:

KING EDWARD An easy task; 'tis but to love a king.

LADY GREY That's soon performed, because I am a subject.

(*3H6* III.ii.53-54)

The love she can give to the king, she adds, is the “love which virtue begs and virtue grants” (63). When he makes it clear that he wants her to sleep with him, she resolutely refuses:

KING EDWARD To tell thee plain, I aim to lie with thee.

LADY GREY To tell you plain, I had rather lie in prison.
(3H6 III.ii.69-70)

When she again and again firmly refuses him and values her chastity over her life and her children, he realises that “All her perfections challenge sovereignty” (86). When he proposes to her, in humble self-awareness, she refuses, again: “I know I am too mean to be your queen, /And yet too good to be your concubine” (III.ii.97-98). The refusal of the proposal is the last step in Shakespeare’s shaping her into a virtuous lady, whose virtue, like Helena’s virtue in *All’s Well*, becomes symbolic capital that can “challenge sovereignty” and elevate her status to well above that of a widow and a minor noble. Her dignified and self-aware image also transforms the carnal desire of Edward IV into love. The Tudor myth is at work in beautifying queen Elizabeth: she is the grandmother of Henry VIII. Shakespeare does not have to distort history to make their unconventional marriage fit the “neutrality” pattern: their marriage is not a utilitarian royal marriage, but it does not turn out to be bad.

Shakespeare may mock the purely political royal marriage, but he does not support a purely romantic royal marriage either. Shakespeare’s neutrality sees that, in political marriage, a lack of caution can lead one party to be taken advantage of by romantic love. Henry VI is an example yielding a positive outcome; though he is manipulated by Margaret, the marriage proves politically beneficial. Edward IV and Queen Elizabeth’s union is also successful, both politically and personally. However, in the case of Richard and Lady Anne in *Richard III*, Lady Anne falls into the trap of Richard’s feigned romantic love. Lady Anne is Warwick’s daughter, who has hastily married the son of Henry VI and Queen Margaret in *Henry VI, Part 3*, and in Act 1, Scene 2, of *Richard III*, Richard halts the coffin carrying her husband’s body and proposes to her. After professing his long-standing love and offering his life to her, she softens and takes his hand, even though Richard admits to killing her husband, whose body lies in the coffin beside them. Richard mocks her romantic soul in his classic lines: “Was ever woman in this humour wooed? / Was ever woman in this humour won? / I’ll have her; but I will not keep her long” (I.ii.287-89).²⁵

When Anne mourns for her late husband, she curses Gloucester’s (Richard’s) future wife: “If ever he have wife, let her be made /More miserable by the life of him /Than I am by my young lord’s death and thee!” (26-28). Just as New Cambridge editor Janis Lull indicates, the curses throughout the *Henry VI* tetralogy come true, reflecting the Tudor myth that a divine curse resulting in the Wars of the Roses will be purged by Henry VII.²⁶ Anne’s curses, on the other hand, without

²⁵ All quotations from *Richard III* are from the New Cambridge edition: William Shakespeare. *King Richard III*. Edited by Janis Lull, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

²⁶ Janis Lull (ed.), *Richard III*, 6.

exception, rebound upon herself. In Act 4, Scene 1, she repents that shortly after the curse, she “Grossly grew captive to his honey words / And proved the subject of mine own soul’s curse” (80-81). Though the marriage is politically beneficial to Lady Anne, Shakespeare presents her as a victim of a sinister eloquence and the exploitation of romantic love.

Of the three marriages among Henry VI, Edward IV and Henry VIII, Henry VIII’s to Anne Bullen is the least expected and most unconventional, especially since she is one of the reasons he divorces Katherine of Aragon. Though the play is a collaboration of Fletcher and Shakespeare, they took turns in writing the whole play and must have reached a consensus on the image of Henry VIII.²⁷ While Henry VI has a powerful lord Gloucester to oppose his choice of queen, Henry VIII’s Gloucester is Wolsey, who voices displaced paternal objections.²⁸ Wolsey has plans for Henry VIII’s next wife — “It shall be to the Duchess of Alençon, /The French king’s sister; he shall marry her” (III.ii.85-86) — and he resents the idea of Henry marrying Anne Bullen:

WOLSEY The late queen’s gentlewoman, a knight’s daughter,
To be her mistress’ mistress? The Queen’s queen?
This candle burns not clear. ‘Tis I must snuff it;
Then out it goes. What though I know her virtuous
And well-deserving? Yet I know her for
A spleeny Lutheran, and not wholesome to
Our cause that she should lie i’t’h’bosom of
Our hard-ruled king. ...

(H8 III.ii.94-101)²⁹

Wolsey’s standard for choosing queens is utterly conventional: status and wealth. Anne is only Katherine’s gentlewoman, and her father only a knight. The way Wolsey snobbishly denigrates Anne’s social status is unprecedented in Shakespeare’s plays. Wolsey’s hatred is not merely fuelled by political concerns about royal marriage, he also points out the religious difference between Anne and himself: she is a Protestant, which threatens his Catholic cause if she becomes involved with Henry.

²⁷ Jonathan Bate, in his introduction to William Shakespeare, *The RSC Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, 2 ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022: 1364.

²⁸ Gordon McMullan, in his introduction to William Shakespeare and John Fletcher. *King Henry VIII: Third Series*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2000: 139.

²⁹ All quotations of *Henry VIII* are from the Arden Shakespeare: William Shakespeare and John Fletcher. *King Henry VIII: Third Series*. Edited by Gordon McMullan, Bloomsbury Academic: 2000.

Henry VIII

Henry VIII provides an alternative reading of historical materials to explain the coming of the Reformation to England.³⁰ Shakespeare reshapes the historical accounts from the Chronicles, Hall, and Campion into a distinct narrative that challenges the notion of objective, factual history. In history, for example, Anne Boleyn did play a significant role in advancing the Reformation in England and the following economic prosperity of Tudor Dynasty, particularly through her marriage to Henry VIII, which catalysed the break with the Catholic Church. Indeed, her marriage to Henry VIII in 1533 prompted his excommunication by the Pope. As a Protestant, she actively supported the Reformation by promoting evangelical scholars and reformers, such as Matthew Parker, and aiding in the dissemination of William Tyndale's scriptures. In 1534, she wrote a letter to Thomas Cromwell to advocate for the protection of reformers like Richard Herman. She ensured the upbringing of her daughter, Elizabeth, under Parker's care, thus embedding Protestant influences in the future monarch's education. Without Anne's marriage to Henry VIII, the subsequent ecclesiastical reforms and the establishment of the Church of England under the 1534 Acts of Supremacy might not have occurred, nor would the ensuing revenue generated by confiscating Catholic churches in England have accrued.³¹

In the play of *Henry VIII*, however, these facts are not considered significant, and her religious role is glossed over in a few lines:

GARDINER It will ne'er be well...
Till Cranmer, Cromwell—her two hands—and she
Sleep in their graves.

(H8 V.i.31-32)

Shakespeare deliberately downplays Anne's religious-political role and plays up her sexuality. The key word to tie Henry to Anne is "conscience", a word discussed at length by scholars to unravel its sexual innuendo. "Conscience" holds significant martyrological meaning and is directly connected to Buckingham, Wolsey, and Katherine. But just as Monta Susannah Brietz argues that, in *Henry VIII*, the word is only interpreted at face value, even in its sexual meaning,³² the Arden editor

³⁰ See Annabel Patterson. "All Is True: Negotiating the Past in *Henry VIII*." *Shakespearean Criticism*, vol. 61, 2002: 111.

³¹ See Chapter 7, 'I have done many good deeds in my life': Anne Boleyn's religion, in G. W. Bernard, *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions*, Yale University Press, 2010, for a discussion on Anne Boleyn's influence on the Reformation, including her support for evangelical scholars and her involvement in the religious transformation in England.

³² Susannah Brietz Monta, "'Thou Fall'st a Blessed Martyr': Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and the Polemics of Conscience." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2000: 262–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.2000.tb01172.x>

Gordon McMullan points out that, in two texts, “conscience” means “vagina”.³³ The first place is when Henry VIII asks the rhetorical question of whether or not it hurts his conscience to divorce Katherine, referring to conscience as a “tender place” and he “must leave her” (II.ii.139-42). The second place is where the Old Lady asks whether Anne’s conscience can “stretch” to receiving the King’s gifts (II.iii.31-33). Henry’s conscience does hurt a little because, in the play, he divorces the Queen for the sake of Anne, not because he believes he is cursed by marrying his brother’s widow. He meets Anne for the first time in Act 1, Scene 4, in Wolsey’s banquet and masque, and covets her beauty:

KING The fairest hand I ever touched. O Beauty,
Till now I never knew thee.

(H8 I.iv.75-76)

And the “conscience” speech is in Act 2, Scene 2, where Henry suddenly brings up the whole idea of divine punishment. Apparently, Henry does not pursue divorce until after he meets Anne. Anne’s coronation scene, featuring “Great-bellied women” (IV.i.76), further reinforces her role as a fertility symbol: an object for sex and fertilisation, rather than a figure of political-religious history.

But what Shakespeare deliberately glosses over in Anne would not have been overlooked by any of the playgoers in his time. The lower born Anne Boleyn did bring Henry his most significant political achievement, compared to the more conventional marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine. Catherine was previously the Princess of Spain, the daughter of King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile. In the play, she is an impeccable queen, devoted to her husband, always kind, and possessed of a strong sense of justice in political matters. In Act 1, Scene 2, she condescends to kneel on the ground as a suitor until Henry VIII is willing to address the unfair taxation he has imposed on the people. Her kneeling on several occasions presents the independence of her stance, without posing a threat to Henry.³⁴ In Act 3, Scene 1, she declares that “Nothing but death/ Shall e’er divorce my dignities” (III.i.156-57) — a virtuous resolution equal to Queen Elizabeth powers to “challenge sovereignty”. In Act 4, Scene 2, on her deathbed, she sends three petitions to Henry. First, she spends eight lines asking him to care for their daughter. Second, she dedicates ten lines to requesting that her women be well settled, and six lines for the well-being of her men — the virtue of putting others before herself is another strong indication of her perfection. Even with Henry’s abandonment, she still professes her love for him on multiple occasions, including on her deathbed. Shakespeare stages the music of the spheres in her dream to

³³ McMullan (ed.), *King Henry VIII*, 80-81.

³⁴ See Thongrob Ruenbanthoeng. “The Representation of Female Speech in Shakespeare’s Late Plays.” *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses*, 2019: 191.

match her virtues with highest wonder. The more respect encouraged for her, the harsher the criticism of Henry himself, who abandons a virtuous queen to marry a lower-born gentlewoman. But political success and ethics do not go together, aligning with Shakespeare's neutrality on politics generally.

For playgoers in Shakespeare's time there was another well-known source of history that Shakespeare did not need explicitly to mention, which is that Henry might have executed Anne for the same reason he divorced Katherine: being unable to give birth to a male heir. Henry VIII repeatedly escapes consequences by divorcing and executing his wives, exploiting and abandoning them, yet he remains a successful king who builds a thriving kingdom. What Shakespeare does, however, is to break the cycle of Henry VIII's marital tyranny and end the play with the birth of Elizabeth, who remains unmarried. The play ends with the christening of Elizabeth, who would defy the social expectations of traditional motherhood and become a symbolic mother to her subjects, and by doing so avoid her mother's fate of being labelled a failure.³⁵

Shakespeare cannot change the direction of history. Here, in the case of royal marriages, he cannot change the record of kings and their queens. What he can do, however, is take creative liberties with how they get married, and with the other characters' reactions to their marriages, integrating the socio-political facts of the era with imaginative commentary on that history. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality towards royal marriages in history highlights the fact that the so-called 'good' political marriages may fail in their intended political purposes, while the outcomes of so-called 'bad' royal marriages might lead to positive results. His portrayal of these royal marriages also critiques various politicians' attempts to ensure the political welfare of the state, underwritten as they were by an often-cynical functionalist practice and an illusory teleological vision of history.

Section 2 Politics and Political Outcomes

Shakespeare's neutrality in politics portrays kings who behave similarly in similar situations, but experience opposite outcomes. As a king, Henry VIII embodies all the traits that led to the downfall of previous monarchs, yet he establishes the prosperity of his kingdom. Both Henry VIII and Richard II are strong-willed kings who exploit the nobles and the people, but only Henry VIII succeeds, while Richard II fails. Henry VIII, Richard II, and Henry VI all face powerful nobles, but only Henry VIII's kingdom endures. Henry VI's apparent virtues are rare amongst Shakespeare's

³⁵ Mary K. Nelson. "Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*: Stigmatizing the 'Disabled' Womb." *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2009, doi:10.18061/dsq.v29i4.995.

kings, yet Henry's political failures are the greatest. Conversely, the most villainous among the three, Henry VIII, achieves the best political outcomes. Unlike the genre of history play which he uses for Henry VI and Richard II, Shakespeare presents Henry VIII's history in the genre of romance, imbuing it with an almost fairy-tale quality, underlined in the ironic subtitle *All Is True*, as Shakespeare asks the rhetorical question: how can this be true?

The beginning of *Henry VIII* is filled with extravagance, but it is the people and the nobles who bear the financial burden. Interestingly, the blame does not fall on Henry VIII but on Wolsey. The summit meeting between King Francis I of France and Henry VIII, historically called The Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520), is a luxury show in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. Every day the events become more extravagant: "Each following day / Became the next day's master, till the last / Made former wonders its." (I.i.16-18) Today the Frenchmen wear gold, tomorrow Englishmen will up the game: "Every man that stood / Showed like a mine" (21-22). While readers anticipate that the meeting will be positive and a display of national power, an unexpected turn takes place. Thomas Healy observes that this scene exemplifies a play that leads its audience to view events in a particular way, only to challenge or overturn their interpretation. Any effort to maintain a coherent understanding of the events or a singular narrative perspective on the historical meaning is futile.³⁶ The money squandered at the meeting is extracted from the landowners, as pointed out by Buckingham and his son-in-law Abergavenny: "many / Have broke their backs with laying manors on'em" (83-84) and "I do know / Kinsmen of mine, three at the least, that have / By this so sickened their estates that never / They shall abound as formerly" (80-83).

They do not, however, blame Henry VIII for the waste of money, instead they blame Wolsey. According to them, the reason why Wolsey forces the gentlemen to go to the meeting with Henry VIII is not because he wants them to attain honour, but to burden them with debt (75-78). The meeting, while costing so much, achieves nothing, because the French have "flawed the league" (94-96). Cardinal Wolsey is a person whose "pride / Peep[s] through each part of him" and who makes a "new hell in himself" (68-72). The seemingly neutral Norfolk actually sides with the Buckingham family. The only reason he remains neutral on the surface is that he knows Wolsey is "revengeful", so he advises Buckingham to consider Wolsey's power and "malice" (105) together and not show his aversion to Wolsey so openly. Since in both history and the play, The Field of the Cloth of Gold is a summit of two monarchs squandering substantial amounts of money, it is hard to conclude that it is Wolsey's fault for raising the budget, rather than the monarch's fault for setting

³⁶ Thomas Healy. "History and Judgement in *Henry VIII*." *Shakespeare's Late Plays*. Edited by Jennifer Richards and James Knowles, Edinburgh University Press, 2022:160.

When Katherine kneels to plead for relief for the people from a heavy taxation, historically as the “Amicable Grant” of 1525, Henry VIII denies any knowledge of it and shifts the responsibility onto Wolsey:

WOLSEY Please you, sir,
I know but of a single part in aught
Pertains to th'state, and front but in that file
Where others tell steps with me.

Apparently Henry VIII and Wolsey jointly orchestrate the tax, since all the other lords complain about it in Act 1, Scene 1. However, it is clear that Henry subtly intimates to Wolsey that he (Henry) must remain blameless and that Wolsey should help him evade responsibility. While Katherine persistently presses the issue, Henry continues to deny any knowledge of it, even swearing on his life:

WOLSEY And for me,
I have no further gone in this than by
A single voice, and that not passed me but
By learnèd approbation of the judges.

In this incident, Henry VIII demonstrates a readiness to sacrifice Wolsey repeatedly, rendering Wolsey vulnerable. Wolsey functions as Henry's instrument of enforcement, akin to Buckingham in *Richard III*, executing the king's dirty work only to be discarded at the monarch's discretion. The historical Henry VIII is exactly as Shakespeare depicts in the 1525 Amicable Plan. Henry, as king, was adept at letting his chief ministers take the blame for unpopular policies, thereby retaining his

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own ‘deniability’³⁸. Shakespeare keenly captures this aspect of Henry VIII’s kingship, which is effective, but morally dubious.

Henry VIII also appears innocent, even foolish, in the subsequent scene sentencing Buckingham, in which Wolsey again bears the blame. There is only one witness, the Surveyor of Buckingham, who with the collusion of Wolsey goes to testify in Henry’s court, relaying what it is that Buckingham has said without any substantial evidence. According to Queen Katherine, the Surveyor has a personal grudge against Buckingham. Henry VIII, however, takes the Surveyor at his word and replies with indignant exclamations: “Ha? What, so rank? Ah, ha! / There is mischief in this man” (I.ii.186-87) and calls Buckingham “A giant traitor” (199). In the end, because of what Buckingham is reported to have said, Henry VIII announces his immediate arrest without further investigation: “He is attached; / Call him to present trial” (210-11). In the play, there is no fair trial; Buckingham is convicted and then executed without the king being present, denying him the chance to defend himself. Shakespeare’s terrible neutrality is at work with the depictions of Henry VIII and Richard III. He does not depict Henry VIII as a tyrant, though Richard III, who treats his Buckingham in the same way, is definitively portrayed as a tyrant:

BUCKINGHAM Will not King Richard let me speak with him?
SHERIFF No, my good lord. Therefore be patient.

(H8 V.i.1-2)³⁹

Henry VIII’s image in public is deceptively naïve. Credulous, impetuous, ignorant of legal procedure and legal awareness, Henry VIII looks like he is entirely under Wolsey’s thumb. The stage direction at the start of Act 1, Scene 2, echoes Henry VIII’s decision: *Enter King Henry, leaning on the Cardinal’s shoulder . . . The Cardinal places himself under the King’s feet on his right side*. The image of the king is of one dependent on Wolsey for political decision-making, while Wolsey flatters and manipulates him. Henry VIII’s Buckingham – noble, respected by the lords, Queen Katherine, and the citizens, and only sentenced to death because of a personal grudge between him and Wolsey — is wronged. In history, on the other hand, Buckingham and Wolsey were similar, and Buckingham had also been called an “evil counsellor and corrupt favourite”.⁴⁰ In the play, Buckingham is summarily executed. In history, Henry VIII conducted a lengthy and

³⁸ G. W. Bernard. “Reflecting on the King’s Reformation.” *Henry VIII and the Court: Art, Politics and Performance*. Edited by Thomas Betteridge and Suzannah Lipscomb, 2014: 10.

³⁹ All quotations of *Richard III* are from New Cambridge Shakespeare. William Shakespeare. *King Richard III*. edited by Janis Lull, Cambridge University Press, 1999. *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*.

⁴⁰ Thomas Cogswell and Peter Lake. “Buckingham Does the Globe: *Henry VIII* and the Politics of Popularity in the 1620s.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 3, 2009: 256.

detailed investigation to gather evidence of Buckingham's alleged treason, in which many people were questioned:

After the apprehension of the duke, inquisitions were taken in diuerse shires of England of him; so that by the knights and gentlemen, he was indicted of high treason, for certeine words spoken (as before ye haue heard) by the same duke at Blechingleie, to the lord of Aburgauennie: and therewith was the same lord attached tease for concelement, and so likewise was the lord Montacute, and both led to the Tower. Sir Edward Neuill, brother to the said lord of Aburgauennie, was forbidden the kings presence. Moreouer, in the Guildhall, within the citie of London, before John Brugge knight, then lord maior of the same citie, by an inquest whereof one Miles Gerrard was foreman, the said duke was indicted of diuerse points of high treason, as by the same indictment it appeareth.⁴¹

The sharp difference between history and Shakespeare's play shows that Shakespeare intentionally shapes Henry VIII into a gullible and cruel monarch. This image of Henry VIII as gullible and dependent is, like the shift in the summit, overturned by his abandonment of Katherine and Wolsey. Later, it becomes a pattern that the king uses to escape censure and eliminate queens and lords for whom he has no use. Divorce, the dominating word in the play, becomes associated with their execution.⁴² Before Buckingham's execution, his dying speech includes a comparison of his own life to a marriage, from which he sees his impending death as a "divorce" (II.i.76). This moment coincides with the news of Katherine's divorce in Act 2, Scene 2. Katherine's divorce and death also parallels Wolsey's downfall and death. Even Anne, in her conversation with the Old Lady, connects divorce with beheading, foreshadowing her own eventual fate.⁴³

As if this were not surprising enough, the same perpetrator is praised by his victims. Prior to his execution, Buckingham is still singing Henry's praises: "My vows and prayers / Yet are the King's and, till my soul forsake, / Shall cry for blessings on him" (II.i.88-89). The same scenarios are repeated on the deathbeds of Wolsey and Katherine. Wolsey confesses to Cromwell that the king is a "sun I pray may never set" (III.ii.415). Deprived of her title, Katherine, before her death, entrusts Caputius with a message: "Tell him in death I blessed him" (IV.ii.163) — an exaggeration of Essex's confession on the scaffold that he did commit treason and was "justly spewed out of the realm".⁴⁴ The difference is that Essex did indeed organise an armed uprising. Shakespeare's

⁴¹ Raphael Holinshed. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland: Volume 3*. Printed for J. Johnson, F. C. and J. Rivington, et al., 1808: 658. For more information about Buckingham's investigation, see pages 658-663.

⁴² Susan Frye. "Queens and the Structure of History in *Henry VIII*." *Shakespearean Criticism*. Edited by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard, Blackwell Publishing, 2005: 436.

⁴³ Frye, "Queens and the Structure of History in *Henry VIII*", 437.

⁴⁴ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 17.

neutrality can comprehend an ethically corrupt and incompetent monarch who is still respected by the innocent whose lives he takes.

Henry VIII dismisses Wolsey in a manner similar to the way he treats Buckingham. In cutting down powerful lords, Henry VIII is as ruthless as Richard II in his treatment of Gaunt and Bolingbroke, or as Henry VI in his dismissal of Suffolk. While Wolsey is still feeling himself the “prime man of the state” (III.ii.162) and wrestling with the idea of whom Henry should marry, we learn unexpectedly that he has fallen out of favour. In Act 3, Scene 2, in the span of a moment, Henry invites Wolsey to exchange expressions of love and admiration, only in the next instant to present him with the paper revealing his betrayal. Wolsey is taken aback by Henry’s “sudden anger” (204) until he suddenly realises, “this paper has undone me” (210). One stage direction in Act 3, Scene 2, leaves a strong impression on Jonathan Bate:

King exits, frowning upon the Cardinal; the nobles throng after him smiling and whispering, and exit.

Bate marvels that “kingly authority is asserted by ... the ruthless axing of counsellors who have served their purpose. The stage direction is typical both of the world of drama and the world of Shakespeare”.⁴⁵ Shakespeare stands aloof and reveals the terrible truth that kingly authority is cruel in the play because it is cruel in reality, past and present.

What Shakespeare resorts to is an anachronistic blending of the apprentice Henry with the mature Henry. Historically, Wolsey and Henry VIII gradually rose to power together. Henry VIII inherited from Henry VII two primary counsellors, Richard Foxe (c. 1448–1528, Bishop of Winchester 1501–1528) and William Warham (c. 1450–1532, Archbishop of Canterbury 1503–1532). During the first six to seven years of his reign, Henry sought counsel from them both, although they did not endorse his inclination toward war. Henry gradually consolidated his authority, leading to their decline in influence by 1515 and 1516. Wolsey ascended to power by aligning with Henry’s inclination toward war with France, and over the course of the next five or six years, he assumed control over most state affairs. With the support of Wolsey, who pandered to his political ambitions, Henry VIII ascended to a new level of confidence and power. However, when Henry and Wolsey clashed over his marriage, Henry dismissed him, much as he had previously severed ties with his former advisors.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Bate (ed.), *Henry VIII*, 1365.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 10 of *Henry VIII: The King and His Court* by Alison Weir, for a detailed discussion on Henry VIII’s early councillors Richard Foxe and William Warham, his consolidation of power, and the early political career of Wolsey.

In this regard, the historical Wolsey is like Falstaff, participating in the education and rise of the monarch until one day the monarch “has gone beyond” him (III.ii.408). The historical honeymoon period between Henry and Wolsey saw Henry “leaning on the shoulder of Wolsey” and Wolsey fully in charge of the summit. However, in history, the period of dissention marked Wolsey’s fall from power. Shakespeare fuses the two different Henrys from these two different periods, portraying Henry VIII as capricious and unpredictable. Shakespeare’s rendering the story of Henry VIII in the genre of romance enables a reconstruction of the historical events.⁴⁷ The way we imagine history is deeply rooted in the cultural modes we adopt, but these modes are unable to “square with the messy, contingent, and ultimately inscrutable nature of the past”.⁴⁸ The genre of romance contributes to constructing an alternative historical narrative, one that inherently projects an idealised world. The imperfect story of Henry VIII, when intertwined with romance, generates a new way of imagining and a new interpretation of history.

Henry VIII's hidden authority again flowers in the matter of Cranmer. In Act 5, Scene 1, even before Cranmer is interrogated, Henry tells him that his answers will be required and that he has to move into the Tower of London:

KING you must take
Your patience to you and be well contented
To make your house our Tower.
(H8 V.i.104-106)

Henry pretends to be friendly, but impotent, as if the only favour he can offer Cranmer is to inform him in advance of the bad news. He provides no assurance of what he can do, merely expressing his spiritual support and warning Cranmer that his many enemies are powerful and malicious (128-35). His eloquent tongue and the offer of his ring moves Cranmer to tears (156-57). The next day, it turns out that Henry VIII *can* do more for Cranmer, but waits until Cranmer is being sent to the Tower and shows up with greater freedom and power than he had manifest the day before to rescue him and establish Cranmer's authority in front of the public. Henry's last-minute rescue forces Cranmer to endure a terror he easily could have been spared. For Cranmer, however, the ordeal becomes an indelible adventure, leaving him eternally grateful to Henry. We have seen this kind of political manipulation carried out by the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who keeps Isabella in the dark and makes her believe her brother is dead. We also see the same device used for benevolent purposes by Paulina and Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, when they stage a miracle to make the

⁴⁷ Dmitry Senyshyn. "Reconstructing Holinshed: History and Romance in *Henry VIII*." *Rethinking Shakespeare Source Study: Audiences, Authors, and Digital Technologies*. Edited by Dennis Austin Britton and Melissa Walter, Routledge, 2018: 155.

⁴⁸ Senyshyn, “Reconstructing Holinshed: History and Romance in *Henry VIII*”, 156.

reunion of Perdita and Leontes unforgettable. *Henry VIII* likewise deploys such political manipulation to secure Cranmer's gratitude.

Which is why many readers approach Cranmer's prophecy about the future prosperity of England with a grain of salt; it may reflect a scepticism shared by Shakespeare and Fletcher that Cranmer is merely ingratiating himself with Henry.⁴⁹ Henry's approach of balancing mercy with authority must have instilled fear in Cranmer. Similarly, in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke could have saved Isabella's brother from the start, but instead makes Isabella endure the agony of bereavement and her brother the immense fear of imminent death. This cruel method serves only to establish a monarch's authority over his subjects. Maybe it is this very fear and resultant gratitude that enables Henry to become the leader of the Church of England, rather than being side-lined by new religious leaders.

Henry's effort to save Cranmer is unlikely to have been appreciated by the lords in the Council, but miraculously it provokes no complaints or rebellion. When Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, flatters Henry, he sharply retorts that his flatteries are "too thin and base to hide offenses" (V.ii.168), and when Surrey wants to talk, Henry shuts him up:

SURREY May it please your Grace—

KING No, sir, it does not please me.

(H8 V.ii.168)

Henry does not even allow them the chance to discuss Cranmer's "crime" of being Protestant. In that Catholic world, legally speaking, Cranmer deserves to be sent to prison. But the crime is not even mentioned in Henry's defence of Cranmer, nor does anyone have a chance to bring it up. In the trials of Wolsey, Buckingham, and Cranmer, Shakespeare's Henry VIII always overrides and ignores the law. Though it might have been because there was no legal basis in England, especially in religion,⁵⁰ it is obvious that Henry VIII knows how easily he can manipulate the law and disregard its spirit: truth and conscience.⁵¹ This tyrannical monarch is fortunate to avoid rebellion, while Richard II, Richard III, and Edward IV, through similar arrogations, doomed their kingdoms. Richard III, for example, kills Lord Hastings in a similar manner, confronting him in front of the lords with patently ridiculous accusations and demanding his immediate execution — a wish that is swiftly granted. The wretched act becomes one of the many terrifying actions that define the

⁴⁹ Daniel Knapper. "Biblical Prophecy and Political Counsel in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII (All Is True)*." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2024: 204.

⁵⁰ McMullan, *King Henry VIII*, 137.

⁵¹ Gerard Wegemer. "*Henry VIII* on Trial: Confronting Malice and Conscience in Shakespeare's *All Is True*." *Renascence*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2000: 112.

tyranny of Richard III. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality here works again, this time to give opposite outcomes to similar meetings of the king and council.

While Wegemer calls Shakespeare's Henry VIII a tyrant,⁵² G. Wilson Knight sees the play as a celebration of kingship and national values.⁵³ Knight's approach of overlooking the ethical faults of Henry VIII in the play survives into the 21st century, as productions like the 2004 *Henry VIII (All is True)*, presented by the Stratford Festival of Canada at the Festival Theatre, continue to depict Henry VIII in a positive light and portray him as rejecting the taxation proposal of the deceitful and snakish Wolsey.⁵⁴ The portrayal of Henry VIII as a good and successful king, with all his faults attributed to others, was conventional before Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. But Shakespeare terribly shapes Henry VIII into something else, and in the play, politics to Henry is a game of foregoing ethics and winning regardless. For the victims of Henry VIII, *Henry VIII* is centred around a deep understanding of human division and isolation, reflecting the notion that happiness is constrained by the inevitable losses that accompany every gain,⁵⁵ but it is Henry VIII who causes the division, isolation, and the collapse of their happiness.

Richard II

There are many similarities between Richard II and Henry VIII in political strategy. Both are strong-willed and hard-ruling, but Richard II's fate contrasts sharply with that of Henry VIII. Richard II imposes taxes on both the people and the nobles, and, when he deems it necessary, removes the nobles from power with unquestionable authority and wilful dispatch, much like Henry VIII. In Act 1, Scene 1, of *Richard II*, in which Bolingbroke appeals against Mowbray, the relationship between Richard II and Mowbray mirrors the relationship between Henry VIII and Wolsey: Shakespeare sets up this control experiment. When Queen Katherine questions Henry VIII about taxation, Henry sells out Wolsey, as we saw, but Wolsey still needs to cover for Henry. In the case of Bolingbroke's appeal, Mowbray is the one who is sold out by Richard, but is still obliged to cloud the issue for the king's sake. In the court chosen by Richard II, Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of murdering the Duke of Gloucester:

BOLINGBROKE Further I say and further will maintain
Upon his bad life to make all this good,

⁵² Wegemer, "Henry VIII on Trial", 126.

⁵³ Julia Briggs. "Tears at the Wedding: Shakespeare's Last Phase." *Shakespeare's Late Plays*, Edited by Jennifer Richards and Knowles James, Edinburgh University Press, 2022: 213.

⁵⁴ Justin Shaltz. "Review: *Henry VIII (All Is True)*." *Shakespeare Bulletin*, vol. 23, 2005: 162.

⁵⁵ Briggs, "Tears at the Wedding: Shakespeare's Last Phase", 226.

That he did plot the Duke of Gloucester's death
(R2 I.i.98-100)⁵⁶

Richard II comments ironically on Bolingbroke's vengeful mood and asks Mowbray to respond:

RICHARD How high a pitch his resolution soars!
Thomas of Norfolk, what sayst thou to this?
(R2 I.i.109-110)

Readers with no knowledge of the historical context will think Richard II is only hosting the court and has nothing to do with the conflict between the two lords. Mowbray does not answer directly but tries to gauge Richard's stance. Richard's reply indicates that he will not help Mowbray in this matter because he claims to be "impartial" (115). Mowbray then ambiguously explains his role in Gloucester's attempted murder and death:

MOWBRAY For Gloucester's death,
I slew him not, but to my own disgrace
Neglected my sworn duty in that case.
For you, my noble lord of Lancaster,
The honourable father to my foe,
Once did I lay an ambush for your life,
A trespass that doth vex my grievèd soul;
(R2 I.i.132-138)

To whom does he swear his duty and what duty does he swear to? Is it to murder Gloucester or to protect him? Why does he lay an ambush on Lancaster's life? Mowbray does not seem to be a villain, he voluntarily mentions the attempted murder, shows respect for Lancaster and apologises, even though Bolingbroke does not accuse Mowbray of anything in that regard. Readers who know nothing of the historical context can still sense something is amiss: it is a thorny issue for Mowbray to speak openly and frankly. By withholding certain information, Shakespeare provides exactly what is needed to stimulate our critical examination of historical events.⁵⁷

Gaunt unveils the myth in Act 1, Scene 2. When Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester talk about revenge for the death of Gloucester, Gaunt helplessly suggests that they "cannot correct" but only "Put our quarrel to the will of heaven" (5-6) because it was God's deputy who caused Gloucester's death (37-39). Mowbray, upon hearing the surprisingly heavy sentence, had protested to Richard II, arguing that he deserved support from his king, not further punishment: "A dearer

⁵⁶ All the quotations of *Richard II* are from William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Richard II*. Edited by B. Dawson Anthony and Yachnin Paul, Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁵⁷ Dawson and Yachnin (eds), *Richard II*, 37.

merit, not so deep a maim .../ Have I deserved at your highness' hands." (I.iv.156-58) The truth is revealed: it was Richard II who ordered Mowbray to murder Gloucester.

Meanwhile, Richard, fully aware that Bolingbroke also accuses him of the murder, solemnly and brazenly dodges the accusation and shifts the blame back onto his enforcer, Mowbray. Richard, like Henry VIII, does not even help his henchman in court, leaving him helplessly defending himself and covering for Richard. Shakespeare shows sympathy to Mowbray, just as he later does to Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. Although in history there is only limited information that Mowbray went to Jerusalem,⁵⁸ Shakespeare elevates him as a Holy War crusader and makes Bolingbroke admire his virtue: "Sweet peace conduct his sweet soul to the bosom / Of good old Abraham" (IV.i.104-05). The cruelty of Richard II to the lord who helps him and the magnanimity Bolingbroke shows to his enemy might be offered as an explanation of Richard II's fall: a legitimate but evil king gives way to an honourable and capable king. However, when we consider Henry VIII's comparable case, it seems unlikely that there is any causal relationship between the way Richard II treats his lords and his eventual fall. Wolsey's lamentation applies to Mowbray, too: "O, how wretched / Is that poor man that hangs on princes' favours" (III.ii.366-67).

Like Henry VIII with Wolsey and Buckingham, Richard II seeks to eliminate both Mowbray and Bolingbroke, and his actions are just as wilful as Henry VIII's. In the trial-by-combat scene (Act 1, Scene 3), a grand challenge is staged, with everyone present to watch. The Lord Marshal and Richard II go through all the ceremonial processes, so it is shocking when Richard II abruptly terminates the combat and delivers his sentence:

LORD MARSHAL Sound, trumpets, and set forward, combatants!

A charge sounded

Stay. The King hath thrown his warder down.

RICHARD Let them lay by their helmets and their spears
And both return back to their chairs again.
Withdraw with us and let the trumpets sound
While we return these dukes what we decree.

(R2 I.iii.117-22)

⁵⁸ Dawson and Yachnin (eds), *Richard II*, 239.

In history, the tournament between Mowbray and Bolingbroke lasted four days,⁵⁹ and the decision was made in council after two hours' discussion.⁶⁰ Shakespeare condenses the scene, not allowing the two lords to fight, and has Richard II decide on the sentence himself, without consulting the council. Richard II establishes his kingly authority sensationally, through this abrupt intervention, and the play makes everything appear more wilful than in history, giving Richard II a more headstrong and authoritative role than the historical account.

Facing an unjust sentence, Bolingbroke — unlike the complaining Mowbray, but much like the victims of Henry VIII — accepts the cruel judgment and even expresses his gratitude to his monarch:

BOLINGBROKE Your will be done. This must my comfort be:
That sun that warms you here shall shine on me
And those his golden beams to you here lent
Shall point on me and gild my banishment.

(R2 I.iii.144-47)

Another wilful aspect of Richard II as king is his approach to solving his financial crisis. Before confiscating Gaunt's property, he betrays his military purpose and plans to raise more money by renting out lands ("farming our realm") and asking wealthy individuals to donate:

RICHARD We will ourself in person to this war,
And, for our coffers with too great a court
And liberal largesse are grown somewhat light,
We are enforced to farm our royal realm,
The revenue whereof shall furnish us
For our affairs in hand. If that come short,
Our substitutes at home shall have blank charters
Whereto, when they shall know what men are rich,
They shall subscribe them for large sums of gold
And send them after to supply our wants,
For we will make for Ireland presently.

(R2 I.iv.42-52)

It is here, while Richard is planning to get more money, he hears of the grievous sickness of John of Gaunt. Gaunt, in his turn, seizes the opportunity of his sickness to lecture Richard on how to rule a kingdom, because "death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear" (II.i.16). John of Gaunt's emotional lecture mirrors Gloucester's criticism of Henry VI's marriage, and they both think that certain behaviours of the king impair the stability of the kingdom. Gaunt accuses Richard of being

⁵⁹ Dawson and Yachnin (eds), *Richard II*, 149.

⁶⁰ Dawson and Yachnin (eds), *Richard II*, 155.

manipulated by “a thousand flatterers” (100), of murdering his grandfather’s sons, and of leasing the lands out: “more than shame to shame it so” (113). Gaunt thinks Richard is possessed by an evil spirit and that, if he continues to behave like this, he will be possessed enough to depose himself (107-08). Knapper views Gaunt’s admonition to Richard II as morally insightful, grounded in wisdom and experience.⁶¹ However, Knapper also acknowledges that Gaunt’s admonition fails to reform Richard, primarily because Gaunt fails to establish his authority before speaking.⁶² The outcome of Gaunt’s behaviour reveals that his wisdom is flawed. Moreover, establishing authority is unlikely to have been effective, since it is legitimate for Richard, as king, to resent others attempting to assert authority before him, which explains his explosive rage.

After hearing Gaunt’s speech, Richard feels offended and, in response, confiscates all the wealth belonging to the dying man. Richard II also levies taxes on the common people, as Ross complains:

ROSS The commons hath he pilled with grievous taxes
And quite lost their hearts. The nobles hath he fined
For ancient quarrels and quite lost their hearts.
(R2 II.i.246-48)

As we have suggested before, Henry VI’s kingdom does not go to ruin because he marries Margaret of Anjou. Here the question is: does Richard’s kingdom go to ruin because of his taxation policy, his exploitation of the lords, renting lands, or indulging flatterers? These actions are recorded in Holinshed and Hall as the political misconduct responsible for Richard’s failure. Henry VIII’s case shows us that a kingdom will not necessarily go to ruin if a king faces a financial crisis due to military spending or extravagant expenditures. Imposing taxation can be an effective way to resolve a financial crisis, even though the commons may complain to the point where the queen must kneel before the king to seek justice. Henry VIII’s case also illustrates that when a king possesses kingly authority, it is natural for both lords and commoners to flatter him. The unethical actions of Richard II and Henry VIII prove to be effective political methods to revive the kingdom.⁶³ Yes, from a moral perspective Richard is wrong, but Gaunt is also morally wrong — he takes a dying person’s privilege to reprimand his king about something that has not yet happened. More generally, the fact that tyrants can be successful is a perfect example of the incompatibility between politics and ethics.

⁶¹ Knapper, “Biblical Prophecy and Political Counsel”, 189.

⁶² Knapper, “Biblical Prophecy and Political Counsel”, 194.

⁶³ Peter Lake argues that this scene demonstrates Richard’s tyrannical nature, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, 243.

Richard II does not necessarily fail through taxation and the imposition of arbitrary authority on others, he fails because he is unlucky — in other words, he fails due to the “mysterious action of Fortune”, and the wheel of Fortune is constantly in Richard’s mind throughout the play.⁶⁴ In Act 3, Scene 2, near the coast of Wales, when Richard II learns that there is nothing stopping Bolingbroke and his army from charging towards him, he does not enquire where York’s army is, as Aumerle does. Instead, he becomes disillusioned and delivers the famous “let’s talk about graves” speech, expressing his haunting resentment of uncontrollable fate (of which Bolingbroke is only an agent) and of his own mortality:

KING RICHARD for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king,
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable: and humoured thus,
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!
(R2 III.ii.160-170)

The wheel of Fortune is in the Queen’s mind, too. In Act 2, Scene 2, after Richard goes to Ireland with his army and leaves the capital unguarded, she feels an “unknown sorrow”: “methinks, / Some unborn sorrow, ripe in Fortune’s womb, / Is coming towards me, and my inward soul / With nothing trembles” (II.ii.9–12). Her prognostication focuses on chance’s capacity to change the course of things, not on specific enemies.⁶⁵ Before Richard goes to Ireland, though his nobles harbour grudges, they remain obedient. Mowbray, despite his grievances and bitter moans, submits to Richard’s cold dismissal and returns to swear his oath as commanded. Gaunt, though displeased with the sentence of his son’s exile, still speaks respectfully and moves Richard with his affecting vulnerability. Richard fails because of betrayals. Bolingbroke foreswears his oath and returns to England and other lords support him, committing treason against Richard II. If we were to read *Richard II* on its own, disregarding the other plays, we might conclude that Richard II failed because of his wilful, capricious actions. But Henry VIII’s story tells us that Richard II is just unlucky and his lords malevolent. Robin Wells describes Richard as a tyrant who prioritises his own

⁶⁴ John Dover Wilson, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Richard II: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare*. Edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 2009: xx-xxii.

⁶⁵ Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld. “The Queen’s Conceit in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2020: 28.

needs over those of the country,⁶⁶ but the war with Ireland appears to be an action taken for the nation's stability, not a personal endeavour.

As Dawson and Yachnin argue, Shakespeare paints a negative image of Richard, but he also frustrates any easy condemnation of him.⁶⁷ The phenomenon of having it both ways is typical of Shakespeare's terrible neutrality. A close reading of Bolingbroke will unveil the truth of Richard's fall in Shakespeare's eyes. From Bolingbroke's attack scene (Act 2, Scene 2) onwards, Shakespeare sympathises with Richard and condemns Bolingbroke's behaviour, and by the end of the play many in the audience will have forgotten what Richard has done in Act 1 and Act 2, Scene 1. Richard maintains a good relationship with his queen, but close counsellors Bushy and Green are executed by Bolingbroke for separating them:

BOLINGBROKE You have in manner with your sinful hours
Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him
(R2 III.i.11-12)

Despite being labelled as flatterers, Bushy and Green seem no such thing. Their friendship with the queen is genuine and sincere: in Act 2, Scene 2, Bushy comforts the worrying queen and Green shares the most confidential information with her. The queen is also close to Richard. In Act 5, Scene 1, she and Richard exchange their love and sorrows, like a pair of star-crossed lovers. So Bolingbroke's statement is simply not true. Bushy and Green also face death fearlessly:

BUSHY More welcome is the stroke of death to me
Than Bolingbroke to England. Lords, farewell.
GREEN My comfort is that heaven will take our souls
And plague injustice with the pains of hell.
(R3 III.i.31-34)

Their uncompromising speeches before the execution are moving, echoing Lord Rivers' resolute conversation before execution in *Richard III*. Clearly, they have been framed and maligned by the king:

RIVERS Sir Richard Ratcliffe, let me tell thee this:
To-day shalt thou behold a subject die
For truth, for duty, and for loyalty.
GREY. God bless the prince from all the pack of you!
A knot you are of damned blood-suckers.
(R2 III.iii.1-5)

⁶⁶ Robin Headlam Wells. *Shakespeare, Politics and the State*. Macmillan, 1986: 90.

⁶⁷ Dawson and Yachnin (eds), *Richard II*, 50.

Bolingbroke's execution of Bushy and Green in Act 3, Scene 1, reveals his ambition to be king, given that he continues to claim his military presence in England is merely to recover his title: "As I was banished, I was banished Hereford; / But as I come, I come for Lancaster" (III.i.113-14). Perhaps Bolingbroke's initial motive is not entirely pure, at least not for the lords who support him. If Bolingbroke only wants his title, there is no excuse for the many other lords to join Bolingbroke and betray Richard. The crime of treason is severe, and the lords understand the potential cost of forsaking their properties, families, and titles to follow Bolingbroke, if Richard were to remain king. There are examples in Shakespeare's plays of the consequences of betraying a tyrant king. In *Macbeth*, Macduff flees to England, creating both risk and opportunity for the tyrant Macbeth to slaughter his family. Another tyrant, Richard III, likewise threatens Stanley's son to prevent Stanley from siding with Richmond. Unlike Macbeth and Richard III, Richard II is not a tyrant, but he has threatened the nobility's interests, and the lords, forsaking their allegiance, must feel confident in betraying Richard and seeking greater personal profit by following Bolingbroke.

There is an interesting controlled experiment between Richmond's followers in *Richard II* and Bolingbroke's followers here. Richmond's followers appear compelled to break away from a tyrant, or risk losing their integrity and conscience, whereas Bolingbroke's followers seem to be merely choosing which venture to invest in. Glitz argues that they may admire Bolingbroke's self-fashioned maturity, in contrast to Richard's apparent immaturity in ruling.⁶⁸ While this may be true, regardless of Bolingbroke's degree of maturity, following him guarantees that they will receive benefits that Richard would never grant them. Shakespeare's Northumberland, as Bolingbroke's right-hand accomplice, openly harbours ambitions of usurpation and carries out much of Bolingbroke's dirty work. In Act 3, Scene 3, upon approaching Flint Castle, Bolingbroke asks Northumberland to convey his allegiance to Richard, stating that he will come to Richard's feet to "lay my arms and power" (38) in exchange for the revocation of his exile and the return of his lands. Bolingbroke also unequivocally declares his purpose to Richard:

BOLINGBROKE My gracious lord, I come but for mine own.

RICHARD Your own is yours and I am yours and all.

(R2 III.iii.194-95)

Richard, however, does not believe in Bolingbroke's fabrication. He interprets "my own" not as the Lancaster title, wealth, and lands, but as the kingship, recognising the blatant betrayals of so many lords.

⁶⁸ Rudolph Glitz. "'Cousin, I Am Too Young': Age and Authority in Shakespeare's *Richard II*." *Shakespeare* (London, England), vol. 16, no. 2, 2020: 128.

Besides defaming Bushy and Green, Bolingbroke also arrests the noble Carlisle. Carlisle is a lord of exceptional virtue who steadfastly supports Richard's rights, and he is described by Bolingbroke's allies as "a clergyman / Of holy reverence" (27-28). In Act 4, Scene 1, when York brings the news that Richard gives up his throne to Bolingbroke, Bolingbroke without hesitation accepts it: "In God's name I'll ascend the regal throne" (114). Bolingbroke's haste lays bare all his prior acts of hypocrisy and his impatience to seize the crown. While Carlisle strongly objects to it, he condones Northumberland for arresting Carlisle for treason. It is not poetically just to arrest someone who is so righteous. Shakespeare's Henry V serves as a strong example of the right way to lead: he does not punish the Lord Chief Justice who disciplined him during his time as a prince; instead, he expresses gratitude and commands the Lord Chief Justice to retain his position under the new reign. I agree with Tillyard in thinking that "Shakespeare knows that Richard's crimes never amounted to tyranny, and hence that outright rebellion against him was a crime".⁶⁹ However, Wells disagrees with Tillyard's assertion and claims this view reflects the mainstream interpretation of historical accounts, because, in *Holinshed*, Richard II's abdication appears to be a voluntary act that follows strict legal procedure.⁷⁰ In this regard, Shakespeare's political sensitivity catches the tension in *Holinshed* and his neutrality interprets the event as something more than common sense: abdication simply cannot be a voluntary act. Although legal procedure is followed, this does not mean that the act of abdication itself is just or rightful. From a common-sense perspective, the abdication does not make any sense; it is merely another example of how the law can be bent to serve political purposes.

Besides arresting the virtuous Carlisle, Bolingbroke orders Richard to show up in public and admit his crime ("surrender"), in which way "we shall proceed / Without suspicion" (IV.i.157-58). These two actions completely tarnish Bolingbroke's image. He no longer resembles what York initially described as employing unjust means to achieve justice: "to find out right with wrong" (II.iii.144). Instead, he leverages justice to commit unjust acts, revealing that his earlier righteous deeds were merely a camouflage. From the dethronement scene, many readers will suddenly realise that Richard's crime is narrated by his enemies, that his enemies are not reliable narrators, and maybe it has not been wise to trust them from the very beginning, when Gaunt was criticising Richard's policies. Gaunt and other lords take for granted what will happen if Richard II continues to rule England, just as Brutus and the other conspirators take for granted what will happen if Caesar lives in *Julius Caesar*. Historically, Bolingbroke and Gaunt were not that innocent, either. They were Richard's powerful political rivals, fully aware of their proximity to the throne and

⁶⁹ E. M. W. Tillyard. *Shakespeare's History Plays*. Penguin Books, 1944: 261.

⁷⁰ Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles*, 106.

driven by ambition.⁷¹ Shakespeare deliberately conceals the truth while continually planting narrative clues, only to unveil it at the end of the play.

Shakespeare employs a subtle and ambiguous method of unveiling the truth. When Bolingbroke assumes power, he becomes Richard. In Act 4, Scene 1, Bolingbroke continues to overstep his authority by performing Richard's duties and establishing an unauthorised court to investigate cases. The nobles' act of throwing down gages mirrors the tournament hosted earlier in the play by Richard for Bolingbroke and Mowbray, and signifies that Bolingbroke has effectively become Richard. At Richard's court, only two lords, Mowbray and Bolingbroke, throw down their gages, whereas in Bolingbroke's court, nearly all the lords present do so, suggesting that Bolingbroke is likely to incite greater internal conflicts than Richard has. Even Prince Hal satirises the gage-throwing scene, joking that he will go to a brothel, take a glove from the ugliest whore, and "wear it as a favour" (V.iii.18).

In *Henry IV* and *Richard II*, both Bolingbroke and Richard mirror each other as kings, each critiquing the other's approach to rule. They both understand that good kingship needs to get the favour and support of the people — a point frequently emphasised by political thinkers in Shakespeare's own time, so that even Shakespeare's Richard III fakes his image to elicit popular support.⁷² As Henry IV, Bolingbroke in *Henry IV, Part 2* accuses Richard II of having been too often seen by the people: a "skipping King" who frequented "the common streets" and thus "enfeoffed himself" to the common people. Because the people saw him too often, Bolingbroke argues, their respect for him diminished:

KING That, being daily swallowed by men's eyes,
They surfeited with honey, and began
To loathe the taste of sweetness...
(2H4 III.ii.70-73)

"Enfeoffed" means that Richard made himself dependent upon the favour and the power of the people.⁷³ On the contrary, Henry IV tells his son Hal, he himself is rarely seen by the people, so when they see him they find him "fresh and new" (55), "like a comet" to be "wondered at" (47),

⁷¹ Gaunt's well-known ambition was recognised by English Parliament from the time of Richard II's father, Edward III, to Richard II, see May McKisack. *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399*. Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁷² See *Richard III*, Act 3, Scene 7, where Richard stages a display of religious devotion, and the Mayor of London brings in selected citizens to fabricate a public appeal urging the supposedly reluctant, saint-like Gloucester to accept the crown.

⁷³ Dawson and Yachnin (eds), *Richard II*, 166.

and thus he is able to “pluck allegiance from men’s hearts” (51-52). Yet while Henry IV sees Richard’s approach as vulgar, Richard views Bolingbroke’s calculated humility in a similar light:

KING Observe his courtship to the common people,
How he did seem to dive into their hearts
With humble and familiar courtesy
...
As were our England in reversion his,
And he our subjects’ next degree in hope.
(R2 I.iv.24-36)

Apparently, when it comes to what they expect from the people, Henry IV and Richard II both value their allegiance, but take different approaches to securing it. They also tarnish each other’s reputations by emphasising only one side of the story.

The “heir apparent”, Bolingbroke, is worse than the Richard of the first two acts. He has his own “Mowbrays”, such as Northumberland and Exton. Northumberland, involved in the civil war, develops a sneaky, cowardly image in the *Henry IV* plays, while Exton, who helps Bolingbroke fulfil his wish by killing Richard, is ‘rewarded’ with exile. Bolingbroke admits that he desires Richard’s death but detests the person who commits the act, calling it a “fatal slander” on the land. Exton, shocked by Bolingbroke’s reaction, refuses to conceal Bolingbroke’s instigation, asserting that “From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed”(V.vi.37). Bolingbroke tacitly acknowledges his role in condoning Exton’s murder of Richard, but still refrains from expressing gratitude. Instead, he condemns Exton, urging him to bear the “guilt of conscience” for his crime and banishing him:

KING With Cain go wander thorough shades of night
And never show thy head by day nor light.
(R2 V.vi.43-44)

Bolingbroke’s cruelty and ingratitude are on another level, compared to the Richard in the first two acts. In this way, the play ends with a bitter irony.⁷⁴

Bolingbroke’s usurpation fails to improve the kingdom and his military and political actions amount to nothing more than a regime change, where the victors gain personal benefit while the vanquished suffer the consequences without any broader benefit to the realm. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, from the conversations of the two Carriers, Shakespeare implies that there is also an economic crisis under the reign of Henry IV:

⁷⁴ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 20.

SECOND CARRIER Peas and beans are as dank here as a dog, and that is the next way to give poor jades the bots. This house is turned upside down since Robin Ostler died.

FIRST CARRIER Poor fellow never joyed since the price of oats rose, it was the death of him.
(*IH4* II.i.7-11)

The conversation indicates that the cost of living in England is skyrocketing, severely impacting people's well-being. People have to survive by illegitimate means. The Carriers refuse to tell Gadshill the time or lend him a lantern, because they are not in the habit of giving people in the inn accurate information, in case they are robbed. The Chamberlain indeed colludes with Gadshill for the guests' information like "three hundred marks . . . in gold" (45) and "layest the plot" (42) on how to steal from them. Knights like Falstaff, unable to find a legitimate means of livelihood, mingle with thieves, engaging in all sorts of scams – an economic state hardly befitting what should be a flourishing era under the reign of a "better" king. Shakespeare's Henry IV, apart from dealing with civil war, accomplishes little.

In *Holinshed*, from the perspective of the Percys, who admittedly made the accusation as propaganda to undermine the king, Henry IV's economic policies were an intolerable burden on the realm:

the earle of Worcester and the lord Persie with their complices . . . vnder their hands and seales, which articles in effect charged him with manifest periurie . . . Diuerse other matters they laid to his charge, as leuieng of taxes and tallages, contrarie to his promise, infringing of lawes & customes of the realme...⁷⁵

The accusation that King Henry heavily taxed the people is presented as a political motive or opinion, and *Holinshed* does not clarify whether or not, in reality, the tax really was burdensome, but the heavy tax is overwhelmingly evident in Shakespeare's narrative, which means Shakespeare stands with the Percys on the matter of Henry IV's economic failure in his reign. When Henry V assumes power, he earns a reputation as a good king through war with France, only to return to a land filled with wailing, wounded veterans — a social scenario equally sad compared to the start of *IH4*. It is hard to see what Bolingbroke's usurpation does to improve the condition of England.

Shakespeare's neutrality positions Henry IV as a ruler plagued by the fear of being usurped, mirroring Richard II's fate in full circle. He quickly falls out with the allies who helped him in the usurpation. In *Holinshed*, King Henry, because of a rootless suspicion, refused to pay the ransom for Mortimer when he was imprisoned by Glendower, shackled with irons, and still faithful and true to the king – after which, Mortimer's brother-in-law Percy was enraged and said openly that he

⁷⁵ *Holinshed's Chronicles*, 25.

would rebel against the king⁷⁶. Mortimer, according to Holinshed, only married his enemy in Glendower's daughter because he had to form an alliance, having been betrayed by the king. But in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, Henry IV refuses to pay the ransom *because of* Mortimer's marriage to Glendower's daughter: why should he pay for a traitor? Shakespeare makes Henry IV's refusal understandable and Percy's proposal to redeem Mortimer unreasonable. By doing so, Shakespeare shifts the focus from the morality of the Mortimer incident to presenting Percy and his faction as a usurping force threatening Henry IV's reign. Though he sides with the Percys in Holinshed regarding Henry's economic failures, he terribly reshapes the Percys as would-be usurpers and ensures that the threat of usurpation turns back upon Henry IV himself.

Not only does Henry IV face usurpation, but the existence of his heir, Prince Hal, makes a mockery of its being a "merit-based" reign: the throne will be succeeded by a prodigal son who appears to be less capable than almost everyone at court. In this regard, Henry IV's public concern and frustration with Hal, and his fear that Hal will ruin the kingdom in future, become heavily ironic. He never once considers that, as a usurper who has taken the crown of Richard II and claims to rule the kingdom better, he could pass on his crown to someone more capable than his own son. Perhaps this is the terrible truth Shakespeare conveys: that politics is merely a struggle for power, unrelated to legitimacy, merit, national strength, or the well-being of the people. Richard II does not deserve to be overthrown, Henry IV is not wiser or more virtuous, and Hal is not eligible to succeed. Throughout *Richard II*, the *Henry IV* plays, Shakespeare portrays a tragic history in which a legitimate king is unethically usurped by someone who claims to be a better ruler, but only proves to be worse. This usurper passes the throne to a son whose merit is doubtful at court, and both father and son suffer from their ill-gotten power. The ease with which, at the end of *Richard II*, Aumerle and York betray their oaths highlights how quickly a stable political structure can be dismantled.⁷⁷ As Dover Wilson puts it, the deposition and murder of Richard not only shocked the conscience of Christendom, but also undermined the legal foundation of the monarchy, and by extension, the entire constitutional system of England.⁷⁸

Henry VI

Andrew Hadfield argues that, in Shakespeare's history plays, it is clear that rulers maintain their power not just through inherited titles, but by gaining the support of the people or the favour of

⁷⁶ Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 22.

⁷⁷ Christina M. Squitieri. "'O Loyal Father?': Aumerle, Treason, and Feudal Law in Shakespeare's *Richard II*." *Shakespeare* (London, England), vol. 15, no. 1, 2019: 32.

⁷⁸ John Dover Wilson (ed.), *Richard II*, xxiii.

powerful subjects.⁷⁹ But the character of Henry VI raises doubts about what qualities in kings gain the support of the people. In *Henry VI, Part 3*, Henry VI proudly states that his people will support him and not be seduced by Edward IV because he is a kind, loving king who always solves peoples' problems and never burdens them:

KING HENRY That's not my fear; my meed hath got me fame:
I have not stopped mine ears to their demands,
Nor posted off their suits with slow delays;
My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds,
My mildness hath allayed their swelling griefs,
My mercy dried their water-flowing tears;
I have not been desirous of their wealth,
Nor much oppressed them with great subsidies,
Nor forward of revenge, though they much erred:
Then why should they love Edward more than me?
No, Exeter, these graces challenge grace:
And when the lion fawns upon the lamb,
The lamb will never cease to follow him.

(3H6 IV.viii.38-50)

What Henry VI overlooks is that people cannot decide which king to follow. The terrible paradox in Henry VI is that a king who embodies all the qualities of a good ruler — kindness, mercy, selflessness — proves to be the most vulnerable and the least effective. He might not even have the support of his people: at the beginning of *Richard III*, Henry VI's people enjoy being under the rule of Edward IV, who has become king through military victory.

Being the king of both France and England, Henry VI should have been more successful than his father, Henry V, having inherited all the fruits of his father's victories. Yet, politically, he is the weakest king in Shakespeare's history plays. The overall political image of Henry VI, as shaped by Shakespeare, is of a king who is easily discouraged and manipulated. He does have opportunities to show his majesty, but many of them end as acts of compromise. For example, in *Henry VI, Part 2*, Act 3, Scene 3, he wields his power to punish Eleanor and dismiss Gloucester. The way he asks Gloucester to give up his role as Protector asserts kingly authority:

KING Stay, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester: ere thou go,
Give up thy staff: Henry will to himself
Protector be; and God shall be my hope,
My stay, my guide and lantern to my feet:

(2H6 II.iii.23-27)

⁷⁹ Andrew Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014: 73.

On the surface, this appears to demonstrate authority and decisiveness, but in reality it stems from Henry's weakness and rigid adherence to legal procedure. His instinct tells him that Gloucester is being framed, yet he still allows the Cardinal to arrest him. Afterward, he flees the Parliament:

KING My lords, what to your wisdoms seemeth best,
Do or undo, as if ourself were here.

QUEEN What, will your highness leave the parliament?

KING Ay, Margaret; my heart is drowned with grief
(2H6 III.i.195-98)

Henry effectively surrenders his authority, allowing the lords to act as they please before removing himself from the situation. His retreat prompts Margaret to question the propriety of his actions. He justifies his departure by claiming that witnessing Gloucester's downfall fills him with sorrow and that he is powerless against Gloucester's enemies, who are too "mighty" (220). By leaving, however, Henry unwittingly grants the powerful lords the opportunity to conspire against Gloucester's life. Henry naively assumes that a proper investigation will exonerate Gloucester, failing to foresee that Gloucester will not survive the process. With his "political innocence",⁸⁰ he clings to legal formalities, while Gloucester's enemies disregard the law entirely. Unlike Henry VIII or Richard II, who would bypass legal procedure and assert their authority to protect an ally, Henry VI remains trapped by his own innocence, weakness, and indecision. Although he detests Gloucester's murder, he dares not act upon it until the people again and again demand Suffolk's execution. Only then does he exile him: "He shall not breathe infection in this air / But three days longer, on the pain of death" (III.ii.287-88). The power of the language in which he does so shows a fleeting moment of the kind of king he should have been.⁸¹ However, the decisions to dismiss Gloucester and Suffolk respectively, arguably the most decisive actions of Shakespeare's Henry VI, are both passive and forced on him rather than initiated by his own will. Henry VIII also avoids negotiating with the lords and chooses instead to watch them fight among themselves, but this makes him appear strategic.

The historical Henry VI was neither that weak nor that loving, and the historical Gloucester was not that honourable. The image of political weakness shown in his bond with Gloucester is not historically accurate, which is one of the major differences in Shakespeare's version. Historically,

⁸⁰Roger Warren, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Henry VI, Part Two*. Edited by Roger Warren, Oxford University Press, 2003: 11.

⁸¹ Warren (ed.), *Henry VI, Part Two*, 44.

Henry was complicit in Gloucester's arrest.⁸² And, as discussed in the marriage section, historically Henry and Gloucester fell out when dealing with France — while Henry wanted peace with France, Gloucester advocated war. Shakespeare idealises both figures, portraying them not as enemies but as a loving uncle and nephew. In doing so, he sets their bond against the corrupt chaos of the other lords.⁸³ Love transcends politics, but (again) tragically and helplessly, politics proves cruel and incompatible with ethics. Facing powerful enemies, a weak king can do nothing but let politics drown love.

Recognising that Shakespeare portrays Henry VI as both weak and virtuous, we can examine how this weakness is fleshed out and how the same behaviours and choices unexpectedly characterise not only the feeble Henry VI, but also the iron-willed Henry VIII and the equally resolute Richard II. As kings, Henry VI, Richard II, and Henry VIII all fight with powerful nobles, and their methods are similar. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, Henry VI does not think faction is important, because the causes of conflict are “slight and frivolous” (IV.i.112). Henry even puts on a red rose to show that wearing it does not mean he proposes to reconcile and focus on the war with France. In *Part 2*, Henry does not take sides and tries to be a “peacemaker”: “I care not which; / Or Somerset or York, all's one to me” (I.iii.99-100). He persuades Margaret not to get involved in the fight: “blessed are the peacemakers on earth” (II.i.35). Greenblatt criticises Henry's detachment and not taking sides by choosing Somerset or York, because his high-minded contempt for the fight only intensifies the competition.⁸⁴

But taking sides is not how most of Shakespeare's kings operate, and it is unwise for Henry VI to do so. His unintentional preference for the red rose already fuels York's resentment — York complains, “I like it not” (176) and warns that if Henry were to take sides deliberately, York would never forgive him. The political choice to not take sides, ignoring fierce competition between nobles, is successful for Henry VIII, who also avoids negotiating with the nobles, instead watching them struggle among themselves before eliminating the remaining factions himself, making him appear strategic in his efforts to weaken powerful nobles. Similarly, Richard II remains indifferent to the lords and dismisses conflicts to assert his authority — a tactic that proves effective in driving away Mowbray and Bolingbroke. Though the same response leads to the downfall of Gloucester, Winchester, Suffolk, and even York, Henry VI does not employ these methods as political manoeuvring; unlike Richard II and Henry VIII, he has no intention of eliminating the powerful

⁸² Warren (ed.), *Henry VI, Part Two*, 35.

⁸³ Warren (ed.), *Henry VI, Part Two*, 35-40.

⁸⁴ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 30-31.

nobles. In *Henry VI, Part 3*, Edward IV, who facilitates the temporary reconciliation of Gloucester, Buckingham, and the Woodvilles, manages to maintain stability, at least during his reign. The image of the peace-making king also applies to a king who wins his throne through war, his peace-making not being a sign of weakness, like Henry VI's, but of the mercy of a commanding ruler, even in his most physically weakened state.

The next political strategy I turn to is the kings' flight from the battlefield. The image of a king fleeing the battlefield shows a sign of weakness, and Shakespeare's Henry VI in *Henry VI, Part 3* is no exception. Shakespeare also highlights the haste with which Henry's side flees, rather than strategically retreating. Prince Edward yells "Fly, father, fly!" (125), Margaret urges "Mount you, my lord" (128), Exeter intends to abandon Henry, saying "I'll away before" (136), and Henry begs Exeter:

KING Nay, take me with thee, good sweet Exeter:
Not that I fear to stay, but love to go
Whither the queen intends. Forward; away!
(3H6 II.v.137-29)

Previously, in Act 4 of *Henry VI, Part 2*, when faced with Jack Cade's rebellion, Henry chooses to flee London rather than confront the enemy. Later, during York's attack, he becomes so despondent that he even considers giving up on the retreat altogether, prompting Margaret to reprimand him: "What are you made of? you'll nor fight nor fly" (V.ii.74).

Shakespeare revisits this motif throughout his history plays. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, for instance, during the Battle of Shrewsbury, Henry IV has multiple knights dressing like him to mislead Douglas, who is particularly focused on hunting him down: "Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads" (V.iv.24). Douglas is repeatedly frustrated to find that his efforts are in vain. The "many kings" strategy exhausts him, mentally and physically, and gives Henry IV more chance of survival. Though historically, Henry IV did indeed use the tactic during the Battle of Shrewsbury, Shakespeare depicts Henry IV not just as strategic, but also as cunning, even duplicitous. While Douglas condemns Henry IV's "counterfeit" (34) as the evil Hydra heads that exhaust the heroic Hercules, Henry IV himself hypocritically "grieves at heart" (28) for Douglas having fought nothing but his shadows. This feigned remorse reveals Henry's double-faced nature – he fully understands that his trick is dishonourable, yet he does it anyway, all the while pretending to be troubled by the very trick he orchestrated.

In *Henry VI, Part 3*, because of a strategic mistake, Edward IV with few guards is raided by Warwick at midnight, but he still represents kingly authority: "Though fortune's malice overthrow

my state, / My mind exceeds the compass of her wheel" (IV.iii.46-47). Richard and Hastings abandon Edward IV and run away, but Shakespeare does not criticise them for being cowards. Then, during his custody, Edward IV sneaks away from his garden with the help of Worcester's brother, Gloucester, and secures aid from Burgundy to reclaim his throne. Historically, Edward IV did not receive assistance from Worcester's brother and escape; instead, he was released by Warwick facing resistance from Yorkist supporters. The fictional escape is designed by Shakespeare not to ridicule him for fleeing, but to suggest how strategic and almost miraculous Edward IV's survival was. The motif of the king in flight changes across Shakespeare's history plays and shows how, in different contexts, the same political decision leads to contradictory judgements to the kings.

Though Henry VI's abdication of the throne is a sign of weakness, his abdication also represents a fleeting moment of bravery in the king. In *Henry VI, Part 3*, Act 1, Scene 1, Shakespeare figures Henry in the abdication scene as a wise and brave politician. Henry VI has an opportunity to slaughter York, as Exeter says, even if Warwick has an army outside, "when the duke is slain, they'll quickly fly" (I.i.69). The benevolent Henry cannot bear the idea of parliament as a slaughterhouse – "To make a shambles of the parliament-house" (I.i.71) – and declines the proposal. Warwick, in contrast, swears that he will "root up" (47) whoever is in the way and projects an image of ruthlessness. The benevolent Henry, faced with such provocation, proves to be not weak, but insistent on his kingly authority. He does not treat Yorkists nicely, he calls them traitors, and accuses York of sitting in his throne, going on to declare that he will not give in, unless over the bodies of himself and the people of England. Henry is in command of the rebels until his conscience moves him, thinking on the usurpation of Richard II by his grandfather, Bolingbroke, when he confesses to himself that "my title's weak" (I.i.134).

Although Henry suffers from a conscience at odds with politics, he never intends to compromise until Warwick sends soldiers in. Instead, Henry proposes a middle-way: make York his heir and "Let me for this my life-time reign as king" (171), not completely collapsing by giving up the throne immediately. If he does not do that, he will be killed. Margaret hates Henry for valuing his life above his honour (246), but even if Henry does die, the crown will not automatically go to the Prince. Henry in negotiation exhibits political wisdom and bravery, as well as conscience, and his image in the negotiation is anything but weak.

During the negotiation, Henry mentions how Richard II gave up his throne to Henry IV:

KING For Richard, in the view of many lords,
Resigned the crown to Henry the Fourth,

Whose heir my father was, and I am his.
(3R6 I.i.137-39)

Henry VI is not someone who lies intentionally, but York insists that Richard II did not give up his throne willingly, but under threat:

YORK He rose against him, being his sovereign,
And made him to resign his crown perforce.
(3R6 I.i.139-43)

The contradictory interpretations show just how easy it is to present history in opposite ways. *Richard II* was written after the *Henry VI* trilogy, of course, and Shakespeare extends the abdication motif, giving it an interpretation that contradicted the historical record. In *Holinshed*, Richard II did not willingly abdicate, Henry IV imprisoned him and coerced him to abdicate, declaring himself king. But Shakespeare rewrites his deposition as a voluntary act, leaving out the threats to Richard and emphasising that Richard resigns to preserve his dignity, rather than be completely stripped of it. Abdication is a sorrowful fate, even for flawed kings; Shakespeare grants both kings tragic dignity in their abdication scenes, and even extends sympathy to the tyrannical York when Margaret humiliates him with a paper crown. Shakespeare shows greater sympathy to the individuals who faced failure in public or private life than to those who achieved success.⁸⁵

As a rare positive figure in the *Henry VI* plays, Henry is especially virtuous in religion, which is also a major feature of Shakespeare's history plays. Historically, Henry's religiosity was reinforced by many of the Tudor chroniclers, notably by Hall (*Holinshed* does not emphasise it as much). For Shakespeare's Henry, religiosity is his defining trait.⁸⁶ In *Henry VI, Part 3*, Act 3, Scene 1, when he returns to England secretly, he is disguised as a preacher "with a prayer book". Having witnessed father and son kill each other in the war, he invokes God to have pity on the people (II.v.96). In *Henry VI, Part 2*, when he witnesses a blind man regain his sight at St. Albans, he thanks God; yet when Gloucester exposes the fraud, he also thanks God for revealing the deception. His having a bet each way suggests that Shakespeare understands Henry's religiosity as both sincere and somewhat naïve, as Aviva Farkas suggests his Medieval credulity cannot battle with his courtiers' Renaissance scepticism in politics.⁸⁷ Henry's daily language is full of the worship of God. In *Henry VI, Part 1*, the celibate Henry is willing to accept any choice of wife as long as the marriage "tends to God's glory" (V.i.27). In *Henry VI, Part 2*, when he meets Margaret for the first

⁸⁵ John Palmer. *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. Macmillan, 1962: viii.

⁸⁶ Warren (ed.), *Henry VI, Part Two*, 32-34.

⁸⁷ Aviva Farkas. "Shakespeare's Bookish Rulers: Philosophy and Nature Poetry in the Henry VI Trilogy and the Tempest." *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 12, 2023: 3.

time, he thanks God, instead of Suffolk, for choosing Margaret for him (I.i.19-23). When he reclaims the throne from Edward IV, he thanks God, as well as Warwick, for Warwick is God's "instrument" (IV.vi.18).

Though Henry's language is stamped with true religiousness, politically his genuine piety does little to advance the country's religious destiny or inspire greater devotion among the people. Matthew Carter argues that Henry is so devoted in his faith that he lets it take the lead and neglects the political knowledge he should acquire.⁸⁸ Henry relies on words, not action, even though the *Henry VI* trilogy is a series of plays of action.⁸⁹ Action is indeed a means of demonstrating political effectiveness; ironically, the irreligious Henry VIII initiates the Reformation, while the devout Henry VI accomplishes little. It is common in the history plays that the clergy do not constantly speak of religion, but instead engage in political disputes and power struggles — Winchester in *Henry VI*, the Archbishop of York in *Henry IV*, Part 2, and Wolsey and Cranmer in *Henry VIII* are all ironic examples. In my chapter on religion, *Measure for Measure* features the hypocritical Angelo, the absolute Isabella, and the sly Duke. None of them possesses a more positive image than Henry VI, yet each tries to use religion to make the dukedom a better place. Henry's religious image carries a tragic weight, as his goodness fails to govern the kingdom effectively or uproot the powerful and corrupt nobles, while other pseudo-religious or irreligious figures in Shakespeare's plays shape the course of religion more decisively within their political spheres.

A Mirror for Magistrates claims that morally good rulers are able to govern their realms successfully. Janis Lull challenges this view by pointing to Henry VI as a morally good king who nevertheless fails to rule effectively. Lull argues that Henry's problem is his excess of goodness.⁹⁰ But morality is the least decisive factor in successful kingship. Shakespeare's neutrality imagines kings with similar political methods reaching different political outcomes. While the 'bad king' Richard II gets punished for his behaviour, the 'bad king' Henry VIII escapes all the risks, and the 'good king' Henry VI does not get respected for his virtues. Machiavellian strategies work in *Henry VIII*, but do not work in *Richard II* or (ultimately) in *Richard III*; Christian benevolence works for Edward IV but does not work for Henry VI. The political realism Shakespeare recreates in his history plays clashes with the varying degrees of political idealism represented by the different

⁸⁸ Matthew Carter. "'O Piteous Spectacle! O Bloody Times!': The Faithlessness of English Identity in 1, 2, and 3 *Henry VI*." *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2023.

⁸⁹ Michael Taylor, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Henry VI, Part One*. Edited by Michael Taylor, Oxford University Press, 2003: 60.

⁹⁰ Janis Lull. "Plantagenets, Lancastrians, Yorkists, and Tudors: 1–3 *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *Edward III*." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*. Edited by Michael Hattaway, Cambridge University Press, 2002: 96. Lull is also the editor of the New Cambridge *Richard III*.

characters. He neutrally sets variations of the same motif and enjoys using them as experiments to control the variables – like the characters’ personalities and underlying motivations, as well as their differing backgrounds and relative actions. As a result, the political consequences of their various choices may be similar or terribly different.

CHAPTER THREE – POLITICS (II)

Section 3: *Henry V*

In this third section of my examination of Shakespeare on politics, I am going to examine the development of the most successful politician among all the kings in Shakespeare's history plays — Henry V — and to ask whether or not politics can shape a perfect political leader and a society which benefits the interests of all parties. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare presents a portrait of his most successful king, both as a leader and a politician, and embodies the ideals of political mastery. Through Henry's rise from the riotous Prince Hal to the formidable King Henry V, hero of Agincourt, Shakespeare sketches a trajectory of political education and maturation, and demonstrates how the young prince's early indulgence in the tavern with Falstaff and the lower class forms the foundation of his remarkable leadership. However, Shakespeare does not simply glorify Henry V's kingship; instead, with a neutral stance, through the lens of his triumphs and failures, Shakespeare probes the terrible tensions that lie between human nature and the demands of politics. While Henry's eloquent speeches and martial gallantry create a seemingly perfect ruler, his actions — ranging from his brutal threats during the siege of Harfleur to the harsh execution of his prisoners during the battle of Agincourt — hint at the underlying cold-bloodedness characteristic of his rule and suggest that the foundation of success in politics might be the sacrifice of integrity, benevolence, friendship, and joy.

A command of language, or what the Archbishop of Canterbury refers to as “sweet and honeyed sentences”, is the most important characteristic that makes Henry V a successful leader and a great king. Jonathan Bate gives a detailed analysis of the rhetorical capability of Henry V: he can debate, cajole, command, inspire; and statistically speaking, Henry V speaks more than three times the number of words of the other characters. In terms of his ease in switching between prose and poetry, only Hamlet can match him.¹ More to the point, he understands the language of others. The experience of learning the language of the common people from the tavern enables him to engage with, and raise the morale of, his lower-class soldiers in the battles in France. In offering his rallying speech before the gates of Harfleur in *Henry V*, the yeomen, who comprise the majority of the army, are greatly encouraged and eulogized:

HENRY And you, good yeomen,

¹Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 1012.

Whose limbs were made in England; show us here
 The mettle of your pasture: let us swear,
 That you are worth your breeding—which I doubt not:
 For there is none of you so mean and base,
 That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
 I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
 Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
 Follow your spirit; and upon this charge,
 Cry, 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

(H5 III.i.25-34)²

Henry gives the spotlight to the yeomen, complimenting them in a way yeomen can be proud of. By praising their respectful breeding, nobility, importance, and valour, Henry elides the hierarchy of classes and grants the common soldier due recognition — a notably republican ethos, which I will return to in Section 4. His assertion of brotherhood makes his Agincourt speech unique not just in this play, but in all the history plays.³ In the rallying speech of the French King there is an obvious difference. Made in a palace surrounded by some of his nobles, his speech only addresses the upper-classes:

KING CHARLES Charles Delabreth, high constable of France,
 You Dukes of Orleans, Bourbon, and of Berri,
 Alencon, Brabant, Bar, and Burgundy,
 Jacques Chatillon, Rambures, Vaudemont,
 Beaumont, Grandpre, Roussi, and Faulconbridge,
 Foix, Lestrake, Bouciqualt, and Charolois,
 High dukes, great princes, barons, lords, and knights;
 For your great seats now quit you of great shames . . .

(H5 III.v.40-7)

Given that not every one of them can be present in the palace, the speech of the French King is not effectively delivered to the entire army. In this small lens, the two kings and the two monarchies are under scrutiny, and the English king's egalitarian approach outperforms the vertical-style of French management in its rallying power.

For Bate, Henry V's "dazzling power of words creates the triumph out of extremely limited resources".⁴ What Bate suggests is that the brilliant language of Henry V goes to the heart of

² The citations of texts of *Henry V* and *Henry IV* plays in Section 3 are from the Cambridge Dover Wilson editions: William Shakespeare. *King Henry V*. Edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 1968. *The First Part of the History of Henry IV*. Edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 1964. *The Second Part of the History of Henry IV*. Edited by John Dover Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

³ Andrew Gurr, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *King Henry V*. Edited by Andrew Gurr, Cambridge University Press, 2005: 30.

⁴ Bate (ed.), *Henry V*, 1011

politics: language — rhetoric — is the best way to manage relationships between people with maximum efficiency and least cost. In the speech of Henry V to the governor of Harfleur in Act 3, Scene 2, a future scenario of outrageous cruelty is depicted. Scenes of the rape of virgins are mentioned three times — “Mowing like grass/ Your fresh fair virgins” (13-4); “if your pure maidens fall into the hand” (20); “with foul hand/ Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters” (34-5) — and immoral images of infanticide pictured twice: “Mowing like grass/... your flowering infants” (13-4) and “Your naked infants spitted upon pikes” (38). The two threats secure the surrender of the governor of Harfleur without further ado and prove the maximum efficiency of the rhetorical language of Henry V. The speech, however, is unnecessarily cruel in its hasty pursuit of pragmatic efficiency; Henry V seems to lose decorum, indeed humanity, in his shocking, later infamous choice of language. Taunton compares Henry V in Harfleur to Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, who also uses cruel language to show his indifference to people’s lives and the ruin of a city.⁵ Gary Taylor thinks that Henry’s killing of French prisoners, as well as his cold-blooded bluffing at Harfleur, forms a pattern of unscrupulous behaviour in his conquest of France.⁶ According to Jordi Coral, Henry’s approach undermines traditional knightly ideals, particularly their focus on self-discipline.⁷

While rhetoric is action on the battlefield, political efficiency and language are sometimes at cross purposes in other aspects of Henry’s reign. Law, marriage, and religion are all exploited to influence people and stimulate action. However, Canterbury’s sixty-three line wordy proof of Henry’s so-called legitimacy to claim the French crown reveals the extent to which language can be woven into an elaborately deceitful narrative.⁸ While Canterbury’s long speech generates new laws to rationalise the conquest of France, turning invasion into a form of self-defence, Henry’s one-sentence economic response — “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” (I.ii.95-6) — implies that, when compared with political decisiveness and direct action, the narrative generated by language is a tool of little consequence. In the king’s wooing of Katherine, the limits of language

⁵ Nina Taunton. *1590s Drama and Militarism: Portrayals of War in Marlowe, Chapman and Shakespeare’s Henry V*. Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001: 64.

⁶ Taylor (ed.), *Henry V*, 38-39.

⁷ Jordi Coral. “‘Maiden Walls That War Hath Never Entered’: Rape and Post-Chivalric Military Culture in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.” *College Literature*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2017: 406-07.

⁸ The speech spans 62 lines, see New Cambridge Shakespeare *Henry V*, Act 1, scene 2, lines 33-95 for full text. Excerpt:

CANTERBURY Then hear me, gracious sovereign, and you peers
That owe your selves, your lives and services
To this imperial throne. There is no bar
To make against your highness’ claim to France
But this which they produce from Pharamond:
In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant,
— No woman shall succeed in Salic land —
(*H5* I.ii.33-39)

when compared with its purpose — action — is staged again. Henry sexually invades France by kissing her lips while knowing that his behaviour is transgressing the French tradition. What is interesting in the wooing scene is the two characters' use of English and French — no matter how poor his French is, he manages to achieve the functional equivalence of the two languages and force his intentions on the princess. The wooing scene demonstrates Henry's political insight and flexible application of language, which is always action-orientated and can be either sugar-coated or concise and to-the-point, whichever is more likely to gain maximum efficiency.

In other words, Shakespeare's neutral stance allows Henry's rhetoric to appear effective in some contexts, but limited and less successful in others. Religion peppers Henry's speeches and justifies his cause, but when he invokes God with three soldiers on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, he only irritates Williams and suffers his first rhetorical challenge. The reason for the soldier's indifference is because they take the legitimacy of a war largely on trust in the king, rather than on their bond with God.⁹ They are willing to fight for the king on trust — if they die, they will die “contented” — which makes it the king's responsibility, and his burden. It is not necessary or ingenuous to justify the “king's cause” with God. Language, sweet and honeyed though it be, collapses in the endeavour to obviate the king's responsibility on fundamental matters. The soldiers' actions in fighting in the war and the king's decision to prosecute the war aggravate his burden.¹⁰ No matter how convincing Henry's language is, Henry cannot change their ideas. Language is a fig leaf rendered pointless by action.

Westmoreland justifies the king's expedition as containing the “cause, and means, and might” (I.ii.125-6) to do it, anticipating Hamlet's “Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means /To do't” (IV.iv.45-6). In both plays, justification is only an elaborate rationalisation of controversial action, causing both Henry and Hamlet to become melancholy. Hamlet's procrastination helps us understand Henry's uncommon reaction to the soldiers' anger. Hamlet questions his own inaction after witnessing the army of Norwegian prince Fortinbras, who, like Henry, is a pragmatic, brave and warlike prince. Hamlet sees the great human cost of war as a joke, and argues that his own revenge is more justifiable, but throughout the play the very nature of effective action puzzles him. The mind alone is knowable, action in the external world problematic, according to Coleridge's commentary on Hamlet.¹¹ The disillusionment that comes from realising

⁹ Taylor (ed.), *Henry V*, 39.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the scene, see section 4.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. “From ‘Lectures on the Characteristics of Shakespeare’” (1813). *Romantics on Shakespeare*, edited by Jonathan Bate, Penguin, 1992: 18.

that action is problematic tortures both Hamlet and Henry, and neither Hamlet's philosophical meditation nor Henry's "sweet and honeyed language" can solve the dilemma of their moral responsibility for their respective actions.

Shakespeare's representations of kings in all his history plays are governed by the belief that it is kings' actions, rather than their identities or what they claim to be, that are important.¹² The first political lesson that Henry as Prince Hal gets from his father, Henry IV, is to be a man of military action. Henry IV, on more than one occasion, claims that, to Hal's shame, he wishes "brave Percy" (Hotspur) to have been his son. In the *Henry IV* plays, prince Hal's idleness in the tavern is magnified by the contrast with Percy's gallantry in war:

PRINCE HARRY I will redeem all this on Percy's head,
And in the closing of some glorious day
Be bold to tell you that I am your son
(*IH4*, III.ii.132-4)

Again and again in his reconciliation speeches to his father, Hal states that he will break the erstwhile father-son relationship between Percy and Henry IV by taking action. When Hal kills Percy on the battlefield, it is strange that he lets Falstaff steal the credit, since he has sworn vengeance and condemns Falstaff's lies in the earlier part of the play. Tromly sees this compromise as Hal's way of balancing the moral accounts of his father's regicide (the usurpation and murder of Richard II that haunts both Henrys): since he has gilded his father's lie, that is, he can easily gild Falstaff's.¹³ On the embattled journey to maturity, Hal chooses to devalue his own actions in order to obtain a moral balance, a decision that foreshadows his breakdown on the eve of the battle of Agincourt.

As a youth traumatized by his father the king's political sins, it is less forgivable for Henry V to employ unethical political methods like killing innocent victims, which is as dark as usurpation. And it is demoralising for him to realise that, in order to be a good king, he is obliged to resort to such methods.¹⁴ Regardless of the problematic nature of political action, however, action remains the primary element of Henry's success, especially his courage in the field and his ability to arouse his soldiers' gallant allegiance. In his decision to mount an expedition to France, his rallying speeches, and the miraculous victory they achieve at Agincourt, gallantry is the momentum. The

¹² Andrew Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014: 56.

¹³ Fred B. Tromly. *Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare*. University of Toronto Press, 2017: 112.

¹⁴ The sins of usurpation that cause suffering for three generations of kings (Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI) are intrinsically linked to monarchy as a political system, a topic that will be explored in detail in the next section.

terrible conflicts of political success through action and the moral problems of action are rooted in Henry V's youth.

The conflict between Henry IV and Hal goes beyond the pleasure-seeking lifestyle of the son. In dealing with his father's crime, Hal is again in many ways a prototype for the even more elusive and ambivalent prince Hamlet.¹⁵ "Why she, even she": Hamlet is sunk in the dilemma of his mother's immoral and incomprehensible behaviour, akin to the way Henry IV's usurpation of the throne appears to Hal. The mask of the prodigal son seems to be a strategy designed to escape the pain, just as Hamlet chooses the mask of madness. In this way, Hal's reputation as a riotous and prodigal son is vindicated by his disdain for ugly politics. Erasmus, in his influential *The Education of a Christian Prince*, argues that a prince, regardless of his noble lineage, is naturally inclined toward vice; without proper instruction from tutors, he is likely to be found among foolish women, prostitutes, depraved companions, shameless flatterers, drunkards, and seekers of pleasure.¹⁶ In this regard, Henry IV not only sets a poor example for Hal, but also seldom spends time educating him. If Hal escapes to Eastcheap because of his disdain for the usurpation, his youthful withdrawal only intensifies the cold-bloodedness of his later political decisions, starting with banishing his surrogate father, Falstaff.

The father-son relationship between Falstaff and Hal is evident throughout the *Henry IV* plays, and not just when they play father and son in the tavern rehearsal of Hal's appearance before the king. Hal and Falstaff consistently acknowledge their relationship as such: in *Part 1*, Hal refers to Falstaff as "father ruffian" (II.iv.445-6) in the king-son role-play scene, and in *Part 2*, Henry V describes Falstaff as both the tutor and feeder of his riots (V.v.63). The roles of father and tutor often overlap, as a father can also be a tutor when parenting is considered. Falstaff's fatherly gestures toward Hal are numerous and striking. Falstaff's 'Project Hal' appears as early as in Act 1 of *Henry IV, Part 1*: "Marry then, sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty" (I.i.23-5). Later he suggests that a future law might abolish the death sentence for thieves: "Do not thou, when thou art king, hang a thief" (I.i.60-1). In this way, Shakespeare makes it as clear as possible, and as early as possible, that if this father-son relationship lasts, order in the kingdom will not survive.

While always avowing a father's love and expectations with regard to Hal, in Act 4 of *Henry IV Part 2* Falstaff comments on the "cold blood" of the family of Henry IV, a hereditary problem

¹⁵ Tromly, *Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare*, 95-96.

¹⁶ Desiderius Erasmus. *The Education of a Christian Prince*. Edited by Lisa Jardine, Cambridge University Press, 1997: 8-9.

making out Henry IV and Prince John to be lacking manhood and cheerfulness. Invoking their characteristic “cold-blood”, Falstaff implies that they use dirty and calculating political tricks. As discussed in the last session, Henry IV deceives Douglas on the battlefield at Shrewsbury by having several people impersonate him, a trick that in its imitation of the king recalls his own usurpation and doubtful possession of the title. Falstaff has a famous theory about how best to govern. In the kingdom of the human body, he argues, wine can perfect the brain and warm the blood; on the one hand, wine makes the brain (king) perfect by casting away vile elements and making room for wit; on the other hand, the perfect brain (king) wins the affection of people in the whole kingdom (all the organs and limbs), no matter high or low, circulating warm blood through its ubiquitous veins — by disseminating warm valour, that is, as opposed to cold-blooded political chicanery. Wine and its circulation through the blood, as far as Falstaff is concerned, is a useful metaphor for the best leadership. The cold-blood issue for Hal, however, is alleviated and medicated by his habit of drinking wine, thus Falstaff predicts that Hal will be the best king with the support of all the classes in England:

FALSTAFF Hereof comes it that Prince Harry is valiant, for the cold blood he did naturally inherit of his father he hath, like lean, sterile and bare land, manured, husbanded and tilled with excellent endeavour of drinking good and good store of fertile sherris, that he is become very hot and valiant. . . . If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I would teach them should be, to forswear thin potations, and to addict themselves to sack.

(2H4 IV.iii.113-21)

In *Henry V*, the valour and the capacity to muster “the vital commoners, and inland petty spirits” and “all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm” are exactly the two greatest features of Henry V, who brings a great victory to the whole nation. On the other hand, the inherited cold blood apparent in some of his political decisions, like executing the captives and hanging his former friend Bardolph, threatens to blacken the glorious image of Henry V.

The trajectory from Prince Hal to Henry V shows a continuous education in political skill, even when the prince is apparently “riotous”. From the start of the story in *Henry IV, Part I*, we know these riotous behaviours to be Hal’s elaborate camouflage, so that when he becomes a good king the contrast will surprise the world into respecting him more:

PRINCE Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wondered at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

W. H. Auden finds this speech of Hal's has the same patterning as a speech of Iago's, arguing that they both deceive and destroy.¹⁷ Bate, too, is convinced that *Henry V* reveals Prince Hal's riotous behavior to have been an elaborate game, a cynical piece of play-acting.¹⁸ Through the play-acting life in the tavern, however, Hal learns key strategies to engage with people. Henry V's encounter with soldiers on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt not only aligns with a dramatic tradition of English kings confronting their subjects, but also sets him apart: unlike other monarchs, Henry V does not merely appear before his subjects, he actively engages with them.¹⁹ The conversations with people demonstrate the consistency of personality from Prince Hal to Henry V. The ability to talk the language of his subjects mentioned earlier is developed in the tavern: in one quarter of an hour, Hal can drink with any tinker in his own language during his life (*IH4* I II.iv.17-9). What the tricky prince resorts to in order to trap Falstaff or win the hearts of the lower-orders is also exploited to deal with traitors and make inspiring speeches. The consistent early training undertaken by prince Hal makes him more — or, arguably, more sinister — than the typical Renaissance prodigal prince who suddenly (miraculously) changes into a good king, because, for him, from the beginning, he is more anti-prodigal than prodigal.²⁰

Peter Lake thinks that the effect of the relationship between Hal and Falstaff is an escapist fancy in a world of political realism.²¹ While Lake's perspective holds an obvious truth — the tavern does offer Hal a retreat from the court's politics — the tavern also has significant real-world functions. Falstaff offers the prince a friend more cunning than the rivals of the future Henry V. Falstaff's world of lower-class people and ruffians, of deception and theft, is much like Henry IV's upper-class world of deceitful nobles, out to steal large parts of the kingdom. More to the point, however, it is the complex and far-reaching anatomisation of power in the two *Henry IV* plays that makes the two plays so comprehensive in their political analysis and (in light of the almost exclusively aristocratic power politics of the earlier history plays) so experimental. More stage time is given to lower-class and middle-class (Shallow), factional and regional voices than in any of the other history plays, and in the length and proportion of the plays, half of the scenes are given to Eastcheap folks, reinforcing the political significance of their lives.

¹⁷ W. H. Auden. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. Random House, 1962: 205-06.

¹⁸ Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 1012

¹⁹ Taylor (ed.), *Henry V*, 40-41.

²⁰ Tromly, *Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare*, 97.

²¹ Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, 386.

Prince Hal's ability to engage with the common people reaches its full expression in Act 2, Scene 4, of *Henry IV, Part 1*. Before the appearance of Falstaff, Hal has already been "sworn brother to a leash of drawers" and teased Francis the ostler, displaying how adeptly he can manipulate people in the tavern, but his most effective manipulation in the tavern is of Falstaff.²² When Falstaff comes in, there is a shrewd political experiment at work, one planned as early as Act 1, Scene 2, when Poins and Hal discuss how to ambush Falstaff after the latter robs a travelling group. The plan is laid out in minute detail, including the place, the time, the horses, and the clothes for the ambush. Hal knows everyone in the company of Falstaff well enough to be able to predict their reactions and the odds of success. What could be better training for a prince with military ambitions? The goal of the subterfuge, stated by Poins, is to see the wonderful performance of the fat knight making excuses for himself and his failure.

The virtue of this jest will be the incomprehensible lies that this same fat rogue will tell us when we meet at supper, how thirty at least he fought with, what wards, what blows, what extremities he endured, and in the reproof of this lives the jest.

(*IH4* I.ii.178-82)

For Hal, however, its purpose is also to hone his political skills with an excellent training partner. Both the Machiavellian calculation and the fun-loving personality of prince Hal are revealed in this scene. Falstaff forestalls everyone by cursing Hal and Poins as "cowards", in contrast to the bravery of his own "victory" — "there be four of us here have ta'en a thousand pound this day morning" (155-6) — a trick designed to get everyone's attention as well as to distract from the failure of losing the money. Then Falstaff grossly and cumulatively exaggerates his own valour and the number of enemies he has engaged with, in an episode which at once entertains the audience and finds its parallel in the speech and subsequent battle of Agincourt in *Henry V*, a battle won by an inspiring speech under the circumstances of being grossly outnumbered by their enemies.

The confrontation in Eastcheap, moreover, tutors Hal in the political acuteness of identifying lies and responding to elaborate excuses. In the tavern, Hal accuses Falstaff of being a liar three times, all of which find resonances in *Henry V*. The first time Hal makes an allegation of lying against Falstaff it is a psychological move to force Falstaff to confess. The psychological play is applied in *Henry V* to the surrender of the city Harfleur:

KING HARRY ...in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters:

²² Hugh Grady. *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*. Oxford University Press, 2002: 165.

Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls:
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds; as did the wives of Jewry,
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.
What say you ? Will you yield, and this avoid ?
Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed ?

(H5 III.iii.34-44)

Back in the tavern scene of *Henry IV, Part I*, Hal makes the allegation that Falstaff is lying a second time. Hal deduces that Falstaff cannot tell the colour of the clothes of his enemies because it is very dark, an accusation that showcases the deductive intelligence of the prince. Whereas Falstaff cunningly avoids answering by accusing Hal and Poins of a vicious 'compulsion' in forcing him to explain himself, his diversionary response is predicated on the assumption that he is indeed a liar. Henry V's diverting domestic attention abroad by rallying his compatriots to a war with France is prefigured in Falstaff's evasive answer.

Back in the tavern a third time, Hal bluntly lays all the evidence down to confront Falstaff. Knowing that Falstaff has nowhere to run away from the charge, Hal is eager to observe and test Falstaff's capacity to escape his crimes. In an ingenious reversal, Falstaff replies that he has known from the beginning that it was Hal who ambushed him, but he would never hurt Hal and that is why he ran away instead of fighting. The response is Falstaff at his most astute, more competent, more cunning than all the political rivals Henry V will handle in *Henry V*. The perfect response wins the laughter of the whole tavern (and the whole audience).

But Falstaff's entertaining antics cannot save him from being banished by Hal. When Falstaff and Hal stage a mock conversation between Hal and his father, Hal, in the role of Henry IV, foretells that he will banish Falstaff. Falstaff explains playfully why he cannot be banished – because the joy he brings Hal is equal to the whole world:

FALSTAFF ...No, my good lord—banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins, but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff, and therefore more valiant being as he is old Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company, banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

PRINCE I do, I will.

(1H4 II.iv.465-71)

In the series *The Hollow Crown*,²³ directed by Richard Eyre, we get a poignant close-up, letting the audience know that Falstaff (played by Simon Russell Beale) understands that Hal (played by Tom Hiddleston) will one day be so heartless, and is deeply saddened by it, his eyes brimming with tears. The day of Falstaff's banishment comes at the end of *Henry IV, Part 2*, and in the beginning of *Henry V* he dies of heartbreak: "The king has killed his heart" (II.i.87). In the next scene, when Henry V deals with the traitors Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey, a similar confrontation appears: he is eager to observe the reaction of the traitors by suddenly disrupting their casual conversation and confronting them with evidence of their betrayals. The traitors have no time to comprehend and nowhere to escape to — giving Henry V the opportunity to observe their wit and embarrassment, like a cat torturing a mouse, showing no mercy afterwards. The three traitors beg for mercy by cleverly claiming that they are happier to have been discovered than to have succeeded in usurpation:

GREY Never did faithful subject more rejoice
At the discovery of most dangerous treason,
Than I do at this hour joy o'er myself,
Prevented from a damnèd enterprise
(H5 II.ii.161-4)

The wit entertains the king, but is never exchanged for mercy, even though one of the traitors is Henry V's "bedfellow" (II.ii.8), an intimacy similar if not the same as his relationship with Falstaff. Henry V's ruthlessness in decision making, his cold-heartedness in responding even to the best explanation, his habitual planning, his political sharpness in discerning and uncovering faults and in observing and understanding people, all echo with the education his loose living in the company of Falstaff imparts.

In the tavern scene, Falstaff begs Hal not to banish him and predicts that, if Hal were to banish him, he would banish all the world (II.iv.468-70), a prediction that is partly true, if by "the world" is meant the world of merriment. When Prince Hal is in the tavern, he feeds on the jesting Falstaff shares with him and Falstaff gives high satisfaction by performing a wonderful play — a live mock-Homeric battle, full of entertaining confrontations that sets the tavern on a roar. Falstaff's ability to make others laugh is, as we saw, clearly nurturing for Hal, capable of dissolving immoral acts into merriment. Falstaff is the only jester in the trilogy and, if Falstaff is banished, the world of merriment is banished, too. In *Henry V*, all the jesting occurs in the scenes with the tavern gang, excluding Henry V, who is far removed from his old companions. As a result, there is a notable absence of humour throughout the play. Henry V seeks solitude and isolates himself from any group

²³ "Henry IV, Part 1", *The Hollow Crown*, written by William Shakespeare and Richard Eyre, 2012.

of people, his refusing contact making him a completely different person after his father's death and his own coronation. Only in Eastcheap is he quite at ease.²⁴

In Act 4, Scene 1, this anguished isolation erupts in a long monologue before the Battle of Agincourt. Hal has been playing a role in *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, and appears untroubled by his voluntary isolation; once he is truly separated from his tavern companions, however, his introspection deepens and the burden of his identity looms large. He complains that kings are deprived of the happiness of common people — “What infinite heart's ease /Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!” (233-4) — and suffer more of grief: “What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more /Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?” (237-8). Grieving for the lost joy of Eastcheap, Henry V suffers like Richard II when he bemoans the vain “pomp” of kings and loss of “friends”. The illusion Richard II clings to at the end of his reign is analogous to Henry V's own illusion before reaching the peak of his career, and both fall back on ceremony and pomp. In Henry V's monologue, “ceremony” appears seven times, suggesting meaningless ostentation and acknowledging that the identity bestowed upon him by ceremony does not align with his innermost feelings about who he truly is.²⁵ In a poignant inversion, the king is “subject” to the breath of every fool (230-31) — “subject” to his subjects, that is. So Richard II complains that death grins at kings' “pomp” (163), and advocates that kings abandon “ceremonious” duty (173), for they, too, are “subjected” (176). Henry V's monologue echoes not only Richard II, but also Henry IV, whose insomnia connects Henry V to his father, who in *Henry IV, Part 2* envies the “many thousand of” his “poorest subjects” (III.i.4-5) who can sleep. These sorrows and worries, and this guilt further intensifies Henry V's internal struggle. Isolated from Falstaff and from his tavern friends, he loses the source of his merriment, leaving only the burden of office. It is clear that this stress only intensifies further with the execution of Bardolph in Act 3, Scene 6, right before Agincourt: “banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.”

Once king, Hal longs for order and lives by reason, but Falstaff lives by instinct. Bate highlights the key word “instinct” in *Henry IV, Part 1*, a key concept totally contrary to the aim of a sixteenth-century royal humanist education designed to overcome such innate propensities by developing the ethical, linguistic, and political faculties of the pupil prince.²⁶ Bate also recognises that Falstaff has an instinctive sense of self-preservation. However, Falstaff's instinct is more than

²⁴ Taylor (ed.), *Henry V*, 43.

²⁵ David Riggs. *Shakespeare's Heroical Histories: Henry VI and Its Literary Tradition*. Harvard University Press, 1971: 141.

²⁶ Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 881

utilitarian or hedonistic self-interest. If Falstaff's aim was merely to survive and gratify his sensual needs, he would not have died heart-broken. Falstaff does have moments of aspiring to reform. When he claims that he has killed Hotspur, he does this in part to take the opportunity to live "cleanly as a nobleman should do":

FALSTAFF I'll follow, as they say, for reward. He that rewards me, God reward him! If I do grow great, I'll grow less, for I'll purge, and leave sack, and live cleanly as a nobleman should do.

(1H4 V.iv.161-4)

If Falstaff were to embrace the fame of having slain Hotspur and take the opportunity to work harder, cut his bad habits, he could, as he wished, live as a noble man. And more opportunities would come to the reformed Falstaff once Prince Hal became Henry V. Even if unable to reform himself by the time of the coronation, Henry V might still look out for him. Although Henry V decides to make a clean break with the past by a striking and presumably difficult act of will – the banishment of Falstaff²⁷ – he still offers Falstaff a "competence" to stop him earning his bread by evil means, and even to reward him if he can clean up his act:

PRINCE HARRY For competence of life I will allow you,
That lack of means enforce you not to evils.
And as we hear you do reform yourselves,
We will, according to your strengths and qualities,
Give you advancement.

(2H4 V.v.67-71)

A ruffian as brazen as Falstaff professes to be at times would happily take the opportunity offered. Falstaff, however, turns these offers down and dies of a broken heart: "The king has killed his heart" (H5 II.i.86). The image of a heartbroken Falstaff is contrary to the stereotype of the self-serving opportunist, and we need to extend the meaning of "instinct" to include being unable to break free from the habitual life-style that leads to his downfall. In the political sociology of his *Weapons of the Weak*, James C. Scott examines the way in which, to challenge oppression, marginalised groups often resort to subtle, everyday acts of resistance, like laziness, rather than overt defiance. This concept aligns with Falstaff's instinctual behaviour. His drinking, eating, stealing, and cheating have become habits from which he is unable to break free, much like the peasants in Scott's analysis, keeping him trapped in a cycle of indulgence.

The other instinct of Falstaff is a sincere love for Hal. Falstaff is broken by the sudden realisation that his love and loyalty are met with Hal's cold-blooded banishment. Falstaff's instincts stand in stark contrast to Hal's political savvy: Hal uses Falstaff to hone his political skills and then

²⁷ Gary Taylor (ed.), *Henry V*, 44.

coldheartedly discards him, like a worn-out toy. Falstaff's displaced paternal love is his vulnerability, his only weakness, and the source of his destruction.²⁸

And yet Henry V has to banish Falstaff or the kingdom will become the nightmare Henry IV refers to in *Henry IV, Part 2* as “up, vanity!/ Down, royal state!” (IV.v.119-20), in which Falstaff promises to impeach important officials — “the laws of England are at my commandment” (140-1) — and to sell offices: “choose what office thou wilt in the land, 'tis thine” (126-7). Harold Bloom detests Hal's hypocrisy and calculation, while fully embracing what Falstaff represents. He acknowledges that Falstaff does commit conventional sins, spending most of his time indulging in eating, fornication, drinking, and profiting from the civil war. But Bloom views Falstaff as a satirist speaking truth to power and teaching us freedom from the constraints of society, which makes him the most complex and lovable of all Shakespeare's characters. In this regard, Falstaff, for Bloom, symbolises Shakespeare himself, and the *Henry IV* plays should be entitled the *Falstaffiad* (270-277).²⁹ Bloom's listing Falstaff's many instances of bad behaviour shows that he is well aware of the extent to which Falstaff can inflict suffering on individuals, communities, and the country. Yet Bloom believes that Falstaff's scorn for the hypocritical and dark side of noble (chivalric) society is the highlight of his character and is far more valuable than the damage he causes. Falstaff's famous speech “Can honour set to a leg?” in Act 5, Scene 1 of *Henry IV, Part 1*, is cited as a standing challenge for sympathisers with the prince.

I am not persuaded by this method of turning moral decay into a valuable quality, because I believe that when Shakespeare writes about right and wrong, he remains clearly aware of their distinction. Just as Falstaff is not a romantic idealist seeking a perfect world, however, nor is he an enlightened realist sharing his author's profound existential and pragmatic neutrality. Instead, he is a natural anarchist whose ritualistic sacrifice from a political point of view is inevitable. The idea of patricide — or at least the fear of it, which flickers across the king's mind — is raised earlier in the deathbed scene of *Henry IV, Part 2*, when Hal snatches his father's crown as he weeps over the burden the crown has placed on both his father and himself. The rejection (patricide) of Falstaff is also a burden of the heavy crown. Issues of state trump the personal. As Brutus says in *Julius Caesar*: “Not that I love Caesar less, but that I love Rome more”. Just as Brutus loves Caesar as a father, but murders him, Henry loves Falstaff as a father, but has to betray him. In this recurring theme of patricide for political reasons, Shakespeare terribly illustrates that intimate relationships can be sabotaged by incompatible political ideas, and that such relationships are, by nature, as

²⁸ Harold Bloom. *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human*. Penguin Publishing Group, 1998: 272.

²⁹ Bloom, *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human*, 270-77.

irreconcilable as fire and water. It is an irony that politics, originally an art designed to facilitate interpersonal relationships, should destroy the relationships of the people caught up in its power struggles. Sacrifices and the sufferings on both parts of Falstaff and Henry V must be made in order to ensure the flourishing of the state. Henry V's Machiavellian behaviour in dealing with Falstaff has attracted severe criticism, but if Shakespeare's Henry is meant to symbolise the ideal prince in some way, it is because of, not in spite of, the clearly "Machiavellian" traits in his method of ruling.³⁰

Section Four: Monarchy and other polities

The challenges of fashioning Hal into Henry V inevitably relate to monarchy as a political system. As a king, Henry V must shoulder the immense burden of leadership for life, and when he inherits the throne, he also inherits the original sins of his predecessors. The Eastcheap of Hal's early experiences resembled a republican society, over which an influential Falstaff presided with the support of his lower-class associates. Just as I mentioned earlier in Section 3, Henry V praises the yeomen in his pre-war speech, there is a more striking comparison in the Prologue of Henry V:

CHORUS Like to the senators of th'antique Rome,
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Csesar in.
(H5 V.0.26-28)

Shakespeare compares Henry V to Caesar and his subjects to plebeians and senators. Henry V's way of ruling shows quasi-republican traits in which a good king rules not only by virtue of his bloodline, but also through distinguished action and an inherent sense of nobility and justice, arguments that were part of the intellectual and political mainstream.³¹ In Section Four, I will examine the problems of monarchy in the Henry IV tetralogy alongside another flawed 'monarchy' in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* occupies a transitional state between (Tarquinian) monarchy and republicanism, in which Coriolanus's disregard for the well-being of the people can be interpreted as a typical hangover of the monarchy. The play *Coriolanus* also illustrates a flaw in republicanism, which is that people's obsession with power and the constant political struggle this encourages can cause unnecessary harm to other stakeholders of the city and lead to issues the powermongers cannot resolve on their own. Two other polities, both extreme forms of government depicted in the Henry IV tetralogy and *Coriolanus* — anarchy and absolutism — will also be discussed. I'll also

³⁰ Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, 386.

³¹ Andrew Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014: 28.

compare *Coriolanus* to two other Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, to explore how Shakespeare's thinking moves from questioning the merits of different polities to an increasing emphasis on the quality of political leadership — suggesting that, in the end, leadership may matter more than the form of government itself.

For Shakespeare, the use of historical parallel could be a way of avoiding censorship while dramatising potentially controversial (and actionable) ideas and opinions, especially on politics.³² In the Roman plays, Shakespeare is able to explore republicanism, which was introduced to England decades before Shakespeare's time,³³ and compare it with the present monarchy. Interestingly, in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare gives people much more voice than is given them by his source Plutarch.³⁴ Even Machiavelli, the most widely-read republican theorist, does not emphasise the people as much as Shakespeare does in the *Henry V* and Roman plays.³⁵ Despite the power given the people's voice, however, republicanism remains a controversial issue in Shakespeare's plays. In *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare often represents the people as gullible, unwise, vulgar, and potentially violent, suggesting the dangers of republicanism and how important it is to limit the people's power.

While there are only glimpses of the people in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* fully focuses on the way powerful and changeable mobs can turn on a hero who is unsuited to being a leader, but does not deserve to die. Coriolanus has a disdain for the commoners that is arguably a feature of the ruling class, but his character flaw is to make him show his disdain publicly. He is a patrician warrior living according to the masculine code of courage and gallantry (*virtus*), the greatest virtue of the Roman, who despite having all the martial virtues, has none of the civic ones.³⁶ Especially when confronting inevitable conflict between patricians and plebeians, Coriolanus never hides his disdain for plebeians and thus comes into public notoriety. The notorious disdain, however, seems justified as Shakespeare seems to incline more to Coriolanus. To raise Coriolanus and diminish the plebeians, Shakespeare reshapes the plot narrated by Plutarch, highlighting the *virtus* of Coriolanus and the mutability of "common fools". The corn incident that directly causes the people's rage against Coriolanus's election in the *Lives* is moved by Shakespeare to Act 1, weakening its importance against the invasion of Rome's enemies. Again, in Act 3, Scene

³² Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 1517.

³³ Rita Banerjee. "The Common Good and the Necessity of War: Emergent Republican Ideals in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and *Coriolanus*." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2006: 30-31.

³⁴ Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 1517.

³⁵ Andrew Hadfield. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. Cambridge University Press, 2005: 11.

³⁶ Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 1517.

1, when plebeians decide to go back on their word, Coriolanus is preoccupied with a newly planned attack on Rome by its enemies. The way the plebeians hinder the efficiency of state management and later ruin the peace of Rome is shockingly rendered. In the *Lives*, there is no record of the commoners going back on their word, so Shakespeare's intention is clear: the people are foolish enough to ruin the state and should not be afforded so much political power.

Coriolanus is not suitable to be a consul, not because he does not have the ability, but because his resentment of the plebeians overrides his willingness to rule. It is interesting here to compare *Henry V* to *Coriolanus*, because in *Coriolanus* leaders seem to embrace a monarchical or hierarchical polity, rather than republicanism. The form of leadership Shakespeare advocates in *Coriolanus* has the same characteristics of the best leadership in *Henry V*. The eloquence and courage of Henry V are shown in Menenius and Coriolanus respectively: while Coriolanus is the epitome of *virtus*, Menenius has a silver tongue to resolve political crises and disagreements over principle. Coriolanus and Menenius combine to form the Roman counterpart of Henry V. But both the Roman leaders embrace anti-republican political ideas.

Menenius offers his theory of the best polity of Rome in Act 1. What is interesting is that a parallel theory can be found in Falstaff's speech on the best leadership, in which the same metaphor of "veins" and the same body politics are used as in Menenius's theory. When Menenius explains to commoners how a polity works like a body, he compares the ruling class to the "belly":

MENENIUS That I receive the general food at first,
Which you do live upon; and fit it is,
Because I am the storehouse and the shop
Of the whole body. But, if you do remember,
I send it through the rivers of your blood,
Even to the court, the heart, to th'seat o' th' brain;
And, through the cranks and offices of man,
The strongest nerves and small inferior veins
From me receive that natural competency
Whereby they live . . .

(*Coriolanus* I.i.130-9)³⁷

The ruling class, the belly, receives the food first and then delivers the food through the veins all over the body. For Menenius, the best polity is hierarchical: the ruling class gets the resources first (here it is the corn) and then distributes them to the lower-classes. The metaphor itself is not appealing to commoners since the labour of resource allocation is an excuse to privilege the belly. Republicanism rests on the power of plebeians, not on the power of the nobles, and it is obvious

³⁷ The New Cambridge William Shakespeare. *Coriolanus*. Edited by Lee Bliss, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

that both Coriolanus and Menenius hate the idea of the plebeians having political power. What Coriolanus ardently lobbies for among the nobles and senators is a return of the power they have given to the people, and the ruling class fails him, indirectly causing his exile and his decision to exact revenge. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality suggests that Henry V's polity is stable precisely because it is not a complete monarchy but a republican monarchy, while Coriolanus' polity would be stable only if it were not a complete republic but a monarchical republic.

As I suggested earlier, when Shakespeare writes about Falstaff, he is conscious of himself creating a character who is naturally immoral. In the Henry IV tetralogy, although the Falstaff gang is the source of merriment and Hal's education, they are nonetheless thieves, opportunists, liars, and deserters. Shakespeare's opinions of the people suggest that his ideal polity is hierarchical, not horizontal. The hierarchical power structure that he advocates in the tetralogy and the Roman plays, however, does not necessarily mean that monarchy is an ideal alternative. In fact, as we saw, Henry V suffers a good deal from his inherited title, the confrontation with Williams on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt manifesting the strain of being a king at the head of an army. When he camouflages himself as an ordinary soldier to talk to other soldiers in the camp, Williams questions the "cause" of the expedition and lays all responsibilities on the king:

WILLIAMS But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all "We died at such a place"...

(H5 IV.i.133-8)

This is the moment where Henry V loses his self-composure and the ensuing duel with Williams is a blot on his record of getting along with people and also directly leads to his painful monologue:

KING HARRY Upon the king!
'Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our care-full wives,
Our children, and our sins, lay on the King.'
We must bear all.

(H5 IV.i.212-15)

This exclamation at the start of the monologue serves as an outlet for Henry V. The Henry V who replies bluntly to Canterbury's long speech of the legitimacy of the war — "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (I.ii.95-6) — is opposite to the Henry V who feels burdened by the cause of the war here. It is true that Henry is caught between the king's political body and natural body — when he wants war, he is in his political body, but when he faces accountability for

national actions, he is tortured by his natural body.³⁸ But in this polity of monarchy, a king must “bear all”: lives, souls, debts, and sins. Henry V complains as his father has complained before him, and Richard II before him: kings are deprived of the simple happiness of the common people, a happiness that can be as simple as sleep. The intertextual echoes between the monologues of the two kings registers the shift of the burden of kingship from Henry IV to Henry V, as the father’s sin (usurpation) is also inherited by the son. Similar intertextual echoes between Henry V’s monologue and Richard II’s famous speech on the “hollow crown”, discussed above, suggests that Henry V also inherits Richard II’s stress as a king. Later, Henry painfully recollects his traumatic experience in seeing Richard’s body:

KING HARRY Not to-day, O Lord,
 O not to-day, think not upon the fault
 My father made in compassing the crown!
 I Richard’s body have interred new,
 And on it have bestowed more contrite tears,
 Than from it issued forced drops of blood.
(H5 IV.i.274-9)

The sins of the previous two kings are inherited by Henry V in a way that momentarily undermines the brave and successful king of “sweet and honeyed words”. The scene is a crucial juncture in the play, at which the audience is reminded of the fragility and unstable foundations of the monarchy.³⁹ In picturing this other side to this most renowned king, Shakespeare throws some doubt on the dependence of monarchy on a single monarch.

Shakespeare’s implacably neutral vision of monarchy and republicanism, then, allows that neither polity is necessarily useless and that, while both are vulnerable, both can conduce to order and virtue. Certain types of government, on the other hand, contribute nothing but civil disaster. Despite all Falstaff’s fatherly affection for Hal, the Elizabethan audience would easily have identified Falstaff as the figure of “Vice” in a morality play, and behind the evident moral disapproval glimpsed the other “vice” of anarchy. In Falstaff’s account of himself — fat, wine- and food-loving, sexually rapacious, spontaneous, and merry (II.iv.461-4) — sensual indulgence is portrayed in a positive light, despite the fact that these characteristics still align with the “Vice” figure. In contrast, Hal reproaches Falstaff for representing a more sinister vision of the “Vice” as villainous and deceitful, even when he does not have to be. Falstaff represents what is quite contrary to the government — of the self and of the state — that Henry V aspires to. He and his father are

³⁸ Arlene W. Saxonhouse. “Nation and Responsibility: the King and His Soldiers in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.” *Political Theory*, vol. 49, no. 6, 2021: 968.

³⁹ Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, 38.

fully aware that Falstaff's political vision, in which stealing is tolerated, recruitment is profiteering, and Shallow promised any position in the kingdom — represents a form of anarchy. Falstaff's ideal state is a state with no rules or laws, motivated by wilful, spontaneous instinct. In this version of anarchy, jesting adds a merry and playful texture to the chaos. Falstaff's jesting offers Hal a happy youth, but in the end is renounced as indiscriminate and lacking restraint. The excessive fun-loving nature of the ludic Falstaff is typical of what Bakhtin observes in Renaissance carnival, which is essentially a fun-loving, anarchic, moral 'vacation' in which social classes and distinctions disappeared, and vulgarity and profanation was allowed, but only as a prelude to the return of order and hierarchy.⁴⁰

The other polity to which Shakespeare shows no mercy is absolutism, which flickers through the tetralogy. The word "absolutism" does not come into being until the mid-eighteenth century (OED), but Shakespeare uses "absolute" and its variants to present the lurking dangers of absolutism. In OED, "absolute" in a political sense means "of a ruler, government, etc.: having unlimited authority or power; not subject to any constitutional or external restraint". In this sense, in the *Henry IV* tetralogy, the motive for Bolingbroke's usurpation is that Richard II, despite the firm opposition of York and in contempt of tradition and law, confiscates Bolingbroke's property. The absolute power that Richard II willfully abuses plays a significant role in the nobles' reaction to his high-handed behaviour and his eventual downfall. As discussed earlier, Richard II's willful actions do not necessarily lead to his demise, but his absolutism serves as powerful propaganda, encouraging the aristocracy to betray him whenever the opportunity arises.

Coriolanus is the play in which Shakespeare offers his most detailed exploration of absolutism. Greenblatt calls Coriolanus a tyrant, and thinks that, though the tribunes are ignoble and self-serving career politicians, they represent the people's voice, making them the real saviours of the city.⁴¹ Greenblatt is partial to the tribunes and the people in his effort to expose the sins of absolutism in *Coriolanus*, and he is not alone. As early as November 1935, the Manchester Repertory Company produced *Coriolanus* with Coriolanus as a fascist, while the tribune Sicinius resembled Lenin.⁴² However, I think there is absolutism in both parties and the tendency of both to absolutism is the very thing that threatens the equilibrium of two powers. In *Coriolanus*, the epithet "absolute" is used both of Coriolanus and of the people, suggesting that both their powers tend to

⁴⁰ See, for example, Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1984: 196-277.

⁴¹ Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 177 and 182.

⁴² Bliss, *Coriolanus*, 83-84.

the “absolute”. Coriolanus calls the people absolute twice (the second time in reference to the Greeks):

CORIOLOANUS ‘Shall remain’?

Hear you this Triton of the minnows? Mark you

His absolute ‘shall’?

(*Corionalus* III.i.88)

CORIO LANUS . . . there the people had more absolute power –

I say they nourished disobedience, fed

The ruin of the state.

(*Corionalus* III.i.119)

The same word, however, is thrown back at Coriolanus by his mother, when he refuses to apologise to people: “You are too absolute [= inflexible]” (III.ii.39). Absolute has a positive meaning, too — since Aufidius praises Coriolanus as a “most absolute [= steadfast] sir” (IV.v.139) — but it remains a question as to just how ironic its use is in the case of Coriolanus.

Coriolanus lobbies for reclaiming power from the people, a position that reflects his elitism. If Coriolanus becomes a consul, the whole ground of republicanism will be subverted. The plebeians, on the other hand, intend to banish the leader they do not like, regardless of his being a hero and the sole protector of Rome. The absolute political stance of Coriolanus leads to his banishment, while the absolute political power of the people reaps what they have sown: the destruction of the whole state. One more similarity between Coriolanus and the plebeian is expressed by Menenius: the same metaphor Menenius makes earlier, comparing one citizen to the great toe, is later thrown back at Coriolanus when Menenius claims that Coriolanus is the deceased foot.⁴³ As Jonathan Bate argues, the play *Coriolanus* anatomizes the strengths and the weaknesses of both absolutism *and* republicanism, interrogating the principle of aristocracy along with that of democracy.⁴⁴ The horrible scenarios brought about by absolute power on the part of both the people and the elite constitute the darkest political disasters in Shakespeare's plays. And when the people

⁴³ The foot comparison is identified by David G. Hale in “Coriolanus: The Death of a Political Metaphor.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1971: 197–202. Hale’s argument is grounded in the relationship between two bodily analogies in the play. In the First Folio, it is Menenius who articulates the foot analogy:

The service of the foot,

Being once gangren'd, is not then respected

For what before it was. (*Coriolanus* III.i.306–308)

Although the editor Lee Bliss of the *New Cambridge Shakespeare* does not consider this analogy consistent with Menenius' character and reallocates the lines to the tribune Sicinius (210), I find Hale's reading more persuasive. The analogy gains force from the structural parallels Shakespeare draws between Coriolanus and the plebeians; both are marked by the same political absolutism. It is precisely here that Shakespeare's terrible neutrality lies, as he endows opposing political forces with the same underlying problems.

⁴⁴ Bate (ed.), *RSC Complete Works*, 1518

choose to banish Coriolanus, their action is entirely misplaced: they should have used their political power to secure the corn hoarded by the aristocracy, rather than allowing it to serve the tribunes' ambition for power. As readers, we may also have forgotten the original conflict at the opening of the play, where Shakespeare deliberately lays his terrible ambush.

While *Coriolanus* stages the dilemma of republicanism at its birth, *Julius Caesar* represents republicanism at the moment of its death. True republicanism seldom appears in *Julius Caesar*. Brutus might be the only character who appears to believe in it, and even his motives are suspicious. There is a long-standing debate over whether Brutus's love for Rome stems from a genuine commitment to republicanism or from a desire for power, because Brutus's reasons for wanting to assassinate Caesar are weak. Though Shakespeare's Caesar holds the supreme power in Rome, as evident from the Act 3, Scene 3, where every suit is brought to him and senators kneel to beg for his reconsideration, he refuses to be crowned in Lupercal. Caesar is an emperor to be, but he does not aspire to the imperial throne yet, so there remains some ambiguity about Caesar's ultimate intentions.⁴⁵ In this vein, Brutus has too little justification for assassinating Caesar for the things Caesar *might* do. Brutus's lengthy self-justifying speeches and monologues are too weak and too disingenuous to justify taking Caesar's life. Brutus's actions in moving to protect republicanism lead to Augustus's coronation and the end of republicanism in Rome. It is Shakespeare's terrible neutrality at work here again, probing Brutus's reputation and allowing a morally ambiguous Brutus to believe he can control the course of history, but in vain. Leaving aside the issue of political preference, Brutus is not a good leader of the assassination plot, repeatedly making politically naive – and, in the circumstances, fatal – mistakes. He forbids the murder of Antony and even allows him to speak publicly, despite Cassius's repeated objections. Even if Brutus had been fortunate enough to succeed, he is unlikely to have been able to lead an ailing Rome very far down the path of republicanism.

The plebeians in *Julius Caesar* do not grasp the essence of republicanism. They understand only that they are respected by the elite insofar as the elite persuade them that they possess political influence. What the plebeians fail to recognize is that this very influence is exercised in support of elite individuals who aspire to autocratic power; in doing so, they unwittingly contribute to the destruction of republicanism itself. While in *Coriolanus*, the power of the tribunes is soaring, in *Julius Caesar* their power is diminishing. The tribunes who can exile the military leader in *Coriolanus* can only make public speeches that no one listens to at the beginning of *Julius Caesar*.

⁴⁵ Jeremy Lopez, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*. Edited by Marvin Spevack and Jeremy Lopez, Cambridge University Press, 1988: 15.

Shortly afterwards, we are told parenthetically that tribunes Murellus and Flavius “for pulling scarves off Caesar’s images, are put to silence” or executed (I.i.275-76). In Act 1, Scene 1, as Caesar returns with the news of his having killed Pompey to a grand welcome from the people, the tribunes accuse them of being disrespectful to Pompey. The tribunes, elected by the people to represent the people, do not protect the people but oppose them in order to uphold the Republic. Meanwhile, the people remain politically unaware, concerned only with their own private affairs.⁴⁶ The tribunes in *Julius Caesar* attempt responsibly to guide the people and are better than the self-serving ones in *Coriolanus*, but no one listens to them. What people enjoy, says Casca, is the festivity and the engagement with Caesar. Not caring what form of the festivity might take, they even joyfully take part in the game of crowning Caesar:

CASCA ...And then he offered it the third time; he put it the third time by, and still as he refused it, the rabblement hooted, and clapped their chopped hands, and threw up their sweaty nightcaps, and uttered such a deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused the crown that it had, almost, choked Caesar, for he swooned and fell down at it. And for mine own part I durst not laugh for fear of opening my lips and receiving the bad air.

(JC I.ii.238-44)

Casca despises the people’s ragged attire, sweaty hats, chapped hands, and stinking breath, showing his contempt for their poverty as well as their foolishness. After all, in Act 3, Scene 3, they murder Cinna the poet only because he shares a name with Cinna the conspirator, irrationally seeking to “pluck but his name out of his heart” (III.iii.33). Shakespeare stands unanimous with Casca on the mob’s foolishness: republican elites flatter them to get their support, but the essence of republicanism is alien to them. Patrick Gray thinks that Shakespeare experiments in the Roman plays with a prototype of a liberal ethos whose focus on the individual’s autonomy can only lead to either autocracy or civil war.⁴⁷ Gray might be right about *Coriolanus*, but he ignores the fact that in *Julius Caesar* there is no republicanism, which has died long ago. The people of this decaying republican Rome have thrown their support behind Caesar’s rise to the imperial throne. After his death, they erase his achievements faster than they forget Pompey’s, supporting Brutus by declaring, “Let him be Caesar” and “Caesar’s better parts / Shall be crowned in Brutus” (II.ii.43-44). Brutus never manages to rekindle their love of republicanism; instead, he is hailed as the new Caesar. Then, immediately after Brutus’s speech, susceptible to the superior rhetoric of Antony, the people turn against Brutus.

⁴⁶ Jan H. Blits. *The End of the Ancient Republic: Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar*. Bloomsbury Academic, 1993: 22-25.

⁴⁷ Patrick Gray. *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018: 20.

Gray argues rightly that the tragic flaw of Shakespeare's Roman political leaders is their blind pursuit of power, especially absolute power.⁴⁸ Though Shakespeare depicts a transition period from republican to imperial Rome in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the emphasis is not upon the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two polities. Whether Rome is republic, or empire, or triumvirate, or Antony and Cleopatra's kingdom and empire, what is important is the character of their leaders. The result of Brutus's murder of Caesar is the rise to power of Antony and Augustus, aided by the violence of the people. Part of *Julius Caesar* describes the second triumvirate, which causes more casualties than Brutus's short-lived era. Brutus allows only Caesar to be killed, sparing everyone else, including Antony, but the second triumvirate in Act 4, Scene 1, executes vast numbers, including the conspirators' brothers and nephews, highlighting their corruption and the lengths they will go to to secure power.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the merit of the polity and the welfare of the people are no longer the focus; instead, Shakespeare turns his attention to political leadership and reveals a further level of its degradation in the pursuit of power. Even a figure like Antony, who is portrayed as ambivalent in *Julius Caesar*, seems more honorable than Rome's ultimate emperor, Augustus. While in *Julius Caesar* there are concerns that Caesar will impair republicanism, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, this concern is totally disregarded. Republican Rome becomes a site of incessant military strife and an increasingly hollow pursuit of honour, whereas the Empire depicted in *Antony and Cleopatra* represents a decay of spirit and the disappearance of both plebeians and patricians as meaningful political actors.⁴⁹ Both polities in *Antony and Cleopatra* thus suffer from structural flaws; nevertheless, if one must be preferred, the Empire appears the relatively better option, not because of its constitutional form, but because of the quality of its leadership. Antony's political actions are focused solely on consolidating his own power, while Augustus, in a brazen display of political manoeuvring, eliminates Lepidus and Antony to secure his dominance and become emperor. Neither Antony nor Augustus seems concerned with the interests of the people. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is Cleopatra who speaks of the potential violence of the mob, an anxiety she cannot endure which leads her to take her own life. Shakespeare seems to favour the rule of Antony and Cleopatra over that of Augustus, not because they rule as monarchs while Augustus rules as emperor, but because Antony and Cleopatra are better or at least more sympathetic rulers. They embrace love and passion, whereas Augustus is cold-blooded and selfish (as discussed below, in the chapter on Shakespeare and Love). The Shakespeare who weaves a heaven under the reign of

⁴⁸ Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, 3.

⁴⁹ Paul A. Cantor. *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*. 2 ed., The University of Chicago Press, 2017: 130 and 137.

Antony and Cleopatra seems different from the Shakespeare who cares about people's well-being in Henry IV plays. But both Shakespeares are one Shakespeare, the Shakespeare who is neutral on the issue of polity.

In *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare centers on leadership, particularly on the virtues of political leaders. It is also worth noting that the Roman plays were written after *Henry V*.⁵⁰ Read retrospectively, *Henry V* presents a king who, despite his many flaws, appears superior to Henry IV and Richard II, as well as to other potential claimants to the throne, such as his brother John, a cold-blooded politician who lacks a code of honour. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, Act 4, Scene 1, John falsely proposes to Mowbray, Westmoreland, and the Archbishop that they both discharge their armies and reach a peace treaty. John sincerely promises that "I give it you and will maintain my word, /And thereupon I drink unto your grace" (IV.i.295-96). But once his opponents do that, instead of discharging his army, he orders their arrest for treason and humiliates them because "Most shallowly did you these arms commence" (IV.i.355). Although his reputation is tarnished by his abandoning his Eastcheap friends and killing the French prisoners, Hal does not play Machiavellian politics to the same extent that John does. He also engages people with his human warmth and excels at projecting a kingly authority, which John lacks. Henry V performs a white Machiavellianism.⁵¹ Only Percy has Hal's military gallantry, but the hot-headed Hotspur lacks the cool resolve of a politician. Hal is still the best candidate for succeeding to the crown. In all of Shakespeare's plays, there is no such thing as the perfect political leader, but in each polity, he fashions the best political leader in and for a specific context, and for Shakespeare it is better, no matter what the polity is, to have a good leader.

The *Henry IV* plays serve not only as a study of the most efficient political leadership, but also as a critique of the very notion of ideal leadership. By tracing Henry V's rise alongside the burdens of kingship, Shakespeare prompts a reconsideration of monarchy's capacity to produce just and wise rulers. More broadly, the play reflects a profound disillusionment with all forms of governance — monarchy, republicanism, anarchy, absolutism — revealing the inherent contradictions and necessary sacrifices required in all polities, and all human enterprises. Shakespeare's vision of politics and human nature remains neutral: no political system fully aligns with human nature, and every form of rule entails compromises. This incompatibility and the

⁵⁰ *Julius Caesar*, in particular, was written in the same year as *Henry V*, in 1599.

⁵¹ A. D. Nuttall. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. Yale University Press, 2007: 151.

compromises it entails is embodied in political leaders — especially kings — and in the structures of governance they represent.

A Mirror for Magistrates describes a causal interrelationship among the people, the officials, and the ruler: “where offices are duly ministred, it can not be chosen, but the people are good, whereof must nedes folow a good common weale. For if the officers be good, the people can not be yll. Thus the goodnes or badnes of any realme lyeth in the goodnes or badnes of the rulers”.⁵² The moral lesson of *A Mirror for Magistrates* suggests that a virtuous ruler produces virtuous officials, which in turn leads to a prosperous kingdom and the welfare of the people. In this chapter, however, I argue for the opposite position: Shakespeare’s “terrible neutrality” dismantles these causal links. There is no necessary relationship between a morally good ruler, his counselors, the success of the kingdom, and the welfare of the people. Otto von Bismarck’s argument that “politics is the art of the possible” aligns with Shakespeare’s stance in politics. This quote is widely cited because it captures the uncertainty of political action: the impossibility of relying on experience or theory to respond to events as they unfold, and the unpredictability of political outcomes. There is no textbook answer for leaders governing the state; instead, there are only possibilities for political strategies and outcomes, as politics is contingent, situational, and adaptive.

My approach treats Shakespeare’s history plays as sites of political inquiry, providing a productive entry point for examining the complex contingency of politics. Shakespeare’s neutrality allows him, working from chaotic yet already existing raw materials, to compare, reimagine, and reorganise historical events and figures in ways that are politically revealing and often unsettling. This approach should not be confused with New Historicism. I do not claim that Shakespeare constructs an alternative history, nor do I assume that his plays actively shape or circulate cultural power. Rather, Shakespeare’s historical drama operates through a secondary reworking of history, using historical material as a medium through which political judgment, leadership, and contingency can be explored.

Perhaps the most terrible insight in Shakespeare’s plays lies in the recognition that politics is fundamentally unfit to coexist fully with morality and humanity. Political success may be achieved, but perfection in leadership or polity remains impossible. To return to Bismarck and the art of the possible: when a sudden political event demands an immediate response, leaving no time for moral deliberation, a successful political leader can only seek the optimal solution, often at the cost of sacrificing what appears least significant — whether people, principles, or interests. This dilemma

⁵² William Baldwin. *The Mirror for Magistrates Edited from Original Texts in the Huntington Library*. Edited by Lily B. Campbell, The University Press, 1938: 64.

recalls the paradox of justice discussed by Michael J. Sandel in his Harvard course *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*⁵³ In the well-known trolley problem, a runaway train is headed toward five people; by pulling a switch, one can divert it onto another track where it will kill one person instead. Would one intervene? Such a choice involves not only legal justice, but also ethical judgment, public welfare, practical constraints, human considerations, and long-term consequences. A successful leader inevitably confronts this kind of dilemma: whether to violate morality actively through decision, or to violate it passively through inaction. Likewise, no political system can be perfect for all. These conclusions can only be drawn by viewing Shakespeare's works as a whole, through comparison across multiple plays and political figures. The one remaining affirmative note is that Shakespeare, as a humanist, still chooses to place his trust—within imperfect politics and flawed polities—in a leader who is capable (unlike the evasive Henry VI), decisive (unlike the contemplative Hamlet), not excessively corrupt (unlike Henry VIII or Richard III), and not driven to extremes (unlike Coriolanus).

⁵³ Michael J. Sandel. *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. A discussion of justice in its legal sense will be addressed in the next chapter; here the concern is political judgment.

CHAPTER FOUR – LAW

There is a prevailing belief that, over the centuries, science and technology have been progressing at a tremendous rate, while humanity has been in steady decline. If this were true, law would be an exception, for the law in modern times keeps developing towards greater justice and equity. The premise of this chapter is that the law in Shakespeare's age was not so advanced as it is today, but that resonances of the spirit of modern law can be found in Shakespeare's works, suggesting Shakespeare's legal foresight. There is no universal law that applies to all ages, cultures, political forms, social contracts, or welfare models. Instead, the law changes in different contexts to accommodate changes in beliefs and values over time and across different cultures. From a modern perspective, the law is neutral in its application of equity and justice, impartial to any one individual or group in society, and it protects the rights of everyone indiscriminately. But in Shakespeare's England — where no modern legal system existed, where Christianity was the dominant belief, and where social hierarchy was rigidly enforced — it requires a nuanced understanding and a terrible neutrality to grasp the spirit of law in the modern, egalitarian sense.

Laws in the Elizabethan era were very different from modern laws. They classified people into different social tiers in order to manage them. One example is the Poor Law, which evolved over time. The 1601 Poor Law, in particular, transitioned from harsh measures to more compassionate ones in its approach to governing the poor.¹ The 1574 Sumptuary Laws constrained people's spending strictly according to their social status, limiting the expenditure of the different classes in areas like food, drink, furniture, jewellery, and clothing.² Breaking these laws could lead to harsh consequences, such as fines, the confiscation of property and titles, even execution. In the context of modern consumerism, such laws seem almost unimaginable. Another example is the 1559 Second Act of Supremacy, highly characteristic of its time.³ It reinforced the supremacy of the monarch and the unity of religion. Although it appeared to have little to do with the people, it actually had a profound impact on their beliefs, as discussed in the chapter on religion. These laws of the Elizabethan era were all designed to

¹ C. W. Brooks. *Law, Politics and Society in Early Modern England*. Cambridge University Press, 2008: 416-17

² Maria Hayward. "'Outlandish Superfluities': Luxury and Clothing in Scottish and English Sumptuary Law from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century." *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c. 1200–1800*, Cambridge University Press, 2019: 104-05.

³ Robert Bucholz. *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013: 118.

serve the interests of class and control, and bear little resemblance to modern legal principles and practices.

The laws in Shakespeare's time did not entirely disregard the welfare of the people. There had always been an underlying principle of 'justice for all' and the nation had a systematic way of allocating justice through parliamentary statute and the courts of common law and equity, the one dealing with legal disputes based on common law principles, while the equity courts handled matters where the strict application of common law would not lead to a just or fair outcome. From historical records of Shakespeare's numerous legal involvements, people at the time relied on the justice system to defend their individual rights — in the case of *Belott v. Mountjoy*, for example, Shakespeare was summoned to testify: Mountjoy had promised his apprentice Belott a sum of money for marrying his daughter, but later refused to fulfill that promise (a legal conflict that finds a counterpart in the plot of *Timon of Athens*).⁴

But the ideals of equity and justice, though central to any legal system, were subject to limitations imposed by religious, political, and hierarchical structures, and the legal encounters of Shakespeare's family serve as examples. Shakespeare's father, for example, submitted a legal petition to acquire a coat of arms that would confer the status of gentleman on himself and his son, William, and the process took nearly thirty years to be resolved.⁵ This kind of "law's delay" demonstrates how significant it was for people to achieve social elevation. Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway also reflected the way religion affected the marriage law; since she was already pregnant, the couple had to marry hastily with a special license on 27 November 1582 and baptise their baby Susanna next year in May.⁶ The theme of pregnancy before marriage appears in *Measure for Measure* (1604), written years before he witnessed his daughter summoned to the bawdy courts in 1613.⁷ From the legal documents concerning Shakespeare, it is evident that people's pursuit of justice and the obligations imposed on them, though partly echoing our modern world, were deeply shaped by the religious, social, and political contexts of the time. Law functioned as a vehicle for preserving the order of a specific society.

⁴ Mark Fortier. *Shakespeare's Law*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022: 22.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004: 78-79.

⁶ Jonathan Bate. *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*. Random House Publishing Group, 2009: 151.

⁷ Bate, *Soul*, 166.

Many scholars identify Shakespeare's neutrality in the law and discuss what Shakespeare does with the law. Mark Fortier, in his influential work *Shakespeare's Law*, surveys the law in Shakespeare's time in detail, and in a case study of *The Merchant of Venice* gives a brilliant example of how to use a modern legal perspective to criticise the loopholes in the law in Shakespeare's play to reveal how unprofessional the law is in Shakespeare's Venice, where, for example, discretion is used when it should not be used, and cannot be used when it is critical to use it. Carolyn Sale, discussing judgement in *Measure for Measure*, argues that theatre is an open space inviting the legal imagination to raise doubts and engage in a non-coercive discourse that resists retributive justice and fosters other legal possibilities.⁸ Paul Raffield examines the development of English common law through five of Shakespeare's plays in his *The Art of Law in Shakespeare*, arguing that the arts of law and drama imitated each other in Shakespeare's time.⁹ In *Shakespeare's Imaginary Constitution*, Raffield investigates the poetic imagination in judiciary procedure and its influence in shaping constitution through six Shakespeare plays.¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum, in her seminal work *Poetic Justice*, advocates for literature's function in enlightening law.¹¹ In *Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England*, Holger Schott Syme draws a terribly neutral conclusion in his study of *The Winter's Tale*: that indirect forms of narration, such as testimony, are more reliable than Leontes's own eyewitness experience, underscoring the importance of procedural justice.¹²

The abundance of legal terminology in Shakespeare's works might suggest that he had legal training, but Shakespeare did not need to have been a lawyer to engage deeply with the law. Shakespeare's personal experience in dealing with the law, his broad and indiscriminate reading habits, and the opportunity to communicate with lawyers, all provide enough exposure to law and the legal system of his day. After all, the stereotypical law student at the Inns of Court had a reputation for preferring Shakespeare's plays to studying law.¹³ Amongst the intellectuals in Shakespeare's time, the

⁸ Carolyn Sale. "'Practis[Ing] Judgment with the Disposition of Natures': *Measure for Measure*, the 'Discursive' Common Law, and the 'Open Court' of the Theater." *Shakespeare and Judgement*. Edited by Kevin Curran, Edinburgh University Press, 2017: 135.

⁹ Paul Raffield. *The Art of Law in Shakespeare*. Hart Publishing Ltd, 2017: 9.

¹⁰ Paul Raffield. *Shakespeare's Imaginary Constitution Late-Elizabethan Politics and the Theatre of Law*. Hart Publishing, 2010.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Beacon Press, 1997.

¹² Holger Schott Syme. *Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England: A Culture of Mediation*. Cambridge University Press, 2011: 223-25.

¹³ W.R. Prest. *The Inns of Court under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts: 1590-1640*. Cambridge University Press, 2023: 178.

laws' justice was constantly being cross-examined, so Shakespeare, even indirectly, would have been exposed to legal debates. As Jordan and Cunningham note, Shakespeare's contemporaries challenged the established law using a non-scripted "natural law" — moral or natural principles not written into formal legal codes but believed to exist universally. Christopher St. Germain, for example, argued that positive law was subordinate to natural and eternal (divine) law; Sir Thomas Smith thought that sovereignty resided not in the king, but in Parliament. England's James I not surprisingly thought otherwise, and his *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) offered proof.¹⁴ Even if Shakespeare was not fully aware of contemporary legal debate, he is acknowledged as having had a sustained habit of reflecting critically on the central concerns of human society, and these concerns included the issues of legal authority and justice. Beyond invoking larger ideas of justice and order, the law in Shakespeare's own time gives the impression of elaborate formalism, rigid procedure, and indecipherable language embedded in documents that demanded signatures before comprehension.

Rather than focus exclusively on the specifics of Elizabethan law, however, I am interested in the way Shakespeare's ideas interact with the broader history of legal thought. Shakespeare's thoughts on the law resonate with key legal debate from Aristotle to Hobbes, and from Jeremy Bentham to 21st-century legal scholars. My concerns include whether legislation and legal procedures ensure individual justice, and how individual justice might relate to the preservation of social order, since the law, by its very nature, is designed to uphold order. This chapter puts Shakespeare's work in conversation with key themes in legal philosophy to show how he transcends the social, political, and religious constraints of his own time. Through his neutrality, Shakespeare can be seen to reflect on legal issues with a timeless, almost modern sensibility.

The twentieth-century English judge, Lord Denning, articulates the tension at the heart of any system of law: "The law as I see it has two great objects: to preserve order and to do justice; and the two do not always coincide. . . . The right solution lies in keeping the proper balance between the two".¹⁵ Aristotle's influential virtual equation theory, or distributive justice, proposes that justice means giving each person their due, based on merit or need. In short, he argues that justice consists in treating equals equally and "unequals" unequally, in proportion to their respective inequality. Since Aristotle does not think slaves and women have equal rights with Greek male citizens, his distributive justice

¹⁴ Constance Jordan and Karen Cunningham. "English Law in Shakespeare's Plays." *The Law in Shakespeare*. Edited by Constance Jordan and Karen Cunningham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015: 5.

¹⁵ Raymond Wacks. *Law: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2023: 22.

lacks any notion of universal human rights. Hobbes states that social order should be above individual justice, and is now regarded as authoritarian.¹⁶ Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism theory proposes his notorious "felicific calculus", meaning to sacrifice the small group's happiness for the happiness of the greater good. John Rawls, in opposition to Bentham's indifference to the interests of the small group, advocates the idea of the veil of ignorance to ensure fairness, a thought experiment in which decision-makers are asked to be unaware of their own place in society. From the above ideas, we can trace differing and evolving perspectives on law and justice, as well as on the relationship between individual justice and social order. Shakespeare, in his works, also reflects these ideas.

To create a universe of law, Shakespeare must first establish laws — that is, enact legislation. He then introduces legal authorities such as lawyers and judges to interpret these laws. Characters' interpretation of law, which falls within the domain of the judiciary, can vary: some follow a literal approach, others a purposive approach, even the mischief rule. In addition to legislation and interpretation, Shakespeare also depicts the way laws are enforced. Law enforcement is carried out by figures such as constables, watchmen, justices of the peace, sheriffs, and jailers, who operate under the supervision of higher authorities — lords, dukes, kings, and other rulers. In this regard, I divide the chapter into two parts: legislation and procedure.

In this first section, I explore how Shakespeare interrogates the purpose of legislation through a 'purposive' approach — that is, one which enquires into the purpose of any legislation. He creates inappropriate or wrong-headed laws to drive his plots forward, as in *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. He also intentionally enacts legislation that is patently unfair to certain stakeholders in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*. The rigidity of a law can violate or even undermine the purpose that law, as in *Measure for Measure* and Jack Cade's case in *Henry VI*. At times, bending the law in service of its true spirit — where the interpretation of the law subdues the purpose of law, but ultimately serves justice — is exemplified in *Henry IV*. Across his legal universe, Shakespeare demonstrates a keen awareness of legislative flaws, showing how laws can produce unfair outcomes for certain groups or events, while at the same time acknowledging that complete fairness is often unattainable in social reality.

In the second section, I will explore the concept of procedural justice and examine the way Shakespeare critiques the role of procedure in law enforcement and its impact on justice. In *Much Ado*

¹⁶ Wacks, *Law*, 21.

About Nothing, good legal characters like Dogberry enforce the law correctly despite their poor management of procedure. In *The Merchant of Venice*, individuals with bad intentions, but proper procedural knowledge, manipulate the law to their own advantage. *Measure for Measure* presents three characters — the Duke, Isabella, and Angelo — all of whom defer legal procedure to avoid accountability and manipulate legal procedure for personal gain. Falstaff in *Henry IV* manipulates procedural loopholes in his recruitment campaign for the civil wars, and while the Justice chooses to bypass formalities in order to address Falstaff directly in the street, the result is not as effective as in the court. In Shakespeare's tragedies, such as *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Titus Andronicus*, immediate killings bypass all legal procedure and illustrate the brutal abuse of power. The relative importance of procedural justice, on the one hand, and the obviation of procedure, on the other, are in a delicate balance. Sometimes, procedure can be a waste of time, while at other times it is crucial for fairness. Good leaders, even with poor management of procedure, can enforce the law correctly. Conversely, bad individuals with proper procedural knowledge can abuse the system for personal gain. When both the individuals and the procedure are flawed, the result is tyranny, as seen in the brutal misuse and abuse of power. Shakespeare, through his neutrality, shows a humanist's concern that procedural justice, while fundamental to social order, is only invoked as a necessary safeguard of fairness and individual rights.

Section 1: Legislation

The method I will use to explore Shakespeare and the law in this section is the purposive approach, a form of legal interpretation that focuses on understanding the intended purpose or underlying aim of a law, rather than on adhering rigidly to its literal wording. It is especially useful in situations where the language of the law is too abstract, and a literal reading might lead to unjust outcomes. In such cases, a more liberal interpretation can help uphold the justice inherent in the law. The purposive approach is widely practised; courts in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the European Union all employ it. For instance, under the European Communities Act of 1972, courts are required to adopt a purposive approach when interpreting legislation that implements European Community (EC) law, as EC legislation often operates at a high level of abstraction.¹⁷ There is a common psychological tendency to assume that the law is inherently right, rather than to question whether it was created unjustly.

¹⁷ Wacks, *Law*, 30.

Shakespeare takes advantage of this psychological tendency to create tensions in his plays. Many characters unquestioningly obey laws, however unjust, because they are not in the habit of scrutinising their purposes. Often, obedience to unjust laws stems not from respect, but from a sense of helplessness: once punished, there is no remedy. In this way, law can seem like fate — cruel, arbitrary, incontestable, and irreversible.

If we examine the laws in Shakespeare's plays from a purposive perspective, it becomes clear that Shakespeare often sees their original legislative intention as compromised or unjust, due to conflicts between the social order and an individual's rights in the context of international relations, civic strife, or religious conflict. In all cases, the injustice lies in sacrificing the individual's rights for the sake of the social order. For example, in *The Comedy of Errors*, the law dealing with cross-border conflict punishes innocent individuals, and in *Measure for Measure*, harsh criminal penalties are used for civil transgressions. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality reflects the social reality of individuals rarely succeeding in their fight with unjust laws. Some laws are unjust simply because their legislative intentions no longer suit the society to which they are applied. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Theseus's decree for the duel invokes Mars's rule but ignores Venus's rule. In *Julius Caesar*, for a society in political transition, neither republican law nor imperial law proves fully adequate. In *Henry VI, Part 2*, the chaos created by Jack Cade shows how laws crafted with inconsiderate intentions fail to support the regime they are designed to support. Legislative intent may also benefit one group while discriminating against another. The judgment of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* reflects this kind of exclusionary bias. In *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*, mercy becomes a site of religious-legal conflict. In *Hamlet*, religious doctrine constrains revenge — Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius during prayer, fearing he would send a penitent sinner to heaven. Shakespeare's neutrality portrays law's precarious existence within conflicting imperatives: international strife, regime instability, religious difference, social disorder, and individual suffering.

How Shakespeare's judges and lawyers employ the purposive approach to interpreting laws is also significant. The natural authority of law is manifested in its very form: its mere existence can deter people — as when Antony makes use of Julius Caesar's will — or provoke instinctive hatred, as seen in Jack Cade's burning of legal documents. Whether characters succeed often depends on how effectively they exploit or reject the form of law to serve their own purposes. In *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Henry IV, Part 2*, Shakespeare depicts unjust legal authorities exploiting unjust laws for unjust ends, and just legal authorities manipulating just laws to achieve just outcomes,

counterintuitive reversals that underscore Shakespeare's neutrality and humanistic perspective in the interpretation of the law: laws can only be just when interpreted by just legal authorities.

The Comedy of Errors

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare looks at the way rigid, literal laws in times of international conflict can threaten the right to life of individuals. A control group of two pairs of twins, who share identical faces but have different social experiences, allows the effects of terrible neutrality to generate particularly interesting reflections.¹⁸ The play opens with the Duke Solinus of Ephesus's unyielding refusal to spare the life of Aegeon, a merchant from the recently hostile state of Syracuse: "Merchant of Syracuse, plead no more; / I am not partial to infringe our laws" (I.i.3–4). Because Aegeon is a citizen in Syracuse, he faces execution simply for entering Ephesus, unless he can pay a ransom of one thousand marks within a day. Even after the Duke learns that Aegeon was unaware of the conflict between his homeland and Ephesus and pities Aegeon's misfortune, he maintains the sentence—reluctantly, but firmly:

DUKE Now, trust me, were it not against our laws,
Against my crown, my oath, my dignity . . .
Beg thou, or borrow, to make up the sum,
And live: if not, then thou art doomed to die.

(*Err.* I.i.142–154)

The purpose of establishing this rigid and impersonal law regards the law as a tool of political retaliation — punishing Syracusan citizens in response to national offences — while disregarding the rights and circumstances of individuals. Aegeon's life becomes collateral damage in a game of state-level diplomacy and vengeance. In her 2004 New Cambridge Introduction to *Comedy of Errors*, Ros King notes that the legal system in Ephesus lacks any avenue for equitable appeal and depends entirely on Duke Solinus's discretion to grant mercy. Recent British productions of the play have frequently portrayed Solinus as a dictator, with many casting him with an African identity.¹⁹

¹⁸ Plautus's *Menaechmi* has often been identified as the source material for Shakespeare's twins plot, and it features only a single pair of twins. Additionally, the scene of slave twins conversing inside and outside a door in Plautus's *Amphitruo* may have provided Shakespeare with inspiration. However, only this particular moment is directly borrowed. See Ros King, in her introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*. William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*. Edited by Ros King and T.S. Dorsch, Cambridge University Press, 2004: 5. Shakespeare invented the rest of the slave twins plot developments himself. These original additions are closely intertwined with the subsequent contract-related events in the play.

¹⁹ King and Dorsch (eds), *The Comedy of Errors*, 19.

Interpreting the Duke as a dark-skinned authoritarian ruler is questionable, as it implies that the law of Ephesus does not originate from a “civilised” Western tradition, but rather from what were seen as “barbaric” cultures, represented by figures such as Cleopatra, Othello, or Antioch in *Pericles*. According to this reading, it becomes natural that such laws would be more despotic, because they are a feature of the “East”. However, I do not believe Shakespeare’s intention was to demonise Ephesus or to geo-politicise the law. In fact, it is Syracuse that first creates rigorous statutes to arrest merchants from Ephesus, sentencing them to death if they fail to pay the required ransom. The Duke of Ephesus is simply mirroring this law, using the same measure in return. This “eye for an eye” logic is rooted in the Old Testament, while the idea of treating the unequal unequally derives from Aristotle, as discussed in the introduction of this chapter — together reflecting the Hellenic and Hebrew traditions that constitute foundational sources of Western civilization.

Geographically, although Syracuse lies in modern-day Italy and Ephesus on the western coast of present-day Turkey, in the ancient Greek world around 500 BC, Ephesus belonged to the East Greek territories and was in political conflict with Syracuse. In other Shakespearean plays, Ephesus continues to appear as part of the Hellenistic cultural world. It is where Othello’s tragedy unfolds; where, in the ancient-Greek-themed *Pericles*, the protagonist Pericles finds his long-lost wife serving as a priestess in the temple of Diana — like Aegeon’s wife in *The Comedy of Errors*, who also becomes an abbess. This suggests that Shakespeare consistently regarded Ephesus as part of the Greco-Roman, and thus Western, world. The Duke’s legal system in Shakespeare’s imagination, therefore, is fictional, but western. The law itself also exposes the tendency within the western legal tradition to prioritise social order over individual rights. The purpose of this harsh lawmaking is unrelated to any imagined “bad race” or geographic differences; rather, it concerns political retaliation within the same Western polity.

The Duke’s insistence on a rigid law, however, changes at the end of the play. Shakespeare’s neutrality directs this sudden change, but makes the seemingly absurd turn both logical and appealing:

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHEBUS These ducats pawn I for my father here.

DUKE It shall not need. Thy father hath his life.

(*Err.* V.i.390-91)

He spares Aegeon’s life without requiring ransom and does not even acknowledge that Antipholus of Syracuse, as a citizen of Syracuse, has committed the same “crime” as his father. This supports Ros King’s interpretation of Ephesus’s legal system: the law is both harsh and entirely subject to the Duke’s

discretion. Having initially insisted that the law was immutable, the Duke overlooks it later — a critical turning point prompted by the true purpose of legislation and the question of whether or not it is just to prioritise social order over the right to life. The Duke’s doubts about the rigidity of the law begin as early as his decision to allow Aegeon to tell his story and defend himself. Although the Duke does not revoke Aegeon’s death sentence, he grants a delay in execution to give Aegeon time to gather the ransom.²⁰ While the scholars mentioned in this section may differ in their opinions of the Duke, they agree on his humanitarian approach to bending a strict legal system.

Two things motivate the Duke to reverse his position and override the law: his emotional engagement with Aegeon’s story and his recognition of Antipholus of Ephesus’s loyal service. Aegeon “mount(s) one of the most skilfully crafted oratories in the canon”.²¹ Like the sultan in *One Thousand and One Nights*, the Duke is moved by narrative; Aegeon’s storytelling enables the Duke to see, not an abstract political enemy, but a living, suffering human being. When he later discovers that Aegeon is the father of his loyal subject — Antipholus of Ephesus, who has fought in the Duke’s wars and whose marriage to Adriana the Duke himself arranged (V.i.161–62) — his perception shifts further. Shakespeare thus allows humane sentiment to soften the rigidity of legal authority. One might even imagine that, were there a sequel, the Duke would begin to reflect more critically on the inflexibility of his own law.

Although the Duke’s view of the law becomes humanised over the course of the play, he is not a central character. The main characters — Antipholus of Ephesus, Antipholus of Syracuse, and their father Aegeon — benefit more directly from the contract-based legal system in Ephesus. Their troubles stem less from legal injustice than from a loss of purpose. Both Aegeon and Antipholus of Syracuse set out in search of their lost family, but Antipholus soon forgets his aim. He grows melancholic and disoriented:

ANTIPHOLUS OF SYRACUSE I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop,
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.
So I, to find a mother and a brother,
In quest of them, unhappier, lose myself.

(Err. I.ii.35-40)

²⁰ Eric Heinze. “‘Were It Not against Our Laws’: Oppression and Resistance in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*.” *Legal Studies (Society of Legal Scholars)*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2009: 247.

²¹ Heinze, “Oppression and Resistance in Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*”, 244.

The speech betrays spiritual and emotional incompleteness, hopelessness, self-doubt, loss of one's identity.²² Antipholus of Syracuse delivers the “drop of water” speech in Act 1, Scene 3, and shortly afterwards Adriana, the wife of Antipholus of Ephesus, addresses Antipholus of Syracuse with a remarkably similar image. Although she is, strictly speaking, in error and speaking to her brother-in-law rather than to her husband, the curative force of the speech nonetheless reaches the *right* person:

ADRIANA A drop of water in the breaking gulf,
And take unmingled thence that drop again,
Without addition or diminishing,
As take from me thyself, and not me too.

(*Err.* II.ii.125–29)

In this moment, Adriana's words articulate precisely what Antipholus of Syracuse lacks. Yet he is too disoriented to recognise the parallel with his earlier speech, in which he figures himself as a solitary drop of water, searching in vain for its counterpart in his lost family. What Adriana advocates instead is a different logic: that he should *minge* with the ocean, opening his eyes to a world that can absorb and sustain him rather than isolate him. When the pull of love is insufficient, the law emerges as a coercive force that attempts to bind what affection alone cannot hold together. Despite the existence of various signs indicating the presence of his twin, Antipholus of Syracuse fails to recognise them and even attempts to flee what he believes are encounters with sorcerers (4.3.11) — a course of action interrupted only by officers arresting him for his brother's debt.

Aegeon, too, appears to have lost sight of his goal. The play opens with his desire for death: “Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall, /And by the doom of death end woes and all” (I.i.1-2). This is not the attitude of a man actively seeking reunion with his family. Andrew Zurcher notes Aegeon's pessimistic fatalism and argues that it reflects the comic genre's emphasis on social performance, echoing contemporary legal debates about the nature and regulation of promises. Such debates, Zurcher suggests, enrich the play's exploration of selfhood, trust, and credit.²³ The contract-based legal framework provides the procedural conditions that allow Aegeon's life to be spared, and it compels the sons to move beyond distractions to reclaim both their memory and their original intent. In doing so, they rediscover their lost family — and, along with it, their selfhood, trust, and social identity. Thus,

²² Charles Whitworth, in his introduction to *The Comedy of Errors*. William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Comedy of Errors*. edited by Charles Whitworth, Oxford University Press, 2002: 51.

²³ Andrew Zurcher. “Consideration, Contract, and the End of the *Comedy of Errors*.” *Law and Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007: 162-63.

the unjust and just laws in *The Comedy of Errors* do more than resolve confusion, they enable a restoration of love and humanity at the heart of the comic resolution.

The Two Noble Kinsmen

Although *The Two Noble Kinsmen* was co-authored by Shakespeare and Fletcher, the character of Theseus remains consistent with his portrayal in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In both plays, Theseus occupies the highest position of authority, yet his laws prove ineffective. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he threatens Hermia with a harsh ultimatum: if she refuses to marry Demetrius, she is condemned "Either to die the death, or to abjure /For ever the society of men" (I.i.65–66). Valerie Voigt argues that this decree constructs celibacy, not as a noble choice to be celebrated, but as a punishment to be endured.²⁴ Theseus's decision that Emilia should marry one of her two suitors in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* reflects a similar assertion of patriarchal authority. However, just as Hermia escapes Theseus's sentence by fleeing Athens with her lover, Lysander, thus removing herself from the reach of Athenian law, and just as his sentence is annulled by Demetrius's change of mind, so is his authority again unsettled in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The most striking legal decision in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is Theseus's decree that the two cousins, Palamon and Arcite, must settle their rivalry for Emilia through a duel: the victor will marry Emilia, while the loser will forfeit his life. However, in a twist of fate, Arcite wins the duel but dies in an accident, and Palamon, though defeated, finally marries Emilia. Theseus's purpose in making the law is to assert his power. The final outcome is not determined by Theseus, Duke of Athens, but by the choice of god to whom each of the two men prays. Arcite appeals to Mars, who grants him victory; Palamon prays to Venus, who ensures he wins Emilia's love.

The third person involved after the duel is Emilia. Laurie J. Shannon notes that Emilia's marriage is planned, or forced, by Theseus, but Theseus's unreasonable rule is contested by Emilia's chastity and a degree of autonomy in love.²⁵ Emilia is aided by Diana, the goddess she prays to, and Venus, the goddess Palamon prays to. The gods' intervention reveals the limitations of human justice and the absurdity of reducing life and love to a contest of strength and chance. Shakespeare seems to

²⁴ Valerie Voight. "I Am Not against Your Faith yet I Continue Mine: Virginal Vocation in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 55, no. 2/3, 2021: 317.

²⁵ Laurie J. Shannon. "Emilia's Argument: Friendship and 'Human Title' in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*." *ELH*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1997: 676.

question the Duke's authority by introducing an anachronistic legal principle, in which Theseus imposes a medieval-style trial-by-combat in a supposedly ancient Greek setting. He decrees:

THESEUS By fair and knightly strength to touch the pillar,
He shall enjoy her, the other lose his head
And all his friends, nor shall he grudge to fall
Nor think he dies with interest in this lady.
Will this content ye?

(*TNK* III.vi.297-301)

Shakespeare often expresses scepticism about the justice of duels. In *Henry VI, Part 2*, the trial by combat between Thomas Horner and Peter is deeply flawed, the outcome depending less on truth than on manipulation and physical strength. In *Twelfth Night*, duels arise from mischief, and anyone can be dragged into them without reason or real cause. In *Richard II*, the king interrupts a formal duel, declaring that both parties are guilty and that letting only one be punished would undermine the fairness of his rule. Because *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is adapted from Chaucer, it is essentially an early modern recreation of a medieval story. Theseus's reliance on duelling as a legal solution recalls the medieval notion of *Judicium Dei* ("judgment of God"), in which the one Christian God supposedly determined the winner and thereby the just party. It is not Shakespeare and Fletcher, but Chaucer who displaces this medieval legal concept into an ancient Greek setting, where it no longer fits. Felix Sprang compares the way the gods manipulate the duel in Chaucer to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and discovers that, in the medieval world Shakespeare and Fletcher depict, people seem powerless despite believing they are in control. Their additions to Chaucer's tale highlight a fatalistic view, offering no reasons for the events that unfold.²⁶ Shakespeare and Fletcher make it most feelingly that Theseus's medieval law is powerless before the law of the Greek gods. The belief that justice is determined by martial prowess — the way of Mars — proves incompatible with the values of love and emotional truth represented by Venus. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a law from one era (the medieval period) ceases to function coherently when transplanted into another (ancient Greece). Through this, Shakespeare critiques both the brutality of such laws and the illusion that divine justice can ever be revealed through violence.

²⁶ Felix C. H. Sprang. "Never Fortune Did Play a Subtler Game: The Creation of 'Medieval' Narratives in *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*." *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2011: 121.

Julius Caesar

If anachronistic law fails in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, it functions effectively in *Julius Caesar*. The culmination of this anachronism lies in the way the laws of republicanism and empire perfectly counterbalance each other in the figures of Caesar and Antony during this transitional era. As discussed in the chapter on politics, Caesar's triumph is to create an empire in the guise of a republic: he flatters the crowd, theatrically refusing the crown offered by Antony and cultivating a personal cult through public humility. A republican façade with an imperial core — this is the key to Caesar's popular appeal.

The important legal dispute of *Julius Caesar* centres on whether or not Brutus's assassination of Caesar is legal. However, Brutus does not occupy a position of justice: his killing of Caesar is fundamentally self-interested, rather than principled. Brutus is resorting to a legal euphemism to disguise the severity of his act and his own culpability.²⁷ It is against this backdrop that we can more precisely ask what kind of “law” it is that Brutus claims to enact. Carlo Pelloso argues that, under Roman republican law, it was legal for Brutus to kill Caesar — and that Shakespeare shares this view. According to Pelloso, in Brutus's speech, “Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods” (174) and “We shall be called purgers, not murderers” (180), Shakespeare demonstrates a clear understanding of Rome's legal-religious framework. Within this framework, Caesar is presented as a *homo sacer*: one who, by offending the gods or the civic order, loses legal protection and becomes subject to divine ownership. Killing a *homo sacer* was not considered a crime, since such a person's life no longer belonged to human law, but to the gods. Thus, Brutus and the conspirators tell themselves that they are not murderers, but as agents of divine justice (*longa manus*).²⁸ Tracing Caesar's historical actions, Pelloso shows how he systematically dismantled republican principles through legal mechanisms. After crossing the Rubicon in 49 BC and subordinating law to military force, Caesar accumulated power through successive dictatorships, beyond the traditional limits, culminating in his assumption of the title *dictator perpetuus* in 45 BC, which concentrated civil, military, and religious authority in his person and effectively ended the Republic.²⁹ At the same time, Pelloso acknowledges that Shakespeare

²⁷ William Christie. ““What's in a Name?": Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in a Post-Truth World.” *The Better Strangers Series*, 2017.

²⁸ Carlo Pelloso. “Are the Conspirators Purgers or Murderers? Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Roman Ius Sacrum.” *As You Law It - Negotiating Shakespeare*. Edited by Daniela Carpi and François Ost, vol. 15, De Gruyter, 2018: 213.

²⁹ Pelloso, “Are the Conspirators Purgers or Murderers?”, 213-18.

recognises the contingency of history: the republican ideal embodied by Brutus and Cassius, and the Caesarean counterforce, would be reconciled in the Augustan synthesis.³⁰

However, I believe that while Pelloso correctly identifies the law Brutus appeals to as republican in origin, he overlooks a more fundamental problem. By the time of the assassination, Caesar had not only begun to alter the *political* order, but to accommodate and legitimise his emerging dictatorship he had also started reshaping the *legal* order. If we adopt a purposive approach and reason backward from consequence to cause, it becomes difficult to maintain that Rome's legal and political reality remained solely republican in any meaningful sense. The maturity of the dictatorship had rendered republican law no longer exclusively operative, even if it continued to function rhetorically. In this context, Brutus's appeal to republican legality alone cannot ground his act in law, since within the coexisting legal order of dictatorship or empire, the killing of the dictator is unequivocally illegal.

In "Romans, Countrymen, and Lovers", Martha Nussbaum argues that law in *Julius Caesar* represents the ideal of republicanism and the strict rationality embodied by Brutus.³¹ In contrast, its opposing force is passion, personal loyalty, and charismatic leadership, represented by Antony. The people side with Antony, betraying their preference for passion and charisma. Textually, Nussbaum misinterprets Brutus, because Brutus also has passion and charismatic leadership, which are delivered through his strict rationality and high noble mien. Brutus's intention to inflame the mass is no less than Antony. Nussbaum has subtly redefined the concept of "law" to fit her argument. She assumes republicanism is inherently good and monarchy inherently bad, so only republican law qualifies as true law. Even a benign monarch, in her view, reduces people to slaves. This framework fails to assess the complexities of the transitional period neutrally depicted in the play and overlooks how the nature of law itself might evolve in response to shifting social and political contexts. The contingent nature of the law is easily overlooked. As Wacks says, the social, political, moral, and economic dimensions of the law are essential to a proper understanding of its workaday operation. This is especially true in times of change. It is important to recognise the fragility of formalism; we skate on dangerously thin ice when we neglect the contingent nature of the law and its values.³²

³⁰ Pelloso, "Are the Conspirators Purgers or Murderers?", 224.

³¹ Martha Nussbaum. "Romans, Countrymen, and Lovers." *Shakespeare and the Law: A Conversation among Disciplines and Professions*. Edited by Bradin Cormack et al., University of Chicago Press, 2013.

³² Wacks, *Law*, 2.

Antony, on the other hand, exploits the duality of law's republican and imperial features when he invokes Caesar's will, a legal document that blurs the distinction between "legality" and "republicanism" for the people. He uses republican means — an emotional, populist speech — to stir the crowd, only to redirect that energy toward expelling Brutus and his fellow republicans. Lisa M. Barksdale-Shaw argues that Caesar's will serves as a crucial legal tool promising economic benefits to all Roman citizens in the name of social justice, while at the same time diverting attention from the accusations of tyranny against Caesar and revealing the self-serving ambitions of "Noble, noble Cassius" and Brutus.³³ Barksdale-Shaw regards Brutus and Cassius as hypocrites, just as Antony portrays them.

This is not entirely accurate, however. It is true that Caesar bequeaths money, property, and land to every Roman citizen, and it is also true that his will outlines a path toward social justice. Caesar's purpose of writing the will is to impress people as a dictator, not a republican leader. Caesar was a dictator for life and he did indeed undermine the spirit of the republic, and Shakespeare faithfully portrays it in his play. In this regard, Brutus and Cassius are not wrong in labelling him as "ambitious". What Barksdale-Shaw overlooks is that, like Nussbaum, she equates the centralisation of power with tyranny. She fails to acknowledge that a ruler who consolidates power can still serve his country and promote social justice for his people. She falls into the legalistic trap laid by Antony: the assumption that a will with legal validity automatically proves Caesar's support for republican ideals. It is an easy trap to fall into: the idea that anything legally binding must be morally right. Caesar's bloody corpse combines with his legal bequest to form a ritual that traps almost every citizen in the play.³⁴ In this case, republicanism is seen as the absolute good, so legal formality is automatically equated with republican virtue. By speaking as a man of the people and then manipulating them into rejecting republican ideals, Antony reveals how, through a legal document, republican rhetoric can be turned to imperial ends.

The formality of law, as embodied in Caesar's will, both awes and influences the Roman crowd in *Julius Caesar*, though it is manipulated by Antony for his own political ends. By contrast, in the *Henry IV* plays, the Chief Justice has good intentions, but fails to harness the law's performative setting

³³ Lisa M. Barksdale-Shaw. "'Did Not Great Julius Bleed for Justice' Sake?": Examining a Theory of Social Justice through Will-Making in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*." *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, vol. 33, 2020: 75.

³⁴ More about how the will acts as a legal document in the speech scene, see Thomas P. Anderson. "The Embodied Will in *Julius Caesar*." *Shakespeare's Fugitive Politics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2016:12-18. And Gary Wills. *Rome and Rhetoric: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. Yale University Press, 2011:79-112.

— the courtroom — to restrain Falstaff effectively. Though he frequently attempts to assert authority over Falstaff, he is consistently outwitted. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Falstaff tells Hal that an old lord of the Council reprimanded him in the street. Though the man spoke wisely, Falstaff admits he ignored him:

FALSTAFF An old lord of the Council rated me the other day in the street about you, sir, but I marked him not, and yet he talked very wisely, but I regarded him not, and yet he talked wisely – and in the street too.

PRINCE Thou didst well, for wisdom cries out in the streets and no man regards it.

(1H4 I.ii.66–71)

Since in Part 2, the Chief Justice will address Falstaff in the street, it is likely that this “old lord of the Council” refers to him. Hal’s remark points to a deeper truth: wisdom must be delivered in the right setting to be effective. The street, associated with disorder and irreverence, cannot sustain the authority of law. This is confirmed in *Part 2*, where Falstaff again ignores the Chief Justice in public. Deprived of the courtroom’s institutional weight, even a judge’s wisdom goes unheeded. Shakespeare’s neutrality presents two contrasting situations: in *Julius Caesar*, the law is misused for manipulation; in *Henry IV, Part 1*, the law goes unused, and thus becomes ineffective.

Henry VI, PART 2

The law’s form is not always respected, and some of Shakespeare characters hate it. In *Henry VI, Part 2*, Act 4, scene 7, after Jack Cade’s rebellion succeeds, the first action Cade does is to pull down the Savoy Palace, one of the richest noble houses in London, and the Inns of Court, where England’s lawyers get trained. The second thing he does is to “burn all the records” (12) of England. In Jack Cade’s speech, which has become iconic, he gives his reasons for ordering Lord Say’s execution, treating Say as a representative of the class of power, knowledge, and law:

CADE Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school: and whereas, before, our forefathers had no other books but the score and the tally, thou hast caused printing to be used, and, contrary to the king, his crown and dignity, thou hast built a paper-mill. It will be proved to thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear. Thou hast appointed justices of peace, to call poor men before them about matters they were not able to answer. Moreover, thou hast put them in prison, and because they could not read thou hast hanged them, when, indeed, only for that cause they have been most worthy to live.

(2H6 IV.vii.30-43)

In Cade’s rhetoric, the grammar school, books, printing technology, even language itself, are all treated as crimes. The office of justice of the peace is portrayed as a position designed to oppress the poor

through the weapon of knowledge. Cade argues that illiterate men were wrongfully imprisoned and executed, because their inability to read was regarded as guilt. In his view, knowledge is the origin of all evil, and the law represents its most extreme form. After Say defends himself, Cade is visibly moved, nevertheless he immediately resolves to have Say executed, precisely because he “pleaded so well for his life”(IV.vii.101–02). The word *plead*, drawn from legal vocabulary, emphasises that Say’s greatest crime, in Cade’s eyes, is his lawyer-like ability to argue and defend himself.

Cade’s hatred of the law finds empathy in many ordinary people, including many modern-day Shakespeare scholars: the substance of the law is often buried beneath complex language, cumbersome documents, and lengthy procedures, which allow corrupted lawyers and judges to wrong the innocent. Civilians who do not understand legal processes often find themselves at a great disadvantage. Jaihong Ha and Mikyung Park argue that Cade’s hatred of law’s corruption invokes common lawyers’ advocacy of liberty in Shakespeare’s England as a reminder of the very nature of law.³⁵ Cade’s burning the legal records symbolises a yearning for a just legal order. But Cade wants to throw out the baby with the bathwater and lacks the capacity to realise such a vision. Alexander Leggatt regards Cade in his speech to Say as one of the most articulate social critics in Shakespeare. Cade’s incompetent actions, however, do not match his penetrating vision.³⁶ Due to the confusion he creates in legislation, there is a fear of losing order even within his own camp. When Dick proposes that “the laws of England” come out of the mouth of Jack Cade (IV.vii.6), abolishing all existing laws and replacing them with Cade’s word as law, both Holland and Smith immediately express concern:

HOLLAND [*aside*] Mass, ‘twill be sore law, then; for he was thrust in the mouth with a spear, and ‘tis not whole yet.

SMITH [*aside*] Nay, John, it will be stinking law; for his breath stinks with eating toasted cheese.
(2H6 IV.vii.7-10)

Holland and Smith have no faith in Cade’s ability to legislate, since Cade is merely an individual who is wounded (his mouth injured by a spear) and unstable (characterised by his indulgence in coarse food). The adjectives “sore” and “stinking” imply not only the coming of anarchy but also the beginning of internal division within Cade’s faction. As soon as Cade takes London, he begins issuing his own policies. He transforms “law’s delay” into its opposite extreme: law’s expediency. When Cade

³⁵ Jaihong Ha and Mikyung Park. “Jack Cade’s Rebellion and the Rule of Law in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*.” *Journal of English Studies in Korea*, vol. 36, 2019: 123.

³⁶ Alexander Leggatt. *Shakespeare’s Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays*. Taylor & Francis, 2005: 18.

demands to be called “Lord Mortimer”, for example, and a soldier, unaware of the new decree, arrives and addresses him as “Jack Cade”, the soldier is immediately executed.

As a law-maker, Cade’s purposes are contradictory. By calling himself “Lord Mortimer”, he appears to aspire to aristocratic status, while at the same time claiming that everything should be “common” (IV.vii.15), implying commonwealth. His demands for *jus primae noctis* (the right to sleep with virgins before their marriage) and for control over everyone’s property, however, point toward tyranny. Cade’s foolishness and brutality become even clearer when he encourages Dick to plunder the people’s goods and to abuse corpses. His absurdity is symbolised in his first ‘policy speech’: he decrees that wine should flow from the city’s public fountains — the “pissing-conduit” — for the first year of his reign, paid for at the city’s expense (IV.vi.3–4). Chris Fitter argues that all of this is merely imbecile plotting, written to pass censorship.³⁷ I disagree. The absurd behaviours follow a discernible logic: throughout world history, when victors without knowledge or institutional understanding rise to power, their rule is almost invariably marked by barbarity, brutality, and blunt, one-size-fits-all, subversive policies.³⁸ After these oppressive policies and atrocities, Cade quickly loses the support of his soldiers in a *Julius Caesar*-like scene where, like Brutus, he is outmanoeuvred by Clifford in a battle of speeches. Cade’s conception of legislation is deeply confused, for he claims the authority of a monarch, yet his popular support is rooted in republican ideals. If he were able enough, he could fulfil his ambition to be king and also get support from the people by creating the illusion of a republicanism (as Julius Caesar does). But he fails. His illiteracy results in a total abandonment of law and, without law, no lasting order is possible. The anarchy he creates can only be fleeting revelry.

³⁷ Chris Fitter. “Shakespeare, Jack Cade, and ‘Kentish Men’: England’s Earliest Working-Class Rebel-Heroes?”. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2020: 100.

³⁸ England produced almost no “successful” peasant uprisings, at least if “success” is defined as ones that achieved a transfer of institutional power or long-term political victory. China, however, witnessed one such successful peasant rebellion, unfolding much as Shakespeare seemed to anticipate. The Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), a peasant-led movement, established a relatively clear institutional power structure, and its leader Hong Xiuquan actually declared himself king and followed a revolutionary path. In this regard, it bears a certain resemblance to Shakespeare’s imagining of Jack Cade’s pursuit of power. Yet the Taiping movement simultaneously exhibited many of the typical limitations of peasant uprisings. It carried out large-scale massacres, lacked expertise and administrative knowledge in its institutional design, implemented highly simplified or arbitrary policies, and rapidly re-established a highly centralized, quasi-feudal political order even while proclaiming equality and anti-oppression ideals. This internal tension resonates closely with Shakespeare’s depiction of Cade’s rebellion (see, e.g., Fitter). As Fitter notes, historically, Cade’s uprising did not involve the killing of lawyers or the nobility, and English peasant revolts were never comparably brutal—and the massacre and imbecile scenes are Shakespeare’s own invention. I think the peasant uprisings in England were not brutal enough primarily because they were quelled before reaching such a stage. Logically, Shakespeare’s imagining of a successful peasant uprising that reaches this absurd stage therefore carries a meaningful, if speculative, reality. For more information on the Taiping Rebellion, see Thomas H. Reilly. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. University of Washington Press, 2011.

After all, the rebellion is instigated by the Duke of York, and Cade is a monster created by York, who belongs to the class who owns the power and knowledge. Cade's fleeing the speech scene because of his disappointment in his supporters' volatile nature and his death by hunger cast him as a tragic hero-villain, and the audience's empathy and pleasure in his rejection of law's formality is thus deepened. Historically, the Cade rebellion did originate in peasant's grievances and Shakespeare does indeed include many such details that show his sympathy.³⁹ Craig Bernthal argues that, with Cade, Shakespeare uses his negative capability, allowing Cade to be a rebel, but essentially unrebelling; to sin, but be redeemed; to criticise the legal system and to explore a series of contradictory pleasures and thoughts.⁴⁰ In this way, the law of Henry VI is both overturned and restored, and its form, the purpose of legislation and its relationship to politics, are all brought under close scrutiny. From the perspective of his complete works, Shakespeare consistently approaches the experiences of the lower classes with a sense of justice. From the grievances fuelling Cade's rebellion in *Henry VI* to the economic burdens borne by commoners in *Henry IV*, from the innocent messenger in early *Titus Andronicus* being used as a scapegoat by General Titus to the jailor's daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* being systematically exploited and abandoned by Palamon, Shakespeare's neutrality renders terrible the experience of the commoners, conveying a certain sympathy with their sense of helplessness in the face of social injustice.

Measure for Measure

In addition to politics, religion serves as critical lens through which to interpret the purpose of Shakespeare's legal frameworks. *Measure for Measure* is one of the two plays (another one is *The Merchant of Venice*) in which law is the most prominent theme. Shakespeare leaves much space for the characters, as well as his audience, to use a purposive method to interpret the legislation. Debora Shuger provides crucial historical evidence: no legal tradition — from the Bible to medieval law, or even the law of the most extreme Puritans of Shakespeare's own time — ever prescribed the death

³⁹ Ellen C. Caldwell compares historical details, such as government corruption and the war with France, with events in the play to demonstrate Shakespeare's sympathy for Cade, rather than the anti-populism claimed by many contemporary critics in 1990s. See Ellen C. Caldwell. "Jack Cade and Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2*." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 92, no. 1, 1995, pp. 18-79. Fitter, on the other hand, identifies further criticisms of more recent scholars who support the view of sympathy for Cade, and also compares these interpretations with historical sources.

⁴⁰ Craig A. Bernthal. "Jack Cade's Legal Carnival." *Studies in English literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2002: 274.

penalty for fornication.⁴¹ The Duke does not understand that the problems of the state are in its legislation, so instead of changing the law, he thinks it is his own obligation to enforce it, at the same time confessing that he is unable to do so in that “too dreadful” way (I.iii.35). In fact, the Duke’s law is unfair and outdated, especially in Julietta and Claudio’s case: pregnancy before marriage, even during engagement and before marriage, violates the law and the husband must be sentenced to death. While Claudio must die, the brothel goers, who constantly have illegal sex, are merely put in prison. The law seems to be just to the brothel goers, punishing them in a fair way and maintaining order in society. But in maintaining order, the law is violating Claudio’s right to life. Social order before individual rights is a legal stance that Thomas Hobbes would support, but it is now regarded as authoritarian. Shakespeare’s humanity makes possible his modernity.

Claudio’s situation in *Measure for Measure* raises serious concerns about the fairness and legitimacy of the Duke’s law. According to Claudio, it also has been nineteen years since the Duke has resorted to the harsh law (I.ii.146-49). He is like the soldier of Jack Cade who rushes in ignorant of the new law and gets executed for transgressing it. In modern legal systems, such a case would likely be seen as a violation of the principle of legal foreseeability — the idea that citizens must have a clear understanding of what the law requires and be able reasonably to anticipate its enforcement. When a law has been dormant for nearly two decades, it is no longer reasonable to expect citizens to treat it as active. Claudio’s punishment, death, is applied in a highly selective and disproportionate way, making him a victim not only of legal absolutism but of arbitrary governance. His case illustrates the way laws applied inconsistently or without warning can turn justice into cruelty, and how the legal system, when divorced from fairness and predictability, fails to protect the very citizens it claims to serve.

Isabella’s plea in *Measure for Measure* represents the conflict between law, morality, and religion. Isabella’s interpretation of the law in Act 2, Scene 2, with its deeply emotional appeal, subtly redefines the nature of justice, separating the sin from the sinner: “Let it be his fault, and not my brother” (35–36).⁴² In doing so, she encourages Angelo to adopt a purposive approach and bend the law from its rigid enforcement. It is when Angelo resists this logic that she pivots toward a more theological and ethical argument, invoking the concept of mercy. If Angelo shows mercy, no one will think it is a bad thing: “And neither heaven nor man grieve at the mercy” (51). Mercy can obviate the harm of the

⁴¹ Debora Kuller Shuger. *Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure*. Palgrave, 2001: 10-11.

⁴² R.N. Watson, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Measure for Measure: Third Series*. Edited by A.R. Braunmuller and R. N. Watson, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020: 86.

world (54). She frames mercy not as weakness, but as a divine quality, superior to the authority of kings and judges (61-64). Her rhetorical shift — from emotional to moral persuasion — demonstrates her ability to adapt and elevate the discourse, presenting mercy as a higher form of justice than rigid legality. She then compares law in the city to God’s law, regarding Angelo’s judgement as ridiculous compared to divine judgement and vainly hoping to change his thoughts. Then she criticises Angelo’s obsession with power in the eyes of God — “but man, proud man, /Dressed in a little brief authority, /Most ignorant of what he’s most assured” (121-123) — and finally moves Angelo’s stubborn heart on his absolute interpretation of law. Angelo’s admiration for Isabella’s eloquence, however, transforms into a deformed kind of desire, as discussed in the chapter on religion.

Here Isabella plays the perfect lawyer, interpreting the law as rigid and cruel, unable to accommodate to the law of heaven. Shakespeare’s insight here is remarkably prescient: Angelo, representing a kind of legal positivist, treats the law as a mere collection of absolute rules devoid of moral content. Such an approach risks creating the illusion that legality and morality are entirely separate, a problem dramatized elsewhere in Cade’s famous burning of legal documents. Morality, a concept carrying inherently noble connotations, offers an endless range of aspirational standards, whereas law, at the very least, should safeguard the basic moral foundations of society. In Wacks’ *Law*, the third chapter, titled “Law and Morality”, notes that, while people may differ about the definition of morality, there are certain laws that violate values held by the vast majority,⁴³ and the Duke’s harsh law represents such a violation. Besides Isabella’s interrogation of the morality of the law, underlying Isabella’s speech there is also a powerful tension between human law and divine justice. Inspired by religious ideals, Isabella articulates a moral vision in which the preservation of life outweighs the punishment of sin. Shakespeare’s decision to have a female character, a religious figure, expose the deficiencies of the Duke’s law elevates both religion and morality as guiding principles in the purposive methods of law.

Similarly, Hamlet’s hesitation about killing Claudius partly stems from religious concerns about the state of Claudius’s soul. “Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge” (III.iii.79) — according to Christian belief, if Claudius had confessed his sins before death, his soul would ascend to heaven, so killing him would paradoxically assist him, rather than punish him. Wilson argues that Hamlet’s delay in killing Claudius also touches on criminal law regarding capital punishment: if Hamlet kills Claudius simply because Claudius killed Old Hamlet, Hamlet himself becomes a murderer. Later, Hamlet’s

⁴³ Wacks, *Law*, 68.

worry comes true in another form: he mistakenly kills Polonius, thinking he is Claudius, and thus becomes a murderer (14–15). In delaying killing Claudius during his confession, Hamlet is first and foremost concerned about making mistakes under religious law: how to punish Claudius’s body as well as his soul. Hamlet struggles to balance earthly law and heavenly law and Claudius’s confession also throws up the challenge of how to achieve heavenly absolution without losing earthly authority.⁴⁴ Shakespeare’s terrible neutrality allows him to capture the inner conflicts of religious laws and the conflict between law and religion.

The Merchant of Venice

Measure for Measure raises a crucial question: if a law is flawed, how should a judge or a lawyer flexibly alter its application to avoid unjust rulings? From Shakespeare’s neutral standpoint, the consequences of such flexibility can be either beneficial or disastrous. The hypocrite Angelo uses his authority to twist the law for his own corrupt, personal desires. Isabella, had she been allowed to interpret the law in court like a lawyer, might have had a chance to win within the legal system. But instead, Angelo circumvents the legal process and privately proposes a morally repugnant deal. His offer is a dark parody of Isabella’s own desire for legal flexibility: if she is willing to bend, so will he. This private negotiation, if successful, has nothing to do with preserving the social order. Angelo becomes a criminal exploiting a young woman; Isabella risks either losing her chastity or becoming complicit in her brother Claudio’s death.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia applies laws flexibly in both good and bad ways. In reading the bond between Shylock and Antonio, she famously contends that a pound of flesh is only flesh, not a drop of “Christian blood” should be shed (IV.i.305-06). In modern law, such bond should not be legal, but the law in the play supports the legitimacy of the bond and Portia’s interpretation of the bond saves Antonio’s life. Portia’s intelligence does Antonio justice, but she does not do Shylock his due justice:

PORTIA	Tarry, Jew:
The law hath yet another hold on you.	
It is enacted in the laws of Venice,	
If it be proved against an alien	
That by direct or indirect attempts	
He seek the life of any citizen,	
The party ’gainst the which he doth contrive	

⁴⁴ Jennifer Flaherty. “Heaven and Earth: Confession as Performance in *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*.” *Theatre Symposium*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013: 81.

Shall seize one half his goods, the other half
Comes to the privy coffer of the state,
And the offender's life lies in the mercy
Of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice.
(*MV* IV.i.342-52)

Introducing the criminal law, Portia reveals a deep tension between the rights of citizens and the rights of foreigners. According to this law, a foreigner who threatens the life of a citizen is subject to severe punishment, a clear privileging of the citizen that blatantly violates the principle of equality before the law. Notably, Portia invokes this obscure and unjust law even though no one else mentions it, a similar situation to the premarital sex law in *Measure for Measure* not having been used for nineteen years. Her goal is not fairness; she is not a neutral legal actor. Rather, her use of legal intelligence serves a strategic purpose, which is to destroy Shylock, and her skill in manipulating the law's flexibility furthers this aim.

In his 1987 introduction to the New Cambridge *Merchant of Venice*, M. M. Mahood suggests that Portia's application of the law satisfies us: "Our normal human reaction here is again satisfaction. Shylock has got what was coming to him".⁴⁵ Mahood, who dedicates a section of the introduction to the law, focuses on how the equity of the law was highly praised in Shakespeare's time, especially the equity between citizens and foreigners in Venice. However, he overlooks the law's unfairness towards foreigners and its cruelty towards Shylock, who is forced to sacrifice his life, property, and beliefs for his attempted murder. The purpose of this criminal law is not to promote fairness and prosperity in Venetian trade. More recent studies on the law in *The Merchant of Venice*, such as Christopher Pye's analysis, argue that the criminal law invoked by Portia is tainted. The more aggressively the outsider is expelled, the more this exclusion becomes a defining characteristic of the state.⁴⁶ Before Portia enters, Shylock reminds the Duke: "If you deny it, let the danger light /Upon your charter and your city's freedom!" (IV.i.38-39). Shylock's warning appears to come true: if exclusion becomes the defining characteristic of the state, true fairness between citizens and foreigners becomes impossible. A flawed law undermines the very order of society; Portia's victory is, in fact, a loss for the entire city.

Portia's courtroom victory reflects Jeremy Bentham's legal utilitarianism, particularly his theory of the "felicific calculus," which justifies legal decisions by the greatest happiness of the greatest

⁴⁵ M.M. Mahood, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by M.M. Mahood, Cambridge University Press, 2003: 18.

⁴⁶ Christopher Pye. "Literature's Stake: Economy, Law, and Aesthetics in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2022, pp. 76-99, at 92.

number. Shylock's defeat becomes a collective celebration: Antonio's life is spared; Bassanio is relieved of his moral burden; Portia's domestic authority is elevated; the Duke and Antonio both receive a financial reward; Shylock's daughter Jessica inherits more wealth; her broke Christian husband gains more money to squander; the Christian community welcomes another convert. All of this happiness is built upon Shylock's suffering. He is stripped of his wealth, his faith, and his dignity. The minority, Shylock and the Jewish community he represents, experience no joy. Their unhappiness is precisely what enables the majority's joy, making this a textbook case of how utilitarian logic can legitimise the sacrifice of the few for the pleasure of the many.

Shakespeare's neutrality also entertains the possibility of a good outcome from bending a flawless law in *Henry IV, Part 2*. The Chief Justice is portrayed as an incorruptibly upright figure, stern even toward Prince Hal. Their tense relationship originates in *Henry IV, Part 1*, when Henry IV chastises Hal and alludes to his expulsion from the Privy Council: "Thy place in Council thou hast rudely lost" (III.ii.32). This may reference the legendary episode in which the unruly prince, after being scolded for drunken behaviour, struck the Lord Chief Justice and was consequently removed from the Council (Weil 164). By the time Hal becomes Henry V, many lords fear for the Chief Justice's fate, believing he will be punished for having previously opposed the new king. Even the Chief Justice himself expects retribution, declaring he would rather follow the deceased Henry IV than bow to the new monarch, if the new monarch proves to be a tyrant:

JUSTICE And never shall you see that I will beg
A ragged and forestalled remission.
If truth and upright innocency fail me,
I'll to the king my master that is dead
And tell him who hath sent me after him.

(2H4 V.ii.37-41)

However, in a surprising act of magnanimity, Henry V instead reappoints and honours him. Ironically, this very man — once known for his unwavering integrity — makes a legal concession for Falstaff, excusing his criminal past with an interesting justification: "your day's service at Shrewsbury hath a little gilded over your night's exploit on Gad's Hill. You may thank th'unquiet time for your quiet o'er-posting that action" (I.ii.117–120). Falstaff's robbery at Gad's Hill takes place at the beginning of *Henry IV, Part 1*, and the Chief Justice seeks to hold him accountable, pursuing the case from *Part 1* through *Part 2*. But, in a surprising turn, he spares Falstaff, justifying this decision by weighing Falstaff's valour at the Battle of Shrewsbury against his earlier crime and allowing military merit to cancel out misconduct. Penelope Geng suggests that the Chief Justice demonstrates a readiness to relax

the rigid application of legal rules in order to reach a fairer resolution. The Chief Justice's choice illustrates a type of legal equity in which a law is bent in the spirit of the law.⁴⁷ Contrary to the cases of *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*, where unjust legal authorities bend the unjust law for unjust ends, the Chief Justice adds another footnote to Shakespeare's neutral perspective on the flexibility of law: if the legal authority is just, the law is just, too, and the bending of a just law by a just legal authority satisfies the law's spirit.

In Shakespeare's legislative universe, laws are, by and large, cruelly realistic and rarely just. Injustice manifests on multiple levels: the law may fail to protect individual rights; it may provoke conflict between personal interest and the social order; it may not even succeed in safeguarding the social order itself. Shakespeare does not shy away from these contradictions—instead, he confronts the many dimensions of legal injustice. When examined through the lens of purposive interpretation, it becomes clear that the legislative intent behind many of the laws in Shakespeare's plays is deeply shaped by politics, religion, historical moment, and social conditions. As society and time move forward, laws that once held authority may become outdated or lose relevance. In the pursuit of justice, the role of legal authorities — including legislators, judges, and lawyers as interpreters of the law — is therefore critical. How they draw on the formal authority of law and how they interpret its purpose can decisively shape outcomes. Shakespeare's neutrality reveals that legal outcomes are influenced by a complex web of factors — sometimes producing contradictions — but what he emphasises most is the moral and humanistic quality of the legal authorities. For Shakespeare, the justice of the law depends on the justice of its interpreters: those who, depending on circumstance, either follow the law to the letter or bend it (using a purposive approach) in the name of equity. Angelo is a morally flawed figure, but he is right in saying the law should not just be a scarecrow for birds; Cade is a romantic figure, but it is not right to burn the laws and kill all the lawyers. Shakespeare deliberately assigns powerful legal insight to morally ambiguous or even dangerous characters, reinforcing his terrible neutrality: justice is never the property of the righteous alone, nor is error confined to villains. The law, as he shows, is a tool that can be wielded wisely or destructively, depending on who holds it and how it is interpreted.

⁴⁷ Penelope Geng. "On Judges and the Art of Judicature: Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 114, no. 1, 2017, pp. 97-123, at 113.

Section 2: Legal Procedure in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Raymond Wacks emphasises the importance of procedural justice:

Justice requires more than just laws; the process whereby justice is attained must be a fair one. This entails, first, an impartial, independent judicial system... Second, there must be a competent and independent legal profession ... Third, procedural justice is a vital ingredient of a just legal system.⁴⁸

Though the judicial system, legal profession, and procedural justice were not fully developed in Shakespeare's time, it has been a common understanding that the three elements are as important as the content of the law. Shakespeare knows the misfortune of a world without procedural justice. In the chapter on politics, there are many examples of the chaos caused by the lack of procedural justice. In *Richard III*, Richard accuses Lord Hastings of conspiring against him and, without ordering his arrest, collecting evidence, or holding a trial, has him executed on the spot. Through this act, Shakespeare underscores Richard's tyranny. Shakespeare usually depicts tyranny as the lack of procedural justice. Be it open execution or secret murder, such acts reveal a conscious defiance of lawful process — precisely because they could never survive the test of legal or ethical scrutiny. From Macbeth's orchestrated murders of Banquo and Macduff's family to Regan and Cornwall's extrajudicial torture of Gloucester, and from Titus Andronicus's revenge killing of Tamora's sons to Claudius's secret assassination of Hamlet's father and attempted murder of Hamlet — these are all acts too shameful or unlawful to survive the scrutiny of due process.

Besides exposing the dangers of tyrannical defiance of procedural justice, Shakespeare's neutrality also opens the door to another possibility: that an overemphasis on procedural justice can itself become problematic. In a society where legal literacy is limited — both among the populace and within the legal system — strict adherence to procedure may be manipulated or rendered ineffective by those in power. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the parody of judicial procedure reflects Shakespeare's scepticism toward legal formalism: when legal authorities are unable to fulfil their roles competently by following such procedures, the procedures themselves risk becoming redundant or even ridiculous. The figure in the play who draws most critical attention, second only to Beatrice and Benedick, is Dogberry.⁴⁹ Dogberry wants to speak in a legal manner and perform the procedure in a legal manner, but neither his language nor his action helps to deliver the suspect to the attention of a higher authority

⁴⁸ Wacks, *Law*, 25.

⁴⁹ F.H. Mares, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Edited by F.H. Mares, Cambridge University Press, 2003: 25.

in time. In Act 3, Scene 5 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Dogberry informs Leonato that the watch has apprehended two suspicious individuals:

DOGBERRY One word, sir—our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship.

(*MAAN* III.v.43–45)

However, Leonato, preoccupied with the upcoming wedding, postpones the examination:

LEONATO Take their examination yourself, and bring it me, I am now in great haste, as it may appear unto you.

(*MAAN* III.v.46–47)

At this point, Dogberry himself does not know what crime the two men have committed — there is no indication that he has inquired of the watchmen, nor that the watch has reported the nature of the crime to him. Common sense suggests there ought to have been some minimal communication; the absence of any such exchange marks a procedural gap. Of course, Shakespeare does not delineate the exact judicial procedures followed in *Much Ado*, but the failure to clarify the crime before reporting to Leonato appears to be a procedural oversight.

It is Leonato, not Dogberry, who is negligent of his duty. The New Cambridge editor, F. H. Mares, argues that the constable in Shakespeare's time was an unpaid, annually rotating, citizen-elected position, and constables were "proverbially witless"⁵⁰ and "notoriously tedious".⁵¹ It was common for them to be semi-literate and capable only of simple duties, such as patrolling and apprehending suspects. More complex legal functions, such as articulating charges in formal language or conducting examinations, were beyond their capacities. The constables' duty stayed similar for two hundred years. According to *The Constable's Guide* (1790), the primary duties of a constable were to maintain the peace, apprehend suspects, report them to higher authorities, and deliver them to the gaoler.⁵² The manual does not suggest that constables had the authority to conduct interrogations. This aligns with the depiction of constables in Shakespeare's plays: in *Measure for Measure*, the constable Elbow resembles Dogberry in that both can arrest suspects and deliver the suspects to higher authorities, but

⁵⁰ Mares (ed.), *Much Ado*, 235-36.

⁵¹ Mares (ed.), *Much Ado*, 253.

⁵² Anonymous, a Member of the 'Proclamation Society'. *The Constable's Guide to His Duty: Containing Instructions to Constable, Petty Constable, Headboroughs, Tithingmen, &c. In the Several Particulars of Their Office*. J. Salter, 1790. Phoebe S. Spinrad also does significant research on constables in early modern England. See Phoebe S. Spinrad. "Dogberry Hero: Shakespeare's Comic Constables in Their Communal Context." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 89, no. 2, 1992: 161.

their illiteracy and rhetorical incompetence render them unable to communicate facts effectively or conduct even the simplest investigations. It is naturally the duty of the higher authority — in the case of *Much Ado*, Leonato's duty — to conduct the examination. Through Dogberry's incompetence, Shakespeare critiques the underdeveloped nature of the legal profession in his era. Although Dogberry fails clearly to report or understand the offence, he does fulfil the basic duties of a constable by apprehending the suspects and informing his superior. When Leonato asks him to conduct the examination himself, Dogberry promptly obeys without delay or distraction — even declining to attend the wedding feast: “Go good partner, go get you to Francis Seacoal, bid him bring his pen and inkhorn to the gaol: we are now to examination these men” (III.v.54–55). This moment demonstrates Dogberry's commitment to his perceived duty, however misguided or ineptly executed.

Shakespeare engineers Dogberry unwittingly to create a scenario that stands as an opposite example to 20th-century American political philosopher John Rawls's theory of the “veil of ignorance”. In Rawls's model, justice is best achieved when decision-makers are deprived of knowledge about the perpetrator's position in society, so as to prevent bias. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, however, Dogberry withholds not the identity of the perpetrator, but the identity of the victim, from Leonato. Lacking this crucial information, Leonato cannot recognise that his daughter is implicated, and therefore chooses to prioritise the wedding over the examination of the suspects — after all, the guests are waiting for him to give his “daughter to her husband” (III.v.50–51). Shakespeare creates a moment in which any father, unaware that his own daughter is the injured party, would choose to proceed with the ceremony. Even if Dogberry had specified that the suspects had slandered a lady's reputation, it is unclear whether or not Leonato would have abandoned the wedding. Shakespeare presents a similar interruption in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, where three queens halt Theseus's wedding to demand that he go to war on their behalf first. Unlike Leonato in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Theseus knows the victims' identities and social status, which legitimises his decision. The scenario presented in *Much Ado About Nothing* reverses Rawls's logic: the decision-maker knows his own duty, but not the identity of the harmed party — thus limiting his capacity for bias, but also undermining justice.

While Dogberry's negligence of procedure indirectly (if not decisively) contributes to Hero's public disgrace at the wedding, his effort to adhere to legal procedure similarly results in disorder — albeit disorder that causes no lasting harm. Having missed the opportunity to interrogate the suspects prior to Hero's wedding in Act 3, Scene 5, Leonato consequently experiences one of the most humiliating moments of his life in Act 4, Scene 1. Only slightly later, in Act 4, Scene 2, Dogberry

conducts an examination of the detainees. This scene functions as a parody of legal inquiry: lacking professional competence and operating beyond the scope of his limited responsibilities, Dogberry fixates on procedural formalities — particularly the written record — while neglecting the actual purpose of interrogation, namely, the extraction of truth. He repeatedly instructs the Sexton to record irrelevant details, such as whether the suspects believe in God and their use of insults such as “coxcomb” and “ass” directed at the officers. Dogberry obtains no substantive information from the accused, and every meaningful advance in the case is prompted either by the Sexton or by the watchmen. Ironically, the most critical information supplied by the two watchmen who had arrested the men is not requested by Dogberry to be recorded at all. While the Sexton hurries to deliver the examination report to Leonato, Dogberry remains preoccupied with the insults hurled at him, still demanding that the record be expanded with further trivialities.

Ignoring the hindrance of his personality, the examination gives Dogberry a great opportunity to practise law. He learns how to move the examination forward despite insults to his dignity,⁵³ and, when he cannot extract information from the suspects, knows to consult the watchmen who made the arrests. Perhaps, upon later reflection, he realises that the formality of the record-taking goes too far. As he gains more experience, he will handle the process with increasing professionalism, but constables in Shakespeare’s time did not have such a well-developed judicial system to train them and help them improve. Most Dogberries did not encounter Leonatos who were able to give them repeated opportunities to gain experience.

Dogberry’s obsession is not only with following procedure in examination, but also with speaking legal language, which causes further forgivable disorder. In Act 5, Scene 1, on the way to transfer the suspects to Leonato, Dogberry bumps into Don Pedro and Claudio. Don Pedro asks what crime the two men have committed, Dogberry decides to speak to him like a legal professional:

DOGBERRY. Marry sir, they have committed false report—moreover, they have spoken untruths—secondarily, they are slanders—sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady—thirdly, they have verified unjust things—and to conclude, they are lying knaves.

(*MAAN* V.i.191-94)

⁵³ Spinrad, “Dogberry Hero”, 175.

These ordering words — “moreover,” “secondarily,” “sixth and lastly,” “thirdly,” “to conclude” — are thrown together in a jumbled sequence that ironically shows no real sense of order. Don Pedro’s mocking imitation of Dogberry’s phrasing gives Dogberry another chance to straighten out his logic:

DON PEDRO First, I ask thee what they have done—thirdly, I ask thee what's their offence—sixth and lastly, why they are committed—and to conclude, what you lay to their charge.

(*MAAN* V.i.195-97)

Dogberry tailors his speech to match the formal structure of legal language. He reduces each point to the simplest subject-verb-object sentence, without touching on the essential truth: that the men acted under Don John’s instruction to slander Hero’s chastity, which led Don Pedro and Claudio publicly to shame her at her own wedding.

This episode does not delay Hero’s vindication, however, nor does it cause further misunderstanding. Borachio confesses everything soon after and Leonato arrives immediately to demand justice for his ‘dead’ daughter. Mares remarks that “Left to himself Dogberry would never have managed it” and Dogberry is dependent on the watchmen and Borachio’s confession.⁵⁴ But even if Borachio had said nothing, Leonato was already on his way and the truth was bound to reach Don Pedro and Claudio very soon. Dogberry only needed to fulfil his basic duty as a constable — delivering the suspects — and his duty in the procedure was done, the suspects were not running away, and the truth would naturally come to light in due course. In the end, Leonato tolerates Dogberry and respects what he has contributed to the case. Even after Dogberry’s long-winded and confused remarks, he still says, “I thank thee for thy care and honest pains” (V.i.307) and offers him a reward. Shakespeare portrays Dogberry as a well-intentioned legal officer who, despite his poor procedural management, enforces the law effectively. As early as during the watch in Act 3, Scene 3, W. H. Auden argues, Dogberry has already shown his working ethic as one of good nature over efficiency.⁵⁵ In this sense, Dogberry becomes an experiment in legal practice that prioritises substantive justice over strict adherence to procedural form. Shakespeare appears concerned with a legal culture in which too few professionals are adequately trained in procedural justice, and suggests that, in such a context, procedural formality may need to yield to practical effectiveness in the pursuit of justice.

⁵⁴ Mares (ed.), *Much Ado*, 36.

⁵⁵ W.H. Auden. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Edited by A.C. Kirsch, Princeton University Press, 2019: 122.

In contrast to Dogberry's case, where well-meaning but procedurally incompetent legal staff nonetheless help restore justice, Shakespeare also presents scenes in which corrupt legal authorities exploit legal procedures for unjust ends. Unlike those tyrannical acts mentioned earlier that completely lack procedure, procedure can be manipulated with ill intention to become a tool for power, desire, or other personal interests. In *Henry VI, Part 2*, the Lord Protector relinquishes his power because his wife is accused of witchcraft, and Suffolk is exiled for murdering the Lord Protector. On the surface, everything follows proper procedure, but in essence, both men are framed by their political opponents. In *Henry VIII*, the king is a master of procedure — evidence gathering, courtroom trials, and examinations form a fixed process he uses to eliminate his political pawns who become useless. In *Coriolanus*, Coriolanus's banishment also adheres to due process: the tribunes deliver speeches and call for a popular vote. Yet exiling the only national hero capable of defending the country is hardly a just outcome. The manipulation of legal procedure is not only a major theme in modern film and television, it is also a common tactic in real life—behind even the most refined judicial systems, there are always cunning individuals ready to exploit the gaps. Among Shakespeare's plays, *Measure for Measure* is the classic example of procedural manipulation: all three main characters, the Duke, Angelo and Isabella, make strategic use of legal processes. Isabella, however, does one thing that finally makes up for her manipulations: she pleads for the Angelo who has wronged her, thus breaking the cycle of retaliation and irresponsibility.⁵⁶ Isabella has firstly pleaded for mercy out of personal interest, but this second plea is disinterested. Measure is, finally, *not* for measure at the end of the play. Aristotle's virtual equation theory that criminals get what is due to them is transformed into more humanitarian treatment by Isabella's final plea.

Shakespeare, from multiple dimensions, unfolds the pros and cons of legal procedure. Legal procedure by itself is formalism, but the impartial judicial system and legal profession behind it guarantee legal justice can be achieved, provided the legal people involved are just and the procedure itself is used professionally. When legal authorities are just, but lack procedural expertise, justice may be delayed—though eventually achieved. Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Elbow in *Measure for Measure* are the examples. Another instance is the Chief Justice in *Henry IV, Part 2*, who shows procedural flaws in trying to question Falstaff on the street instead of asking law enforcement to bring him to court. Conversely, unjust authorities proficient in legal procedure may manipulate the system to serve corrupt ends. The Duke and Angelo in *Measure for Measure* exemplify this type, and even more

⁵⁶ Yachnin, Paul and Desmond Manderson. "Shakespeare and Judgment: The Renewal of Law and Literature." *The European Legacy, Toward New Paradigms*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2010: 210.

extreme cases appear in the history plays and tragedies: tyrants and power-abusing figures like those in *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, and *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's view of procedural justice is nuanced and balanced, reflecting the complexity and unpredictability of legal realities in the world.

We would like to see the characters in *Merchant of Venice* pleading for Shylock, like Isabella for Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, that "his act did not o'ertake his bad intent", but unfortunately they say nothing of the kind. Sentencing intention, by presuming guilt before action, is a trespass of legal procedure and violates key principles such as the presumption of innocence and the requirement that both *actus reus* (the guilty act) and *mens rea* (the guilty mind) must be present to constitute a crime. Intention alone is not enough. Shakespeare is fascinated with the theme. In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus trespasses legal procedure in sentencing Caesar to death, not because Caesar commits the crime, but because Caesar has the potential to commit the crime. Brutus worries that Caesar will be an Emperor, even though Brutus thinks Caesar is a reasonable person and never swayed by his emotions:

BRUTUS...to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections swayed
More than his reason.

(*JC* II.i.20-22)

But Brutus would rather regard Caesar as a "serpent's egg", "Which hatched would as his kind grow mischievous": once the egg is hatched, the serpent will be harmful, so it is better to "kill him in the shell" (II.ii.33-34). Brutus decides not to kill Caesar when Caesar becomes an emperor, but to kill him before he becomes an emperor.

Shakespeare's plays repeatedly dramatize the complex nature of procedural justice. In this section, we examined specific procedures — the arrest process, evidence gathering, interrogation, delivery of suspects to the gaoler, record-keeping, the senate's deliberation and petitioning, delegation of power, disguise and infiltration tactics, execution protocols, and entrapment schemes — and seen how Shakespeare returns to the presumption of innocence in *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Julius Caesar* as he experiments with this theme in different legal scenes. Across these plays, Shakespeare's neutrality exposes both the promise and the peril of process. He suggests that without impartial judges, a professional legal class, and a shared respect for fair procedure, law cannot guarantee justice—and yet, even perfect form can be twisted into an engine of oppression. The true lesson, he seems to say, lies not in choosing between substance and form, but in cultivating in every office-holder the integrity, skill, and civic virtue necessary to temper both.

Conclusion

Justice is hard to find in Shakespeare's plays. Even in the comedies and romances — genres beyond the main scope of this chapter — Shakespeare frequently presents injustice. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, his first comedy, an unfair paternal custom dictates that the younger daughter Bianca cannot marry until her elder sister Katherina does — despite Katherina's unwillingness to marry and Bianca's many suitors rush to marry her. This folkloric rule, found in many cultures, is exaggerated to highlight its inherent injustice to both women. B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, in their monograph *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage*, examine the ambiguities of early modern marriage law and how these legal uncertainties appear in Shakespeare's work.⁵⁷ In *As You Like It*, disputes over inheritance and social standing bring injustice to both the old Duke and Orlando. Shakespeare's late romances are also tragedies of injustice before resolving in reconciliation: *Pericles* portrays a persecuted prince; *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* feature heroines falsely accused; *The Tempest* includes both the usurped Prospero and the dispossessed, motherless Caliban. Even in revenge tragedies such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*, the revengers often first seek legal redress before turning to vengeance. As Derek Dunne notes, "many revengers first seek legal remedies for their losses before stepping outside the law".⁵⁸ One might argue that Shakespearean drama often draws its power precisely from the failure or absence of justice.

This chapter has focused on Shakespeare's neutrality toward the law, leaving several important questions unaddressed. As noted in the introduction, law is a self-correcting discipline that continually seeks to address its own shortcomings — particularly regarding gender, race, and class. Shakespeare's engagement with legislative, judiciary, and procedural justice reflects not only the deficiencies of law of his era, but also his acute interest in the law's evolving nature. Modern legal systems themselves are not immune to regression, particularly under ideological pressure from religious and political disputes. The rollback of abortion rights in parts of the U.S. serves as a contemporary example. While Shakespeare gestures toward such legal tensions — for instance, through Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* — these are not fully analysed here. Additionally, the chapter only briefly touches on structural flaws in the English legal system of Shakespeare's time, such as the jury system. As Dunne observes,

⁵⁷ B.J. Sokol and Mary Sokol. *Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁵⁸ Derek Dunne. *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016: 3.

the participatory nature of English law empowered juries but also overwhelmed them with too many cases and workloads, often preventing just outcomes.⁵⁹ Shakespeare remains neutral not only toward law itself but also between legal traditions. Civil law is portrayed as rigid, obscure, and antiquated; common law, bound by precedent, fails to adapt to novel or unique situations. In *Measure for Measure*, the strict application of civil law proves deeply troubling; in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Timon of Athens*, common law's rigidity fails to meet moral and human complexity. This chapter does not attempt fully to explore these legal frameworks, rather it aims to establish Shakespeare's position of neutrality toward law as a whole.

While Paul Raffield argues that law and literature mirror each other,⁶⁰ I would suggest that literature, more significantly, fabricates law. Shakespeare's plays create imagined legal worlds that not only reflect contemporary dilemmas but also pose enduring questions. As a dramatist and thinker, he constructs legal problems that transcend his era, offering insights that continue to challenge legal theory today. His *neutrality* reveals the tensions between law and other forces — politics, religion, economics, diplomacy, ethnicity, gender — and shows how these tensions may sometimes be resolved through professionalization and humanist values. But not always. Shakespeare presents no universal solution. His plays depict diverging outcomes, implying that rigid formulas are inadequate and underscoring the ongoing need to question whether or not rigid legal systems truly uphold justice and equity. Nowhere is Shakespeare's concern with justice more evident than in the tragedies. He refuses to let justice rest by staging mock trials (*King Lear*), cries to the stones (*Titus Andronicus*), and anatomizing vengeance in *Timon* and *Coriolanus*. Nor does he condone the perversion of legal procedure, as when the Duke of Cornwall in *King Lear* declares:

CORNWALL Though well we may not pass upon his life
Without the form of justice, yet our power
Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men
May blame, but not control.

(*KL* III.vii.24–27)

⁵⁹ Dunne, *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law*, 2.

⁶⁰ Raffield, *The Art of Law in Shakespeare*, 9.

These lines suggest how often the invocation of justice conceals injustice — and that true justice, in Shakespeare's view, must arise from the integration of legislation, judicial reasoning, and procedural fairness, all animated by a spirit of humanism.

In contrast to his view of politics, which occasionally can be antagonistic to humanitarian values, Shakespeare sees law as a potentially ideal mechanism for justice. Yet his interest lies not in abstract ideals, but in law's practice: the making of laws and their relationship to equity, shared morality, and social-political-religious contexts. He explores the way laws are enforced and whether they achieve justice, imagining situations in which the law falls short and morality and humanism must fill the gap. And sometimes, even morality offers us no escape from irreconcilable conflict. Literature thus becomes a space for legal imagination. Shakespeare's plays are not legal treatises, yet they create and test legal worlds against both historical constraints and human nature.

CHAPTER FIVE – LOVE

Introduction

When Renaissance writers wrote of romantic love, one challenge needed to be met: how to beautify such a base emotion? Though rooted in biblical and classical tradition, romantic love was far inferior to Plato's love and God's love — so low that, to praise and legislate romantic love, Renaissance poetry had to elevate and compare it to divine love, just as exegetes transformed the Song of Songs in the Bible. The sonnet tradition before Shakespeare saw poets such as Petrarch, Ronsard, Sidney, and Spenser enshrine their lovers in a hierarchy below God but above human beings. Romantic love was regarded as inferior in the literary tradition because of its ubiquity: anyone can love, no matter whether they are virtuous or villainous, king or beggar. Romantic love's ubiquity made it incompatible with the grand narrative tradition, which typically accorded worthiness only to noble political and historical figures. But romantic love declares itself so forcefully that Renaissance writers felt obliged to defend it, hence the flawed comparison with divine love, which could not hide romantic love's classlessness and amorality.

Shakespeare, on the contrary, admits romantic love's ordinariness and humanises its greatness, not by altering it from human love, but by converting it from religious love back into human love. Romantic love fascinates Shakespeare. Audiences of Shakespeare's era would have recognised him as a purveyor of romantic love, and in crafting *Romeo and Juliet*, he transformed tragedy — a genre conventionally linked with history and politics — into a realm of intense personal emotion¹. Shakespeare seldom idealises love (meaning “romantic love” throughout this chapter); in his seemingly ideal love stories there are always “Rosalines of Romeos”² serving as reminders of love's whims. For Allan Bloom, Shakespeare's humanistic naturalness leads to his understanding of love: he knows so well that man's nature is a mixture of high and low, respects

¹ Sasha Roberts. “Reading Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in Early Modern England.” *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works*, 2005, pp 108-33, at 108.

² Romeo's love for Juliet is a betrayal of his love for Rosaline. Friar Laurence especially complains about Romeo's quick change of affection and only decides to help Romeo pursue Juliet because their union can help resolve the feud between the two families.

the low part and believes that sometimes the lower part can lead to a higher part, and, when the lower part breaks the encrustations of conventions, still blesses the nature of love.³ The distinction between high and low in love mirrors the contrast between Platonic (idealised) love and romantic (bodily) love, a dichotomy rooted in the Renaissance worldview that human beings are capable of both angelic and animalistic impulses.

Both Allan Bloom and John Wilders criticise the kind of shallow reader who, standing on a high moral ground, fails to grasp Shakespeare's neutral understanding of love. Wilders refers to them as "Victorian readers",⁴ while Bloom calls them "scientists with clinical sterility".⁵ Hamlet, in his cold condemnation of his mother's remarriage, represents exactly this sterile stance. In his abstract imagination, she is too old to love. But in reality, middle-aged people are perfectly capable of love. Antony and Cleopatra are of middle age, John Falstaff is also of middle age. Falstaff's love in *Henry IV* is real, moving, and, though tinged with calculation, undeniably sincere. Mistress Quickly and Doll are fully aware of his flaws, yet they love him nonetheless, a love relationship that is shockingly realistic. As Allan Bloom observes, Shakespeare fills his plays with real experience rather than abstract or rhetorical ideals.⁶ For Shakespeare, love in the real world is (as it were) neutral, though Shakespeare at times makes this neutrality a terrible one. Indeed, the more human romantic love is, the more terrible it is.

In the scholarship on Shakespeare's theme of love, many argue that Shakespeare's representation of love is complex, realistic, and neutral. David Schalkwyk, for example, drawing on Theodore Leinwand's affect theory, contends in *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (2018) that love should not be understood as a singular internal emotion, but as "a complex of interwoven orientations to the self and the world, embodied in forms of action"; that love is not a unified, abstract concept, but a set of behaviours and attitudes shaped through language.⁷ Michael Hall identifies seven recurring models of love in Shakespeare's tragedies — including the Petrarchan,

³ Allan Bloom. *Love and Friendship*. Simon & Schuster, 1993: 396.

⁴ John Wilders, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Edited by John Wilders, Bloomsbury, 2014: 49.

⁵ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 397.

⁶ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 397.

⁷ David Schalkwyk. *Shakespeare, Love and Service*. Cambridge University Press, 2008: 7.

the misogynistic, the etherealized, and the violent — and shows that no single model governs any one play.⁸ Each tragedy blends multiple conventions, revealing the instability and complexity of Shakespearean love. Allan Bloom argues that Shakespeare treats love as a natural force that resists moral or ideological confinement; even when love violates ethical boundaries, Shakespeare respects it, because such unruly love reflects how love actually exists in the world. Taken together, these perspectives show that love in Shakespeare is not governed by a single logic, value system, or emotional consistency. It manifests in acts of speech, desire, obedience, and betrayal; it crosses boundaries between the personal and the political, the noble and the destructive.

This chapter will start with lovers' inconstancy as the first aspect of human love subject to Shakespeare's terrible neutrality. "Were man / But constant, he were perfect", as Proteus regretfully notes in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (5.4). In exploring love, Shakespeare applies his usual method of returning to a single theme again and again, each time with variations, in order to attain a complete understanding of love in a neutral, characteristically human way. In the second part of the chapter, the theme of self-knowledge in love rendered with a neutrality no less terrible. Even though love's fickleness and lovers' lack of self-awareness intrigues Shakespeare, he does not trivialise or negate the great force which causes lovers' blindness. Finally, the third part of the chapter examines that great force — the greatest force beyond all other forces in the world — and how it completes Shakespeare's vision of the terrible neutrality of love.

Section 1: "Men are giddy": love's vagaries

Shakespeare recognised love's vagary from the beginning of his career. In the 1590s, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* portrays Proteus transferring his affection from Julia to Silvia, knowing Silvia to be his best friend's lover. Following the tradition of maintaining the hero's moral integrity, Proteus, the agent of such infamous behaviour, is not the protagonist. In 1595-96, however, Shakespeare's neutrality led him to create a protagonist of shifting affection: Romeo, who shifts his love from Rosaline to Juliet. From the subsequent two centuries' reception of the

⁸ Michael Hall. *The Structure of Love: Representational Patterns and Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*. University Press of Virginia, 1989.

often-omitted Rosaline story line,⁹ it is clear that audiences disapproved of morally flawed characters as protagonists and expected the protagonist to be an honourable figure. At around the same time as *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's neutrality found another way to circumvent moral scolds by drugging the protagonists to change their affections in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the protagonists (Titania and Lysander) are not morally flawed, yet the theme of shifting affections continues to be explored through magic. Shakespeare's middle period witnesses *Twelfth Night* showing the vagary of the Duke in comically shifting his affections from Olivia to Viola. Shakespeare's neutrality allows him to test shifting emotion in comic as well as tragic and historical situations, and in *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and his late play *Henry VIII*, the theme of changing affections evokes bewilderment, trauma, rage, and endless echoes of self-questioning. Hamlet painfully interrogates his mother's fickleness — "Why she, even she" — and Henry VIII's victims never know when, how, and why he suddenly changes his allegiance, while the whole play of *Troilus and Cressida* deals with not only Cressida's, but all the characters' vagaries.

Shakespeare's ambition in *Troilus and Cressida* lies in a resolution to retell the story of Homer's *Iliad*. In epics, the heroes' characters can be morally dubious, but their greatness and valour atone for their errors. Shakespeare has no intention whatsoever of masking Homeric characters with the veil of epic, rather revealing the other side of the coin — the reality underneath the bubble "bombast" — so that together he and Homer form a picture of a neutralised Trojan war. No one is great or honourable in Shakespeare's Trojan war: Agamemnon and leadership rarely go together; Hector never wins a single fight and dies of his greediness for armour; rather than heroically fighting Hector, Achilles disgracefully murders him; Helen never resists her abductor's love and even flirts wantonly and indiscriminately; Ulysses applies his intelligence to trivial matters, such as analysing lovers' betrayals and voyeuristically observing their meetings. The absurdities of these Homeric characters do not necessarily betray their original persona: they are all able to behave in this way when situated in the context of everyday

⁹ The New Cambridge editor, G. Blakemore Evans, found that the 1679 Thomas Otway's adaptation, the 1744 Theophilus Cibber's adaptation, and 1748 David Garrick's *Romeo and Juliet* all deleted Rosaline, and Garrick claimed that the Rosaline storyline is "a Blemish" in Romeo's character. It was not until 1845 that the American actor Charlotte Cushman restored Rosaline during an English tour. G. Blakemore Evans, in his introduction to William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*. edited by G. Blakemore Evans. Cambridge University Press, 2003: 34-36.

life, rather than achieving great deeds in epic narratives. The heroes of the Trojan war are not eponymized in the title *Troilus and Cressida*, a love story of medieval origin (in Bocaccio and Chaucer, for example). Instead, they serve as the background noise to the tale of Troilus and Cressida, a deviation from Homer that unfolds in the Trojan setting. The play is particularly interesting in literary history because it crosses the border from the medieval – the age when chivalric love, an important form of romantic love, was also born – to the early modern.¹⁰

The charm of the story of Troilus and Cressida is grounded in the betrayal of Troilus by Cressida. The literary tradition before Chaucer labelled her a whore, but Chaucer sympathized with Cressida and found excuses for her betrayal. Although Shakespeare sympathizes with her to a lesser degree and does not view her betrayal as sinless, he strives to understand and partly exonerate her betrayal by ironizing the Trojan war itself. In this toxic environment, Cressida's betrayal stands as such a natural consequence and evokes so much empathy that her image is reshaped as a victim of the reality weaved by the Trojan and Greek camps. Auden calls the Homeric background noise "the world, not a world".¹¹ Cressida only betrays when she is in this reality, in "the world", not in "a world" of epic.

Shakespeare's greatest mistrust of Homer is in the character of Helen, the original trigger for the Trojan war. In the *Iliad*, Helen's chastity and allegiance are not subject to change. She denounces the idea of being Paris's lover and bewails her fate and the sufferings of the Greeks. In Book 3, for example, when Priam asks for the Greek warriors' names, she announces that she loves her husband, and she wishes herself dead during the abduction.¹² In private, when Aphrodite asks her to sleep with Paris, she instantly refuses and condemns the goddess's morality and motivation in the harshest language. Homer's Helen guards her chastity regardless of all temptation, never acting out of expediency. Shakespeare scorns such an unrealistic

¹⁰ Andrew James Johnston and Russell West-Pavlov. "Introduction: Performing the Politics of Passion: *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Troilus and Cressida* and the Literary Tradition of Love and History." *Love, History and Emotion in Chaucer and Shakespeare: Troilus and Criseyde and Troilus and Cressida*., edited by Andrew James Johnston et al., Manchester University Press, 2016: 6.

¹¹ W.H. Auden. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. edited by A.C. Kirsch, Princeton University Press, 2019: 179.

¹² Richmond Lattimore. *The Iliad; Translated with an Introduction by Richmond Lattimore*. University of Chicago Press, 1951.

approach. An abducted woman in the real world dares not refuse, so a realistic Helen dares not refuse to love. In this sense, Cressida and Helen are each other's footnote.

The most pressing concern for a woman kidnapped and trafficked in a foreign camp is her security. She is coerced, threatened to comply, and made to abandon any hope of escape. When the Trojan Cressida goes to the Greek camp, she calls her lover Diomedes "guardian". The Trojan camp also traps the Greek Helen, and obviously Helen also needs a "guardian" to protect her. Willingly or unwillingly, Helen must love Paris, so Paris will protect her. She also loves Hector, so Hector will protect her if Paris dies one day on the battlefield. In Act 1, Scene 2, Pandarus and Cressida's small talk about the daily comings and goings of Helen and Hector is as casual as the weather, as if they — Helen and Hector — are the couple:

PANDARUS What were you talking of when I came? Was Hector armed and gone ere ye came to Ilium? Helen was not up, was she?

CRESSIDA Hector was gone but Helen was not up.

(TC I.ii.41-3)

Actively or passively, Helen shifts her love between Paris and Hector. Paris even panders to Helen and Hector's relationship. In Act 3, Scene 3, Paris woos her to unarm Hector's buckle with her "white enchanting fingers", which are stronger than all Greek kings (129-34). The 1968 Royal Shakespeare Company production, directed by John Barton, also depicts Helen physically unarming Hector.¹³ When arguing why Troy should keep Helen, Paris states his opinion that the whole of Troy should enjoy Helen: "I propose not merely to myself /The pleasures such a beauty brings with it" (II.ii.146-47). Helen can flirt with Troilus at a family party and flirt with Pandarus in the feast. Put bluntly, she is a whore; put nicely, she is the "the mortal Venus, the /heartblood of beauty, love's invisible soul" (III.i.30-31). If one day Paris, Hector, Troilus, and Pandarus are not able to protect her anymore, there will always be other men to protect Helen. If her beauty tempts everyone to fall for her and the whole society encourages it, why should she not exchange her love for protection? In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, James C. Scott comments that "In public life—that is to say, in power-laden settings—a carefully

¹³ John Barton. "Troilus and Cressida." Royal Shakespeare Company, 1968.

calculated conformity prevails for the most part”.¹⁴ Shakespeare’s Helen exemplifies this form of strategic conformity: aware that her reputation for beauty inspires desire and devotion, she deliberately uses it to seduce and bind others to her, ensuring both love and protection in a world ruled by male power.

While Helen shoots her darts of love to everyone in Troy, Cressida does not necessarily need flirtation there. Before being Troilus’s lover, Cressida is a mere outsider of the royal or military circle. In Act 1, Scene 2, Cressida’s ignorance of her surroundings draws the audience into her perspective. She asks, “Who were those went by? / And whither go they?” (I.ii.1–2), not recognizing Hecuba and Helen. She also enquires about the causes of Hector’s anger and his character: “What was his cause of anger?” (I.ii.12) and “What of him?” (I.ii.14). In the same scene, Pandarus offers her a full introduction to the Trojan heroes, functioning much like the invocations and catalogues in Homeric epic that present the key players to the audience.

In this way, Shakespeare positions us, as he does Cressida, as newcomers to the world of heroes, drawn into the epic not as its central figures but as ordinary onlookers, who may helplessly make decisions that reflect the empathy of any other bystander. Her curiosity about their lives in Act 1, Scene 2, might stem from her own vanity, her crush on Troilus, or her anxiety about her father’s betrayal, but her insecurity is not that deep, allowing her to lead a relatively comfortable life as a self-contained noblewoman. No matter how Pandarus boasts about the heroes, Cressida remains detached, offering only wry commentary. For instance, when Pandarus recounts a moment of royal amusement — Helen spotting a white hair on Troilus’s chin and everyone laughing — Cressida responds with dry irony:

CRESSIDA At what was all this laughing?

PANDARUS Marry, at the white hair that Helen spied on Troilus’ chin.

CRESSIDA An’t had been a green hair, I should have laughed too.
(TC I.ii.131-33)

While others laugh freely at the white hair, Cressida withholds her laughter — it is not funny enough. She does not blend into the scene of happiness in the royal inner circle. At least

¹⁴ James C. Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press, 1985: xvii.

outwardly, she maintains a pose of independence and ironic detachment. All signs suggest that Cressida, still untouched by love at this stage, is capable of self-preservation. What's more, if she and Troilus had remained lovers within the walls of Troy, it is unclear whether she would ever have flirted as freely as Helen, or have flirted at all.

Cressida acts as a traditional coy mistress, craving Troilus's love but cautious about yielding too soon:

CRESSIDA Yet hold I off. Women are angels, wooing:
Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing;
That she beloved knows nought that knows not this:
Men prize the thing ungained more than it is;
That she was never yet that ever knew
Love got so sweet as when desire did sue.
Therefore this maxim out of love I teach:
Achievement is command, ungained beseech.
(TC I.ii.246–53)

Cressida simply desires a normal, traditional Petrarchan relationship. Shakespeare presents the beginning of Troilus and Cressida's love story as so normal, innocent, and pure that it leaves readers wondering what could possibly go wrong. Just as Michael Hall says, however, the hallmark of the play's Petrarchanism only lasts in Act 1.¹⁵ Before the exchange, Cressida is still Troilus's Cressida: she does not want to go because of her love towards Troilus. She pleads to her uncle, her guardian in Troy, but her uncle replies negatively:

CRESSIDA O you immortal gods, I will not go.

PANDARUS Thou must.
(TC IV.ii.91-92)

She then pleads to Troilus, and Troilus also says she has to go:

CRESSIDA And is it true that I must go from Troy?

TROILUS A hateful truth.

CRESSIDA What, and from Troilus too?

¹⁵ Hall, *The Structure of Love*, 118.

TROILUS From Troy and Troilus.

CRESSIDA Is't possible?

TROILUS And suddenly –

(*TC* IV.iv.29-32)

Things go wrong when it never crosses Troilus's mind to keep her in Troy.

Should Cressida stay? It depends on who she is and who Troilus is. Here, Cressida and Helen, Troilus and the other Trojan princes should be compared. Troilus rallies for keeping Helen, the lover of Paris, who is a Trojan prince, so Troilus knows Trojan princes can keep their lovers. Troilus is a Trojan prince as legitimate as Paris. In Act 4, Scene 5, Ulysses describes Troilus as a “true knight” (96), a man of action (98), and a better warrior than Hector (104-09). Pandarus thinks the same as Ulysses when he sells Troilus to Cressida: Hector is not a better man than Troilus (I.ii.68-9). If there is any truth in Pandarus' words, he also suggests that Cressida is fairer than Helen: “as fair o'Friday as Helen is on Sunday (I.i.71-72) — Cressida not dressed up is as fair as Helen when dressed up for festivals. Compared to the incestuous and illegitimate relationship of Helen and Paris, Troilus and Cressida fall in love as a bachelor and a maid, so their love is irreproachable. Helen can stay, why can't Cressida? Troilus and Pandarus, the only two men she relies on, frustrate her, and from the very moment when Troilus denies (if not abandons) her, she is all on her own. Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton record the way Trevor Nunn's National Theatre production (1999) presents Cressida's sense of abandonment: the gates and walls of Troy bang shut around her, and she is left alone on the stage.¹⁶

Dawson and Minton question Troilus's behaviour: Troilus never brings up the idea of marriage, nor does he seem to view it as an option — if he did, why would he not proclaim his intentions when the exchange is announced?¹⁷ Although the discussion situates the story in the Christian era, which Shakespeare intentionally transcends, the audience readily grasps the irony

¹⁶ Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton, in their introduction to *Troilus and Cressida*. William Shakespeare. *Troilus and Cressida*. edited by Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton, Cambridge University Press, 2017: 30.

¹⁷ Dawson and Minton (eds), *Troilus and Cressida*, 28.

in Pandarus' abundant language of Christian betrothal in Act 3, Scene 2.¹⁸ Troilus never promises marriage before Cressida goes, he only taxes her to "be true" ten times. John Kerrigan thinks that Troilus insults Cressida by harping on the topic of fidelity: to require it is to suspect her of not being able to abide by it. Kerrigan interrogates Troilus's standard of constancy and finds that Troilus infamously inherits a Stoic constancy that is misogynistic: men are born to be constant, while women's constancy needs to be tested and proven. He insults Cressida because of an unhealthy and defensive desire to put her to the test.¹⁹ The prize of Troilus's test is ridiculous, too. Troilus promises "be thou true/ And I will see thee" (IV.iv.65-66) — if she can be constant, he will visit her in the Greek camp. Cressida's constancy earns her a mere visit, instead of marriage, while Helen's inconstancy to Menelaus and Paris secures her marriage, care, and even an epic war.

In the end, Troilus comes to the Greek camp without visiting her, he would rather put her to the test of constancy first and eavesdrop on her conversation with Diomedes. If he had visited her directly and reinforced her faith in their relationship, things might not have gone wrong. Lobsien Verena Olejniczak describes this unfair relationship from another perspective: in the same scene, Cressida shows the courage to break all family ties for him, defying the demands of "consanguinity" (IV.ii.95), while Troilus unquestioningly follows orders to deliver her.²⁰ When Troilus argues in favour of keeping Helen, he commodifies her worth as high, but here, consciously or unconsciously, he devalues Cressida. Such a beautiful maid, the lover of such an excellent prince, is made cheap by that very prince.

When the isolated Cressida comes to the Greek camp in Act 4, Scene 5, what awaits her is exactly Helen's predicament: a foreign place full of men of lust, prey among a horde of predators. After Agamemnon welcomes her with a kiss, Nestor, Ulysses, Achilles, Patroclus, and Menelaus all offer to fondle her with their kisses. Cressida becomes the Helen of the Greek

¹⁸ Act 3, Scene 2 is where Cressida agrees to sleep with Troilus. See Roberta Kwan. "'Are in the State of Grace?': the Absence of Grace and Semantic Embrangement in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*." *English Studies*, vol. 97, no. 4, 2016, pp. 362-82, at 371-74.

¹⁹ John Kerrigan. "Troilus, Cressida, and Constancy." *Shakespeare's Binding Language*, Oxford University Press, 2016: 258-61.

²⁰ Verena Olejniczak Lobsien, "'Stewed Phrase' and the Impassioned Imagination in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*," *Love, History and Emotion in Chaucer and Shakespeare: Troilus and Criseyde and Troilus and Cressida*, Manchester University Press, 2016, pp. 125-40, at 129.

camp, coveted by all the men. She conquers the trap of the powerful impulse of romantic love after experiencing that her love for Troilus proves dangerous, the consequence of which is that she coolly plays with the desires of the Greek men.²¹ She rejects all requests with her witty words, but her decency does not win her respect, because right afterwards Ulysses slut-shames her out of revenge for not getting her kiss: “her wanton spirits look out /At every joint and motive of her body” (IV.v.56-57).

Some readings trust Ulysses and the others, interpreting Cressida’s replies as flirtatious. But this is to fall into Shakespeare’s trap: there is simply not enough textual evidence to prove that Cressida is a whore, yet scholars like Michael Hall, who consistently labels her as either a whore or both a whore and a saint,²² are too ready to believe the male characters’ judgement of her. But Ulysses is an unreliable narrator and Cressida’s loyalty to Troilus remains at that time. Not until she is confronted by Diomedes does she painfully resolve to give up her constancy. The only man who does not request kisses is Diomedes, from whom Cressida gets some respect. In this regard, Diomedes does look like a good choice for a guardian, otherwise she would have to oblige all the Greeks as her lovers, as Helen does in Troy. Here is the difference between Cressida and Helen. They are in similar circumstances, and both feel insecure, but Cressida is not willing to stoop that low. Shakespeare seems to create a Helen designed to soften the criticism of Cressida.

Inasmuch as Shakespeare intends to redeem Cressida’s reputation, it is the change in circumstances and her sense of insecurity that fascinates him. Shakespeare defends Cressida and emphasises that any moral judgment of her “inconstancy” should take into account her specific circumstances and the constantly changing context she faces.²³ Cressida does strive for constancy, but finally breaks when Diomedes coerces her and pushes her insecurity to its peak.

DIOMEDES: Fo, fo! Come, tell a pin. You are forsworn.

²¹ Daniel Juan Gil. “At the Limits of the Social World: Fear and Pride in *Troilus and Cressida*.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2001, pp. 336-59, at 349-350.

²² Hall, *The Structure of Love*, 136.

²³ Unhae Langis. “‘Desire Is Death’ in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*.” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, suppl. Special Issue 24: *Readings of Love And Death*, 2015, pp. 1-23, at 2.

CRESSIDA: In faith, I cannot. What would you have me do?
(TC V.ii.23-24)

CRESSIDA Diomed –

DIOMEDES No no, good night. I'll be your fool no more.
(TC V.ii.31-32)

DIOMEDES And so good night.

CRESSIDA Nay, but you part in anger.
(TC V.ii.43-44)

The whole conversation (or negotiation) is permeated with Diomedes' threats and Cressida's anxieties. Lees-Jeffries Hester describes their conversation as the "anxious, perhaps flirtatious, pacifications of a woman trying not to anger a bully".²⁴ Shakespeare makes Cressida transfer her constancy under threat.

Was ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won? Cressida, Helen, Lady Anne, possibly Gertrude, all give themselves away amidst insecurities created and intensified by men. Even Ulysses' wife Penelope, the byword of constancy, Lees-Jeffries suggests, has to string along her suitors by unravelling her weaving.²⁵ If Ulysses were to witness his wife stringing along the suitors, he might insult her with the same words — "her wanton spirits look out / At every joint and motive of her body" — while he himself is indulging in sensual moments with Circe and Calypso, willingly or unwillingly. Why? Because men can change. Romeo is merely chided by Friar Laurence for his inconstancy to Rosaline, and then the friar wholeheartedly supports his relationship with Juliet. Henry VIII's inconstancy to the virtuous queen Catherine is not criticized by a single person. When women are seen to change, they face the harshest criticism from men — even murder, as seen in the sufferings of Hermione and Desdemona.

²⁴ Lees-Jeffries, Hester. "What's Hecuba to Him? Absence, Silence and Lament in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Troilus and Cressida*." *Love, History and Emotion in Chaucer and Shakespeare: Troilus and Criseyde and Troilus and Cressida*, Manchester University Press, 2016, pp. 61-75, at 71.

²⁵ Lees-Jeffries, "What's Hecuba to Him?", 72.

Cressida serves as a strong case for feminist criticism and there are many feminist critics defending her, but I do not think Shakespeare intends to create a completely innocent Cressida. Though of all the characters she receives the least cynical scorn from Shakespeare in this play, she is not a perfect victim. Shakespeare is indeed sympathetic towards Cressida, but he is far less sympathetic towards her than Chaucer is towards Criseyde. As the narrator of the poem, Chaucer is able to aestheticize the story and retreat from its harsh truths; once the story is rendered in the dramatic form, however, those truths can no longer be shielded by Chaucer's protective evasions.²⁶

Chaucer's Diomedes woos Criseyde as an honourable knight. In Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the private meeting of Criseyde and Diomedes is romantic, and with mutual love and respect:

But in effect, and shortly for to seye,
This Diomedes al fresshly newe ayeyn
Gan pressen on, and faste hire mercy preye;
And after this, the sothe for to seyn,
Hire glove he took, of which he was ful feyn;
And finally, whan it was woxen eve
And al was wel, he roos and tok his leve.
(*Troilus and Criseyde* V.1009-1015)²⁷

Chaucer lavishes attention on Criseyde's inner struggles and his Criseyde slowly and gradually transfers her affection from Troilus to Diomedes. Shakespeare's Cressida, on the other hand, is muted in this scene, and there is a group of surveyors, including Troilus, watching, criticising, and shaming her. What is she thinking about? No one knows. She is brazenly objectified by men and gives in to a bully.

Chaucer's Troilus might have a good reason for letting Criseyde go, because his Troilus is insignificant and unable to influence others. Shakespeare, on the other hand, empowers his Troilus by having him interfere in the biggest political decision of whether or not to send back

²⁶ Daniel M. Murtaugh. "Troilus and Cressida in the Light of Day: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer." *English: Journal of the English Association*, vol. 65, no. 250, 2016, pp. 191-210, at 192.

²⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer. *Troilus and Criseyde: A Norton Critical Edition (Norton Critical Editions)*. edited by Stephen Barney, Norton, W.W., and Company, 2006: 365.

Helen, and his influence proves to be greater than Hector's. As a result, Helen remains in Troy; Troilus's strenuous efforts to retain her succeed, even though many characters in the play, including Hector, regard Helen as unworthy of being kept. This perspective is powerfully reinforced in performance. For example, in Sam Mendes's 1990 production of *Troilus and Cressida* at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, Helen is presented as an object of ironic display. Helen of Troy (played by Sally Dexter) is absurdly artificial in her heavy makeup and tight red dress — sexually tempting but far from sufficient to justify the waste of the war fought on her behalf.²⁸ Compared with Chaucer's lovers, Shakespeare's Troilus is not obliged to give up on Cressida, because he is influential enough to keep her, and Shakespeare's Cressida does not have to succumb to a tyrannical lover, even if she wants protection. She can choose a better one, one who loves her sincerely, like Chaucer's Diomedes. Unlike Chaucer, Shakespeare refuses to rationalize or romanticize the predicaments of Troilus and Cressida, in the same way that he refrains from heroizing Homer's Trojan War. Chaucer wants to depict an unavoidable tragic event, finding excuses for Cressida's vagary and giving her time to shift her love. But Shakespeare mystifies the behaviours of Troilus and Cressida — his Cressida changes her allegiance in one day — even the hostile circumstances fail to explain and defend her on that issue. The myth of the lovers' change implies a cruel truth: sometimes there is no apparent or justifiable reason for vagary, people just change.

Cressida and Troilus are weak, inconstant, and succumb to hostile circumstances, but their love story is not particularly important in this play. Cressida, the byword of vagary, has the fourth highest line count, following Troilus, Ulysses, and Pandarus, equal to that of Thersites. In fact, many modern productions choose either Pandarus or Thersites to dominate the stage.²⁹ Shakespeare allocates more space than Chaucer to Troilus, Diomedes, Paris, Achilles, and others. As I suggested earlier, in writing *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare rewrites the *Iliad* in the form of the mock-heroic. The Trojan war is the surrounding circumstance of the story of Troilus and Cressida. While Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* centres only on the lovers, Shakespeare focuses more evenly on both the lovers and the Homeric characters. Shakespeare's

²⁸ David M. Bevington, in his introduction to *Troilus and Cressida*. William Shakespeare. *Troilus and Cressida*. edited by David M. Bevington, Bloomsbury, 2017: 118.

²⁹ Dawson and Minton (eds), *Troilus and Cressida*, 4.

Lucrece calls the Trojan war a stir begun by a strumpet, whose beauty she wants to tear with her nails. The affair of Paris and Helen should have been private pleasure, but it became a public plague and caused guiltless souls to pay for guilty woes.³⁰ Lucrece's remarks indicate that, from the start of Shakespeare's career, he never approved of the Trojan war. In the Trojan war of *Troilus and Cressida*, opportunism is the only way to win.³¹ The battle scenes of Act 5 witness heavy casualties on the Greek side, and just as the Greeks seem on the verge of defeat, Achilles secures a lone victory for the Greek camp by dishonourably murdering Hector, who becomes the only significant casualty on the Trojan side. Achilles' ambush of Hector, as conceived by Shakespeare, parallels the ambush of the Trojan horse in Homer, which seals the Greeks' contentious victory in the war.

In grand narratives, history is shaped by pivotal events, and the story of the Trojan War begins with Helen's abduction and concludes with Hector's death and the ambush of the Trojan horse. However, for Shakespeare, fighting or winning the Trojan War is of little significance. After all, "all the argument is a whore and a cuckold" (II.iii.64) and people "cannot fight upon this argument, /It is too starved a subject for my sword" (I.i.86-87). Shakespeare seems to be asking, what was the Trojan war really like, after seven years of indecisive battles, when stripped of the glamour of poetry?³² The heroes spend years living both inside and outside the Trojan walls and grapple with the mundane realities of daily life. In this mundane existence, the same heroes sleep, gossip, and make love. Years of war have worn down their will and shifted attention from the outside world to themselves, just as Troilus says: "Why should I war without the walls of Troy /That find such cruel battle here within?" (I.i.2-3) Shakespeare spends much of the play depicting the trivial politics of the Greek camp, where the heroes, though they retain their identities from Homer, reveal their personalities, not through pivotal events, but through ordinary moments. Agamemnon's attempts to assert his leadership as the "king of kings" are tedious, Ulysses' displays of cunning through long-winded speeches with little result are equally

³⁰ William Shakespeare. *The Poems: Venus and Adonis, the Rape of Lucrece, the Phoenix and the Turtle, the Passionate Pilgrim, a Lover's Complaint*. edited by John Roe, 2 ed., Cambridge University Press, 2006. *The Rape of Lucrece*, lines 1471–84.

³¹ Marina Ansaldo. "'tis but the Chance of War': Fortune and Opportunity in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*." *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2016, pp. 28-58, at 54.

³² Kenneth Muir, in his introduction to *Troilus and Cressida*. William Shakespeare. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Troilus and Cressida*. edited by Kenneth Muir, Clarendon, 1982: 23.

dull, and even Achilles' defiance of Agamemnon is uninspiring. The only engaging aspect is Thersites' cynical critiques of them all. In this world of the Greek camp, no one cares about "a cuckold and a whore", and no one fights for their interest.

Everyday life in the Trojan palace revolves around men and women gazing and consuming Helen, who transforms Troy into a city of love. When love becomes a condition of human existence, war creates an extreme circumstance, prompting people to shift their affections to align with their own best interests. War brings about change, and in the Trojan war in *Troilus and Cressida*, everyone changes, everyone is Cressida. After all, as Benedick says after shifting from a vow of celibacy to proposing to Beatrice, "men are giddy". Shakespeare's cynical portrayal of the Trojan War heroes explains Cressida's transformation. Shakespeare does not pity Cressida as much as Chaucer, neither does he insult her like his medieval predecessors, represented by Henryson. Henryson's work had a huge impact in 16th century.³³ Henryson restores her dignity by making her contract leprosy (divine retribution on an inconstant woman) and commit suicide. Where heroes are inconstant, according to Henryson's idea of poetic justice, they should be punished. Chaucer's pity is problematic, because he agrees with chivalry's ethics. Neither of them confront inconstancy bravely, only Shakespeare does, with a terrible neutrality.

The same terrible neutrality also makes the outcome of vagary quite different in each play. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, Orsino's shift of affection occurs in an instant, with little justification beyond the comic momentum of the plot. Cressida, by contrast, also appears to change her heart suddenly under Diomedes' coercion, but her betrayal is shaped by a more complex web of pressures and motivations that have been gradually building throughout the play. In Tim Carroll's 2013 Globe production of *Twelfth Night*, Liam Brennan's Duke Orsino watches as Olivia finds happiness with Sebastian and Viola reunites with her brother, leaving him momentarily on the outside of the joyful resolution. It is in this moment of quiet loneliness that he begins to pursue Viola:

ORSINO If this be so - as yet the glass seems true
I shall have share in this most happy wreck.
[To Viola] Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times
Thou never shouldst love woman like to me.

³³ Dawson and Minton (eds), *Troilus and Cressida*, 273.

(TN V.i.249-51)

His pursuit comes across as abrupt and unmotivated, a mere attempt to join in the general happiness, which draws laughter from the audience.³⁴ Orsino's sudden change of heart, however, had long been anticipated by Feste. As early as Act 2, Scene 4, while singing to Orsino, Feste delivers a cryptic comment:

FESTE Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal. I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything and their intent everywhere, for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing. Farewell.

Exit

(TF II.iv.70-74)

Feste likens Orsino's mind to changeable opal and mocks his lack of constancy, implying that Orsino is not truly devoted to Olivia, a prophecy that proves true by the end of the play.

Orsino's change of heart resembles the comedic reversals in other Shakespeare plays, like Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Proteus in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, or even King Henry's shifting affection in *Henry VIII*. These transformations contribute to a sense of closure and festive resolution. Cressida's change of heart, however, has quite the opposite effect. Cressida makes her final appearance in *Troilus and Cressida* in Act 5, Scene 2. Her name appears once more in this scene – penultimately in the entire play – when Troilus reacts to her betrayal with bitter disbelief:

TROILUS O Cressid, O false Cressid, false, false, false!
Let all untruths stand by thy stained name
And they'll seem glorious.

(TC V.iii.176-79)

Troilus attempts to project all forms of betrayal onto Cressida, just as he had previously projected all virtue and beauty onto her. This reveals a recurring pattern in his perception: he swings from one extreme to the other, idealising Cressida absolutely and then condemning her utterly. His worldview, therefore, is marked by emotional volatility and cognitive instability.

³⁴ Tim Caroll. "Twelfth Night." Shakespeare's Globe, 2013.

Derick Marsh observes that Troilus's confused and chaotic reasoning persists throughout the play, and that he never comes to understand Cressida's predicament.³⁵ The play is far from over at this point, with seven more scenes remaining, most of them scenes of war. But Cressida's name is mentioned only once more, in Act 5, Scene 5. Diomedes, having bested Troilus in battle, orders Troilus's horse to be brought to Cressida as a tribute, asserting that he has proven himself to be the better lover:

DIOMEDES Go, go, my servant, take thou Troilus' horse,
Present the fair steed to my lady Cressid.
Fellow, commend my service to her beauty;
Tell her I have chastised the amorous Trojan
And am her knight by proof.

(*TC* V.v.1-5)

The interaction between men is weirdly sexual. Troilus's misogynistic feelings toward Cressida steer him back toward the homoerotic domain of combat, and Thersites envisions Troilus as "tickling" Diomedes's helmet (V.iii.176).³⁶ The change of heart is never simply between men and women. Cressida's betrayal is always already a matter between men. Her inconstancy becomes a battleground for masculine rivalry: proof of victory, of humiliation, of the shifting tides of war and honour. And even without her betrayal, men would have found other ways to start wars, if only to transform themselves into heroes. As Louise Glück writes in *Departure*, a short poem that reframes Homer's epic through a wife's perspective, men's yearning to become heroes often outweighs their desire to stay with the women they claim to love:

On the beach, voices of the Greek farmers,
Impatient for sunrise,
As thought dawn will change them
From farmers into heroes.
(*"Departure"* 19-22)³⁷

³⁵ Derick R.C. Marsh. *Passion Lends Them Power: A Study of Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*. Manchester University Press, 1976: 43.

³⁶ Gary Spear. "Shakespeare's 'Manly' Parts: Masculinity and Effeminacy in *Troilus and Cressida*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1993, at 421.

³⁷ Glück, Louise. *Poems: 1962–2020*. Penguin Books Limited, 2021.

Section 2: Jealousy with no self-knowledge

In the first section, Shakespeare's terrible neutrality in love is manifest in his understanding of inconstancy. In this section we will delve into another form of vagary in love: when people perceive inconstancy in their imagination, many of them experience a strong emotion that can completely transform them, and this emotion is jealousy. Shakespeare establishes his neutrality in jealousy by examining it through various characters and settings, acknowledging it as a ubiquitous emotion. The most famous example is, of course, Othello. In all of Shakespeare's plays, there are anticipations and afterlives of Othello. These "other Othellos" each respond to jealousy differently, highlighting the emotional complexity and diversity of this emotion. If we look at all the plays in chronological order, there are characters such as Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Iago and Othello in *Othello*, Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Posthumus in *Cymbeline*, and Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, all suffer a jealousy that clouds their judgement and affects their relationships.

Beyond exploring jealousy across different environments and personalities, Shakespeare does take a stance: his "neutrality" regarding jealousy lies in the fact that none of the above characters' jealousy is based on actual unfaithful behaviour; instead, all arise from misunderstandings, mirroring everyday life where jealousy often arises in the imagination, as is the case with Othello. In *Othello*, Shakespeare's neutrality expresses itself in two ways: first, Othello's jealousy lacks self-awareness, yet it harbors mistrust and possessiveness, culminating in violence. Second, Othello's jealousy incites Iago's heinous actions. The absence of self-knowledge and the tragedy of jealousy's incitement make Othello Shakespeare's most intense treatment of jealousy.

A. C. Bradley believes that "Othello's description of himself 'as one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,/ Perplexed in the extreme', is perfectly just", because Othello's nature is not fit for jealousy, it is just that he is easily deceived and acts too quickly, without reflection or delay.³⁸ Bradley stretches credulity in believing everything Othello says. On the contrary, Othello is easily made jealous, and it is exactly his incredulity that fuels his jealousy. The

³⁸ A.C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1937: 186.

relationship between incredulity and jealousy in *Othello* is causal, not mutually exclusive. Othello does not intentionally hide from the truth, just as Norman Sanders suggests by using the word “self-delusion” when restating the reservation of certain critics (represented by F. R. Leavis) about Othello.³⁹ Othello genuinely believes that he is not jealous, merely incredulous, for he simply does not know himself well enough. Othello’s self-awareness is quite conflicted in dealing with the idea of potential betrayal. In Act 3, when Othello first learns of Desdemona’s purported betrayal, with a touch of nonchalance he considers that, if she has indeed betrayed him, he should simply let her go:

OTHELLO If I do prove her haggard,
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings,
I’d whistle her off and let her down the wind
To prey at fortune.
(*Oth.* III.iii.262-65)

This Othello seems to have nothing to do with jealousy.

Yet a few lines later, without any substantial evidence proving Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, Othello abandons the idea of letting her go; instead, he wants to “tear her all to pieces” (III.iii.432). This Othello switches from not being jealous to being jealous, admits to being jealous, and Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona all agree to it as well. Iago slyly pretends to warn Othello against jealousy:

IAGO O beware, my lord, of jealousy:
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.
(*Oth.* III.iii.167-69)

Othello’s response is “O misery!” (iii.173), acquiescing in the fact that he is already suffering from jealousy. In Act 5, before murdering Desdemona, Othello explains his motive: he does not kill her for his own sake, he declares, but because “she’ll betray more men” (V.ii.6). Then, when Desdemona’s chastity is confirmed and the handkerchief plot wrought by Iago revealed, he insists that his murder was not out of hate: “For naught did I in hate, but all in honour” (V.ii.292).

³⁹ Norman Sanders, in his introduction to *Othello*. William Shakespeare. *Othello*. Edited by Norman Sanders, Cambridge University Press, 2003: 23.

Othello denies his jealousy, along with the hatred and disgust the very jealousy creates. Rebecca Olson argues that Othello fears losing his possession of Desdemona, and in Shakespeare's time, jealousy was "losing possession".⁴⁰ But here, Othello points out that it is shameful for men to lose possession of women (Desdemona will only betray more men), and he finds himself honourably taking a moral stance on behalf of all men, totally unaware the thought is an extreme form of jealousy.

Again, however, he insists that he is not jealous:

OTHELLO Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme...
(*Oth.* V.ii.339-42)

If he loved too well, but not wisely, it is hard to understand his killing out of love for Desdemona. He kills her for his own sake (out of jealousy and hatred), not selflessly protecting other men. If we take him at his own word, he is not jealous in Act 3, jealous in Act 3, and not jealous in Act 5; he kills for his own sake in Act 5, and kills not for his own sake in Act 5. Behind the famous "not wisely but too well", Shakespeare centres on jealousy, not on love.⁴¹

Othello's jealousy blinds him to himself and to his own motives, and this is at the centre of the play. When *Othello* is mentioned, most of us spontaneously think of Iago's machinations and (thanks to Coleridge) his motiveless evil. Iago dominates scholarship on *Othello*, and naturally Othello's jealousy is dwarfed and blindsided by Iago's vice. Jealousy, it seems, lacks the tragic gravitas to elevate *Othello* into the top rank of Shakespeare's four great tragedies. Bradley points out that many readers harbour a distaste for Othello's jealousy, perceiving this emotion as repulsive and unpoetic rather than tragic, and therefore unworthy of serious criticism.⁴² Bradley might not directly connect this view to the issue of where the interest in *Othello* criticism lies, but it is evident that analyses of the play prioritize Iago's machinations

⁴⁰ Rebecca Olson. "'Too Gentle': Jealousy and Class in *Othello*." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015: 3-4.

⁴¹ Derick R.C. Marsh. *Passion Lends Them Power: A Study of Shakespeare's Love Tragedies*. Manchester University Press, 1976: 90.

⁴² Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 183.

over Othello's jealousy, as if it were the villain's actions, rather than Othello's jealousy, that were responsible for making *Othello* barely comparable to Shakespeare's other three great tragedies.

When critics analyse the character Othello in the current critical climate, it is his race that predominantly attracts scholarly attention. But Othello's race or outsider status may complicate, even deepen his jealousy, but cannot exclusively account for the emotion, and if that jealousy is not dealt with, the tragic core of the play is not fully captured. Focusing on racial issues does not help to give a holistic view of Othello's jealousy. There is a variety of reasons for Othello to be jealous, as there is for all readers suffering from the same emotion. What is universally true and relevant is that, as long as jealousy is real, it is easy for everyone to get jealous, regardless of their race or social status, and jealousy transforms people and precipitates tragedy.⁴³

What is more intriguing is the way Othello's downfall unfolds step by step after his succumbing to jealousy. The key to understanding this downfall is to distinguish between Iago's autonomous scheming and the actions he undertakes under Othello's own coercion. When critics discuss Iago,⁴⁴ his lack of motivation is considered almost a given, a tantalising myth that has puzzled and mesmerised readers and audiences. What Coleridge meant when he famously coined the phrase "The motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity" in his lectures on Shakespeare was that Iago possesses pure evil; that his motives are not just hidden or unknown, but are not to be explained by any logic.⁴⁵ For Coleridge, moreover, the motives Iago confesses to in his soliloquies cannot be trusted. Stephen Greenblatt, accordingly, uses the theory of Iago's motivelessness as a fact in many of his works, including *Will in the World*, where he insists that

⁴³ More about Othello's jealousy can be found in Bradley J. Irish's research on the early modern racial anthropology of jealousy and the relationship between Moor and jealousy. Irish found that Othello's race is not particularly jealous as imagined in the Shakespeare criticism, and Shakespeare's contemporary writers also wrote many other peoples who have excessive jealousy. Bradley J. Irish. "Just How Remarkable Was the 'Jealous Moor'?" *Othello, Jealousy and Early Modern Racial Stereotypes.* *Shakespeare.* vol. 21, no. 1, 2025, pp. 74-90.

⁴⁴ There are all different criticisms to Iago, being motiveless evil is just the best known among them. Marvin Rosenberg offers a detailed summary of Iago in criticisms, including good, pure evil, stupid and dull, etc. See Marvin Rosenberg. *The Masks of Othello; the Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics.* University of California Press, 1961: 166-67.

⁴⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism.* Edited by T.M. Raysor, Harvard University Press, 1930: 350.

“Shakespeare refused to provide the villain with a clear and convincing explanation for his behavior”.⁴⁶

But Iago is not motiveless, nor is his scheme that grand or vicious in the first place. I agree with Piotr Sadowski that Iago never plots to go as far as taking Desdemona’s life, but only manoeuvres to take Cassio’s lieutenant’s job and provoke Othello to madness.⁴⁷ As Jonathan Bate asks, if Iago were to kill Othello, how could he get a promotion? How can Iago afford to lose someone that he can so easily manipulate?⁴⁸ Iago does not hide his intentions from the audience in his soliloquies. In Act 1, Scene 3, he reveals his hatred for Othello, suspecting him of involvement with his wife. As revenge, Iago plans to convince Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona. The scheme aims both to avenge himself and to secure a promotion: “To get his place and to plume up my will / In double knavery” (I.iii.375-76).

In Act 2, Scene 1, Iago reiterates his hatred. Suspecting an affair between Othello and his wife, Emilia, he will not be happy unless he can have an affair with Desdemona and be “evened with him, wife for wife” (II.i.280), or, if he fails to sleep with Desdemona, can “put the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgement cannot cure” (II.i.281-83). Iago’s satisfaction stems from driving Othello into a state “even to madness” (292) and getting Othello to thank him, love him, and reward him (289). And his plan stays the same: to plant jealousy into Othello’s mind and reap a reward from Othello — the promotion. The darker part of the plan is in anticipating that Othello will be tortured by jealousy. His phrase, “even to madness”, registers a sense of uncertainty as to where the plan will lead, and Iago concludes his soliloquy with “Tis here, but yet confused; / Knavery’s plain face is never seen till used” (II.i.292-3). Iago is right about the uncertainty as to where the plot leads, and his patent directorial genius proves unable to control or steer the development of the plot.

This soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 1, is Iago’s second-to-last soliloquy. After Act 2, as the plot develops, there is increasingly less power on the part of Iago to pull at the reins of Othello’s

⁴⁶ Stephen Greenblatt. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004: 325.

⁴⁷ Piotr Sadowski. ““Do It Not with Poison”: Iago and the Killing of Desdemona.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3-4, 2022, pp. 242-57, at 242.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Bate, in his introduction to *Othello*. William Shakespeare. *The RSC Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. edited by Jonathan Bate and Rasmussen Eric, 2 ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022: 3935.

actions. The cessation of Iago's soliloquies follows a Shakespearean pattern: when a character stops soliloquising, he or she loses composure and becomes increasingly influenced by external forces. Hamlet delivers his final soliloquy in Act 4, Scene 4, and then he is never seen on stage to talk or think himself at that depth. In the beginning of Act 5, Scene 1, the gravedigger scene, Hamlet's meditation on Yorick is interrupted by the funeral of Ophelia, which marks the cessation of Hamlet's soliloquies and the start of dealing with the duel and the subsequent killings. What Hamlet does afterwards, and what he believes before in his soliloquies, are opposite. He initially believes that any action is mistaken, and procrastination the best way to avoid the impossibly complex issue of his father's revenge, but afterwards he is obliged to act involuntarily because the plot forces him to do so.

Richard III also has soliloquies in which Richard (as Gloucester) confidently outlines his plans in the early scenes, only to have his composure gradually disrupted by a series of external forces. The shift is signified by the decreasing confidence of his later soliloquies — such as the one in Act 4, Scene 2, where he plans to marry his brother's daughter — and culminates in his complete collapse in the dream soliloquy in Act 5, Scene 3. Iago's case is more telling; he simply stops soliloquising in the face of external forces which oblige him passively to go with the flow, rather than actively steer events with self-assured intent, like the confident director of the initial plot. Iago's soliloquies simply disappear after Act 2, Scene 3, leaving him to be repeatedly pushed to complete the task imposed by Othello — not out of revenge, but out of self-preservation.

The turning point from positive scheming to passive action occurs in Act 3, Scene 3, with Othello's threat to Iago's life if he cannot find "ocular proof" (361) of Desdemona's betrayal:

OTHELLO Make me to see't; or, at the least, so prove it
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on - or woe upon thy life!
(*Oth.* III.iii.365-67)

Othello's dramatic violence erupts in language, as well as in action. In the text of the Arden Shakespeare, there is a stage direction for the line "ocular proof": "[*Catching hold of him*]", indicating Othello's physical aggression. Iago's reply is that it is "impossible" to see sexual acts. Joshua Avery argues that Othello's idealism compels him think his truth-seeking process is

absolutely right, so if he sees proof, Desdemona is guilty, thus he falls in into extreme self-deception.⁴⁹ Millicent Bell's response to the demand for "ocular proof" is that jealousy feeds on the unseen, not the seen.⁵⁰ Iago knows that Othello has given him an impossible mission, because jealousy is a terrible emotion that lives in the gap of paradox.

Othello further proposes a shocking hypothesis that sees through Iago's scheme:

OTHELLO If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more; abandon all remorse;
On horror's head horrors accumulate;
Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed:
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that.

(*Oth.* III.iii.369-73)

This eloquent curse on Iago's soul is more severe than just taking his life. The curse and the threat of physical violence from the eloquent and warlike Othello cannot be ineffective to Iago, who does not initially envision potential damnation when he plans to plant jealousy in Othello's mind and rob Cassio of his position. Paul Cefalu argues that Iago's pleasure here is unmistakable and he enjoys being a masochist.⁵¹ But Iago is a realistic manipulator, not an unrealistic masochist. His jealousy and desire for promotion are deeply rooted in reality, a reality he is not willing to detach himself from or to place his life and soul entirely at the disposal of the game he orchestrates. Nor does Iago expect Othello to forsake his own life by declaring "Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone" (III.iii.359).

Othello's desperation is crucial here. Arden editor E. A. J. Honigmann glosses the word "occupation" as "employment, hence life, because life has lost all meaning for him" (232). I agree with Honigmann; Othello is not merely bidding farewell to his occupation in a military role, but also to his life and his entire sense of purpose in losing Desdemona. Iago's replies — "Is't possible? my lord?" (361) and "Is't come to this?" (367) — reflect genuine surprise, rather

⁴⁹ Joshua Avery. "Protestant Epistemology and Othello's Consciousness." *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, vol. 65, 2013: 277.

⁵⁰ Millicent Bell. "Othello's Jealousy." In her *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*. Yale University Press, 2017: 83.

⁵¹ Paul Cefalu. "The Burdens of Mind Reading in Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Cognitive and Psychoanalytic Approach to Iago's Theory of Mind." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2013: 283-84.

than hypocritical rhetoric intended to further drive Othello to madness. Iago's shock is occasioned by the realization that he is losing control over Othello's reactions, where he only wanted to vex Othello, not to ruin him. If Othello is ruined, Cassio will take his place and, indeed, Cassio does take his place in Act 5, Scene 2, which is exactly what Iago hates.⁵² If Othello forsakes his career, Iago will not be able to get a promotion and Cassio would get further promotion; if Iago fails to prove Desdemona's unfaithfulness, his life is at risk; if he is exposed for fabricating rumours, he will face Othello's curse. There is no way to go from this point except to play Othello's game. Ultimately, it is Othello's jealousy, rather than Iago's own original scheming, that compels Iago to commit further atrocities.

Othello, jealous but without self-knowledge, is also unaware that he has orchestrated his own tragedy when, in his last words, he describes himself as:

OTHELLO Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe

(*Oth.* V.ii.340-44)

Othello regards himself as a passionate lover and downplays his atrocities, claiming that he was being passively worked on ("being wrought") and thus bewildered (perplexed) and passively "in" the extreme, rather than actively "acting" the extreme. Grammatically, the passive voice and the preposition "in" suggest Othello lacks any knowledge of his own agency in committing the violent acts. He then continues to use elegant language to sugar-coat his crimes, referring to his loss as "throwing away a pearl". Throughout, he glosses his acts of murder, seeing himself not as guilty, but as a noble lover. Even his suicide serves to embellish his self-image as an honourable lover who gets blindsided by Iago, not a jealous murderer who plans the killings. Othello's self-complacency, the "idealism" and "self-deception" mentioned by Joshua Avery, are embarrassing. Timothy W. Burns suggests that by hearing the "loved not wisely, but too well" speech and witnessing Othello's suicide, the audience is not moved to condemn Othello but is instead

⁵² Piotr Sadowski. "'Do It Not with Poison': Iago and the Killing of Desdemona." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3-4, 2022: 248.

inclined to pity him.⁵³ Yet it is difficult to feel pity for a violently jealous murderer who, even at the point of death, remains unable to grasp the nature of his own wrongdoing and seeks to aestheticize and dignify his self-image.

The reason why Shakespeare selects jealousy, this destructive human trait in the romantic love relationship, to take so large a space in his four great tragedies might be because of this emotion's universal and ubiquitous quality. Othello is one of the most devoted romantic lovers, even Iago admits that he is "of a constant, loving, noble nature" and a "most dear husband" to Desdemona (II.i.270-71). But jealousy, Othello's jealousy, murderous, unfathomable, and devoid of self-awareness, is the most destructive emotion of romantic love. Shakespeare's terrible neutrality unflinchingly reveals this darker, human side of romantic love.

Shakespeare explores the same dark emotion in many of his plays; as I suggested earlier, there are many 'Othellos' in the canon besides Iago and Othello himself: Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598); Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597-1601); Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07); Posthumus in *Cymbeline* (1610); Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* (1611). Jealous men first appear in the genre of comedy between 1579 and 1601. The most outrageously jealous man is Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), who falls into Don John's trap and publicly insults Hero "to death" at the wedding, with Don Pedro's support. Nor is the wedding insult scene the most shocking scene of his jealousy. Even after Hero's supposed death, Claudio feels no guilt and continues brazenly to insult her father, brushing him aside saying "Away, I will not have to do with you" (V.i.77), behaving arrogantly in Messina, her father's territory. Shortly afterward, Claudio has the audacity to joke with Benedick about their duel and Benedick's affair with Beatrice, demonstrating how lightly he takes Hero's death. Nothing conceals his cruelty. Claudio is Sir Timbreo in the source Bandello's story of Timbreo and Fenecia, but Sir Timbreo never insults Hero at their wedding, he only writes a message to cancel the wedding. Instead, his conduct invites public condemnation because of his attempts to distance himself from the marriage entirely. Shakespeare's Claudio, however, is at once more realistic and more ruthless, signifying Shakespeare's willingness to explore the cruel side of jealousy throughout his plays.

⁵³ Timothy W. Burns. "One That Loved Not Wisely but Too Well: Devotional Love and Politics in *Othello*." *The Soul of Statesmanship: Shakespeare on Nature, Virtue, and Political Wisdom*. Edited by Khalil M. Habib and L. Joseph Hebert Jr. , 2018, chapter 1.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597-1601), Ford plays a comical jealous husband who is constantly outsmarted and made to look foolish by his wife. Shakespeare does not allow Ford's jealousy to cause any real harm, making the jealousy in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* light-hearted.

After the two Othellos in *Othello*, the next tragedy to feature jealousy is *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07). Unlike Claudio's, Iago's, and Othello's, Antony's jealousy is not baseless, as Cleopatra does pay homage and show attention to Octavius through the messenger Thidias in Act 3, Scene 13. Antony and Cleopatra's love is complex, and will be analysed further in the next session. In the romances *Cymbeline* (1610) and *The Winter's Tale* (1611), written at the end of Shakespeare's career, the potential for tragedy is forestalled by reconciliation at the end of the play, and jealous men are punished more severely and for longer than they are in the earlier comedies and tragedies. Rather than granting them a quick death, Shakespeare makes them live on, repenting their self-ignorance. Leontes repents for sixteen years for wronging his wife Hermione, while Posthumus, even while believing his wife unfaithful, comes to realize that his crime of murdering her is far more severe than her supposed adultery. Leontes and Posthumus are Othellos who find redemption by recognising their jealousy and lack of self-awareness. Still, however, Shakespeare takes something away from them permanently, and they cannot undo all the injuries they inflict. Shakespeare's punishment for Leontes is grievous: for sixteen years, he loses his entire family, and in the end, his son Mamillius cannot be restored.

Section 3: Love with worldliness

Antony's lack of self-awareness and jealousy in *Antony and Cleopatra* comprise two of the elements of their tragic love story. His lack of self-awareness encompasses an ignorance of the relationship between his political ambition and his love for Cleopatra. Antony makes a huge mistake in imagining that his political career and personal ambition belong in Rome. Shaped by his Roman identity,⁵⁴ he mistakenly regards Egypt as a place of mere hedonism, failing to see

⁵⁴ James Hirsh singles out Cleopatra's phrase "a roman thought" in Act 1, Scene 2 to describe this typical Roman mentality. He emphasizes that Rome appears differently from the perspective of Egyptians than it does from the perspective of Romans, and similarly, Egypt is perceived differently by Romans and by Egyptians. I highlight the

that it is where his political ambitions can truly take flight. Upon the death of his wife, Fulvia, he confesses that he has to “break off” from “this enchanting queen”, because his idleness hatches “ten thousand harms more than ill” (I.ii.125-7). The thoughts of many Romans’ echo this understanding. His follower Philo, for instance, opens Act 1 saying “this dotage of our general’s / O’erflows the measure” (I.i.1-2). Octavius addresses Antony with a simple injunction: “Antony, Leave thy lascivious wassails” (I.iv.57).

However, Antony and his fellow Romans’ view of Egypt as mere idleness is narrowly Roman and reflects both cultural bias and a propagandistic effort to discredit him. Antony can only be great, alive and strong, by staying in (or relocating to) Egypt and staying away from Octavius. Antony’s Soothsayer has already warned him, but he refuses to listen:

ANTONY Say to me, whose fortunes shall rise higher,
Caesar’s or mine?

SOOTHSAYER Caesar’s.
Therefore, O Antony, stay not by his side.
Thy daemon – that thy spirit which keeps thee – is
Noble, courageous, high unmatchable,
Where Caesar’s is not. But near him thy angel
Becomes afeard, as being o’erpowered; therefore
Make space enough between you.

ANTONY Speak this no more.

(AC II.iii.15-25)

Antony’s return to Rome renders him personally nothing beneficial, and only assists Octavius to check Pompey’s power. Pompey himself explains in Act 2, Scene 1, that, without Antony’s participation, his rising powers will not be balanced by Octavius: “my powers are crescent” (II.i.10). After a renewed alliance with Octavius and meeting Pompey, Antony thanks them that

ANTONY The beds i’th’ East are soft; and thanks to you,
That called me timelier than my purpose hither,
For I have gained by’t.

difference in perspectives because readers easily fall into the trap of Roman perspective and fail to see the positive aspects in Egypt. For more comparison between Rome and Egypt, see James Hirsh. “Rome and Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra and in Criticism of the Play.” *Antony and Cleopatra: New Critical Essays*, edited by Sara Munson Deats, Routledge, 2005, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/anu/detail.action?docID=199666>.

(AC II.vi.50-52)

Antony's address reveals that he is unaware that he gains little by foolishly stepping in, instead of strategically stepping back and staying in Egypt, allowing Pompey and Octavius to exhaust themselves in their conflict.

Antony further weakens himself and his cause by forming an alliance with Octavia and staying in Rome, until he realises that he has been egregiously exploited by Octavius and returns to Cleopatra, as Enobarbus had prophesied when Antony left Cleopatra in Act 2, Scene 2:

MENAS Now Antony must leave her utterly.

ENOBARBUS Never. He will not.

(AC II.ii.243-44)

Enobarbus might mean that Antony cannot leave Cleopatra because of love, but clearly an alliance with Cleopatra is politically good for Antony, too. During the period of the Second Triumvirate, Roman power was reorganized and redistributed: Octavian controlled Italy and the western provinces, while Antony governed the Roman East, including the Greek provinces, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt; Lepidus was assigned North Africa.⁵⁵ It is wise for Antony to make Egypt the center of his power, relying on its immense wealth and strategic location to consolidate his rule in the East and to confront the Parthian Empire (also mentioned by Shakespeare in the play). Whether by using Egypt's financial resources to stabilize his existing territories or by treating it as a base from which to project and expand imperial power, this strategy is a politically coherent and rational plan. To take the stance of the Romans to think Antony's vacillation is between "Egyptian pleasure and his political obligations to the Roman empire and Roman allies" and "between Roman piety and excessive pleasure, between honour and epicureanism" falls into the trap of the Roman mentality in the play and misconstrues that pleasure and political success cannot coexist.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ For more historical references see session "Antony's reorganisation of the East" and "Antony, Cleopatra and Parthia" of Chapter 14 "Octavian's rise to power". Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland. *The Ancient Romans: History and Society from the Early Republic to the Death of Augustus*. Routledge, 2021.

⁵⁶ Roger Stritmatter and Shelly Maycock. "A Kingdom for a Mirth: Shakespeare's 'Fatal Cleopatra' and the Worm's Turn." *Critical Survey*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2022: 47.

Reuniting with Cleopatra, Antony still has a chance to flourish, but his unawareness of how complicated their relationship is keeps destroying his political ambition. According to Octavius, Antony and Cleopatra are “levying /The kings o’th’earth for war” (III.vi.69-70). If Antony had known himself better, he would not have taken such a detour. Allan Bloom’s opinion that “Antony is drinking poison, but oh how good it tastes!”⁵⁷ is not exactly right. Cleopatra is not the poison; on the contrary, Rome is. Shakespeare spares no effort in vividly sketching a potential future in which Antony and Cleopatra create a great empire, the possibility of which I will look at more closely later. The bright future, however, is sabotaged by Antony’s continuing lack of self-awareness, which reaches its first peak when, out of jealousy, he throws a tantrum with Thidias. In Act 3, Scene 13, Octavius sends Thidias to urge Cleopatra to betray Antony, and Cleopatra, in front of Antony’s follower Enobarbus, pays homage to Octavius. Enobarbus quickly goes to tell Antony of Cleopatra’s betrayal, and Antony becomes jealous and violently whips Thidias. Bevington thinks this episode is difficult to interpret; that Cleopatra might have acted ironically towards Thidias, but might also want to desert a sinking ship and convert to Octavius, as Enobarbus suggests.⁵⁸ Antony’s momentary jealousy leads to violence and engenders in his followers a mistrust in his temperament and abilities as a leader.

The truth is that there is no pure love, nor pure political intention between Antony and Cleopatra. As the Arden editor John Wilders says, “Nothing purely good or evil can be found in the play and what seems admirable in one context is shown as ridiculous in another — or, rather, appears as both admirable and ridiculous at one and the same time”.⁵⁹ Cleopatra is more alert than Antony to the inescapably political dimension of their relationship, and for this reason her emotional excesses rarely translate into political damage. Antony’s volatility, by contrast, precisely because he fails to recognise how deeply their intimacy is entangled with politics, repeatedly results in grave political misjudgements. The relationship of Antony and Cleopatra is structured by a terrible mixture of reasonable paradoxes.

⁵⁷ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 300.

⁵⁸ David Bevington, in his introduction to *Antony and Cleopatra*. William Shakespeare. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Edited by David M. Bevington, Cambridge University Press, 1990: 26-27.

⁵⁹ Wilders, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 49.

What drives this violent outburst is Antony's uncertainty about whether he can trust Cleopatra and his lack of understanding of Cleopatra herself. Whether or not Cleopatra wants to abandon a sinking ship, she chooses to side with Antony, and in their fight, Cleopatra earnestly questions Antony, pleading that he does not truly know her — "Not know me yet?" (III.xiii.163) — before swearing a solemn curse upon herself, invoking dire consequences should her words prove untrue, until Antony is momentarily pacified. Yet his jealousy and the resulting mistrust do not entirely dissipate. After his defeat on battle in Act 4, Scene 14, he blames Cleopatra's betrayal for his defeat and draws the famous cloud analogy:

ANTONY That which is now a horse, even with a thought
The rack dislimns and makes it indistinct
As water is in water.

(AC IV.xiii.9-11)

Lewis thinks "dislimn" the antonym of "limn", a kind of painting method mentioned in Nicholas Hilliard's *Arte of Limning* using water colour or some other kind of wash. So to dislimn is to "unpaint from within" — Antony forsakes his fundamental identity, like wind blowing the water and changing its shape.⁶⁰ In Northrop Frye's *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, Antony's disappearance as a cloud when "the rack dislimns" is thought to be due to his "self-destroying will".⁶¹ It is true that Shakespeare does not allow Antony's doom to be caused by outer forces, like Octavius, but by himself. Antony's lack of self-awareness persists until, out of passion, he forces Cleopatra's feigned death, when he returns to a sober self-awareness, understands his love for Cleopatra, and takes his own life for his love in Egypt and his honour in Rome.

In spite of its tragic end, *Antony and Cleopatra* is essentially a play praising romantic love, not criticising it. Shakespeare's choice of genre perfectly aligns with the principle of terrible neutrality: it is great love, despite of the chaos, or the chaos that makes the love great. On a foundation of inevitable tragedy and predetermined history, he crafts an intense love story,

⁶⁰ Rhodri Lewis. "Shakespeare's Clouds and the Image Made by Chance." *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2012: 7-8.

⁶¹ Northrop Frye. *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*. University of Toronto Press, 1996: 74-75.

offering an alternative vision of the future for the two lovers. In Act 5, Scene 2, after her attempted suicide, Cleopatra relays her dream in a rapture:

CLEOPATRA I dreamt there was an emperor Antony.
O, such another sleep, that I might see
But such another man! . . .
His face was as the heav'ns, and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course and lighted
The little O, the earth. . . .
His legs bestrid the ocean; his reared arm
Crested the world

(*AC* V.ii.75-81)

In her dream, Antony is an emperor whose greatness is commensurate with the universe, whose generosity and wealth have no boundary, and whose authority is acknowledged by all other kings, who bow to him in submission.⁶² This counterfactual history exists alongside the triumph of Octavius recorded in history.⁶³ Antony's declaration in Act 1, Scene 1 — "Let Rome in Tiber melt . . . We stand up peerless" (I.i.33–40) — reveals Shakespeare's reordering of a traditional hierarchy of values: even the grandeur of Rome seems insignificant in comparison to the exalted love between Antony and Cleopatra.⁶⁴ In this reordered hierarchy, Cleopatra and Antony become titanic figures — larger than history, larger than scripture — whose grandeur defies what Shakespeare's audience would have conceived as the moral and political order.

Their future, as envisioned in Cleopatra's imagination, flashes before her in a moment of triumph. Even when their empire-building is recounted ironically by Octavius to Octavia, the grandeur of the list of kings who bow to Antony and Cleopatra mirrors the epic catalogues of heroes in the *Iliad*:

OCTAVIUS No, my most wrongèd sister, Cleopatra

⁶² The play contains numerous textual moments that underscore the sheer magnitude of the empire to which Antony and Cleopatra belong. This geographical and imaginative grandeur has been analysed in detail by G. Wilson Knight, particularly in his discussion on pages 206–207.

See G. Wilson Knight. "The Transcendental Humanism of Antony and Cleopatra." *The Imperial Theme: Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies Including the Roman Plays*, vol. 6, Oxford University Press, 1931, pp. 199-262.

⁶³ Jane Hwang Degenhardt. "Counter-Imperial Horizons in Antony and Cleopatra." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2022: 67.

⁶⁴ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 303.

Hath nodded him to her. He hath given his empire
Up to a whore, who now are levying
The kings o'th'earth for war. He hath assembled
Bocchus, the King of Libya; Archelaus,
Of Cappadocia; Philadelphos, King
Of Paphlagonia; the Thracian king, Adallas;
King Manchus of Arabia; King of Pont;
Herod of Jewry; Mithridates, King
Of Comagene; Polemon and Amyntas,
The Kings of Mede and Lycaonia,
With a more larger list of sceptres.

(*AC* III.vi.65-78)

Even the language of hatred toward Antony and Cleopatra is lush. Just as Allan Bloom says, the play contains some of the lushest language in all of Shakespeare.⁶⁵ From Act 4, scenes 7 to 9, Antony's army triumphs over Octavius, and he is swept up in proud optimism. Echoing Henry V's speech at Harfleur, Antony thanks his soldiers, praising their valour and comparing them and himself to gods in general, and specifically to Hector and Phoebus Apollo, fostering the illusion for the audience that victory over Octavius is within reach.

Antony's interaction with Cleopatra is equally romantic, poetic, and celebratory. He calls her "Nightingale", while she reverently addresses him as "Lord of lords", solidifying their mutual admiration and the grandeur of their shared triumph. Antony asks Cleopatra to extend her hand to Scarus, the loyal follower who contributes to their victory, saying, "Commend unto his lips thy favouring hand" (IV.viii.23). This moment beautifully intertwines the themes of love and war, blending them seamlessly. In the eyes of the Romans, Cleopatra is a diversion to Antony, but it is this diversion that gives Antony the strength to withstand division and endure all the obstacles.⁶⁶ According to Frye, compared with the two-faced cunning of Antony when he is in Rome in both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony in Egypt appears honourable,

⁶⁵ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 300.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Baldo. "Fatal Distraction: Eclipses of Memory in Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra." *The Routledge Handbook of Shakespeare and Memory*. Edited by Lina Perkins Wilder and Andrew Hiscock, Routledge, 2018: 160.

romantic, chivalric, and warlike, as if possessing a “superhuman vitality” that the Antony in Rome cannot equal.⁶⁷

But Frye’s full opinion is that Egypt is able to evoke a superhuman vitality from Antony that Rome cannot equal, not in spite of the fact that it destroys him, but because it destroys him.⁶⁸ Antony and Cleopatra fail because history requires it and the tragic element Shakespeare introduces is Antony’s instinctive prioritization of love above all else — a decision driven by the very “superhuman vitality” of his nature, though his Roman reason remains dissatisfied with it. Antony’s power starts to decline when he notoriously follows the fleeing Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in Act 3, scenes 7 to 11:

ENOBARBUS Naught, naught, all naught! I can behold no longer.
Th’Antoniad, the Egyptian admiral,
With all their sixty, fly and turn the rudder.
To see’t mine eyes are blasted.

(AC III.x.1-4)

Antony’s decision to fight at sea faced strong opposition from his followers, yet under Cleopatra’s influence he stubbornly insists on it. The failure at the Battle of Actium causes his followers to lose faith in him and feel disheartened, leading some to betray him, even as Antony, in a self-destructive manner, urges them to abandon him:

ANTONY Friends, begone.
I have myself resolved upon a course
Which has no need of you. Begone.
My treasure’s in the harbour.

(AC III.xi.8-11)

Shakespeare not only emphasizes Antony’s failure, but also portrays him as violating the principles of military leadership and tactics outlined in Renaissance war manuals.⁶⁹ The failure of the Battle of Actium is twofold: not only does Antony, ignoring warnings, blindly echo Cleopatra when she says “at the sea”, but he then pursues Cleopatra in her escape from the battle. Bernard Shaw strongly criticises Shakespeare’s depiction of Antony fleeing the battle for love,

⁶⁷ Frye, *Fools of Time*, 73.

⁶⁸ Frye, *Fools of Time*, 73.

⁶⁹ Bevington (ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*, 12.

calling it unbearable. Shaw's argument is that such a scenario is inappropriate for a tragedy, contrasting it with Mistress Quickly pawning her plate for love in a comic setting, where romantic infatuation is more fitting and effective.⁷⁰

What Shaw really cannot bear are the unbearable feelings of Antony and Cleopatra for each other, expecting Shakespeare to write a tragedy of love in which other forces overwhelm the perfect lovers, not one in which imperfect lovers are killed by their own love. Shakespeare's Antony is far from perfect, torn between his love and his reason and despising himself for the dishonourable negligence of his duty. But still, inevitably and instinctively, he does it for love. As early as Act 1, he fears he might lose himself in this "dotage" of love (I.ii.113). Shakespeare makes the love of Antony and Cleopatra uncontrollably destructive. David Bevington in a note to the play in the New Cambridge Shakespeare argues that Shakespeare invites us to see the ironic discrepancy between the myth that Antony imagines and the often disappointing failures of his actual life.⁷¹ But there is no irony in this: despite the failure at the Battle of Actium, Shakespeare still creates a beautiful illusion of Antony and Cleopatra's future, praising them without distorting the historical facts.

What really kills the couple is not Octavius, but the betrayal of their love for each other.

ANTONY All is lost!
This foul Egyptian hath betrayèd me.
My fleet hath yielded to the foe, and yonder
They cast their caps up and carouse together
Like friends long lost. Triple-turned whore! 'Tis thou
Hast sold me to this novice, and my heart
Makes only wars on thee. Bid them all fly;
For when I am revenged upon my charm,
I have done all. Bid them all fly. Begone!

(AC IV. x.9-17)

We cannot be certain whether or not what Antony says here is true. Why would the soldiers, so loyal to him, surrender and cheer for the enemy? Perhaps this is just an illusion, much like the moment in *Julius Caesar* when Cassius in Act 5, Scene 3, hears cheering and mistakenly

⁷⁰ Bernard Shaw. *Three Plays for Puritans*. H. S. Stone, 1901: xxix.

⁷¹ Bevington (ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*, 232.

believes his troops have been captured, when in fact it is his two armies joining together. Some scholars also take a positive view of Antony and Cleopatra's position in the war. For example, Sali Said argues that the Battle of Actium may have been a tactical retreat — a strategic choice rather than an impulsive flight on their part.⁷² While I do not fully agree with this interpretation, it reflects the tendency of some critics sincerely to acknowledge the potential strength and political/military viability of their union. If Antony and Cleopatra had remained united in purpose, they might have had another chance at victory, just like the victory in Act 4, Scene 7.

Antony's response to this setback is one of self-destruction. He lashes out at Cleopatra without any justification; she has done nothing to deserve it. The scene where she angers Antony by speaking with Octavius's messenger takes place in Act 3, Scene 11, *after* the defeat in Act 3, Scene 7, but *before* their victory in Act 4, Scene 7. Their relationship shows no real deterioration after that. It is Antony's jealousy and emotional volatility that underlie this crucial tragic speech. Moreover, Antony's furious command to dismiss the army is an utterly self-sabotaging act. At this point, Antony's self-unawareness reaches its second and final peak.

Terrified by his fury, Cleopatra blindly follows her maid Charmian's advice. In this life-and-death moment, she stages another fake suicide at Charmian's suggestion — just as she had done before:

CLEOPATRA To th' monument!
Mardian, go tell him I have slain myself.
Say that the last I spoke was 'Antony',
And word it, prithee, piteously. Hence, Mardian,
And bring me how he takes my death. To th' monument!
(*AC IV.xiii.6-10*)

As early as Act 1, Scene 3, Cleopatra has used the threat of death to elicit Antony's pity and reignite his love. Her feigned illness, as Claire Hansen and Bríd Phillips argue, is so convincingly performed that it mirrors the genuine medical symptoms of heartbreak, or Takotsubo syndrome (TTS):

CLEOPATRA Cut my lace, Charmian, come!

⁷² Sali Said. "The Question of Culpability in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*: Revealing Cleopatra's Humanity." *Critical Survey*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2022: 1.

But let it be; I am quickly ill, and well,
So Antony loves.

(*AC* I.iii.71-73)

In this context, the only effective treatment is Antony's care itself.⁷³ Enobarbus sees through this romantic trickery from the beginning. In Act 1, Scene 2, he tells Antony:

ENOBARBUS Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying.

(*AC* I.ii.136-140)

Once again, Shakespeare's terrible neutrality is at work: Cleopatra's pretended death, once merely part of a flirtation and admired for its theatricality, is still effective. Though Antony and his attendants are fully aware of her games, they continue to be taken in. In Act 4, Scene 13, Cleopatra uses this love-strategy once more, and Antony believes her, just as he always does in their love games. Even Eros, by his side, is convinced of her lie. What was once a flirtatious spice in their love now pushes Antony toward his end. Believing Cleopatra dead, he kills himself: "I have lived in such dishonour that the gods / Detest my baseness" (IV.xiii.55-57). He must follow Cleopatra, catch up with her in the afterlife, and beg her forgiveness: "I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and Weep / for my pardon (IV.xiii.44-45). He even imagines that, in Elysium, they will be the most dazzling couple of all, more loving than any mythical lovers the gods have known:

ANTONY Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops,
And all the haunt be ours.

(*AC* IV.xiii.51-54)

Antony's vision of the afterlife is filled only with thoughts of their love; he imagines no continuation of power, no legacy of empire, and nothing about the future of their children. Few people are capable of such selfish self-forgetting, and it is this utterly selfish kind of love that proves more powerful than any other expression of love.

⁷³ Claire Hansen and Bríd Phillips. "'Wilt Break My Heart?' Takotsubo Syndrome and Shakespeare's Discourse of Heartbreak in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear*." *Shakespeare*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2025: 310.

To reiterate, then: it is not Octavius who destroys Antony and Cleopatra, but their love — its jealousy, its theatrical games, its volatility. Shakespeare cannot change the historical fact that they die in their war against Octavius, but he can allow love, rather than Octavius's military success, to be what kills them. The love between Antony and Cleopatra does not end with Antony's suicide. His death occurs not at the end of Act 5, but at the end of Act 4. Shakespeare deliberately separates the lovers' deaths to subvert the aesthetic conventions of romantic suicide. In his vision of the afterlife, Antony emphasizes that he and Cleopatra will be happier than Dido and Aeneas. Like Antony and Cleopatra, Dido and Aeneas are a power couple, but Aeneas famously abandons Dido in pursuit of greater political glory. Compared to Aeneas, Antony's and Cleopatra's manipulations of one another for political advantage are even more ruthless: Cleopatra aligns with Antony for power; Antony marries Octavia to gain political capital, abandoning Cleopatra, until he realizes that his alliance with Caesar brings no real benefit. Only then does he return to Cleopatra and seek to build an empire from Egypt.

Once again, I would depart from Allan Bloom, who thinks of Antony and Cleopatra as diametrically opposed to Octavius: the former live solely for love, the latter solely for power. Bloom argues that politics in *Antony and Cleopatra* is no longer honourable, that the nobility of ruling the world has vanished, and that this is why Shakespeare breaks with Machiavelli and instead turns to Antony, opening up a new path and showing sympathy for Antony's eroticism.⁷⁴ However, I would argue that Antony and Cleopatra never fully abandon political ambition; on the contrary, they continually seek to use each other to gain greater power, and the empire they build is a product of that mutual ambition. Whether we call it love or eroticism, their way of ruling the world is more noble than Octavius's cold, loveless domination.

After Antony's death, Cleopatra does not immediately follow him into death. Instead, she appeals to Octavius in the hope of securing power or preserving property for her children. This is not a betrayal of Antony, but rather fulfills his dying wish that she "seek [her] honour" from Octavius (IV.xv.48). He even names Proculeius as the only man she should trust (IV.xv.50). Yet once Antony is gone, Cleopatra is emotionally dead. Her love and her political power were bound up with him. She knows there is no hope of restoring Egypt's sovereignty. She is no

⁷⁴ Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 313.

longer a queen, but, as she says, like a “milkmaid”, performing the “meanest chares”. Emotionally, too, she is no different from common women, subject to “poor passion”, the grief of mourning a lost lover (IV.xv.79–80).

After managing the practical matters of defeat in Act 5, Cleopatra embraces death with seductive theatricality:

CLEOPATRA As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle –
O Antony! – Nay, I will take thee too.

[*She applies another asp*]

What should I stay –

(*AC V.ii.305-307*)

Her afterlife, too, is imagined only as a reunion with Antony. Nothing else in the world is worth staying for (307). Their love is real, and so is their self-interest. Antony’s final thoughts are of Cleopatra’s safety and property. Cleopatra, after securing what she can, chooses to die for the preservation of her own honour, as well as for a reunion with Antony. These complex actions crystallize the essence of their relationship: a love between two middle-aged people, full of calculation, desire, and worldly entanglements, a *terrible neutrality* that gives their love depth and endurance. To them, their love is neither bitter nor tragic, but ecstatic – an ecstasy worth dying for. It is difficult to imagine Romeo and Juliet, had they lived long enough to attain power and wealth, still sustaining such passionate and sublime love. *Antony and Cleopatra* is a tragedy of love that celebrates both the seductive and the destructive power of passion, where love triumphs over political power, royal status, and material wealth. And yet, had the story not been bound by history, Shakespeare might have written a version where they succeeded. As Auden observes, the unusually fine weather in the play reflects Shakespeare’s desire to present the world as seductive, desirable, and deeply precious.⁷⁵ Even within the framework of his *terrible neutrality*, Shakespeare preserves a deep-seated preference for romantic love.

Conclusion

⁷⁵ W.H. Auden. *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Edited by A.C. Kirsch, Princeton University Press, 2019: 242.

Shakespeare's view of physical desire is also markedly neutral: desire has a positive side, capable of fostering the love of Antony and Cleopatra, or of Romeo and Juliet. But it also has its negative side, such as the sexual consummation of Troilus and Cressida, which appears too rash. Desire can even turn people into monsters — like Cloten, the foolish son in *Cymbeline*, who attempts to rape Imogen — or into laughingstocks, like Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, who is duped by fake love letters and ends up role-playing in the woods at midnight. Shakespeare often sees the corruption in romantic love, making it far from pure. Instead, it becomes fraught, messy, and disturbingly flawed. Those aspects of love discussed in this chapter — its inconstancy, lack of self-knowledge, and worldliness — are all part of the *layers* Shakespeare adds to love. There are actions by Shakespeare's lovers even more brutal than the calculated cruelty between Antony and Cleopatra, with their worldly concerns and mutual manipulation. Posthumus's command to have Imogen killed in *Cymbeline* is *utterly cruel, as is Othello's crime of passion in killing Desdemona*. Shakespeare introduces such complications into love, not out of cynicism or satire, but because imperfection is the norm. Vagary, inconstancy is normal; self-ignorance is normal; the conflicting influence of worldly concerns is normal. People in love are naturally prone to jealousy, fickleness, the abandonment or betrayal of love for other causes, even to turning love into hatred. In this sense, Shakespeare's *drama* provides a fitting lens through which to portray love over time.

Shakespeare's *terrible neutrality* will never produce a perfect love, but it can depict true love. Whether it lasts for a moment or for a period of time, true love always exists. In Shakespeare's imperfect romances, even villains can experience true love; even the unfaithful can experience true love; even those who kill their beloveds can have true love. Like the sonnets — at times full of complaint and reproach, at times accusing the young man of betrayal — they always return to praise, to professions of enduring affection. Shakespeare's sonnets are a revolt against various currents of love philosophy of his day. For Shakespeare, love is not an abstract ideal but a complex and turbulent reality, and Petrarchan tradition does not do love justice.⁷⁶ All Shakespeare's 154 sonnets are love poems, but when read in sequence, they reveal perhaps most eloquently of all his works his terrible neutrality toward love. Shakespeare never presents love as

⁷⁶ Lu Emily Pearson. "Shakespeare and Love Conventions." *Elizabethan Love Conventions*, University of California Press, 1933: 75.

purely sweet, there is always bitterness mixed in. If it is not the universe that is flawed, then it is the youth; if it is not the youth, it is the speaker himself. The sonnets contain every negative emotion love can evoke, and the emotional tone of any sequence fluctuates constantly. Out of his terrible neutrality, Shakespeare never offers us a perfect love. Yet it is precisely this mixture of sweetness and bitterness that moves so many real-world readers to tears.

CONCLUSION

In my introduction, I used *Hamlet* to illustrate Shakespeare's "terrible" or uncanny neutrality and its relationship to his earlier plays to show that *Hamlet* did not appear fully-formed, so to speak, but was shaped through a repeated exploration of scenarios and ideas found in his earlier plays. The very process that shaped *Hamlet* was itself guided by that same uncanny neutrality. By way of conclusion, I want to return to the idea of revision with difference as evidence of an experimental artistic method that confirms Shakespeare's variability and impartiality in the vital matters of religion, politics, law, and love that have been the focus of this thesis. Whether we look at the phenomenon prospectively through the early plays or retrospectively through the late plays, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare revisits particular ideas and particular moral and physical scenarios in his plays to explore the possibilities of different interpretations and a different valence. Under the guidance of this uncanny neutrality, Shakespeare's linguistic skill, development of character, and understanding of the world are all enhanced, and he is able to revisit and reimagine early dilemmas and re-address the fates of early characters in his later plays.

Religion

These plot and character revisitings are by no means simple copy-and-paste repetitions; rather, they explore ways in which the same dramatic scenarios can produce different outcomes, and how different human dispositions react differently in identical situations. For example, the motif of divine dreams has entirely opposite effects in *Henry VI* and in *Pericles*. In the early *Henry VI*, the "blind" charlatan, Simpcox, claims to have received a divine dream, asserting that God instructed him to go to St. Albans and that a miracle cured his blindness. His deception is exposed by the Duke of Gloucester. (As I suggest in my chapter on Religion, the contrasting reactions of the characters before and after Simpcox's exposure illustrate the sophisticated nature of religious language.) In the late play, *Pericles*, Shakespeare revisits the motif of the divine dream: the goddess Diana appears to Pericles in a dream, instructing him to go to Ephesus and publicly reveal his past sorrows. Pericles does not know whether or not the dream is true, nor what he might gain by going to Ephesus, and, at that time, it seems more reasonable to go to another country for revenge, instead of blindly following the divine dream. However, he follows divine instruction and is rewarded by an unexpected reunion with his long-lost wife. In *Henry VI*, there is no real divinity, no genuine

faith; the miracle is fabricated. In *Pericles*, there is a divine presence and an apparent miracle, though without faith the miracle cannot be realised. When the motif of divine dreams reappears in Shakespeare's late romances, the dramatic technique itself is not significantly enhanced; even allowing for the difference in genre, the older Shakespeare seems less sceptical of religious practices than his younger self and more open to its power. The argument by Stephen Greenblatt and others for a "Catholic Shakespeare" suggests itself in *Pericles*, especially given that miracles are so central a part of the Catholic faith, but it cannot explain the Shakespeare who mocks divine dreams in *Henry VI*. Such readings tend to overlook the complexity and polysemy of religion across the many different dramatic contexts in Shakespeare and are therefore not entirely convincing.

Justice

Although Shakespeare does not extend juridical redress to many of the innocent parties in his works, he grants a form of retrospective justice to some by fashioning equitable outcomes for their analogues in later plays. Falstaff's symbolic rehabilitation in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is one such case; Jack Cade is another. In his *Henry VI* plays, Cade — whom I have in the chapter on Law described as a tyrant of law — dies, not in open combat, but in procedural deficit: fleeing, starving, and apprehended in the garden of the Kentish gentleman, Iden. His final protest — "I, that never feared any, am vanquished by famine, not by valour" (2H6 IV.x.73–4) — suggests a miscarriage of natural justice and raises the hypothetical question of justice. Had Cade not been famished and in flight, might he have prevailed against Iden? In Shakespeare's final play, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, two young noblemen, Arcite and Palamon, are set to duel over a woman (Emilia). Arcite, favoured by the royal court, encounters Palamon — escaped from prison, exhausted and famished — during a hunt. Unlike Iden with Cade in *Henry VI*, or Achilles with Hector in *Troilus and Cressida*, Arcite does not exploit Palamon's disadvantaged condition; he not only conceals Palamon's escape from the Greeks, but furnishes him with food and armour, thereby ensuring that Palamon may confront him under conditions of equity and procedural fairness. Throughout the play, the nobility of the two young men elevates those around them and secures them a reputation and status commensurate with their virtue. Whereas the jungle world of *Henry VI* offers no truly noble figures, only ordinary people performing ephemeral acts of nobility. Nobility there functions merely as an epitaph. In contrast, in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, nobility is reinstated as both a moral and legal category: it fulfils and elevates the young men, reverses the fate of nobility in earlier drama, and infuses the play with a humanistic jurisprudence.

Shakespeare, in his late plays, also restores justice to the prosecuted generals and political leaders of the earlier plays, as if granting them redress and equity within the jurisdiction of his collected works. In *Henry VI*, two figures stand out as victims of the “law of the jungle”. The first is the valiant general, Talbot, who, deprived of reinforcements by the internecine strife of the red and white roses, chooses with his son to die on the battlefield rather than flee for safety. The second is the slandered Protector, who endures with a Stoic patience until he is stripped of both power and dignity and dies a violent death. The first figure is resurrected in *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*: had the general not perished in political conflict, he might have returned to the historical stage — perhaps to fail, perhaps to triumph. The second character reappears in *Julius Caesar*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter’s Tale*: patience in adversity brings steady suffering, yet the patient figure is always haloed with integrity. (The theme of patience as classical and religious consolation for the early modern mind has been discussed in detail in the Religion chapter.) In Shakespeare’s late plays, however, patience that has endured half a lifetime is sometimes rewarded with a miracle, affirming the belief that even those in deepest despair may yet find renewal.

Love

Though we have discussed romantic love in the Love chapter, two additional themes relevant to romantic love — desire and paternal love — fall under the broader concept of love and remain closely entwined with Shakespeare’s notion of terrible neutrality, particularly prominent in the late plays. Shakespeare’s treatment of desire has its origins in early plays and reaches its height in the late plays. The early modern literary tradition, rooted in Christian culture, generally treated sexual desire as sinful. In Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, the women who empower knights are chaste and virtuous, whereas the women who lead them astray are portrayed as seductive and licentious. In Shakespeare’s final works, such as *The Tempest*, Prospero’s magic can only serve as the surface mechanism for a revenge plot. The real instrument of reconciliation comes from the skilful generation and orchestration of desire. Prospero, the ageing Duke of Milan, facing his usurping brother and the complicit King of Naples on his island, can either exact vengeance by killing them, or allow them to repent and, together with his grown daughter, return to their homeland. The best marital match for his daughter is the Prince of Naples, who has come to the island. Prospero engineers their romantic encounter so that they fall in love at first sight; he also restrains the prince in ways that provoke his daughter’s sense of justice and compassion, allowing them to spend more time together privately. Eventually, their union, secretly arranged, is fully within Prospero’s design.

Before the wedding, Prospero warns the prince about the dangers of unbridled desire. This warning is not only to prevent premarital consummation, but also reflects Shakespeare's late understanding of sexual desire: it is a powerful force, inherently neither good nor evil; whether it destroys or renews a kingdom depends entirely on human choice. Along with the controversies of desire in *Henry VI* and the deliberate use of desire in the late plays, Shakespeare also depicts it as sublime and sacred in *Romeo and Juliet* and as pleasurable and luxurious in *Antony and Cleopatra*. He explores the distinctions and confusions between desire and love in *Troilus and Cressida*, and considers its relation to religion in *Measure for Measure*. Across his entire career, Shakespeare's reflections on desire originate in the questions raised in *Henry VI*: must human sexual desire necessarily be corrupt? Shakespeare's treatment of desire at one time or another embraces many contradictory stances.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare also makes a breakthrough in his treatment of father-daughter relationships. In the early plays, such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, the father Baptista disregards his daughter Katherina's feelings and forces her into marriage, and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the father Page behaves in a similar way. In *As You Like It*, Duke Senior is completely unaware of the hardships his daughter Rosalind endures during her exile in the forest. In *King Lear*, Lear shows a violent temperament toward Cordelia that earlier fathers never have, but at the same time he also displays an unprecedented degree of care and love for her as a father. *Lear* marks Shakespeare's profound exploration of father-daughter bonds. The three later romances — in *Pericles*, Pericles's search for his daughter Marina; in *Cymbeline*, Cymbeline's remorse toward his daughter Imogen; and, in *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes' abandonment of and repentance towards his daughter Perdita — all echo elements of *Lear*. But in *The Tempest*, Prospero's concern for Miranda rises to another level. He becomes a parent who fulfils both fatherly and motherly roles for her. Their relationship is unlike that of any other father and daughter in Shakespeare's previous plays: Prospero and Miranda depend entirely on each other, and once they are cast away on the island, his love and care for her become part of their daily life, not just a conventional stage gesture. It is Shakespeare's neutrality that generates variations on paternal love, but it is Shakespeare's terrible neutrality that creates versions of paternal love that are, variously, traditionally negligent, fashionably devoted, shockingly violent, humanly tender, and movingly humble. Shakespeare finalises his depiction of paternal love in Prospero, whose care for Miranda and careful planning of her future reflect the universal theme of parental devotion and represent a return to a more realistic and grounded portrayal of fatherly love.

Politics

In my Politics chapter I have concentrated on the history plays, with little direct analysis of power itself. Yet Shakespeare's portrayal of power is equally fascinating in its terrible neutrality, especially in *The Tempest*, where Shakespeare's depiction of power also achieves a new perspective. His treatment of usurpation as a recurring motif in this play, compared to earlier plays, exemplifies this neutrality. When Sebastian and Antonio are tempted to assassinate Alonso, the moment recalls Cassius's incitement of Brutus, Menas's attempt to persuade Pompey to kill the triumvirs (Caesar, Antony, Lepidus) at the banquet, and the witches' instigation of Macbeth. Yet the two instances in *Julius Caesar* lack any real catalytic force. Cassius merely fans the flame — Brutus already entertains the same suspicion. Menas's suggestion has no effect either, since Pompey refuses such dishonourable means, even though he would have rejoiced at the downfall of the triumvirs. In contrast, the three witches' temptation of Macbeth is dramatically decisive: Macbeth has never conceived the idea of usurping the crown, nor of murdering Banquo and his son, until their prophecy plants and inflames his ambition.

In *The Tempest*, Sebastian and Antonio are indirectly tempted by Prospero himself, for it is Prospero who arranges the scene: his assistant Ariel lulls the others to sleep, leaving only the two awake. What is terrible in this temptation is its silence: no one whispers in their ears, urging them to kill Alonso. Prospero merely creates the opportunity, and Antonio immediately conceives the plan to persuade Sebastian to kill his brother. Sebastian's only hesitation is a scruple of conscience:

SEBASTIAN But, for your conscience?

ANTONIO Ay, sir; where lies that?

(*Tempest* II.i.272-73)

By asking where it "lies", Antonio forces conscience into visibility, as though it were something that ought to appear to the naked eye; its inevitable invisibility then becomes the pretext for denying its meaning altogether. This resembles Falstaff's classical question, "What is honour?", but applied to usurpation the question turns from trivially cynical to lethally dangerous. Prospero understands well that a usurper like Antonio will inevitably persuade Alonso's brother Sebastian to usurp in his turn; he needs only to provide the occasion. Prospero orchestrates the entire situation and breaks the sleep spell only at the brink of murder, rousing the sleepers and shattering Sebastian and Antonio's grim dream. This scene echoes earlier Shakespearean temptations yet remains unlike any of them.

As for power itself, Prospero's renunciation of it in *The Tempest* is more difficult, and more admirable, than a relentless pursuit of it. His dramatis personae range from the single-minded figures who live only for power, such as many lords in *Henry VI*; to those who possess but refuse to

pursue it, as exemplified by Henry VI himself; to Henry IV and Henry V, conscious of the unbearable weight of power; to the banished Duke in *As You Like It*, who, having lost the struggle for power, finds joy in pastoral retirement; to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who unconsciously discover the torment of power once they have seized it; and to Hamlet, torn between the pursuit of power and the pursuit of selfhood. I have already discussed, in the Religion chapter, how Prospero's renunciation is inflected with a religious dimension, but I have not yet considered the dynamics of his relation to power itself. Prospero's trajectory resembles that of the banished Duke in *As You Like It* in its first act of political loss, but, unlike the Duke, he does not live free of care in the forest. Rather, Prospero follows a pattern later familiar from figures such as the Count of Monte Cristo, he gathers strength on the island to reconstruct order; in the mode of a revenge tragedy hero, he manipulates his enemies. Yet, at the end, he chooses reconciliation and to relinquish his power. Though his brother, Antonio, and Alonso's brother, Sebastian, remain unrepentant, Prospero seeks coexistence, not annihilation, becoming a composite figure of Shakespeare's terrible neutrality — various and perplexing, yet coherent. Nowhere else in Shakespeare does a man so ardent for power renounce it so completely.

This renunciation is the mark of his wisdom: he recognises his age, the inevitability of succession, and his own withdrawal from the stage of power. By handing authority to the next generation, he simultaneously begins the pursuit of a new kind of power — no longer worldly status or force, but the power of language, of wisdom, of forbearance, visible in his mercy and compassion, which guide him in restraining his enemies and in reconciling courtly relations to come. Though *The Tempest* is not Shakespeare's final play — *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* follow — it powerfully conveys a sense of closure: the feeling of retirement, of reconciliation born of age, of compassion, and of courage. It reveals the pain of relinquishing a lifelong vocation, yet also the wisdom of letting it go.

In this conclusion, I have traced the way Shakespeare's neutrality on major issues enabled his late plays to enter into dialogue with the earlier ones: religion, politics, law, and love. If we turn to other large themes of Shakespearean drama, such as theatre, science, war, and history, the result is the same: all exhibit Shakespeare's fascinating neutrality when we consider the whole canon, and all are worthy of further study. Though Shakespeare does achieve improvements over time, from the perspective of Shakespeare's complete works, it is impossible to claim that one period of his plays is categorically superior to another. The late plays, however, are undeniably filled with reflections on the early plays and with a more affirmative response to the world. His breakthrough

early work, *Henry VI*, is suffused with greed for power and with human hatred, while the late plays, though no less marked by suffering, are nevertheless imbued with love — between people and between humankind and the world. “What’s past is prologue”, as Antonio says in *The Tempest* (II.i.249), and the problems raised in *Henry VI* become questions that Shakespeare continues to explore throughout his career, deliberately returning to his original concerns in the late plays with renewed intensity.

In the late plays, we can also see Shakespeare’s dramatic technique matures under the principle of neutrality over time, especially in its negotiation between language and action: the most important means of resolving problems is no longer action, but language. The function of language is an indicator of how much a dramatist believes in his art.¹ If we regard language’s function as a variable featured in similar scenes across the whole canon, Shakespeare’s language becomes stronger and more dominant over time. In the early plays, it is often highly ornamental, marked by Shakespeare’s artistic self-consciousness, but largely impotent. In *Henry VI*, for example, the nobles’ desire for power is the true engine of the plot, and no matter how elaborate the language may be, it does not alter the course of events. Language exists to serve action — it is used for quarrelling, lying, and oath-breaking, but seldom resolves problems or becomes the structural foundation of the action. The beauty of language, and the social function that comes with that beauty, begins to be explored in plays of the same genre, such as *Richard III* and *Henry IV*. Richard’s wooing of Anne and Henry V’s triumph at Agincourt are both rhetorical masterpieces that nonetheless serve to propel the plot forward.

Having said that, action still remains the principal force driving the plot forward. Gradually, however, Shakespeare comes to master the use of blank verse as the medium in which people think and speak, and in doing so, his language grows ever closer to the complexity of human experience. In the late plays, the status of language rises dramatically — it becomes the key means by which problems are solved. Language becomes the vessel of human intelligence and conviction. In *Measure for Measure*, it bears secularized religious thought, serving both petition and temptation, and drives the action forward; in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, it is the instrument by which Helena persuades the king to undergo treatment and convinces the widow and her daughter to cooperate; in *The Winter’s Tale*, it is the very force sustaining sixteen years of repentance in Leontes; in *The Tempest*, it is the means by which Prospero commands the spirits to act and effects his restoration to

¹ A skilled writer does not necessarily have to make language the driving force of a work; it is entirely legitimate to produce a great piece in which language does not play a central role. Yet an awareness of what language can achieve reflects a writer’s faith in the power of words, and it is a mark of distinction when a writer can demonstrate, within the work itself, that language is indeed great.

Milan. David Schalkwyk researches the effect of Shakespeare's language on the internal action, describing it as performing "things through the language it uses".² I believe Shakespeare's words not only betray language's internal action, but its internal capacity to cause action. Just so, Raphael Lyne contends that Shakespeare's characters use rhetorical language and figurative thought, not merely to express psychology, but actively to shape and drive the plot — a point powerfully exemplified by Iago's manipulation of Othello.³ Action is born of language, and once language becomes a form of witchcraft in *Othello* it evolves into a supreme form of magic in Shakespeare's late plays.

Finally, I want to reiterate that Shakespeare's terrible neutrality offers a perspective from which to look at his plays as embracing all stances. Shakespeare is not a writer who can be confined within a single category. Donald Friesner, in his essay "*William Shakespeare, Conservative*", argues that, shaped by Shakespeare's mixed noble and middle-class background, education, and life experiences within a conservative environment, Shakespeare's plays generally show respect for order, law, traditional institutions, and monarchy, and express scepticism toward popular violence, making him a consistently conservative writer. That is why he claims one may "conscientiously and reasonably call this man . . . Shakespeare, Conservative".⁴ By contrast, in *Radical Shakespeare: Politics and Stagecraft in the Early Career*, Christopher Fitter dismisses those scholars as "Tudor Isaiahs" who believe in the "groundless conservative myth".⁵ The title itself signals that Fitter's study emphasizes Shakespeare's radicalism and places his perspective firmly against the conservative interpretation. Fitter is, again, only one of the many scholars who view Shakespeare as radical. Similarly, in my master's thesis, I highlighted just how radical Shakespeare could be in terms of gender issues and the reversal of hierarchy in the *Sonnets*. Yet all these opposing readings illustrate the same point: labelling Shakespeare as either radical or conservative captures only one aspect of his work and temperament. Regarding Shakespeare's own stance, he deliberately avoids a fixed position, which allows him to write multiple, and even contradictory, perspectives in a neutral manner.

The notion of Shakespeare's having no fixed stance leads naturally to the holistic perspective adopted in this thesis, which reflects on the limitations of interpreting his plays through a single critical lens. I have looked at the way he embraces as many themes and character types as possible,

² David Schalkwyk. "The Performative Power of Shakespeare's Language." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Language*, Cambridge University Press, 2019: 35-36.

³ Raphael Lyne. *Shakespeare, Rhetoric and Cognition*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁴ Donald Neil Friesner. "William Shakespeare, Conservative." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1969: 178.

⁵ Christopher Fitter. *Radical Shakespeare: Politics and Stagecraft in the Early Career*. Routledge, 2012: 30.

and at how he systematically returns to chosen topics in different — sometimes many different — contexts. Far from advocating a single theoretical approach, my understanding of the variety and impartiality characteristic of Shakespeare's dramatic method is a challenge to critical models dominated by a single perspective. A single theory can certainly provide a useful lens, but to claim that Shakespeare himself views everything through only one lens — to insist that he is a Catholic propagandist or (as Coleridge does) that he is always pro-authority; that he is for or against human sexuality, or for or against the lower orders, or for or against any idea or institution — is too absolute and betrays the uncanny neutrality of his vision of the human world.

Apart from Shakespeare, I propose a reconsideration of the tendency to fix an author, or even an entire period, within a single paradigm. The author of *The Elizabethan World Picture*, E. M. W. Tillyard, is a staunch advocate of the view that Shakespeare was conservative and argues that not only Shakespeare but all Renaissance writers reflected the order of the Elizabethan era. Yet even the notion that the Elizabethan period was an orderly, conservative era has become untenable. Helen Hackett's recent study, *The Elizabethan Mind*, demonstrates that Elizabethan England was not constrained by a unified ideology, but rather constituted a time in which a plurality of ideas flourished.

Apart from examining Shakespeare across his complete works, I want to advocate that a whole-works perspective provides a valuable methodological framework for literary analysis generally. In Shakespeare's case, it enables us to grasp the scope of his "terrible neutrality" across the canon. Critics, whether consciously or unconsciously, sometimes adopt a complete-works panorama in approaching Shakespeare. Some, such as Coleridge in his *Shakespeare Lectures* and Northrop Frye in works like *Fools of Time* and *A Natural Perspective*, structure their criticism around a central idea — characterisation and poetic principles for Coleridge, myth and genre theory for Frye — that runs across the canon. Others, such as W. H. Auden in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* names the chapter titles taken from the plays themselves. The same perspective also brings into focus the distinctive features of other authors. For instance, Shakespeare's contemporaries — such as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Middleton — were prolific playwrights, and questions raised in one of their works may be addressed in another. Similarly, when we consider Jane Austen's oeuvre as a whole, we can see how she repeatedly experiments with the same motifs. Because her characters' professions and living environments are relatively limited, she develops a remarkable skill in using variations and permutations to explore familiar patterns in fresh ways. The complete-works approach can be daunting, as it requires scholars to engage with even the less popular works, but it offers a whole world of explanations and research opportunities that make the effort worthwhile.

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