Catholic-Protestant Controversy and the Shakespearean Stage:
The Play of Polemic

Submitted by Daniel Charles Cattell to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in October 2012

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Catholic-Protestant Controversy and the Shakespearean Stage

THE PLAY OF POLEMIC

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In memory of Dr. Mike Fielding
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Abstract

Shakespeare’s career in the theatre coincides with the ascendancy of Catholic-Protestant polemic, a body of writing that exerted a deep and pervasive influence on literate life in early modern England. Eroding a secularizing bias within the academy, the much heralded turn to religion in the discipline has already covered ample ground in repositioning Shakespeare in relation to the religious cultures of his age. But if such criticism is no longer the preserve of parti pris commentators, Shakespeare’s plays have yet to be fully explored through the particular breed of antagonistic writing that emerged during the Reformation and eventually contributed to the period’s self-styling as the “scribbling age.”

Placing drama within this neglected field of enquiry, I reveal the importance the modes and preoccupations of such controversial writing had for the evolving shape and content of Shakespeare’s art. The four plays considered here illuminate the subtlety and sophistication with which Catholic-Protestant polemic permeates the theatre; but they also demonstrate that theatre could in turn permeate polemic, hijacking and radically altering its concerns or critiquing its values and assumptions as a practice. King John, I Henry IV, Hamlet, and Henry VIII are all marked by cultures of religious scribbling, but in strikingly different ways. By charting changes to these configurations across such a chronology, we can grasp how the plays loosely move from a tentative, experimental approach to polemic to a greater assuredness in its repudiation, developments with important implications for piecing together Shakespeare’s development as a reader and writer.
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1 Andrew Maunsell, *A Catalogue of English Bookes* (1595)  page 11
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7 Matthew Sutcliffe, *The Supplication of Certaine Masse-priests*, 1st edn. (1604) 158
8 Matthew Sutcliffe, *The Supplication of Certaine Masse-priests*, rev. edn. (1604) 159
10 Anon., *The Royall Line of Kings, Queenes, and Princes, from the Uniting of the Two Royall Houses, Yorke, and Lancastor* (1613?) (Society of Antiquaries, Broadside No. 175) 189
11 Title page, Samuel Rowley, *When You See Me, You Know Me* (1613) 197
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Note on the text

The spelling of early modern texts has been retained with the following exceptions: u, v, i, and j have been regularized and contractions silently expanded. Italics in all quotations are original unless otherwise noted.

Capitalization in titles of works has been standardized throughout. Full publication information is provided in a footnote when a work is cited for the first time. Thereafter, when it is clear which work is being referred to, citations are supplied parenthetically in the text.
# Abbreviations

**ODNB**
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online edn.

**OED**
Oxford English Dictionary, online edn.

**STC**
English Short Title Catalogue, online edn.
hosted by the British Library, <http://estc.bl.uk>
Introduction: Shakespeare and the “scribbling age”

shall I now become a scribling Creature with fragmentes of shame, that
might long sithence have beene a fresh writer with discourses of applause?

—Gabriel Harvey, Pierces Supererogation (1593)

Perceptions of the unbridled transit of insidious Catholic texts in late-Jacobean England are
perfectly apprehended (and simultaneously exploited) in John Gee’s The Foot out of the
Snare (1624). “Witnesse the swarmes of their booke,” he writes:

which you may heare humming up and downe in every corner both of City and
Countrey . . . I verily beleewe, they have vented more of their pamphlets within
this Twelve-month, then they did in forty yeeres before. They have Printing-
presses and Book-sellers almost in every corner.

Published a year after the First Folio, this lurid piece depicts a vast clandestine infrastructure
for the production and dissemination of reading matter that had been officially suppressed
since the outlawing of the Catholic faith at the beginning of the reign of James I’s
predecessor, Elizabeth. Gee’s own experience of the phenomenon was doubtlessly first hand.
Nominally a Church of England clergyman, he had inclined to Catholicism, and was among
the congregation assembled for a Jesuit sermon in a Blackfriars gatehouse on 26 October
1623, a tragic occasion during which the building collapsed, killing some 95 people.

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1 Gabriel Harvey, Pierces Supererogation (London, 1593), 20.
3 The Elizabethan Act of Uniformity (1559), successor to the Edwardian Acts of 1549 and 1552 repealed by
Mary I (1553–58), reintroduced the Book of Common Prayer, and made attendance at the thereby standardised
form of Protestant worship compulsory.
instigation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, a more or less unscathed Gee used the occasion to produce a text that both celebrated his providential deliverance and exposed the means of Catholic proselytising by which, as his title indicates, he had almost been ensnared. Thus, conjuring these contraband books as constituents of an all-encircling pestilence, Gee pursues an established strategy in Protestant polemical writing, associating the Catholic clerics responsible for this noxious textual circulation with the locusts loosed on the world in the Book of Revelation. The pamphlet itself is fashioned as inoculation against the threatened spiritual contagion, as its author vaunts: “so shall not the Locusts of the wilderness, with their Scorpion-like tayles (who now swarme in such abundance) hurt any of our little ones with the deadly sting of their contagious error” (24).5

Gee’s pamphlet is certainly a work of its moment. Appearing in the wake of the collapse of diplomatic negotiations over the Spanish Match, the proposed marriage alliance between Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta Maria Anna, it capitalises on the fresh license and market for such material amid the renewal of anti-Catholic legislation after a temporary period of officially sanctioned tolerance.6 Indeed, one of the ways in which it establishes its currency is through its insistence upon capturing a phenomenon now occurring on an


unprecedented scale, for the specific claim is that more Catholic pamphlets have appeared “within this Twelve-month, then they did in forty yeeres before.”

Gee anatomizes as much as he describes the infestation of the metropolis; his appended catalogues of “Popish books” (R4\textsuperscript{r}-S4\textsuperscript{v}), “Popish Book-sellers” (T1\textsuperscript{r}–v), “Popish Priests names” (T2\textsuperscript{r}–V4\textsuperscript{v}), and “Popish Physicians” (X1\textsuperscript{r}–X2\textsuperscript{v}), frequently with addresses supplied for named individuals, overlabour the text’s claims to have merely apprehended an objective reality, and perhaps designedly counterbalance the more nebulous sensationalism of its polemical language. But if Gee is keen to exacerbate fears among his readership of a land overrun with fugitive, verminous texts – a situation that effectively justifies the appearance of his own exposé – the general outline of his account does cohere with official legislation. For 1624 also witnessed the issue of James’s *Proclamation against Seditious, Popish and Puritanicall Bookes and Pamphlets*, which warned that

> the printing, importing, and dispersing of Popish and seditious Bookes and Pamphlets . . . is growen so common, and practised so licentiously, both to the traducing of Religion, and the State, as that great inconveniences may grow therby, if they be not prevented and punished.

The sober rhetoric of official censure contrasts with Gee’s polemical idiom even as it corroborates his claims. Governmental hendiadys blurs the distinction between “Popish and seditious, . . . Religion, and the State,” producing a conflation of religious and political

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\footnote{Providing a clue to its self-conscious hyperbole, the list of “Faults escaped” records that a much smaller comparative timeframe of “12 yeares” had been erroneously printed in earlier uncorrected copies of this first edition (O2\textsuperscript{r}). Subsequent editions prefer suggestive ambiguity, printing in place of “forty yeeres” simply “many yeers.”}

\footnote{James I, *A Proclamation against Seditious, Popish and Puritanicall Bookes and Pamphlets* (London, 15 August 1624).}
dissent whose roots lie in the critical legacy of the Henrician Reformation: the monarch’s assumption of supremacy over the English Church.9

However, Gee’s assertion of novelty obscures the fact that the palpable threat of politically and spiritually destabilising Catholic books is not new. In 1565, a year after Shakespeare was born, Elizabeth I wrote to Edmund Grindal, Bishop of London, in an attempt to restrain the influence of:

certayn unnatural and seditious subjects of this our realme, being fled out of the same, and lyving on thother syde of the seas, [who] ceasse not contynually to contryve and send over hither sundry seditious and slaunderous books to be spredde abrode here, partely for there own private gayne, but specially to move the ignorant people to dysorder.10

Official Elizabethan attempts at suppression meant that the production, distribution and ownership of Catholic books became an often dangerous endeavour, but, as the appearance of subsequent legislation highlights, not one that could be eradicated.11 The ineffectual regulation of textual traffic is partly responsible for the very public symmetry of refutation in print, a necessary strategy, though hardly an unproblematic one given the attention drawn to

9 For a recent account of this legacy and its effect on chronicle history and drama in the sixteenth century, see David Womersley, Divinity and State (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
11 The antiquarian John Stow became a prominent victim of Grindal’s mandate when his collection of “Popish books” was seized, including “such books as had been lately set forth in the realm, or beyond sea, for defence of Papistry” (John Strype, The History of the Life and Acts of . . . Edmund Grindal [London, 1710; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1821], 184–85). Notable proclamations from later in Elizabeth’s reign include: A Proclamation Made against Seditious and Traiterous Bookes, Billes, and Writings (1 July 1570); A Proclamation for the Suppressing of Seditious Bookes and Libelles (12 October 1584); A Proclamation against the Bringing In, Dispersing, Uttering and Keeping of Bulles from the Sea of Rome, and other Traiterous and Sedicious Libels, Bookes, and Pamphlets (1 July 1588).
an adversary’s arguments when reproduced for the purposes of rebuttal. The “Catalogue of all such Popish Bookes either aunswered, or to be aunswered,” set forth by the prolific controversialist William Fulke in 1579, stressed that Catholic works not yet responded to were “for the most part . . . in answering, and those which are not shall receive their several replies.” That Fulke both called upon his adversaries to highlight inadvertently omitted works and subsequently revised the list in accordance with the fluid shifts of polemical exchange argues the priority placed on countering (or at least being seen to counter) oppositional writing.

The central argument of this thesis is that a complex and productive relationship exists between this burgeoning, contemporaneous world of Catholic-Protestant polemic and Shakespeare’s drama. It is an argument I will pursue microcosmically in the following chapters, each of which focuses on an individual Shakespeare play in order to analyse how it is configured within broader cultures of antagonistic religious writing. But specific textual

12 The Catholic writer (and later Jesuit) John Rastell, for instance, expressed glee at the Protestant “liberalitie towardes poore Catholikes, whose writinges without the author his labors and charges, full diligentlie thei have printed” (*A Replie against an Answer (Falslie Intitled) in Defence of the Truth* [Antwerp, 1565], †jv–†ijr). Protestant anxieties over the pernicious effects that even ostensibly refuted Catholic arguments might have on certain kinds of reader are crystallised in the powerful proverbial figure that “out of one and the same floure the Bee sucketh hony, and the spider draweth poison” (Thomas Wilson, *The Rule of Reason, Containing the Arte of Logique* [London], 1551), S4r). See Alexandra Walsham, “The Spider and the Bee: The Perils of Printing for Refutation in Tudor England,” in *Tudor Books and Readers: Materiality and the Construction of Meaning*, ed. John King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 163–90. I am very grateful to Professor Walsham for sharing a version of this essay with me in advance of its publication.


14 William Fulke, *A Retentive, to Stay Good Christians, in True Faith and Religion, against the Motives of Richard Bristow* (London, 1580) A2v–A3r; idem, *T. Stapleton and Martiall (Two Popish Heretikes) Confuted* (London, 1580), A2r–v. As Jesse Lander writes, “It is this public quality of ‘Bookes of Encounter’ that guarantees their endlessness, for it becomes common to assume not simply that polemics can be answered but that they *must* be answered” (*Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 15). To give one example from the period, in his *Survey of Popery* (London, 1596) the Protestant convert Thomas Bell bragged to his opponents about the impact of their failure to answer the work stemming from his conversion, *Thomas Belts Motives: concerning Romish Faith and Religion* ([Cambridge], 1593):

> Your owne Papists here at home, greatly wonder at your silence in that behalfe: Some (God be thanked for it) are wholly and soundly reformed: Othersome are infornd so to doubt of your doctrine, as they know not in the worlde what to say or thinke thereof: Othersome either seduced by your sinister report, or else to save your credite, if it would be, affirme very desperately, that you have answered my Motives already (A3v).

Michael Questier’s study of early modern conversion notes that polemicists “believed that defections from their own side would occur if opponents’ major works went without reply” (*Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 17).
analysis is premised on a more generic claim I now advance in detail in the first part of this introduction: namely, Catholic-Protestant polemic achieves an ascendancy that contributed to the period’s being styled among Shakespeare’s contemporaries as the “scribbling age.” The second part of the introduction will then examine critical resistance to positioning Shakespeare in such a culture of religious “scribbling,” resistance traceable in the growing prominence accorded to the poet-playwright in his lifetime and continuing today.

I

If not a new phenomenon, Catholic-Protestant polemic grew in importance and substance as a category of writing, bearing imaginative fruit within the literary cultures of the early modern period. Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type printing in the mid-fifteenth century irrevocably altered the technology of religious contestation, transforming far more circumscribed and verbalised practices, such as those methodologically enshrined in the medieval academic curriculum by means of the scholastic disputation,15 into debates that could be played out in front of potentially far wider audiences. As England’s official religious identity underwent a profound, if unsteady, refashioning in the sixteenth century, eventually moving from Catholic to Protestant through the sequence of events historians collectively refer to as the Reformation or Reformations, religious polemic becomes both a dialogic forum in which opposing perspectives and arguments might, in theory at least, engage with each other and a propaganda tool to promote the interests of a particular side.16 Protestant polemic certainly draws on the medieval traditions of anti-clerical satire and complaint

present in Chaucer and others, but, as Jesse Lander’s important recent study of religious polemic and print culture has observed, it is precisely in this period that this kind of writing “achieves a generic regularity, becoming a discursive form with its own recognizable set of conventions.” By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, I suggest, the significance of this printed genre had been firmly established. Lander avoids deploying statistical evidence, and yet the available figures provide at least an approximate indication of general trends. Peter Milward, SJ, the great bibliographer of early modern religious controversy, records a mere three Catholic-Protestant works appearing in 1560; by 1610 that annual total had reached 51. This rise might seem modest in some respects because


18 Lander, Inventing Polemic, 35.

19 While this thesis is concerned primarily with printed polemical works, whose medium generally conferred greater authority and ensured wider distribution, manuscript polemic of course also circulated. As Harold Love has demonstrated, scribal publication thrived alongside print production during the seventeenth century (Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-century England [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993]). In fact, as Earle Havens points out, the logistical problems of a clandestine Catholic textual culture necessitated a greater reliance on scribal publication by Catholic writers (“Notes from a Literary Underground: Recusant Catholics, Jesuit Priests, and Scribal Publication in Elizabethan England,” Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America 99 [2005]: 505–538). The boundary between print and manuscript polemic was, however, a permeable one. Manuscript polemics sometimes find their way into print through the incorporation of their arguments into the refutation of an opponent. For instance, William Fulke’s Confitutation of a Papishe, and Sclaundorous Libelle (London, 1571) reproduces passages of a Catholic manuscript circulating at court, and yet bemoans its poor transcription, wishing for “the principall copie of the authors owne hande” to confer greater accuracy, and hence authority, on the rebuttal (fol. 1r). Alternatively, both print and manuscript mediums might be deployed for the same text, as in the famous case of Leicester’s Commonwealth (first printed under the title The Copie of a Leter, Wryten by a Master of Arte of Cambrige [(Paris?), 1584]), whose suppressed printed text was used as the basis for manuscript copies of which over 65 still survive. See D. C. Peck, “Government Suppression of Elizabethan Catholic Books: The Case of ‘Leicester’s Commonwealth’,” The Library Quarterly 47.2 (1977): 163–77, esp. 173–74.

20 My figures are based upon a count of year by first editions of works listed in Milward’s two-part bibliography, Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age: A Survey of Printed Sources (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), and Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age: A Survey of Printed Sources (London: Scolar Press, 1978). The totals rise erratically year to year with peaks in 1566 (27 works), 1581 (35), 1590 (31), 1602 (36) and 1606 (44). Taking into account the fact that many works printed in the period are no longer extant, and that polemic is perhaps especially liable to perish as an ephemeral genre reacting to the dictates of a particular situation in time (thus lacking the durability of other religious publications such as devotional manuals), these figures are most likely very conservative estimates. H. S. Bennett’s study, English Books and Readers 1558-1603 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), estimates that there are 250 editions of Catholic controversial works alone published during Elizabeth’s reign (126). More generally, the number of published religious works in general in the period is staggering. Admitting the difficulty of defining what ought to count for a religious work in an age where “‘religion’ permeated much, if not all, of what is now secularized,” Patrick Collinson, Arnold Hunt and Alexandra Walsham suggest that “[r]eligious books”, in conventional terms, are found to have been the single most important component of the publishing trade,
obviously connected to overall increases in book production; yet when we take into account
the fact that annual book production remained in the low hundreds for much of the period, we
begin to build up a picture of conspicuous proliferation.21

Further evidence that religious controversy becomes an acknowledged force on the print
market in the period is the appearance of an ambitious bibliographical guide aimed at both
reader and bookseller, Andrew Maunsell’s *Catalogue of English Printed Bookes* (1595).
While a projected third volume was never realised, the first part devotes itself to works in
English “which concerneth such matters of divinitie.”22 As one recent commentator has
remarked, the *Catalogue* as a whole “reminds us of how dominant theology is as the primary
category of cultural attention and print publication,” with “divinitie” accounting for 2,639
works against the mere 321 titles of the second part, “which concerneth the sciences.”23

Indeed, the second part consists of a mere 27 pages of entries against the first part’s 123. Of
its kind the *Catalogue* is unprecedented. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the Swiss
bibliographer Conrad Gesner published a remarkably ambitious catalogue that claimed to
include all works in Latin, Greek and Hebrew.24 Johann Tritheim and John Bale, their efforts
separated from each other by half a century, compiled more geographically circumscribed

21 In 1558, the year of Elizabeth’s accession, annual book production stood at 112 publications, 90 of which
were printed in London. By Elizabeth’s death in 1603, some 45 years later, this figure had all but quadrupled,
reaching 428 titles in total, 337 of which were printed in London. See John Barnard and Maureen Bell, “Table 1.
84.
Matters of Divinitie* (London, 1595). The second part, “which concerneth the Sciences Mathematicall, as
Arithmetic, Geometrie, Astronomie, Astrologie, Musick, the Arte of Warre, and Navigation: And also, of
Phisick and Surgerie,” is printed together with the first, with its own title page and separate pagination.
24 *Bibliotheca Universalis, sive Catalogus omnium scriptorum locupletissimus, in Tribus Linguis, Latina,
Graeca, et Hebraica* (Zurich, 1545).
catalogues of the literatures of Germany and Britain respectively. Yet these three efforts are in Latin. Anton Francesco Doni’s *Libraria* (1550) stands as the first catalogue of vernacular works to be written in the vernacular, but Maunsell’s is the first of its kind in English, evidence of the growing importance of and market for works of vernacular divinity in England by the 1590s. Indeed, Maunsell produces and organizes a category of knowledge as much as he records the most important sub-division in the early modern book trade. Invoking the efforts of his bibliographical predecessors “Gesner, Simler [Josias Simler (1530–1576), Swiss theologian and editor of and adder to a posthumous version of Gesner’s work],” and our countriman *John Bale*” (A4r), Maunsell produces by comparison a remarkably well conceived research tool that, unlike its predecessors, excludes manuscripts in order to focus solely on printed works. Bale’s bibliography is ordered chronologically, with only a prefatory index in alphabetical order, oddly, of the author’s Christian name, and contains works on various subjects; Gesner’s, though not chronological, is also arranged by Christian name. Maunsell, in contrast, selects material by the overarching category of divinity, introduces important sub-divisions within that category, and deploys a sophisticated system of cross-referencing. Authors are arranged in the more useful alphabetical order of surname; but Maunsell also interposes headings for genre, such as “Bible,” listing commentaries and paraphrases by biblical book (10–22), “Catechismes” (28–32), and Sermons (96–107), and subject headings including subjects of controversy such as “Of Faith & workes” (49), “Of Purgatorie”(91), “In Defence of the Popes Supremacie” (111–12) and “Against the Popes Supremacie” (112). When a subject heading or generic keyword appears in the title of a work listed by author’s name, it is italicized to alert the reader to check for other works within that

subject heading, and works listed under a subject heading are usually cross-referred back to the fuller reference given under the author’s name (fig. 1). This system effectively structures writings in the category of divinity in general and controversial exchange in particular, allowing its user both to follow the output of a particular controversialist or discover extant writing on a specific controversial topic. This extremely useful bibliographical tool presupposes the existence a new kind of reader, one who might, like Ben Jonson’s Shakespeare, possess “small Latine, and less Greeke,” but has a keen interest and seeks guidance in the ever-burgeoning field of vernacular religious controversy. Unlike Doni’s Libraria, whose portable duodecimo format meant its readers could consult it on the move, perhaps during an actual visit to a bookseller, Maunsell’s folio format signifies through its sheer size the cultural value and permanence of vernacular divinity and suggests both its professional use as a durable reference work in the book trade and a guide for private study. Maunsell’s own sense of this dual purpose is reflected in the Catalogue’s separate prefatory addresses: “To the Reverend Divines, and Lovers of Divine Bookes, true knowledge of God, and a good Conscience” (A3r–v), and “To the Worshipfull the Master, Wardens, and Assistants of the Companie of Stationers, and to all other Printers and Booke-sellers in generall” (A4r–v). Indeed, a testament to its enduring value as a research tool, the Catalogue was still in use over a century later, providing a ready-made reading list with which Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, navigated the pathways of Elizabethan controversy in preparation for his Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1699).30

Yet Maunsell’s efforts are by design incomplete. Alongside Protestant vernacular works of religious controversy, he includes “The auncient Popish Bookes that have beene Printed

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29 Chartier, Order of Books, 73.
Against the Popes Supremacie, \v. Peter.

The true difference between the regall power, and the Ecclesiastical, translated out of Latine by Henry Lord Stafford, printed by William Copeland.


Vid. Alexander Nouell against Dammart, 76.

Vid. William Thane, entituled, Rooting out of Romish Supremacie, p. 32. 92.

Vid. John Bridges, p. 23.

Vid. Thomas Eves, p. 22.

Vid. a Sermon preachted before the Queenes Maiestie, printed by John Prim. 1585. 8.

Vid. Rainsbys against Hurt. p. 89.

Solemne constitualion of duele popes, for the advancing of their Supremacie: printed and faithfully collected out of theye owne Canon law, according to their very words, &c, printed by John Day. 8. (unc col. 3d. Rognis.) Vid. the defence of peace, &c. p. 45.

A Treatise, pouing by the kinges lawes, that the Bishops of Rome had never right to any Supremacie within this realme, printed by Tho. Barthelet, 1533. 8

A Dialogue between a Knight and a Clarke concerning the power spiritual, and temporall, printed by Thomas Barthelet.

Fig. 1 Andrew Maunsell, A Catalogue of English Bookes (1595).
Fig. 2 MS additions, Andrew Maunsell, Catalogue of English Printed Books (1595).

Facsimile of copy in the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, taken from Early English Books Online.
heere,” but deliberately excludes “Bookes written by the fugitive Papistes, as also those that are written against the present government,” not thinking these “meete for me to meddle withall” (A3\textsuperscript{v}).\textsuperscript{31} However, this incompleteness was also recognised in the Catalogue’s layout, which is generously spaced and purposely interleaved to allow for new or omitted works, popish or otherwise, to be added (A4\textsuperscript{r}) – an opportunity diligently taken by readers of some surviving copies (fig. 2). In practice this strategy allowed the reader to compensate for Maunsell’s unilateral focus, and indeed, one extant copy now in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, heavily annotated in a contemporary hand, incorporates two manuscript lists of its own, entitled “Catalogus librorum prohibitorum Protestantium” and “Catalogus . . . Papistarum,” at the end of the Catalogue’s first part.”\textsuperscript{32}

If Maunsell’s Catalogue attests to professional and readerly interest in all kinds of vernacular religious texts, the terms polemical and controversial, which I will discuss in greater detail below, ought not artificially to quarantine a crucial sub-category that cross-pollinated other recognized modes of religious writing. It has been argued that Catholic writing in the period is very often suffused with polemical concerns, even when its explicit agenda is devotional rather than controversial, since continuing the struggle for the Old Faith on the printed page was “a more acceptable mode of resistance” for the broadest spectrum of English Catholics.\textsuperscript{33} The sentiment is succinctly expressed by the Marian courtier and Elizabethan Catholic exile Sir Francis Englefield, who declared: ‘In steded therefore of the

\textsuperscript{31} Significantly, Maunsell includes “fugitive” devotional works such as A Booke of Christian Exercise (edn., London, 1589) and The Second Part of the Booke of Christian Exercise (edn., London, 1591), correctly attributing them to “Rob. Parsons” (i.e., the Jesuit writer Robert Parsons) even though these adapted Protestant versions of a Catholic work simply bear the initials “R. P.” on their title pages (79). Maunsell’s open ascription to Parsons indicates a conceptual divide in the book trade between works purporting only to foster piety and those openly opposed to the established church.


sword, which we cannot obtayne, we must fight with paper and pennes, which can not be
taken from us.”34 If arguments that print technology helped to precipitate a Protestant
Reformation are not uncomplicated, they do originate, and are prominent, in the very period
in question; by contrast, the ways in which Catholics made use of the early modern press
have typically been less well promoted and understood.35 However, recent redresses of the
ingrown Protestant teleological and triumphalist bias in the traditional accounts recognize the
importance of print to Catholicism. Most cogently, Alexandra Walsham has carefully
presented the case that Catholic piety in the period is also bibliocentric, and suggests that
“[w]e need to set aside the cliché that popery was an intractable enemy of the press and
replace it with an awareness of the existence of two rival cultures of print.”36 Indeed, it has
also been argued that, after the Elizabethan religious settlement, the Catholic “dependence
upon texts [was] if anything even greater.”37

A far more nuanced account of the Reformation has emerged in recent years, one
suspicous of overarching narratives, and focussed on the sporadic nature of religious change,
the experience of the marginalised, and the unsatisfactory nature of confessional labels that
simplify and distort the reality to which they attach themselves.38 In some respects, Catholic-

35 For contemporary connections between the Protestant Reformation and the invention of printing, see, for
example, Jean-François Gilmont, “Protestant Reformations and Reading,” in A History of Reading in the West,
ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts
study, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early
Modern Europe, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), produces, albeit with sophistication
and an absence of providentialism, a fundamentally similar view of print technology as a precipitant of the
Reformation. For a critique of the technological determinism often associated with her work, see Michael
Warner, The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America
36 Alexandra Walsham, “‘Domme Preachers’? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print,”
38 Key revisionist studies include: J. J. Scarisbrick, The Reformation and the English People (Oxford: Blackwell,
and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Christopher Haigh, English Reformations: Religion, Politics,
and Society under the Tudors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). For a recent overview of debates and
Protestant polemic sits uneasily in such an account, with its propensity to reproduce the very kinds of biases and zealous simplifications that scholars have striven to avoid. Yet at the same time, scholarly work in a number of related fields is starting to construct a picture of the extraordinary pervasiveness of the polemical in the period. To give some examples: the indebtedness of Old English Studies to the dictates of early modern religious controversy;\(^{39}\) the polemical agenda underpinning the bibliographical practices of Thomas James (1572/3–1629), first librarian of the Bodleian;\(^{40}\) the adaptation of existing literary forms for partisan ends;\(^{41}\) the interpenetration of sacred music and religious polemic.\(^{42}\)

In generally choosing to adopt the words “polemic” and “polemical” in place of cognate terms such as “controversy” or “controversial” to characterize an ascendant form of Catholic-Protestant writing, I am insisting on a descriptive practice that takes root in Shakespeare’s lifetime. The vocabulary to denote this particular species of writing enters the written language at this point, more than a decade earlier than has previously been assumed. Lander’s *Inventing Polemic* and the *OED* pinpoint the appearance of “polemical” to 1615, in a work by Joseph Hall that promises its reader to combine several distinct types of divinity:

“Speculation interchanged with experience; Positive Theologie with Polemical; Textuall with Discursorie; Popular with Scholasticall.”\(^{43}\) The adjectival use of “polemic,” cited in the *OED* but not by Lander, appears a year earlier, in 1614, in a work to which I come below.

But “polemical” in fact appears in print as early as 1603, in Andrew Willet’s *Antilogie or...* developments in this field, see Peter Marshall, “(Re)defining the English Reformation,” *Journal of British Studies* 48.3 (2009): 564–86.


\(^{43}\) Joseph Hall, *A Recollection of Such Treatises as Have Bene Heretofore Severally Published, and Are Nowe Revised, Corrected, Augmented* (London, 1615), A2. For Lander’s discussion of the emergence of “polemical” and “polemic,” see *Inventing Polemic*, 11–14.
Counterplea, a work responding to the Catholic priest Richard Broughton’s Apoloegick Epistle (1601).\(^{44}\) Surveying the body of hostile writing generated by the recent Archpriest (a.k.a. Appellant) Controversy (1598–1602), an internecine Catholic dispute between Jesuits and secular priests over Rome’s appointment of the pro-Jesuit George Blackwell to oversee the English mission, Willet noted the textual manifestation of disagreement and division that suggested a programmatic incoherence among his opponents:\(^{45}\) “In divers other points these two Popish sects doe differ, as may be gathered out of their late polemicall writings and invectives set foorth by one against the other.”\(^{46}\) Willet’s innovation is to use a word ultimately descended from the ancient Greek “polemos,” meaning war, and its adjective, “polemikos,” or warlike, to mark what he wants to be viewed as the defining attribute of a particular group of texts.\(^{47}\) Simultaneously more expansive and medium-specific than the denotation of verbal violence by “invective,” the newly coined phrase “polemical writings” reduces an entire collection of works to a common denominator of inscribed hostility.

That Willet’s phrase appeared when it did in 1603 also suggests more precise motives. For the agenda of a work dedicated to the newly succeeded king was not only to conduct a refutation of the specific arguments advanced in Broughton’s Epistle, but also to ensure that James I himself did not succumb to Catholic pleas for toleration.\(^{48}\) Having depicted Catholic

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\(^{44}\) For the controversy, see Milward, Jacobean Controversies, 72–73.


\(^{46}\) Andrew Willet, An Antilogie or Counterplea, (London, 1603), 50.

\(^{47}\) See the entries for “polemic” in the OED and Eric Partridge, Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 1977), 2478. The literally received meaning of “polemic(al)” in English, “of or relating to war” (OED), perhaps marginally predates the word’s transference to modes of writing – Arthur Golding’s translation from French of Jacques Hurault, the Politick, Moral, and Martial Discourses (London, 1595), not cited in the OED, notes that “the men of old time called the goddesse Pallas [i.e., Athena, Greek goddess associated with wisdom and strategic warfare] by the names of Polemike and Politike” (1) – but becomes obsolete by the end of the seventeenth century.

\(^{48}\) For Catholic hopes of toleration under James, and even the monarch’s conversion to Catholicism, see Victor Houliston, Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons’s Jesuit Polemic, 1580–1610
writers as marksmen targeting James, “some with darts of envy & trechery, some with bolts of flatterie,” Willet professes his hope in the king’s “unchaungeable constancie [that] hath manifested it selfe in your stedfast resolution for the continuance of religion in sinceritie without mixture” (*3\textsuperscript{r}). James’s views on religion were advertised in his *Basilikon Doron* (Edinburgh, 1599; London, 1603), a handbook on kingship ostensibly written for his older son Prince Henry, which found itself eagerly devoured by an English readership.\textsuperscript{49} The endorsement of a religion anchored in private commitment rather than public profession resonates in the advice that Henry “[k]eepe God more sparingly in your mouth, but abundantly in your heart” and James’s ire is principally reserved for outspoken belligerents at opposite ends of the confessional spectrum:\textsuperscript{50}

> Puritaines . . . Whome against I have written the more bitterlie, in respect of divers famous libels, & injurious speaches spred by some of them . . . [which] yet were never answered but by Papists, who generally meddle aswell against them, as the religion it selfe; whereby the skandale was rather doubled, then taken away (A5\textsuperscript{r}–A6\textsuperscript{r}).

James’s self-presentation as “Rex Pacificus”, the peaceful king, becomes more pronounced later in his reign, yet clues to this styling may certainly be located in the pre-accession

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\textsuperscript{50} James I (VI), *Basilikon Doron. Or His Majesties Instructions to His Dearest Sonne, Henrie the Prince* (London, 1603), 20.
writings. It is perfectly plausible, then, that by transferring the belligerent associations of “polemical” to a series of exclusively Catholic texts, Willet strives with subtlety, and with the new king’s interests in mind, to portray Catholics as the principal disturbers of an otherwise peaceable print culture.

That “polemical writings” already constitute for Willet a tainted category in which incompatible Catholic positions are publically displayed suggests the need to rethink the kinds of values attached to polemic in the period. Lander’s argument that “polemic” and “polemical” become largely pejorative terms after the Restoration is, I think, a misreading of the available evidence. Lander cites funerary sermons and elegies from the 1640s and 1650s for members of Chelsea College, a short-lived institution established in 1609 for the pursuit of religious controversy, to argue that the generally positive estimation of polemic shifts to its eventual denigration as a practice, a transformation bound up with the marginalization of religious enthusiasm and the rise of secular political theory after the Restoration. Yet it is hardly surprising that “polemic” should be used positively in this particular context: funeral orations for state-sponsored polemicists. Lander’s thesis that by the late-seventeenth century religious polemic has moved from a culturally central position to peripheral obsolescence is original and exciting, but it necessarily imposes an uncluttered trajectory that, in this instance, conveniently effaces the less flattering connotations of “polemic” and “polemical” found at their inception and early use.

If Willet forges the polemical as the practice of Catholic opponents, other early appearances of the word bear out its unsavoury associations. In the prefatory epistle to *The Arte of Divine Meditation* (1606), Joseph Hall’s rationale for adopting a devotional mode of religious writing offers an individual perspective on the general climate of religious publishing at the time and the specific circulation of oppositional religious works:

> Ever since I began to bestow my selfe upon the common good, studying wherein my labours might bee most serviceable; I still found they could bee no way so well improved, as in that part which concerneth devotion, and the practise of true piety: For on the one side I perceived the number of Polemicall bookes, rather to breede, than ende strifes; and those which are doctrinall, by reason of their multitude, rather to oppresse than satisfie the Reader; wherein if we write the same things, we are judged tedious; if different, singular. On the other part respecting the Reader, I sawe the braines of men never more stuffed, their tongues never more stirring, their hearts never more emptie, nor their handes more idle.⁵⁴

Hall’s influential treatise, which was to furnish the dominant model of meditative practice in England for half a century after its publication,⁵⁵ fashions itself against the counter-productivity of polemic. The desire to reconstitute religion as internalised piety, wrested from the “stuffed braines” and “stirring tongues” symptomatic of intellectualised public debate has clear affinities with James’s preference for the monarch’s more muted, interior devotion. Yet the boundary constructed by Hall between the polemical and the devotional is an artificial one, masking the actual interpenetration of the two modes; as at least one commentator has recognised, Hall’s meditative theories are also shaped by his religious politics.⁵⁶ Within three years *The Peace of Rome* (1609) had marked Hall’s own entry into the world of anti-Catholic

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polemic, a caution against turning his sentiments into a practical manifesto. Yet the dubious status accorded to “polemical Bookes” is, if anything, compounded by the force of Hall’s adopted neologism.

The negative associations that lent “polemical” efficacy for Willet’s and Hall’s purposes are also found in the OED’s earliest citation, in which the Scottish churchman Patrick Forbes claims that, after his first publication, a work of strongly anti-Catholic exegesis entitled *An Exquisite Commentarie upon the Revelation of Saint John* (1613), he had “resolved never any more to put pen to paper, at least, in this polemick kinde of writing.”57 That Forbes divulges this intention in a work that constitutes the frustration of that intention – a Catholic attack on the Reformed ministry and the ardent desires of “two or three godly Gentlemen” have engineered his return to polemic – betrays misgivings over the status and value of the enterprise (2). When opponents “interpret our silence to the advantage of their owne and weaknes of our cause” (1), writing polemic becomes for Forbes a necessary, if not wholly laudable, pursuit.

If the value of polemic becomes uncertain as the very word to describe it gains currency, this is surely a reaction to a new proliferation that Fulke and his manageable list of a few dozen Catholic titles compiled in the 1570s and 1580s would not have recognized. Warning in 1625 how “[t]he Jesuites and Romish Priests multiply Bookes and Pamphlets against us and our Religion,” Thomas Beard, like Forbes before him, must qualify his participation in what he calls a “scribbling Age.”58 The Puritan biographer Samuel Clarke’s later observation, in 1642, that “in this scribling age, many Polemicall Pamphlets come forth, with more teeth to bite, then arguments to convince,” at first glance appears historically localised

57 Patrick Forbes, *A Defence of the Lawful Calling of the Ministers of Reformed Churches, against the Cavillations of Romanists.* (Middelburg, 1614), 2.
disillusionment against the backdrop of suspended censorship and an explosion in print publications in the early 1640s. Scribbling connotes hasty or careless composition, and such works, Clarke suggests, are characterised by their conspicuous hostility and lack of intellectual substance.

In fact, Clarke and Beard adopt a phrase already current in Shakespeare’s lifetime, one associated in particular with Catholic writing, and achieving a not uncomplicated durability, for in the very act of using it a writer is implicated in the phenomenon it defines. The preface to Henry Hexham’s 1610 translation of a work of controversy by the Dutch Calvinist theologian Johannes Polyander van den Kerckhoven constructs a typical image of such a self-perpetuating expansion of texts:

> The extreame libertie, which this scribling age taketh of writing, and publishing idle and unprofitable pamphlets, and the double diligence of Popish Writers in painting the old and withered face of their Jezabel; not onely may, but ought to provoke those that can dee it, to set forth wholesome things as counter-poysons or preservatives against the foresaid poysons of manners and doctrine.

Here the notion of a “scribbling age” is made to serve the interests of this particular print production, for if poisonous scribbling is primarily a Catholic activity, Hexham simultaneously justifies the appearance of his translated textual antidote.

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60 Robert Burton is a brilliant example of the capacity for authorial self-awareness in the period. Writing under the pseudonym Democritus Junior, he first apocalyptically warns the reader of “a vast Chaos and confusion of bookes” in which material is constantly recycled without originality and all manner of second-rate authors manage to enter into print: “we weave the same webbe still, and twist the same rope againe and againe, or if it be a new invention, ‘tis but some bable [i.e., bauble] or toy, and who so cannot invent? *Hec must have a barren wit, that in his scribling age can forge nothing*” (*The Anatomy of Melancholy* [Oxford, 1621], 8–9). Having emphatically condemned a devalued bibliographical culture, he mischievously reveals his own paradoxical involvement: “For my part I am one of the number” (9).

In George Goodwin’s Latin verse satires against the Catholic Church, appearing first under the title *Melissa Religionis Pontificae* (1620) before being published in the English translation of his friend John Vicars, the “Scribling age” arrives specifically as a period in which Rome attempts to consolidate her power. “For senselesse *Writs* and sottish *Writers* rare,” Goodwin notes, “Rome long hath borne the *Bell*, past all compare.” Suggesting, comically, how such reading matter might be put to more fitting use – “*T’ Apollo's Kitchin I'd not bring their *Bookes* / But for *Pie-papers*, and for *Spice* for's *Cooke*s”62 – Goodwin wittily laments only the pernicious economic influence such scribbling has on his own material conditions as a writer: “their mad making many *Bookes*, I feare; / Is it which makes mee buy my paper deare.”63 Even when the scribbling age is fancifully conjured as exclusively Catholic, the two sides inhabit conjoined textual worlds and the Protestant author cannot escape its impact.

Replying to an adversary in the 1640s, John Saltmarsh similarly attributes excessive book production to Catholics, and yet recognizes that any attempt to engage with this production risks generating an impenetrable textual thicket:

> It is indeed the way of the *Popish Schools* to fill the world with *Volumes* and *Tomes*, and rather to astonish then convince: and this is one thing hath made the *world wonder* after the *Beast*. *There is no end in making many Books*. How hath *Truth* been carried out of sight from the *Reader* in the Labyrinth of *Replies* and *Rejoynders*. Your self gives us an Experiment in this *Book*: for, how are you puzled to let the Reader know what was *yours*, and what was *mine* at first, and what is *yours* again, and what was *mine* afterwards, and what is *yours* again in answer to *mine*, and what *Truth* is after all this.64

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Saltmarsh identifies the same basic dynamic as his contemporary Clarke: innumerable showy
texts substitute for insufficiency of argument. The bilateral practice of polemic only succeeds
in bodying forth an increasingly complex “Labyrinth of Replies and Rejoynders,” itself
replicated in Saltmarsh’s prose by the dizzying accumulation of opposing possessive
pronouns and adverbs of time and frequency: “what was mine at first, and what is yours
again, and what was mine afterwards.” Saltmarsh’s empathy appears to lie with the reader, an
invisible yet interested third party at risk of losing sight of the ownership of specific positions
in the exchange; and yet, placed in the context of his own diagnosis, his text’s title, An End of
One Controversie, can only be read as hopelessly delusional or profoundly ironic.

The Preacher’s words near the end of the Book of Ecclesiastes – “of making many books
there is no end” (12:12) – to which Saltmarsh refers were thought to have a special pertinence
to the rising flood of print productions that constituted the “scribbling age.”65 The verse
paraphrases (1597) of Ecclesiastes by the devotional poet Henry Lok fill out the parallel with
a teeming yet debased bibliographical culture in which both quality and efficacy have
suffered:

These many bookes wherewith this world is fild,
Do slender profit to the readers lend,
Which stuft with words of superficiall show,
But little fruit by them to world doth grow.66

In response to Robert Parsons (whom he incidentally cartoons as a “scribling Jesuite”),
William Barlow, bishop of Lincoln, pointedly adds to the biblical passage to underline its
contemporary application to antagonistic cultures of print: “Here is no end of making many
books (saith the Preacher in the end of his booke) especially if they be bookes of

65 Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from The Bible: Authorized King James Version, intro.
66 Henry Lok, Ecclesiastes, Otherwise Called the Preacher (London, 1597), 116.
“Encounter.” 67 “Encounter” is of course used here in its oldest sense to denote “a meeting (of adversaries or opposing forces) in conflict” (OED). In 1615, John Jones, parson of the London parish of St. Nicholas Acons, even cited the biblical passage to substantiate his refusal to publish: “the Preachers note in the 12 of his Ecclesiastes, and the 12 verse, against the scribbling Age wherein we live, That there is no end of making of Bookes, had once made me vow my life to obscuritie.” 68 But predictably, leaving behind only a posture of ruined intentions, like Hall, like Forbes, and a host of other religious writers, Jones is reluctantly sucked into the vortex of early modern print.

To be sure, the construction of a “scribbling” age is an artificial authorial device that served at least two valuable purposes: to denigrate Catholic textual cultures and to furnish a polemical etiquette that simultaneously excused and justified a writer’s descent into a dubious world. There is of course also a tendency for every period to perceive the scale of its textual circulation as somehow unprecedented. The clergyman William Jones implied that such a construction transcends periodized history when he observed in the 1630s that “making bookes . . . hath beene an excessse in all ages. Apollinarius filled the world with bookees; Chryfippus wrote 71. books: Origen wrote 6000. books.”69 And yet the accessible data concerning the very significant rises in overall book production and religious polemic in Shakespeare’s lifetime, coupled with the growing frequency with which references to such phenomena begin to occur at end of the Elizabethan and the beginning of the Jacobean period, argue more profound changes: changes of which Shakespeare, a prominent figure living in England’s cultural capital, with an interest in and appetite for all manner of texts to utilise as imaginative stimuli, could hardly have been unaware. And it is to Shakespeare and

67 William Barlow (d. 1613), An Answer to a Catholike English-man (London, 1609), 367, 1, my emphasis. Lander also cites this passage in Inventing Polemic, 11.
68 John Jones, Our Saviours Journey to the Gadarens: or the Love of Christ unto Man (London, 1615), A2’.
69 William Jones, A Commentary upon the Epistles of Saint Paul to Philemon, and to the Hebrewes (London, 1636), 680.
the complex resistance towards positioning him in such a world that I now turn in the second half of the introduction.

II

The argument that Shakespeare’s works are also anchored in a culture of polemic might be objected to initially for the following reason. Shakespeare’s writings are often considered, in Harold Bloom’s memorable phrase taken from the work of Northrop Frye, a “secular scripture.” Bloom’s oxymoron strips religion from Shakespeare as it simultaneously imbues the Shakespearean corpus with an enduring cultural authority and centrality whose only historical analogue is the sacred texts of the Western religious canon.

In fact, the processes by which Shakespeare becomes marked as a, if not the, quintessentially secular author begin in his lifetime. He is the probable target of several contemporary Catholic critiques, recently examined by Alison Shell, that centre on his refusal to write in the overtly religious mode favoured by many of his literary peers. The Jesuit poet and martyr Robert Southwell, who, as Shell notes in a separate essay, was “an influential articulator of the position that religious writing was the only proper employment for the poetic imagination,” plausibly targets Venus and Adonis (1593) in a posthumously published collection of devotional verse:

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Still finest wits are stilling Venus Rose
In Paynim toyes the sweetest vaines are spent
To Christian workes, few have their tallents lent.\textsuperscript{73}

The possibility of a connection with Shakespeare is strengthened by other evidence.

Southwell was in fact a distant cousin of Shakespeare’s,\textsuperscript{74} and a prefatory note in the collection, “The Author to his loving Cosen” (A2\textsuperscript{v–v}), insists on the current trivialising of poetry to the degree that “a Poet, a Lover, and a Liar, are by many reckoned but three wordes of one signification” (A2\textsuperscript{v}); its echo of \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} (c. 1595) unmistakable,\textsuperscript{75} the note is expanded in a 1616 edition printed at St Omer to include, tantalisingly, the cousin’s initials, “Maister W. S.,” though no concrete evidence exists to confirm that Shakespeare was the addressee.\textsuperscript{76}

Whether or not Southwell directly admonishes Shakespeare, the Jesuit’s insistence on the religious as poetry’s true sphere certainly found its adherents. The 1601 \textit{Odes} by the Catholic intelligencer Richard Verstegan reveal in their prefatory verse a Southwellian purpose,


\textsuperscript{75} “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (5.1.7–8). This and all subsequent quotations from Shakespeare’s works, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (eds.), \textit{William Shakespeare, The Complete Works}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{76} Robert Southwell, \textit{S. Peters Complaint. And Saint Mary Magdalens Funerall Teares. With Sundry Other Selected, and Devout Poems} ([St Omer], 1616), A2\textsuperscript{v}. For a discussion of the initials, see Shell, \textit{Shakespeare and Religion}, 88–89, and Klause, \textit{Shakespeare, the Earl}, 43.
similarly fashioned against a profane literary culture for which Shakespeare might be made to stand as figurehead.\textsuperscript{77}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{l}
\textit{The vaine conceits of loves delight}\\
I leave to \textit{Ovids} arte\\
Of warres and bloody broyles to wryte\\
Is fit for \textit{Virgils} parte.\\
\textit{Of tragedies in doleful tales}\\
Let \textit{Sophocles} entreat:\\\nAnd how unstable fortune failes\\
Al Poets do repeat.\\
\textit{But unto our eternal king}\\
My verse and voyce I frame\\
And of his saintes I meane to sing\\
In them to praise his name.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Encompassing the genres of love poetry, martial epic, and tragedy, Verstegan produces a suggestive list of pagan classical authors against which to position his own, Christian verse. That Verstegan had Shakespeare partly in mind as their literary descendent cannot be proved, but the list’s configurations with the poet-playwright’s emerging reputation are not hard to construct. Citing “his \textit{Venus} and \textit{Adonis}, his \textit{Lucrece}, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends, \&c,” Francis Meres famously suggested in 1598 that “the sweete wittie soule of \textit{Ovid} lives in mellifluous \& hony-tongued \textit{Shakespeare},” an identification fortified by much recent scholarship on the intertextual relationship between the two writers.\textsuperscript{79} There may be scant

\textsuperscript{77} For Southwell’s influence on Verstegan’s verse collection, see Paul Arblaster, \textit{Antwerp and the World: Richard Verstegan and the International Culture of Catholic Reformation} (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 81–83.

\textsuperscript{78} Richard Verstegan, \textit{Odes in Imitation of the Seaven Penitential Psalmes, with Sundry Other Poemes and Ditties Tending to Devotion and Pietie} ([Antwerp], 1601), A2v.

evidence of a direct Sophoclean influence on Shakespeare, yet their tragic modes have often been paralleled; Meres himself compares Shakespeare and other contemporary dramatists with a group of Greek “Tragicke Poets” that includes Sophocles (fol. 283); and Ben Jonson’s laudatory verse in the First Folio also names the Greek tragedian. If, as Charles Martindale suggests, Shakespeare “is not usefully to be described as a Virgilian poet,” he nevertheless read and deployed the Aeneid and the Georgics in his works. Correspondences between the poet-playwright infamously described in an early attack as “an absolute Johannes fac totum” or “man of all-work” (OED) and the breadth of non-Christian literature invoked here are not specific enough to establish that Verstegan had Shakespeare in mind, though they certainly underlie the latter’s profound involvement in a literary culture whose value the Catholic writer diminishes.


81 See, for instance, The Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies, A4.


The denigration of literary artefacts from a humanist culture cannot of course be associated with Catholicism per se. Just as Catholic writers might adopt humanist literary models, Protestants, especially radical ones, attacked poetry and the stage.84 Even the student Judicio, in the third of the trilogy of Parnassus plays performed at St John’s, Cambridge, between 1598 and 1602, was forced to concede the popularity and poetic merits of “Adonis love, or Lucre’s rape,” but nonetheless wished of Shakespeare: “Could but a graver subject him content, / Without loves foolish lazy languishment.”85 For some of his contemporaries, then, Shakespeare was a gifted, if also in some sense, frivolous writer, one whose talents might be more fruitfully deployed in worthier modes of which the religious was arguably the pre-eminent.

Positioning Shakespeare’s writing as the antithesis of a religiously engaged literature is, however, a problematic strategy that unwittingly ascribes an analogous authority to what it would condemn. William Prynne’s anti-theatrical tract Histriomastix (1633) denounced the often lavish material existence of drama, noting that “Shackspeers Plaies are printed in the best Crowne paper, far better than most Bibles.”86 At least in the world of commercial publishing, Prynne concedes, the word of Shakespeare rivals and even outstrips the word of God, its growing cultural status inscribed in its higher publication costs. The suggestion made by John Cook, lead prosecutor in Charles I’s trial, that if the king “had but studied Scripture half so much as [he studied] Ben: Johnson or Shakespear” he might have acquired some valuable precepts, elevates the edificatory value of the former set of texts far above the latter


85 Anon., The Returne from Pernassus: or the Scourge of Simony (London, 1606), 1.2, B2’.

even as it recognizes a parallel between a biblical and a secular theatrical authority.87

Responding to the portrayal of Charles as a martyr in *Eikon Basilike* (1649), John Milton invokes “one whom wee well know was the Closet Companion of these his [i.e., the king’s] solitudes, William Shakespeare.”88 His subsequent allusion to and citation of *Richard III* (pr. 1597) forms part of a provision of exempla to demonstrate “that the deepest policy of a Tyrant hath bin ever to counterfet Religious” (10); yet the case is a special one, since, taken from a work with which Charles was supposedly intimately “conversant” (11), it exposes the king as an inept or recalcitrant reader, incapable of grasping the moral lessons proffered to him in his most familiar literature. Nicholas McDowell’s recent analysis of Milton’s complex relationship with Shakespeare’s writing similarly views the allusion in *Eikonoklastes* as an indication that “the plays offer the right or ‘spiritual’ reader lessons in the workings of tyranny;”89 yet McDowell does not discuss Milton’s significant qualification to the Shakespearean citation: “Other stuff of this sort may be read throughout the whole Tragedie, *wherin the Poet us’d not much licence* in departing from the truth of History, which delivers him [Richard III] a deep dissembler, not of his affections onely, but of Religion” (11 my emphasis). If in this particular Shakespearean instance poetry and history felicitously coalesce, generating valuable insights into the workings of a religiously disguised tyranny, Milton implies that such is not always the case. With “licence,” poetry can just as easily obscure or supplant actuality, as Milton argues has happened in the dissembling, poetic image of Charles propagated in *Eikon Basilike*.90 Distancing himself from Sir Philip Sidney’s

87 John Cook, *King Charl’s His Case: or, an Appeal to All Rational Men, Concerning His Tryal* (London, 1649), 13. A classic article by Ernest Sirluck sketches how, in the 1640s, the works of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson became “part of the arsenal of political warfare” (“Shakespeare and Jonson among the Pamphleteers of the First Civil War: Some Unreported Seventeenth-Century Allusions,” *Modern Philology* 53.2 [1955]: 88–99, 89).
88 John Milton, *Eikonoklastes in Answer to a Book Intitl’d Eikon Basilike, the Portrature of His Sacred Majesty in His Solitudes and Sufferings* (London, 1649), 11.
90 Though failing to recognize the subtlety of Milton’s use of Shakespeare, Stephen M. Fallon captures the general tone of the tract: “Eikonoklastes marks a turning point in the use of poets and poetry in Milton’s prose writings. In this work references to poetry are pejorative; they focus on its mendacious fictionality” (Milton...
theories of a simplistically benevolent “Poetrie [that] ever sets vertue . . . out in her best cullours,”
Milton condemns Charles’s Christian appropriation of Pamela’s heathen prayer in Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590), and ultimately insists on a demarcation of the purviews of religious and secular works: for Sidney’s prose romance is “a Book *in that kinde* full of worth and witt, but among religious thoughts, and duties not worthy to be nam’d; nor to be read at any time without good caution” (12 my emphasis). Milton’s circumspect handling of Shakespeare argues his preference that the revered playwright, now tainted by royalist association and appropriation, might be confined more safely to the same category of imaginative, non-religious literature.

Paradoxically, as Shakespeare’s writing becomes secularized through its collision with more overtly or enthusiastically religious discourses, its status and effect are increasingly articulated in religious language. John Weever’s “Ad Gulielmum Shakespeare” (1599) is perhaps more ambiguous in its praise than is often assumed, yet it remains the first description of a Shakespearean effect akin to religious awe:

*Romea Richard* more whose names I know not,
Their sugred tongues, and power attractive beuty
Say they are Saints althogh that Sts they shew not
For thousands vowes to them subjective dutie.

Reinforcing through rhyme a semantic connection between “beuty” and “dutie,” Weever urges the compulsive nature of the Shakespearean cult of the aesthetic. Like Richard III’s
wish “to seem a saint when most I play the devil” (1.3.336),
Shakespeare’s theatrical eloquence masquerades as the holy. Akin to the images of saints which Protestants believed fostered idolatrous worship, “[h]onie-tong’d Shakespeare” diverts his reader’s and auditor’s attention from the substance of the thing represented to an attractive, if potentially misleading, linguistic veneer.

It is not incongruous that the collected plays, whose First Folio prefatory dedication “most humbly consecrate[s] these remaines of your servant Shakespeare,” are styled from the beginning as a sacred relic, for as “Bardolatry” gradually takes root after the Restoration, religion becomes the dominant metaphor for articulating Shakespeare’s ever-growing appreciation and influence. In 1753, responding to Voltaire’s criticisms of Shakespeare, Arthur Murphy penned the sentence, “With us islanders Shakespeare is a kind of established religion in poetry,” thereby succinctly interweaving the national and religious strands of Shakespeare’s afterlives. Hostile critics such as Thomas Rymer, whose particularly damming assessment of Othello (c. 1603–4) was published in 1693, were accused by John Dryden of aiming “at the destruction of our Poetical Church and State.” Almost a century and a half later, a lecture originally delivered by Thomas Carlyle on 12 May 1840 suggested calling Shakespeare the “melodious Priest of a true Catholicism, the ‘Universal Church’ of the Future and of all times,” a perspective opposed to “narrow superstition, harsh asceticism,

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95 Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies, A2².
intolerance, fanatical fierceness or perversion” and connected to the poet-playwright’s “indifference to the creeds and theological quarrels of his time.”

This necessarily brief survey of Shakespearean afterlives at least begins to give some sense of how “Shakespeare” assumes a prominent position at the intersection of the secular and the religious, and the much needed account of how in English the secular appropriates the language of religiosity would surely feature Shakespeare at its heart. Recent work in the sociology of religion has highlighted the artificiality of the boundary imposed between the secular and the religious by theories of secularization; in actuality, any such boundary is far more permeable: one which allows for secular energy to penetrate the religious and vice-versa. If literary New Historicism uncritically incorporated the early modern theatre into what Jeffrey Cox and others have called the “master narrative” of secularization, more recent work has emphasised drama and theatre’s continuing interaction with religion and religious institutions on their own terms. The New Historicist thesis is most famously articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, who reads Shakespeare’s appropriation of Samuel Harsnett in *King Lear* – to which we will come – as the transformation of the literal into the literary: in a process that he typically calls “evacuation” or “emptying out,” Greenblatt explains that what “exorcism and Harsnett’s attack on exorcism . . . did signify in the letter is accomplished – with a drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular – in the theatre.”

Deploying the methodologies of New Historicism in his richly documented monograph, Jeffrey Knapp mounted an important challenge to the theory that the theatre becomes a secularized

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institution in the period, arguing instead “that English theology and ecclesiology shaped the drama at a fundamental level, in helping to determine the conceptualization of the player and the playwright as professions, and of the theater as an institution.”¹⁰² Other literary scholars sensitive to the interpenetration of the religious and the dramatic, whose recent work forms part of what has been called “the turn to religion” in the discipline,¹⁰³ have furthered our understanding of the operation of the religious within a theatrical and dramatic framework. Jean-Christophe Mayer has presented Shakespeare’s stage as a space where religion is explored and debated;¹⁰⁴ a monograph by Beatrice Groves carefully unravels the dual Catholic and Protestant inheritance in Shakespeare’s plays.¹⁰⁵ Yet no sustained attempt has been made to interrogate how Shakespeare’s plays are involved, perhaps unsurprisingly given the latter’s cultural prominence, in both the language and preoccupations of Catholic-Protestant polemic.

In some respects this absence is peculiar, since confessional polemic is a nominally religious genre notorious for releasing secular energies, which suggests fruitful and fascinating structural parallels of discourse with Shakespeare and a theatre both strangely suspended between the religious and the secular. If for the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson poetry is a kind of “organized violence committed on ordinary speech,” then polemic is a form of writing that institutes linguistic malevolence as its presiding spirit.¹⁰⁶ Unable to contain his glee as bystander to the vitriolic Catholic writings issued during the internecine Archpriest Controversy, the maverick polemicist Thomas Bell transforms them

into sadistic visual entertainment. Animalising his opponents, a traditional strategy in polemic, Bell imagines how the primary faction of his loathing, the “English traiterous hispanized Jesuits [,] endeavour to set the Lay-Papistes on like mad dogges, to barke, bite, and devour their ghostly fathers, and deare friends.” But if the general strategy is to solidify divisions between the Jesuits and secular clergy, Bell’s extra-religious fury is reserved primarily for an individual. Exposing the author behind the pseudonymous pamphlet to which his Counterblast (1603) responds, Bell launches a brutal *ad hominem* attack, from whose content he can distance himself by claiming merely to reproduce aspersions cast elsewhere by that author’s Catholic antagonists. His target is none other than “Robert Parsons the Jesuite . . . a notorious lyer, a brasen faced Fryer, a known cozener, a sacrilegious Bastard, an incestuous villain, a cursed Fairie bratte, and bloudthirsty traytor . . . [who] seemeth to excell all others (fol. 43v). This vertiginous accumulation of abusive terms is typical of Bell’s riotous prose, in which *ad hoc* shifts into verbal carnage momentarily propel the text out of the Christian sphere into older indigenous traditions such as flyting, premised not on doctrine but the pleasure of language.

Parsons also succumbs to such linguistic – we might even say literary – seductiveness, but he retains a sense both of its inappropriateness to religious argument and the ways in which such inappropriateness can in itself become an object of attack. Thus, in the so-called Watchword Controversy (1598–1603), whose original participants were Parsons and Sir Francis Hastings, the Jesuit excoriates his amateurish opponent for a polemical engagement at odds with the Protestant knight’s high social standing: for “lying, forging, and falsifying, ignorant vaunting, odious scoffying, malitious calumniations, seditious interpretations, bloodie exaggerations, barbarous insultations . . . ought to be far from the nature, pen, and

tongue of a knight or gentleman.”

Ironically, Parsons’s hostile reconstitution of these supposedly ill-suited strategies partakes in the very practice it would be seen to decry; the paradox becomes even clearer when Parsons resorts to fantastical (and again animalised) imagery to ridicule the linguistic excesses of his opponent:

A railing tongue untied, is a wilde beast without a bridle, and to ruun after him with a cudgell, though at certain turnings many blowes and bastinadoes may be given him (as in parte there hath bin I suppose to this man, by convincing his falshoods, raylings and calumniations) yet it is a wearisom excercise even to the giver himself, and therefore I will let him ruun, until wearied by his own furye, he become more calme, and enter into som more temperate cogitations, if not of truth and charity yet of christian honor and honestie (40).

The claim being made is that Hastings’s prose is somehow unchristian. If polemic has the potential to unlock malignant dispositions, it falls to the respondent to rein in such disorderly verbal energy. Yet the “many blowes and bastinadoes” meted out are necessarily of the same kind; Parsons is forced to repel Hastings precisely on the latter’s terms, unbridling the same linguistic facility he seeks to repress. And thus the text glimpses the unprofitability of its own existence, as the process of refutation is construed as “a wearisom excercise.” Indeed, this momentary insight allows Parsons to indulge briefly in a fantasy where his refutation would not have to exist at all – a world is imagined in which wild beasts, having run the gamut of slovenly behaviour, grow weary and become tame of their own accord.

Though this study cannot pretend to be exhaustive, it hopes to give a sense of the range, depth and subtlety of Shakespeare’s engagement with polemic. Each chapter takes as its focus a single play. Chapter One explores how the Reformation refashioning of King John into a proto-Protestant martyr infused the historical material underpinning Shakespeare’s

King John (c. 1595–6) with the binaries of polemic. These binaries, I argue, are ultimately rejected by Shakespeare, and yet the ensuing ambiguity in terms of dramatic conflict mars the play’s subsequent aesthetic appreciation. Nonetheless, even as it repudiates these structures, the play, I suggest, remains rooted in controversial discourse, drawing attention to issues of popular sovereignty and polemic’s corruption of language as a vessel for truth.

Chapter Two carefully examines John Speed’s infamous accusation of Shakespeare’s cultural collusion with the Jesuit polemicist Robert Parsons for producing, in the character now known to the world as Falstaff, a negative depiction of the rehabilitated Protestant martyr Sir John Oldcastle. Speed’s illuminating remark provides the platform for an exploration of polemic’s transformation into the materials of comedy in 1 Henry IV (c. 1596), and Parsons’s subsequent investment in the cultural capital of theatre to assert partisan truths. Such processes, I argue, underline the critical role of readers in the neglected traffic of representation in the period between stage and controversial page.

Chapter Three understands Hamlet’s (c. 1600–1) allusion to the marginal apparatus of the Geneva Bible as a symptom of the play’s underlying concern with the problem of authority in religious texts: polemical, devotional and scriptural. Hamlet’s aim to store only the command of his father’s spirit in the “book and volume” of his brain of course proves an unrealistic one, and Ophelia’s dissembling prayer book demonstrates how in actuality religious texts are unreliable vessels, often exploited for invidious purposes. Encompassing elements ranging from the counter-productive typography of turn-of-the-century polemic to, in Hamlet’s contemplation of suicide, the validity of Protestant rejections of the canonicity of the Books of the Maccabees, the play, I suggest, remains laden with doubt over the validity of any religious authority anchored in text.
In the final chapter I examine the collaborative *Henry VIII* (1613), a play oddly muted about the events of the Reformation, especially when compared with the anti-Catholic vigour of Samuel Rowley’s *When You See Me, You Know Me* (pr. 1605), which depicts the same monarch and was most probably revived for the same occasion by a rival playing company. Such muting, I argue, is characteristic of the play’s scepticism towards partisan historical narrative, a scepticism announced in its ironic alternative title *All is True* and its Prologue, and aligned with contemporaneous rejections of polemical writing by writers such as Bacon and Sir Edwin Sandys.

It might be objected that this selection of plays is biased towards a specific genre, with three histories and one tragedy examined. Yet, as David Womerseley has recently shown, the monarch’s assumption of ecclesiastical supremacy in England conflated political and religious allegiance and imbued chronicle history with religious controversy, which in turn impacted on the pre-eminent dramatic utilizer of chronicle history in the period: the history play. If English history in the theatre is an obvious yet fruitful forum in which to explore the impact of Catholic-Protestant polemic, the history play itself is an unstable, hybrid genre. Referring to *1 Henry IV*, Parsons noted how a theatricalised lampoon of Sir John Oldcastle is “commonly brought in by comedians on their stages;” for one contemporary at least, comedy, more than history, was constitutive of the play’s identity. The selection thus enables a focus on Shakespearean elements of comedy, tragedy and history, and, in addition, *Henry VIII* provides an important perspective on Shakespeare’s engagement with polemic at the end of his career, and also raises interesting questions about how this engagement was affected by the circumstances of collaboration.

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109 Womersley, *Divinity and State*.
Certainties in Shakespeare’s biography are few and far between. John Speed’s association of Shakespeare with Robert Parsons (see Chapter Two) only stands near the beginning of a long history in which commentators have speculated about Shakespeare’s personal beliefs and attempted to append the label of Catholic, Protestant, or even Puritan.\textsuperscript{111} The construction of a serious argument for Shakespeare’s Catholicism, advanced in the nineteenth century largely through the pioneering scholarship of Richard Simpson, remained a \textit{parti pris} activity on the periphery of the critical mainstream for much of the twentieth. The Catholic Shakespeare argument has received more mainstream attention in the last twenty years or so, partly as a result of revisionist histories of the period, which have emphasised the persistence of Catholicism in English life and focussed more intensively on the experience of the marginalised. However, this thesis is not concerned with marshalling close reading and historicist analysis of the Shakespearean playtext in the name of biographical assertion: a highly speculative endeavour of dubious value. The labels “Catholic,” “Protestant” and “Puritan” have some worth for the purposes of loose description and identification; but in their tendency to homogenise subtle gradations of belief, they are often particularly ill-suited to describing individuals. As Sir Francis Bacon more eloquently puts it: “Men create oppositions, which are not; and put them into new terms, so fixed, as whereas the meaning ought to govern the term, the term in effect governeth the meaning.”\textsuperscript{112}

But if assertions about Shakespeare’s personal beliefs are necessarily speculative, solid evidence at least points towards Shakespeare’s interest in the linguistic verve of polemical writing. Unlike other contemporary poets and playwrights, including Anthony Munday, Henry Constable, and John Donne, Shakespeare did not author religious polemic, but he

\textsuperscript{111} Works arguing for a Catholic or Protestant Shakespeare abound, and several of these will be touched on in the main part of the thesis. Unsurprisingly, the argument that Shakespeare was a Puritan is very rare, but see Thomas Carter, \textit{Shakespeare, Puritan and Recusant} (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1897).

\textsuperscript{112} Francis Bacon, \textit{The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall} (London, 1625), 15–16. This is a later, expanded version of an essay that first appeared under the shorter title “Of Religion” in 1606. Its position there as the very first essay in the 1606 \textit{Essaies} highlights the important currency of its concerns.
certainly read it. Samuel Harsnett’s *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), a state-sponsored tract against a series of Jesuit exorcisms carried out at Denham House in Buckinghamshire in 1585–86, influenced the composition of *King Lear* (c. 1605–6), an influence which critics have understood both in terms of Shakespeare’s attraction to Harsnett’s language, which filters into the play, and also the playwright’s rejection of the position taken up by Harsnett in the piece. F.W. Brownlow even reads *King Lear* as “a massive reply to the cleric’s argument, rhetoric, and purpose,” a reply made feasible by its presentation in coded form on the stage. David Kaula has also argued Shakespeare’s familiarity with a range of polemical pamphlets generated by the Archpriest Controversy based upon linguistic parallels in *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1603), *Measure for Measure* (c. 1603–4), *Othello*, and *Macbeth* (c. 1606–7). Even if the many instances Kaula notes occasionally appear flimsy when taken in isolation, their cumulative effect suggests, as Brownlow concurs, that Shakespeare was familiar with at least some of the pamphlet literature issuing from the controversy. This is a likely scenario given that these works were both popular and accessible. Robert Cecil drew attention to their widespread circulation, complaining of the “unlimited libertie of the dispersing and divulging these Popish and seditious Pamphletes, both in Powles Churchyeard, & the Universities.” And this circulation was both the product and the cause of readerly interest across the confessional

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spectrum; a letter written from London by the Jesuit Richard Blount in June 1602 informs Parsons that two of his forays into the controversy, the “Manifestation and Appendix [,] both are here very current, and are greedily read of Protestants as well as of Catholics, with good liking of all.”¹¹⁹ Kaula’s modestly argued claims raise interesting questions about the linguistic interpenetration of drama and religious controversy in the period. That such questions have not propelled further scholarly enquiry perhaps underlines an ingrained, unconscious reluctance to implicate Shakespeare in the practice of polemic, even as its materials are transformed into art. For Carlyle’s elevation of Shakespeare to transcendent authority within a “Universal Church,” a position he still retains today for those who would proclaim a “secular scripture,” is premised upon an art form not contaminated by anything so partisan. And it is to Shakespeare’s theatrical art circa 1595 that we now turn.

CHAPTER 1

Polemic and aesthetic insufficiency in King John

I assure ye, fryndes, lete men wryte that they wyll
Kynge Johan was a man both valeaunt and godlye.
What though Polydorus reporteth hym very yll
At the suggestyons of the malicyouse clergye?
Thynke yow a Romane with the Romanes can not lye?

—John Bale, King Johan, (c. 1538)¹

we seldom feel that the pen was dipped in his own heart’s blood.

—John Dover Wilson, ed., King John, (1936)²

However lengthy and laboured in its refutations of an opponent’s arguments, polemic possesses a basic structural clarity. Animated by the spirit of contention, early modern Catholic-Protestant writing forged a vivid world: one of stark polarities and diametric oppositions.³ From a more sanified twenty-first-century perspective, the crude configurations of these verbalized hostilities do not lend themselves readily to literary sophistication, and yet polemical concerns propelled much of the period’s literary innovation.⁴ John Bale’s King

⁴ Lander’s claim that the familiar, more circumscribed category of the literary emerging after the Restoration is fashioned through an active rejection of polemical modes of writing underlines the erstwhile proximity of
Johan (c. 1538) is a prominent example of how dramatic and polemical ends converge. Using the universalizing framework of the moralities, Bale simultaneously manages to people his stage with concrete figures from the nation’s past, and is thus often credited with creating the first English history play. But like his younger friend John Foxe, Bale operated as both playwright and controversialist, and structurally the play emerges from the realm of Reformation controversy, the product of the struggle between conflicting religious ideologies. It is a divisive work, deliberately splitting its audience into two camps, “fryndes” and “Romanes,” and promoting allegiance as paramount in a world where to “lye” “with the Romanes” is both to be Catholic, and to practise forms of deception that, for militant Protestants like Bale, were integral to Catholicism.

Whether Shakespeare knew Bale’s play cannot currently be proved, though the possibility has been mooted. What is certain, however, is that when, some fifty years after King Johan, the leading playwright in the Lord Chamberlain’s men set about constructing a drama on the same historical subject, something markedly different materialized: a work that many subsequent critics, as we shall see, have found deficient or problematic. Negative critical perceptions of King John (c. 1595) are surely responsible at least in part for the changing theatrical fortunes of a play once popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but

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6 Some twenty-four plays are known to be Bale’s, five of which survive. A far less prolific playwright, Foxe did author Christus Triumphans (1558), a Latin allegorical drama about church history, which he described as an “apocalyptic comedy.”

7 Here we may usefully extend Lander’s comments on the period’s printed polemic to encompass Bale’s dramaturgy: “While the vast majority of print productions strive to forge a unified body of readers . . . polemic seeks to divide its readers into friends and enemies” (Inventing Polemic 16).

since reduced to one of the least performed in the Shakespearean corpus. This waning does parallel a shift in the preferred modes of Shakespearian production, as the formerly dominant “archaeological” style of using elaborate sets and costumes to articulate fully the play’s pageantry became unfashionable in the twentieth century. But it seems no accident that King John’s fall from favour in the theatre also corresponds to the increasing professionalization of the academic discipline of literary criticism from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. For even as scholars like E. M. W. Tillyard and Lily B. Campbell spotlighted Shakespearean history, bringing their contextual interpretations of Elizabethan historiography to bear on the plays, King John refused to shelter easily under any overarching critical schema.

Yet even the most casual comparison of Bale’s and Shakespeare’s play can suggest reasons for the latter’s alleged incoherence. The historical King John’s reputation in the mid-sixteenth century had been freshly tempered in the furnace of religious controversy as Protestant calls for ecclesiastical reform and independence from Rome spurred a transformation of the medieval “Catholic” narratives bequeathed by monastic chroniclers like Matthew Paris and Roger of Wendover. Bale himself famously called upon “some lerned Englysheman . . . to set forth the Englyshe chronycles in theyr ryght shappe,” a labour he deemed second in importance only to the provision of faithfully rendered scripture in the

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10 Braunmuller, ed., King John, 85.


vernacular. Where received accounts had stressed John’s cruel, irreligious character and inept kingship, Protestant writers recognised overriding analogues to the present: for in his dispute over Innocent III’s appointment of Stephen Langton to the Archbishopric of Canterbury, John had also grappled, albeit unsuccessfully, with the power of the papacy. Current Catholic-Protestant antagonism, then, threw the past of John’s reign into sharp relief, producing a retrospectively significant moment in England’s history as constituted separately from and in opposition to the history of Rome’s religious and political dominion over England. Reformation writers mobilised the legacy of the early-thirteenth-century king to help construct an authorising lineage of Protestant opposition, a lineage necessary to counter Catholic charges of novelty bound in the disarmingly simple question, “Where was your church before Luther?”

Thus, having portrayed the pope and his various agents as the stage vices “Usurpid Powre,” “Privat Welth,” “Dissymulacyon,” and “Sedicyon,” Bale’s play at last makes explicit John’s connection to the present time: the king’s death is shortly followed by the arrival of “Imperyall Majestye”, a figure typifying Henry VIII who manages to restore order and rebuff the forces of popery. Shakespeare’s direct dramatic source, *The Troublesome Raigne of John King of England* – published in two parts in 1591 without ascription but established by recent linguistic analysis as the work of George Peele – makes the same association, not

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15 In performance the parallel between John and Henry VIII may have been heightened by using the same actor to play both parts. For this hypothesis, see Barry B. Adams, “Doubling in Bale’s ‘King Johan’,” *Studies in Philology* 62.2 (1965): 111–20, 119.
through the actual entrance of a Tudor successor on the stage, but by means of the king’s powerful dying prophecy:¹⁶

I am not he shall buyld the Lord a house,
Or roote these Locusts from the face of earth:
But if my dying heart deceave me not,
From out these loynes shall spring a Kingly braunch
Whose arms shall reach unto the gates of Rome,
And with his feete treade downe the Strumpets pride,
That sits upon the chaire of Babylon.¹⁷

Collapsing history by fusing past and present, the prophecy deploys established tropes in anti-Catholic polemic to cast the Tudor Reformation as the glorious fruition of a project of kingly resistance to Rome started by John.¹⁸

Shakespeare’s *King John*, however, fails to reproduce the Protestant mythologizing of its antecedents, and tends either to soften or efface their anti-Catholic idiom. The ensuing ambiguity in the confessional outlook informing the play has allowed critics at opposite ends of the spectrum to claim it as “thoroughly Protestant” and “definitely favourable” to the Catholic Church, both readings, if highly selective, at least anchored in some kind of evidence from the text.¹⁹ But ambiguity, as we shall see, has also led to the charge of

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¹⁸ For the locust in polemic, see Introduction, p. 2, n. 5.

aesthetic insufficiency. This chapter seeks to understand *King John’s* critical problems as a symptom of its attitude to the polemic of its sources: chronicle and Foxean apocalyptic history and the play’s important and immediate dramatic precursor, *The Troublesome Raigne.*

This material ought to have placed the contours of polemic readily at hand, and yet in refashioning it Shakespeare repudiates the underlying polemical structures, which has in turn marred the play’s provision of aesthetic satisfaction according to its reception within a predominantly Protestant critical tradition. To connect what we might term de-polemicization with allegedly flawed artifice is to question the prevailing orthodoxy in Shakespeare studies of an artist whose “writing treated all religions, including the Christian doctrine of his time, as subservient to artistic unity and closure;”

such a connection suggests instead, in what has recently been highlighted as an “experimental” phase in Shakespeare’s dramatic career, a playwright shunning the ready-made outlines of polemic without conjuring up adequate replacements.

In an inversion to the usual order proposed in criticism, the demands of the particular aesthetic actually appear subservient to the desire to avoid replicating the structures available in the source material. Rejecting the structure and idiom of polemic, however, does not equate to a refusal to engage with it. Rather, close attention to the play is repaid by an illumination of Shakespeare’s concern not only with particular polemical works, but with some of the broader questions raised by such a body of writing.

This chapter will first survey the evolution of John’s reputation in polemic during the course of the sixteenth century, exploring how the development of binary structures and specific preoccupations contributed to a tradition that Shakespeare would have received. Second, it will assess *King John*’s subsequent critical tradition, which often, in faulting the


Suggesting that by the end of *3 Henry VI* Shakespeare had exhausted the apocalyptic mode, David Womersley views *King John, Richard II* and *Richard III* as a subsequent chronological grouping of histories of more experimental form (*Divinity and State*, 269, 298–99).
play, covertly passes judgement on Shakespeare’s relationship with his sources. Finally, it will focus more exclusively on the playtext itself, examining in detail the presentation of three crucial scenes: the opening, the scene before Angiers, and John’s death. Close attention to the play’s nuanced language reveals that, in spite of its ostensible rejection of the extreme representation of polemic, it is in fact formulated at key moments precisely in response to this form of writing, a form at any rate intimately related with textual depictions of John in the period.

I

Shakespeare passed up a current, if relatively short-lived, interpretive framework for controlling the historical material in King John. Though by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Magna Carta would come to be viewed as the defining event of John’s reign, the fitfulness and uncertainty of religious change in the sixteenth ensured the prominence of John’s struggle with Rome. Simon Fish’s A Supplicacyon for the Beggers (c. 1529), a tract that sought to draw attention to the temporal pretensions of the clergy, is one of the earliest sketches of the fundamental binary structuring Protestant revisionism. There John is cast as Henry VIII’s “nobill predecessour” and a “rightuous kinge,” who found himself pitted against an invidious pope, “a cruell deuelisshe bloudsupper dronken in the bloude of the sayntes and marters of christ.” In a similar vein, a contemporaneous dialogue perhaps authored by the reformist writer William Barlow presents two characters, a gentleman and a husbandman, discussing the clergy’s insidious use of political power to malign rulers such as John. The gentleman concludes that such mistreatment at the hands of the clergy is in fact twofold, since:

While they were a lyve they did them trouble
And after their deathe with cruelnes double
They ceased not their honour to diffame.24

John may have been subject to the machinations of clerical detractors in his lifetime, but the
gentleman recognises the arguably far greater damage done to the king’s posthumous
reputation. It is a perspective that echoes William Tyndale, who suspected that the clergies
“have put the best and fayrest for themselves and the worst of kinge John / For I suppose they
make the cronycles them selves.”25 The reappraisal of history through the lens of religious
polemic worked to engender reflection on how historical knowledge had been constructed
and transmitted, promoting a more sceptical attitude towards bequeathed historical sources.26
Illustrating the continuities of Protestant historical scholarship, this partisan erosion of the
credibility of monastic sources is in operation over eighty years later in John Speed’s History
of Great Britaine (1611), which suggests that if John’s story had not fallen “into the handes
of exasperated Writers, hee had appeared a King of as great renowne, as misfortunes.”27

Popular forms were also utilized in early efforts to propagate the revisionist perspective, of
which the anti-clerical satire “The Image of Ypocresye” (1533) is an especially fine surviving
example. Its rhythmic, rhyming balladry, focussed particularly on the clerical machinations
responsible for John’s emotive submission to the Pope, demonstrates how through recitation
the reformist perspective might flourish even in communities where the communication of
ideas was predominantly an oral activity.28

26 For an account of the deployment of history in religious polemic, see Felicity Heal, “Appropriating History:
27 John Speed, The History of Great Britaine under the Conquests of ye Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans
(London, 1611), 506.
28 Admittedly, I have been unable to determine whether the ballad is the direct product of recent sixteenth-
century reformist innovation or emerges at least in part from older oral traditions. If, given the ballad’s
programmatic quality, the former seems more likely, it is plausible that it also connects with existing anti-
clerical traditions.
Later history writers such as Foxe and Richard Grafton expanded on the early Protestant revisions of John, but to some extent illustrated the trend Carole Levin’s monograph charts from the wholeheartedly heroic images of the monarch in the early Reformation to more circumspect, nuanced treatments later in the century. Foxe’s particularly influential account in the Book of Martyrs conceded some of John’s vices, but, like Tyndale before him, emphasised the king’s textual misrepresentation by authors who, “being led more with affection of poperie, then with true judgement and due consideration, depraved his doings more then the sincere trueth of the historie will beare them.”

Protestant revisionism of course met resistance from Catholic writers. Polydore Vergil’s Anglica Historia, published in 1534 but written before the break with Rome, freshly communicated to its sixteenth-century readership an image of John akin to that in the chronicles, indeed arguably even more villainous. His version of John, as the quotation prefacing this chapter illustrates, became one of Bale’s specific targets in King Johan.

Catholic counter-narratives also formed a more immediate context for Shakespeare’s play. Replying to William Cecil’s The Execution of Justice in England (1583), a tract defending the Elizabethan regime’s execution of Edmund Campion and other Catholics in 1581,

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30 Levin, Propaganda.
Cardinal William Allen uses John as an example of how kings “may be and have bene justlie both excommunicated & deposed, for injuries done to Gods Church, and revoult from the same.”

Four years later, in a pamphlet designed to incite English Catholics to rebellion against Elizabeth in preparation for the Armada, Allen turned to John again as part of a larger argument over Elizabeth’s legitimacy as monarch. Elizabeth, Allen writes, “never had consente nor any approbation of the See Apostolike,” a necessity on account of an “auncyent Accorde”:

This accorde afterwardeis being renewed, aboute the yere 1210. By Kinge Iohn, who confirmed the same by othe to Pandulphus the Pope his legate, at the speciall requeste and procurement of the Lords and Comons, as a thinge most necessary for preservation of the Realme from unjust usurpation of Tyrantes, and avoydinge other inconveniences which they had proved, and mighte easely fall againe by the disorder of some wicked Kinge.

In the Watchword Controversy, the mismatched encounter between the Jesuit polemical master Robert Parsons and the Puritan politician Sir Francis Hastings, Parsons devoted an entire chapter of his second rejoinder to discrediting Protestant claims – made especially powerfully in a set of woodcuts accompanying Foxe’s narrative in the Book of Martyrs – that John was poisoned by a monk who had received prior absolution for the deed. According to Parsons, Foxe’s extraordinarily influential, yet disingenuous version of events leaves the reader beguiled, as:

all other English heretyks since have followed him in the same impudency, both in booke, sermons & common speeches, which sheweth that they do not follow reason, nor seek truthe, but only to hold the reader in error by any meanes of sleight or falshood whatsoever, which ought to warne every true Christian man,
who seeketh sincerely to know the verity of matters in controversy . . . not to beleeve so easily these cosening people.35

Parsons, writing in the early seventeenth century, examines with a measure of historical perspective a Protestant tradition that he believes has now replaced the medieval chronicles. The product of the literate cultures of Foxe and Bale, it is a tradition, he notes, which is also disseminated orally through “sermons & common speeches.” If conceding the self-perpetuating force of accumulated traditions, Parsons’s argument is a call for the reader to be sceptical of such traditions, prone as they are to the uncritical repetition of errors.

Levin’s study of the propagandist deployment of John in the period suggests that the heroic image forged by early Protestants gave way to a subtler, more complex and nuanced assessment of the monarch’s reign and reputation “by the end of Elizabeth’s reign,” an assessment that conceded the king’s failings. Levin connects this development with trends towards greater historical accuracy and the progress of unravelling Reformations; for if to the early reformers the king was central to the work of reform, for Elizabethan Puritans the monarch was no guarantee of the desired settlement. Indeed, for Levin, Shakespeare’s King John, a work in which “the old and new views were at work simultaneously,” is evidence of such a development.36

But Levin’s scholarship does not account for why Shakespeare decided to reject the markedly more heroic, confessionally inflected, and, crucially, current image of John available to him in the immediate source play The Troublesome Raigne, a work whose enduring popularity is indicated by quarto printings in 1591, 1611 and 1622.37 While John of The Troublesome Raigne is not quite the unambiguously positive figure he is in Bale, the

35 Robert Parsons [N. D. (pseud.)], The Warn-word to Sir Francis Hastings Wast-word (Antwerp, 1602), ii5v.
36 Levin, Propaganda, 107.
37 The 1611 and 1622 printings proclaim their author, respectively, as “W. Sh.” and “W. Shakespeare.” The attribution to Shakespeare is generally considered spurious, though the fact that it was made at all and Shakespeare’s play never entered into the Stationer’s Register perhaps indicates, as Irving Ribner speculates, that King John and The Troublesome Raigne were considered “commercially identical” (English History Play, 119).
later play’s prefatory address does fashion him strikingly as a valiant warrior in the struggle with Catholicism and simultaneously a figure of immense theatrical worth:

You that with friendly grace of smoothed brow
Have entertained the Scythian Tamburlaine,
And given applause unto an Infidel:
Vouchsafe to welcome (with like curtesie)
A warlike Christian and your Countreyman.
For Christs true faith indur'd he many a storme.
And set himselfe against the Man of Rome.
Untill base treason (by a damned wight)
Did all his former triumphs put to flight,
Accept of it (sweete Gentles) in good sort,
And thinke it was preparde for your disport (72).

From the outset, the author establishes John as a stage hero worthy to join the pantheon of early modern theatrical colossi. Indeed, he elevates John above Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine because the king is not “Scythian” but a home-grown hero with whom the reader/spectator is implored to identify: “your countreyman.” Further, the address superimposes a unifying causality on John’s actions that is identified with Protestantism – “For Christs true faith” – and already implies the connection between the pope, or “Man of Rome,” and the succeeding “base treason” that results in regicide. The struggle with Rome and John’s murder are made the two definitive, interconnected moments of John’s reign. Significantly, there is no mention of monarchical legitimacy and the claim to John’s throne made by his nephew Arthur, issues which Shakespeare makes central to his drama. But if the preface invests in the image of John propagated in the early Reformation, it also gestures towards John’s transformation into entertainment, a theatrical construction “preparde for your disport.” The John of diversionary spectacle associates itself with the spirit of the early
period’s Robin Hood plays, even as that competing tradition produces a substantially
different, villainous depiction of the king more attuned to the chronicle representations.38

II

Shakespeare’s rejection of both the immediate and slightly more distant structures available
to him has led to critical fault-finding. Yet there is some irony in complaints about the
structure of King John, given that structure is precisely an element with which the play seems
peculiarly preoccupied. Of course, the word “structure” to denote the way in which a body of
matter is arranged was unavailable to Shakespeare; it is a usage that only becomes current
later in the seventeenth century, and the word does not appear at all in Shakespeare’s works.
The older and roughly homologous word “form,” however, was at hand. Strikingly, it occurs
twelve times in King John, a number matched from the plays only by Hamlet, and more than
double the number of occurrences in any other single play.39 Close attention to the play’s
language reveals a general concern, even anxiety, with the intersection of matter and form.

Be of good comfort, Prince, for you are born
To set a form upon that indigest
Which he hath left so shapeless and so rude (5.7.25–27).

Salisbury’s consolatory words to Prince Henry in King John’s final scene seemingly take
their cue from a conventional ending in tragedy: following a sequence of traumatic events –
here, home-bred rebellion, foreign invasion and regicide – the successor to power is tasked

38 The more famous Robin Hood plays of the 1590s include Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle’s The
Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington and The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington (both printed 1601). For
this dramatic tradition, see Levin, Propaganda, Ch. 6, and Lois Potter, ed., Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as
Performance in Five Centuries (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 21–90. It is important to note
that, contrary to the Protestant tradition I have been describing, John is not a figure of religious significance in
these plays.
39 These figures are based on a search of the online Open Source Shakespeare Concordance:
with the re-institution of order. In a play whose parallels to its contemporary political world are numerous and long noted this moment appears to uphold the purpose and values of the Elizabethan establishment. Monarchy is cast as the great form-giver; as indeed it is in the Homilie agaynst Disobedience and Wyful Rebellion (1570), an official text issued in the wake of the Northern Rebellion of 1569 which promotes the connections between godly creation, post-lapsarian forms of hierarchy and obedience to the temporal sovereign, the shaping forces which hold at bay “confusion and utter ruine,” and uses the historical king John as part of an argument that princes should be obeyed.

Borrowing from Ovid, Shakespeare here terms a shapelessness antithetical to form “indigest.” On one level “indigest” conjures an England descended into political chaos. The nobles have rebelled against their sovereign and almost subjected their land to foreign conquest at the hands of Louis the Dauphin. The Bastard arguably supports such a reading in the play’s closing lines, where the biggest threat to national harmony is cast as an internal rupturing of order:

This England never did, nor never shall,

Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror

But when it first did help to wound itself (5.7.112–14).

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40 Francis Meres’s important 1598 list of Shakespeare’s early works places King John alongside Romeo and Juliet and Titus Andronicus as a tragedy (Palladis Tamia, fol. 282r). In the eighteenth century, William Warburton considered John the most appropriate subject for tragedy from the histories: Of all the English Princes that Shakespeare has taken into Tragedy King John was the fittest to have made a Hero for a Tragedy on the antient [sic] Plan...John had that Turbulence and Grandeur of Passions, that Inconstancy of Temper, that equal Mixture of Good and Ill, and that Series of Misfortunes consequent therto, as might make him very fit for a Hero in a just Composition (rpt. in Vickers, ed., The Critical Heritage, 2:532).


42 Deployed exceptionally here by Shakespeare as a noun, the adjective “indigest,” as it appears in the contemporary work of Chapman and Marston, typically describes a primordial state of chaos. The derivation is almost certainly from Ovid’s depiction of the world before creation in Book One of Metamorphoses: “Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum / unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe, / quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles” (my emphasis) – in Arthur Golding’s popular translation: “Before the Sea and Lande were made, and Heaven that all doth hide. / In all the worlde one onely face of nature did abide, / Which Chaos hight, a huge rude heape” (The XV. Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, Entytuled Metamorphosis [London, 1567], B1v).
The Bastard’s closing couplet – “. . . Naught shall make us rue / If England to itself do rest but true” (5.7.117–18) – is oddly destabilising, though; with its circular self-reference, it provides no clue as to what resting true to oneself might mean precisely in a national context.

But “indigest” also means, more literally, undigested. Shakespeare demonstrates his immense control over the multivalent power of language at the moment we learn that the monarch, the would-be form-giver, has consumed poisoned food. The joke is at John’s expense, for this deadly instance of the king’s “indigest” is extended in the image of himself that John seizes upon in his dying speech:

    I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen
    Upon a parchment, and against this fire
    Do I shrink up (5.7.32–34).

Death is imagined elsewhere in the play as the antithesis of creation, a return to formlessness. When the dying Melun reveals to the rebelling English nobles the Dauphin’s plans to execute them after taking the English throne, he uses his imminent death to authenticate his words:

    Have I not hideous death within my view,
    Retaining but a quantity of life,
    Which bleeds away, even as a form of wax
    Resolveth from his figure ’gainst the fire? (5.4.22–25)

Death here is a relinquishing of form, yet in John’s case the specific figure – the scribbled form drawn on a parchment – is the incineration of a hastily constructed text, a metaphor that looks back to the king’s artless construction in polemic, but also points to an irrevocable historical reality vanishing at the point of his death.

    Given Shakespeare’s heightened concern with form in King John, it is ironic that many readers have precisely paid attention to the play’s formal deficiencies. This process can be
documented at least from the 1730s, when an evidently staunch neoclassicist complained that *King John* was “principally deficient in the three grand Unities,” the unities of action, place and time prescribed for drama in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. More significantly, Colley Cibber’s reworking of the play, opportunistically produced in 1745 at the time of the second Jacobite rising, sought to present a blatantly anti-Catholic drama under the altered title *Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John*. Cibber in fact provides, in the prefatory dedication of the printed text, a reading of the Shakespearean original that supplies his ostensible motives for the revision, motives which centre on Shakespeare’s perceived failure to do justice to fine material in the original:

> In all the historical Plays of Shakespear there is scarce any Fact, that might better have employed his Genius, than the flaming Contest between his insolent Holiness and King John. This is so remarkable a Passage in our Histories, that it seems surprizing our Shakespear should have taken no more Fire at it.

For Cibber, the historical data bequeathed to Shakespeare (which he uncritically calls “Fact,” rather than the product of Protestant revisionism) comes pre-arranged for the purposes of the drama. Its dominant structure derives from diametric opposition, “the flaming Contest between his insolent Holiness and King John.” Shakespeare’s failure is to “have taken no more Fire” – in other words, not to have received imaginative sustenance from a structure he might have reproduced with the ardency of a polemicist. Cibber briefly entertains the possibility that this apparent dramatic failing (alongside “the solemn Description of Purgatory given us by his Ghost in *Hamlet*” [A3v]) might constitute proof of Shakespeare’s Catholicism, but then swiftly reinstates the “our Shakespear” of the Protestant literary canon.

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Singling out John’s vehement condemnation in the play of the practice of selling indulgences or pardons (3.1.90–93), he concludes that, “This is too sharp a Truth to be suppos’d could come from the Pen of a Roman-Catholick” (A4v). Ironically, Cibber’s attempt to restore what he viewed as the basic oppositional structure of the source material, a structure loudly proclaimed in the revised title Papal Tyranny, was not quite successful. As Elaine McGirr suggests, the contemporary analogues Cibber hoped to deliver to his audience through Shakespearean history were by no means clear-cut, and the material ultimately proved “too complex to be easily flattened out into dramatic history, Whig or otherwise,” a difficulty Cibber did not face in his more famous and durable adaptation of Richard III, where the polarities of good and evil are obvious enough to support unequivocal allegory.46

The prefatory commentary to the text of Cibber’s adaptation illustrates how King John’s structural ambiguities convert themselves into interpretive difficulties, which in turn generate problems with psycho-biographical deductions about Shakespeare based on the plays. For Cibber’s reading simultaneously suggests that Shakespeare might have been a Catholic and provides proof that he wasn’t, demonstrating the play’s peculiar status as what Deborah Curren-Aquino has called “a literary work of multiple personalities.”47 Debate over Shakespeare’s religious affiliations intensified in the Victorian period, particularly after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which helped provide the conditions in which such a debate could flourish, and by the 1850s a Catholic movement to establish the Catholicism of England’s national playwright had begun.48 At the same time, and perhaps because of these developments, Shakespeare became an increasingly important indicator of England’s Protestantism, revered especially for his social class, typically identified as mercantile and

46 McGirr, “Whig Heroics,” 34.
commercial, a class identified with Protestantism itself.\textsuperscript{49} In the contests over national and religious identities that had appropriated Shakespeare as a lens to focus their energies, \textit{King John} became recognised as critically important “textual testimony” in the Catholic vs. Protestant Shakespeare debate.\textsuperscript{50} This debate invariably followed partisan lines. Catholic critics such as Henry Sebastian Bowden, and later, the Rev. Gerard M. Greenewald argued that the play evidences Shakespeare’s favourable disposition towards the Catholic faith.\textsuperscript{51} Yet John’s defiance of Pandulph in Act 3 Scene 1 remained what Tom Merriam calls “the \textit{locus classicus} of Shakespeare’s Protestantism.”\textsuperscript{52} The American poet and essayist George Henry Calvert suggested with pride that in John’s denial of the pope, Shakespeare “becomes the spokesman of English independence, of Protestant manliness . . . as not only the foremost national poet of England, but as the champion of Protestantism or free religion.”\textsuperscript{53}

Replicating Cibber’s attitude, Goldwin Smith, Regius Professor of History at Oxford, wrote of John’s first speech (3.1.73–97): “That he [Shakespeare] had any latent hankering after Roman Catholicism, or that his heart was on the Papal side of the great quarrel between the nation and the Pope, it is impossible to believe in face of such lines as these.”\textsuperscript{54}

The “multiple personalities” of \textit{King John} could be mined to construct a Catholic Shakespeare without masking the structural deficiencies of the play which enabled such mining to take place. Perhaps the most astute of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholic critics of \textit{King John} in this regard is Brother Zachary Leo, who damned the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{50}{George Wilkes, \textit{Shakespeare, from an American Point of View; Including an Enquiry as to His Religious Faith, and His Knowledge of the Law} [1877], 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (New York: Appleton, 1882), 64.}
\footnotetext{51}{Henry S. Bowden, \textit{The Religion of Shakespeare} (London, 1899), 121, 135. Greenewald, \textit{Shakespeare’s Attitude}.}
\footnotetext{52}{Tom Merriam, \textit{Co-Authorship in King John}, (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, Sophia University, 2007), 46.}
\end{footnotes}
play for Shakespeare’s failure “to impart a unified dramatic quality to the play as a whole.”

He even praises Cibber’s adaptation and title for its structure, in that it “conveys an idea of contrast – which might or might not take the form of conflict – and suggests that underlying antithesis which Shakespeare’s play needs, but has not” (80). The implication is that, by toning down the anti-Catholic vitriol of the polemical sources, Shakespeare seriously damages the play’s structure, ultimately sacrificing dramatic art for the sake of religious sensibilities and historical credibility so often distorted in Catholic-Protestant controversy.

Though the play’s structure found its supporters in the twentieth century, much criticism merely reproduced traditional verdicts. E. K. Chambers called Shakespeare’s king an “incoherent patchwork.” Eugene Waith saw “political design far more evident” in other sixteenth century dramas about John, in Cibber’s adaptation, and Richard Valpy’s alterations to the play in 1800 for its performance by the boys of Reading Grammar School. Gareth Lloyd Evans echoes Cibber’s preface, suggesting that “it is as if King John is the only monarch of English history whom Shakespeare found not only uninteresting but incapable of striking fire from his imagination;” Shakespeare’s lack of zeal weakens King John’s theatrical coherence, since, “[b]ecause John is conceived in a cool mind [,] the play lacks a centre” (38).

Fascinatingly, perceptions of structural ambiguity have impacted on the play’s performance in the twentieth century. In his RSC production (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1974 and

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56 For an appreciation of the play’s structural subtleties fashioned in opposition to its detractors, see Adrien Bonjour, “The Road to Swinstead Abbey: A Study of the Sense and Structure of King John,” *ELH* 18.4 (1951): 253–74.
58 Waith, “Drama of History,” 193, author’s emphasis. Valpy’s version was published as *King John, an Historical Tragedy, Altered from Shakespeare, as It was Acted at Reading School* (Reading: Smart and Cowslade, 1800).
London, 1975), John Barton followed Cibber in making significant changes to the Shakespeare play, in order to deliver a more satisfying theatrical experience. Barton suggested that “those areas left cloudy by King John were more clearly explored in The Troublesome Reign,” and he proceeded to use lines from the latter play and Bale’s King Johan, along with some of his own invention, to remedy the deficiency.60 A contemporary academic reviewer claimed Barton’s version to be “almost certainly the most severely altered Shakespearian text ever to be delivered at the Stratford theatre,” and also noted its increased anti-Roman tone.61 What Barton’s production suggests is both the diachronic similarity and durability of objections to King John, objections which Barton himself innovatively, if not uncontroversially, answered by a return to early modern plays about John in which the structure of polemics is far more pronounced.

III

My contention, then, is that Shakespeare’s King John deliberately and unequivocally distinguishes itself from its precursors from the very outset, a decision that has subsequently marred its critical fortunes. In Catholic-Protestant polemics John had become an emblem of a broader religious struggle, an emblem that helped bring key issues such as the relationship between church and state and papal intervention in English affairs into sharper focus. By the 1590s, following a 1570 Papal Bull excommunicating Elizabeth, the continuing execution of Catholic priests on charges of “treason” from the 1580s onwards, and the thwarted Spanish Armada of 1588, such issues had arguably grown in importance, not diminished. Indeed, the historical exemplum of John is of sufficient weight to warrant mention in political tracts such as Sir Thomas Smith’s The common-wealth of England (1589), in which the kingdom’s

60 Qtd. in Cousin, King John, 65.

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independence is asserted even in the face of John’s submission to the pope with the argument that “that acte being neither approoved by his people, nor established by Acte of Parlement, was foorthwith, & ever sithens taken for nothing, either to binde the king, his successors or Subjects.”

But Shakespeare turns immediately, not to the legitimacy of the pope, but to the legitimacy of John himself, as the French ambassador arrives at the English court to urge the claim to the throne of the king’s young nephew, Arthur of Brittany:

KING JOHN: Now say, Châtillon, what would France with us?

CHÂTILLON: Thus, after greeting, speaks the King of France,
In my behaviour, to the majesty –
The borrowed majesty – of England here.

QUEEN ELEANOR: A strange beginning: “borrowed majesty”? (1.1.1–5).

The opening tableau of The Troublesome Raigne, in which John’s kingship is conferred with legitimacy in the presence of a company of assembled barons, finds itself subtly excised. In its place we come across a somewhat laboured repetition of the phrase “borrowed majesty” which has not, in my view, been adequately explained. The phrase itself is almost certainly Shakespeare’s own invention, deriving neither from Holinshed or The Troublesome Raigne.

By and large unglossed in nineteenth-century editions of the play, “borrowed” is typically interpreted by twentieth- and twenty-first-century editors of Shakespeare as “usurped.” E. A. J. Honigmann’s second series Arden edition supplies the definition “stolen, counterfeit;” for A. R. Braunmuller, in the Oxford edition of the play, the phrase is “compactly insulting.”

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63 This point is recognised by Max Meredith Reese, The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare’s History Plays (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 272. W. G. Boswell-Stone also notes that “There is no historical authority for Chatillon’s embassage” (Shakespeare’s Holinshed [New York, 1896], 47). Boswell-Stone is quoted in Campbell, Shakespeare’s Histories, 145.
signifying “usurped . . . sovereignty” (120); the New Cambridge Shakespeare volume compiled by L. A. Beaurline simply footnotes “borrowed” as “false, put on;” and R. L. Smallwood’s accompanying commentary for the Penguin edition suggests that “[t]he outright accusation of usurpation quickly destroys the false mood of courtesy.”

What all these commentaries fail to recognize is how the phrase heightens the moment’s metatheatre. Bound up in “borrowed majesty” is certainly a charge of illegitimate authority; but it is a charge that constitutes, when read against the preoccupations of the polemical context in which Shakespeare was operating, a “strange beginning” to any play about John, not merely the opening lines of the French ambassador’s speech. Wrong-footed by the opening, Robert Ornstein complained that it “creates no historical perspective, no sense of the past such as exists in the plays of the first tetralogy.” But in a play that David Womersley has recently called Shakespeare’s “dramatic laboratory,” the opening appears an experiment, calculated to jar with the expectations of the audience by highlighting the self-conscious human constructedness of the historical material.

This sense of metatheatre is assisted by the critically neglected broader resonances of “borrowed majesty.” The more commonplace – and morally neutral – meaning of “borrowed” is, of course, “taken on loan” or “not one’s own” (OED). Thomas Dekker’s account of James the First’s ceremonial entry into London in March 1604 describes the city

67 In his work on how discourses of legitimacy are constituted on the early modern stage, Robert Zaller makes the similar point that “borrowed majesty is indeed a “strange beginning, both for a reign and for the play that anamorphically represents it” (The Discourse of Legitimacy in Early Modern England [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007], 399. However, Zaller does not connect this “strange beginning” to metatheatre or the play’s polemical context, the two central facets of my discussion.
68 Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare’s History Plays (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 88, qtd. in Marsha Robinson, “The Historiographic Methodology of King John,” in King John: New Perspectives, ed. Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 29–40, 29. This is not to say that the opening scene’s abruptness has not had its admirers. The nineteenth-century Shakespearean editor Charles Knight writes: “In the whole range of the Shakespearean drama there is no opening scene which more perfectly exhibits the effect which is produced by coming at once, and without the slightest preparation, to the main business of the piece” (The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare, 2nd ed. rev., 5 vols., Histories vol. 1, [London: Routledge, 1867], 72).
69 Womersley, Divinity and State, 273.
bereft of the monarch as “(like an Actor on a Stage) stript out of her borrowed Majestie.”

Just as here the majesty of London does not properly belong to the city but to the monarch who bestows it, so in Shakespeare the phrase emphasises the illusory power of acting, its dependence on the outward signifiers of costume which may just as easily be removed.

Metatheatre draws attention to the human processes shaping the construction of history in a way that polemic does not. Polemic, overzealous in its claims to privileged access to unilateral truths, rarely displays the same level of self-consciousness as to its own artifice. This is not to say that metatheatre constitutes a rejection of polemic. With its multivalent signification, Shakespeare’s language simultaneously underlines its own invention and invokes partisan theories of kingship.

The profound and deliberate topicality of *King John* has been critically appreciated for at least over a century, since the pioneering literary criticism of Richard Simpson demonstrated how the playwright “made the example more apposite, and the allusions more telling, by altering history.” Shakespeare turns to traditions, old and new, of representing John at an historical moment in which such representation is rendered more pertinent. Beginning the play by undermining John’s right of succession thrusts such pertinence into the spotlight, for, with a childless Elizabeth in her sixties and no established successor amongst several rival claimants, the issue of succession had become critical in 1590s England. The official embargo on public discussion of the succession dating back to an Act of 1571 that had banned the unauthorised publication of succession claims failed to suppress interest and debate, and drama became a natural forum for exploring such issues through historical and

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fictional analogues.\textsuperscript{72} Significantly, one of the first works to be entered into the Stationers’ Register after Elizabeth’s death was Sir John Hayward’s \textit{Answer to the First Part of a Certaine Conference, concerning Succession} (1603);\textsuperscript{73} Hayward’s target was \textit{A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland} (1595), a Catholic political treatise, pseudonymously published in Antwerp though almost certainly in large part the work of Robert Parsons, that advocated elective monarchy and argued the claim to the throne of the Spanish Infanta, Isabella Clara Eugenia. The Conference’s contemporary stature is indicated by its controversial reception across the confessional spectrum, and it seems very unlikely that Shakespeare would not have been aware of the work.\textsuperscript{74} Hayward suggests that, due to the official embargo, the Conference enjoyed something of a hegemony in printed discourse, since “our English fugitives did stand in some advantage, in that they had free scope to publish whatsoever was agreeable to their pleasure; knowing right well, that their books could not be suppressed, and might not be answered.”\textsuperscript{75} According to Peter Holmes’s classification, the theories of resistance to authority that were prominent in Elizabethan Catholic thought between the years 1584 and 1596 comprised two principal parts: “first . . . a theory of the rights of the people or political community, and second . . . the rights of the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{73} Elizabeth dies on 24 March 1603. Hayward’s reply is entered into the Stationer’s Register on 7 April 1603.
\bibitem{75} John Hayward, \textit{An Answer to the First Part of a Certaine Conference, concerning Succession} (London, 1603), A4'. Printed responses to the Conference were, of course, issued from outside of England. Examples include: Irenicus Philodikaios [pseud.], \textit{A Treatise Declaring, and Confirming against All Objections the Just Title and Right of the Moste Excellent and Worthie Prince, James the Sixt, King of Scotland, to the Succession of the Crowne of England} ([Edinburgh], [1599?]), and Henry Constable, \textit{A Discoverye of a Counterfecte Conference} ([Paris?], 1600).
\end{thebibliography}
pope”. By depicting the rebellion of the nobles and the papal deposition of a king of England, *King John* incorporates both. Armed with examples from both English and European history, Parsons’s *Conference* constructs the central argument that succession by propinquity alone is “manifestly agaynst al reason, and conscience,” that the will of the “common wealth” or “weal publique” is just as important as hereditary right in electing the future monarch. Kingship is conferred at least partially by the people, a fact demonstrated for Parsons by the necessity of oaths at the installation of a new monarch. According to this formulation, John’s majesty is literally “borrowed” insofar as a “common wealth” bestows it; the “common wealth,” Parsons further argues, also retains the right to revoke that majesty at a later point given sufficient cause. The treatise uses John to authenticate both facets of this argument. That God upholds John’s kingship against Arthur’s closer propinquity is cited as proof of the importance of the people’s acquiescent will during the monarch’s original investiture. But equally, the rebellion of the barons against John is recounted as an example “Of Kings Lawfully Chastised by Their Common Wealthes for Their Misgovernment, and of the Good and Prosperous Successe that God Commonly Hath Given to the Same.” In effect, Chatillon’s charge of “borrowed majesty” is threefold. It makes an argument about John’s legitimacy that constitutes “a strange beginning” to the play if we read that beginning against the polemized images available to Shakespeare in his sources; simultaneously, its metaphorical stripping away of the actor’s costume – the king is not in fact a king – elevates the sense of metatheatre, and the human agency behind a theatrical presentation that has deliberately selected this “strange beginning.” Lastly, “borrowed majesty” coheres with

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77 Robert Parsons et al. [R. Doleman (pseud.)], *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland* ([Antwerp], 1594 [vere 1595]), 2.
78 The protocols of coronation and the importance of oaths are discussed by Parsons in Part 1, Chapter 5 (*Conference*, 82–121).
79 Parsons et al., *Conference*, 194.
80 The heading of Part 1, Chapter 5 (Parsons et al., *Conference*, 37).
Catholic theories of resistance prevalent in the 1580s and 1590s, and specifically the discourse of popular sovereignty constructed in Parsons’s influential *Conference*, a treatise that was of necessity unanswered in print in England until after Elizabeth’s death. Indeed, Shakespeare’s French ambassador is an especially appropriate mouthpiece for notions of a majesty whose power resides, not in the monarch, but in a wider political community, for the French Wars of Religion (1562–98) played an important part in the development of resistance theories, in the first half, among Huguenots, whose literature includes Theodore Beza’s *Right of Magistrates* (1574), and in the second, among Catholic Leaguers whose core ideas of “popular sovereignty, papal deposition, and tyrannicide” are clearly contiguous with Parsons’s political thought in the mid-1590s. To align Shakespeare’s “strange beginning” with the contours of Catholic resistance theory promulgated in England around the time of *King John* is not to suggest Shakespeare’s personal investment, even less to support a reading of the play that detects sympathy with Catholic ideas and beliefs. The heterogeneity of such political theories, their shifting cross-confessional transport in the period, is remarkably illustrated by the fact that Parliamentarians reprinted adaptations of the *Conference* in the 1640s and 1650s to justify the deposition of Charles I. The beginning of *King John* does, however, show a playwright attuned to the religious polemic of the play’s context, fashioning a drama that is, in many ways, a reaction to that context.

A preoccupation of the *Conference* and Shakespeare’s unusual focus on John’s legitimacy converge in “borrowed majesty,” a phrase that underlines the richness of the play’s layered

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language. Such an opening sets up the later, key scene before Angiers, where the appropriateness of language as a vessel for a singular truth and thus an effective medium of controversy is subjected to scrutiny. When John and King Philip of France successively address the citizens of Angiers, voicing their competing claims to dominion over the town before its walls, a minor incident in the historical sources finds itself transformed. The potential of the episode in the theatre as a vehicle for powerful speech may have been suggested to Shakespeare by a brief story at the beginning of Thomas Wilson’s *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) that describes how Pirrhus [King Pyrrhus of Epirus], in his “battaile against the Romaines,” would send the Thessalonian Cineas to persuade the occupants of initially recalcitrant strongholds and towns to relinquish them without force. That the ancient Greek general’s battle is with Rome correlates the historical anecdote with the religious struggles of the sixteenth century, a correlation noticed by Linda Gregerson in her discussion of Wilson and Reformation eloquence.

But if Wilson’s story is an unambiguous celebration of the power of rhetoric as an “adjunct to military conquest,” one which manifests the period’s general apprehension of persuasion through language as a form of violence, Shakespeare’s treatment is far more circumspect. This circumspection is anchored in the fact that the two kings’ orations, though arguing for opposite causes, exhibit a high degree of linguistic similitude. Indeed, to borrow

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83 Holinshed mentions only John’s taking of Angiers, without reference to a preliminary verbal contest (Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, 4:34). The episode does appear in *The Troublesome Raigne* (88–89), but its structure is subtly altered by Shakespeare. In the probable source play, the citizen of Angiers answers John and Philip separately, directly after each of their respective speeches, while in *King John* the citizen responds only after both speeches have been delivered. In addition, the listless prose of the episode in *The Troublesome Raigne* contrasts with the kings’ dynamic blank verse in *King John*, the latter enabling Shakespeare’s special focus on the power of language.

84 The story appears in the first edition, in the prefatory epistle to John Dudley (Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* [London, 1553], A1r–v), and is reprinted in subsequent editions. Wilson’s manual was extremely popular in the period, and Shakespeare was probably familiar with it. See the discussion in Thomas J. Derrick’s critical edition of the *Arte of Rhetorique* (New York: Garland, 1982). The links between Wilson and this episode in *King John* have not been made in the critical literature, but the connections between Sonnet 22 and an Erasmian epistle published in Wilson’s manual are known. See John F. Reichert, “Sonnet XX and Erasmus’ ‘Epistle to Perswade a Yong Gentleman to Marriage’,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 16.2 (1965): 238–240.


86 Gregerson, *Reformation of the Subject*, 261.
Trevor McNeely’s words, “[t]he speeches . . . political antitheses as they are, nevertheless make identical cases, with identical force, employing identical rhetorical flourishes.” And thus, with the great difficulty of selecting among political agents who are, at least on the linguistic plain, indistinguishable, the cleverly evasive response of the citizen of Angiers promises allegiance only to the claimant “that proves the King” (2.1.270).

If language is powerful enough to become a substitute for actual war, as in Wilson’s story, such power does not guarantee authenticity. Ironically, this is a point made by one of the rival claimants:

Behold, the French, amazed, vouchsafe a parle;
And now instead of bullets wrapped in fire,
To make a shaking fever in your walls,
They shoot but calm words folded up in smoke,
To make a faithless error in your ears (2.1.226–30 my emphasis).

John promotes himself as preserver of Angiers; his forces have intercepted the French, averted their destruction of the town, and reduced the matter to a (for now) peaceable debate. But the speech records the residual tension between physical force and eloquent French rhetoric, extending its imagery of warfare to make “calm words” the corollary of real “bullets.” If anything, such words are more dangerous on account of their deceptiveness, their quiescent veneer a viperous distraction from their murkier intent.

“Faithless error” gives that intent an unmistakable religious dimension. Simply on its own, the word “error” in the period is often shorthand for mistaken or false religious belief. Most famously, in the religious allegory of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (pr. 1590), the Red Cross Knight slays the monster Error, a moment paralleling Elizabeth’s simultaneous outlawing of

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Catholicism and elevation of the “true faith” of Protestantism. In “Englands Eliza,” a poetic chronicle celebrating Elizabeth’s reign which Richard Niccols composed and included in his 1610 revised edition of A Mirror for Magistrates, the connection between error and Catholicism during the reign of Elizabeth’s predecessor, Mary, is made explicit:

Then men did walke in shades of darkesome night,
Whose feeble sight with errors blacke strooke blind,
Could in no place Times faire Fidessa find.

Niccols clearly borrows from Spenser; Fidessa (faith or faithful) is of course the name under which Duessa masquerades in The Faerie Queene. It should be noted that Shakespeare shows his awareness of the religious connotations of “error” elsewhere. For instance, in his declamation on ornament during the casket scene in Merchant of Venice, Bassanio specifies how “[i]n religion, / What damnèd error but some sober brow / Will bless it and approve it with a text” (3.2.77–79). In King John the startling collocation “faithless error” intensifies these connotations; it clearly suggests that dissembling rhetoric may lead the citizens of Angiers into mistaken beliefs whose dimensions are religious as much as political. Philip’s subsequent address extends the language of divine belief, the French king arguing to the citizens that, as promoter of young Arthur’s right to the throne, he is in fact:

. . . no further enemy to you
Than the constraint of hospitable zeal
In the relief of this oppressèd child
Religiously provokes (2.1.243–46 my emphasis).

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Developing Roy Battenhouse’s contention that Arthur is “the play's representative of genuine religious piety,” Beatrice Groves has recently challenged the consensus that King John empties out the religious meaning of its earlier dramatic precursors, suggesting instead that “Shakespeare . . . transferred the crypto-religious power with which John had been imbued by Protestant writers, onto his nephew, Arthur.”91 Indeed, the suggestive analogues that Battenhouse and Groves note between the portrayal of a captive, powerless Arthur, whom, on John’s orders, Hubert is unable to murder, and the Abraham and Isaac mysteries help us to glimpse how broader theatrical knowledge shaped the dramaturgy, shifting it away from the models available to Shakespeare in his more direct sources.92

Arthur has been made central in King John in a way that he is not in the sources. This is suggested by Shakespeare’s altered opening, which sharply establishes the defining conflict between John and his nephew. It is perhaps no accident that John’s ordering of Arthur’s murder and Arthur’s pleading with his executioner Hubert have traditionally been praised as first-rate Shakespeare and especially subject to pictorial representation in nineteenth-century editions. Arthur’s centrality, then, to the struggle for Angiers – it is over his claim to the throne, after all, that John and Philip are competing – is symptomatic of his centrality within the play as a whole. After Arthur dies trying to escape his captivity, the posthumous verdict that “[t]he life, the right, and truth of all this realm / Is fled to heaven” (4.3.145–46) is telling, as its mouthpiece, the Bastard, is a character often viewed as a kind of detached moral commentator on the unfolding events.

And thus to return to John and Philip’s rhetorical encounter before Angiers: this encounter has at its centre Arthur’s right to the throne, a right denied by John, championed by Philip, and clothed, as Groves has shown, in symbols of religion and true piety. By placing a religious core at the heart of an encounter of words – an encounter whose structures derive, Douglas C. Wixson argues, from the combative pamphlet literature of the Elizabethan period – Shakespeare presents an allegory of religious polemic, with its convergent aim of asserting a partisan version of “true faith” through the medium of language. Polemic is also charged with obfuscation, a proclivity towards enveloping “calm words . . . in smoke” that paralyses the ability of language to act as a vessel for truth. The prominent sonneteer and Catholic loyalist Henry Constable, for instance, dismissed the arguments of the *Conference* because he discerned in the tract “[a] most monstrous excesse in speache against all reason equitie and good conscience,” whose intention was “to cover truthes amonge mists & cloudes for wininge of tyme, suche as politike simulation, & dissimulation with help of poetrie can breath & puff out to dasel the sight of simple, or credulous people.” The problem with writing that deploys linguistic finesse to construct a claim to truth is that such finesse may be mirrored in the response of an adversary, thereby making two polarized texts extremely difficult to distinguish at the level of language. When Parsons’s *Responsio ad Edictum* or *Philopater* (1592) – a response to a royal proclamation of 1591 against Jesuits and seminary priests – appeared in Richard Verstegan’s English translation, it was impishly disguised as a disclosure from a Protestant intelligencer concerning the imminent appearance of the Catholic text; with heavy irony, the translation draws attention to precisely the quandary of the reader faced with the dissimulation of polemic:

. . . this booke againste the proclamation, I do assure you it is the moste sharpe, bitter, and odious thing that ever I thinck was written by the papistes, though the writer pretende great modestie, and doeth not in deede use open raylinge tearmes, but by a close, fluente, and cutting stile, and by discussing (as I have saide) of many, and curious particularities, and by pretending to prove all he saith, by our owne booke, lawes, cronicles, and recordes, he filleth his reader with infinite desire to reade al through out.96

It is text remarkably conscious of its own internal mechanisms, caustically observing that to use language disingenuously is to craft an effective piece of polemic. “[C]alm words folded up in smoke” are problematic – for the citizens of Angiers, for early modern readers of confessional polemic – because they are symptomatic of a corrupted discourse turned colubrine and chameleonic; because they are the equivalent of bullets yet somehow even deadlier. Vitriol and vituperation clearly announced are far less seductive than the opaque signification of craftily disguised polemic.

If polemic underlines concerns about the seduction of eloquence ripe to be explored in a theatre similarly invested in the power of the word, it also trades in disputed “facts.” And the uncertain circumstances enshrouding John’s death made it perhaps the most disputed “fact” within the monarch’s sixteenth- and seventeenth-century polemical incarnations. Indeed, in the account of John in the Actes of Monuments – for which Bale was very possibly responsible, and of which, as I will show, there is hitherto overlooked evidence of Shakespeare’s knowledge – this disputedness manifests itself in a striking tension between text and image.97 The prose narrative of John’s death, placing particular emphasis on the story’s transmission via Caxton’s Chronicles (1480), claims that from the chronicles “most

96 Robert Parsons, An Advertisment Written to a Secretarie of My L. Treasurers of Ingland, trans. Richard Verstegan ([Antwerp], 1592), A4v.
agree in this that he was poysoned by the Monke;” yet this bald assertion jars with the juxtaposed concession that:

Many opinions are among the Chroniclers of the death of king John. Some of them doe wryte that he died of sorrowe and heavinesse of heart, as Polydorus [Polydore Vergil]: some of surfetting in the night, as Radulphus Niger [Ralph Niger]: some of a bloudy flixe [i.e., flux], as Roger Hoveden [Roger of Howden]: some of a burning agewe, some of a cold sweat, some of eating apples, some of eating peares, some plummes, &c. (1:256).

The famous accompanying woodcut, however, pointedly rejects the plurality of interpretation towards which the prose gestures, presenting instead a striking pictorial narrative of six scenes. First, the monk poisoner receives prior absolution for the deed, tempers the poison, and proffers John the poisoned cup of which he has himself tasted; then the dead bodies of John and the monk are displayed, as well as the perpetual masses now being sung to ensure the safe passage of the monk’s soul (fig. 3). The unequivocal visual mythology overpowers the more circumspect prose, and must have exerted a considerable influence on readers’ interpretations of this section, particularly those without the literacy to digest the written narrative.

In late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England, Foxe’s account would give way to a more evaluative handling of the story of monk poisoner. There is certainly evidence that the version of events propagated in the woodcut persisted within the established church; for instance, a virulent sermon preached by William Burton in Norwich Cathedral in 1589 declaimed against the fact that “papists dispense with murther and treason, as, the killing of king John, the prince of Orange, the king of France, and others can testifie.”

Holinshed’s Chronicles (1577), however, note the story of the monk poisoner only as one of a series of

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98 William Burton, A Sermon Preached in the Cathedrall Church in Norwich, the xxi. Day of December, 1589 [London], [1590?], F3v.
circulating explanations for John’s death, and refuse to uphold the veracity of one account over another:

How soever or where soever or when soever he died, it is not a matter of such moment that it should impeach the credit of the storie: but certeine it is that he came to his end, let it be by a surfet, or by other meanes ordained for the shortening of his life. The manner is not so materiall as the truth is certeine.99

Were it not for the woodcut there would almost be a sceptical coherence between Foxe and Holinshed. By 1618, however, in the continuation of his prose history, The Collection of the

History of England, Samuel Daniel’s forensic weighing of historical sources had led him to reject the poisoning story, largely because of the absence of surviving testimony from the one medically skilled person with access to the corpse:

The Abbot of Crockeston, a man skilfull in Physicke, and at that time the Kings Physition disembowelled his body, who, no doubt would have given notice, to the World had his Maister (as it was in after ages vainely bruted) beene poysoned by a Monke of Swinshead Abbay, but the Writers of those times report no such matter. (Mat. Par.) Howsoever his Death takes not away the reproach of his life, nor the infamy that followes him, whereunto ill Princes are as subject as their evill Subjects, and cannot escape the brute of a clamorous Pen.100

But if Daniel’s discrediting of the story had no influence on his damming assessment of John, the interpretation of the woodcut persisted as an object of contestation in Catholic-Protestant controversy. Criticized by Parsons for conflating papal pardon and priestly absolution, and thereby demonstrating his ignorance of the subtleties of Catholic doctrine and practices, Sir Francis Hastings responded:

how ignorant soever you presume me to be of the difference betwixt the Popes pardon, and the Priests absolution, because I make mention of them both together . . . yet herein they concur . . . that both are used as inducements to most hainous sins, thereby to satisfie the Popes pleasure.101

The first example chosen by Hastings to make his point is from the “[s]undry chronicles [that] make mention of Simon the Monke of Swinested, who poysoned King John, that before the fact hee confessed his purpose to his Abbot, who highly commended his zeale, and gave him absolution before-hand, for the committing of this wicked acte” (74). Though Hastings doesn’t mention Foxe by name, the configurations with the graphic representation in the

101 Sir Francis Hastings, An Apologie or Defence of the Watch-word (London, 1600), 74.
woodcut are clear, underlining both Foxe’s influence and the element in his account that still made assumptions about John’s death so inflammatory and controverted. Parsons now turned to tackle what he called “a notorious imposture about the poysoning of King John” in his 1602 response, criticizing Hastings’s failure to cite specific sources for the story, though recognizing its derivation from Foxe:

> Wherfore we must now try; whether Fox or he [Hastings] be the truer man in relating Stories, or whether both be not of one, and the same sise in misreporting. John Fox hath not only a long tale, but also a ful pagent printed and painted to this: to wit of the poysoning of K. John by this monk (ll3’).

Parsons questions Foxe’s (and by extension Hastings’s) reliance on Caxton’s *Chronicles*, and notes John Stow’s treatment in the *Annales of England* (1592). Stow himself chose to rely on sources contemporary to John’s reign. He does mention the later account of the poisoning in Caxton’s *Chronicle* but, like Holinshed, refuses to pass judgement: “But to conclude, howsoever hee died, certaine it is, that hee raigned with trouble ynough.” Parsons was to critique Foxe’s book in greater detail in his *Treatise of Three Conversions* (1603–4), to be discussed in the next chapter, and recorded his concern with the woodcuts in particular. Foxe’s book performs the stealthiest of falsehoods, and “hath done more hurt alone to simple soules in our countrey, by infecting and poysoninge them unawares, under the bayte of pleasant historyes, fayre pictures and painted pageants, then many other the most pestilent bookes togeather” (3:400). The influence on the illiterate is particularly pernicious, since “the foresaid spectacle and representation of martyrdomes . . . delighteth many to gaze on, who cannot read” (3:400).

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102 Parsons, *Warn-word*, ll2’.
104 This second quotation from the *Three Conversions* also appears in Elizabeth Evenden, *Patents, Pictures and Patronage: John Day and the Tudor Book Trade* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 103.
Drama was also a participant in conflicting accounts over the poisoning. The second part of the *Troublesome Raigne* had made it a prominent episode, advertised on the title page and an important part of the stage business. The Swinstead monk soliloquizes on his determination to carry out the deed before receiving absolution from the Abbot. Most critics also assume that John is poisoned by a monk in Shakespeare’s play. However, this widespread interpretation has been challenged more recently by Eva Hartby, who argues that the fact that the monk is never shown and no motivation supplied suggests a deliberate attempt to leave the veracity of this one account among many undetermined.⁹⁵ Roy Battenhouse also draws attention to the uncertainty over the agent of John’s death, highlighting the odd circumstance that, after Hubert’s brief and unconvincing report, the monk poisoner is not subsequently mentioned during John’s dying scene.⁹⁶ Even if we don’t accept Hartby’s argument fully, it nevertheless exposes a critical desire to make connections in a play as rife with troubling ambiguities as *King John*. The monk poisoner appears to be the manifestation of Pandulp’s earlier call

*blessèd shall he be that doth revolt*  
From his allegiance to an heretic,  
And meritorious shall that hand be called,  
Canonizèd and worshipped as a saint,  
That takes away by any secret course  
Thy hateful life (3.1.100–5).

But his actual existence is called into account by the playwright’s circumspect treatment. Hubert announces to the Bastard simply, “The King, I fear, is poisoned by a monk” (5.6.24), a moment which Braunmuller’s commentary rightly describes as “[a]n intolerably clumsy piece of exposition, if the audience does not know its history.”⁹⁷ Zachary Leo wittily

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⁹⁶ Battenhouse, “Religion in King John,” 143.  
⁹⁷ Braunmuller, ed., *King John*, 262, n. 23.
acknowledged the effect of such indeterminacy in casting doubt on the story, but also its
dramatic ineptitude. “[w]hile his procedure must win the hearty approval of all good monks
as monks,” he suggests, “from the point of view of dramatic efficiency it is open to question”
(76). If deliberate clumsiness is in fact the point, an attempt to underline the unsubstantiated
claims for historical accuracy furnished by competing accounts, then it is achieved only at the
price of dramatic incoherence. In this vein, the words in which the dying John is described,
the “scribbled form,” become especially pertinent. Jean-Christophe Mayer has highlighted
how the phrase emphasises the notion of John’s textual construction since, at the moment of
his “poisoning,” Shakespeare highlights the dubious “truth value” of the sources.108 However,
neither Mayer nor other critics of the play have considered that the image of John “drawn
with a pen / Upon a parchment” (5.7.32–33) might have been suggested to Shakespeare by
one of the scenes in Foxe’s woodcut. The positionally dominant image in the woodcut of the
king’s body in the top centre (fig. 3) is set apart from the others by its ornate frame, the image
presented on a cartouche. At this moment, the Book of Martyrs makes visually manifest what
John is all along in the prose narrative – a “scribbled form” constructed through polemical
agency – and it is to this sense of textual constructedness that Shakespeare turns in the diction
of John’s death. In Foxe’s image, John is precisely a form on a piece of paper, an ornamental
roll of parchment. As the historical reality of the actual John recedes at the moment of his
expiration, this is also what he becomes in Shakespeare.

King John’s supposedly flawed artifice directly correlates to its modification of polemic.
The play stands as the product of a plural culture in which multiple representations of the
king circulated and contended with each other. It is of course erroneous to imagine that the
early reformist image of John, fashioned in literary form by Bale and propagated by Foxe,

108 Mayer, Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith, 77–78.
held unquestioned orthodoxy in 1590s England. If Catholic writers such as Allen and Parsons mirrored Protestants in exploiting the elements of John’s reign that best suited their purposes, histories of John such as Holinshed’s and Daniel’s illustrate a trend towards a more objective handling and presentation of the sources that might mediate between two extremes. But, significantly, Shakespeare’s play distinguishes itself from the anti-Catholic idiom of its closest literary precursor, Peele’s *The Troublesome Raigne*, and there is evidence to indicate the greater popularity of Peele’s version. Appearing in three quarto printings in 1591, 1611, and 1622, it had a considerable commercial durability as an individual play, in contrast with Shakespeare’s *King John*, which does not appear in print until the First Folio. The varying printed fortunes of the two plays in the period, then, may in itself be taken as an early sign of a problematic response to Shakespeare’s *King John*. As the plays themselves become fully-fledged objects of critical enquiry after the Restoration, it is a response that is articulated with ever-greater sophistication and persists in modern academic criticism: the play is found to be aesthetically insufficient and dramatically inadequate, particularly when compared with other plays in the Shakespeare canon whose subjects are less obviously implicated in polemic.

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that the play’s problematic construction, like its preoccupation with legitimacy, language and form, only makes fullest sense against the illumined hinterland of Catholic-Protestant polemic. In what was his first major confrontation as dramatist with polemic, taking on a subject in which, as Bale’s and Peele’s efforts illustrate, the partisan clarity of sides appeared almost obligatory, Shakespeare works out an already sophisticated and complex response, one with elements of fine theatre but blighted by an overarching incoherence. But Shakespeare was soon to turn to a different form of history, one which would interact with the constructions of polemic of history in strikingly different ways.
CHAPTER TWO

“This Papist and his Poet”: comedic collusion in 1 Henry IV

PRINCE HARRY: Thou art not what thou seem’st.
SIR JOHN: No, that’s certain: I am not a double man.

(1 Henry IV 5.4.135–36).

It is anachronistic to impose sharp terminological distinctions between polemic and literature in the early modern period. If liberal humanism insists on the transhistorical validity of “great literature,” polemic is always rooted within a specific time and place. Yet when the polemical and the literary converge, the two modes are often mutually constitutive and can therefore be prised apart only with difficulty. The trajectory of post-Reformation drama in England is certainly one towards increasing artistic sophistication and, with the advent of the purpose-built commercial theatres from the mid-1570s, specialization and professionalization; but this is an evolution owing a debt to both a medieval dramatic inheritance and the anti-Catholic plays of the early Reformation, which wrought that inheritance in accordance with the agendas of religious controversy, thereby demonstrating the latent potential and adaptability of existing dramatic forms.¹ The theatre’s growing accessibility and cultural importance in the Elizabethan period, coupled with its perceived laxity of moral regulation, provoked an opposition associated primarily with the radical or Puritan wing of the established Church, an opposition that is well documented in the critical literature, though by no means as uniform and straightforward as is sometimes suggested.² But these later developments ought not to

¹ For the role of anti-Catholic drama in the development of dramatic form, see Pines, Anti-Catholic Drama.
² The classic account remains Jonas Barish, The Antitheatrical Prejudice (Berkley: University of California Press, 1981). More recently, Jeffrey Knapp has stressed the productive traffic between church and stage too easily obscured in oversimplified reconstructions of antitheatricalism (Shakespeare’s Tribe), and the first
disguise how the early reformers harnessed the energy of theatre to promote their cause and
denounce their opponents. Theatre could popularise ideas; as Thomas Cromwell’s chief
propagandist Richard Morison once declared, “into the common people things sooner enter
by the eyes than by the ears.” Moreover, theatre could be closely aligned with other modes
of religious production to create the kind of unbreachable cultural fortification John Foxe
envisioned in his Book of Martyrs: “plaiers, printers, preachers . . . be set up of God, as a triple
bulwarke against the triple crowne of the Pope, to bring him down” (2:1348).

Foxe’s warm support of popular forms deliberately harnessed to ensure the victory of a
particular truth might appear an appropriate response to the time and the text that provoked it:
a 1547 letter (also printed in Foxe) by the conservative Bishop of Winchester Stephen
Gardiner to Protector Somerset complaining precisely about those newly tolerated polemical
forms under the recently inaugurated boy king Edward VI. The ecclesiastical authority
embodied here in Gardiner stands as an obstacle to reformation, retrenching its position by
insisting on the regulation of hostile cultural activity. Drama’s destabilizing potential would
be recognized in a 1551 Edwardian Act that modified existing Henrician legislation,
“Concernyng Punysshement of Beggers & Vacabundes,” and targeted, among others,
“players, and printers without license, and divers other disordered persons.” A further Act
“Prohibiting Religious Controversy, Unlicensed Plays, and Printing” (1553), which appeared
in the first year of Mary I’s reign, acknowledged in its purview the dangerously close links
promoted by Foxe between polemic, print and drama. Later, the 1559 proclamation

chapter of Shell, Shakespeare and Religion, 30–78, provides an excellent, nuanced survey of antitheatrical
discourse in the period.

3 Qtd. in G. R. Elton, Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Cromwell
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 185.

4 The quotation also appears with modernized spelling in King, “Light of Printing,” 56.

5 Qtd. in Douglas A. Brooks, From Playhouse to Printing House: Drama and Authorship in Early Modern
England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17–18. Richard Dutton describes the proclamation as
“the first definite attempt to institute a formal system of licensing of materials to be performed, which implicitly
also meant censorship” (Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama
“Prohibiting Unlicensed Interludes and Plays Especially on Religion and Policy” set the agenda and mechanism for regulating religious material performed in Elizabethan England. Indeed, this act would eventually sanction the suppression of the regional civic Mystery plays.6 By the 1590s, after more than three decades of political stability, established religion had clearly achieved a measure of durability and Foxe’s Book of Martyrs an iconic, if not uncomplicated, position within English Protestantism. In this transformed climate, with drama as primarily a commercial venture subject to the operation of censorship, “plaiers, printers, [and] preachers” might hardly combine in any programmatic sense to produce and propagate the kind of coherent religious perspective envisaged by Foxe.7 Yet plays and polemic remained part of a dense cultural network whose connections, though not necessarily avowed or witting, could be forged through the interpretive labour of contemporary commentators. Such labour might even illumine traffic between polemic and the stage that simultaneously undermined Foxe and bolstered Catholic controversialists.

This chapter is concerned with one such instance of this traffic: the depiction of the Foxean martyr Sir John Oldcastle in 1 Henry IV. If through a controversy now difficult to reconstruct with any surety that character’s name would be changed to Falstaff, the Oldcastle who first appeared on Shakespeare’s stage in 1596 or 1597 as prince Hal’s roguish associate and corpulent drinking companion was certainly an unflattering portrait. One difficulty lies in establishing whether the name change was enforced because of complaints from Oldcastle’s descendants, the Brookes, a scenario that needn’t preclude the character’s more general offensiveness. Richard James, librarian to Sir Robert Cotton and originator of explanations for the substitution of names, suggests (it should be noted, over thirty years after the play’s

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7 The obvious exception that proves the general rule is how the initially encouraged anti-Martinist interludes and stage plays that ridiculed and denounced the Marprelate Tracts needed themselves to be eventually suppressed by the authorities. See the recent, succinct discussion in Black, “Performing the Marprelate Controversy.”
original performance) the likelihood of both scenarios operating simultaneously. His dedicatory epistle to a manuscript copy of Thomas Hoccleve’s medieval poem on Oldcastle being prepared for publication, probably composed in 1633–34, records:

That in Shakespeares first shewe of Harrie the fifth [i.e., *1 Henry IV*], the person with which he undertook to playe a buffone was not Falstaffe, but Sr Jhon Oldcastle, and that offence beinge worthily taken by personages descended from his title, as peradventure by manie others allso whoe ought to have him in honourable memorie, the poet was putt to make an ignorant shifte of abusing Sr Jhon Falstaffe or Fastolphe, a man not inferior of vertue though not so famous in piete as the other, whoe gave witnesse unto the truth of our reformation with a constant and resolute martyrdom.8

James’s view of Oldcastle as one “whoe gave witnesse unto the truth of our reformation” is aligned with the figure that appears in Foxe’s martyrology. Yet the important word “peradventure,” underlining the prior assuredness that specific “offence” was caused, reveals as mere speculation that “manie others” would have objected to Shakespeare’s portrayal. James’s epistle remains important evidence that this particular representation of Oldcastle mattered to someone at the time, and that alteration was compelled. At any rate, Oldcastle duly became John Falstaff, a name suggested by the soldier and contemporary of Oldcastle, Sir John Fastolfe.9 It may be, as E. K. Chambers conjectured, that “purging the offence” necessitated the play’s publication “unusually soon after its production.”10 The title page of


the 1598 First Quarto certainly accords prominence to the altered name, advertising as one of the play’s key contents “the humorous conceits of Sir John Falstaffe.”

However, internal traces of the original name remained. Shortly after Sir John’s first appearance, Hal calls him “my old lad of the castle” (1.2.41–42), an obvious pun that would have helped to preserve from the outset, even after the operation of some form of censorship, the audience’s and reader’s identification of Falstaff with Oldcastle. Further, the line “Away, good Ned. Oldcastle sweats to death” is a regular decasyllable with the Oxford editors’ restoration of the original name (2.3.16), but unmetrical with Falstaff in its place. 2 Henry IV also contains evidence of the name change. At one point in the 1600 First Quarto the speech prefix “Old.” is used before one of Falstaff’s lines. In addition, in a seeming attempt to stifle further controversy, this dramatic sequel added an epilogue claiming distance between Falstaff and Oldcastle: “for Oldcastle died a martyr,” it states, “and this is not the man” (29–30).

If a brief rehearsal of the well-known evidence underlines that a change of name occurred, it gives no clear indication as to why Shakespeare might traduce Oldcastle. Uncertainty, however, has not inhibited critical speculation. Arguing against Geoffrey Bullough’s view that Shakespeare simply borrowed the Oldcastle name from the older anonymous play The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth (pr. 1598) without realising that offence might be caused, E. A. J. Honigmann is surely right to claim that “Shakespeare could not have failed to

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11 [William Shakespeare], The History of Henrie the Fourth (London, 1598), A1’.
12 For a summary of internal evidence for the name change, see Chambers, William Shakespeare, 1:381, and Scoufos, Typological Satire, 32–33.
13 Unless greater specificity is required, I refer to the Shakespearean character throughout as Sir John, the shared Christian name usefully covering both incarnations and avoiding the convolution of “Falstaff/Oldcastle.”
be aware of Sir John Oldcastle, the Protestant martyr.” Shakespeare may have come across Oldcastle in the *Book of Martyrs*, which he had already used, in all likelihood, as a source for *2 Henry VI* (c. 1590–91) and *King John*, and would certainly draw on closely for the episodes involving Thomas Cranmer in *Henry VIII*; The historical episode was in any case available in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, a work utilised “as a source for over a third of his plays.” Though it has been argued that Oldcastle’s Elizabethan descendants, the Cobhams, would not have taken direct offence at the satirical portrayal of an ancestor, the delight at the depiction of Cobham as Falstaff in letters from the Essex-Southampton circle, enemies of Henry Brooke, eleventh Baron Cobham, suggests the identification had some kind of caustic valency, whether or not the product of authorial intention. Here is not the place to rehearse the dense and often speculative network of contemporary connections in which Shakespeare may or may not have been directly involved, connections which have received a full treatment by Alice-Lyle Scoufos. If Shakespeare’s lampoon of Oldcastle offended specific individuals – and it is likely that it did – James’s reference to the probable indignation of “manie others allso whoe ought to have him in honourable memorie” suggests a wider impact consonant with the very public act of disassociation in the epilogue to *2 Henry IV*, mentioned above.

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18 Ibid., 245.
19 See Ch. 9, “Shakespeare’s Oldcastle: Another Ill-Framed Knight,” in Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 132–148, which argues that the indirect ancestry and the absence of Cobham’s name in the play would have made the dramatic material inoffensive to the Brookes (144–45).
It is intriguing, then, to consider just how broadly offensive a satirical portrayal of one of Foxe’s martyrs might have been to London playgoers in the mid-1590s. David Scott Kastan presents the argument that Oldcastle is satirized from a mainstream Protestant position:

Shakespeare’s audience in 1596 or 1597 was far more likely to see the lampooning of Oldcastle as the mark of a Protestant bias rather than a papist one, providing evidence of the very fracture in the Protestant community that made the accommodation of the Lollard past so problematic.21

The claim being made here is that, within the context of Protestant non-conformity’s being increasingly driven underground, we ought to view “the travesty of a Lollard martyr not as a crypto-Catholic tactic but an entirely orthodox gesture” (101). Other critics concur that the butt of the joke is radical Protestantism. For Paul Strohm, “Shakespeare’s Oldcastle is a walking, talking, sweating rejoinder to Puritan antitheatrical critique.”22 Kristen Poole sites the character within the Marprelate Controversy, arguing that “Falstaff assumes the characteristics of Martin Marprelate himself, reproducing Martin’s irreverence for established authority and bringing the dynamics of religious controversy into a burgeoning sphere of public print culture.”23 But by Poole’s own admission the links between Shakespeare’s drama and an intra-Protestant controversy – in 1596 to 1597, no longer hotly topical, we should add – are “speculative” (34); ultimately she over-relies on flimsy connections between fine detail on the controversy itself and the dramatic character, writing, for instance, of “striking structural similarities” between Oldcastle’s and Marprelate’s story (33).

But to insist on a mainstream Protestant provenance for Shakespeare’s satire is unnecessarily to limit its more extensive discursive scope. As suggested by the proverbial

21 Ch. 5, “‘Killed with Hard Opinions’: Oldcastle and Falstaff and the Reformed Text of 1 Henry IV,” in David Scott Kastan, Shakespeare after Theory (New York: Routledge, 1999), 100.
22 Strohm, Theory, 145.
figure of the bee sucking honey and the spider poison from the same source, a derived meaning was not understood as the passive, uncomplicated property of the text; it was forged at least in part, and thus malleable, in accordance with the dispositions of its readers. As Gary Hamilton’s subtle if inconclusive exploration of this question alerts us:

In looking at the play through the Bale-and-Foxe-loathing, Elizabethan-court-bashing lens of a Catholic libel, Oldcastle/Falstaff looks more like the Catholic’s monstrous Protestant, of course, than merely that monstrous anti-prelatical wing of Protestantism that the bishops wanted other English Protestants to learn to hate.

To some readers a Catholic valence would be, and was, equally plausible. Indeed, where evidence exists of reaction to the religious significance of Shakespeare’s portrayal among the playwright’s contemporaries or slightly later seventeenth-century commentators, it tends not to point towards intra-Protestant controversy. As we shall see, Robert Parsons, John Speed and Thomas Fuller all position Shakespeare’s Oldcastle on a Catholic-Protestant polemical axis. Other evidence also detracts from the critical construction of a Puritan Sir John. As Paul White has argued, the historical Oldcastle “was more generally hailed by mainstream Protestantism as a godly man who heroically died for his faith.” Indeed, the literary Oldcastles that emerged in dialectic with Shakespeare’s portrayal, the Admiral’s Men play *Sir John Oldcastle* (1599) and John Weever’s long poem *The Mirror of Martyrs* (1601), indicate that the defence of Oldcastle was also a popular and therefore commercially viable position. If Shakespeare’s Oldcastle was conceived against William Brooke, a satire of Puritanism does not easily fit with important biographical evidence concerning the intended

target: Brooke’s patronage of a playing company, role as organiser of entertainments, enlistment on the side of the authorities during the Marprelate Controversy, and suspected closet Catholicism in the early 1570s.27

Although critical deadlock indicates that Shakespeare’s intentions in the play and his attitude towards the Brookes are now irrecoverable, there are still ways of obviating a retreat into interpretive indeterminacy. I argue here for the importance of the broader cultural nexus within which 1 Henry IV’s meaning was constituted, presenting Sir John as merely one manifestation of a set of complex interactions between religious writers, literary practitioners and their readers over the reputation and status of this complex historical figure. A critical reading of the play itself is thus always secondary to an analysis of the ways in which it was actually read in the period. The first and second parts of this chapter therefore examine the key groups within this nexus: respectively, sixteenth-century writers contributing to the construction of Oldcastle before 1 Henry IV, who propagated elements in their portrayals that find their way into Shakespeare’s character, and early- to mid-seventeenth century readers and playgoers, some of whom evidently assembled the play’s meaning in light of these writers. In the third and fourth parts, I explore the literary responses to Shakespeare’s treatment, the collaborative drama Sir John Oldcastle and Weever’s Mirror for Martyrs, responses that inform our understanding of the continued, sophisticated negotiations between literature and polemic in the late sixteenth century, and assert that 1 Henry IV becomes embroiled in the polemical struggles over Oldcastle’s reputation precisely because of its dramatic power.

27 Ibid., 152–53.
I

Executed as a heretic and traitor in 1417, during the reign of Henry V, Oldcastle emerged in the historiography of the sixteenth century as the subject of conflicting accounts. Caxton’s *Chronicles*, laconically narrating that Oldcastle was “hanged and burnt on the Galeyewes and all for his lewdnesse and his fals opinions,” are unsympathetic to the future Protestant martyr. Yet this prosaic focus on Oldcastle’s double punishment, meted out for treason and heresy, and thus marking his transgression as both political and spiritual, would be memorialised in visual depictions in Foxe and later Holinshed (figs. 4&5). Significantly, *Henry IV* wastes no time in intimating that a grim execution awaits Sir John, and the theme of punishment resounds throughout the play. Given Oldcastle’s fate, playgoers familiar with these historical events are surely invited to find deep irony in early remarks made by Sir John to Hal: “shall there be a gallows standing in England when thou art king . . . ?” and “By the Lord, I'll be a traitor then, when thou art king” (1.2.57–59, 1.2.144–45). Hal himself, noting the fluctuating fortunes of a thief, suggests that men like Sir John are “now in as low an ebb as the foot of the ladder, and by and by in as high a flow as the ridge of the gallows” (1.2.37–38). Individual reversal, enacted more generally by the Protestant rewriting of the past, becomes constitutive of Sir John’s unstable identity in the play. His status and reputation, like that of his historical counterpart, are never securely fixed.

Oldcastle’s reversal, like King John’s, became central to Protestant revisionism of the past. Indeed, both figures were represented, often together in the same works, as victims of clerical perfidy. *A Proper Dyaloge, betwene a Gentillman and a Husbandma[n]*, noted in the

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Fig. 4 “The Description of the Cruell Martyrdome of Sir John Oldcastle, Lorde Cobham,” John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments*, (1563).

Fig. 5 “Sir John Oldecastel Executed,” Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577).
previous chapter for its sympathetic construction of John, also turns to the lamentable exemplum of Oldcastle:

Did not they [the clergy] so longe strive and wrastle
Against the good knight sir Jhon oldecastle
Other wise called lorde of Cobham.
That from highe heresy unto treasone
They brought him to finall destruction
With other many a noble man.³⁰

The rehabilitation of Oldcastle’s reputation gathered pace with the publication of his testimony, “the Examinacion of the Lorde Cobham,” a document possibly edited by William Tyndale. Its appearance alongside The Examinacion of Master William Thorpe (1530) – another testimony by a Lollard preacher who, like Oldcastle, was interviewed for his heretical beliefs by the incumbent Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel – suggests a programmatic attempt both to displace official fifteenth-century records and to construct the individual conscience as the locus of true faith in recent English history.³¹ John Bale published a fuller version of Oldcastle’s story in 1544, an account that would underpin Foxe’s influential and contentious propagation of Oldcastle in the Actes and Monuments as a proto-Protestant martyr who enabled the tracing of a Protestant lineage back through the history of the Church. But Bale’s Oldcastle (as distinct from Foxe’s) also remained important in its own right, enjoying at least one contemporary reprinting some four years later (STC 1278) and resurrected after almost two hundred years in 1729, in an edition compiled by John

³¹ [William Tyndale, ed.], The Examinacion of Master William Thorpe . . . The Examinacion of the Honorable Knight Syr Jhon Oldcatest Lorde Cobham ([Antwerp, 1530]).
Blackbourne, who praises Bale for having “been more modest in it than Fox that copied after him.”

Bale’s *Brefe Chronicle Concerninge the Examinacyon and Death of the Blessed Martyr of Christ Sir Johan Oldecastell the Lorde Cobham*, to give the work its full title, emphasised Oldcastle’s godliness and Christ-derived strength in answering his interrogators. Importantly, he is depicted as a brave knight whose courage is drawn without intermediary from the word of God. Such is the compelling image visually summarised for reader and viewer on the title page: a robust figure complete with sword and a shield depicting a scene from the crucifixion, beneath whose feet lies an aptly chosen biblical quotation from Daniel 12:10, presenting the opposing groups of godly and ungodly: “In the latter time shall many be chosen, proved, and purifyed by fyre yet shall the ungodly lyve wickedly styll, and have no understanding.” (fig. 6). It is intriguing in itself to note the change in Protestant iconography from Bale’s image of the muscular, valiant knight to Foxe’s pictorial emphasis on the martyrdom itself, later picked up in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. With Shakespeare’s perfect inversion of Bale’s image, it is tempting to assume the playwright’s familiarity with this specific version, though no compelling evidence exists for this and a form of Bale’s account is of course transmitted in the *Book of Martyrs*. The two key attributes stressed by Bale, valour and personal command of scriptural truth, are turned inside out in *1 Henry IV*. Sir John’s cowardice is soon exposed in the Gadshill double robbery, as the disguised Hal and Poins unburden him and his thieving crew of their spoils (at 2.3), and his irreligious penchant for scriptural citation is integral to his characterization. Bale’s Oldcastle, by way of contrast, is fashioned as one locked in an apocalyptic struggle, a member of “those godlye and valeaunt warryours / which hath not spared to bestowe theyr most dere lyves for the veryte of Jesus Christ against the malygnaunt

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33 Of some 55 biblical references located by Nasseb Shaheen in *1 Henry IV*, 23 alone come from Sir John (Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999], 407–25).
Fig. 6 Title page, John Bale, *A Brefe Chronycle concerning the Examination and Death of . . .
Sir John Oldecastell*, 2nd edn. (1548?).
mustre of that execrable Antichrist of Rome the devils owne vycar.” Bale argues that only the context of the present time enables a full appreciation of Oldcastle’s achievements: “A most oryent freshe myrrour of Christen manhode apereth this worthye lorde Cobham in our age / the veryte now open / which was in her absens a lampe of contempt before wordlye wyse menne.” “In the myddes of great Antichristes modyre mustre,” the courage of Oldcastle allowed him to effect “victorye over them by the clere judgement of the scripturs / what though the worldes judgementes be farre otherwise” (fol. 9v).

Recognizing the need to besmirch the accounts of his contemporaries, Bale fashioned his revisionist history, like his play King Johan, at least in part against the Italian Catholic historian Polydore Vergil, whom he accuses of having “deformed his wrytynges greatlye / polutynge oure Englyshe chronycles most shamefullye with his Romyshe lyes and other Italyshe beggerye” (fol. 5f). While Bale praises Vergil’s learning as “verye excellent” he criticizes the primary omission of his history of England. “[T]he prevye packynge of Prelates / and crafty conveyaunce of the spiritualte hath he in every place almost full properly passed over,” Bale writes, and he attributes this absence to Vergil’s being “to famylyar with the Bysshoppes” and taking “to moche of theyr counsell” (fols. 5v, 5f). Vergil’s own assessment of Oldcastle, appearing ten years before Bale in the Anglica Historia, is perhaps best summed up in the description viro forti caeterum impio, “a brave but impious man.”

The temporary restoration of Catholicism during the reign of Mary I provided conditions in which Oldcastle’s story could serve contrary purposes to Bale’s by writers connected to the new regime. Oldcastle and figures involved in the 1414 Lollard uprising with which he is associated such as Sir Roger Acton were transformed into powerful historical examples of

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34 John Bale, A Breve Chronicle Concerninge the Examinacion and Death of the Blessed Martyr of Christ Sir Johan Oldecastell the Lorde Cobham ([Antwerp], 1544), fol. 2r–fol. 3r.
just punishment for Protestant rebellion. For John Christopherson, bishop of Chichester, such examples functioned as a warning against heresy: “let everye man, that is infected with the same doctrine, & loketh for a daye (as a great meane do) be well assured, that whenssoever he adventureth the like acte, he shal have a like daye, that is to saye, a daye of his utter confusion.” The Marian polemicist Miles Huggarde followed Vergil in conceding Oldcastle’s bravery, but underlined that such bravery was misplaced, positioning the knight instead in a lineage of “headdie, and hyghmynded” Protestant traitors that included, in chronological order of execution, Sir Roger Acton, Thomas Cromwell, John Dudley, duke of Northumberland, Sir Thomas Wyatt (b. in or before 1521, d. 1554, son of the Tudor poet and courtier), and Thomas Cranmer. The heretical and treasonous image of Oldcastle now able to circulate freely in England was counteracted from abroad by the Marian exiles. In Foxe’s *Commentarii Rerum in Ecclesia Gestarum* (1554), the Latin precursor of the *Book of Martyrs*, Oldcastle is already a central figure in tracing Protestantism from Wycliffe to the mid-sixteenth century. Foxe’s fellow exile William Kethe also recognized the value of Oldcastle’s story within the context of an embattled English Protestantism. Admonishing “the nobilitie and ientlemen of Englande” for their passive coexistence with the freshly reinstalled Catholic clergy, he implores them to:

Cal to your mindes how their [i.e., the clergy’s] predecessors (whiche mighte not bee thought able to matche with these in maliciousnesse) handled youre noble auncetours. Reade you the dolfull storie of S. Jhon. Oldcastle, the worthy L.

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36 John Christopherson, *An Exhortation to All Menne to Take Hede and Beware of Rebellion* (London, 1554), Cciiii.
37 Miles Huggarde, *The Displaying of the Protestantes, and Sondry Their Practices* (London, 1556), M6v–M7v, citation M5v.
Cobham, by the vilanous handelynge of whome you may partely se their charitie.”

For Kethe, the memory of clerical viciousness encapsulated in “dolfull” stories such as Oldcastle’s had an important political function in the present, with the potential to destabilise the Marian regime by inciting division between the clergy and the nobility.

To borrow Annabel Patterson’s word, Oldcastle becomes a “symbol” of historiographical contention in the sixteenth century. His status and construction at any given point are intimately connected with the nature of the prevailing religio-political orthodoxy as well as being an index to developments within Catholic-Protestant controversial exchange. Indeed, the 1563 English publication of Foxe’s account of Oldcastle in the Book of Martyrs marks the transference of Oldcastle the martyr into the Elizabethan mainstream, and the turn of Catholic writers to contest that transference from a position of geographical and authoritative marginality. In the prefatory dedication to his translation of Bede (1565), and following the cue of Polydore Vergil, Thomas Stapleton addresses not Foxe, but Elizabeth, positing a providential connection between Henry V’s military successes and his prior quelling of heretics such as Oldcastle. The thinly veiled allegory exploits the Foxe-forged link between Lollard heresy and current Protestantism, entreating the Queen to follow her royal predecessor by extirpating domestic Protestant innovation before pursuing foreign policy.

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41 “By this speedy diligence of that gratious Prince, bothe that heresy was then quailed in your highnes dominions, and (as Polidore noteth) the Noble victories of that valiaunt prince ensued: God undoubtedly prospering his affaires, who had preferred the quarell of him, before his owne prepared viage [i.e., voyage]” (Bede, The History of the Churche of Englande. Compiled by Venerable Bede, Englishman, trans. Thomas Stapleton [Antwerp, 1565], >2’). Vergil had written of Henry V’s crushing of the 1414 Lollard uprising: “Est haec parva pro nominis Christiani conservatione, gesta domi à principio res, quae sine dubio potuit monstrare victoriam quae postea in Galliis parta est – This was a small feat of the king, made for the sake of preserving Christianity, which beyond doubt foreshadowed the victory he subsequently gained in France” (Anglica Historia, 436).
Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* soon became itself the focus of controversial exchange for what Catholic writers considered its flagrant abuse of the word “martyr.” The *Dialogi Sex* (1566), completed by Nicholas Harpsfield while imprisoned under the Elizabethan regime and published under the name of Alan Cope, has been called “the first sustained and systematic attack on Foxe’s book.”42 A massive work, its first five fictional dialogues between the characters of an Englishman, Irenaeus, and a German, Critobulus, principally combat the great European work of Protestant historiography, the *Historia ecclesiae Christi*, or Magdeburg Centuries, while the final and longest “Dialogus Sextus Contra Pseudomartyres” turns its attention to Foxe, and denounces Oldcastle as a heretic and a traitor.43 Such was the scale of Harpsfield’s attack that it provoked the insertion of “A Defence of the Lord Cobham, agaynst Alanus Copus” in the 1570 edition of *Actes and Monuments*, and the “Defence” also appears in subsequent editions. But the “Defence” may have had the ironic effect of bringing greater attention to the continentally printed Catholic work. Certainly Harpsfield’s *Dialogi* seem to have exerted influence in scholarly circles beyond the confines of Catholic-Protestant controversy. For example, in his “Description of Ireland,” published in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Richard Stanihurst criticized Cope (Harpsfield) for disparaging the Irish and suggesting that the soil and not St. Patrick caused the absence of venomous animals in Ireland.44

Harpsfield’s Latin condemnation of Foxe’s “pseudomartyrs” was soon followed by more accessible assaults written in the vernacular. In 1567 the Louvain scholar Thomas Harding condemned the “murderers, theeves, Churcherobbers, rebelles, and Traitours” such as


Oldcastle, “whom nevertheless Foxe hath canonizate for holy Martyrs.” In the same year, Stapleton’s answer to a controversial work by the incumbent Bishop of Winchester, Robert Horne, elaborated on the contested notion of true martyrdom. Rebuffing Horne’s claims that Catholics are in fact Donatists, notorious for their violence and voluntary martyrdoms, Stapleton instead compared Protestants to the fourth-century North African heretical sect, illustrating the fluid reversibility of polemical images in the period. Underlining the false appropriation of the category of martyr, Stapleton explains that “[t]he Donatists though they were most wicked Murtherers of others and of them selves also, killing them selves moste wretchedly without any other outward violence don to them: yet were they taken of their confederats for Martyrs.” Thus, turning specifically to Foxe’s “develish dirty donghil of . . . fowle heretical and trayterous Martyrs,” Stapleton posits an important if vexed distinction between martyrdom and treason:

Have ye not then in M. Foxe, Sir John Oldcastle, and Syr Roger Acton canonised for holy martyrs, though they died for high treason? yea their names al to be painted, dasshed, and florished in the kalender with read letters, I thinke because we shoulde kepe their daye a double feaste? Whose and their confederates condemnation for conspiringe againste the Kinge, the nobilitye, and their countreye, appereth aswell by acte of parliament then made, as by the full testimony of all our English Cronicles (fol. 60r).

The rehabilitation of Oldcastle is attacked at its weakest point, its disregard of primary evidence that Bale and Foxe had attempted to counteract.

If Foxe had supplied his own defence of Oldcastle, other writers also targeted the Catholic arguments. Future bishop of Oxford John Bridges answered Stapleton and others in The Supremacie of Christian Princes (1573), rebuffing the label of Donatist that had been

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45 Thomas Harding, A Rejoindre to M. Jewels Replie against the Sacrifice of the Masse (Louvain, 1567), fol. 181v.
46 Thomas Stapleton, A Counterblast to M. Hornes Vayne Blaste against M. Fekenham (Louvain, 1567), fol. 60v.
attached to the Protestant martyr. Unlike the Donatists, Bridges argued, Oldcastle disallowed manslaughter and recognised that the authority of princes lay above that of the pope. Further, Bridges criticised Stapleton’s technique, which he characterised as the politic omission of unfavourable material, in contrast to Foxe, whom he assumed set down the “popish” sources as he found them. Bridges’s work illustrates some of the problems involved in reconciling the image of Oldcastle as martyr with a historical figure condemned for both heresy and treason. These problems, less pronounced when English Protestantism was itself at odds with the prevailing religious and political orthodoxy, became more acute when Oldcastle’s rehabilitation threatened to undermine the Elizabethan regime’s own construction of Catholic missionary activity as seditious. Such contradictions are writ large in a 1584 tract by Anthony Munday (with whom Shakespeare collaborated on the manuscript play *Sir Thomas More* [(c. 1600, rev. 1603–4)], that urged obedience to the monarch partly through the provision of historical examples:

> it shall not be much amisse for mée to make repetition of former tretcherous practises, and withall to declare their end and successe, which happilie may cause some men to alter their bad affections, and séeing the accidentes that hath héretofore chaunced in their owne Countrie, they may forsake those contrarie natures whereby they are governed, and so in time shew themselves more vehement in duetie.

Tellingly, Munday notes Oldcastle’s rebellion (7r–8r) – indeed, he can hardly ignore such a prominent event – but he does not single Oldcastle himself out for special condemnation. The account mentions executions related to the Lollard uprising, but refuses to make explicit that

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Oldcastle himself was executed. This absence in Munday is revealing, for it underlines how willed amnesia as much as studied remembrance had a critical role to play in constructing the past from the perspective of present preoccupations.

If glaring omission was a viable strategy in a more populist work by a lay writer such as Munday, religious polemicists were forced to confront specific arguments in the process of formulating their responses. In a work written by Matthew Sutcliffe against Parsons, we witness the threefold structure of partisan efforts to exert control over historical memory:

Neither may we marvel, if they have slandered the dead, seeing they spare not the living, making their credulous followers believe, *That we make God the author of sinne, and speake unreverently of Christ*. They have also laid most false imputations upon *Luther, Calvin, Zvinglius, and other our teachers*. Further, we are not to marvel, if they have charged *Sir John Oldcastle, and divers others the followers of Wicleffes doctrine with treasons, and rebellions, and other enormous crimes*. For so did the heathen deal with the first Christians, as appeareth by the Apologies of *Tertullian, Arnobius, and others*. And now they cease not to exclaime against our doctrine, as if the same were enemie to the Magistrates authoritie: the which is not more troden under foot by any, then by the Popes of *Rome*, and their agents.50

Conflicts over authority and legitimacy in the present inform the interpretation of any given moment in the past, but that interpretation both forms and is in turn informed by other moments in the past – for Sutcliffe in this instance the persecution of early Christians. If Catholic polemicists emphasised the dissolute lawlessness of Protestant dissent, construing Oldcastle as dangerously sceptical of all forms of authority, both temporal and spiritual, Sutcliffe and other writers countered with a Protestantism uneasily aligned with a kingly authority elevated far above that of the pope.

Sutcliffe’s tripartite polemical construction of history in fact indicates a means of moving beyond the speculative critical efforts of Scoufos, Taylor, Kastan, Hamilton and others to focus more exclusively on the processes by which early modern readers could understand Sir John’s significance. A survey of Oldcastle’s development in sixteenth-century controversy has been necessary for it illustrates both which facets of the figure become substantial in those accounts, and how in polemic the layered practices of reading, citation and writing combine to create that substance. As both a reader and a writer, Sutcliffe forges meaning at the complex intersection of current polemics, existing accounts of Oldcastle, and the work of early Christian apologists such as Tertullian and Arnobius. Oldcastle is the product of readerly negotiation among a range of texts, a negotiation that found its expression in the act of writing. If Sir John is first and foremost a character on a commercial stage and thus not ostensibly an entrant in the polemical exchange sketched here, it is also true that 1 Henry IV becomes a text to be navigated within this exchange – one which, as we shall see, had a special cultural prominence in the values it attached to the Oldcastle name. Importantly, evidence from contemporary readers and auditors does survive to indicate how Sir John was reconstituted in the process of textual negotiation and interpretation. Indeed, there is a clear sense in which this evidence is of greater value than any hypothetical explication of the play itself, for it demonstrates the actual existence of what Stanley Fish calls interpretive communities . . . [.] made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.” Fish’s seminal work in the field of reader-response criticism posits that such interpretive strategies “exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of
what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way round.” 51 Partisan religious commentators certainly bring specific, pre-existent sets of assumptions to bear on the play, but they also form “interpretive communities” that cut across religious affiliations by asking similar questions of intentionality and meaning within a shared conceptual framework.

Robert Parsons was one such member of the interpretive community surrounding Shakespeare’s play, and it is to his reading of Sir John, in a work of religious polemic, that we turn first. Parsons’s *A Treatise of Three Conversions*, published in St Omer under the pseudonym N. D. in three volumes between 1603 and 1604, unsurprisingly had the status of an officially prohibited Catholic text in England, its genealogy one of religious controversy. While the first volume of the *Three Conversions* is specifically an extension of Parsons’s argument with Hastings in the Watchword Controversy over the historical role of the Roman Church in Britain’s conversion to Christianity, in its entirety the work is more generally written “against the whole course of John Foxe his . . . Acts and Monuments.”52 Parsons’s project centres on what Victor Houliston calls an attempt “to demonstrate the English church's debt to Rome, and the compatibility of the doctrine and practice of the modern Roman church with that of the Christian religion in England from the earliest days.”53 It proved immensely popular in England in spite of its fugitive status; it frequently occurs on surviving inventories of private libraries from the period, and its influence extended well into the eighteenth century.54 In 1688 it was reprinted, this time in London by Henry Hills, Sr., royal printer during the short reign of England’s last Roman Catholic monarch, James II, an


52 Parsons, *Three Conversions*, 1:†2v.


intriguing publishing event that would surely repay further investigation.\(^{55}\) Indeed, Edward Gibbon, who owned a copy, suggested that Parsons’s arguments were responsible for his temporary conversion to Catholicism in the middle of the eighteenth century.\(^{56}\)

Central to Parsons’s attack on Foxean history is a dismissal of the controversial “Kalender” of martyrs. This calendar, taking its form from the old-style calendar of Catholic saints that had previously structured the liturgical year, was probably intended to bolster the martyrology’s credentials as an ecclesiastical tome.\(^{57}\) Indeed, in the early 1570s the *Book of Martyrs* was ordered to be placed in cathedrals and its use urged in English ecclesiastical life more generally.\(^{58}\) Oldcastle, or Baron Cobham by virtue of his second marriage, assigned February 6\(^{th}\) in the “Kalender” in between the Hussite leader “Zisca” [Jan Žižka] and the London wool-packer Richard Hoveden [Howndon], had become, as we have seen, one of Foxe’s most prominent and controversial homegrown martyrs.\(^{59}\) In devising his attack, Parsons was evidently aware of how the cultural currency of the Oldcastle name had been modified in England by dramatic representation, for the Jesuit writer seized on drama to bolster his satire of Foxe:

> The second Moneth of February is more fertile of rubricate Martyrs, then January, for that yt hath 8. in number, two Wickliffians, Syr John Oldcastle a

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\(^{59}\) Foxe, *Actes and Mounuments* (1583), 1:§2'. The “Kalender” first appears at the beginning of the 1563 edition. Omitted in the editions of 1570 and 1576, it then subsequently re-appears in the 1583 edition.
Ruffian-knight as all England knoweth, & commonly brought in by comedians on their stages (3:31).

In the word “comedians” Parsons undoubtedly encompasses the most famous (and most controversial) incarnation of Oldcastle on the stage, Shakespeare’s. But the plural form, plausibly hyperbolic given Parsons’s vested interest in displaying a culture in which a would-be martyr is in fact widely disparaged, perhaps indicates that he had more than one comic actor or play in mind. From extant dramas, *Sir John Oldcastle* may be discounted because its portrayal of Oldcastle is favourable; but Oldcastle had appeared slightly earlier on the stage as Prince Hal’s companion in the anonymous *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. However, though certainly a probable source for several episodes that recur in the Second Henriad, *Famous Victories* presents Oldcastle as a relatively minor character without the satirical alignment between history and polemic that would underline the importance of Shakespeare’s Sir John within the interpretive communities surrounding Oldcastle. Thus Parsons’s reference hinges largely on the reader’s identification with Shakespeare’s play, generating argumentative capital in polemic from the lampooning of Oldcastle by a figure, when Parsons’s work was published in 1603–4, undeniably central to theatrical culture and working in an acting company whose patron had recently become the king himself.

The direct invocation of the theatrical world to augment a claim advanced in religious polemic is an intriguing interaction that didn’t escape the attention of at least one contemporary Protestant commentator. In the *History of Great Britaine* (1611), John Speed interrupted his narrative of Henry V’s reign to indicate to the reader his awareness of the negative images of the knight circulating in polemic and on the stage, launching in the process a remarkable double attack on Parsons and Shakespeare for their joint calumniation of the historical Oldcastle:
That N. D. author of the three conversions hath made Oldcastle a Ruffian, a Robber, and a Rebell, and his authority taken from the Stage-plaiers, is more befitting the pen of his slanderous report than the Credit of the judicious, being only grounded from this Papist and his Poet, of like conscience for lies, the one ever faining, and the other ever falsifying the truth . . . I am not ignorant.60

The sentence’s complex grammatical construction, in which arrival at the primary subject “I” is delayed by a succession of subordinate clauses, does not altogether obscure its important features. The singular “Poet” highlights Speed’s own reading of the passage in Parsons (indicated in Speed’s text by a marginal reference) as relating exclusively to Shakespeare. Certainly, Speed rehearses a common anti-theatrical prejudice in the period which connected and collectively disparaged Catholic ritual and theatre;61 yet he also posits an important distinction. While the polemicist and the poet are both charged with fabricating history, only Parsons “feigns” – that is, with deliberate intent to deceive. Shakespeare’s “falsifying,” produced within a theatrical world of self-proclaimed poetic fictions, is certainly undesirable, but by implication less malicious than a position in polemic that masquerades as truth.

To be sure, Speed’s own treatment of the historical Oldcastle is more circumspect than the anti-Catholic and anti-theatrical tone against “[t]he review by N. D.” might suggest (637). Noting how, among others, Alain Copus [i.e., Nicholas Harpsfield] constructs Oldcastle as a traitor and John Stow, drawing on the fifteenth-century chronicle of Thomas Otterbourne (fl. 1420), “alleageth Indentures drawn betwixt him [Oldcastle] and the Scots” (637), Speed signals his awareness of the conflicting images of Oldcastle circulating in print, but in fact defers judgement in the matter to Foxe, “who largely handled it.” In place of constructing his own prose rebuttal, he reproduces part of a letter from Henry V to the Duke of Excester [i.e.,

60 John Speed, The History of Great Britaine under the Conquests of ye Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans (London, 1611), 637.
61 See Barish, Antitheatrical Prejudice, ch. 6. As Regina M. Schwartz notes, “Anti-theatrical prejudice found common cause with anti-popery, equating ritual with magic, magic with the theater, and all of them with lies” (Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008], 42).
Exeter] as primary evidence that Oldcastle was not involved in treasonous plots (637). The connection made between Parsons and Shakespeare remains fascinating, however, for its illumination of the processes by which the distortions of polemic achieve and sustain their cultural currency in the period. For, crucially, the negative construction of Oldcastle is “only grounded from this Papist and his Poet.” The worlds of theatre and polemic intermesh, producing a self-authorising web of deceit that for Speed had no basis in historical actuality. The implication at least is that Parsons’s and Shakespeare’s forceful because mutually sustaining fictions must be displaced by a Protestant counter-alignment of discourse between literature, polemic and history – one in which Weever’s poetic defence of Oldcastle and the play *Sir John Oldcastle* might faithfully serve. “[T]his Papist and his Poet” are for Speed menacingly adrift in a peculiar textual universe, one in which Catholic polemic and plays refer and relate to each other, even when not underpinned by the external validation of truth.

Speed’s accusation of collusion between polemic and commercial drama offers an insight into theatre’s power to feed on, transform, and magnify the latent malevolence in other cultural forms. It is an insight that may also be traced in another commentator who cast a not altogether serious eye on the relationship between Shakespeare’s theatre and the construction of history. In “The Praye of King Richard the Third,” the essayist Sir William Cornwallis the younger reflected Speed’s concern with the mischievous complicity of drama and other types of text to produce and propagate a particular image of the infamous monarch. Central to the mechanism of this received Richard, Cornwallis suggests, is that “malicious credulitie rather embraceth the partiall writings of indiscreet Chroniclers, and witty Play-makers, then his [i.e., Richard III’s] lawes, and actions;” later in the same essay he reiterates the diagnosis “that we must still make him more cruelly infamous in Pamphlets and Playes.”

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62 William Cornwallis, the younger, “The Praye of King Richard the Third,” in *Essayes of Certaine Paradoxes* (London, 1616), B1r–E3r, citations C3r, E3r. The quotation also appears in Munro, ed. *The Shakespeare Allusion-Book*, 1:85.
The dichotomy between “his lawes, and actions” and “partiall writings” is of course hopelessly false, and perhaps deliberately so, for it seems to insist both on the possibility of a return to those “lawes, and actions” unmediated by current preoccupations and that the actual monarch may be separated from his representation in text. But in describing “indiscreet Chroniclers” and “witty Play-makers,” Cornwallis’s choice of adjectives illuminates Speed’s distinction between polemical “feigning,” or deliberate deception, and theatrical “falsifying.” For if indiscretion is to be censured in chroniclers whose task is to survey and present the remains of the past, “witty Play-makers” are surely less blameworthy given that their livelihood, their “wit,” is its own rationale for making alterations to the material at hand for the purposes of entertainment. In any case, the product of a writer with a strong claim to being “the first English paradoxical essayist,” this defence of Richard ought not to be taken at face value; other subjects receiving Cornwallis’s attention in the volume include “The Prayse of the French Pockes” (E4r–F4r) and “That It Is Good to Be in Debt” (G2v–H2r). Yet in the mental processes involved in building the essay’s argument, Cornwallis, like Speed, opens a window onto the powerful, acknowledged ways in which drama might fuse with other forms to construct culturally influential meaning.

Whereas King John rejects much of the (broadly speaking) Protestant polemical form that gave The Troublesome Raigne greater commercial durability as a printed playtext, Shakespeare develops in Sir John a comic perspective contiguous in important respects with the strategies of Catholic polemic. It is important to stress that this is not to argue for willed contiguity, as Speed almost appears to with his possessive determiner: “this Papist and his Poet.” But it is to appreciate that polemic and drama were mutually permeable forms, even if the objectives of the practitioner involved in those two spheres were very often clearly distinct.

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It is also revealing to rehearse here the seventeenth-century afterlife of Speed’s critique of Parsons and Shakespeare, for it positions Speed in the very processes he describes, as text begets text in a diachronic accretion of meaning. Although after the 1642 closure of the theatres live Shakespearean and other drama partially survived through surreptitious performance at taverns and fairs in the so-called drolls, short comical scenes adapted from the pre-Civil War theatrical repertoire, theatre’s brutal attenuation during the Interregnum perhaps provided the conditions for a more extensive consideration of the relationship between plays and polemic. Speed’s remark is reproduced almost verbatim in 1657 by the prolific bible commentator John Trapp, but the connections between popery and the stage Oldcastle receive a more extensive treatment in the works of the erstwhile royal chaplain Thomas Fuller, *The Church-History of Britain* (1655) and the posthumously published *History of the Worthies of England* (1662). Both texts reveal Fuller’s troubled preoccupation with Oldcastle’s cultural reincarnations, the *Worthies* in particular eloquently connecting the circumstances of Oldcastle’s execution, made graphic in Foxe and Holinshed, with his pendent reputation:

As his body was hanged and burnt in an unusual posture at Tyburn, so his memory hath ever since been in a strange suspense betwixt malefactor and martyr; Papists charging him with treason against king Henry the Fifth, and

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65 In a note to Nehemiah 6:6, in which a letter from Sanballat of Samaria attempts to construct Nehemiah’s project of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls as an act of rebellion, Trapp asserts that true conscience is protected from calumny: “But if dirt will stick to a mudwal, yet to marble it will not . . . N. D. Author of the three conversions, hath made Sr. John Oldcastle the Martyr, a Ruffian, a Robber, and a Rebel. His authority is taken from the Stage-players, of like conscience for Iyes; as all men know” (*A Commentary or Exposition upon the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job and Psalms* [London, 1657], 69). The quotation also appears in Scoufos, *Typological Satire*, 41.
heading an army of more than ten thousand men, though it wanted nine thousand
nine hundred ninety and nine thereof, so far as it appears solidly proved.66

Underlining the problem of factual verification, Fuller places a question mark over the
veracity of the original sources, a key issue that dogged Oldcastle historiography in the
sixteenth century.67 In the Worthies’ entry on Sir John Fastolfe, with whose memory Fuller
suggests “the stage have been over-bold . . . making him a thrasonical puff, and emblem of
mock valour” (2:454), he further proposes a specific confessional origin for the
representation of Oldcastle that eventually migrated to the theatre:

True it is, Sir John Oldcastle did first bear the brunt of the one, being made the
make-sport in all plays for a coward. It is easily known out of what purse this
black penny came; the Papists railing on him for a heretic, and therefore he must
also be a coward, though indeed he was a man of arms, every inch of him, and as
valiant as any in his age (2:455).

Appropriating the language of undesired economic circulation, Fuller unambiguously aligns
Shakespeare’s dramatic treatment with Catholic images of Oldcastle. A vested interest in
presenting the origin of the stage Oldcastle as papist and not a mainstream Protestant
manifestation of the stage Puritan cannot be discounted. Fuller is also distant enough from the
referential framework of topical satire in the 1590s to overlook the nuances of Shakespeare’s
portrayal. Yet he was also a specialist in the field, an ecclesiastical historian versed in the
development of Catholic-Protestant and intra-Protestant controversy and close enough in time
to recognize the religious implications of such a dramatic portrayal. These factors alone
suggest that the arguments advanced by Kastan and others that Sir John is depicted from a
position of orthodoxy are inadequate.

1965), 2:72. See Foxe’s and Holinshed’s woodcuts (figs. 4 and 5) for the strange position of Oldcastle’s body in
the meting out of his double punishment, “to be hanged and burned hanging” (Foxe, Actes and Monuments,
1:643).
67 See Patterson, “Symbol of Reformation Historiography,” and idem, Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles
In the slightly earlier *Church-History* Fuller at first glance appears to pronounce a similar condemnation of “Papists” and the theatre:

Stage poets have themselves been very bold with, and others very merry at, the memory of sir John Oldcastle, whom they have fancied a boon companion, a jovial royster, and yet a coward to boot, contrary to the credit of all chronicles, owning him a martial man of merit. The best is, sir John Falstaff hath relieved the memory of Sir John Oldcastle, and of late is substituted buffoon in his place, but it matters as little what petulant poets as what malicious papists have written against him.68

Clearly echoing Speed with its conflation of “petulant poets” and “malicious papists,” Fuller’s account in the *Church-History* is in fact far more circumspect. Confronted with the difficulty of verifying the primary sources, particularly Oldcastle’s alleged involvement in the Lollard uprising of 1414, Fuller admits himself “so lost in the intricacies of these relations, that I know not what to assent to” (2:415). But while the clergyman remains reluctant “to load the lord Cobham’s memory with causeless crimes, knowing the perfect hatred the clergy in that age bare unto him, and all that looked towards the reformation in religion” (2:416), he recognizes that to disregard completely the surviving contemporary evidence is a highly problematic move, posing serious methodological problems for his own scholarship. For Fuller, the records of the Tower of London and Parliament Acts which condemn Oldcastle:

for a traitor as well as heretic, challenge belief. For with what confidence can any private person promise credit from posterity to his own writings, if such public monuments be not by him entertained for authentical. Let Mr. Fox therefore be this lord Cobham’s compurgator, I dare not; and if my hand were put on the Bible, I should take it back again. Yet so that, as I will not acquit, I will not condemn him, but leave all to the *last day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God* [Rom. 2.5] (2:416).

As a scholar working with primary sources, Fuller was keenly aware of the unsettling inconsistency in relying on contemporary records in one instance, and rejecting them out of hand in another. Ultimately, this realization leaves Fuller as oddly suspended as the body of the Protestant martyr itself. If his instincts are to rescue Oldcastle from the clutches of his theatrical detractors, he cannot satisfactorily resolve the inconsistencies inhabiting the uncertain space between conflicting histories. Thus, if far more tentatively than Speed, he similarly invokes circularity by referring the reader back to the most famous fount of the Protestant Oldcastle, Foxe himself.

Shakespeare’s Sir John aroused the ire of Speed and Fuller precisely because he unleashed a power that nurtured polemic but also spilled beyond the bounds of religious controversy. This power is attested to by the fact that, in spite of the players’ expedient retreat in changing the character’s name, the association of Shakespeare’s fantastical gluttonous knight with Oldcastle could not be dislodged. Today Falstaff remains one of Shakespeare’s most popular and enduring creations, and there is no lack of evidence that the character’s imaginative impact was immediate. But contemporary allusions also demonstrate the persistent and widespread identification of Falstaff with Oldcastle that Parsons exploited and Speed attempted to diffuse. An early allusion in a letter from Rowland Whyte to his employer, Sir Robert Sidney, dated 8 March 1599/1600, describes the entertainment provided for the Flemish ambassador on his visit to London: “All this weeke the Lords have bene in Londen, and past away the tyme in feasting and plaies . . . on Thursday afternoon the Lord Chamberlain’s players acted before Vereken Sir John Oldcastle, to his great contentment.” Since Whyte specifies Shakespeare’s acting company, it seems highly unlikely that he had in mind a play still the property of the Lord Admiral’s Men. Although Eric Sams has argued for

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69 Harold Bloom, for instance, calls Falstaff “the essence of Shakespeare’s dramatic art” (*Invention of the Human*, 299).
the appropriation by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men of the play of a rival company, a far more probable scenario is that Whyte refers to one of the parts of Henry IV by the original (and popular) name of its most famous comic creation. This scenario is strengthened by the fact that The King's Men (as Shakespeare’s acting company became known after James’s accession) and their audiences were still thinking of the play as Oldcastle four decades after the name change. Records show “Olde Castle” among a list of plays performed at court before Charles 1 and Henrietta Maria in 1630–31, and the play also appears as Oldcastle in a performance on the occasion of “the prince's berthnyght” in 1638.

Beyond the more elite worlds of diplomacy and court performance, an audience’s knowledge of the original name continued to be assumed in the theatre. In Thomas Middleton’s The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinarie (1604), Signior Shuttlecock uses this knowledge to embellish his description of the Host, telling his companions:

Now Signiors how like you mine Host? did I not tell you he was a madde round knave, and a merrie one too: and if you chaunce to talke of fatte Sir John Oldcastle, he wil tell you, he was his great Grand-father, & not much unlike him in Paunch, if you marke him well by all descriptions.

A character in Nathan Field’s second comedy, Amends for Ladies, printed in 1618, but performed before 1611, alludes to Falstaff’s famous mock catechism at the battle of Shrewsbury (1 Henry IV 5.1.127–40), asking: Did you never see / The Play, where the fat knight hight Old-castle, Did tell you truly what this honour was? That the 1619 printing of

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72 See the discussion in Brooks, Playhouse to Printing House, 76–77. Charles Whitney argues that the performance in question was a private one, interpreting it as “a politic gesture toward a middle ground designed to please a Catholic diplomat, with Protestants ridiculing their own puritanical wing” (Early Responses to Renaissance Drama [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 78).
74 Thomas Middleton, The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinarie (London, 1604), B4'.
76 Nathan Field, Amends for Ladies with the Humour of Roring. A Comedie (London, 1618), G1'.
Sir John Oldcastle claims Shakespeare’s authorship on its title page further suggests a commercially marketable coherence between Shakespeare and the Oldcastle name.\(^7\)

The attribution of the mock catechism to Oldcastle appears once more in a surprising reference in *An Antidote against Purgatory* (1634), a posthumously published work by the recusant gentlewoman Jane Owen. Owen, imploring her readers to focus, not on their worldly situation, but on provision for the afterlife, proclaims: “Alas! what are riches, greatness of state, a needles fruition of temporall pleasures, or that, which you call your reputation & honour.”\(^7\) Remarkably, Shakespeare’s irreligious comic creation is ushered in to strengthen the expedient logic of the argument:

*Syr John Oldcastle* being exprobat ed of his Cowardlynes, and thereby reputed inglorious, replied; *If through my persuyte of Honour, I shall fortune to loose an Arme, or a Leg in the wars, can Honour restore to me my lost Arme, or legge? In like manner I heere say to you, Catholickes: Can your Riches, your wordly pompe and pleasures, or antiquity of your House, and Family redeeme your Soules out of Purgatory?* (160–61)

This unmistakable approximation of Sir John’s lines under the original name is significant for at least two reasons. The rough inexactness of the attributed lines suggests a reliance on memory rather than an actual copy of the playtext. But deploying such a memorial reconstruction in the first place in a religious work of this kind argues that the Shakespearean inversion of Oldcastle’s martial heroism was especially memorable for a Catholic writer and would be recognized, too, by her readers.


\(^7\) Jane Owen, *An Antidote against Purgatory* ([St Omer], 1634), 160. The reference was first noted by R. W. F. Martin, “A Catholic Oldcastle,” *Notes and Queries* 40.2 (1993): 185–86. See also the discussion in Whitney, *Early Responses*, 98–100.
One relatively late poetic allusion to Falstaff as Oldcastle in the period does not revel in the character’s comic value, but rather, like Speed and Fuller, reflects on the cultural processes at work in his creation. In the section on Henry V’s reign in his three-part verse chronicle *Trinarchodia* (1649), probably composed at least in part after the regicide, royalist George Daniel of Beswick recalled Oldcastle as:

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The Worthy S'r whom Falstaffe's ill-us'd Name
Personates on the Stage, lest Scandal might
Creep backward & blott Martyr; were a Shame,
Though Shakespeare Story, & Fox legend write;
That Manual where dearth of Story brought
Such S'r's worthy this Age, to make it out.
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Several critics have assumed that Daniel’s praise for Oldcastle and condemnation of Shakespeare is uncomplicated. Yet while these lines clearly authenticate the existence of Shakespeare’s original stage Oldcastle, transformed into Falstaff, “lest Scandal might / Creep backward & blott Martyr,” they are also cryptic in their ambiguity and repay closer attention. Religious innovation is described unfavourably in the previous stanza as a “Gutlin[g], then but throwne out by the Rest / An evill Bird, defileing its owne Nest,” and Daniel seems to lament the “Worthy S'r” Oldcastle’s involvement in such innovation as “a Shame.” But this perspective contrasts with the recognition that precisely such involvement gives Oldcastle currency in “this Age,” even as he is produced in opposing ways by

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“Shakespeare Story, & Fox legend.” Punctuation endstops the fourth line, denying the arrival of an anticipated object for “write,” and thus the singular form of the following noun in the next, “Manual,” refers only to the Book of Martyrs, reflected on exclusively in the final two lines with a measure of grammatical detachment. Breaking this dense stanza down into its semantic constituents and examining its language reveals more clearly Daniel’s actual disparagement of both Foxe and the construction of Oldcastle’s martyrdom. “Manual,” often used to denote a concise treatise, certainly works as an ironic reference to the voluminous martyrology’s hardly portable size, but it also suggests the historical ecclesiastical meaning of “[a] book containing the forms to be observed by priests in the administration of the sacraments” (OED n., 1a), thereby indicating Foxe’s centrality to the established Church. Daniel implies that Foxe’s canonization of “[s]uch S t s” as Oldcastle is merely expedient, designed to compensate, or “make . . . out,” for the “dearth of Story,” i.e., the scarcity of historical record for the lineage of Protestantism Foxe wished to construct. At any rate, Daniel’s conservative royalist credentials would surely not have predisposed him to the Book of Martyrs, which, as John N. King notes in an essay on Foxe’s eighteenth-century reception, “retained its appeal both to separatists and to adherents to the evangelical wing of the Church of England.” Indeed, Daniel seems far more concerned about the name change itself, which allows an audience “[t]o laugh at Falstaffe as an humor fram’d / To grace the Stage, to please the Age, misnam’d,” and calls on the reader to “[n]oe longer please your selves to injure Names / Who liv’d to Honour” (4:136). Significantly, Oldcastle’s name is itself never mentioned.

82 “Legend” is used primarily in its earlier sense, not to denote the unhistorical but to refer to “[a] collection of saints’ lives or of stories of a similar character” (OED n. 2). However, by choosing this word Daniel, perhaps deliberately, compares Foxe’s enterprise with older Catholic compendiums of saints’ lives such as Jacobus de Voraigne’s thirteenth-century Legenda Aurea (The Golden Legend).

With Sir John achieving such a level of cultural saturation, early modern readers and writers troubled by the religious significance of Shakespeare’s portrayal fight a losing battle in their efforts to undermine it. As the reply in a polemical exchange is always to some extent conditioned by the dictates of the prior text, so the poetic attempts to counteract Shakespeare are shaped in important ways by *1 Henry IV*. Shakespeare’s key theatrical rivals, the Lord Admiral’s Men, appear to have capitalised on the controversy surrounding the original offending performances, presenting in their play *Sir John Oldcastle* (pr. 1599) what one commentator has described as an “explicit dramatic *riposte*.”

Omitting a sketch of Shakespeare’s character in its Prologue, the play makes no attempt to conceal its fashioning against *1 Henry IV*:

> It is no pampered glutton we present  
> Nor agèd counsellor to youthful sins;  
> But one whose virtues shone above the rest,  
> A valiant martyr and a virtuous peer.

Insistence on the separation of Falstaff and the true Oldcastle is not only an opening ploy; it becomes integral to the design, as Falstaff’s mantle is taken by the lusty, thieving parson, Sir John of Wrotham. The structure reflects Shakespeare’s history, interspersing the parson’s comic interludes with the serious plot involving Oldcastle. In addition, there are important resonances with the earlier play. Among the poor who arrive at Oldcastle’s estate seeking alms are a lame soldier and an old man who claims to have fought at the Battle of Shrewsbury (3.20), a projection of the fate of the poor in *1 Henry IV* pressed into service by

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86 On the character’s genealogy from a minor episode in Fabyan’s chronicles, see R. E. Bennett, “The Parson of Wrotham in *Sir John Oldcastle, Modern Language Notes* 45.3 (1930): 142–44.
Sir John for that very battle (4.2). More audaciously, the disguised Henry V later directly invokes the earlier play, asking:

Where the devil are all my old thieves
that were wont to keep this walk? Falstaff, the villain, is so fat he cannot get on’s horse; but methinks Poins and Peto should be stirring hereabouts (10.52–5).

Unlike Shakespeare’s play, *Sir John Oldcastle* attempts to sketch some of the historical detail of early-fifteenth-century religious struggle, a decision that ought to bolster Oldcastle’s credentials in the play. For example, the religious argument preceding the fight between the entourages of Lords Powis and Herbert in the first scene is later described by Powis to Oldcastle as “about some certain points / Of Wycliffe’s doctrine ’gainst the Papacy” (3.107–10). But the need to compete commercially and artistically on the earlier play’s terms by incorporating the Falstaffian as counterweight to its own depiction of a serious religious figure damages *Sir John Oldcastle*’s ideological coherence. Oldcastle cannot be extracted fully from the comedic elements with which Shakespeare has tarnished him and the very reproduction of those elements in a rival play operates as a validation of the power of Shakespeare’s creation.

If drama could not escape Sir John’s shadow, then the poetic response to the play was similarly dazzled by the art it sought to supersede. John Weever’s *The Mirror of Martyrs* (1601), whose printer, Valentine Simmes, was also responsible for the first quarto of *Sir John Oldcastle*, clearly advertises on its title page its own perspective: “The life and death of that thrice valiant Capitaine, and most godly Martyre *Sir John Old-castle knight, Lord Cobham.*” Weever, as Jeffrey Knapp has observed, was especially preoccupied with Shakespeare’s writing around this time and attempted to rival it in his own literary

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creations. Indeed, as we have already seen in the introductory chapter, Weever’s ostensible verse eulogy, “Ad Gulielmum Shakespeare,” is barely able to suppress its internal tensions. The Mirror of Martyrs is itself poised between indebtedness to and differentiation from Shakespeare. Even as it defines itself against Sir John as the “first trew Oldcastle,” (having lain according to Weever in his study for at least two years before being published “because he might not bee suffered to sustaine the s[e]cond Martyredome of the Presse” [A2r]), the poem uses unhistorical detail almost certainly derived from Shakespeare. Whereas in the earlier epigram, Weever expressed devotion to Shakespeare’s theatre in the language of religious awe, his poetic defence of Oldcastle now stresses the elevation of the supernatural deity (for which Mercury is made to stand in the classical schema of the poem’s opening invocation) far above human drama: for “If thousands flocke to heare a Poets pen, / To heare a god, how many millions then?” (A3v). Of primary interest for Weever is the mechanism of “fame,” through which innovation effects a perpetual displacement of collective memory:

The many-headed multitude were drawne
By Brutus speach, that Caesar was ambitious,
When eloquent Mark Antonie had shewne
His vertues, who but Brutus then was vicious:
Mans memorie with new forgets the old,
One tale is good untill another’s told (A3v).

Given Weever’s attempts to distinguish his Oldcastle from false images, it is surprising that he chooses Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (1599) to illustrate how, in the popular imagination, new and more eloquent accounts of contested events may easily replace existing versions.

Yet that he does so says much about his acknowledgment of the power of drama even as he

89 See Introduction, 31–32.
90 Following 2 Henry IV 3.2.23–25, Weever notes that Oldcastle served in his youth as a page to Sir Thomas Mowbray (A4r), and, as in 1 Henry IV 5.3–5.4, places him at the battle of Shrewsbury (C6r). See the commentary to edited extracts of Weever’s poem in Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, eds., The Oldcastle Controversy, 223–53, 224 and 226, n.682.
recognizes its danger.\textsuperscript{91} Unless vigilance is taken in the active preservation of memory, Weever suggests, invidious errors will inexorably take hold – a rationale in itself for the continued proliferation of images of Oldcastle in polemic and literature.

\textbf{IV}

Sir John’s assumed collusion with polemic may be better understood by examining one deliberate alignment between martyrological prose and poetry. In a manuscript poem written in 1582, the imprisoned Jesuit Thomas Pounde launched an attack on the “monstrous martyrs” in the “brainsick book” of “fond Foxe.”\textsuperscript{92} Preceding this versified attack is a prose account, translated from Latin, of a recent martyrdom suffered in Morocco by a Spanish Catholic, Peter Elcius. The pairing of the two works not only dates them with precision (to the year that witnessed both the publication of the translation’s source text in Cologne and the later seizure of Pounde’s manuscript by the Elizabethan authorities, denying it the opportunity of wider circulation);\textsuperscript{93} it also suggests their mutually constituting existence as a kind of polemical diptych. Indeed, the poem’s opening makes clear that both pieces of writing should be read simultaneously, as it bluntly urges its readers to compare the “rabble rout” in the \textit{Actes and Monuments} to Peter Elcius, “this glorious martyr stout” (l84, ll. 1, 3). The poem recasts the prose narrative, explicating its significance by invoking a third, absent text, the \textit{Book of Martyrs}. Such an act of juxtaposition, it is hoped, will bring the polarity of

\textsuperscript{91} Knapp, quoting F. J. Furnivall in \textit{The Shakespeare Allusion-Book}, points out that the reference must be to Shakespeare, since in the principal source, Plutarch, “there is no speech by Brutus on Caesar’s ambition” (184, n.15).

\textsuperscript{92} The poem was discovered in the Public Record Office by Richard Simpson in the 1850s. It has recently been published for the first time in its entirety (510 lines comprising 85 stanzas) with commentary by the aptly named Wayne Pound: \textit{Pounde’s challenge: A Recusant Poem of 1582} (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, Sophia University, 2009). I cite from the slightly earlier anthologised selections: Thomas Pounde, “A Challenge unto Foxe,” in \textit{Early Modern Catholicism: An Anthology of Primary Sources}, ed. Robert S. Miola (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 184–87, 184, ll.1, 2.

true and false martyr into sharp relief, “[f]or black and white comparèd somewhat near, / Will cause them both the better [i.e. more clearly] to appear” (185, ll.5–6).

Pounde, who spent much of his long life incarcerated under the Elizabethan and early Jacobean regimes, was certainly no prolific controversialist. In any case, his manuscript failed to reach an interested readership that had been nurtured by more prominent entrants in the martyrological controversy. But the polemical diptych remains an illumination of how different genres interact, whether through their deliberate conjoining or as disparate elements within a far broader field of cultural production. Perhaps the poem’s key strength is the way in which its direct, accessible language and pedestrian iambic pentameter underline the polemical significance of the preceding martyrological narrative and promote a memorable, uncomplicated reading of the Book of Martyrs. If the verse wants Foxe’s book to act as a foil, showing the far greater lustre of the Catholic account, it makes clear that the Protestant and Catholic accounts are incapable of peaceable co-existence:

On altars God and Dagon cannot hold,
Our Christ and Belial needs must be at jar;
For wolves and lambs agree not in one fold,
No more than peace can live at ease with war.
If, therefore, he in endless bliss do reign,
The state of thine is ever during pain (185, ll.25–30).

As stark in the polarities it adumbrates as Bale’s King Johan, Pounde’s “Challenge” similarly illustrates the deployment of broader literary forms of contestation that simultaneously fed on and nourished the more circumscribed category of prose polemic.

If the previous chapter was in many respects about art’s desire to turn away from polemic without quite managing to do so, then this one has explored the dynamics involved when

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readers and writers themselves collapse the difference between art and polemic in the act of explication. Such dynamics do not of course depend on any deliberate and programmatic alliance between “plaiers, printers, preachers.” I have attempted to emphasise the importance of readers in generating meaning, and it is through their readers that different types of text may meet in multiple configurations over which authors have no control. In 1598, the bookseller Andrew Wise, for whom that year Shakespeare’s *The Historie of Henrie the Fourth* was printed, also sold John Racster’s reply to the Catholic convert William Alabaster’s *Seven Motives*. The physical playtext is literally placed amongst religious controversy at the Sign of the Angel in Paul’s Churchyard, as both texts might simultaneously inhabit the mind of an early modern reader. If Shakespeare’s idiosyncratic *King John* makes fullest sense as a reaction to polemic, his next play based on English history, *1 Henry IV*, is embroiled in controversy to the extent that it becomes directly associated with Catholic polemicism in his own lifetime.

Though his focus is not on contemporary readers of *1 Henry IV*, David Womersley has argued that Falstaff’s “lineage lies in the bitterness of religious altercation.” In order to establish how this lineage might provide clues to the origin of Falstaff’s fatness, Womersley draws attention to a passage in Foxe’s rebuttal of *Dialogi Sex*. Responding to Harpsfield’s reliance on a statue suppressing heresy in the reign of Henry V (2 Henry V, Stat. 1, c. 7) to present Oldcastle as both a heretic and a traitor, Foxe targets the validity of the statute itself. Highlighting the discrepancy between the statute’s preface, which does talk in terms of treason, and the main text, where only heresy is mentioned, Foxe proceeds to parallel the authors of the statute with the imperial persecutors of the early Church. In the context of their

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specific charge that Oldcastle subverted the Christian faith, Foxe mocks the “foreger &
inventer of this reporte, (as it appeareth to procede from the prelates)” for not having the craft
to create a story of greater artifice, and hence greater plausibility:

As if he had first declared the L. Cobham to have bin before in secret
confederacie with the great Turk, or if he had made him some termagant or
Mahound out of Babylonia, or some Herode of Judea, or some Antichrist out of
Rome, or some grandpanch Epicure of this world (1:572).98

The alignment between a fantastical construction of Oldcastle as “some grandpanch
Epicure” and Falstaff is obviously suggestive, but in ways not fully explored in Womersley’s
essay. For Foxe here is advancing a claim about the relationship between art and truth with
important implications for understanding the polemical configurations of Shakespeare’s Sir
John. The statute’s author:

seemeth no cunning Daedalus, nor halfe hys craftes maister in lying for the
whetstone. Better he might have learned of Sinon in Virgill, more artificially to
have framed and conveyed his narration. Which although in no case could sound
like any truth, yet some colour of probabilitie should have bene set upon it, to
give it some countenance of a like tale (1:572).

Skill at constructing narrative, exemplified by Sinon, the pretended Greek deserter whose
story of the giant wooden horse duped the Trojans in Book Two of Virgil’s Aeneid, is
connected with credibility. Indeed, this is a point Foxe makes even more clearly earlier in this
section, entreating his readership to cast an effectively literary-critical eye over suggestions
of a seditious gathering of Oldcastle’s confederates at Ficket’s Field during the Lollard
uprising of 1414:

98 An extended version of the quotation, citing the 1596 edition of Actes and Monuments, appears in
And marke here I beseche thee (gentle Reader) how unlikely and untidely the
poyntes of this tale are tide and hang together (I will not say without all
substaunce of truth, but without all fashion of a cleanly lye) wherein these
accusers in this matter seeme to me, to lacke some part of Sinon’s Arte, in
conveing their narration so unartificiallye (1:569).

If Speed and Fuller ultimately refer their analyses of Sir John back to Foxe, then it is also
Foxe who anticipates and explains the power and the persistence of 1 Henry IV. For it is
precisely Sir John’s skilful art that performs the work of displacement so effectively, effacing
far more unimaginative accounts of the martyr and controlling the ways in which Weever and
the Oldcastle playwrights must respond. The potent mixture of Sir John’s artful construction
in fictional scenes and actual historical episodes adapted from Holinshed produces what Foxe
describes as “some countenance of a like tale.” The mnemonic seductiveness of the original
Sir John ensured the identification of Falstaff with Oldcastle in this “tale” long after the name
change, and it is a recognition of that seductiveness – art’s ability to obliterate the less
adorned “veracity” of prose martyrology – that motivates the objections of Speed and Fuller.
Where King John’s failings as a play are intimately connected with its retreat from polemic,
the force of 1 Henry IV’s dramatic art ironically accorded it a place in that same interpretive
field – one a lesser play could not hope to achieve.
CHAPTER 3

“Edified by the margin”: Hamlet and the crisis of religious textual authority

POLONIOUS: What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET: Words, words, words (Hamlet 2.2.193–95).

“I knew you must be edified by the margin ere you had done” (5.2.118.O): Horatio’s aside to Hamlet in the play’s final scene depicts Osric as a singularly difficult text, one whose opaque language obstructs its purpose of delivering the precise terms of the fencing match with Laertes. Fortunately for its princely reader, however, the bombastic courtier is a living text; that Hamlet must call for clarification evokes for his witty companion reliance on the printed forms of interpretive assistance often inhabiting the periphery of the early modern page.

Imagining people as text is not unusual, neither in Shakespeare nor in the literature of the period more generally. The dying King John, as we have already seen, is “a scribbled form” (5.7.32); other famous examples include Macbeth’s face, “a book where men / May read strange matters” (1.5.61–62). Occasionally such metaphors are, as here in Hamlet, more typographically specific. For instance, likening the elusive object of his desire to a book demanding scrupulous perusal, the speaker in Sir Philip Sidney’s sonnet sequence Astrophil and Stella (written 1581–2; pub. 1591) implores Hope: “Look on again, the fair text better
try; / What blushing notes dost thou in margin see?' The margin here is similarly an extrinsic space where an uncertain reader finds clues to the signification of a central body of text.

Literary works of the period deploy such metaphors, yet remain themselves typographically distinct from the category of texts thereby imagined. As Sidney’s own *Defence of Poesie* (pr.1595) reflects on the defining characteristics of the literary, the poet offers more palatable forms of edification precisely because “[h]ee beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blurre the margent with interpretations, and loade the memorie with doubtfullnesse.”

Horatio’s remark about marginalia is unusual, however, since it alludes to the paratextual apparatus of a specific book: the Geneva Bible. The work of Protestant Marian exiles relocated in Geneva, where the first full edition was published in 1560, this translation of Scripture claimed in its preface to have “faithfully rendred the text, and in all hard places moste sinceryly expounded the same,” providing its reader with marginal annotations “to set forthe the puritie of the worde and right sense of the holy Gost [sic] for the edifying of the brethren in faith and charitie.” Horatio’s echo of perhaps the most prominent repository of marginal edification in the period is supported by scholarship on the plays’ frequent biblical allusions, which has consistently shown that, from the various bible translations available to

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2 Beatrice Groves notes that “[s]onnets, in common with most lyric poetry and plays of the period, ignored the trend for printed marginalia” (“Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Genevan Marginalia,” *Essays in Criticism* 57.2 [2007]: 114–28, 114). The unique scholarly annotations accompanying the printed playtext of Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus His Fall* (London, 1605) are an exception that proves the rule, insofar as they seem at least partly designed to elevate the play above contemporary drama by emphasising its erudition and hence non-theatrical lineage. See the discussion in Joseph Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 149–60.
4 As far as I am aware, James Black was the first scholar to establish this connection, over thirty years ago (*Edified by the Margent: Shakespeare and the Bible. An Inaugural Professorial Lecture in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Calgary, Presented on March 23, 1977* [Calgary: Faculty of Humanities, 1979], esp. 8–9). Cf. the recent discussion in Groves, “Sonnets,” 123–24.
5 *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, ed. Lloyd Berry (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Bibles, 2007), iii, my emphasis. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
him, Shakespeare was most familiar with, or simply preferred to use, the popular Geneva version.6

Significantly, the allusion to the Geneva Bible appears only in the Second Quarto of Hamlet (1604), whose title-page proudly proclaims a play “enlarged to almost as much again as it was” since first appearing in print the previous year.7 Recent commentators have tended to view Q2 as a wilfully literary text, one whose theatrical origins are effaced through the processes of generating a more sophisticated, reader-orientated product for the print market.8 If Q2 is a deliberate creation for readers rather than the mere reproduction of a theatrical text, the allusion to the Geneva annotations acquires a self-conscious resonance, placing the particular experience of reading Hamlet within the context of how readers might experience other, different books.9 For the allusion asserts both similarity and difference. Hamlet and the Geneva Bible are texts to be read, and read by the same reader – a circumstance upon which the efficacy of the reference depends;10 but in this process Hamlet’s own conspicuous lack of marginal annotation is highlighted, marking out its difference to the text it invokes. In his

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8 See the chapter “Bad Taste and Bad Hamlet,” in Leah S. Marcus, Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe and Milton. (London: Routledge, 1996), 132–76, Lukas Erme, Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Lander’s chapter “Whole Hamlets’ Q1, Q2, and the Work of Distinction,” in Inventing Polemic, 110–44. As a caveat to these assumptions regarding Q2, Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass have recently shown that the presence of printed commonplace marks in Q1 also argues its status not as a “theatrical abridgement,” but instead “a literary text for reading” (“The First Literary Hamlet and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays,” Shakespeare Quarterly 59.4 [2008]: 371–420, 380).

9 Beatrice Groves makes a similar point in her discussion of Shakespeare’s sonnets and the Genevan marginalia (“Sonnets,” 123–24).

10 Of course, this efficacy would have been assisted by the sheer availability of the Geneva Bible, 140 editions of which are recorded from 1560 to 1644 (A. S. Herbert, Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible: 1525–1961 [London: British & Foreign Bible Society, 1968], 61–62). The multiple portable and lower cost quarto editions were key to its enduring popularity, producing a translation that could be read and studied in private.
important reading of Q1 and Q2 as deliberately differentiated, discrete texts marked by the preoccupations and production of religious controversy, Jesse Lander suggests that Q2 is the version of the play specifically “absorbed with the issue of controversy itself.”11 But while his account has done much to enrich our understanding of the often subtle cross-fertilization of polemical and literary modes in the period, Lander’s failure to address Horatio’s remark is a surprising omission, given that it ought to cast light on the ways in which *Hamlet* engages with controversial discourses as specifically *textual* phenomena.

The line’s immediate comic context (Hamlet’s struggle to make sense of a hopelessly effusive Osric) certainly suggests a profaning of the Geneva Bible’s editorial strategies. After all, marginal annotation is here transposed from its original authoritative domain of Protestant scriptural scaffolding and placed in a situation where any prospect of edification appears remote.12 Moreover, satirizing the Geneva marginalia in this way, as we shall see, may well have struck a chord with the more discerning members of *Hamlet*’s readership, “the wiser sort” who, if we credit Gabriel Harvey’s famous contemporary handwritten remark, were also enamoured of the play.13

Rejected for authorised ecclesiastical use during Elizabeth’s reign, the Geneva Bible nevertheless enjoyed immense popularity. 1568 saw the issue of the Bishops’ Bible, a new, quasi-official version compiled by Archbishop Matthew Parker’s team of episcopal translators that superseded the Henrician Great Bible (though, surprisingly, unlike its

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12 The seeming irreverence of this reference to the Geneva marginalia arguably weakens assumptions that Shakespeare’s extensive knowledge of the Geneva Bible is enough on its own to rule out the possibility that he was a Catholic. The assumption appears recently, for instance, in Leland Ryken, “Shakespeare and the Bible,” in *Word and Rite: The Bible and Ceremony in Selected Shakespearean Works*, ed. Beatrice Batson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 1–21. Ryken says “It is unthinkable that a closet Catholic would read and probably own a Geneva Bible, a book that was in effect a forbidden book for Catholics” (17). This argument, stemming from an over-attachment to confessional labels such as “Catholic,” which produce the expectation of categorised forms of behaviour, allows no room for subtler gradations of individual belief.
predecessor, was never officially endorsed by the incumbent monarch). Yet preference for the Geneva translation persisted in the established Church, as evidenced by its continued use in the sermons of prominent clergymen such as Launcelot Andrewes and Joseph Hall. Ironically, William Laud, responsible for the eventual suppression of the Geneva Bible, was still referring to it regularly in his sermons up to 1624, a full 13 years after the issue of the Authorized King James version.14 There can be no doubt that the marginal glosses contributed heavily to this popularity. Lloyd Berry goes so far as to call them “[t]he single most important feature of the Geneva Bible, to both the laity and the clergy,” pointing to “evidence that both the unlettered clergy and the laity relied on its notes for proper interpretation of Scripture.”15 Significantly, the folio Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament (1645), produced by the Westminster Assembly (1643–49), conceives of itself as filling the void left by the waning availability of the Geneva Bible (1616 is the date of the last known edition of the early modern period printed in England), noting in its preface how “the people complained, that they could not see into the sense of the Scripture, so well as formerly they did, by the Geneva Bibles, because their Spectacles of Annotations were not fitted to the understanding of the new Text, nor any other supplied in their stead.”16

Yet for all their popular appeal, the notes barely concealed a less palatable agenda, one recognised in the surviving testimony of some of the version’s more prominent readers, to be not so much edificatory as polemical. Parker himself, a figure central to the policymaking of the Elizabethan ecclesiastical establishment and an ardent propagator of the via media,

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15 Berry, ed., Geneva Bible, 15, 19.
indicated his disapprobation in a message to the fellow translators of the Bishops’ Bible: “Item to make no bitter notis uppon any text, or yet to set downe any determinacion in places of controversie.”\textsuperscript{17} That the Bishops’ Bible, far from rejecting scriptural annotation \textit{per se}, even adopted many of the Geneva interpretive notes may be further testament to their popularity and influence; yet Parker’s evident aim was to construct a textual edifice that was freestanding when at its most contentious.\textsuperscript{18} William Barlow’s official account of the 1604 Hampton Court Conference recorded one kingly reader’s disdain for the Genevan marginalia, and provides one explanation as to why they were never adopted as a feature of the bible that was to bear his name. During the event at which the idea for a new translation was first formally proposed, James insisted “that no marginall notes should be added, having foundin them which are annexed to the \textit{Geneva} translation . . . some notes very partiall, untrue, seditious, and savouring too much of daungerous, and trayterous conceites.”\textsuperscript{19}

Horatio’s quip, then, is a joke at the expense of a very familiar, popular, though not uncontroversial, institution of early modern scriptural typography. Shakespeare’s acting company had been operating under direct royal patronage since the 1603 Tudor-Stuart succession, and we can well imagine both the joke’s appeal to James, and the possibility that it was deliberately incorporated into the play before its second printing with a view to the new monarch’s sensibilities.\textsuperscript{20} The joke’s significance, however, runs far deeper. It is a comic manifestation, I suggest, of a far more persistent preoccupation with the problem of authority in religious texts, a preoccupation central to both the world of the play and the controversial

\textsuperscript{18} Eadie, \textit{English Bible}, 2:30.
\textsuperscript{19} Qtd. in Berry, ed., \textit{Geneva Bible}, 15.
\textsuperscript{20} Shakespeare, whose acting company were playing at court for the Christmas season 1603–4, would have been present when the Conference took place in January 1604. See Daniel Swift’s sketch of the Conference and Shakespeare’s presence: \textit{Shakespeare’s Common Prayers: The Book of Common Prayer and the Elizabethan Age} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–27.
discourses mobilised by Catholics and Protestants over the divisive issue of scriptural interpretation in the post-Reformation period.

William Tyndale’s suggestion that a “bare text” without notes was enough to make men “wise unto salvation” is in itself indicative of the confident gymnobiblism of early English Protestantism. Indeed, belief in the sufficiency of unadorned scripture placed in the hands of the unlearned underpins the developing mythology of the early Reformation, for it is Foxe who records Tyndale’s famous claim in an argument with “a certaine divine recounted for a lerned man” that “he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture, then he [i.e. the divine] did.” Whether the story is apocryphal, the pastoral image at the heart of its symbolic battle between the elitist institutional control of wilfully opaque scripture and the unvarnished democratic truths accessible by means of homegrown industriousness coheres with Erasmus’s wish that “ye plowman wold singe a texte of the scripture at his plowbeme / And that the wever at his lowme.” While Tyndale’s English New Testament, first fully published in Worms in 1526, is certainly glossed, the preface to the 1534 edition asserts the primacy of the text itself, which, if “lefte uncorrupt” would be able to “purge hir selfe of all maner false gloses, how sotle soever they be fayned, as a sethinge pot casteth up hir scome.”

The Geneva marginalia, like Tyndale’s, of course evolve from earlier medieval traditions of glossing the Vulgate, the Latin translation of Scripture prepared by Jerome (383–405) and

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22 Foxe, Actes and Monuments, 2:1076.
23 The sentence originally appears in the “Paraclesis,” the preface to Erasmus’s Novum Instrumentum (Basel, 1516). I quote from the original English translation, An Exhortation to the Diligent Studye of Scripture, [trans. William Roy?] ([Antwerp], 1529), A6v. For a discussion of Erasmus’s and Tyndale’s use of the ploughman here, see Mike Rodman Jones, Radical Pastoral, 1381–1594: Appropriation and the Writing of Religious Controversy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 85–86.
already in ecclesiastical use in England by the fifth century. The *Glossa Ordinaria* (Standard Gloss) was a series of glosses incorporating the early exegetical efforts of the Church Fathers and compiled in part by Anselm (d.1117) and Ralph of Laon (d.1134 or 1136). Published c. 1135, the *Glossa* reflected the development of school and university education in the medieval period and the centrality of the Bible as a core text in emerging academic curricula. The Vulgate itself remained influential for much of the sixteenth century even among Protestant exegetes such as Conrad Pellican. For instance, the traces of its language have been discerned in the works of Calvin, and Beza accords it a continued respect in his *Annotationes*.

But if the Geneva marginalia didn’t emerge from a void, they were also, inevitably, a specific response to the set of historical circumstances under which the translation was generated. In accord with the recent experience of the Marian exiles responsible for its production, the first full edition of the Geneva Bible paints in its prefatory appeal to the recently crowned Elizabeth a vivid, apocalyptic picture of the true faith, struggling to establish itself, yet beset on all sides by the forces of iniquity in the form of “Papistes,” “worldlings,” and “ambitious prelats” (ii’). Echoing Hamlet’s metaphor of the “unweeded garden” (1.2.135), the authors implore her “to roote out, cut downe and destroy these wedes and impedimentes” (ii’). Yet more than anything else, England under the new regime is envisaged as the projected building of the godly, a metaphor allowing the translation of

Scripture to be figured as “the first fundacion and groundworke, according whereunto the good stones of this building must be framed, and the evil tried out and rejected” (ii°). The Bible’s title page advertises the marginal glosses as “profitable annotations upon all the hard places,” a phrasing that suggests their conception as aids for the more opaque parts of Scripture. The proffered raison d’être suggests a scholarly purpose more in keeping with the Glossa Ordinaria, which, coinciding with the rise of the schools and universities, helped to produce a text for academic study. And yet the binary framework of the prefatory epistle, its battle between good and evil, and the translation’s positioning as a touchstone by which “the evil [must be] tried out and rejected,” bring into view the hinterland of confessional polarities lurking behind the glosses.

If the Protestant dictum of sola scriptura effectively weakened the church’s pastoral function, promoting the Bible’s sufficiency for the salvation of the individual reader, it also exposed scripture as a literary text capable of provoking and supporting readers and readings at variance with one another, and raised questions about the authority underpinning individual exegesis. The second chapter of Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians supplied a key text through which such questions might be probed. In it Paul explores the linguistic authority of his own apostleship, proposing an explicatory dichotomy between wisdom and spirit: “And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4). Knowledge of God is animated by the Spirit of God, which in effect sanctions the individual: “he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man” (1 Cor. 2:15). If the Geneva gloss to this passage noted that “the trueth of God is not subject to the judgement of man” (NT fol. 77°), thereby undermining the role of the “human” apparatus of church tradition in the work of interpretation, Gregory Martin and his fellow compilers of the Catholic Rheims New Testament (1582) explicated the passage for precisely the opposite agenda:
For when the spiritual [man] is said to be judged of none, the meaning is not that he should not be subject or obedient to his Pastors and Spiritual Powers and to the whole Church . . . but that a Catholike man . . . should not be any whit subject to the judgement of the Heathen or the Heretike.  

The judgement of the spirit is given scope to operate only within the prescriptions of the Catholic Church; with the working of the spirit in the individual confirmed only in its operation within these institutional confines, heretical appeals to the spirit from outside of the church become defunct.

Hamlet’s first soliloquy not only presents the Christian framework running throughout the play, it also introduces some of the characteristic problems attendant upon the interpretation of scripture that I have briefly sketched here:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon ’gainst self-slaughter! O God, O God (1.2.129–32)

Hamlet wills a spontaneous annihilation in which he need not act as physical agent; such an annihilation, he implies, might operate within the parameters of divine proscription, a logical progression which explains the slightly peculiar syntactical linkage of the two ideas: “Or that the Everlasting.” Hamlet thus tentatively explores suicide, a discourse shot through in the period with polemical significance. If the Foxean martyr Oldcastle examined in the last chapter is a specific instance, religious martyrs more generally assumed an uneasy prominence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 

Suicide had of course been a subject of controversy in Christendom since the early Church. Christianity’s long acquaintance with

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and intellectual exploration of the phenomenon of religious martyrdom often complicated clear-cut definitions of what constituted suicide – blurring the boundary between the laudable and the blameworthy. Augustine theorized the problem of suicide more generally in Book One of *De Civitate Dei* and in a sermon given in 410 applied these theories to recent experience, condemning the voluntary martyrdoms embraced by the North African Donatists. But considering a martyrdom to be voluntary was in itself a subjective act of interpretation. For instance, a dialogue between Samuel, Saul and Solomon debating precisely such issues, penned in 1578 while he was a student at Cambridge, is evidence of John Harington’s perplexity; for Saul, Protestant martyrdom during Mary’s reign was a wilful act, yet not one receiving divine disapprobation: “Did not the martyrs of Queen Mary’s days willingly offer themselves to the flames? Were they therefore reproved?” The First Clown [Gravedigger] turns to the key problem of volition in Ophelia’s case: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?” (5.1.1–2). It is a crafty remark that resonates with the problematic category of voluntary religious martyrdom, and, in the ensuing discussion, implies that suicide is not, as Augustine would have it, a matter of unambiguous divine proscription, but precisely a matter of human interpretation.

It is obvious to suppose that notions of religiously motivated “suicide” had assumed a more radical complexion in the belligerent world of post-Reformation martyrrology. We have noted in the previous chapter how Oldcastle had been labelled a Donatist by Catholic polemicists. Robert Parsons equated Protestants more generally with members of the early Christian heretical sect, “who, rather then they would lacke martyrs, were ready to murder

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themselves.” 32 Foxe, too, was willing to make polemical capital out of suicide, listing in the

*Book of Martyrs* papists and apostates who had taken their own lives. 33 Foxe’s sense of what
the act of suicide signified was probably aligned with the position promoted by the Geneva
notes, in which suicide is constructed as an indication of divine displeasure, and thus
evidence of God’s favouring one party over another. The gloss to 2 Samuel 17:23 on
Ahithophel’s suicide, for instance, surmises that “Gods just vengeance even in this life is
powered on them, which are enemies, traitours, or persecutors of his Church.” 34 The
puritanically inclined clergyman Thomas Beard would later replicate Foxe’s strategy. The
1612 second edition of his *Theatre of Gods Judgements* (1st edn. 1597) included for the first
time a chapter entitled “Of Such as Have Murdered Themselves.” Moving from famous
classical suicides such as Cato and Lucrece, Beard turns to his own age, condemning,
amongst others, figures familiar from Foxe: Henrie Smith, an “open adversarie to Gods
truth,” and “the sonne of one Levar a husbandman, that mocked and scorned at the holie
Martyr master Latimer.” 35

Although prominent Protestant suicides such as Sir James Hales posed a problem for
Foxe, 36 he nonetheless vaunted that “[n]o man [is] able to bring forth any one example . . . of
any . . . true Gospeller, that eyther killed himselfe or shewed forth any signification or

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32 Qtd. in Lander, *Inventing Polemic*, 130.
34 Also qtd. in MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 60-1
35 Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements*, 2nd edn. (London, 1612), 316. Foxe records how Henry Smith, a Middle Temple lawyer raised as a Protestant, “began to be perverted to popery.” He hung himself in 1569, having returned to London after a period in Louvain. Disparaging remarks made by Levar, a Suffolk ploughman, against the martyred bishop Hugh Latimer were shortly “punished” by his son’s suicide. (*Actes and Monuments*, 2: 2105, 2103).
appearance of despayre."\textsuperscript{37} Yet, as the existence of *Biathanatos*, Donne’s remarkable manuscript treatise on suicide, testifies, for those sceptical of the reductive polemical bias in both Protestant and Catholic arguments, a complex intellectual problem remained, albeit one made more acute by recent experience of religious factionalism and martyrdom. Donne himself is well aware of the bearing of Catholic-Protestant controversy on his chosen subject, as he carefully explains at the beginning of the work his policy of citation, a policy evidently designed to facilitate a more dispassionate discussion:

\begin{quote}
I have this safe defence against any quareller, that what place soever I cite from any Catholique Autor, if I have not consider’d the booke it selfe, I cite him from another Catholique Writer. And the like course I hold in the Reformers. So that I shall hardly be condemn’d of any false Citation, except, to make me Accessory, they pronounce one of theyr owne freinds principall.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Even with this attempt at even-handedness, Donne does not suppress the pressures of his own religious biography as he speculatively proposes Catholicism as a possible cause of the suicidal inclinations he admits to having experienced:

whether it bee, because I had my first breeding, and conversation with Men of a suppressed and afflicted Religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin’d Martyrdome . . . Or that there be a perplexity, and flexibility in the doctrine it selfe (29).

Hamlet’s thoughts on suicide, unlike the self-reflexive analysis of Donne, are not associated in any obvious way with a Catholic perspective. That Hamlet attends the University of Wittenberg, most famous for its Professor of Theology Martin Luther, and doesn’t grasp that remembrance of his father’s purgatorial ghost ought to provoke prayer rather than vengeance

\textsuperscript{37} *Actes and Monuments*, 2:2114; also qtd. in MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, 61.

is on the contrary cited by critics as evidence of the character’s Protestant outlook. But Hamlet’s sustained intellectual contemplation of suicide, resurfacing in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy (3.1.58–92), at least corroborates what Donne views as “a perplexity, and flexibility in the doctrine it selfe.” Indeed, if we examine closely the precise wording of what at first glance appears to be the acknowledgment of an absolute and unambiguous divine proscription of suicide in accord with Augustinian exegesis in De Civitate Dei, we start to uncover precisely those elements of “perplexity” and “flexibility.”

Hamlet wishes that “the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ’gainst self-slaughter.” “Canon” is the load-bearing term in the formulation. The OED oddly cites this usage as an example of the broader, non-ecclesiastical sense of “general rule, fundamental principle, aphorism, or axiom” (def. 2b); such an interpretation, however, clearly ignores the specifically Christian framework invoked by “the Everlasting.” And indeed, Hamlet’s usage of “canon” here has proved a source of perplexity for scholars of Shakespeare’s biblical usage. In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Wordsworth remarked in the chapter of his study entitled “Of Shakespeare’s Religious Principles and Sentiments Derived from the Bible”: “I am not aware that such a prohibition is to be found in Holy Scripture . . . The ‘canon,’ therefore, to which our poet refers must be one of natural religion.” A footnote to the word “found” – “Unless it be in the Sixth Commandment” – demonstrates Wordsworth’s uncertainty as to what kind of “canon” is being invoked. Richmond Noble’s classic study of Shakespeare and the Bible from the 1930s discusses its meaning in a chapter entitled

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“Defects in Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge.” Noble defends Shakespeare’s usage against those who argue that Hamlet’s sense is of a definite proscription. The Bible does clearly tell us “Thou shalt not kill” (e.g., Exod. 20:13, Deut. 5:17), such commentators suggest, but the specific act of suicide is not prohibited by name. This critical perspective in fact concurs with Donne, who, arguing against Augustine’s interpretation of “Thou shalt not kill” to prohibit the killing of oneself, holds the commandment to be too vague to refer specifically to “self-slaughter,” when, in practice, there are specific situations in which killing appears to be sanctioned: during war and the execution of justice, for instance (115–16). Against critics, who – perish the thought – would appear to question the sophistication with which Shakespeare apprehends the Bible here, Noble argues that, while Hamlet does have in mind a specific prohibition, it is a prohibition anchored in the Church’s formation of its own laws, “canon law,” and interpretations of Scripture, institutional interpretations which, as attested to by the glosses on the Geneva and Bishops’ Bible, were unambiguous in their condemnation of suicide (102–3). Thus Noble, comparing a similarly worded divine proscription of suicide voiced by Innogen in Cymbeline, concludes that “in neither passage was Scripture in mind and that in Hamlet’s eyes the Church’s canon was the Canon of the Everlasting” (103). Noble is certainly right to draw attention to the importance of institutional interpretive control; but he is wrong to reject the idea that Scripture is being referred to. Noble effectively restricts canon to canon law, the ecclesiastical code stemming from the official institutional interpretation of Scripture. To return to an early modern examination of the suicide problem, the tripartite structure of Donne’s Biathanatos draws a firm distinction between canon law and the law of the Everlasting, discussing canon law in the treatise’s second section, entitled the “Law of Reason,” and Scripture in its third, entitled the “Law of God.” Yet Donne’s structural separation of these two elements in his discussion might seem somewhat artificial,

41 Innogen’s words are: “Against self-slaughter / There is a prohibition so divine / That cravens my weak hand” (3.4.76–78).
since it is precisely in the word “canon” that institutional control and individual interpretation of scripture meet. For “canon,” when used of scripture, signifies the body of holy writings institutionally deemed to be the word of God – in other words, the biblical books whose genuineness and inspiration the Christian Church approves. Bound up with questions of valid authority and control, “canon” in this specific sense (from the Greek κανών meaning “rule”) emerges in English through contestation and the repositioning of authority in the text, and it first appears in an early Wycliffite Bible.\textsuperscript{42} Citing Galatians 6:16, “As many as walke according to this Rule (or Canon),” in the definition of “Rule” supplied in his Christian Dictionarie (1612), the clergyman Thomas Wilson (1562/3–1622) reveals an early seventeenth-century understanding of “canon”:\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{quote}
The direction of the word of God, as a Rule to go and worke by . . . Hence the Scriptures are called Cannonicall; because they containe and give a perfect Rule of faith and manners unto the Church, which is bound obediently to walke according to this Rule, and to give Testimony to it, and not by her authority to over-rule it, and the sence of it.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

In its insistence that the Church submit to the rule of scripture lies a veiled critique of the Catholic position, which also accorded weight to extra-scriptural traditions. But Wilson’s injunction that the Church may not “over-rule . . . the sence of it,” questionably assumes both that the “sence” of scripture is readily apparent and that the body of writing from which “sence” might be derived is in itself fixed and thus not open to question.

The Bible in fact contains several instances of suicide, or deaths which may be interpreted as suicide: Samson (Judg. 16:28–30), Saul and his armour-bearer (1 Sam. 31:4–5; 1 Chron. 10:4–5), Ahitophel (2 Sam. 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:18–19), Ptolemeus Macron (2 Macc. 42 See “canon” (\textit{OED}, n.1, def.4).
43 I supply the dates of Wilson’s life to avoid confusion with his more famous namesake, the sixteenth century humanist author of \textit{The Arte of Rhetorique}, briefly discussed in Chapter 1.
10:13), Razis (2 Macc. 14:37–46), Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:5). Yet none of these instances meets with overt disapproval in its respective narrative. As Donne puts it, “the phrase of Scripture never diminishes them by any aspersion or imputation for that fact, if they were otherwise vertuous, nor aggravates thereby their former wickednesse, if they were wicked” (133). For Protestant theologians, who, generally speaking, granted the sufficiency of scripture and promoted its widespread dissemination, private misinterpretation was especially problematic: it threatened to undermine this central tenet, anchored in the supposed translucency of the Bible’s spiritual wisdom. Razis was a particularly perplexing case. A venerated elder of Jerusalem known as “a father of the Jewes” (2 Macc. 14:37, fol. 473r), he appears in the second of the Books of the Maccabees, which cover the history of the Jews in the two centuries before Christ. His three-stage suicide to avoid falling into the hands of an invading army is, even by Old Testament standards, brutally convoluted, as attempts at self-impalement and jumping from a wall are followed by a culminating act of ripping out his own bowels. Troublingly, Razis’s actions appear to be praised by the narrator, who views him as “[w]illing rather to dye manfully, then to give him self into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer reproche unworthie for his noble stocke” (2 Macc. 14:42, fol. 473r; my emphasis). Beard’s Theatre of Gods Judgements, floundering to site Razis in its framework of manifestations of divine retribution on earth for wickedness, notes the perplexing authorial stance, which Beard finds antithetical to the spirit of God; he can only surmise in the absence of textual indicators that the suicide must have been “a just punishment of some former sinne wherein he lay without repentance” (310).

45 I quote Razis’s story from the 1560 Geneva text, as I will be discussing the Geneva gloss to the passage in due course.
Though Beard surprisingly chooses not to draw attention to this fact to undermine the story, Razis’s suicide appeared in a biblical text of questionable status. The Catholic Church established its unambiguous acceptance of the canonicity of the Maccabees – along with other Old Testament writings not part of the Hebrew Bible such as Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus – in 1546, at the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent.\textsuperscript{47} Developing the theories underpinning the “Catholic” organization of the biblical canon, the theologian Sixtus of Siena, a.k.a. Sixtus Senensis (1520–1569), a converted Jew, posited in his \textit{Bibliotheca Sancta} (1566) three categories of Scripture: protocanonical (first order), deuterocanonical (second order), and apocryphal books of two kinds, books with uncertain authors and books with uncertain authority.\textsuperscript{48} Apocryphal books were not to be used “in the dogmatic field nor for public edification, but are reserved for private reading, at home, ‘\textit{privatim et domi’}.”\textsuperscript{49} As deuterocanonical texts, the Maccabees were therefore effectively of equal authority with the rest of the established canon, even if the deuterocanonical distinction acknowledges their posteriority.

Early reformers, however, regarded the Maccabees, and other scriptural texts that would form part of the Tridentine deuterocanon, with deep suspicion. Citing Jerome’s early-fifth-century distinction between Greek and Hebrew Old Testament texts, Luther’s 1534 Bible published the Greek separately as Apocrypha. Indeed, Luther made a specific complaint about the text in which Razis’s suicide had occurred: “I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.”\textsuperscript{50} Such suspicion left its mark in the official position of the Elizabethan religious establishment. Though based on the Edwardian Forty-Two Articles

\textsuperscript{48} Sixtus Senensis, \textit{Bibliotheca Sancta} (Venice, 1566), 10.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{The Table Talk of Martin Luther}, trans. and ed. William Hazlitt (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), 11.
authorized in 1553, the Elizabethan Thirty-Nine Articles innovatively incorporated a list of the accepted canon of the established Church, and, like Luther, also cited Jerome as an authority. Article 6, “Of the sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for salvation,” stated that these “other books (as Hierom saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth not apply them to establish any Doctrine.”51 If the status of the Protestant apocrypha was thereby fixed in this central, enduring document of the Church of England, the theoretical underpinnings of the position would develop through the intellectual labour of Catholic-Protestant controversy. The *Disputatio de Sacra Scriptura contra huius Temporis Papistas* (1588), Cambridge Regius Professor of Divinity William Whitaker’s important contribution to arguments over canonicity, attempted a systematic demolition of the deuterocanon. Dialectically forged against works by Thomas Stapleton and the Counter-Reformation colossus Robert Bellarmine,52 the *Disputatio* offered a simple syllogism for rejecting the canonicity of deuterocanonical writings that centred on their authorship:

Omnes Canonici libri veteris Testamenti scripti sunt à Prophetis: Nullus horum librorum scriptus est a Propheta aliquo: Ergo horum Librorum nullus est Canonicus

(All canonical books of the old Testament were written by prophets: none of these books was written by any prophet: therefore none of these books is canonical).53

52 The principal works countered by Whitaker are Stapleton’s *Principiorum Fidei Doctrinalium Demonstratio Methodica* (Paris: Michael Sonniius, 1578) and Bellarmine’s *Disputationes . . . de Controversiis Christianae Fidei, adversus huius temporis haereticos*, 3 vols. (Ingolstadt: Sartorius, 1586). For a bibliography of the controversy, see Milward *Elizabethan Age*, 148–150, 152–55. For more detail on the broader arguments deployed, see the section on Whitaker in Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 125–133.
Citing evidence from the New Testament for the acceptance of the canonical Old Testament’s prophetic authorship, Whitaker presents historical and linguistic proofs that the authors of texts in the deuterocanon could not have been prophets. The argument is then developed in the second part of this section through asserting the importance of validation by the ancient Hebrew church. Put simply, Old Testament books in the Protestant canon are also canonical in the Hebrew tradition; writings in the deuterocanon are not (18–21). But of most significance for the present discussion is Whitaker’s *argumentum firmissimum* (“very strong argument”):

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Possunt in his libris singulis quædam inveniri, quæ libros ipsos minimè Canonicos esse arguant: quod argumentum firmissimum est, ex librorum ipsorum natura & ingenio petitum (21)
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(Certain things may be found in these books which prove them not to be canonical. This argument is very strong, as derived from the nature and genius of the books themselves [53–4]).

In the final analysis, Whitaker’s trump card does not rest on external circumstances but rather on internal evidence gathered from a critical reading of the deuterocanonical texts themselves.

Protestant arguments about the constitution of the biblical canon were of course resisted by Catholic writers. Typical in its appeal to the harsh discontinuity and wholesale innovation of these arguments, the preface to the Rheims New Testament complained that Protestants had made “doubtful, divers whole bookez allowed for Canonical Scripture by the universal Church of God this thousand yeres and upward” (B1v). The erosion of the authority of the Apocrypha / deuterocanon in general and the Maccabees’ in particular was consolidated by the collective institutional manoeuvring of the Elizabethan Church and the individual labours of its members. But the continued inclusion in printed bibles of writings whose content was
occasionally suspect risked private misinterpretation and a reader deriving values unacceptable to the established Church. Exerting control in the margin was one strategy for neutralising the dangerous elements lurking in the text. Indeed, the Geneva compilers thought the suicide of Razis sufficiently opaque to warrant an edificatory marginal note:

As this private example ought not to be followed of the godlie, because it is contrary to the worde of God, althogh the author seme here to approve it. So that place as touching prayer chap.12.44, thogh Judas had appointed it, yet were it not sufficient to prove a doctrine, because it is onely a particular example (2 Macc. 14.41, fol. 473f).

The stipulation that Razis’s example “ought not to be followed” betrays the anxiety that he might be. Furthermore, a cross-reference to another dubious passage in 2 Maccabees works to undermine the authority of both. The cross-referred passage (2 Macc. 12.44) appears to sanction prayers for the dead and was deployed by Catholic controversialists as scriptural justification for the doctrine of purgatory. When the reader takes advantage of the Bible’s apparatus for information retrieval, leafing back one page to the verse indicated, he or she finds one of the Geneva’s lengthiest glosses, worth quoting in full as it weakens the claims of the entire text:

From this verse to the end of this chapter the Greke text is corrupt, so that no good sense, muche lesse certeine doctrine can be gathered thereby: also it is evident that this place was not writen by the holie Gost, bothe because it dissenteth from the rest of the holie Scriptures, and also the autor of this boke acknowledging his owne infirmitie, desireth pardon, if he have not atteined to yt he shulde (fol. 472f).

The question mark raised over authorship anticipates the objection in Whitaker’s Disputatio. But Whitaker’s treatise has the space to offer a much fuller reading of the Razis story,

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devoting an entire chapter to the status of the Maccabees (65–72; 93–102). As a key instance of the more general *argumentum firmissimum* that the content of the apocrypha is proof enough of their non-canonicity, Whitaker presents two readings of the Razis story: the problematic literal reading and the reading in accord with the correct judgement of the Spirit:


In these books if not a precept, at least a permission for a man to take his own life, is to be detected. For in 1 Macc. chap. vi. Eleasar is praised for voluntarily rushing upon death. And in 2 Macc. chap. xiv., the fortitude of Razis is commended, who laid violent hands upon himself. Yet Razis deserved no praise for his fortitude. For this was to die cowardly rather than courageously, to put himself voluntarily to death in order to escape from the hands of a tyrant. The Holy Spirit judges not of valour by the same measures as profane men, who extol Cato to the skies for committing suicide lest he should fall into the power and hands of Caesar: for he either feared, or could not bear to see him, or sought to catch renown by an act of such prodigious horror. Thus he was crushed and extinguished either by despair, or grief, or some other perturbation of mind; any of which motives are foreign from true fortitude. Rightly, therefore, did Augustine deny those books to be canonical, in which such a crime is narrated with some commendation by the authors (95).
The parallel between the “self-slaughter” of Razis and the Roman statesmen Cato the Younger, whose biography is reported in Plutarch’s *Lives*, was probably suggested to Whitaker by the fact that both are mangled in initially unsuccessful suicide attempts before finally managing to rip out their own bowels. Introducing the classical narrative into an argument about canonicity is in fact a clever strategy that implies some kind of moral parity between the Maccabean and the pagan author. Contemplation of suicide in *Hamlet* similarly displays the inheritance of a mixed tradition. If the Christian conceptual framework of Hamlet’s “canon” of Everlasting appears rigorous in its certainty, it is a framework that progressively recedes. When, like Whitaker’s reading of 2 Maccabees 14:37–46, the play’s most famous soliloquy probes the mental attributes of the suicide, questioning “Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer” (3.1.58–90), the focus has shifted from an externally imposed proscription of the canon to a new interpretive mode, in which the cognitive processes of the individual actively fashion meaning – effectively questioning whether the “canon” was itself divinely “fixed” in the first place or the product of human fashioning. As Horatio impulsively determines to commit suicide after Hamlet’s poisoning, he imagines himself as “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (5.2.293). Yet we do not finally witness the fruits of the slow accretion of Hamlet’s interpretive labour. The Christian oath greeting the classical rationale as Hamlet seizes the poisoned vessel from Horatio – “Give me the cup. Let go. By heaven I’ll ha’t” (5.2.295 my emphasis) – is almost sardonic in intimating an eschatological vocabulary; such oaths were, after all, explicitly condemned in the New Testament. Hamlet’s call for Horatio to “[a]bsent . . . [himself] from felicity a while” is ultimately pragmatic (5.2.299), demanded by the need for the tale to have a teller. There is no longer time for a more considered statement of belief, as, famously, “[t]he rest is silence” (5.2.310).

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55 In the sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “Swear not at all; Neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: / Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool” (Matt. 5:34–35). Cf. James 5:12: “But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by earth.”
Shakespeare’s biblical knowledge, remarkably rich in both its breadth and depth, certainly encompassed the Protestant Apocrypha. From these writings of doubtful canonicity, Ecclesiasticus is referred to most often in the plays, but allusions to or echoes of the Books of the Maccabees demonstrate the playwright’s familiarity with them.\(^{56}\) It is likely that Shakespeare was aware of the narrative of Razis. Naseeb Shaheen even supposes that knowledge of the unambiguous prohibition of suicide propounded in the Geneva gloss to this narrative may account for the sense of divine proscription that emerges in *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline* (539). Such a scenario is far from implausible. If the multivalent term “canon” could mean the codified teachings of the Church, the direct connection of this canon to “the Everlasting” rather suggests forms of unmediated access to the divine word. Shakespeare belonged to a generation that reached adulthood at a time when the Bible in English was becoming accessible on an unprecedented scale.\(^{57}\) In the first half of the twentieth century Richmond Noble’s methodology of attending closely to the form of Shakespeare’s references and connecting these forms to particular versions of the Bible uncovered that Shakespeare referred to the Bishop’s Bible until around 1598, after which the Genevan forms begin to predominate in his allusions. It is a discovery broadly accepted by modern scholars.\(^{58}\) This transition is fascinating in ways that have not been fully explored, for it also signifies a shift in Shakespeare’s interpretive practice, one that coincides with the emergence of a wider readership of vernacular divinity discussed in the introduction – one catered for, and also

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\(^{56}\) Anyone researching the field of Shakespeare and the Bible is indebted to the comprehensive scholarship of Naseeb Shaheen’s *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999). Shaheen notes 66 references to some 52 sections of Ecclesiasticus, 9 references to 8 sections of 1 Maccabees, and 4 references to 3 sections of 2 Maccabees (799-800). The qualifying criteria for Shaheen’s references mean that the noted allusions are sometimes speculative, and do not always prove Shakespeare’s direct engagement with a specific biblical text where other forms of exposure to its language or ideas provide plausible explanations. However, the reference to 2 Maccabees 9:4–10 located by Shaheen in *Pericles* 2.4.6–12 is particularly convincing as it involves Shakespeare’s expansion of his sources, John Gower and Lawrence Twine, with detail from the biblical text (689–90).

\(^{57}\) The Geneva Bible was not published in England until 1576, when Shakespeare reached twelve years of age. As Shaheen notes, it was only then that the Geneva translation established itself as the most popular Bible (*Shakespeare’s Tragedies*), 24.

\(^{58}\) See, for instance, Ryken, “Shakespeare and the Bible,” 7.
constituted by, Maunsell’s *Catalogue*. Shakespeare’s main interaction with the Bishop’s Bible was surely aural; this version was typically available in massive folio editions only, designed for ecclesiastical use, and quarto versions before 1585 are rare. But the Geneva Bible, never accepted for official use, was always a text that promoted reading and private study. If its marginalia attempted to place limits on what could emerge from these processes, they also indicated that reading the Bible properly was inseparable from the act of interpretation. The Geneva Bible offers a glimpse of Shakespeare the reader, studiously engaging with a sophisticated textual apparatus. Conceiving of Hamlet’s question to Osric as recourse to marginal edification, Horatio imagines the dynamic of such an exchange to be uncomplicated; the reader asks a question of the text and the margin answers. Yet, as Hamlet’s evolving attitudes towards suicide demonstrate, the margin’s answer is not always adequate. The efforts of legislation, controversial exchange, and scriptural glossing to fix, in this instance, a biblical canon unambiguous in its prohibition, do not rein in the disorderly reader like Hamlet, possibly like Shakespeare himself, a figure haunting the frictional periphery of the early modern page, where authorial control meets individual cognition.

Marginal edification operates as its own kind of marginal gloss to the play. In a playtext without marginalia, Horatio’s brief remark, seemingly incidental to plot and character, rewards a reading that negotiates between the edges and the centre. However, the comic interlude provided in the fifth act by the gravediggers, or clowns, is more obviously and directly concerned with problematic interpretation, signalled immediately by its opening question about the fate of Ophelia’s corpse: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?” (5.1.1–2) In *Inventing Polemic*, Lander suggests that the gravediggers’ humorous attempts to grapple with complex theological questions and

60 For an exploration of how Shakespeare used the Geneva system of cross-reference in a specific compositional instance, see Sarah Velz, “Man’s Need and God’s Plan in *Measure for Measure* and Mark 4,” *Shakespeare Survey* 25 (1972): 37–44.
outmanoeuvre Hamlet with “equivocation” reveal profound concerns “over social mobility and the potential collapse of status differences” (5.1.134; 134). But to place too much emphasis on the dissolving of hierarchies in this scene, is to pass over the fact that the gravediggers’ lowly status is precisely the attribute that licenses their subversion. The gravediggers do not merely reflect the attitudes of a particular social group; rather, they are a vehicle through which serious yet explosive questions may be brought onto the stage under the guise of comedy.

As the following dialogue shows, the gravediggers in fact further complicate questions of scriptural authority:

FIRST CLOWN: There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam’s profession.

SECOND CLOWN: Was he a gentleman?

FIRST CLOWN: A was the first that ever bore arms.

SECOND CLOWN: Why, he had none.


From a critical perspective attuned to conflict over the role of the Bible in the period, the dialogue resonates with the haughty disdain of the Rheims translators, who claim their hand forced by the times into issuing an uncorrupted Catholic version in the vernacular, but nevertheless maintain their condemnation of universal accessibility to scripture. Though conceding that licensed vernacular translations of Scripture had been available before the Reformation, Gregory Martin and others posit a key difference between then and now:
we must not imagin that . . . the translated Bibles into the vulgar tongues, were in
the handes of every husbandman, artificer, prentice, boies, girles, mistresse,
maide, man: that they were for table talke, for alebenches, for boates and barges,
and for every prophane person and companie (Aiij').

Unlike Tyndale’s and Erasmus’s ploughman, a seemingly passive idealized rustic whose
social position is uncompromised by knowledge of scripture, these images present the dark
and radical underbelly of universal accessibility, its mass unbridling of a linguistic faculty
vented in a precursor to the Habermasian public sphere. A stated fear of the Rheims
compilers is that vernacular translations become increasingly bastardised. “Look whether the
most chast and sacred sentences of Gods holy word,” they complain, “be not turned of many,
into mirth, mockerie, amorous ballets & detestable letters of love and leudnes” (B1'). In a
sense, then, the gravediggers’ dialogue embodies the Rheims nightmare, where scripture is
debased through its transformation into the popular idiom of the uneducated. But the
gravedigger’s joke simultaneously makes a far more sophisticated and subversive point about
scriptural interpretation, one partially submerged beneath its comedic context and clownish
characters. To explore this joke we ought briefly to sketch the broader landscape of post-
Reformation exegesis in which it sites itself.

Recent commentators have sought to position the exegetical methods of Reformers such as
Calvin closer to their medieval antecedents than to modern critical exegesis, though this
subtle shift does not obscure the basic discontinuities between the medieval and early modern
periods. Moving away from the allegorical modes of the Middle Ages, humanist emphasis on
philology and a return to the study of the text itself helped to facilitate a sharper interpretive
focus on the letter.61 The transference of humanist textual practices onto scripture irked the
Rheims compilers insofar as handling a biblical and classical text in much the same way was

a potentially irreverent gesture, and they therefore attacked Protestant translators who “supply, adde, alter or diminish as freely as if they translated Livie, Virgil, or Terence” (B1v). Richard Muller describes the transition in exegetical practice in the period as one “from a precritical approach that could acknowledge spiritual senses of the text beyond the literal sense to a precritical approach that strove to locate spiritual meaning entirely in the literal sense.”62 The promotion of the literal sense of Scripture counteracted the complexities of fourfold medieval exegesis, in which the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses all played a part.63 That spiritual meaning could be located primarily in the literal sense of scripture helped to justify its being made widely accessible. The homily “A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture” implores its auditor to:

Read it [the Bible] humbly with a meeke and lowly heart, to the intent you may glorify God, and not your selfe, with the knowledge of it: and read it not without dayly praying to God, that he would direct your reading to good effect: and take upon you to expound it no further, then you can plainly understand it.64

The instruction is not to over-analyse the text but focus on what can be readily apprehended: “to plainly understand.” The Rheims compilers, by way of contrast, stress the ridiculousness of such instruction given the opacity of scripture:

How much more may we gather, that all thinges that be written, are not for the capacitie and diet of every of the simple readers, but that very many mysteries of holy writte, be very far above their reach, & may and ought to be (by as great reason) delivered them in measure & meane moste meete for them? whiche in deede can hardly be done, when the whole booke of the Bible lieth before every man in his mother tonge, to make choise of what he list (A4v).

62 Ibid., 14.
63 Ibid., 9.
The first gravedigger, with his mock rebuke to his colleague – “How dost thou understand the Scripture?” – in fact performs a clever satire of exegetical focus on the literal sense. Literal interpretation becomes problematic when the meaning of a word such as “arms” is not restricted to a single definition, when it can be contorted to support the preposterous, if comedic, inference that Adam was a gentleman (i.e., had a coat of arms). Much of Shakespeare’s comedy of course celebrates the fluidity of words, their ability to signify different things simultaneously. It would not be surprising if such an acutely developed awareness of the possibilities of language might reject a dogmatic emphasis on the literal sense. It is Shylock’s insistence on the letter of the bond, we recall, that leads to his undoing; Portia’s innovative interpretation of the bond demonstrates how two variant interpretations might still both accord with the literal sense. The apparent grasping of the literal sense, as the gravedigger’s witticism makes plain, is no guarantee of the validity of the interpretation.

_Hamlet_, then, is marked in important ways by early modern controversy over scriptural interpretation; in turn it played a role in informing and shaping, however obliquely and indirectly, the attitudes of its audiences and readers. The concern with marginal edification, referenced explicitly in Horatio’s remark, is part of a larger exploration of interpretive insufficiency. Moving beyond controversy over biblical exegesis and the canon more narrowly defined, I now want to argue that marginal edification operates more expansively. If _Hamlet_’s reference to marginal edification points specifically to the typographical layout of the Geneva Bible, it also resonates as a polemical practice more broadly conceived. Vernacular translations of scripture such as the Protestant Geneva Bible and the Catholic Douai-Rheims Bible (New Testament, 1582; Old Testament, 1609–10) were, of course, not the only types of religious text to deploy glosses for the purposes of a partisan explication of the text that masqueraded as edification. Controversialists also adopted the practice,

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65 Shaheen detects an alignment with, among other passages, Romans 4:3: “For what saith the scripture?” (Shakespeare’s Tragedies, 109).
recognising the incendiary potential of reproducing, partially or wholly, the text of an adversary, only to dismantle that text by means of hostile marginalia. Such a polemical strategy was evidently in vogue around the time of James’s accession to the English throne in 1603; it is the means by which a number of individual Protestant writers attempted to diffuse the impact of several anonymous supplications, nominally addressed to the new king, and arguing in favour of toleration for Catholics. In works that quickly ran into multiple editions, Christopher Muriell, Gabriel Powel and Matthew Sutcliffe all reproduce their target Catholic text but surround it with a marginal apparatus that attempts to dominate it: by turns confuting, exposing, and ridiculing their opponents’ putative meaning.66 Viewing his own endeavour as a kind of toxicological exegesis, Sutcliffe mobilises his marginalia “to remedy the poyson of the Text” (A2v); a similar perspective registers in Muriell’s complaint that “[t]hese Romanists have sugered wordes, but their harts be full of deadly poyson, yet they can change their shape into an Angel of light, to deceive the very elect, if it were possible” (C3v).

Muriell’s anxieties about “sugered words” that “change their shape” transform a written text into a misleading vision akin to the doubtful ghost of Old Hamlet, who “[m]ay be the devil . . . [with] power / T’assume a pleasing shape” (2.2.601–2). Muriell and Hamlet probably have in mind Paul’s teaching on the deceptive appearance of the diabolical in 2 Corinthians 11:14: “for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. / Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as ministers of righteousness.” Hamlet himself, at least at the beginning of the play, attempts to stand for an ingenuous, unbroken

66 The long titles of their books draw attention to the marginal apparatus: Christopher Muriell, An Answer unto the Catholiques Supplication . . . Whereunto is Annexed the Supplication of the Papists Word for Word as it was Presented unto the Kings Majestie: With Some Necessarie Annotations Thereupon (London, 1603); Gabriel Powel, The Catholikes Supplication unto the Kings Majestie; For Toleration of Catholike Religion in England with Short Notes or Animadversions in the Margine. Whereunto is Annexed Parallel-wise, a Supplicatorie Counterpoyse of the Prostestants (London, 1603); Matthew Sutcliffe, The Supplication of Certaine Masse-priests Falsely Called Catholikes . . . Published with a Marginall Glosse, for the Better Understanding of the Text, and an Answer to the Libellers Reasons, for the Cleering of all Controversies Thereof Arising (London, 1604 [STC 14429.5]). (I provide the STC reference to avoid confusion when a later edition of this text is discussed.) Sutcliffe’s text appears anonymously, but is attributed to him in Gabriel Powel, A Consideration of the Papists Reasons of State and Religion, for Toleration of Poperie in England (Oxford, 1604), A2v’.
connection between surface and interiority. His insistence on the continuity between his outward expression and inner state of grief occasions an early reproach to his mother, Gertrude: “Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’” (1.2.76). And later, after the Ghost has revealed the extent of Claudius’s villainy, it is precisely the usurper’s dissembling that the prince finds most troubling; indeed, this fact alone is excised from the Ghost’s message and eagerly recorded in written form: “. . . meet it is I set it down / That one may smile and smile and be a villain’ (1.5.108–9).

Polonius, on the other hand, familiar with and willing to oblige the politic practices of the new regime, coolly accepts the disjunction between outward sign and inward reality; in fact, his instructions to Ophelia to prepare for the secret observation of Hamlet set the disjunction specifically within a religious context:

\[
\text{We are oft to blame in this.}
\text{‘Tis too much proved that with devotion’s visage}
\text{And pious action we do sugar o’er}
\text{The devil himself (3.1.48–51).}
\]

“We are oft to blame in this”: for Polonius the practice of dissembling is rife, yet including himself in the assessment forestalls any harsher moral condemnation. More tellingly, the speech prompts a secret admission of guilt from Claudius, and the king’s subsequent aside converts Polonius’s visual religious frame (“devotion’s visage . . . pious action”) into a dissimulation anchored in language:

\[
\text{The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art,}
\text{Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it}
\text{Than is my deed to my most painted word (3.1.53–55, my emphasis).}
\]
The verbosity of Osric is merely the comedic manifestation of a more sinister semiological dysfunctionality, one that, in Horatio’s quip, would require some kind of externally imposed framework, or marginal edification, to render the truth of the “text.” Hamlet’s failure to act swiftly on the message of his father’s ghost – to “[r]evenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25) – is bound up precisely with the problem of meaning in a world of shifting shapes and the attendant difficulty of correct interpretation.

William Slights’s study of printed marginalia in religious writings of the period suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that “the identification and deployment of issues, personnel, and matériel . . . were carefully designed to limit the interpretative contexts available to the wayfaring, warfaring Christian.”67 If Hamlet represents a world in which interpretation is perilous, where linguistic and visual signs are inherently unstable and thus threaten to mislead, then religious marginalia constitute an organised effort to supply interpretive fixity, to arrest the flux of such rogue signifiers. In his preface to the second, enlarged edition of his answer to the Catholic supplication, Sutcliffe tries awkwardly to justify the need to respond without being seen to grant his opponents’ arguments any worth. Having belittled the credentials of the text – “For what shall any neede to contend with such, as runne away in a cloud of generalities, and seldome come neere the cause in question? Or why should any man busie himselfe to answer the idle quotations of these fellowes . . . ?” – he asserts the self-sufficiency of religious truth and the redundancy of temporal agents: “light and darkenesse doe not more repugne one to another, then the errors of the Popes particuluer doctrine and opinions, to the true faith of the Catholike church of Christ Jesus.”68 The implication is that the worldly agents who seek to preserve and advance that truth are on some level redundant; as the fool in Samuel Rowley’s When You See Me, You Know Me (pr.1605) mockingly puts

67 Slights, Managing Readers, 230.
it: “I am suer [sic], the true faith is able to defend it selfe without thee.”\textsuperscript{69} The \textit{raison d’être} of Sutcliffe’s rebuttal becomes the fact “that Simple Papists may soone be abused with glorious shewes, and for want of skill take shadowes for substance, brasse for golde, falshood for truth.”\textsuperscript{70} The less sophisticated are precisely the ones most likely to succumb to the seductive eloquence of the text (the people whom Aragon in \textit{Merchant of Venice} refers to contemptuously as “the fool multitude, that choose by show” [2.9.25]), and it is for the benefit of these that Sutcliffe’s reply is warranted.

Yet Sutcliffe, dean of Exeter and the most illustrious of the aforementioned polemicists who took it upon themselves publicly to subdue the supplications, betrays his uneasiness at the extent to which the marginalia alone exert semantic control over the Catholic text; by the time his counter runs into its second edition in the same year, Sutcliffe has decided to make significant changes to the layout. No longer is the supplication allowed to stand freely with only annotations to assist its interpretation; now the source text is also interspersed with passages drawn from Sutcliffe’s prose rebuttal to the Catholic arguments, a passage that originally stood on its own after the reproduced supplication. Sutcliffe, anxious at the priority awarded the Catholic text in the former version, evidently hoped that the new layout would exercise even tighter control over the meaning of the rogue text (figs. 7 and 8).

If the topicality of \textit{Hamlet}, its preoccupation with the pivotal Tudor-Stuart succession, has often been asserted,\textsuperscript{71} the play’s concern with a crisis of religious authority has been less well documented. It is a crisis that gathers pace at the beginnings of the Henrician Reformation in the More vs. Tyndale polemics, but receives fresh impetus from the


\textsuperscript{70} Sutcliffe, \textit{Masse-priests}, rev. ed. (STC 14430), A3\textsuperscript{v}.

14. A Religion, that instituted the a feastes, the fastings, a An holiday
dayes, and all the goodly ceremonies, and solemne observati-
ons, which are yet vied (though many other pared away) and b We tell you
commanded in the b Protestant religion, as the festuities of often our re-
ligion is Ca-
Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Whitsontide, and the Eues and
tholike and
feastes of the Apostiles, likewise the fastes of Lent, and Ember
Apostolike.

dayes, abstinence on Fridayes & Saturdayes, much holesome, c We desire
and very commodious to the Common-weale: Semblable
the rites & sacred formes kept in Coronatiōs, installements,
and in all other sortes of solemnities, that carry euyther state, mooved,
decency or veneration with them.

15. A religion, that founded the Ecclesastical d cenfures,
and sortes of discipline, as suspension, interdiction, excommu-
ication, irregularity, degradation and the like, and was also d The cenfures
the author of the Cannon law, studied throughout the uni-
eral Christian world, & many pointes, both of her cenfures,
lawes and discipline, practised by the protestants themselves, e We vse the
things refuse
the abusēs.

16. A religion that onely hath canonized her professors
for Saints after death, and celebrateth their annuall memories,
whereby their names ever live in honor, and all posterity inci-
ted both to glorifie God for his graces bestowed on them, & f What is this
also studiously to imitate their vertues, Whereby that aulg-
cration of the Prophet is verified, e T by friends (O God) are very on of Saints?
much honoured of me, Psal. 138. 17. Likewise that saying of Ec-

17. A religion, whose refuse & reuelt priests are g de-
ed lawfull and sufficiently ordered to preach the word of h Most easily
God, to miniter Sacraments, and to exercise all spiritual in-
risdiction in the protestant and Puritan Congregation. A Their Priests
proofe, which seemeth b vnanswerable, that our church is the
true Church: for were her doctrine false, the teaching in ma-

tical priests
ny pointes as she doth, it must needs follow that she is the recognizing
synagogue, if not the arch-synagogue of Satan, and consi-

dently,

Fig. 7 Matthew Sutcliffe, The Supplication of Certaine Masse-priests, 1st. edn, (1604). The Catholic supplication is printed in its uninterrupted entirety with Sutcliffe’s marginal notes.
Fig. 8 Matthew Sutcliffe, *The Supplication of Certaine Masse-priests*. Rev. edn., (1604). The Catholic supplication is now controlled by marginal notes and Sutcliffe’s interspersed “Answere” to each of its sections.
uncertainty concerning the form the religious settlement might take upon James’s accession. If Parson’s Conference attempted to influence the outcome of that settlement in advance, the Catholic supplications and their refutations, along with the Puritan petitions presented to James, are all claimants in a contest over authority. Hamlet stands apart from other Shakespearean tragedies, as A.C. Bradley recognised more than a century ago, by virtue of its “freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided . . . intimation of a supreme power concerned in human evil and good.” But the correspondences between the play and the central religious discourses of the culture from which it emerges – its absorption in problems as varied as predestination, providence and purgatory – do not harden into doctrinal certainties. Rather, Hamlet’s Denmark remains, in Peter McCullough’s phrase, “confessionally schizophrenic.” Lander sees this confessional ambiguity writ large on Q2 as a deliberate attempt by the various agents involved in its production to produce a particular type of text, one that certainly intersects with the concerns of religious controversy in the period, yet is ultimately aimed at “the unperturbed, literate gentleman, one who can stand above, or rather sit quietly at a remove from, the fray, taking pleasure in speculation and drawing edification from the undermining of dogmatic positions” (139). But such an account, largely focused on positioning Q1 and Q2 in the early modern marketplace of print, overlooks how ambiguity is a historically specific response to the problem of textual authority in religious controversy.

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It was a problem that Montaigne, a moderate Catholic, turned to in his final essay, “Of Experience” (pr. 1588), where he contemplates the difficulties that arise from the desire of many to exert interpretive control over a singular text. Shakespeare’s only indisputable usage of Montaigne is a late one, *The Tempest’s* paraphrase of the essay “Of Cannibals,” and yet John Florio’s English translation of *Essais* appeared in 1603. Shakespeare and Florio in fact shared the same patrons and there is a long tradition behind the assumption that Shakespeare probably read the translated *Essayes* in manuscript in advance of their publication. Indeed, in the critical literature tracing the conceptual parallels between Montaigne’s skepticism and Shakespeare’s developing notions of identity and subjectivity in the plays, *Hamlet* is unsurprisingly a key text. Montaigne’s position is actually a dismissal of the business of textual interpretation as a process over time in which understanding is usefully accumulated to be shared with other readers:

> Who would not say that commentaries increase doubt and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, human or divine, with which the world has any business, in which the difficulties are cleared up by the interpretation? The hundredth commentator passes it on to his successor in a thornier and more crabbed state than that in which he first discovered it.

While one could be forgiven for wanting to apply Montaigne’s observation to the current state of *Hamlet* criticism, within its immediate historical context it paradoxically suggests

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both a virtue and serious flaw in the Protestant dictum of *sola scriptura*. To place emphasis on the text alone is to strip away at one fell swoop the centuries of paratextual accretion in the form of commentary and unwritten church tradition. And yet holding aloft the holy text as singular, incorruptible authority theoretically assumes the self-evidence of its meaning. Such an assumption works in turn to facilitate a larger argument for shifting the emphasis of control over scripture, and hence salvation, from the institution to the individual. In practice, of course, scripture could be interpreted in multiple ways, often at variance with the institutional control over meaning exercised by the established Church. And thus, far from doing away with successively thornier commentaries, Protestantism merely inaugurates its own rival tradition of explicating scripture. Protestant controversialists were effectively placed in a double bind. “[A]lbeit both heretiques & devills abuse the scriptures by alleadging them to evill endes,” as a character from an instructional religious dialogue published in Cambridge in 1600 put it, “yet it is the true way and the onely way to be resolved by, and to finde rest for our consciences in all matters of controversie.”  

Ironically, a primary source of religious dispute, scriptural interpretation, is simultaneously hailed as an authoritative means of resolution. Montaigne astutely recognised the illusoriness of attempts to re-anchor authority in scripture itself, for as he explains:

> those men who think they can lessan and check our disputes by referring us to the actual words of the Bible are deluding themselves, since our mind finds just as wide a field for controverting other men’s meanings as for delivering its own (344).

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In other words, it is the very richness, range or “width” of the Bible that defies reduction to singularity; moreover, exegetical practice makes necessary a fundamental distinction between “words” and “meanings.” Words might be relatively fixed (though with controversies encircling the methodologies employed in bible translation itself, this may not be uniformly assumed), but words fail to transform themselves in any automatic or consistent way into meaning.

For Montaigne, then, religious controversies remain, firmly and reductively, “disputes about words” (349). And yet the shift in emphasis from the particular doctrine or confessional perspective being contested to the medium of language in which the controversy is conducted did not escape the practitioners of controversy themselves. Cardinal William Allen, for instance, writing in his *Defence and Declaration of . . . Purgatory* (1565), decries novel Protestant interpretations of established Catholic practices. “By what righte,” he asks, “they chaunge the names of thinges, that can not allter theyre natures. Who authorished [sic] theyme to call that extirpation of superstition, whiche oure fathers cauled sacraledge? Or that blinde devotion, whiche oure holy elders named true religion?”80 Bound up in the phraseology here is a fundamental critique of the relationship between language and authority. Protestant writers, Allen asserts, attempt to reposition Catholic practices at the level of language: “true [Catholic] religion,” for instance, is transformed into “blinde devotion.” Yet language ought not to be granted its own sufficiency. The rhetorical question “Who authorished theyme . . . ?” denies the self-authorising function of words, and reaches out to an extra-linguistic realm where a “Catholic” monopoly on truth is still assured. It is a truth concealed beneath layers of language, and yet to which (Allen hopes) the obfuscatory polemical interplay of signifiers can ultimately be referred.

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“Hamlet ultimately demonstrates, however, that Allen’s extra-linguistic truth is an illusion; concepts, even the concept of extra-linguistic truth itself, are only ever apprehended in “[w]ords, words, words.” If early Protestantism arguably evinced a less complicated faith in the possibility of engendering fruitful individual relationships between individual readers and the Bible, the durable practice of glossing attested to concern and control over the nature of this relationship. Such concern is compounded by controversies over canonicity; labelling a text as apocryphal partly because of its dubious content and yet continuing to include that text in printed bibles is a dangerous move that carries with it the threat of private misinterpretation. Glossing for marginal edification may attempt to parry this threat; and yet in both the Bible and religious polemic it is ultimately an inadequate strategy, promising to readers such as Hamlet and Shakespeare comforting forms of existential certainty, yet in practice incapable of fixing the meaning of the text.
CHAPTER 4

“Such an honest chronicler”: Truth and anti-polemical fantasy in

Henry VIII

Religious love put out religion’s eye

(A Lover’s Complaint 250)

Written at a pivotal moment in Shakespeare’s career, *Hamlet* arguably constitutes the period’s most sophisticated dramatic articulation of religious controversy as intellectual problem.\(^1\) If *King John* and *1 Henry IV*, in very different ways, chart the transformation of English history in post-Reformation polemic, *Hamlet* locates the paradox of the subject, tormented by – yet forging a distinct identity through – the erosion of religious authority. It is intuitive that such preoccupations persist in the playwright’s Jacobean *oeuvre*. Religious polemics continue to proliferate in ever greater numbers after the accession of the Stuart king, and the conformist rhetoric of James’s court preachers, often equating even moderate Puritanism with popery, betrays an ecclesiastical polity more riven with internal tensions than has been traditionally assumed.\(^2\) That plays written in this climate such as *King Lear* and *Macbeth* have been explored for their immersion in topical Catholic-Protestant controversies

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is perhaps unsurprising, and this criticism needn’t be rehearsed at any length here. ³ But in
despite of clear thematic continuities in Shakespeare’s early Stuart plays, his collaborative
dramatization of the events of the early Reformation at the very end of his career in the
theatre is at once puzzling and untidy.

With the tradition of identifying Shakespeare with Prospero already well established by
the mid-eighteenth century, generations of readers and theatregoers have sought to interpret
Prospero’s valediction at the end of The Tempest (1611) as Shakespeare’s own farewell to the
stage.⁴ Unfortunately, The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eight (as it is called
in its original printed manifestation in the First Folio) is one of three plays co-authored with
John Fletcher, Shakespeare’s successor as leading playwright for the King’s Company, that
spoils such neat endings.⁵ Henry VIII’s composition may in fact be pinned with an unusual
degree of certainty to the years 1612–13, for several extant accounts describing its
performance on 29 June 1613 refer to it as a “new play.” (The occasion itself was memorable
for the wrong reasons, since charge from canons or “chambers” [s.d. 1.4.50] used during the

³ On King Lear and Samuel Harsnett’s A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures (1603), see Introduction,
p. 40. The bibliography on Macbeth’s connections with the Gunpowder Plot is large, but on the play’s Catholic-
Protestant topicality, see especially Willis, Witches and Jesuits; Frances E. Dolan, Whores of Babylon:
Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999; rpt. Notre
Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 76–78; Maurice Hunt, “Reformation/Counter-Reformation

⁴ Critics sometimes trace this tradition only as far back as Thomas Campbell’s suggestion in his 1838 edition of
Shakespeare’s works that “Shakespeare himself is Prospero” (The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare, ed.
Thomas Campbell [London: Routledge, 1838], Iviv). See, for example, Samuel Schoenbaum, William
Michael Dobson, citing among other evidence verses produced for the Stratford Jubilee of 1769, has shown that
the association was already current in the eighteenth century (“Remember / First to possess his books”: The
identification of Shakespeare with Prospero in a recent biography, see Stephen Greenblatt, Will in the World:

⁵ The other two are The Two Noble Kinsmen (1613) and the lost Cardenio. Although a century earlier the poet
Richard Roderick had noted the uncharacteristic irregularities of poetic measure in Henry VIII (“Remarks on
extracted in Vickers, ed., Critical Heritage, 4:338–40), the argument for the play’s co-authorship was first
presented in 1850 by the literary editor James Spedding (“Who Wrote Henry VIII?” Gentlemen’s Magazine, n.s.
34 (August 1850), 115–24. The current critical consensus supports Spedding’s broad argument for Fletcher’s
authorial involvement in the play. For a full account of the debate, see Brian Vickers, Shakespeare, Co-author
performance set fire to the roof of the theatre, causing the Globe to burn down.⁶ With some thirteen years having elapsed since Henry V (c. 1599), the final history in the second tetralogy, Henry VIII holds an anomalous position in the trajectory of the Shakespearean canon. If, in the middle of the twentieth century, critics such as G. Wilson Knight, Howard Felperin, Ronald Berman and Frances Yates illuminated the play’s artistic correspondences with other late plays often grouped under the generic heading of “romances,”⁷ still others have preferred to emphasise its coherence with the much earlier histories.⁸ Perplexing, too, is the play’s apparent disembodiment from its cultural and theatrical moment. Work may now have been done to recover its specifically Jacobean frame of reference;⁹ but before the precision in dating afforded by the discovery of documents relating to the fire at the Globe, important eighteenth-century Shakespeare scholars had assumed it to be an Elizabethan play, largely thanks to what they interpreted as its endorsement of Tudor ideology.¹⁰ It is also, as William

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¹⁰ In his Critical Observations on Shakespeare (2nd ed. 1748), John Upton sees the incorporation of a reference to James I in Cranmer’s fifth-act prophecy (5.4.39–55) as a later addition to the play, “another prophetic patch of flattery . . . tacked onto it.” In 1778 and 1790 Edmund Malone ascribed a date of 1601 to the play (Vickers, ed., Critical Heritage, 3:300, 6:190–91, 6:531).
M. Baillie notes, “probably the only history play, based on English chronicles since the
Conquest, to have been written for any professional acting troupe during the twelve years
from 1607 to 1618.”

Criticism has thus tended to focus on issues of authorship, genre and immediate political
context to the detriment of a fuller understanding of the play’s thematic position within
Shakespeare’s corpus. It is therefore this position, as it relates to a far broader, sustained
preoccupation with polemic, which this chapter examines. Using so far the examples of *King
John*, *1 Henry IV* and *Hamlet*, I have argued in this thesis that, in substantial and
sophisticated ways, Shakespeare’s plays engage with and are implicated in a burgeoning
world of Catholic-Protestant controversy, a world that would eventually collapse, but which
once constituted a shaping force upon early modern England’s literate and literary life. Of all
plays, *Henry VIII*, by its very subject, ought to position itself in some relation to a Catholic-
Protestant controversial discourse that only becomes fully fledged during the reign of that
Tudor monarch. It is the only Shakespeare play set during the early Reformation, if we
discount the apocryphon *Thomas Lord Cromwell* (pr. 1602) and manuscript revisions to the
suppressed play *Sir Thomas More*, and it therefore must necessarily construct on the stage
a king whose reputation and legacy, like King John’s and Oldcastle’s, were objects of bitter
contest in polemical historiography.

The *Book of Martyrs* had furnished the iconic Protestant statement of Henry as, above all,
the triumphant suppressor of papal influence in England, a role graphically reinforced in the
famous woodcut first prefacing the narrative of the monarch’s reign in the 1570 edition.

There the king is explosively depicted abusing the prostrate figure of Pope Clement VII as a

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11 Baillie, “Jacobean History,” 247. Baillie bases this count on Alfred Harbage’s *Annals of English Drama, 975–
12 For a discussion of the authorship of *Thomas Lord Cromwell*, see Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of
full examination of the complex composition of *Sir Thomas More*, see Munday and Chettle, *Sir Thomas More*,
1–29.
royal footstool while handing the Bible to Thomas Cranmer (fig. 9). No doubt spurred by such triumphalist narratives, which typically lauded a connection between the divine word and kingly authority that bypassed the pope, Catholic controversialists responded with their own histories of this critical period. The missionary Nicholas Sander produced the most notorious Catholic account of Henry, a work that would earn him the moniker of “Dr. Slanders” in seventeenth-century ecclesiastical histories. His *De Origine ac Progressu Schismatis Anglicani*, published posthumously in 1585, attempts to cast aspersions on the motivation for religious reform by focusing on the king’s personal failings, presenting the scandalous claim that Anne Boleyn was in fact Henry’s own illegitimate daughter.

Illustrating how in controversy text begets text, weaving an ever more intricate and self-authorising web, Sander’s history became a source for both polemic and drama. Parsons, for instance, refers to the *Schismatis Anglicani* in the margin of one sally in the Watchword Controversy as an authority for his attack on Thomas Cranmer’s character. Translated into French, German, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish, and appearing in six Latin editions between 1585 and 1628, Sander’s book exerted an influence far beyond religious and scholarly life in England. It is the principal source for a surviving neo-Latin academic drama, *Henricus Octavus Seu Schisma Anglicanum*, penned by the Belgian humanist Nicolaus 13 On the significance of the woodcut to Foxe’s construction of Henry in particular, and ecclesiastical history more generally, see Elizabeth H. Hageman, “John Foxe’s Henry VIII as Justitia,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 10.1 (1979), 35–43.

14 High-Churchman Peter Heylyn’s Laudian history of the Reformation, whose research was begun in the 1630s, writes that Sander was “never more truly Dr. Slanders than in that particular” and bemoans the work’s “frequent falshoods [, which] make him no fit Author to be built upon in any matter of importance” (*Ecclesia Restaurata* [London, 1660], 122). The pagination in this edition is not consecutive throughout. The remark appears in the last section, “Affairs of Church and State in England, During . . . the Reign of Queen Elizabeth.”

15 Sander writes of Anne Boleyn in his preface, “quin etiam, ipsiusmet Henrici propria filia no sine multis indicis habebatur” (besides, she was considered, not without many good reasons, to be Henry’s own child”), and iterates in the main history “nec Annam Bolenam alterius quàm regis Henrici filiam esse” (“that the child Anne was the daughter of no other than Henry VIII”), drawing the reader’s attention to the point with the marginal heading “Anna Bolena pater” (*De Origine ac Progressu Schismatis Anglicani*, ed. Edward Rishton [Cologne, 1585], ἀρ, fol. 15’). The English translation is taken from David Lewis, ed. and trans., *The Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism* (London: Burns & Oates, 1877), cxlvi, 24. On the influence of Sander’s work in the period, see Christopher Highley, “‘A Pestilent and Seditious Book’: Nicholas Sander’s ‘Schismatis Anglicani’ and Catholic Histories of the Reformation,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68.1/2 (2005): 151–71.


Fig. 9 The Pope Suppressed, John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1570).
Vernulaeus (Nicolas de Vernulz) and performed at the University of Louvain in 1624.\(^\text{18}\) As the basis of Pedro de Rivadeneira’s *Historia Ecclesiástica del Cisma del Reino de Ingalaterra* (“An Ecclesiastical History of the Schism in the Kingdom of England” [1588]),\(^\text{19}\) it is also in turn the key source (either directly or mediated via the Spanish Jesuit’s writing) for *La Cisma de Ingalaterra* (“The Schism of England”, c. 1627), the work of the great playwright of the Spanish Golden Age, Pedro Calderón de la Barca.\(^\text{20}\)

To be clear, this brief sketch of contested histories and their cultural manifestations does not claim that adherence to Sander’s account of Henry’s sexual incontinence was in some way the preserve of continental Catholic writers. If Jack Wilton, the fictional narrator in Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), could call Henry “the onely true subject of the Chronicles,” more radical Protestants laboured under no illusion about Henry’s flawed character and the deep inadequacy of any reformation started during his reign.\(^\text{21}\) A particular vehement example of this view is found, for instance, in the Genevan writing of the exiled clergyman Anthony Gilby, who asserted in 1558 that there had been “no reformation, but a deformation in the tyme of that tyrant and lecherous monster.”\(^\text{22}\) Yet the work of Foxe and Sander indicates at the very least the cruder outlines of representative binaries to be negotiated in any construction of Henry in the period.


\(^{19}\) Highley “Sander’s ‘Schismatis Anglicani’,” 154.


\(^{21}\) Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (London, 1594), B1f.

Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII* can therefore hardly evade the spectre of controversy, dealing as it must with individual figures caught up in the beginnings of profound religious change. Inevitably its lexicon incorporates appropriate confessional labels as part of the dramatic conflict: Cardinal Wolsey calls Anne Boleyn “a spleeny Lutheran” and Cranmer “an heretic, an arch-one” (3.2.100, 103); and as religious division later becomes more acute, Stephen Gardiner reiterates that Cranmer is “A most arch heretic, a pestilence / That does infect the land” (5.1.45–46). Such linguistic markers of contestation are, however, fleeting, and the play makes no attempt to depict the substance of struggles over doctrine to which these markers refer. As we shall see, a slightly earlier play set during Henry’s reign, Samuel Rowley’s *When You See Me, You Know Me* (pr. 1605), does present doctrinal themes as part of its dramatic vision, and against this rival drama their absence in *Henry VIII* is made keener. To be sure, a very small number of critics have remarked on the play’s engagement with the tropes and topics of religious controversy. But there can be no doubt that the editor of the recent single-play Oxford edition, Jay L. Halio, articulates a prevailing critical view in suggesting that Shakespeare and Fletcher “eschew theological debate.” Tellingly, when the play approaches a fuller treatment of religio-political events and their implications in the largely Fletcherian fifth act, its dramatic effectiveness has even been called into question.

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26 Sir Hebert Beerbohm Tree wrote of his 1910–11 production of *Henry VIII* at Her Majesty’s Theatre, Haymarket, his longest running Shakespeare revival: “It has been thought desirable to omit almost in their entirety those portions of the play which deal with the Reformation, being as they are practically devoid of dramatic interest and calculated, as they are, to weary an audience” (*Henry VIII and His Court* [London: Cassell, 1910], 90; qtd. in *King Henry VIII*, ed. McMullan, 36).
A refusal to make such themes prominent, however, does not signify polemic’s redundancy to the conceptual apparatus through which Reformation history is rendered. Rather, a perspective on an inchoate religious controversy emerges that is conditioned in important ways by the separation of some eighty years between the actual period and its dramatic representation, the cultural immediacy of that controversy now transformed through the ascendancy of polemic. I argue, then, that *Henry VIII* is a response to a contest over religious truth, but one aligned with the growing recognition among Shakespeare’s contemporaries that polemic is a highly problematic, compromised activity, and thus a most unfit vehicle for approaching that truth.

The reluctance to emphasize the specifics of dispute and thus underline the Henrician Reformation as a Protestant event may, as Halio suggests, be rooted in an ecumenical act of dramatic collaboration.27 Fletcher’s firmly Protestant upbringing contrasts with the alleged recusant Catholic background of Shakespeare’s immediate family,28 and it is plausible that differing religious views would have steered the play’s schema away from more controversial areas. But in part precisely because of its lack of explicitness, the play articulates an attitude toward controversy, especially when the absence at its heart is considered in the light of what does appear on the stage. With the better part of a century having elapsed since the landmark polemics exchanged between William Tyndale and Thomas More in the late 1520s and early 1530s,29 it would have been forgivable to regard these documents of religious contestation with suspicion. Tyndale’s and More’s texts have been considered models of the “Pauline

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open letter,” addressing a wider community over which they hope to exert influence. Yet the texts’ privileged intellectual status is achieved at least in part by the relative paucity of vernacular polemic, against which those texts might more readily come to the fore. If England had become unambiguously (and, it seemed, irreversibly) Protestant by the 1610s, the textual phenomenon of religious polemic was, as I have argued, more palpable than ever before. An interested reader using Maunsell’s *Catalogue* to guide a course of self-study might not be blamed for concurring with the preacher in Ecclesiastes that “of making many books there is no end” (12:12).

It is tempting to speculate about the kinds of values Shakespeare himself would eventually place on controversy as a textual practice. After a lifetime of active, omnivorous reading refracted in the plays and poems, what opinions did he hold as to its ultimate worth when he returned to Foxe and to Holinshed for a new play about Henry VIII? Shakespeare’s great theatrical contemporary Ben Jonson provides a rare insight into how an early modern dramatist’s reading habits accumulate over many years, finding their physical embodiment in the personal library. In a poem occasioned by fire damage to that library in 1619, the book collection becomes a memory of long developing intellectual interests:

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twice-twelve-years stor'd up Humanity,
With humble Gleanings in Divinity;
After the Fathers, and those wiser Guides
Whom Faction had not drawn to study sides.31
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With typical evasiveness, Jonson’s self-fashioning in this moment is at once modest and thrasonical. His “Gleanings in Divinity” are confessedly “humble,” and yet, rejecting

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polemical authors who “study sides,” he learnt to follow “wiser Guides” not constricted by the narrower scope of factional writing. The association with “wiser Guides” simultaneously bolsters Jonson’s own credentials as a reader of theological works and offers a condemnatory judgement on the partisan texts from which he wishes to be disassociated. No comparable autobiographical evidence of Shakespeare’s reading survives, but the fact that his works are so supportive of numerous, and often conflicting, critical explorations of religion is its own testament to an aggregated knowledge.

There is ambivalence in Shakespeare’s attitudes towards polemic, discerned through the plays. Where the knowledge of Harsnett deployed in Lear suggests at least a fascination with its language, King John appears deliberately to turn away from its structures. It is perhaps significant, then, that Henry VIII and King John share important features. Both lying outside the historical continuity of the two tetralogies, the two plays have often been grouped together in volumes of criticism. Indeed, their critical proximity extends beyond their anomalous historical subjects. As we have seen in the first chapter, King John provoked critical disapprobation for its aesthetic deficiencies, and Henry VIII has elicited similar remarks for its presumed lack of thematic unity. The important eighteenth-century neo-classical critic Charlotte Lennox suggested that the downfall of Katherine or Wolsey would have:

    each singly afforded a Subject for Tragedy. Shakespeare, by blending them in the same Piece, has destroyed the Unity of his Fable, divided our Attention between them, and, by adding many other unconnected Incidents all foreign to his Design, has given us an irregular historical Drama instead of a finished Tragedy.33

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Unconnectedness is also a charge levelled in more recent criticism. Alexander Leggatt, for example, presents the play’s action as being always dissipated and dispersed in different directions.34

But modern criticism, used to fragmentation and decentredness, is generally more comfortable when it finds these characteristics in literary works. While the argument has been occasionally presented for a consistency of perspective, critics tend to acknowledge and rehabilitate the play’s discontinuities.35 Echoing Lennox, Ivo Kamps notes the fact that a single personage fails to dominate or grab our attention, but considers this the product of deliberate design: that “Shakespeare and Fletcher give us not a disunified play about history but a play about disunified history.”36 Judith Anderson sees what she calls the play’s “flaws” as “patterned and full of meaning, controlled and deliberate.”37 For Susannah Brietz Monta, a multiplicity of perspective is offered on the Reformation figures it presents; “the play’s interest in competing historical and religious controversies over the proper interpretation of the origins of the English Reformation,” she argues, “suggests its willingness to address Reformation history from a perspective capable of weighing various and conflicting controversial positions.”38

I will later analyse two particular instances in Henry VIII in which we clearly discern this fragmentation of perspective operating in connection with religious truth: the Prologue and the depiction of Wolsey. Resisting the unilateral constitution of truth in polemical

34 Alexander Leggatt, Shakespeare’s Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays (London: Routledge, 1989), 221.
35 Karen Britland, for example, suggests that the play’s various elements “combine to promote a strongly Protestant message” (“Politics, Religion, Geography and Travel: Historical Contexts of the Last Plays,” in The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Last Plays, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 71–90, 86).
representation, such multiplicity is still actively defined against it, a point forcefully made by the Prologue’s fashioning against an earlier chronicle history. It is important, however, first to place this resistance, articulated through fragmentation and multiplicity, within the context of evolving attitudes towards polemic in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean period, attitudes which similarly question polemic’s fitness as a vessel for truth.

I

If, as Jesse Lander argues, religious polemic is marginalised in the altered cultural climate of the Restoration, the manner in which the word “polemic” is coined at the beginning of the seventeenth century is, as we have seen, already symptomatic of a mode of writing in which valuation is in flux. The Enlightenment has been pinpointed as the moment at which Christian ethics becomes separated from Christian doctrine in the public sphere, the latter discarded in favour of the elevation of reason and empirical method. This transformation inevitably pushes religious polemic to the periphery of public intellectual life – a position in which it has more or less remained to the present. In Foucault’s thoughts on the ethics of dialogue, given in an interview shortly before his death, the practice of polemic is dismissed

39 For this argument, see Graeme Smith, A Short History of Secularism (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008). Smith’s argument that Christian ethics if not doctrine remains is strengthened by a recent modification in the position of Jürgen Habermas, to whom an understanding of the evolution of the public sphere is of course indebted (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society [1962], trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989]). Modifying his earlier position in which religion had no role to play in the public sphere, Habermas suggests in a dialogue with Pope Benedict XVI, published in 2006, that:

For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love (qtd. in Michael Hoelzl, “Towards a Thicker Description of Transcendence,” in Discoursing the Post-Secular: Essays on the Habermasian Post-Secular Turn, ed. Péter Losonczi and Aakash Singh [Münster: Lit Verlag., 2010], 153–65,161).
as “a parasitic figure on discussion and an obstacle to the search for the truth.” 40 The polemicist receives wholesale condemnation as a figure who:

proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in search for the truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat (382).

In his vehemence Foucault almost implies that polemic has no impact on the intellectual positions of its participants, which of course would be a mistake. For it is in the process of contestation that positions are defined and solidified. As Brian Cummings has observed in exploring the relationship during the Reformation between language and religious argument: “[i]t is a grievous historical error to see the partisan approaches as pre-existent, waiting to conflict with each other. Theology is not already there before writing, in some numinous world of ideas. Writing envelopes the articulation of doctrine and dispute as it proceeds.” 41 Though Foucault’s position isn’t quite a polemic against polemics, it underlines the post-Enlightenment commonplace that polemic has no place in rigorous intellectual dialogue. Indeed, for Foucault, polemic is fit to be discarded on the rubbish heap of history precisely because of its intellectual sterility:

Has anyone ever seen a new idea come out of a polemic? And how could it be otherwise, given that here the interlocutors are incited not to advance, not to take more and more risks in what they say, but to fall back continually on the rights that they claim, on their legitimacy, which they must defend, and on the affirmation of their innocence? (383)

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41 Cummings, Grammar and Grace, 51.
In its calcification of stolid positions, polemic for Foucault stifles the dynamics of unrestricted intellectual exchange, and thus retards the advancement of knowledge.

Intellectual history has traditionally positioned the period in which Shakespeare wrote as a phase when rational enquiry had yet to emerge from the shadow of polemic. David Hume, for instance, concludes at the end of his section on James I in Volume One of the *History of England* (1755), that “Every science, as well as polite literature, must be considered as being yet in its infancy. Scholastic learning and polemical divinity retarded the growth of all true knowlege [sic].”

In the same *History* that condemns polemical divinity, Hume more famously disparages Shakespeare’s dramatic art as ignorant, irregular and illogical, remarks for which he would incur the disapprobation of Wordsworth among others. It is ironic, then, that the seeming confessional impartiality of *Henry VIII*, its refusal to engage in any obvious way with controversy, has in fact elicited comparisons with Hume himself. W. J. Birch, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, argued that the “play affords curious negative evidence of the anti-religious idiosyncracy [sic] of our author, who chooses to remain neutral in depicting two great religious parties, a course hard to be followed, and only to be expected in David Hume, or the historian Ferney.” In Birch we have the kernel of an argument, not fully developed, that there is something in the play that resists polemical representation and thus might be aligned with the resistance to polemic that manifests itself in Hume’s *History*.

If polemic was ascendant when Shakespeare was writing, the antecedents of its later, wholesale rejection were also present in the period. Like Montaigne, Francis Bacon had

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touched on the futile linguistic prison-house of religious dispute in his essay “Of Religion.”

In a 1609 letter to his friend Toby Matthew, a Catholic convert, he somewhat cryptically calls himself “the miller of Huntingdon, that was wont to pray for peace amongst the willows; for while the winds blew, the wind-mills wrought, and the water-mill was less customed. So I see that controversies of religion must hinder the advancement of sciences.”

The metaphor’s purpose is to construe religious controversy as “wind,” an ostensibly energetic activity that is in fact vacuous, and for Bacon it constituted a waste of intellectual and physical resources and a serious impediment to scientific progress. Literature would also later mark its difference to polemic: perhaps the most famous satire of the ridiculous uses to which language is put in controversy is Swift’s later depiction of the rival religious sects of big-endians and little-endians in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).

Before turning to closer analysis of *Henry VIII*, I would like to consider at some length perhaps the period’s most detailed consideration in English of the problem of religious polemic, a work illustrative of emerging ideas about the value of religious controversy that can cast light on the apprehension of truth in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s play. Written around 1599 but first published in 1605, *A Relation of the State of Religion* (also known by the variant title used in later editions, *Europae Speculum*) has been called “a unique attempt to produce an overview of religious practices and beliefs throughout western Europe.”

Its author Edwin Sandys, a politician, composed the work after his return from a grand tour taking in Geneva, Italy and France, and it broadly argues in favour of the peaceful coexistence of religious groups in Europe. Incidentally, Sandys was also considered responsible for the conversion from Catholicism in the 1590s of Shakespeare’s erstwhile

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patron, Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton.\textsuperscript{48} Despite the book’s inauspicious beginnings – the Court of High Commission ordered its burning in November of that year, perhaps because its tolerant position towards Catholicism was viewed as especially unpalatable in the immediate wake of the Gunpowder Plot\textsuperscript{49} – its popularity and influence is indicated by the number of printed editions: some fourteen over the next eighty years, as well as translations into Italian, French and Dutch. The \textit{Relation} is remarkable for the breadth of its survey – if most space is devoted to the dynamics of Catholicism and Protestantism, Sandys also discusses the Ottoman Empire and Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox teaching. It further constitutes an attempt, uncharacteristic for the period, to analyse religious structures in a rational fashion.

Of critical importance among those religious structures are polemical learning and propaganda, for Sandys’s image of the Catholic Church in particular is that of an organism maintaining itself “by meere witte”:

\begin{quote}
\hspace{1cm} a Monarchie which as it was founded by meere witte, needeth not anie thing but meere witte to mainetaine it, which enricheth it self without labouring, warreth without endangering, rewardeth without spending, using Colledges to a great purpose, as others can fortresses, \& working greater matters, partly by Schollers, partly by swarmes of Friars, than else they could ever doe by great garrisons and armies.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

According to Sandys, the Catholic Church holds an anomalous position in Europe. It appears to defy the logic of other political structures dependent on economic and military mechanisms to underpin and perpetuate their existence, reliant only on the “witte” of its institutions and agents, its “Colledges [. . .] Schollers [and] . . . swarmes of Friars.” Sandys is

\textsuperscript{49} Rabb, “Sandys, Sir Edwin (1561–1629).” \\
\textsuperscript{50} Sir Edwin Sandys, \textit{A Relation of the State of Religion} (London, 1605), C2'-C3'.

writing before the founding of the short-lived Chelsea College, established in the early
seventeenth century for the pursuit of polemical divinity. But he uncannily anticipates the
inauguration of that institution in noting that:

neither yet have they [the Protestants] in any one of all their Dominions, erected
any colledge of more contemplative persons, to confront and oppose against the
Jesuites, but have left this weighty burthen of clering the controversies, of
perfecting the sciences, of answering the adversaries writings . . . either upon
their ordinary Ministers to be performed at times of leisure from their office of
preaching . . . or upon such as in Universities, having some larger scope, shall
willingly and of their owne accord undertake it for sometimes (G4v-H1v).

There is a concurrence with Bacon that religious controversy must be resolved, or “cleared;”
this goal, Sandys suggests, would be best realised by facilitating the conditions for
specialization in the field. A centralised programme would prove an effective and efficient
arrangement for generating polemic, freeing up intellectual resources being randomly
diverted into the enterprise in the form of ministers and academics. The logic of the
argument, however, seems more anchored in pragmatic reaction to a proliferation of Jesuit
polemic than any hope that controversies might thus be cleared.

Sandys’s description of a Catholic educational infrastructure providing the conditions in
which polemic might flourish is coupled with grudging praise for the remarkable extent of the
Catholic textual network: “[t]here is scare any one of these kindes of writings, (save the
translating of the Bible into vulgar language) wherein the Romanists have not already, or are
not likely very shortly, either to equall, or to exceede their adversaries in multitude of
workes” (H4v). It is extraordinary in itself that an early modern anglophone commentary on
religion in Europe foregrounds an aspect of Catholic textual culture that only revisionist
histories in the last decade have begun to emphasize, namely that Counter-Reformation

51 See the discussion in Lander, Inventing Polemic, 201–21.
Catholicism was a culture of print that in many senses exceeded its Protestant counterpart.\(^{52}\) This fact alone argues the need to distinguish between the period represented in *Henry VIII* and the very different religious textual culture of the 1610s through which an understanding of that period is filtered in the dramatic imagination.

If in his analysis of the Catholic church Sandys momentarily, and with uncharacteristic partisanship,\(^{53}\) passes over the role played by “witte” in the maintenance and propagation of Protestant ideology through education, scholarship and polemic, his later endorsement of a Protestant college of polemical divinity underlines the fact that wit is crucial to the consolidation of both Catholic and Protestant positions. Yet in isolating “witte” as the key constituent in the preservation of religious structures, Sandys shifts ground with a more complex examination of the role and nature of polemic itself, an examination seemingly at odds with the confident notion that controversies may be cleared.

Sandys’s analysis of polemic is sensitive to its historical development in the course of the sixteenth century, for he recognizes a distinction between early Reformation polemic and its later manifestations. The *Relation* praises both the use of public disputations by the early Reformers to strengthen and broadcast their cause, and their dexterity in written polemic, through which they gained an advantage, partly on account of their “speedy reply to all contrarie writings . . . that they might overbeare these with the streames of the evidence of Reason” (H4\(^v\)). If there is a clear sense at this stage that controversy might have been profitably resolved, Catholics have caught up, through their adaptability and great industry, and an impasse has been reached in the wars of truth (H4\(^{r\nu}\)). Polemic, an erstwhile more reputable and circumscribed practice in the early Reformation, is now sullied through its


\(^{53}\) Rabb is probably fair to detect a mild anti-Catholic sentiment underlying Sandys's apparent evenhandedness, though it is only at occasional moments such as this one that it moves to the foreground of the *Relation* (*Jacobean Gentleman*, esp. 21-31).
encouragement of underhand textual strategies, exploited to advance partisan truths. Key among these is the practice of unfair representation, achieved through citing an adversary out of context. Sandys argues that this is primarily a Catholic practice, for it is they who “have taken a toile . . . out of infinite huge Volumes . . . to picke out whatsoever (especially severed from the rest) may seeme to be eyther absurdly, or falsely, or fondly, or scandalously, or dishonestly, or passionately, or sluttishly, conceived or written” (I3r). Such disingenuous selectivity has allowed the Reformers to be presented as “possessed with so fantastical, so wilde, so contrarie, so furious, so maledicent, and so slovenly spirits” (I3v–v).

Sandys concedes that such baser controversial strategies are in fact the Catholic imitation of Protestant practices, yet he insists upon a key difference. While the early Reformers’ battle with “publike authority” to some extent excused the strategies they deployed (I3v), there is no comparable justification for the fact that Catholics:

have runne for supply to every particular mans writings, wherin so huge a multitude of authors and works as this age over-rancke therein, and mens fingers ever itching have produced, it had been surely a great miracle, if they had not found matter inough either worthy to be blamed, or easie to be depraved in their enemies writings (I3v).

Curiously, Sandys does not contemplate the possibility that the beliefs of English Catholics might also place them in an antagonistic relation with “publicke authority,” and thus sanction by the same logic their misrepresentation of their opponents by selective citation. Such strategies, ultimately associated more with Catholic writers in the Relation, are condemned as “farre unworthy of an ingenious & noble spirit, which soareth up to the highest and purest paths of verity, disdaining to stand raking in these puddles of obscuritie” (I3v).
Polemic promotes a kind of hyperactive textual criticism that has damaged “studies of learning,” an argument consonant with Bacon’s (and Hume’s) that advancement of the sciences could not be effected until religious controversy had been suppressed.

Yea, this age hath brought out those curst and these accursed wittes, who by culling out the errours and shews of errours, by formalizing the contrarities, misinterpreting the ambiguities, intangling the obscurities, which in the most renowned [sic] Authors for humane wisdome that were ever in the world, their envious and malitiously fine braines could search (imitating him therein, who by his Labours of the very same nature, though with lesse and no ground at all against the sacred Bible, purchased the infamous name of the enemy of Christianitie) have done that hurt unto the studies of learning, which nothing but the utter extinquishing of their unlearned works can expiate (14r).

Equating polemics with Satan himself, Sandys advocates their annihilation: “the utter extinquishing of their unlearned works.” Polemic is especially pernicious in its proximity to – indeed, its semblance of – true learning. For ostensibly forms of intellectual activity are being conducted by these hypertrophic “fine braines,” even though such exhaustive textual practices may be practised only at the expense of a futile waste of resources.

It is clear that Sandys’s analysis thus far is energized by a Protestant bias, even where his commentary on the textual practices of polemicists is remarkable. But he does move towards giving a more even-handed account of polemic in which the conduct of both Catholic and Protestant writers is faulted, and it is with these parts of the Relation that we will close this section.

Both Catholic and Protestant positions impact in undesirable ways on a figure with whom Sandys remains sympathetic, the individual believer and reader. The Relation devotes space to the reproduction of Catholic arguments that “the proofes of the Scripture to be the word of God can be no other at this day than probable,” and that “the chief proofe that we have . . . is
the testimony of the church” (C3v), a position only tenable for those incapable of understanding controversies who need authority to interpret on their behalf. However, it also positions itself against its conception of a Protestant flaw: the “over-curious indevour to chaunge . . . faith into science” (C3v). Polemic finally becomes unfruitful to consume:

what madness were it for any man to tire out his soul, and to waste away his spirits, in tracing out all the thorny paths of the controversies of these daies, wherein to erre is no less easie than dangerous, what through forgery abusing him, through Sophistrie transporting him, and not rather to betake himselfe to the right path of truth, whereunto God and Nature, Reason and Experience doe all give witness (C4v).

Sandys’s work is a remarkable and thorough attempt largely to discredit polemic. And it is also concerned with the unsettling interface between polemic and art. Art, as we saw in Shakespeare’s Sir John, can augment the claims of polemic, but polemic in turn undermines truth by deploying art in the partisan “stories” it tells: “both the Protestants and Papistes seeme generally in the greatest part of their stories, to be both too blame,” Sandys alerts us:

though both not equally, having by their passionate reports much wronged the truth, abused this present age, and prejudiced posteritie: insomuch, that the onely remedie now seeming to remaine, is to read indifferently the stories on both parts, to count them as advocates and to play the Judge between them. But partiallity seemeth to be the chiefe fault of the Protestant, love & dislike sometimes dazeling his eyes, drawing him from an Historiographers into an Orators profession, though some of them have carried themselves therin with commendable sinceritie, even as some also of the other part have discharged themselves nobly. But surely the Priests and Friars which have written in that kinde, have strangely behaved themselves, and disclosed how small reckoning they make of truth in any thing, their devising, their forging, their facing, their peecing, their adding, their paring, having brought, not onely their modesty, but their wits also in question, whether they forget not what it was they undertooke to write, a worke of
storie, or of poetry rather, which Artes though like yet (ought they to know) are
different (K1v).

There is an attempt at balance here, often lacking, as we have seen, in other parts of the
Relation, for Sandys acknowledges a range of distortions effected by polemic on both sides
of the great confessional divide, distortions linked to the arts of rhetoric and poetry,
inappropriate within a textual vessel whose rationale should be the quest the truth.

Yet it is important to note that literary art is associated primarily with Catholic polemic, a
point that Sandys reiterates elsewhere in the Relation. Remarking on personal slurs in
polemic, he goes some way to justifying their inclusion in early Reformation anti-papal
polemic, where private corruption in its leaders indicates corruption in the Church as a whole.
Catholics now replicate this strategy, but with the critical difference that their slurs are the
product of fabrication.

not as the plaine blunt Protestant; who finding all the matters made readie to his
hands, bestowed no other cost, but the collecting and setting it in some order
together; but like a supernaturall Artisan, who in the sublimitie of his refined witt,
disdaines to bring onely meere Art to his worke, unlesse hee make also in some
sort the verie matter it selfe (I2v).

A careful consideration of Sandys’s attitudes in the Relation forms an important component
of this chapter, not only for its contextualising insights into what people could think about
polemic. It argues persuasively that the principal failure of polemic is its ill-suitedness to
conveying truth, and thus illuminates the concept of truth that becomes central in
Shakespeare and Fletcher’s play. And it also spotlights the opportunistic abuse of art in
polemic, holding out the possibility that a responsible art turned against polemic might prove
a more suitable receptacle of truth. And as we shall see, it is as just such a receptacle that
Henry VIII fashions itself. Shakespeare and Fletcher’s own work of poetry echoes the
moderating voice of Sandys in its treatment of “truth.” But to understand how it might do so, we need first to turn to the special connotations of truth that Henry’s legacy held in the Jacobean period.

II

If Henry’s reputation was contested in polemical writing, and if those very forms of writing were coming under attack by the early seventeenth century in works of which Sandys’s stands as the pre-eminent example, the king remained a figure of special significance within the play’s Jacobean context. It is striking that around the time of Shakespeare’s play we find the Stuart monarchy’s Tudor, and, by association, Protestant lineage reinforced in a broadsheet whose occasion seems to have been the marriage in 1613 of James’s daughter Elizabeth to the Protestant Elector of the Palatinate, Frederick (fig. 10).

Critics have speculated about connections between Henry VIII and the celebration of the marriage, which took place on 14 February 1613; tantalisingly, the biblical allusions in the play sometimes reflect the scriptural passages used by sermon-writers who celebrated the marriage in an ecclesiastical setting. Certainly the Protestant marriage alliance was an occasion of popular rejoicing. A play set in the early days of England’s Protestant Reformation, featuring a queen named Anne (the namesake of James’s queen) who gives birth to another Elizabeth for whom a glorious future is prophesised by Cranmer, would seem on one level apt. Yet Henry VIII is not found in the records of performances put on at court as part of the celebrations, and on closer inspection the parallels are less flattering.

54 See, for example, Graham Parry, The Golden Age Restor’d: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603–42 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 100–5.
55 The echo of Genesis 17 and the imagery of the cedar in Cranmer’s prophecy (5.4.50-55) reflect sermons by John King and George Webbe. See Shaheen, Biblical References, 472-494, esp.493-94.
Fig. 10. Anon. *The Royall Line of Kings, Queenes, and Princes, from the Uniting of the Two Royall Houses, Yorke, and Lancaster* ([London, 1613?]).

(Society of Antiquaries, Broadside No. 175).

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Henry’s Anne was to be executed on charges of treason and incest, and her daughter Elizabeth would die childless.

The broadsheet itself is part of what Kevin Sharpe pinpoints as “a growing market in England for engraved portraits of royalty, courtiers, bishops and men of learning, which may have reflected a broader participation in debate about politics,” and it may been intended, like other notable pictorial ballads celebrating the wedding such as James Maxwell’s *An English-royall Pedegree* (1613), primarily for a rural market.

In the iconography of the broadsheet, Henry is constituted as the dominant (even menacing) figure through his positioning in the top centre; indeed, his description in the accompanying verses underlines the magisterial visual placement: “The second, He, at whose majestique sight / All that opposed him did recoil and cease.” More importantly, the verse then proceeds to fashion the broadsheet’s visually proclaimed lineage as, above all, a lineage of religious truth. It is a lineage temporarily interrupted as the country swings back to Catholicism during the reign of Henry’s first daughter Mary: “The Fourth Queen Mary (in this steame \[i.e., stem\] a stain) / To Rome a friend but to the *Truth* a Foe” (my emphasis). But that lineage’s defining characteristic triumphantly returns in the reign of Elizabeth Tudor:

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The Fift Eliza in whose blessed Reign
Not any room was left for Rome to show
A wooden God to kneel to: *Truth* and shee
One septer swayed, with one clear eye did see (my emphasis).
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Polemists compelled, like the broadsheet’s author, to generate lineages of truth and its corollary falsehood through the misappropriation of art, are of course the very figures

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condemned in Sandys’s analysis for “having by their passionate reports much wronged the truth.” The broadsheet illustrates the fact that connections between Henry and truth were current around the time of the play, and *Henry VIII*’s other title, *All Is True*, as we shall soon see, might have even been prompted by such connections.

Drama, with its typical incorporation of variant perspectives and multiple voices, is ostensibly more dialogic in its form than polemic, whose incorporation of opposing voices is primarily for the purposes of refutation. If Mikhail Bakhtin largely rejected drama as a dialogic form, it has also been pointed out that the unified neoclassical model of drama on which his rejection is based is not appropriate for Shakespeare, whose theatre rarely adheres to such a model. As Bernadette Meyler puts it: “The stance of Shakespeare’s villain is frequently fleshed out as fully as his hero’s, and antitheses are not always reconciled at the conclusion of his plays.” These qualifications are important for *Henry VIII*, a play replete with antithetical perspectives often conciliated in surprising, even fantastical, ways. Yet a posture of dialogism often merely enables anti-Catholic drama to reproduce more subtle versions of polemical “truth.”

“In sailing upon . . . contrary seas,” wrote Thomas Dekker in 1607, “you may observe on how direct a line I have steered my course; for of such a scantling are my words set down that neither the one party speaks too much, nor the other, in opposition, too little in their own defence.” These words preface the published text of Dekker’s anti-Catholic drama *The Whore of Babylon*, a piece that proved unpopular in performance and was swiftly repackaged for the print market. In general, his address to the reader attempts to construct the immediacy and greater authorial legitimacy of the printed play text, and the lines quoted above form part of Dekker’s assertion of the author’s primacy – the navigator who has “steered” his own

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“course.” But, paradoxically, they also enact an effacement of the author. Dekker has managed the controversial subject of his religious allegory, he claims, with an even hand, and thus the author as an individual beset with his or her own bias and a specific agenda has curiously vanished. What Dekker would have us believe remains are merely the two parties of his allegorical world, Babylon (Rome) and Fairie land (England), left, in effect, to speak for themselves. The play establishes opposing conceptions of truth at the very outset, as the cardinals call Babylon the “standard bearer” of “Truth” and depict “Truth” in Fairie land as a “widow . . . mourning” (1.1.234; 1.1.237-38). The pretence is one of perfect balance, with the reader deemed capable of unravelling and recognizing “truth” from among opposing claimants without the aid of authorial intervention. This posturing connects Dekker with the feigned dialogism of much Catholic-Protestant controversial writing in which dialogic modes were used to present both sides of a religious argument with ostensible impartiality. More importantly, the preface illuminates our understanding of the perceived relation between truth in controversial discourse and the dramatic text. In Dekker’s play truth is generated through the reader’s interaction with the text. The author merely facilitates the discovery of that truth in the extent to which the Catholic and Protestant elements of the allegory are presented with an even hand.

III

Whereas Dekker provides a model of polemical drama masquerading as truth, Shakespeare and Fletcher present a drama of multiple truth, rejecting the unilateral representation of polemic. The accounts of an early performance of Henry VIII mentioned at the beginning of the chapter not only help to date the play; they also testify that, at least during its initial run at the Globe in 1613, the play was better known as All is True. Indeed, in a move typical of their

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60 See, for instance, the popular dialogues of the Church of England clergyman George Gifford, which ran through several editions in the period: e.g., A Briefe Discourse (London, 1581, 1582, 1598, 1612), Dialogue betweene a Papist and a Protestant (London 1582, 1583, 1599).
efforts to force the playtext’s radical return to its original conditions of production, the Oxford editors reinstate this as the play’s title in the *Collected Works*. If we are persuaded that this was the title used for the play during its original performances – and the uncharacteristically rich contemporary evidence, a more fortunate side-effect of the destruction of the Globe by fire, overwhelmingly suggests that it was – the play stands alone among Shakespeare’s histories for giving no indication in its title of the period of history it covers. It may participate in a more widespread Jacobean fashion for abstruse titling of plays about chronicle history, which includes Rowley’s *When You See Me, You Know Me*, and the two parts of Thomas Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me, You Know No Bodie* (pr. 1605). Yet I suggest it has far greater significance. For the very title *All is True*, in a play dealing in part with early Reformation opposition between Catholics and Protestants, suggests the possibility that the dramatic text bears some correspondence to truth, but rejects the idea that such truth might be partisan, the property of a particular side. Whether intentionally or not, this title for a play dealing with a king central to the concerns of Catholic-Protestant controversy appears, at least on the surface, a satirical repudiation of the versions of historical and religious truth that conflicted in polemic. For if “all is true,” then the very foundation of such polemical writing, the incessant rationale of which is to preserve the truth and combat erroneous beliefs, is undermined. If “all is true” then truth itself ceases to hold any meaning, stripped of any defining reference point with the extermination of its always implied counterpart, falsehood.

The alternative title, suggestive enough on its own, also corresponds in important ways to the content of the play. That “truth” occurs twenty-one times in *Henry VIII*, more than in any other Shakespeare play, is itself an indication of an unusual preoccupation with the word, and it is a preoccupation immediately brought to bear in the Prologue, which demonstrates that the alternative title is no mere faddish innovation:

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61 This count is based on a search of the online *Open Source Shakespeare Concordance*: <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/>, accessed 11 March 2011.
Those that can pity here
May, if they think it well, let fall a tear;
The subject will deserve it. Such as give
Their money out of hope they may believe,
May here find truth, too (5-9).

Acknowledging the drama as a site of economic exchange in which purchase carries with it expectation of fulfilment, the Prologue’s speaker fashions both play and audience as multi-faceted entities, thereby advertising *Henry VIII*’s potential to meet its audience’s pluralized expectations. The equation of truth with hope of belief of course makes a comment about the credibility of the ensuing dramatic spectacle, but the diction here at least intimates that such truth might have religious resonance for a particular type of theatre-goer.

The Prologue then proceeds to make a more curious suggestion: that there is a particular type of theatre-goer which its dramatic vision will be unable to accommodate:

Only they
That come to hear a merry bawdy play,
A noise of targets, or to see a fellow
In a long motley coat guarded with yellow,
Will be deceived. For gentle hearers, know
To rank our chosen truth with such a show
As fool and fight is, beside forfeiting
Our own brains, and the opinion that we bring
To make that only true we now intend,
Will leave us never an understanding friend (13-22 my emphasis).

Performing the work of distinction in distancing itself from other modes of dramatic representation that, as we shall see, constituted another play about Henry VIII, the Prologue describes its own spectacle as a “chosen truth” – a configuration deliberately selected from a range of possibilities. “Chosen truth” expresses a position that religious polemic does not
entertain: that truth is generated through the human agency of groups or individuals and not
the product of divine sanction. In this sense the Prologue demystifies the position in Dekker’s
Whore of Babylon that truth might reside in the text independently from the subjective stance
of its creator. If the play’s self-advertisement as a “chosen truth” at first glance appears to
challenge the alternative title’s promise that All is True, it only does so within the context of
each individual performance. For the players’ “opinion” of the performance is of an
ephemeral exercise in truth-making conscious of its own subjectivity. Their claim is “[t]o
make that only true we now intend.” Although the line’s syntax is admittedly difficult, “only”
and “now” at least clearly restrict the scope and temporality of the performance’s truth, while
the verbs “make” and “intend” once more emphasise the human agent in the construction of
that truth. This modest claim, in contrast to Dekker’s, admits the existence of other truths
beyond the performance, and thus does not preclude the possibility embodied in the title.

But on what grounds does the Prologue exclude an alternative possibility of dramatic
representation, the drama full of “fool and fight” pointedly omitted from its chosen truth? As
critics have long recognised, this remark exorcises the ghost of a specific play. 62 Samuel
Rowley’s When You See Me, You Know Me is also based on events from Henry VIII’s reign
and similarly alludes in its title to concerns over the relationship between fidelity and
dramatic performance. It was probably first performed in 1604 by the great rivals to
Shakespeare’s company, the Admiral’s Men (in 1603 the theatre company, falling under the
patronage of James’s son, became known as Prince Henry’s Men). 63 Significantly, the play
was reprinted in 1613, the year of the first recorded performance of Henry VIII, and the
republished text perhaps signifies a revival of the Rowley play at that time, its subject now

62 See, for example, Irving Ribner, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare (Princeton: Princeton
Geoffrey Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources, 4:438.
63 Andrew Gurr, Shakespeare’s Opposites: The Admiral’s Company 1594–1625 (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2009), 11.
displayed in all his resplendence on the title page (Figure 11). The reprinting and the possibility of a revival by themselves tie the plays closely together as competing commercial artefacts and lend currency to the contrast between them presented in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s Prologue.

But the critics who find Rowley’s play targeted in this way have not explored the two reasons that the Prologue offers for doing so. The more obvious claim is that Rowley’s history is frivolous, a drama of “fool and fight” relying on the antics of a fellow / In a long motley coat guarded with yellow,” Henry’s fool Will Sommers, who is made a central character in the action. As Eckhard Auberlen points out, John Greene’s *Refutation of the Apology for Actors* (1615) attacked history plays in particular for their use of fools who disturb the dramatic schemata.⁶⁴ If Greene’s attack is proof of resistance to the intermixture of clowns and history on the stage, the Prologue promotes itself as a more sophisticated and intellectualised response to history, one that doesn’t risk “forfeiting / Our own brains.”

But there is also a more important difference between the two dramas. Rowley, far more than Shakespeare and Fletcher, strives to make the detail of the conflicting religious positions of the Reformation central to the performance. In fact, the play manages to engage directly with doctrinal controversy as first the young Prince Edward and his tutor Cranmer are shown debating the existence of Purgatory, and later, Henry’s latest queen Catherine Parr holds an ad hoc religious disputation with the play’s conniving Catholic double-act, bishops Bonner and Gardiner. The Prologue’s snipe at the earlier play’s clowns as a symptom of its lack of intelligence does not at first sight seem appropriate. Though Will Sommers clearly generates comedy in *When You See Me, You Know Me*, he also plays a more serious role in subverting the religious positions adopted by the play’s Catholics. Indeed, it is his position as Henry’s

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WHEN YOU SEE ME,
You know me.
Or the famous Chronicle Historie of king
Henrie the Eight, with the birth and vertuous life
of Edward Prince of Wales.
As it was playd by the high and mightie Prince of Wales
his servantes.

By Samuell Rowly, servant
to the Prince.

AT LONDON,
Printed for Nathaniell Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls
Church-yard neare S. Austines gate. 1613.
court fool that licenses him to speak where others including Henry’s own queen, the Lutheran Catherine Parr, risk imprisonment and execution. And Sommers, along with his sidekick Patch, Wolsey’s fool, is instrumental in exposing the Cardinal’s corrupt hoarding of riches in his cellar. The play’s firm anti-Catholicism, in important respects reinforced by its principal fool, also reflects the interests of its printer Nathaniel Butter, whose output around the time of the play reveals a clear penchant for printing anti-Catholic polemic. And thus the second reason offered by the Prologue for the refusal “[t]o rank our chosen truth with such a show,” I suggest, assumes greater importance: the fact that such a show as Rowley’s forfeits “the opinion that we bring / To make that only true we now intend.” With its simplistic propagation of a partisan truth of Reformation history, When You See Me, You Know Me is also at odds with the relative, inclusive notions of truth espoused in Henry VIII. The Prologue thus attacks the ideology underpinning Rowley’s play, its polemised account of chronicle history that makes truth the exclusive property of a particular side, as much as it disparages the mode through which that ideology is generated, the subversive foolery of Will Sommers.

Henry VIII and When You See Me, You Know Me utilise the same sources (Holinshed’s Chronicles and Foxe’s Book of Martyrs) to construct their respective worlds, and Rowley’s play had a more complex influence on Shakespeare and Fletcher than the Prologue’s act of differentiation might suggest. But for an illustration of the key difference in the plays’ treatment of truth, it is illuminating to consider the presentation of the principal villain in each. For the depiction of Cardinal Wolsey – a character who more than any other in either play stands for papal ambition set against the interests of church and state – is markedly different. When You See Me, You Know Me stresses Wolsey’s scheming papal ambitions from

65 Teresa Grant’s essay, “History in the Making: The Case of Samuel Rowley’s When You See Me You Know Me (1604/5),” in English Historical Drama, 1500–1660: Forms outside the Canon, ed. Teresa Grant and Barbara Ravelhofer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 125–57, notes that Butter’s “publications between 1603 and 1606 show a fascination with anti-Catholic propaganda” (143).
the very start, declaring that “Woolsies head may weare the tripall crowne” (28), and this image of the cardinal is not countered as the action unfolds. The motivation of Rowley's Wolsey is uncomplicated from the opening scenes as an early aside to the audience reveals his thirst for temporal power and an everlasting legacy.

Shakespeare and Fletcher’s Wolsey is in many respects a similar figure in the first half of the play. Opponents typically warn others of his trickery, clothing his character with the tropes of polemic. For Buckingham, whose downfall is swiftly engineered by the Cardinal in the first act, he is a “holy fox / Or wolf, or both — for he is equal rav’nous / As he is subtle” (1.1.158–160). That image extends to encompass a malignant power of seductiveness as the Lord Chamberlain warns a group of assembled nobles “never [to] attempt / Anything on him, for he hath a witchcraft / Over the King in’s tongue” (3.2.17–19).

But, consonant with the inclusive polyphonic vision of the alternative title and the Prologue, Shakespeare and Fletcher ensure that even here “truth” is not straightforward. Nicholas Rowe long ago pointed to the appreciation of both Wolsey’s vices and his virtues in the play, suggesting that “nothing was ever more justly written.” Wolsey is suspected by Queen Katherine of machination in her removal from the Henrician court, and the contempt she reserves for him upon learning of his downfall and death is unsurprising. But remarkably her oration of Wolsey as “a man / Of an unbounded stomach . . . ever double / Both in his words and meaning” is immediately corrected by her gentleman usher Griffith (4.2.34–39), who instead embarks upon a long paean to the cardinal’s good qualities:

This Cardinal,
Though from humble stock, undoubtedly

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68 On witchcraft in polemic, see Waters, “Mistress-Missa.”
Was fashioned to much honour. From his cradle
He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one,
Exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading;
Lofty and sour to them that loved him not,
But to those men that sought him, sweet as summer.
And though he were unsatisfied in getting –
Which was a sin – yet in bestowing, madam,
He was most princely: ever witness for him
Those twins of learning that he raised in you,
Ipswich and Oxford – one of which fell with him,
Unwilling to outlive the good that did it;
The other, though unfinished, yet so famous,
So excellent in art, and still so rising,
That Christendom shall ever speak his virtue.
His overthrow heaped happiness upon him,
For then, and not till then, he felt himself,
And found the blessèdness of being little.
And to add greater honours to his age
Than man could give him, he died fearing God (4.2.48–68).

As Annabel Patterson has shown, the text at this point closely corresponds with Holinshed’s multi-voiced *Chronicles*, which is in fact the source for both negative and more favourable representations of Wolsey. The sympathetic account with which Griffiths counteracts Katherine’s speech – even equating Wolsey with godliness in the suggestion “[t]hat Christendom shall ever speak his virtue” and “he died fearing God” – originates in the Jesuit Edmund Campion’s *History of Ireland* (1571), a version reproduced, nigh on word for word in the *Chronicles*.70 Whether Shakespeare, to whom this scene is usually attributed in the division of authorship, turned directly to Campion or just to the version of Campion mediated through Holinshed is impossible to prove, though the latter scenario is more plausible. At any

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rate, it is not so much how Shakespeare encountered the alternative perspective on Wolsey that we need to weigh, but rather his decision to include it at all, deliberately emphasising a contradictory feature of the multi-authored source material in Holinshed that Rowley’s partisan univocality effaced.

Katherine’s response to Griffith is equally, if not more, remarkable. Having considered Wolsey in the previous moment an enemy and figure of loathing, she instantly assimilates the “truth” of Griffith’s paean and replies:

After my death I wish no other herald,
No other speaker of my living actions
To keep mine honour from corruption
But such an honest chronicler as Griffith.
Whom I most hated living, thou hast made me,
With thy religious truth and modesty,
Now in his ashes honour (4.2.69–75, my emphasis).

There is an unreal quality to this moment that anticipates the Queen’s dream vision which almost immediately follows (4.2.82). It is effectively a fantasy in which opposing truths are reconciled and polemical representation repudiated, partaking in what Judith Anderson describes as the “[d]isjunctive truths and ambivalent moral attitudes” that the play “studies, perhaps too truly” (130). For Griffith’s corrective and Katherine’s astonishing volte-face are the most compelling manifestation of the play’s attitude to truth, affording insights into how polemic shapes drama even in that drama’s refusal to be shaped. We typically read the influence of polemic on drama in terms of overt signs: a play’s active engagement with specific controversial themes and a pronounced confessional bias in its outlook. Such a reading affirms When You See Me, You Know Me and The Whore of Babylon as anti-Catholic even as it presents greater problems with Shakespeare, whose writing is not usually marked in such consistent and obvious ways. But we ought not to forget that influence may operate
negatively as well as positively. It is equally important to attend to the dramatic moment shaped by a dismissal of polemic. It is here that the rejection of partial truth in the alternative title and the Prologue finds its fullest expression: in the fantasy of the “honest chronicler[’s]” many-voiced text in which “religious truth” can reside. It is only here, in the self-reflexive “chosen truth” of fleeting performance, that polemic’s immodest and erroneous claims to “truth” can be magically dispelled.
Conclusion

There are reasons why Shakespeare might not be positioned in a contemporaneous world of Catholic-Protestant polemic. Beyond the extremities of Carlyle’s or Bloom’s construction of the transcendental Shakespeare lies the indisputable fact that the plays were – and still are for most theatre-goers – primarily forms of commercial entertainment and not controversial tracts. By way of contrast, religious polemic in the period is only incidentally a commercial activity. If its proliferation certainly indicates the existence of an interested readership that generated for printers a commercially viable enterprise, polemic prefers to deal in the divine currency of partisan truths as it seeks simultaneously to bolster and nullify competing sets of claims. Polemic of course lives on today, though besmirched, as an argumentative mode, yet it has vanished as a religious practice that flooded the print market, often receiving political sanction and helping to forge and sustain large communities. In the process of diachronic accretion through which meaning is constantly attached to Shakespeare’s works, each age has a propensity to reinvent Shakespeare in its own image. With religious polemic no longer central to that image, it is less readily attached to Shakespeare.

If the legacy of the plays is so malleable, this is because of myriad gaps in the texts and the biography that foreclose certainty through accommodating interpretive plurality. In the first formalised biography of Shakespeare, Nicholas Rowe fills out the scant evidence by plugging some of those biographical gaps, telling colourful, if surely apocryphal, stories of Shakespeare’s youth.¹ To be sure, Rowe’s Shakespeare is partly a precursor of the Romantic untutored genius, forging formidable art through “the natural Bent of his own Great Genius”

(III). But he is also flesh and blood, a figure accorded motivations and desires where few exist in the records. One such instance of Rowe’s licence is the tale accounting for Shakespeare’s arrival in London. Prosecuted “somewhat too severely” as a youth for deer-stealing, Shakespeare enacts revenge for his “ill Usage” by penning a ballad against the gentleman in question. The ballad itself was “so very bitter” that the prosecution gets renewed, forcing Shakespeare to flee Warwickshire and “shelter himself in London.” Rowe holds the bitter ballad to be “probably the first Essay of his Poetry” (V). Though the tale is not verifiable, it still fascinates as an etiological myth. For Rowe’s biography is in an important way also a reading of Shakespeare’s writing, one that supplies spurious information to cohere with an attitude to Shakespeare gleaned from the literary texts. It is remarkable, then, that Rowe would present Shakespeare’s first lost artwork as a piece in which polemical impulse and poetic endeavour meet, and it implies his reading of persistent marks of antagonism in the plays. It may even illuminate the workings of “Shakespeare’s effectiveness,” which Walter Ong, SJ, in an argument about the conceptual persistence of orality in emerging written cultures, considered “highly polemic, not ‘objective’ or scientific.”

The cultural centrality of Catholic-Protestant polemic as a key constituent of the “scribbling age” in which Shakespeare created, ensured a complex, though not uniform, impact on his drama. If King John broached polemical themes while subtly attempting to reconfigure their structures, I Henry IV’s portrait of the Protestant martyr Oldcastle allowed art to become implicated in polemic through the connections supplied by consumers of both. Where Hamlet registers a fin de siècle crisis of authority in which the polemical marginalia of religious texts no longer anchor the individual in interpretive certainties, Henry VIII more confidently detaches itself from the pursuit of partisan concerns, even as that position of

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detachment requires polemical representation as a reference point for its own self-definition.
The trajectory of Shakespeare’s theatrical art I have explored in outline here ultimately moves from a position of experimental diffidence and uncertain intellectual exploration to greater assuredness in its self-definition against polemic. More attention to the contours of that movement would surely repay further insights into the mental habits of Shakespeare the reader and writer, bound in the antagonistic textual culture from which his works emerged.
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