

Shakespeare and the Reformation

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In his last book, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (2007), A.D. Nuttall, a former British Academy Shakespeare Lecturer, and one of the founding luminaries of English at Sussex, said that Shakespeare ‘writes as if the Reformation hasn’t even happened’. It is, I think, a very puzzling remark. For a playwright and poet famed for his intellectual empathy not to notice the major event of his century would be like Wordsworth missing the French Revolution or Beckett the Second World War. However, I think it is also a remark that tells us a lot about the history of Shakespeare studies, and about the development of literature as an academic discipline in the last century. So whereas one of my aims is to reveal, after all, a powerful response to the Reformation in Shakespeare’s writing, I will also try to explain something about the uneasy relationship between religion and literature in the discipline of English, such that it was, I think, true for a long time that *literary history* (rather than Shakespeare) wrote ‘as if the Reformation hadn’t happened’. One reason for this, I will show, is we have often been looking for the wrong concept of religion; another, that we have had in mind, in the process, too narrow a sense of literary response and theatrical effect.

Nuttall’s approach can be summed up by his rhetorical question: ‘Where is the Calvinism in Shakespeare?’, followed by its antithesis, where is ‘missionary Catholicism’? Nuttall looks for, and fails to find, authorial statements of position. The first point to make here is that we lack with Shakespeare any archival evidence of any kind with respect to any position he might have taken on anything, whether smallpox or taxation or the Northern rebellion or tobacco or the Queen’s virginity. Notoriously, the documentary life of Shakespeare consists of baptismal records, mortgages for property and corn, and one court trial in which he is a minor witness in a marriage dispute. Although this last case has produced a book-length study (rather a good one), there is nothing special about the lacuna: Elizabethan men, as anyone who has written for the *Dictionary of National Biography* knows, only flag up their existence when they enter university or serve in government or the church or upset someone enough to get sued. The problem with Shakespeare’s life is not what little survives as that we have looked too hard, so that we have found more than we have any right to, and attach too much significance to what little we have.

Even worse, Shakespeare was a playwright, and so while a prolific writer, the only remains in the first-person are sonnets. I hope nobody here has to suffer the injustice, like poor WS, of having her biography (and sexual orientation) presumed on the basis of her surviving love poems; it is worse than phone hacking. Yet when we look for first-hand opinions in first-person surviving letters, are we looking for the right thing? James Shapiro has recently produced a characteristically sharp analysis of this problem in *Contested Will*. This book has been commonly misunderstood. It is in part, of course, a witty and surprisingly sympathetic run through the various phantom authors of the works from Francis Bacon to Edward de Vere to Captain Picard or Darth Vader. But its deeper thesis is that the life of

Shakespeare, conceptually speaking, began around 200 years after his death. Shakespeare in his own day, as Brian Vickers has shown in detail, was a writer's writer, and co-authored in a world galaxies apart from Nobel or Booker prizes. Even in Nicholas Rowe's *Life* of 1709, a writer's bio is little more than pleasant anecdote, an extended Fuller's *Worthies*. It is only with Edmond Malone, Shapiro argues, that Shakespeare begins to be explained via an authorial motivation. Henceforth, the documentary life produced two parallel monsters: the Bard and the Anti-Bard, Stratford and Oxford. Appetite for literary biography is insatiable, eating up everything before it, most of all the plaintive pleas of every great writer of the last hundred years that biography, however enthralling, tells us nothing terribly important about writing.

That is a polemic for another lecture. What interests me here is that the recent phenomenon of 'Catholic Shakespeare' had as much to do with biography as with religion. Despite some claims, he is not a new figure, but has been around for 150 years; indeed standard popular lives written in the 1950s and 1960s, by F.E. Halliday or A.L. Rowse, suppose that Shakespeare's family was Catholic in sympathy. This is a pretty good guess even without evidence: *most* families in the 1560s in England were residually Catholic. The godly were exceptional, as they themselves kept saying. The question unanswered is whether the religion of John Shakespeare helps us understand the religion of William. While we will probably never have definitive answer to this, let's consider briefly two other children of the 1560s: Robert Southwell was grandson of Sir Richard Southwell, of Norfolk, one of Henry VIII's fiercest loyalists, and a zealous dissolver of monasteries; but Robert became a Jesuit missionary. Samuel Harsnett, of Essex, was the child of hot gospellers, but by his thirties was writing anti-Calvinist sermons, and he was later accused of Catholic tendencies.

All of us in this room may feel ambivalence about the faith of our fathers to one degree or another. The Christian churches, like other religions, make affective appeal to family ties in lashing down affiliation from generation to generation, and heresy and apostasy are commonly linked to a blood metaphor. Southwell in his *Epistle to his Father* calls belief 'hereditary', although in this case he appears to be attempting to push his lineage backwards, to get his parent's piety flowing again. The sixteenth century is full of bad blood, of prodigal sons or familial divorce. 'Catholic Shakespeare' smooths this over, while at the same time treating religious affiliation as a form of pure agency.

Literary history compounds this problem by making an either/or between religious belief and scepticism. Shakespearean criticism has created a cocoon of scepticism around Shakespeare himself, partly based on the absence of firm biographical evidence, but more on an ideological and deep-rooted bias in twentieth-century English as a discipline. Let us take the example of Nuttall again, this time in his Academy Lecture of 1988. Nuttall proclaims that the play requires a new philosophical language. He rejects William Empson's word 'atheism', but concludes: 'What is rather needed for *Hamlet* is, I would suggest, agnosticism'.

There are two obvious problems here, I feel. One is conjuring into being for Shakespeare alone a philosophical exceptionalism, so that he has beliefs (and even a language for them) possessed by no one else in his century. The other is the desire to transpose belief into a credal system, so that Shakespeare (or Hamlet) can be taken as expressing things as a result of a set of motivated statements equivalent to 'I believe in...' (or in this case, 'I *disbelieve*...'). This has reared its head again in the search for the Testament of John (or we hope, William) Shakespeare with headings taken from a Catholic catechism. This takes away

from us responsibility to work out the more intractable question of what it means to believe something in the first place. This is all the more true of the sixteenth century, when religion is everywhere taken for granted; when religious ideas were in a state of constant flux; and when public confessions of faith were prone to examination at the point of death.

Since Nuttall, Stephen Greenblatt has transformed the way we think about *Hamlet* by placing the play at the axis of confessional questions, summarized by his remark that the play shows how ‘a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost’. The play, Greenblatt argues, is caught between a corporeal Catholic culture of death and a Protestant belief in the immanence of spirit; the play expresses a disgust towards a materially endowed physicality and yet simultaneously longs for it, hence the impossible appearance of the ghost as both ethereally spectral and clumsily, shamblingly, real.

Greenblatt’s book, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, is usually given a central place in what has been termed ‘the religious turn in early modern literary studies’. However, I think it has much more in common with Nuttall’s argument than we might think. For Greenblatt sets up a radical dichotomy between purgatory and its subsequent decline. From the fullness of medieval material experience we pass into the Protestant sphere of the spiritual, the doctrinal, the symbolic. Into this realm of emotional loss, the theatre steps. The space of the stage substitutes for the space of Purgatory. This is a historical scenario Greenblatt has repeated over and over again. Shakespeare’s theatre is the desacralized shell of dramatic illusion left over once a kernel of belief is removed. The Elizabethan theatre is the church deconsecrated. This can be summed up by a phrase he uses in relation to *King Lear*: ‘performance kills belief’. *King Lear* is haunted by a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been *emptied out*, he says. He characterizes this as a ‘drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular’ (p.126).

Secularity is as much the key to Greenblatt’s framework for Shakespeare inside the Reformation as it is for Nuttall’s outside it. This was not always so. John Dennis, in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), declared ‘That the Intention of Poetry, and the Christian Religion, being alike to move the Affections, they may very well be made instrumental to the Advancing each other’. In this sense, the writing of poetry is linked to religion: ‘the Ancient Poets had that actual Pre-eminence, but that they deriv’d it from joining their Religion with their Poetry’. A century later, Samuel Taylor Coleridge ebulliently pursued a similar vein. In his course of lectures on the principles of poetry, illustrated via Shakespeare and Milton, at the London Philosophical Society in Fleet Street beginning on 18 November 1811, he stated that ‘religion... is the poetry of mankind’. Religion has this effect, he expanded in Lecture VIII, because of its ability ‘To generalize our notions’. This is the direct opposite of the modern cliché that religion narrows the point of view of the writer. Coleridge declared the contrary, that ‘both poetry and religion throw the object of deepest interest to a distance from us’.

The change in view can be dated with some precision. In his lectures on Shakespearean Tragedy as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1904, A.C. Bradley concluded that the origins of tragic thinking in Shakespeare could not be explained via religion:

The Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular; and while Shakespeare was writing he practically confined his view to the world of non-theological observation and

thought, so that he represents it substantially in one and the same way whether the period of the story is pre-Christian or Christian

‘The Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular’: these are prophetic words. Bradley himself was not part of any anti-religious movement. Indeed three years later in 1907-8 he gave the Gifford Lectures in Glasgow on the topic of ‘Ideals of Religion’. However, it was part of his religious idealism to distinguish firmly in a philosophical sense – thus contradicting Coleridge completely – between poetry and religion. Poetry is part of his explanation of what he calls ‘the inadequacy of natural religion’. The religious is a transcendent world which is separate from the natural and fictive language of poetry.

It therefore seems proper to Bradley to say that Elizabethan tragedy works precisely by means of a secularized world-view. In this way his argument can be assimilated with what has come to be known as ‘the secularization thesis’. This thesis attempts to describe, as part of a historical and universal process, how society and culture have become dislocated from religious institutions, ideas, and symbols. It is one of the ‘big ideas’ of the twentieth century, and one of its main motivations has been to demonstrate how the twentieth century is different: secularization explains what modernity is, and at the same time produces a sense that modernity is historically determined and even inevitable. There are profound methodologies at work here. Secularization is coterminous with the origins of the social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; wherever we look, whether in Max Weber or Emile Durkheim in the development of sociology, or Marcel Mauss or Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, we find secularization in the centre. To take one example, Weber defined the modern condition by means of Friedrich Schiller’s pregnant word *Entzauberung* or ‘disenchantment’: ‘The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”.’

Weber’s concept of ‘disenchantment’ has had a very wide and influential currency. This legacy to the interpretation of cultural history could be summarized in the following way. In a modernized, secularized society, such as now dominates in the West, scientific knowledge is valued more highly than religious belief, and rationalism dominates over mysticism in determining social processes and decisions. Weber saw the two as hand in hand: as sacred gives way to secular, so the prophetic cedes to the personal, the intimate. Placing man at the centre of the universe, the cliché goes, involved dethroning God.

While not explicit, this argument was intrinsic to the study of Shakespeare in the twentieth century in two ways. One is that the Renaissance as a concept was formulated in strict harmony with the theory of secularization, and emerged at the same time. Jakob Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* saw the throwing off of the domination of religion as causing ‘The Discovery of the World and of Man’. While Italian art was the centre of his attention, he attributed the uniqueness of Shakespeare to the same spirit: indeed he was only able to arise at the time he did, after the Reformation dismantled the authority of the church. This is essential to Burckhardt’s idea of the work of art: it is autonomous, self-referring, and therefore universal. After Burckhardt, Shakespeare became one of the icons of this way of explaining cultural history: his secularity became a key to his identity and his importance, since it simultaneously explained the route map to modernity.

In a wider sense, we could see secularity as a foundation stone in the discipline of English. As English literature took over the mantle from classics or theology in the new

humanities, secular humanism was central to its self-exposition as *the* modernist university discipline. Literature was held to be a fundamentally secular form, and its emergence was explained in terms of the transition from a religious culture. ‘Secularism is conceived to be the inaugural moment of literature’s formation, a defining aspect of its identity’, Gauri Viswanathan has recently written in a strong critique of this vogue. Key moments in literary history, she says, have been skewed to fit this vision: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and modernism. The theory finds its apex in the idea of the work of art as something that takes over the function of religious worship and cultic ritual in society. Art replaces religion in culture as science does in the march of logic and ideas. Matthew Arnold, like Bradley a formative philosophical influence in the mid-century academic English department, gave seminal voice to this: ‘Religion says: *The kingdom of God is within you*; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper’. Shakespeare was its ideal author: the human within.

Secularization as an idea is now everywhere on the wane; sociologists talk instead of ‘desecularization’. The world is not as secular as we thought. I will leave this aside; I want to analyse instead how we are to think about Shakespeare without secularization. When many theorists of the modern have abandoned the secular as an explanation for modernity, it hardly makes sense to think of Shakespeare as a secular apostle. Yet this is, I think, still the drive behind Greenblatt’s wonderful evocation of *Hamlet*. Greenblatt’s work is profoundly touched by the idea of *disenchantment* at every turn; Shakespeare for him is the ultimate disenchanted author, and the theatre its modernist space. Disenchantment is, as I have explained, the key principle of secularization. To a large degree, then, I feel the so-called religious turn in literary study has repeated the idea of disenchantment over and again, and thus, ironically, all the talk of religion has been a new version of secularization.

I have to say that although my work is associated with the study of religion in early modern literature I feel very much out of sympathy with the concept of religion that is often purveyed within my discipline. I will explain this by means of a paradox. The secular is a concept that has been developed in modern times to define a rigid boundary with the religious. In re-imagining the religious in a self-consciously ‘secular age’, we have come to think of it as whatever is left outside of the realm of secularity: religion, if you like, is the ‘non-secular’. Both concepts come to us overdetermined by this relationship.

My own argument is that we need to redraw the relationship between sacred and secular so as to see how the boundary between them is always under negotiation. At the time of the Reformation that negotiation is especially stressful, burdened, and anxious, and the boundary unusually fissiparous. We may feel the same is true in our own time. Rather than ritual giving way to representation, the implicature of the body in performance and of language in figuration are both undergoing acute forms of uncertainty. Thus rather than seeing religion as the theatre’s other, or else as its return of the repressed, we could see theatre as part of the same cultural nexus. This is as true of the theatre of Catholic Spain and of the Calvinist northern Netherlands as it is of England.

Where are the boundaries between ritual and representation in Hamlet’s words to his dead father:

I will speak to thee. I’ll call thee Hamlet,
King, father, royal Dane. O answer me.

Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
 Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,
 Have burst their cerements, why the sepulchre
 Wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd
 Hath op'd his ponderous and marble jaws
 To cast thee up again. What may this mean,
 That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel
 Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,
 Making night hideous and we fools of nature
 So horridly to shake our disposition
 With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (1.5.44-56)

Hardly a word here is not in a limbo between literal and figurative. However tempting it is to align such a vocabulary as 'canoniz'd' or 'hearsed' with a Catholic theology, young Hamlet is playing along a border between body and spirit throughout. Indeed his theology is heavy-handed, pushing every possible connection between the body and its sanctification. Figures border on tautology – death itself is 'hearsed' – or else catechresis, as the bones escape their own funeral garments. The verbs especially seem to be doing more work than they can cope with, as the figures break out of mortal entrapment and find a life of their own. Particularly felicitous are 'inurn'd' and 'op'd', as the figure of open graves redoubles back on itself: is the opening of the grave a figure for the ghost roaming the world, or the other way round?

What is so brilliant about the discovery of the ghost in the context of an argument about the Christian afterlife is that it appears to be the proof of the very thing that it cannot be used as evidence of. The very appearance of the ghost tests the audience's credulity: not in Nuttall's rather simplified sense of 'agnosticism', but in its ability to trust either its own senses or the fictional reality in front of it. We do not know whether we are to take anything literally here. But the most shocking moment is not the physical appearance alone, but the moment of liminal transgression when the living enters into conversation with the dead.

Greenblatt has emphasized the controversial nature of the theology around purgatory but I want in this context to concentrate on another feature, the sense of ritual engagement and performance. Talking to the dead was one of the most sensitive issues of the Reformation. One of the earliest sets of proposals of the English Reformation, promulgated by Thomas Cromwell in 1534, argued that 'the prayers of men that be here living can in no wise be profitable for the souls of them that be dead'. In the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, though, at the vital moment of the committal of the body to the earth, the priest still addressed the corpse, 'I commend thy soule to God the father almighty'. In 1552 and the subsequent version of 1559 known to Shakespeare's contemporaries in the Globe, these words were removed. Praying for the dead, as if person to person, remained a taboo in England right up to the First World War, when the natural desire of families to converse with their dead sons caused consternation and was debated in parliament. So when Hamlet addresses his father, one body to another, 'dead corse', he is walking on a tightrope.

Nonetheless I feel it is reductive to identify the confessional force of the moment in terms of Catholic versus Protestant. The conversation between priest, and human mortal remains, took place at a very specific space and moment in Catholic obloquies. Talking with a ghost is a quite different proposition; Catholic theology did not believe in ghosts. The ghost

has an imaginary obliquity which takes us outside of confessional politics. At the same time the scene is brilliantly alive with tensions in sixteenth-century ritual life. The scene offers both gesture and speech which bring the living and the dead into a contact which is both a given of religious belief and at the same time its deepest mystery.

Contrary to stereotype, English reformed burial practice is not an elimination of either mystery or ritual. But it is a site of uncertainty. Textually, the *Book of Common Prayer* had removed many familiar rituals: the processional element was cut; the Office of the Dead was eliminated; there was no Mass; and no prayers at the graveside. Yet the ceremony that remained went well beyond the Puritan desire for a bare removal of the corpse to the earth. And burial practice went a good way beyond the bare text of the Order for the Burial of the Dead. There is no mention in the prayer book of bells; but we know from surviving inventories that new church bells were being cast; and we know from their inscriptions that the 'passing' bell and the 'death knell' were still familiar parts of the soundscape of daily experience. In surviving accounts of Elizabethan funerals, processions certainly took place. In the funeral of Sir Philip Sidney, of which an engraving survives, banners are carried by members of the family and a white pall covers the coffin; his friends hold the four corners; all the mourners are dressed in cowls with hoods. Later in *Hamlet*, when Ophelia is buried, we see such a procession taking place. Commentators sometimes assume it must be a Catholic procession, and point out the play is set in medieval Denmark. But this again is to make too fast a distinction. When Gertrude throws flowers and herbs on the coffin, she was doing what many English people still did at funerals in country churches.

This is sometimes called an example of residual traditionalism or Catholic survivalism. Some call it a case of the re-enchantment of the disenchanted world of Elizabethan Protestantism. But how do we know what is enchanted and what is not? Ritual is not a category which belongs to the religious alone. Indeed, part of the fundamental realignment of social anthropology in recent decades, which has seen the demise of secularization as a valid concept, is a concurrent revaluation of the idea of ritual as a social norm. 'Man is a ceremonial animal', Wittgenstein said, a phrase that is now the title of the standard OUP introduction to anthropology. Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols* of 1970 was a key book in making this reappraisal possible; up to that point, she said, 'ritual' was a dirty word, not just in academic sociology but in society itself: ritual meant behaviour that was conventionalized, unnatural, or fake, as well as tinged with a despised religious aura.

In what remains of this lecture, I want to suggest three principles by which we could recompose our sense of what is at stake in thinking about religion in relation to Shakespeare's theatre, and at the same time suggest a new way of understanding the impact of the Reformation on his writing. The first principle is that the boundaries between bodily ritual and figurative representation are never clear-cut. The second is that there is no absolute divide between ritual in religion and ritual in everyday life. And the third is that there is no fourth wall between ritual in life and ritual in the theatre.

Rather than see the relation between religion and secularity, or between ritual and representation, as a temporal shift, we could see the two as in balance (and sometimes contradiction) in almost any society. Douglas shows how a process of internalization in relation to ritual, in which values of sincerity and authenticity are preferred over a passive acceptance of the social structure, occurs in so-called 'primitive' social contexts; just as a revival of ritual can take place in modern London. It is a fallacy, she says, to think 'all

primitives are pious, credulous and subject to the teaching of priests or magicians', just as it is a fallacy not to see such things in our own culture. Scepticism, materialism and outbreaks of spiritual fervour come and go all the time. Anti-ritualism is not a modern invention or an early modern one. What is fascinating about the Reformation is not the passage from one worldview to another but the juxtaposition of contrary impulses in ways that set them in intensely clarifying relief. In Shakespeare, I contend, we find not an either/ or of ritual traditionalism and representational individualism, but a doubling and intergrafting of both.

I want to give just a few examples of controversial ritual in action in Shakespeare to show what I mean. Rather than the Reformation in words, as an argument about doctrinal difference, I want to think about it as a place of conflict over gesture and of the human system of bodily symbols that gesture infers. At the same time, I want to delve beneath the words of Shakespeare, where as commentators we spend so much of our time, to examine that world of gesture in his theatre, which when we are watching in the theatre, affects us as much as the language on the surface: a space of interaction, and intersubjectivity, where communication takes place, just as profoundly as in the sentences the actors speak. Writing at the same time as Mary Douglas, Peter Brook, the great theatre director, said in *The Empty Space* that 'the theatre had in its origins rituals that made the invisible incarnate'. But he also feared that the theatre today was struggling to find new ceremony that would live up to the old: 'today as at all times', he said, 'we need to stage true rituals'. This feeling of failure in theatrical ritual is not new, I would insist: it was felt by Euripides, in contrast to the blood rituals of Aeschylus. It was surely felt by Shakespeare. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the final scene plays out on an exchange of rings that is deeply embedded in the struggles of the post-Reformation wedding rite. The original story in the *Decameron* turns on the possession of a ring, but what in Boccaccio is a simple love token, becomes in Shakespeare a complex visual fetish. One ring has become two, as Bertram's ring, that he has given to Diana, is transferred to Helena, and Helena's, in turn, which she acquired in sacred trust from the King, is discovered on Bertram. The action of giving a ring is turned into a potential betrayal, now transformed on stage into the plighting of a troth. As with every action in this play, the relationship between word and deed is acutely in question. Can a ring really make right the failures of trust and humiliation to which Bertram has exposed Helena; can her faithfulness and constancy be redeemed by such a trinket? The rings are tested in a series of physical proofs, and in the process the word 'ring' is used over twenty times in the one scene.

Brook's query of what constitutes a 'true ritual' is a very sixteenth-century one. Wedding rings, as I am sure we all know, were much distrusted by Puritans, who thought they were redolent of Popish magic. From the millenary petition of 1603 up to the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1662, there was a campaign to eliminate them from the English marriage service. But we should not take the ring therefore as coterminous with Catholic nostalgia. In fact the Reformed vernacular service placed more emphasis on rings than the original Catholic sacrament of *sponsalia*, where the central moment was not an exchange of rings but the joining of hands. Puritans, on the other hand, did not abandon ritual either: in the Genevan forms of service from the 1560s up to the Civil War *Directory* of 1645, the couple take each other, in a significant rite of gesture, 'by the right hand'. Marriage rings, meanwhile, in the official church of England, were endowed with new significance, most of all in an elaborate verbal symbolism which was often inscribed by metal workers in the inside

of the ring; Thomas Whythorne chose this (very Shakespearean) sentiment: ‘The eye doth find, the heart doth choose, and love doth bind till death doth loose.’

The Protestant service exposes the ritual to a form of internalization which tests it against criteria of authenticity and sincerity for which the bare sign itself was formerly sufficient. Yet this does not make Protestantism shy of ritual. It makes it instead all the more self-conscious about bodily meaning. In this process, both the objects used in ritual and the actions associated with them could subtly metamorphose. In 1549, the *ephphatha*, or rubbing of spittle onto the ears and lips in baptism was dropped, but anointing with oil was retained; in 1552 anointing was ruled out, but signing the forehead with the cross was kept. The cross was a source of tortuous discussion among Puritans over the next century. A proposal was made to remove it in 1563 and lost by only one vote. The presbyterian Laurence Chaderton in a memorandum now in Lambeth Palace Library spent an elaborate page justifying the physical sign as doctrinally symbolic, but also fretted that ‘to make signes or representations of spirituall thinges pertains only to god’. In the 1630s, several incidents record the child being snatched from the priest’s hands, or the face being covered with a cloth, or even the curate’s hand being twisted behind his back, to prevent the ritual taking place.

But while oil and ash were suspect, books were used all the more prominently in ritual. A wonderful example is ‘kissing the book’. This was a pre-Reformation ritual in legal contexts, often employed for instance in the formal entering of contracts or mortgages and also as a common act of fealty to a superior. In the first wave of iconoclasm in the 1530s it came under suspicion, especially because of its association with the manual acts of the priest in the mass, raising the Bible and kissing it before the elevation of the host. But not only did book-kissing survive the Reformation, it emerged with enhanced prestige. It marked a number of things, which we may find paradoxical via a stereotyped view of Protestants as resistant to the world of the body or of physical objects. Touching the holy book acted as a taboo on the witness, attesting to his seriousness in allowing the touch of his fingers and lips on the Bible to make his body liable. The bodily gesture was also a signal of the public and formal nature of the contract, a sign or token of completion. Both of these processes could be taken as registers of internalization, a general assimilation of ritual with proofs of faith or witness. More mysteriously or magically, however, the holiness of the book was transmitted from its contents to the physical artefact. In this sense internalization is accompanied by renewed externalization. Protestants commonly held their physical books in reverence, decorated them with elaborate bindings, or kept them on the person in times of crisis.

See how this transfers itself comically in Act 2 scene 2 of *The Tempest*, when Caliban is made to swear his loyalty to his new masters on the island, the drunken Trinculo and Stephano:

CALIBAN

I’ll swear upon that bottle to be thy true subject, for the liquor is not earthly.

‘Kiss the book’, cries Stephano, at which Trinculo, good as his word, and loyal as ever to liquor alone, kisses the bottle. ‘Hast thou not dropped from heaven’, Caliban avows. He is made to prove his religious conversion by the ceremony of the new ritual form:

CALIBAN I have seen thee in her, and I do adore thee!

My mistress showed me thee, and thy dog and thy bush.

STEPHANO Come, swear to that. Kiss the book. I will furnish it anon with new contents. Swear!

[*Caliban drinks.*]

It is easy enough to characterize this ritual form in Shakespeare by means of the theory of disenchantment, to take it as a simple travesty or emptying out of ritual seriousness. But this, I think, misses the element of bodily performance in the play which is utterly serious even at comic or burlesque moments. And it also misses the way that bodily ritual is made all the more burdensome by its association with internal proof tests. The Reformation enforced acts of loyalty, such as the political oaths of allegiance routinely promoted with every new act of supremacy or succession, by a categorical insistence on ritual as exterior sign of witness. If a witness could not physically sign the oath, he or she was made to kiss the words on the page.

‘Is there another language’, asks Peter Brook, ‘just as exacting for the author as a language of words? Is there a language of action?’ He searches for a vocabulary which can answer to the daily experience of professional theatre, a language of human behaviour to correspond to the emotions we feel, both the emotions of actors on stage and the audience that watches them: ‘gestures, gesticulations, tones of voice’, these are the terms Brook gropes towards. Shakespeareans look for these things in the often paltry evidence of Elizabethan stage directions, mediated to us usually by stage-illiterate printers, or else in the records of rhetorical manuals and the archives of theatre companies themselves. These survive in much more meagre forms than we would hope. Farah Karim Cooper at the Globe has been doing innovative new work in this area, co-operating with working actors, in the noble line of Edmund Chambers and Andrew Gurr. I am suggesting that the history of religious ritual can shed new light on the history of gesture with unexpected richness, clarity and sensitivity.

In this way I am hoping that the reclamation of a history of religion in Shakespeare, rather than either a biographical dead end, or an escape to a world of the sacred in ideological apartheid from the so-called secular theatre, can be an enhancement and enriching of the things we already love in Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s theatre was part of the world around it: if we separate it from what was one of the most dominant and profound aspects of that world, the changes in religion, then we have missed something important. Yet equally, the religion of the Reformation was part of the world around *it*: and we misunderstand that if, as happens all too often, we treat religion as a universe with hermetic boundaries, its own special forms of language, epistemology or anthropology. In much of my previous work I have tried to show how the rules of semantics, of metaphor or grammar or ambiguity, apply as much to religious language as elsewhere. Here I make a similar plea, to reconnect the experience of religious ritual to a history of gesture more largely.

My most significant claim in this regard is to argue for a new synthesis in the treatment of mimesis. Mimesis, I think, is at the centre of the debate which puts Shakespearean theatre outside of the domain of religion. It is also one of the prime means by which philosophers of religion have attempted to place religious ritual outside the domain of ordinary experience. Ritual, Roy Rappaport asserted in a seminal account, is about participation, not about imitation. Ritual brings changes in people’s bodily states, and it changes people’s lives. Theatre, by contrast, is just looking, not doing. Theatre is a place of spectatorship. We watch the imitation of rituals, as the actors perform fictional versions of them. But nothing happens. Curiously, it is not only theorists of ritual who insist on this: it is

a cardinal doctrine of theatre historians, too, and is deeply embedded in Greenblatt's account of Shakespeare as a place of emptied magic, of performance over belief, or 'mere' play. I think this profoundly mistakes and underestimates the experiences we have in theatre and why it moves us. But it does so also, I feel, by misunderstanding the place of mimesis in the rituals of everyday life and of religion. I think Aristotle understood this in relation to the tragedy of Aeschylus or Sophocles better than we do; which is one reason he used religious and medical vocabularies, like *katharsis*, to understand the dynamic of the stage, as well as using *mimesis* in discussions of the body or of politics. Ritual is always about making things up as well as making them happen; and it always involves watching oneself performing it, and watching the other person in the act of doing it. I don't think it diminishes the importance of what is done by recognizing this.

My final illustration of this complex, two-way interaction of the forces of ritual and representation, following the exchanging of rings and the kissing of material objects like books, is the deeply charged physical ritual of kneeling. I choose it because of all rituals kneeling most clearly crosses the invisible boundary between sacred and secular. We kneel before queens and even vice-chancellors; we kneel before lovers and parents; we kneel in homage but also out of respect for someone suffering more than us; we kneel beside a sick child, and sometimes when we win a football match (even in front of the TV, I confess); and of course we kneel in a church or in a mosque, whether or not we share that religion. I also choose it because of its ubiquity in Shakespeare: I have checked, and people get on their knees in every single play, including the co-authored and doubtful ones. My sense of Shakespeare's sensitivity to the embodiment of gesture is enhanced, moreover, by the odd fact that there is not a single reference, even metaphorical, to kneeling in the Sonnets.

I have time for only two cases. Iago in the first scene of *Othello* mocks the act of kneeling when talking with Roderigo as the hypocritical act of knaves in subservience to masters. No person of true self-mastery kneels before a superior, he says. Then Cassio, in a highly-charged moment at the beginning of Act 2, gets the whole company of Cyprus to kneel before Desdemona, addressing her like the Madonna, 'Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven'. This is all the prelude to the great scene of Act 3, scene 3, one of the nastiest as well as the most brilliant in the plays, where first Desdemona and Emilia talk together lightly and exit, and then Iago plays on Othello's mind with dark suppositions about her feelings. Iago's examination of Othello's memories about their relationship and Cassio as go-between hinges on the outward expression of interior states. How do we trust the emotional life of another person, if not by the testimony of the body? Back comes Desdemona, and drops her handkerchief. This token, Emilia says, Othello swore her ever to keep about her person. She kisses it often, Emilia says, even speaks to it, like a holy relic. She gives it, fatally, to Iago.

Now Iago and Othello enter into their deepest complicity. Othello, in a truly weird appeal to voyeurism, demands from Iago 'ocular proof' of his wife's adultery. Then he and Iago enter into a sacred bond which they confirm by an act of ritual kneeling. Othello gets on his knees and swears vengeance on his wife:

OTHELLO Now by yond marble heaven
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words.

Settings and more. We use cookies for various purposes including analytics and personalized marketing. By continuing to use the service, you agree to our use of cookies as described in the Cookie Policy. OK. Unavailable. Oxford Academic (OUP). How important was the Reformation to Shakespeare and the English language? 3 years ago3 years ago. Learning. Shakespeare lived during a period of religious upheaval known as the Reformation. For centuries Europe had been united under the religious leadership of the Pope, head of the Roman Catholic Church. In the early 1500s, however, a new religious movement known as Protestantism broke within the Church. As for Shakespeare himself, recent biographers have speculated that he may have had Catholic loyalties, and that these loyalties may have brought him into conflict with the escalating anti-Catholic campaign of a local gentleman, Sir Thomas Lucy. If this is true, then it would help explain why Shakespeare left Stratford in the late 1580s and sought out safety in the comparative anonymity of London. Shakespeare and Fletcher's play seems more to belie its title doubly: Henry VIII is certainly not a biographical work, nor is it simply a play about the religious truths brought about by the Reformation. Do you want to read the rest of this chapter? Request full-text.