

**SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF THE CHRISTIAN DIMENSION
IN FOUR MAJOR TRAGEDIES, AND ITS DRAMATIC
EFFECT ON EARLY AUDIENCES**

by

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A thesis submitted to
The University of Birmingham
for the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

The Shakespeare Institute
Stratford upon Avon
University of Birmingham
April 2003.

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SUMMARY.

Christian values permeated all aspects of human activity in sixteenth century England; the basic truths of Christianity were largely unquestioned, and these would underlie the views on life and death, whether consciously formulated or not, of most of those who made up Shakespeare's first audiences.

I explore the ways in which Shakespeare responded to, and significantly departed from, his sources in four major tragedies with Christian (or non-pagan) backgrounds: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. In the first chapter, I discuss the prevailing religious tensions in England as Shakespeare was growing up, and the theological instruction he is likely to have received. I examine the interaction of these theological ideas with the cultural exploration of ideas taking place in the English Renaissance. I discuss the spaces in which the plays were first performed, the likely composition of the early audiences and the restrictions of censorship.

Thereafter, taking the four plays in chronological order, I examine the ways in which Shakespeare used his sources, concentrating especially on the situations where Christian ethics are of significance to the protagonists. I show that the Christian dimension enriches the sense of ambiguity and paradox that is at the heart of each play.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to Dr. John Jowett for his wise and scholarly guidance, and to James Shaw, Librarian of The Shakespeare Institute, for frequently pointing me in the right direction.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In his 'Preface to Shakespeare', Samuel Johnson wrote that Shakespeare, whom he refers to primarily as a poet,

is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose . From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to shew in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. The fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place.

(*Johnson: Prose and Poetry* selected by Mona Wilson. London: Hart-Davis, 1950. p.497)

Such sentiments from the great English moralist might be expected. Indeed, a close reading of Johnson's criticism of the plays reminds us of how aware all readers of critical works must be of the mindset, the special agendas and the possibly unconscious prejudices of the writer. But Johnson's view of the function of poetry had some validity in Shakespeare's time. Sir Philip Sidney, in *An Apologie for Poetry* (ed. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. C.U.P., 1905), wrote that the poets

imitate both to delight and to teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly from as from a stranger;

and teach, to make men know that goodness whereunto they are moved, which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed (p.11).

What was true of poetry generally, was true of poetic drama. Henry Chettle in *Kind-hartes dreame* (in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Quartos*. Ed. G.B .Harrison. Edinburgh: The University Press, 1966) makes the spirit of Tarleton say:

In plaies it fares as in bookes, vice cannot be reprov'd, except it be discovered: neither is it in any play discovered, but there followes in the same an example of the punishment: now he that at a play will be delighted in the one, and not be warned by the other, is like him that reads in a book the description of sinne, and will not looke over the leafe for the reward (pp.42-43).

But going to the theatre was not the same as reading a book or listening to the schoolmaster or the cleric. Although there were some similarities between the experience in the theatre and the experience in the church, people went to the one to be entertained; they went to the other to worship God and to receive spiritual and moral instruction. Christian values permeated all aspects of human activity in 16th Century England; the basic truths of Christianity were themselves largely unquestioned, and these would underlie the views of life and death, whether consciously formulated or not, of most of those who made up Shakespeare's first audiences.

In this thesis, I explore the ways in which Shakespeare responded to, and often departed from, his main sources in four major tragedies which have non-pagan backgrounds, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, particularly at the moments in the lives of the characters when their ethical beliefs might determine their

actions. My interest in this subject was fuelled after reading the full text of Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* (in Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol.1), and reflecting on how much bleaker Shakespeare had made the fate of the protagonists in his play by omitting the references to hope of salvation or comfort in the after-life that are to be found in the poem, which is thought to be his major source. I was also intrigued by a friend's experience when introducing a class of thirteen-year olds to *Romeo and Juliet* in a Catholic school in 1999. On learning that Romeo and Juliet take their own lives, the pupils' first concern was that by this action they had endangered their immortal souls. Although this was before the Zeffirelli and Luhrmann films had worked their particular magic on this young audience, it is, nevertheless, a useful reminder that this early tragedy is full of references to specifically Catholic Christian observances, which the characters regard as important to their lives, and in a setting where the Friar is held in high regard by all. And yet the two major characters commit the sin which might condemn their souls to eternal torment, without any comment at all from any other character in the play. In the light of this late-twentieth century reaction to their plight, one was prompted to speculate on how their situation might have been regarded by the play's early audiences. Conversely, in *Othello*, where the chief source is thought to be Giraldi Cinthio's *Story of Disdemonia and The Moorish Captain*, we see Shakespeare deliberately adding a Christian dimension not found in the story by making his hero a Christian convert. Here, one was led to speculate on how this addition affected the way in which early audiences perceived the play.

In trying to establish what are the main sources, one is aware that although a certain amount of indisputable material can be found, it can be perilous to speculate, as Richard Levin has pointed out in several detailed and forthright articles on this subject.¹ He observes that one criterion for a 'source' is that at least 'it should be known to the author who is supposed to be borrowing from it' (Another "Source for *The Alchemist* and Another Look at Source Studies, *ELR* 28. 1998. p.212). Some critics, notably Kenneth Muir (*The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*, London: Methuen.1997), effectively produce the evidence for their claims for the less direct influences on the plots. In this thesis I have used what are recognised to be the major source materials of the plays, while bearing in mind other possible influences which are relevant to the aspects under discussion. This includes Shakespeare's use of biblical references, which are sometimes woven into the fabric of the texts of the plays.

In chapter 2, I look at the prevailing religious tensions in England as Shakespeare was growing up and beginning to write plays, and the theological instruction he is likely to have received. I examine the interaction of these theological ideas with the cultural exploration of ideas taking place in the English Renaissance. I also discuss the physical spaces in which the plays were first performed, the likely composition of the first audiences and the restrictions of censorship, to examine the ways in which they might have any bearing on how the major characters were depicted and perceived.

Shakespeare's method of composition varied from play to play, and there are no obvious links between the ways he used his source material in the four plays I have chosen. I discuss them in chronological order, examining the ways in which Shakespeare

has used his sources in each, concentrating especially on the moments where specifically Christian ethics might be expected to be of significant importance to the protagonists. Romeo and Juliet commit suicide, a sin which might condemn them for all eternity; Hamlet, a Christian prince, becomes a murderer; the Christian convert, Othello, takes his own life; Macbeth knows that his actions will lead to his damnation. I have concluded that Shakespeare's deliberate use of the Christian dimension enriches the sense of paradox and ambiguity that is at the heart of each play.

In the final chapter, I attempt a view of Shakespeare's religious position, as it has emerged to me, after studying the plays in the light of the task I set myself. Some of the secondary material I have read, written by critics and historians with obviously biased agendas, I have found to be overstated or unconvincing². I have much sympathy with Stephen Greenblatt's notion, who, having rehearsed the arguments which I outline for Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies in chapter 2, concludes that Shakespeare felt a 'covert loyalty' to the weakened and damaged structures of the Catholic faith. In the absence of firm evidence to go any further in the Catholic debate, one recalls Gary Taylor's wry warning in 'Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton.' (*ELR*. 2.1994) that it is easy to fit Shakespeare into any 'slot', according to the attitudes of those who study his work.. He quotes from O'Neill's play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, where Edmund, the 'transgressive young literary modernist', quarrels with his father, the 'repressive old Irish actor':

Edmund : (sits down opposite his father – contemptuously)

Yes, facts don't mean a thing, do they? What you want to believe,

that's the only truth. (derisively) Shakespeare was an Irish Catholic,
for example.

Tyrone : (stubbornly)

So he was. The proof is in his plays. (p.287).

Notes:

¹ *New Readings vs. Old Plays*; '(Re)Thinking Unthinkable Thoughts', *NLH*, 28 (1997), 525-37; 'Another "Source" for *The Alchemist* and Another Look at Source Studies', *ELR*, 28 (1998), 210-30.

² In a booklet published in 1997 (Liverpool: Sunwards Publishing) entitled *Shakespeare in Lancashire*, which has a drawing of Hoghton Tower (with the caption 'Shakespeare slept here') and one of Rufford Hall (with the caption 'And here at Rufford Old Hall'), local historian Graeme Bryson claims confidently that Shakespeare's mother was keen to advance her son's standing in Catholic society and therefore was pleased to send her son off to Lancashire with John Cottom to be a tutor in a Catholic household:

When Cottom returned to Lancashire he took William with him to the Hoghton family to become a 'schoolmaster in the countrey'. This is reported in the first biography of Shakespeare written by John Aubrey in 1681 quoting as authority the son of one of Shakespeare's fellow actors, Christopher Beeson. (p.8).

There is no conclusive evidence that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon was the same William Shakeshafte mentioned in Alexander Hoghton's will, (see the discussion in Chapter 2) despite the attempts by several Lancastrians to claim that he was.

CHAPTER 2: THE BACKGROUND

Much interest in the 'lost years' in Shakespeare's life has, in recent years, centered on the likelihood of his being brought up in a Catholic household, and subsequently being employed for a time in one of the Catholic houses in Lancashire. The 1999 conference at Lancaster University, entitled 'Lancashire Shakespeare' brought together some 200 scholars from around the world to examine the proposition that Shakespeare had close links in the early 1580s to the Catholic renegades and priests who assembled at Hoghton Tower in Lancashire during a period of fierce persecution of Catholics in Elizabeth's reign. Hoghton was owned by the recusant Thomas Hoghton who died in 1580; it passed to his brother, Alexander. Alexander, who lived at nearby Lea Hall, died the following year, and in his will, he asked his brother to 'be friendly' to 'William Shakeshifte now dwelling with me' and to help him to find another position. Scholars who are attracted to the idea of Shakespeare's Lancashire connection point out that 'Shakeshafte' was a common Northern variant of the name, 'Shakespeare'.

Was 'Shakeshifte' William Shakespeare? E.A.J. Honigmann in *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (Manchester University Press, 1985) suggests that Shakespeare could have been recommended as a schoolmaster to Alexander Hoghton by John Cottom, the Head Master at Stratford Grammar School. At that time, schoolmasters had to be officially licenced, but Catholic families frequently employed unlicenced schoolmasters for their children, a practice common in Lancashire. J.H. de Groot had pointed out in *The Shakespeares and 'The Old Faith'* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1946) that while Headmaster of Stratford Grammar School, Cottom did not openly

display Catholic sympathies, but when he retired to Lancashire he became a well-known recusant. His brother, the priest Thomas Cottom, companion and friend of the Jesuit Edmund Campion, came from Lancashire. Campion was betrayed and executed in 1581, as was Thomas Cottom.

It is known that Hoghton kept some 'players' and that 'Shakeshifte', along with Fulk Gillan, went to Rufford, the Lancashire house of Sir Thomas Hesketh, after Alexander's death. Honigmann suggests that Shakespeare could have been recommended as an actor by Sir Thomas Hesketh to Lord Strange in 1585 or 1586. He also points out that 'The Chamberlain's Men', the first London Company with which we know Shakespeare to have been associated, was formed around a nucleus of actors who were previously Lord Strange's men; he suggests that Shakespeare was one of them, and seems to have been with them in some capacity for eight or more years.

From the point of view of this present study, the preceding paragraphs serve to add weight to the argument that Shakespeare (if he is indeed 'William Shakeshifte') had Catholic sympathies. Yet it has not been possible to establish that William Shakespeare and William Shakeshifte are one and the same man. Robert Bearman, of The Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon, has examined the parish records in the Preston area for the period, and also the details and implications of Alexander Hoghton's will. In '"Was William Shakespeare William Shakeshafte?" Revisited' (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 Spring 2002), he shows that the surname, with various spellings, was common in the area, and that it is highly likely that the William Shakeshafte mentioned in the will was considerably older than William Shakespeare of Stratford. He concludes that 'the more

likely but distinctly less-exciting scenario [is] that William Shakeshafte was a middle-aged man born and bred in Lancashire' (p.93). Honigmann's beguiling argument does not convince the more sceptical scholars of the Lancashire connection with Shakespeare. Katherine Duncan-Jones in *Ungentle Shakespeare* (The Arden Shakespeare. Methuen, 2001) points out that by the time John Cottom became Head Master of Stratford Grammar School, in 1579, Shakespeare had already left school (p.14). She suggests that the years 1583-9 were 'domestic years' for Shakespeare, at home in the Midlands.

Less dramatic but more convincing for the claim of Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies, is the evidence from local sources that he was brought up in a Catholic household. (I have referred extensively to J.H. de Groot's work, *The Shakespeares and 'The Old Faith'* for the information in this section). Shakespeare's parents married in the reign of Queen Mary, when for a time 'the old faith' flourished again. His mother, Mary Arden, was almost certainly a Catholic. (In 1583 Edward Arden, her second cousin, was executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth.) After the accession of Elizabeth, the Stratford Guild Chapel was 'Protestantised'; John Shakespeare was a Chamberlain and acting-chamberlain during the years 1561-5. The Protestant faith had firmly re-established its hold in many outward ways by this time. Shakespeare and his siblings were baptised in the Protestant parish church, but this, of itself, is not proof that the Shakespeares had completely adopted this faith, since by law all children were obliged to be baptised there.

The detailed research into John Shakespeare's public life shows that he conformed to the outward religious obligations imposed in the reign of Elizabeth. He

must certainly have taken the Oath required by the Act of Supremacy in 1559, since he became an alderman in 1565 and was elected to the post of High Bailiff in 1568 – the highest office in the town..

Events in the following four years led to a much more rigorous treatment of Catholics and Church Catholics under Elizabeth. The foundation of the seminary for priests in Douai in 1568, and the arrival in England of the fugitive Mary Queen of Scots in the same year, alerted Elizabeth again to the possible threat from Catholics. The Northern rebellion of 1569 was followed in 1570 by the excommunication of Elizabeth by the Pope. Roman Catholics who remained loyal to the Queen were threatened with severe Roman church discipline, and this probably meant that more of them were ‘driven to cover’. Thereafter the law of treason was extended, and more people were re-arrested and imprisoned for refusing the Oath of Supremacy. In fact, after this time, no Catholic was absolutely safe, except by conformity, for the rest of Elizabeth’s reign.

After January 1576, John Shakespeare consistently stayed away from Corporation meetings. It seems that he withdrew from public life, and in 1586 he was specifically dropped from the roll of the Corporation. That his withdrawal was an act of conscience by a Catholic sympathiser is as valid as any other theory to explain his absence. After the Queen’s proclamation for Commissions to conduct vigorous interrogations on all suspected recusants, the Warwickshire Commission met in February 1592, and in its Easter report it names nine persons from Stratford absenting themselves from Church for ‘fear of process’ – one of whom was John Shakespeare.

Again, at Michaelmas of the same year, he is mentioned as not coming to church for ‘fear of process for Debtte’. De Groot quotes H.S.Bowden as stating that this Recusancy—return includes none but Catholics, concluding that ‘John Shakespeare was at that time a Popish recusant, sheltering himself under the excuse of debt’ (p.55).

The strongest evidence advanced to claim John Shakespeare’s adherence to ‘the old faith’, however, was thought to be found in his Spiritual Last Will and Testament, first mentioned in print by Malone in his 1790 edition of Shakespeare’s works. Malone at first believed that it was probably drawn up in 1600. The details of the will (De Groot, pp.64-110) as Malone received them, are very Catholic in sentiment, but in 1796 Malone declared that he was misled into supposing the document to be genuine, and that it was the work of a hoaxer. Yet even without this bogus Testament, it is very possible that Shakespeare’s earliest spiritual influences were those of the Catholic tradition.

History tells us that whenever an ideology is driven into secrecy it gains an added potency. After the Reformation, public institutions might well have lost Catholic outward observances, but numerous special days, special ceremonies such as lights at Candlemas, ashes on the forehead on Ash Wednesday, and so on, were remembered, if not enacted, by ordinary households. (De Groot, pp.110-126). If the Shakespeares took their religious duties seriously in the upbringing of their children, these might well have been passed on. Along with horn books, A.B.C. readers were fairly common as early aids to reading in private homes. Many of these contained the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria and the Creed, both in Latin and English. If such books were still in his parents’ possession, the young Shakespeare might have been considerably influenced by them.

While it is not possible to prove conclusively that Shakespeare had Catholic sympathies, there is no difficulty in proving his rejection of the Puritan cause. The Puritans, members of the English Protestants who regarded the reformation of the Church under Elizabeth as incomplete, called for its further 'purification' from what they considered to be unscriptural and corrupt forms and ceremonies retained from the unreformed church. They actively united against 'the adversary', who could be the Pope, the Jesuits, witches, or merely those who did not take their religion seriously enough. On the accession of King James, Puritans hoped that under him further reformation of the church would take place. Instead, the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 served to strengthen the link between Church and State, and all their demands were rejected.

In matters of dress and sobriety of life, and with their objections to most forms of enjoyment, they became easy targets for dramatists, actors and audiences. The term 'Puritan' was generally used disparagingly, and Shakespeare could have been confident that an audience would respond with glee to the side-swipes at Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*; indeed, on each of the seven occasions he uses the word in the plays, it is used in a disparaging and mocking fashion.

We do know that Shakespeare was baptised in a Protestant church, and that he was buried there. At Stratford Grammar School the boys would have observed certain holy days and learned their Catechism. They would have been expected to take notes on the sermon on Sunday and give a report on it to the masters on Monday. All church-goers would have been familiar with bible stories. The most popular bible was the

Protestant Geneva Bible, produced by Marian exiles and first published in 1557. The first complete Geneva Bible to be published in England appeared in 1576, and it is likely that this was the version Shakespeare would have heard most frequently in church services.

Naseeb Shaheen, in his comprehensive work *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1999), claims that although there were several Tudor bibles currently in use, Shakespeare seems, in his plays, to refer most frequently to this one, and suggests that since 'it was the most popular version of the day... it is only natural to assume that he owned a copy' (p.39). Shaheen cites many examples, such as:

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow (*Hamlet*. 5.2.219)

Geneva: 'fal on the ground' (*Matthew* 10.29)

and:

Give place to the devil (*Othello*. 2.3.296)

Geneva: 'give place to the devil' (*Ephesians* 4. 27) (p.39-40)

where the wording is nearer to the Geneva translation than to any of the other versions.

In addition to the Bible, Shakespeare would have been completely familiar with the Anglican Psalter, read daily in church during morning and evening prayer, and it is likely that he would have learned some of the psalms by heart. Shaheen asserts that in his plays Shakespeare refers to the Psalms more frequently than to any other books of the Bible, apart from St. Matthew's gospel.

Soon after her accession, Elizabeth ordered the 1552 prayer book of Edward VI, slightly revised, to be used again in all churches. Under the Act of Uniformity of 1558, church attendance was made compulsory, and in 1563 Convocation summarised the

doctrine of the Anglican Church in The Thirty Nine Articles. The Book of Common Prayer, instituted by Cranmer in 1549, became again, in Elizabeth's reign, the order of all forms of worship for the Anglican Church, and Shakespeare's plays give abundant evidence that he was thoroughly acquainted with the services it contained.

Shaheen quotes the rubric which appears immediately after the Nicene Creed in the communion service in the Book of Common Prayer in 1559:

After the Creede, if there be no sermon , shall follow one of the Homilies already set foorth, or hereafter to be set foorth by common authoritie. (p.55).

The first collection of Homilies to which this statement refers, was published in 1547 in Edward's reign, and the second appeared in 1563. The thinking behind this publication shows, in Elizabeth's reign, the powerful hand of the State attempting to get a grip on captive audiences in church. The poor intellectual quality of some parish priests, and the growing importance of the sermon, gave the Queen cause for alarm, and soon sermons were allowed to be delivered only by licenced preachers. On all other occasions, the homily was delivered; it was most probably written by an eminent bishop. The new homilies in the 1563 edition dealt with doctrine (prayer, the sacraments, matrimony, etc) and morality (gluttony, idleness, excess of apparel, etc.). The most obvious example of State intervention came in 1571 when a homily 'Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion' appeared. This was a direct response to the Northern Catholic Rebellion of 1569, which, although speedily suppressed, caused alarm to the Queen and Council. At the end of the last part of the homily was the prayer 'A thanksgiving for the Suppression of the Last Rebellion'.

Shakespeare was some seven years old when he might have heard a reading of this homily in church. Homilies were certainly among the best-known writings of his day. In his *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Univ. of Delaware Press, 1999), Naseeb Shaheen writes:

By requiring that homilies be read and that no private preaching took place, the Government was able to prevent recusant preaching, whether Catholic, Puritan or other (p.44).

The language of these homilies, the language of the Book of Common Prayer and the beautiful language of the Litany, written by Cranmer in 1544, was the language Shakespeare heard almost daily as he grew up. In the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer skilfully adopted, translated and simplified the four chief books used in the pre-reformation church, the result being, as Shaheen says, 'a literary and religious gem that has been the glory of the English church ever since, second only to the English Bible' (p.40).

The formative years of life are supremely important, and it could well be argued that the continuous contact with the words and forms of the Anglican services might have had a profound, if subliminal, effect on Shakespeare. What his religious observances were in later years can only be a matter of conjecture. In Stratford, London or elsewhere, he, like all adults, would have been required to attend church on Sundays and holy days. In London the Privy Council prohibited performances of plays on Sundays. It was therefore possible for Shakespeare to attend both morning and evening prayer on Sundays. Moreover, he would have been able to observe the holy days, since the acting Companies were expected not to perform during Lent and on other holy days.

Between the accession of Queen Elizabeth and the death of King James, the Protestant church, despite attempts to destroy it, became firmly established, with the Monarch as its head. Patrick Collinson in *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982. Ch.4.) claims that during this time 'The Protestant governing classes progressed from the Elizabethan demand for a new religious order to the Jacobean enjoyment of such an order, already partly achieved', that there was 'a profound veneration for order and a strong disposition towards obedience: the double need to obey God and his earthly representations, and in time to exact the obedience due from inferiors' (pp.152 -153). This 'mind-set' finds expression in many of Shakespeare's plays, with the emphasis on underlying order and the divine right of kings.

Collinson quotes Thomas Cartwright, who wrote of the 'heapes of our people' who had abandoned popery whilst remaining in 'utter ignorance of the truth', and Arthur Dent, who complained of the swearing of common oaths such as 'By our Lady' and 'By my faith' which were traditional Catholic oaths. Another early 17th century writer thought it possible that only one part in twenty of the national population was 'Christian indeed'. (pp.200-201). Nevertheless, by the end of Shakespeare's life, as Collinson concludes, 'the multitude conformed in great measure to the prayer- book religion of the parish church which became part of the fabric of their lives' (p.191).

Such, then, briefly, is the religious scene which provides a background to Shakespeare's work. We now turn to theological ideas and the interaction of these ideas

with the cultural exploration of ideas taking place in the English Renaissance.

Shakespeare's education and his access to books continues to be a matter of debate and research. In Grammar Schools in the 16th century, religion was emphasised, but usually outside the structure of the 'liberal arts programme', as R.M.Frye terms it in *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton U. P.1963, p.77). Pupils had to attend chapel, go to services and listen to sermons, but Christian teaching was separate from the main part of a young boy's education, the study of the classics. Yet it was, of course, true that Renaissance habits of thought were, by and large, religious. In *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (Univ. of California Press, 1960), Deborah K. Shuger points out that although there were many doctrinal differences during the period, the fundamental beliefs held by most were the royal supremacy, the Nicene creed and the value of order. Moreover, religion remained the 'cultural matrix' for the exploration of almost every topic – 'kingship, selfhood, rationality, language, marriage, ethics, ...such subjects [were] considered in relation to God and the soul' (p.6).

From this standpoint, classical stories and ideas infused with Christian habits of thought, allowed Shakespeare to touch on topics which could have been extremely controversial in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Ideas of Purgatory illustrate this well: Protestant England did not accept the doctrine of Purgatory, but those with a classical education might well equate Hades with that region. If this recognition of purgatory as an element of classical and folk tradition made possible its use in drama, then a playwright might rely on it to avoid censorship, since the presentation of plays that seemed to be open propaganda for Roman Catholicism would not have been allowed. To

this subject I shall return in more detail in the examination of *Hamlet*.

The Renaissance brought about a change from the Middle Ages in the idea of Man's relation to God, and the Reformation aided that change. Instead of the medieval church being the first point of contact between God and man, man's own examination of his soul and his personal response to God grew to be of supreme importance. We see Shakespeare exploring man and his 'fighting soul' in *Hamlet*. Indeed, in the closet scene, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude with her sins, she perceives her conduct afresh. Hamlet refuses the Ghost's injunction to

Step between her and her fighting soul (3.4.105)

because she needs to struggle to free her own soul by repentance.

The relation between religion and politics in the period took modes of thought into the public domain. It was necessary to post-Reformation monarchs to assert the Divine Right of Kings. Before the Reformation, there were two sources of sacred power - the monarch and the pope: now there was only the monarch. The long-standing relations with the holy church had been broken, and those who had brought about freedom from the papacy needed to assert the overriding supremacy of the monarch in order to stabilise the state.

Both Elizabeth and James used pageantry and ceremony consciously to sustain their power, investing it and them with an aura of divinity. The pageantry that had been lost in the break from Rome was more than made up for by their own spectacular royal events and progresses, and indeed by their theatrical companies. Roy Strong, speaking of portraits and sculptures in the period 1450-1650, observes that 'in a Protestant country

such as England, where religious images were thrown out as idolatry, the likeness of a monarch, his coat of arms and seal were the only ones accorded ceremonial deference'

(*Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals 1450-1650*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1984. p.67).

Elizabeth's entry into London in 1559 was a triumph for the Protestant Reformation, yet in many respects it owed something in style to a medieval procession. By the time of James' arrival in the capital in 1604, the full ceremonial of a Renaissance prince's triumphal entry was evident.

Most of the saints' days and holy days were now expunged from the calendar, but Elizabeth recognised the importance of some occasions for celebration in the life of her subjects. Saint George's Day could be observed, since his behaviour as a chivalric knight could be stressed. November 17th, her Accession Day, was promoted as a holiday, with many of the festivities associated with the old saints' days taking place. Gradually, the medieval religious plays ceased to be performed, giving way to a new type of secular mystery, entertainments staged in homage to the Virgin Queen as she progressed through her kingdom. The cult of the Virgin Queen, if such it can be called, was an excellent move which helped to cut right across the divisions which existed between Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans.

The analogy between God and King continued to have more than a metaphoric significance to the people in this period, as witnessed by the continued belief in the curative powers of the Royal Touch. When James tried to break away from the traditionally 'sacred' powers he was supposed to possess, particularly administering the royal touch, he met with so much popular opposition that he was forced, reluctantly, to

continue the practice. Shakespeare makes significant reference to this practice in *Macbeth*; it is a topic to which I shall return later.

It could be argued that an element of ‘moral instruction’ is to be found in all Shakespeare’s plays, particularly the tragedies, but as J.E.Hankins observes in *Backgrounds of Shakespeare’s Thought* (Harvester Press, 1978. Ch.1.), his extensive learning is always subordinate to portrayals of character and action, and his didactic teaching, if such it is, almost always serves a dramatic purpose in the characterisation or the plot; thus it seems appropriate in its context. Proverbial expressions abound in the plays. The concentration of threadbare aphorisms in the Polonius/Reynaldo scene in *Hamlet* would, perhaps, have thrown extra light on the ‘tedious old fool’ for the first audiences.

However Shakespeare acquired his knowledge of theology and of classical stories, he might not have written plays at all if the time had not been propitious for them to be produced and acted. Emrys Jones in *The Origins of Shakespeare* (O.U.P., 1977) quotes Lawrence Stone: ‘It may well be that early 17th century England was at all levels the most literate society the world had ever known’ (p.7). It is probably true that Elizabeth and James were more interested in matters of the mind and in drama than any English monarchs before or since; they certainly loved plays. Jones observes that a popular dramatist ‘cannot bloom in unpromising soil’: unless he finds a fairly immediate favourable response to his work, he will not continue. He claims that the plays of Ben Jonson and Shakespeare are the ‘most intellectually demanding entertainments ever put before a large audience in the history of the world’ (p.7).

In a detailed discussion of methods of learning in Shakespeare's time, Jones points out that students frequently learned by imitation. The great works of the past were explored by making the student produce not a copy of the original, but a work which was both similar and different. Shakespeare would have been taught by this method, and 'he was amazingly resourceful in finding ways of converting to wholly original ends what was so abundantly supplied by the printing presses of his time' (pp.19-20). Examination of the sources for the four plays in this present discussion in the following chapters will serve to enforce this view.

Shakespeare's reading, at school and in his life as a working dramatist, is a matter of speculation. However, that he became aware of the work of the Roman Stoic, Seneca, (c.5 B.C.-A.D.65), is indisputable. He might have read Seneca's plays in Latin at school, where the practice of imitation and borrowing formed an important part of a classical education. By 1581, ten of Seneca's tragedies had been translated into English, and it is likely that many students of drama and the playwrights knew only the translations. These English versions must have had a considerable effect in spreading a general knowledge of Seneca's style, the form of his plays, his characters and the principal ideas of his philosophy. Along with Shakespeare, playwrights such as Chapman, Marston and Heywood were also indebted to Seneca, chiefly for the elaborate rhetoric and violent action found in the plays. The plays were never performed on stage in Seneca's own time, but several Elizabethan dramatists represented on stage what Seneca had left to the imagination. The results, as we see in Shakespeare's early play, *Titus Andronicus*, were often gruesome depictions of horrific acts.

Scholars like J.W.Cunliffe (in *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*. Conneticut:Archon Books,1965) and F.L.Lucas (in *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy*. Haskell House, 1922), stressed the debt that Shakespeare owed to Seneca's rhetoric and sensationalism. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the importance of his philosophical ideas in the shaping of Elizabethan tragedy. Audrey Chew in *Stoicism in Renaissance English Literature* (New York: Peter Lang,1988) points out what has often been observed, that Seneca 'offered recipes for maintaining peace of mind that have long been acceptable to Christians' (p.18). Seneca believed that the one essential attribute a human should strive to possess was moral virtue. There were, of course, many Stoic ideas current in this period; in the popular view, Stoic fortitude meant pride in one's own ability to take what comes. Seneca's plays have the overall message that those who become slaves to passion lose their peace of mind, and show that the only power that matters is the power over oneself.

Shakespeare, like other dramatists, was selective in his use of stoical ideas. For example, the acceptance of suicide as a rational way of ending one's life was part of the philosophy of all Stoics. Epictetus (A.D.55-135) believed that man should willingly accept his assigned role in the social order. It was his duty to play that role to the best of his ability, whether his life was long or short, tragic or happy . When he was tired of it, he could always leave - by committing suicide. Christian Elizabethans and Jacobeans would reject that view, believing that the Almighty had 'fixed his canon 'gainst self- slaughter'. (This belief, based on the sixth Commandment, carried with it the belief that suicide demonstrated the sin of despair; since the one who committed 'felo de se' had no

possibility of repenting, his soul was destined for Hell. The plight of Judas Iscariot was frequently cited). Shakespeare uses the stoic view of suicide only in the Roman plays, where the Roman ethos and plot demands it. Where suicides occur in the plays with a Christian background, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, other considerations are in evidence, as will be discussed in later chapters.

How much of the cultural background of the early Elizabethan tragedies would have been understood, consciously, by the early audiences, is a matter of conjecture. Andrew Gurr in *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London 1567-1642*. (2nd ed. Cambridge: C.U.P., 1996) maintains that the history of the writing of plays at this time is not complete without an account of the audience. We see Shakespeare writing plays against the background of a thriving theatre, for audiences whose tastes he began to know well. Undoubtedly, exposure to plays helped to form the mental habits and ways of seeing of the audiences, who enjoyed the experience and came back for more. The direct relationship between the dramatist and the audience cannot be over-emphasised, and the physical spaces in which the plays were performed had much to do with this. Gurr describes the two distinct types of space, the amphitheatre playhouses, open mainly to the elements, and the Hall playhouses, entirely indoor affairs.

The amphitheatres were versions of the animal-baiting houses and the galleried inn-yard entertainment areas of former times. In 1576 the Theatre replaced the Red Lion in Shoreditch, the Curtain was built in 1577, the Rose in 1587 and the Swan in 1595. In 1599 the Theatre was dismantled so that the timbers could be used as a frame for the Globe, erected on Bankside .

The Hall playhouses, with much smaller audience capacity, were situated mainly in the city. The most famous hall was the second Blackfriars playhouse, built by James Burbage in 1596 for his players, Shakespeare's company. The city authorities had been making it difficult for plays to be performed in inns within the city limits in the winter months, which left the players with nowhere to perform for half of the year. Blackfriars was close to the city of Westminster and outside the jurisdiction of the city of London, moreover it was closer to the areas where the wealthier playgoers lived. But local residents petitioned the Privy Council to reject the project, with the usual complaints – that it would attract the wrong sort of people to the area and lower the tone, there would be too much noise, it was near a church, and so on. They were successful the first time in ensuring that the project failed, and the Globe was created instead, to accommodate the Chamberlain's Men. When James Burbage died in 1597, his two sons offered shares in the building of the Globe to the five leading players of the company, one of whom was Shakespeare.

Although the Blackfriars project failed, companies were still interested in having audiences under cover, with smaller capacity and higher admission prices. When the new King gave his patronage, and that of his family, to the leading companies, the city fathers could no longer object, and after 1603 nearly all the new theatres that were built were on the north side of the river and were of the hall type in design. This meant that thereafter Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights had assured use of both the outdoor theatres and the halls. Even though the hall audiences were possibly more refined than those of the amphitheatres, playgoing was often a noisy affair in both: there

was clapping and vocal applause, hissing and shouting. Playgoing was very much a participatory experience.

The composition of the audiences in each type of theatre has been discussed extensively by Ann Jennalie Cook in *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London 1576-1642* (Princeton U.P.1981) and by Gurr in 1987. Both scholars recognise that London was a vibrant city in the period, with a rapidly expanding population and thriving commercial and tourist activities. Educational opportunities were excellent for the privileged, and the level of literacy was much higher than in the rest of the country. According to Gurr, to the young and wealthy the theatre was a good place to be seen: 'the newly rich and the big spenders alike used the playhouses to advertise their status' (p.50).

Cook claims that 'privileged playgoers' dominated the audiences and that the 'lower orders' were there in smaller numbers than has previously been supposed. The term 'privileged' embraces people from humble scholars to prosperous landholders risen from the yeomanry, to noblemen and royalty. She argues that such people had been acquainted with the study of plays in their schooldays, and not a few had experienced performing themselves. The possession of both money and leisure enabled them to frequent the playhouses. Their exposure to a classical education, and for many, to the 'amusements' of fencing, dancing, music and poetry fed their desire to spend their time at the theatre. Students from the Inns of Courts were regular playgoers. In the 1580s they were often charged with causing major disturbances at performances, but their behaviour seems to have improved during the 1590s, when Burbage and Alleyn were regarded as role models of gallant and attractive behaviour (pp.122-123).

In the amphitheatres, performances started at 2 p.m. and lasted for two to three hours. The afternoon was 'leisure time' for the privileged, and going to a play was an excellent way of spending it. Cook states that the 'plebian' playgoers – respectable apprentices, artisans and tradesmen – were all working in the afternoons and that their theatre-going was necessarily limited to holidays, but Gurr seems to suggest that a higher proportion of these managed to find their way to these performances. Respectable citizens' wives were much in evidence. A woman was considered to be respectable if accompanied by a man; if she were alone, she was regarded as a whore looking for trade. Vagabonds, cutpurses and the unemployed, with time on their hands, also attended the performances. Such, then, is the likely make-up of the audiences for whom Shakespeare was writing. The complaint that theatres were the focus for all kinds of crimes and corrupt behaviour was continually made by the Puritans and the City Fathers. Cook asserts, however, that their objections became much less frequent after the companies were given royal protection in the reign of James. (p.248).

After 1599, when the hall playhouses reopened, there was a change in the make-up of audiences. The gentry began to patronise the halls more frequently than the open-air playhouses. The price of admission was higher in the halls, and this in itself might have excluded the more plebian members of London society from them. Since the dramatists were in such close contact with the audiences' tastes, it is possible that they had certain venues in mind in the content and staging of their plays. And since they often performed in private great houses and for the Court, speculation that certain plays were written with a certain type of playgoer in mind cannot be ignored.

Gurr reminds us that rote-learning was an important aspect of education; many people knew a great deal by heart, and were in any case accustomed to listening by going to church every week: 'The hearing of plays, a concept implicit in the Latin origin of the word "audience", was a basic expectation in the minds of Shakespearean playgoers' (p.81). The notion of plays being primarily vehicles for poetic speeches was slow to disappear, and audiences frequently applauded a good delivery of a fine speech. Gurr points out that there is no English word or phrase that defines the experience of both hearing and seeing the action of a play. The poets and most dramatists in the last part of the sixteenth century rated hearing far above seeing in importance for playgoers. Ben Jonson always used the term 'spectators' when he was abusing the audience for preferring stage spectacle; he claimed that the poetic 'soul' of a play could only be found by listening to the words (p.87).

However, Gurr also observes (p.87) that Robert Burton in *An Anatomy of Melancholy* had claimed sight 'to be the most precious and the best' of the senses; likewise, the academic poets Sidney and Spenser believed the eye to be of more importance than the ear. Yet the word 'audience' rather than 'spectators' is the word that has survived for playgoers.

Once purpose-built playhouses appeared, playgoing became an important aspect of London life. Regular and frequent attendances produced well-informed, opinionated audiences, who required a constant supply of new plays, and revivals of their favourites. The 'free' miracle and mystery plays were becoming a distant memory; now people were

paying directly for their entertainment, they were motivated chiefly by the pleasure principle. As Gurr puts it, 'the moral requirement faded as the commercial incentive grew' (p.117). And yet it is significant that *Hamlet* and *Dr Faustus* remained firmly among the four or five most frequently performed plays throughout the period – plays which deal very obviously with man's fundamental struggles on earth. Plebians as well as the educated enjoyed them.

Cook, however, is convinced that Shakespeare was writing, certainly after the turn of the century, primarily for the 'privileged', as she defines them, who made up most of the audience. Such an audience

means that the complex philosophical, theological or aesthetic ideas embedded in a Shakespearean play are not an unconscious reflection of the accepted thought of the day... more likely they typify the effort of a superb dramatist to engage the minds as well as the emotions of an intelligent audience (p.274).

Not everyone shared the enthusiasm for playgoing. Puritans waged constant war on the theatre from the opening of the public theatres in 1576, and many writers understood the reasons for their opposition. This is Philip Stubbes in *Anatomie of Abuses* in 1583, writing against contemporary plays:

Do they not maintain bawdry , insinuate foolery, and renew the remembrance of heathen idolatry? Do they not induce whoredom and uncleanness? Nay, are they not rather plain devourers of maidenly virginity and chastity? For proof whereof mark but the flocking and running to Theatres and Curtains, daily and hourly, night and day, time and tide, to see plays and interludes, where such wanton

gestures, such bawdy speeches, such laughing and fleering, such clipping and culling, such winking and glancing of wanton eyes, and the like, is used, as is wonderful to behold .¹

(Of Stage-playes, and Enterluds, with their wickednes. p144).

Stubbes realised that the attention which plays commanded was not unlike the involvement in worship. There are obvious similarities between dramatic and religious expression in the ritual participation of actor and audience, in the use of costume and heightened language. He was probably aware, also, that a theatrical performance, like a church service, was oriented towards a collective consciousness. As Bacon says in *De Augmentis*, ‘the minds of men are more open to impressions and affections when many are gathered together than when they are alone’ (*The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1905. p.440).

Yet Stubbes did not denounce all plays – he was not himself a Puritan. In the preface to this work he actually commends certain kinds of drama:

All abuses cut away, who seeth not that some kind of plays, tragedies and interludes, in their own nature are not only of great ancientie, but also very honest and very commendable exercises, being used and practised in most Christian common weals, as which contain matter (such they may be) both of doctrine , erudition, good example, and wholesome instruction; conducive to example of life and reformation of manners. For such is our gross and dull nature, that what thing we see opposite before our eyes, do pierce further, and print deeper in our hearts and minds, than that thing which is heard only with the ears.

(p.x. A Preface to the Reader)

In this vibrant and often dangerous period all plays were subject to censorship, but not necessarily on the grounds that Stubbes would have advocated. As early as 1549, a proclamation was made severely restricting public performances of plays in the reign of Edward VI. The Act of Uniformity of that year forbade interludes which contained matter 'depraving and despising' the new Book of Common Prayer. In 1551 it was declared that the Privy Council or Monarch should sign a special licence for any interlude or play to be performed. With the accession of Mary in 1553, the situation remained the same, although Roman Catholicism was the new orthodoxy. Local authorities were to put restrictions on plays at certain times of the year. From early on it was feared that attending stage plays would rival going to church. When Elizabeth came to throne, she issued a proclamation in 1559, forbidding all performances, both public and private, before they had been licenced. This proclamation also included the statement that 'matters of religion' were 'no meet matters to be wrytten or treated upon'.

The Master of the Revels (an appointment first created by Henry VIIIth in 1545) was the most important man in the issue of censorship: A play 'allowed' by him was deemed fit to be performed before the monarch. What seems to have been at the forefront of his scrutiny was evidence of sedition or treasonable material, rather than religious unorthodoxy. Tilney, who assumed the office in 1578, censored plays attacking 'Martin Marprelate', the pseudonym of one or more Puritans who printed rigorous pamphlets on illegal presses attacking the corruption of the Church of England. It seems, however, that his concern was more to preserve public order, than to protect religious

orthodoxy. He censured the seeming incitements to rebellion in the play *Sir Thomas More* in which Shakespeare had a hand, but he failed to spot the potential of the Jack Cade rebellion in *Henry the Sixth, Part Two*.

Richard Dutton, in *Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama* (London:Macmillan,1991), tells us that before 1606, in the period under discussion, there is no clear evidence of The Master of the Revels objecting to any religious opinions, attitudes or doctrines expressed within a play, and there is no evidence of any dramatist being threatened with prosecution for breaking the restrictions on religious matters. But all playwrights must have had the restrictions in their minds and accepted them as the limitations in which they worked, if they wished to avoid getting into trouble and wanted their plays to be staged. They knew that anti-Catholic and anti-Puritan propaganda would be allowed, whilst assaults on the Anglican church would not.

There is only one real reference to censorship as it might affect a writer in the whole of Shakespeare's printed work. Sonnet 66 has the line:

Art made tongue-tied by Authority.

In her excellent book for which she uses this quotation as the title, Janet Clare observes that while Shakespeare remained almost completely silent on censorship restriction, Nashe and Jonson 'were voluble on the subject'. She reflects that it is salutary to recall 'that all the plays of the period were written in the shadow of the censor and that no dramatist could unchain his thoughts from the agent of that most arbitrary and punitive instrument of state control'. (*Art Made Tongue-tied by Authority*. Manchester U.P., 1990. p.215).

Set against this, however, is the wry comment of Margot Heinemann when discussing censorship in her book *Puritanism and Theatre*. (Cambridge: C.U.P.,1980):

Except for the specific ban on oaths and profane language introduced in 1606, the censor was scarcely concerned with questions of morality or good taste. At incest, adultery, rape, sexual invective and innuendo, or Rabelaisian sex-and –lavatory clowning he seems not to have turned a hair (p.37).

In 1606, early in James' reign, An Act to Restraine Abuses of Players came into force, 'for the preventing and avoyding of the greate Abuse of the Holy Name of God in Stageplayes, Interludes, Maygames, Shewes, and suchlike... That if at any tyme or tymes...any person or persons doe or shall in any Stage play, Interlude, Shewe, Maygame, or pageant, jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie, which are not to be spoken but with feare and reverence, [?such person or persons] shall forfeit for everie such Offence by hym or them committed, Tenne Pounds'. (Quoted by Richard Dutton in *Mastering the Revels*, p.162).

This act had a significant effect on dramatists' choice of subjects and on the language of the plays after this time. It is possible that Shakespeare had just finished writing *Macbeth* when the Act was passed, and he may have had to revise it because of the stipulations in it. Martin Wiggins, in a chapter entitled 'The King's Men and After' (in *Shakespeare: an Illustrated Stage History* edited by Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson. Oxford: O.U.P.,1996), claims that 'for the next five years he avoided the restrictions that had been imposed by choosing to set his new plays exclusively in

antiquity, when Christian oaths would be inappropriate, even if permissible' (p27).

In the first year of James' reign, Shakespeare's company became The King's Men and their licence permitted them to perform any comedy, tragedy, pastoral and suchlike or other with no condition as to any previous examination of the plays. Their privileged status clearly preserved James' resident dramatist from the embarrassing situation of having to appear before His Majesty's Master of the Revels, but at the same time, it ensured a subtle pressure to conform in subject and in content.

All of the four plays I discuss in the following chapters have positive Christian backgrounds and content, and are products of that 'imitation' of sources at which Shakespeare was particularly adept. Having briefly outlined Shakespeare's own religious background, and that of most of his audience, I now propose to examine the sources and the plays, and to discuss how Shakespeare, a conformist in many ways, dealt with the religious dilemmas each particular play presents.

Notes

¹ The text of Stubbes' work is reprinted in *Phillip Stubbes's Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakspeare's Youth A.D. 1583*. Part 1. Edited by Frederick J. Furnivall. Published for The New Shakspeare Society by N.Trubner and Co. London: Ludgate Hill, 1877-9.

CHAPTER 3: ROMEO AND JULIET

By placing *Romeo and Juliet* firmly in a Christian setting, Shakespeare ensured that the predicament of the lovers, particularly in regard to their parents' wishes, the sanctity of their marriage vows, and their ultimate decision to take their own lives, would be in sharper focus to a Christian audience than in a play with a pagan setting. It is quite possible that some members of the first audiences would have known the story of the lovers, in some form, before the performance began. If they did not, the plot was revealed in a clear, memorable sonnet before the start of the action, and thereafter they were witnesses to the unfolding of a tragic story which had its roots in pagan antiquity.

Shakespeare could have taken the Pyramus and Thisbe story, either from Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid, which he clearly knew, or from one of the several Elizabethan versions of it, such as the one in *The Gorgious Gallery of Gallant Invention* or the simple ballad by J. Thompson in *A Handful of Pleasant Delites*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* show the dramatist using the basic story for both comic and tragic purposes. Peter Holland, in his introduction to the Oxford edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (O.U.P. 1994), agrees with most scholars who date the writing of both plays between 1594 and 1596. Opinion is divided about which play was written first, but Holland says, 'all that matters is that the two plays were clearly being worked on at roughly the same moment' (p.110).

The setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is entirely pagan, whereas the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is set in a Christian society. Indeed, by the time of the Renaissance, all new versions of the story had acquired a Christian setting, and the names

of the principal characters are those which we are able to recognise from Shakespeare's play. It is possible that Shakespeare knew something of Luigi da Porto's *Istoria novellamente ritrova di due Nobile Amanti* (published in about 1530) and the story of *Romeo et Julietta*, a novella by Matteo Bandello, which was translated into French in 1554 by Pierre Boaistuau. This version was intended 'to warn young people that they should govern their desires and not run into furious passion' (Quoted by Geoffrey Bullough in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol.1. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1958. p.271). Boaistuau's version of Bandello's story differed in certain respects, the chief one being that he makes Romeo die before Juliet awakes. Both da Porto and Bandello have the ironic situation in which Romeo takes the poison, Juliet awakes, and they speak their last words together as Romeo dies. It is interesting to observe that the latest screen version of Shakespeare's play, Baz Luhrmann's 1997 film, shows Romeo with a flicker of life lying in Juliet's arms, but she, in her distracted state, is unaware that he is still alive. The camera can show the audience an irony that could not well be perceived in a stage performance.

Boaistuau's version was translated into English in 1567 by William Painter in *The Palace of Pleasure*. However, five years before this translation, in 1562, there appeared in English Arthur Brooke's long narrative poem, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*. Its reprinting in 1587 is testament to its popularity and it is possible that some of his educated audience, as well as Shakespeare, were familiar with it. Although Shakespeare might have seen Painter's translation, it is likely that he used Brooke's poem as the main source for his play. Brooke states in his introduction that he 'saw the

same argument lately set foorth on stage...being there much better set forth than I have or can dooe' (Bullough p.285), but of this former play there is no record.

Bullough asserts that the story of Romeo and Juliet was popular in the reign of Elizabeth, and records that George Gascoigne's *Posies* (1575) contains a 'Romeo' mask written to be performed on the occasion of the double marriage (uniting two great Catholic families) of Viscount Montacute's son to Sir William Dormer's daughter, and his daughter to Sir William's son. Eight gentlemen of the Montacute family decided to present a mask in celebration of the marriages and had 'caused their garments to be cut to the Venetian fashion'. Having done this, they realised that it might seem strange to their audience that they were wearing Italian clothes, so they asked Gascoigne to devise some verses to explain their attire. He wrote lines for a boy actor who would claim to be a descendant of the Italian house of Mountacute, and made a fictitious connection between it and the English family with a similar name. The boy wore a token in his cap,

which the Mountacutes do beare always, for that

They covet to be known from Capels where they passe,

For ancient grutch which long ago tween those two houses was.

Although it is impossible to know how widely this story of the feud between the named houses of the Mountacutes and the Capels was known at this period, Bullough finds it worth speculating that the mask might have had another airing in August 1591 when Queen Elizabeth accepted the hospitality of Montacute at his home, Cowdray Park, and that 'a Romeo play would have been very suitable for that occasion' (p.275-6).

At all events, it is clear that the Romeo and Juliet story was known in various

non-dramatic forms as well as dramatic before Shakespeare wrote his play, and the lovers might well have already attained something of their legendary status. Yet there is much in the play to have aroused mixed feelings in the first audiences. Gurr observes in *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* that during the period between 1588 and 1605 the Lord Admiral's Company pursued an expressly Protestant set of values in their plays. In the 1590s the company to which Shakespeare belonged on Bankside became notably popular with the Inns of Court students for its plays about love. The rebellion of the young lovers against the 'harsh Athenian law' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could undoubtedly have been somewhat alarming to many a father in the audience. The triumph of love over parental authority in *Romeo and Juliet* might not have found approval with those who identified themselves with the feelings of Capulet. Gurr points out that the Henslowe writers chose to take a more conservative line in 'the marriage debate', and that these plays, deliberately set in the playhouses on the north side of the river, were more in tune with the powerful citizens of London who comprised their audiences. He suggests that Shakespeare's plays at the Globe had popular appeal with the 'Romeo quoting' law students and gallants of the 1590s. (pp.149-151). We note, however, that by 1600 the prudent Shakespeare had ceased to write love comedies, coinciding with the time when the hall companies came into direct competition with the Globe.

If the first audiences of *Romeo and Juliet* were composed mainly of those to whom the idea of an arranged marriage was a matter of social status or financial prudence, then the fate of two young people wilfully disobeying parental wishes might, for them, have been summed up by the words:

These violent delights have violent ends. (2.5.9)

The nobility in the audience might see the prudence of a match between Juliet and Paris, and the gentry, and those aspiring to it, would certainly see why the rich Capulet is keen to enhance his status by an alliance with the Prince's kinsman. They would see that in reality, Capulet has no need to consult Juliet's wishes in the matter; moreover, after the death of Tybalt, the only other male member of his house, they would recognise the wisdom of Capulet's wanting to secure a match for Juliet before his own death.

But there is much evidence that marriage contracts in Tudor times, in all ranks of society, except, perhaps, the highest, were almost always based on mutual regard, and the contract period was sometimes prolonged, not just for economic reasons, but so that this regard might have time to develop into love before the formal betrothal was declared.

Ann Jennalie Cook in *Making A Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and his Society* (Princeton U.P., 1991. Ch.2-4) shows that courtship was considered as a very important period in preparation for marriage. The average age for a woman's first marriage was twenty five, and for a man, twenty seven (pp.17-18). Technically, children could be promised in marriage as young as seven, but vows had to be confirmed by the prospective bride and groom after they had reached the age of twelve and fourteen, respectively (p.19). Once a formal betrothal had been declared, legal action could be taken if either one of the couple reneged on the agreement. Parents were expected to help find suitable spouses for their children; ideally, the children should respect their parents' wishes, or at least consult them in their choice of a spouse, to avoid making rash decisions they might later regret.

The predicament of Shakespeare's lovers must, on all fronts, have aroused

much interest in an early audience. Although Romeo and Juliet had similar social status and backgrounds, their age, the speed and rashness of their actions, their complete disregard of parental wishes, would have been warning signs to most observers, even without the words of the Prologue, that this match could not come to good.

Cook observes that the emotionally intense setting of Shakespeare's play must have had a powerful effect on an early audience in a climate so different from their own:

How emotionally seductive for an Elizabethan audience to enter into a world where beautiful women, already blooming at 13 or 14, might be impetuous enough to marry a young blood not yet 20. Comprising titillating yet condemned practices, the exotic-erotic milieu of Verona could elicit a complex response in an English society where most marriages were delayed till adulthood (p.30).

It is generally accepted that Shakespeare used Brooke's poem (printed in full in the first volume of Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*) as the chief source for his play. Brooke, of all the earlier writers of this story, takes a religious and sternly moralistic stance. In his introduction he states that the 'tragicall matter' is written

to describe...a coople of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to unhonest desire, neglecting the authoritie and advise of parents and frendes, conferring their principal counsels with dronken gossypes, and superstitious friers (the naturally fitte instrumentes of unchastitie) attemptying all adventures of peryll, for thattaynyng of their wished lust, usying auriculer confession (the kay of whoredom and treason) for furtherance of their purpose abusyng the honorable

name of lawful marriage, the cloke the shame of stolne contractes, finallye, by all meanes of unhonest lyfe, hastyng to most unhappye deathe (Bullough p.284).

Brooke's attitude to the lovers' plight is, in fact, much more sympathetic than his introduction would suggest, and he seems positively to assert Romeo and Juliet's immortality, despite the fact that they commit suicide. As Romeo feels death approaching he prays for mercy:

Lord Christ, that so to raunsome me descendest long agoe
Out of thy fathers bosome, and in the virgin's wombe
Didst put on fleshe, O let my plaint out of this hollow toombe,
Perce through the ayre, and graunt my sute may favour finde;
Take pity on my sinnefull and my poor afflicted mynde. (2674-2678)

Juliet, alone with Romeo's body, takes his dagger, the 'beginning of assured happiness', confident that when she dies, her spirit will find his:

For straight my parting sprite, out of this carkas fled,
At ease shall finde my Romeus sprite, among so many ded. (2777-2778)

She addresses him, uncertain about what he can now comprehend:

If knowledge yet doe rest in thee, if thou these woordes dost hear,
Receve thou her, whom thou didst love so lawfully,
That caused (alas) thy violent death although unwillingly;
And therefore willingly offers to thee her gost,
To thend that no wight els but thou, might have just cause to boste
Thinjoying of my love, which I have reserved,

Free from the rest , bound unto thee, that hast it well deserved:
 That so our parted sprites, from light that we see here,
 In place of endlesse light and blisse, may ever live yfere. (2780-2788)

Brooke's Juliet expresses a confidence in the union of their souls in the after life, made certain by the fact that in this life she has preserved her marriage vows. This fidelity seems to be the justification for her hope of immortality. Such hints or hopes of immortality are not to be found in Shakespeare's play, and this is where , perhaps, he departs most significantly from Brooke's poem. To this point I shall return later.

Shakespeare is content to use the Catholic setting for the play. He uses the Friar as a respected figure, hearing confessions and being party to the affairs of both families. In this pre-1606 play, the name of God is used constantly by the Nurse in her ordinary speech in greetings, oaths and proverbial sayings:

God rest all Christian souls, (1.3.17)
 God mark thee to his grace, (1.3.59)
 Now afore God I am so vexed, (2.4.158)
 God in heaven bless thee. (2.4.190)

Her employer uses it in swearing:

God's bread, it makes me mad!, (3.5.176)

and her charge, Juliet, seems to have learned oaths from her:

Oh God she comes, (2.5.18)
 Oh God! Did Romeo's hand shed Tybalt's blood?, (3.2.71)
 Oh God, I have an ill-divining soul!, (3.5.54)

O God, O Nurse , how shall this be prevented? (3.5.204)

The Friar calls upon 'Holy Saint Francis' (2.3.61) and 'Jesu Maria' (2.3.65). Such oaths might still have been used in Elizabethan England, if only by the older generation.

Romeo himself does not use the name of God. His only reference to the Christian deity is in the richly metaphorical speech before the banquet scene:

he that hath the steerage of my course

Direct my suit. (1.4.110-11)

References to Catholic religious observances abound in the play; they are in the very fabric of the language and are used for crucial developments in the plot. Romeo and Juliet both frequent the confessional as a natural part of their lives. Capulet is happy to believe that Juliet has been to confession and has been counselled by the Friar to seek her father's pardon and has resolved to obey his wishes. Juliet's deception is successful because her parents believe she has made a true repentance:

I have learnt me to repent the sin

Of disobedient opposition

To you and your behests, and am enjoined

By holy Lawrence to fall prostrate here,

To beg your pardon. Pardon, I beseech you.

Henceforward I am ever ruled by you. (4.2.18-23)

- Confession, absolution, penance, amendment of life, are stages in a process which is common currency in the world of the play, and would, even by the 1590s, have been recognised still by many in Protestant England.

The sacrament of marriage is central to the play. It is not surprising that Shakespeare includes no marriage ceremony, since the enactment of the sacraments on stage was forbidden by law, but even the legal validity of the marriage of Romeo and Juliet has been questioned by some scholars. Such a marriage was legal, but highly unusual. David Cressy in *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1997 p.312), states that in England a male was legally old enough to be married at the age of fourteen, a female at the age of twelve, but that teenage marriages were extremely rare.

As far as the ecclesiastical courts were concerned, in 1563 (the same year that the Thirty-Nine Articles were published in England) The Council of Trent defined the doctrine of Christian marriage. The Decree Tametsi stated that ‘all marriages, under penalty of invalidity, be contracted in the presence of one’s own parish priest and two or three witnesses’. (in *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, ed. H.J.Scroeder. St. Louis, Mo., 1960. pp.183-4, 454-6).This was done to prevent abuses which had occurred in the past, but it was interpreted differently in different regions of Europe. Technically, Romeo and Juliet’s marriage would be called ‘a marriage of conscience’, and the Friar would just about be on the right side of the ecclesiastical law in agreeing to it. But there is none of the preparation of the couple in the play that we find in Brooke; the brief scene that ends the second act shows the Friar preparing to ‘make short work’ of the ‘holy act’, determining that, presumably to preserve their virtue, Romeo and Juliet shall not stay alone

Till holy church incorporate two in one.

(2.6.37)

It is likely that early audiences would have believed the marriage to be valid, since the Church, in the person of the Friar, had sanctioned it. The sacrament of marriage is of the utmost importance to Juliet, when she is faced with the prospect of being forced to marry Paris. Brooke speaks of the ‘wicked wordes’ of the Nurse who tries to persuade her that she can have the best of both worlds, having both a husband and a paramour if Romeus should return after her marriage to Paris. Shakespeare’s Juliet is prepared to put her immortal soul in danger rather than break her marriage vows.

Belief in the immortality of the soul is iterated by Romeo and Benvolio at the death of Mercutio; they believe that his soul

is but a little way above our heads (3.1.126)

and that

That gallant spirit hath aspired the clouds

Which too untimely here did scorn the earth. (3.1.116-7)

Balthazar, reporting the supposed death of Juliet, says:

Her immortal part with angels lives. (5.1.19)

The pictorial images which these words conjure up would have been perfectly familiar to a Christian audience.

Although the concept of Purgatory did not exist in Protestant theology, it is inconceivable that an Elizabethan audience would not have known what it was. Romeo reveals a belief in this region:

There is no world without Verona walls

But purgatory, torture, hell itself. (3.3.17-18)

Even though he is using the terms metaphorically in his grief, he makes the distinction that hell is the place from which there is no return:

‘Banished’!

O Friar, the damned use that word in hell.

Howling attends it.

(3.3.45-47)

The doctrine of life after death is clearly implicit in the play, and yet, as many have pointed out, both the hero and heroine commit the sin for which, it was believed, there was no salvation – suicide. Romeo’s frantic attempts to destroy himself in the Friar’s cell provoke a long tirade from the alarmed Friar and he proposes a way out of Romeo’s despair, since his immortal soul might be in danger. He calms down Romeo sufficiently to make him listen to several good arguments for the preservation of his life. In a later scene, when Juliet comes to the Friar determined to die rather than be married to Paris and break her vows to Romeo, he takes her threat of suicide much more seriously. The tones of these scenes are very different, and an audience could see, perhaps, a reason for the desperate measures the Friar resorts to with Juliet, while understanding the gravity of the possible consequences of what he proposes.

In the final act, Shakespeare omits any of the hints or hopes of immortality that are found in the sources, and a purely orthodox Christian viewing of the ending of the play, without these comforts, is bleak indeed. Having established the spiritual and religious dimensions of his hero and heroine so firmly throughout the first four acts, he seems to abandon their souls at the end. On hearing of Juliet’s death, Romeo’s immediate resolve is to die by her side. He calls the poison the ‘desperate pilot’ which will run his

‘weary bark’ onto the ‘dashing rocks’. (5.3.117-118) There is no thought of the hereafter.

He acquires more blood on his head than in Brooke’s poem, by the killing of Paris, an act for which he is sorrowful, and asks forgiveness. By now a desperate man, he identifies with the man he has slain:

One writ with me in sour misfortune’s book. (5.3.82)

He does ask forgiveness of the dead Tybalt, but he makes no prayer for mercy from on high, as does Brooke’s Romeus.

Shakespeare’s Juliet, unlike Brooke’s, voices no hope that they might meet again. If Romeo is dead, she has no wish to live:

O happy dagger,

This is thy sheath. There rust and let me die. (5.3.169-70)

For the audience, then, there is no comfort of the after life in this Christian play. Juliet expresses no hope of a meeting of their souls. There is certainly a sense of awe that ‘a greater power... hath thwarted’ (5.3.153-4) the best intentions of the Friar. The reconciliation of the two families would be cold comfort to an audience who have witnessed the possible damnation of two souls.

In his introduction to the Laurel edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1958), W.H.Auden expresses his conviction that the lovers are damned for committing suicide:

It is impossible to feel the full tragic import of the play unless one can entertain ,
at least in imagination, the Christian belief held by everyone in an Elizabethan

audience that suicide is a mortal sin, and that suicides go to Hell for all eternity.

In real life, when a sane person commits suicide, it is always possible for a Christian to hope that, in the last split second, he or she made an act of contrition, but a character in a play is transparent; there is no more to him than the dramatist tells us. If the dramatist makes a suicide utter words of repentance before death, then he repents; if the dramatist does not, then he dies unrepentant and goes to Hell. The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is one that could only occur to two people who loved each other very much. Yet the fact that they kill themselves is, in the profoundest sense, a failure to love, a proof of selfishness (p.38).

Auden's logic might convince on one level, but to see this as a play about damned souls is surely perverse. This play has always been popular from Elizabethan times; it is a story of love and sorrow, but not of horror. It is inconceivable that

These violent delights have violent ends (2.5.9)

would have been regarded as the moral text of the play by an early audience. There are other arguments about events being preordained and the importance of the stars or fate which need to be examined.

Belief in the influence of 'the stars' is not a Christian tenet, of course, but the expression 'star-crossed lovers' has a metaphorical significance which an audience would readily understand. In his play, Shakespeare relies heavily on chance, or fate, in the working out of the plot. Here, much more than in Brooke's poem, events are influenced by chance meetings, messages intercepted, messages not delivered, events misconstrued. All these serve to increase the feeling of impending doom, which has in

any case been foreshadowed by the Prologue.

Yet the characters are not merely helpless victims. Franklyn M. Dickey in *Not Wisely but too well; Shakespeare's Love Tragedies* (San Marino California: The Huntington Library, 1966), argues that the overwhelming majority of an Elizabethan audience would believe that a man is free to choose between right and wrong, despite the 'pressure' which some might think the stars exerted. Even among Calvinists who believed in predestination, to deny freedom of will was a heresy. In all Shakespeare's plays there is an underlying belief in a just providence. Although the innocent suffer, the guilty are always punished. Almost always it is the corruption of will (or reason) which makes men agents of their own destruction. In *Romeo and Juliet* it is the collision of the passions of love and hatred that doom the lovers. The audience would recognise in Tybalt a symbol of hatred and anger. It can be argued that hatred breeds hatred – Romeo kills Tybalt in a blind rage, and however much they might sympathise with Romeo, an Elizabethan audience would recognise his guilt. Dickey comments:

Just as love holds families and nations together, so hatred breaks up families, breaks up commonwealths, and represented by Satan, constantly works to unframe God's handiwork. (p.101).

Certainly an audience could recognise the passion of love as potentially dangerous.

Shakespeare's Romeo never examines the consequences of his actions. He does not heed the Friar's warnings about what can happen to those who allow themselves to be carried away by love, and when the Friar tries to give him 'reasonable counsel', he disregards it. It might be argued that it is Romeo who brings about the 'piteous' misadventures, not the

stars. At the end he kills another man and his last passionate act is to kill himself just before Juliet awakes. Romeo has rejected, or forgotten, the heavenly guide 'that hath the steerage of my course', he had earlier placed his faith in.

It is true that in Renaissance ethics suicide was a mortal sin, but under certain circumstances God was thought to be merciful to passionate sinners. In his book, Dickey quotes Robert Burton in *An Anatomy of Melancholy* who says that those who 'suffer' the madness of love have hope of grace, because persons who are temporarily beside themselves

know not what they do, deprived of reason, judgement, all, as a ship that is void of a pilot must needs impinge upon the next rock or sands, and suffer shipwreck..

Dickey goes on to quote Burton's claim that from love 'comes Repentance, Dotage, they lose themselves, their wits, and make shipwreck of their fortunes altogether: madness to make away themselves and others, violent death' (p.373).

There is no direct moralising on the fate of the lovers, but Shakespeare's audience would recognise that there can be a destructive as well as a creative force of love, and that the passionate will can destroy. Whether they picked up the notion that there could be hope of grace for the two suicides is less certain.

James Seward in *Tragic Vision in 'Romeo and Juliet'* (Washington: Consortium Press, 1973) puts forward a view in which the behaviour of Romeo, in particular, might, from a Christian standpoint, seem to hold the couple much more directly responsible for their fate. He points out that Romeo adopts the same kind of language to speak of Juliet

that we heard him utter when speaking of Rosaline (pp.87-88). While the audience would realise the exaggerated and artificial language showed that he was in love with the idea of being in love, the idolatrous terms in which he speaks of Juliet might be condemned. Since the lovers idolise each other, they are making a religion of their passion.

The first ‘conversation’ of Romeo and Juliet, presented in the form of a sonnet, is full of religious imagery, with both speakers equally aware of the idea of the shrine, the pilgrimage and the status of saints, familiar to the Catholic tradition and anathema to Puritans, if not to Protestants. In their second meeting he calls her ‘bright angel’ and ‘dear saint’; to her, he is ‘the god of my idolatry’.

To elevate another human being into an object of adoration more important than God would, in Christian terms, be considered a sin; a similar point is made by John F. Andrews in *Falling in Love: the Tragedy of ‘Romeo and Juliet’* (in *Shakespeare’s Christian Dimension. An Anthology of Commentary*. Ed. R.Battenhouse. Indiana U.P., 1994):

I think it is... likely that the playwright intended to have his earliest theatregoers see Romeo and Juliet as protagonists whose tragic flaw derives from the same source as their strength and beauty: the very fact that their devotion to each other is so all-consuming that it eliminates everything else from consideration (p.376).

He believes that the love between Romeo and Juliet is a species, however refined, of cupiditas – a form of pseudo-worship in which one’s deity is a creature rather than the Creator. Each lover views the other as the Supreme Good. Each accords the other a degree of adoration that Augustine (and other theologians) had defined as properly



directed only to God. Their love becomes a universe unto itself, and when they are deprived of it each of the protagonists concludes that there is nothing left to live for.

Both Seward and Andrews conclude that Romeo and Juliet fall victim to idolatry because they also succumb to passion. – Again, while appreciating their arguments, one is not fully convinced that this interpretation of an aspect of Christian belief is one which would have been paramount to an Elizabethan audience.

The preceding arguments suggest that the Elizabethans, with their Christian background of thought, would have regarded the lovers as guilty sinners. Paul Siegel, in ‘Christianity and the religion of Love in *Romeo and Juliet*’ (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 12 1961 pp.371-392), offers another point of view which reminds us that this is one of many Elizabethan adaptations of stories of disastrous love derived from Italian novellas which was affected by the manner in which they used the ideas of the ‘religion of love’ that persisted from the Middle Ages. He argues that the other adaptations of the Italian novelle have a crudely mechanical mixture of a glorification of passionate love and a Christian moralistic condemnation of it. In *Romeo and Juliet* these mutually contradictory attitudes are transformed into a ‘complexly unified’ attitude. As in Shakespearean tragedy generally, a perception of the hero’s fatal lack of balance does not preclude admiration and sympathy. We see this clearly in his later love tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*. In Shakespeare’s adaptation of the Romeo and Juliet story the ideas of the religion of love and those of Christianity are interwoven into a unified artistic pattern. The medieval and Renaissance concept that sexual love is a manifestation of the cosmic love of God, which holds together the universe in a chain of love and imposes order on it,

acts as a nexus between the two doctrines. Siegel quotes Harold S. Wilson, commenting on Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*: 'Divine love providentially works through imperfect human love to a higher end' (p.372).

Of course Shakespeare was more concerned with artistic unity, but in this play artistic and logical unity work together at the end. According to a tenet of the medieval religion of love that continued to be expressed in contemporary adaptations of the story, joining the loved one in death qualifies the lover as one of Cupid's saints and ensures that the two meet in the 'Paradise in which dwelt the god of love, and in which were reserved places for his disciples' (William G. Dodd. *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*. Boston, 1913. p.18). Siegel contends that it is the lovers' paradise of the religion of love, not the after-life of Christian religion that is adumbrated at the close of this tragedy. He claims that Auden fails to take account of Shakespeare's use of the tradition of the religion of love and its doctrine of the lovers' paradise in his statement about the fate of the lovers. He refers the reader to passages in C.S. Lewis' *The Allegory of Love* where Lewis points out that in this tradition love, at times 'an escape from religion' and at other times 'a rival religion', can also be 'an extension of religion' and even a 'combination' of all these things. He observes that if it seems strange that dramatic use of this tradition was accepted by Christian Elizabethans, 'it should be remembered that it originated in the Christian Middle Ages'. (*The Allegory of Love*. O.U.P. 1936. pp.21-22).

This view of the passionate love of the characters is totally convincing. Their bent of love is from the first 'honourable marriage'. Juliet's avowal of her love for Romeo comes after he has overheard her soliloquy and by this and several devices

Shakespeare is able to show his audience a young heroine who is both ardent and modest. Her anticipation of her marriage night is eager but exalted. Though alone, she calls upon night to

Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks. (3.2.14)

Shakespeare ensures that his audience never loses sympathy with the lovers, even though their love is so intense and so precipitate that it is almost bound to bring disaster. He uses the Friar to warn about the consequences of immoderate and reckless behaviour, but the Friar is in fact repeating Juliet's misgivings when they pledge their love for each other:

I have no joy of this contract tonight;

It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden. (2.2.117-118)

Speed and rashness distinguish their actions throughout the play, and this, quite as much as misfortune, brings about their deaths. The hasty jumping to conclusions and the thoughts of death with which each responds to the initial disaster of Tybalt's death foreshadow the suicides, as do the premonitions, references to death as a lover and the mentions of fate. Romeo uses the word 'desperate' to describe himself at the end of the play, and it is an apt word, signalling his despair. Yet although their love is reckless, tending to destruction, it is glorious. Just before the marriage Romeo asserts:

Come what sorrow can,

It cannot countervail the exchange of joy

That one short minute gives me in her sight:

Do thou but close our hands with holy words,

Then love-devouring death do what he dare;

It is enough I may but call her mine. (2.6. 3-8)

If such love brings sorrow and death, it is nevertheless worth it.

The Friar's response sums up, perhaps, the ambivalent feelings an early audience might have towards the love of Romeo and Juliet in this play:

These violent delights have violent ends

And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,

Which as they kiss consume. (2.5.9-11)

His first words are a proverbial saying, but the rest of his imagery is explosive. This love, though destructive, is also ecstatic. The word 'die' used together with 'kiss' would suggest to an Elizabethan audience the consummation of the sexual act. The word 'triumph' meant 'the flashpoint of an explosive' or 'high-point of spectacular elation'. (NED.2,3,5,) Throughout the play the image of lightning or explosion is a means by which Shakespeare shows the audience the passionate nature of their love, without debasing it. Moreover, destructive as it is for them, providence is shown working out its own ends for the restoration of harmony by the deaths of the children of the feuding families.

Earlier, I quoted Harold S. Wilson's comment on *The Knight's Tale*: 'Divine love providentially works through imperfect human love to a higher end'. The concept that sexual love is a manifestation of the all-pervading love of God, through which the universe is governed, is an extension of the classical-Christian doctrine of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that God, overflowing with love, created a universe hierarchically ordered. The power of love held the universe together, and one of the chief

causes of discord was its opposite, hatred. *Romeo and Juliet* dramatises this conflict.

When Romeo, fresh from his marriage to Juliet, encounters Tybalt, the audience would recognize in Tybalt an almost two-dimensional character from a morality play, a symbol of Discord, if not of Hatred. Romeo's gentle replies to Tybalt show the Christian ethic of loving his neighbour as himself. When he says that he loves the name of Capulet as dearly as his own, he is showing how human, sexual love should work to harmonise the state of the universe. When he is roused to passion in the subsequent exchanges, he exchanges love for hatred, and that leads him to disaster when he kills Tybalt and is banished. His behaviour in the Friar's cell gives the Friar grave concern; he warns Romeo that in committing suicide he would do 'damned hate' (3.3.117) upon himself and that he would lose 'birth and heaven and earth' (3.3.119) by such an act.

'Heaven' is either a reference to the after-life or to God's mercy, which he would lose by such an act; in either case it is a warning to be heeded. How, then does Shakespeare resolve this dilemma for his audience?

The last act begins with Romeo telling of his dream of death and his re-awakening. This is followed immediately by the misinformation of Juliet's death.

Romeo's first reaction is one of defiance :

Then I defy you, stars! (5.1.24)

He will act alone, and he chooses death. His defiance of the stars could be taken as a rejection of the destiny that God has fixed for him. In this view, the traditional Christian view, by not accepting the death of Juliet as the will of God, and by determining to die, he is damned. But it could also be taken as the expression of one who now is renouncing

the world as being of no significance. In this view, the view of the religion of love, by going to join Juliet he will gain the paradise of true lovers. His words to the apothecary in which he speaks of 'this loathsome world' (5.2.81) suggest that he himself has now transcended earthly concerns.

His unexpected encounter with Paris makes him realise that he is about to commit the sin of murder, and he begs Paris to leave him. By now this young husband seems more mature than his older rival, as he calls Paris 'youth' and 'boy'. He shows compassion for him when he dies, and unites with him as

One writ with me in sour misfortune's book. (5.3.82)

Similarly he begs forgiveness of Tybalt, whose body lies in the tomb. There is an air of reconciliation; all enmity has disappeared and love is the dominant theme. His suicide is a triumph over death and fate, as well as a defeat. The 'lean abhorred monster' (5.3.104) will not claim Juliet as his prize. Romeo and Juliet are united again in their mutual renunciation of life. When Juliet awakes and discovers him dead, she goes fearlessly to her death, which she regards as life. This everlasting triumph over death might well have suggested to Shakespeare's first audiences the paradise of lovers of the religion of love, the 'place of endlesse blisse' to which Brooke had referred.

Throughout the play the love of Romeo and Juliet is opposed to the strife of their parents. Although the powerful nature of their love helps to bring about their destruction, it is only the hatred existing between the two houses that makes their attraction to each other fatal. Shakespeare's deliberate alteration of their ages from his sources lessens an audience's sense of their responsibility for their actions: others are more culpable than

they. Romeo and Juliet die because of the hatred of their families, but love, the love of heaven, restores concord and brings about reconciliation through their love of each other. By fulfilling their destiny, they have served the purpose of divine providence. The Prince's moralising words :

See what a scourge is laid upon your hate

That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love (5.3.292-3)

are richly ambiguous, depending on how the word 'love' is interpreted: 'see how heaven finds means to destroy your happiness, punishing you through the love of your children'; 'see how heaven finds means to kill your happiness, punishing you while loving you'; 'see how heaven finds means to kill your happiness, punishing you while destroying your hatred through the force of love'.

Shakespeare has exploited imaginatively the concept of the two attaining a lovers' paradise to further the feeling of reconciliation beyond just that of the two families. An audience with mainly Christian values and beliefs, with this notion of human love as being a manifestation of God's universal love, would be moved by a sense of the richness of the brief lives of Romeo and Juliet, by a sense of the inevitability of the catastrophe and of its serving the greater ends of divine providence. But they, as audiences have done ever since, would not forget the tragic death of the two young lovers who have so deeply engaged our sympathies. The glorification of the love of Romeo and Juliet, symbolised by the promise of two statues of pure gold, could be accepted in these terms by an audience left with a sense of awe at the ways of divine Providence. Christian and non-Christian ideas are unified in this early love tragedy.

CHAPTER 4: HAMLET

While *Hamlet* certainly cannot be called in the specific sense a 'religious drama', there is in it nevertheless both a freer use of popular religious ideas, and a more decided, though always imaginative imitation of a supreme power concerned in human evil and good than can be found in any other of Shakespeare's tragedies.

(A.C. Bradley: *Shakespearean Tragedy*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan.1957. p.141).

Bradley is right to point out the fact that as well as setting his play in a Christian country, Shakespeare makes much use of popular religious ideas and indeed of biblical references and phrases, perhaps unconsciously, from the homilies he had heard in churches throughout his life. Yet along with its Christian background, and the hero's preoccupation with the Christian 'four last things' (death, judgement, heaven and hell), the play also owes much to the genre of the Senecan revenge tragedy, which means that his predicament is seemingly impossible to resolve, since revenge is incompatible with Christian ethics.

The search for the immediate sources of Shakespeare's play inevitably concludes with the frustrating fact that no text survives of the so-called *Ur-Hamlet*, a play of overwhelming significance, since it and (to a lesser extent) Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* are likely to be the most important dramatic influences on *Hamlet*.

The Hamlet story is entirely pagan in origin. Geoffrey Bullough states in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources in Shakespeare* Vol. VII, that the origins of *Hamlet*

start with the story of Amleth told by the Danish Saxo Grammaticus in *Historiae Danicae*, written at the end of the twelfth century and first published in 1514. This saga belongs to a fairly common type of revenge tale in which the hero pretends to be mad or stupid to save his life and to prepare the ground for some sort of coup. Saxo's tale owes something to the Roman legend of Brutus, who expelled the Tarquins after the rape of Lucrece: Brutus escaped many dangers by pretending to be an idiot. Pagan in setting, this story, unlikely to have been known in the original by Shakespeare, was taken over by the French writer, François de Belleforest, who published several collections of tragic stories between 1564 and 1582 under the general title *Histoires Tragiques*. The fifth volume of these *Histoires*, which contained the Amleth saga, ran into at least ten editions. Each edition contained variations from its predecessor. Bullough cites Professor A.P. Stabler, in *The Histoires Tragiques de François Belleforest* (Univ. of Virginia Ph.D. dissertation, 1959), who asserts that the 1576 edition is more like Shakespeare's play in details than the 1582 text, which could point to the time when Shakespeare, if he did, read the work for the first time, or at least might indicate that he preferred the 1576 edition for his dramatic purposes.

Belleforest apologises for the savagery of the story, which happened 'long time before Denmark received the faith of Jesus Christ', when 'the common people were barbarous and uncivill, and their princes cruel, without faith or loyaltie' (Bullough.p.11). There are important differences between Saxo's version and that of Belleforest, among which are the following : Belleforest emphasises the revenge-theme; the Gertrude figure, Geruth, is shown to be an incestuous adultress before the murder, and because of her

silence after it, she is assumed to have been a willing party to it; after Amleth has slain his uncle, Belleforest expands on Saxo's commendation of his courage and virtue, saying he 'deceived the wise, pollitike and craftie, thereby not onely preserving his life from the treasons and wicked practises of the tyrant, but (which is more) by a new and unexpected kinde of punishment, revenged his father's death, many yeares after the act was committed'. He concludes by asking readers to regard Amleth as an example of natural goodness in a pagan age. (pp.14-15)

This story was known to readers in late sixteenth century England, and the frequent reprints suggest that it was popular. That a play based partly on this material existed by 1589 is famously claimed by a reference in Thomas Nashe's address 'To the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities' published in that year. In it he refers to 'a few of our trivial translators' and continues:

It is a common practice nowadays amongst a sort of shifting companions, that run through every art and thrive by none, to leave the trade of *Noverint*, whereto they were born, and busy themselves with the endeavours of art, that could scarcely Latinise their neck-verse if they should have need. Yet English *Seneca* read by candlelight yields many good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar* and so forth; and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole *Hamlets* – I should say handfulls of tragical speeches. But O grief! *Tempus edax rerum!* What's that will last always? The sea exhaled by drops will in continuance be dry, and *Seneca*, let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our stage; which makes his famished followers to imitate the Kid in *Aesop* who, enamoured with the Fox's newfangles, forsook all hopes of life to leap into a

new occupation, and these men, renouncing all possibilities of credit or estimation, to intermeddle with Italian translations.

(Quoted in Bullough, Vol.7. pp.16-17)

This 'lost' Elizabethan play, the *Ur-Hamlet*, probably derived from Belleforest, and, possibly, the work of Thomas Kyd, may well have been Shakespeare's principal source for his play. It was still being performed in the 1590s: in 1594 Henslowe records a performance of 'hamlet' by the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Thomas Lodge saw a performance of it at the Theatre in 1596; he refers to it in his *Wit's Misery and the World's Madness*, recalling a ghost 'which cried so miserably ... like an oyster wife, "Hamlet, revenge"'. This important piece of information shows that the play departed from Belleforest's narrative by introducing a ghost, and as the ghost calls on Hamlet to take revenge, it follows that the murder must have taken place in secret, not in public, as in Belleforest.

Nashe's mocking reference to Kyd does not prove that Kyd was the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*, but it does imply that he could write in that tragic manner that Nashe seems to have found rather ridiculous. Yet Kyd, clearly influenced by Seneca's revenge tragedies, was capable of much more than this, as his immensely popular *The Spanish Tragedy* of 1587 testifies. This play, considered by some to be the first real revenge play in English drama, is notable for the originality of its subject-matter, since no major source for it has ever been traced. That Shakespeare knew of it is beyond doubt, since parallels in incident and detail abound in *Hamlet* and Kyd's play. *The Spanish Tragedy* was, and is still, a powerful spectacle. In it, there is no kind of Christian perspective. Hieronimo is

aware of the biblical instruction on revenge:

Vindicata mihi!

(3.13.1).

He acknowledges that 'Mortal men may not appoint their time', (3.13.5) but he believes that since 'Justice is exiled from the earth' (3.13.139) his private vengeance is justified. It is likely that in the

moral world Kyd has created, the audience would have sympathised with Hieronimo, driven to madness in his perplexity. At the beginning of the play, the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge sit down to see 'justice'(1.1) done on the malefactors and speak of 'endless tragedy' at its close. (4.4.48) Throughout the play there is no hint of repentance, mercy or forgiveness.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare presents his audience, some of whom would undoubtedly have seen *The Spanish Tragedy*, with a much more complex and subtle consideration of revenge by placing it in a Christian setting. Elizabethan civil law forbade personal private revenge, for, as Francis Bacon wrote in the early seventeenth century, the original crime 'doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that crime, putteth the law out of office'.

The Tudor theologian, Hooker, had written, 'with us one society is both the Church and the Commonwealth' – the established church, as well as the law, condemned private vengeance. Yet years before either play was written churchmen had debated the rights and wrongs of dealing with malefactors in the State. Tyndale distinguished between a private person who should never 'think it lawful to avenge, how great soever the injury be' and a magistrate or prince, who was allowed, indeed obliged, to administer retributive justice. Thomas Aquinas also held these distinctions as valid, so both Protestants and Catholics considered that retribution was required of rulers. (Quoted by

R.M.Frye in *The Renaissance Hamlet*. Princeton U.P., 1984. pp.30- 31.) With this in mind, an audience might see that Hamlet, as the Crown Prince, was morally obliged to take action against Claudius as a usurper.

Moreover, in a period when conspiracy and intrigue might threaten the life of the sovereign, Christian doctrine seems to have been twisted to suit the times. In 1584 many Englishmen had signed the Bond of Association which had been designed to preserve the Queen's safety, especially against the Catholic conspiracy to place Mary Queen of Scots on the English Throne. It required those who signed 'to take the uttermost revenge' on all persons conspiring to overthrow Elizabeth, and also upon any monarch succeeding to the throne by this means. This vow, made before 'the eternal and ever-living God', clearly presented no problem of conscience to those Protestants who signed it, and this enigma in public life is one which is at the heart of the contradiction in attitude towards private and public vengeance upon which several plays of the period were constructed. Earlier in the century, the murder of Darnley in Scotland in 1567, by Bothwell, and his subsequent speedy marriage to Mary the Queen was an event that came to the attention of the whole of Europe. Darnley's parents had tried to persuade James to avenge his father's death when he grew up, and the reaction to this in England seems to have been generally favourable. The parallels between this real-life set of circumstances and what happens in *Hamlet* are obvious. Even though there might be have been few people still alive who had witnessed them, when the play was first performed, those events in recent Scottish history were well-known to interested parties in England and beyond.

So how might Shakespeare's first audiences have viewed Hamlet's revenge?

Belleforest felt the need to defend Amleth's actions. Aware of the biblical injunction against private vengeance, he argued that it was justified to avenge a father who was unjustly murdered. Moreover, by branding the uncle a tyrant, he claimed that an act of vengeance against a tyrant was worthy of praise, rather than condemnation.

Although the word 'tyrant' is not used of Claudius in the play (he has, after all, been in power for a very short time), Shakespeare invites the audience to see him as one. Hamlet was the presumed heir to the throne, and the killer of his father is now king. To kill a good, legitimate monarch is regicide, an act to be condemned ; to kill a usurper and oppressor is tyrannicide, and one who performed it might be seen as delivering the people from oppression. Shakespeare shows the elements of potential corruption in Claudius in the excessive drinking, the use of foreign 'Switzers' as a private bodyguard and in his constant use of spies and eavesdroppers. In the fifth act, Hamlet summarises the tyrannical and bloody acts of Claudius:

He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,
Popped in between the election and my hopes,
Thrown out his angle for my proper life
And with such coz'nage – is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (5.2. 65-70)

It is likely that at this stage a large part of the audience would have agreed with him.

By the end of the sixteenth century, all over Europe both Catholics and

Protestants were, in different ways, offering resistance to rulers they regarded as unfit to rule. Indeed, few of those would have denied the actual killing of the monarch as a possibility in extreme circumstances. In this climate, an early audience might conveniently put aside the Lord's command, 'Vengeance is mine!'

Hamlet takes vengeance on Claudius for murdering the King, taking the throne, and marrying his mother. An early audience would have had little doubt that the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude constituted the sin of incest. Shakespeare adopts the incest theme which is so strong in both Saxo and Belleforest. Most of his audience would have been acquainted with the Church's Table of Kindred and Affinity. Hamlet's words:

You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife (3.4.15)

are reminiscent of the stipulation that 'A woman may not marry with her Husband's brother'. This table, drawn up in 1563 by Archbishop Parker, was given full status of law in 1604. The Old Testament (Deut. 25. 5-10) states that a man was allowed to marry his brother's widow but only if the marriage was childless; this was to provide an heir for the dead brother. But this is not the case in *Hamlet*. This marriage is referred to as incestuous several times in the play, and Gertrude is reminded that

Man and wife is one flesh. (4.3. 5)

An early audience might well have felt a moral revulsion at this marriage, since such a match would have been forbidden in England. They might also have been shocked at the speed of Gertrude's remarriage. (Remarriage was, of course, common, and even expected, but usually it did not take place within two years of the death of a spouse). The social and liturgical rites to mark the death of a king were prolonged, and sombre clothes

would reflect a household in mourning. Hamlet's 'inky cloak' would have been the appropriate garb. A dead king's widow would be in mourning for several months, and so by the standards of the time, Gertrude's behaviour would be regarded as scandalous. R.M. Frye cites many examples from the period to support this view. (pp.82-90).

Shakespeare's Gertrude is not a party to, nor does she have any knowledge of, her husband's murder, which is the situation found in Saxo and Belleforest. But the audience is aware that she has in fact married the man who killed him. Earlier in the century, Mary Queen of Scots had married Bothwell, Darnley's assassin, only three months after the murder, and had provoked an outcry in her own country and throughout Europe. Her subjects were so outraged that Bothwell was forced to flee and Mary herself was imprisoned in Lochleven. With the memories of this in some minds, it is quite likely that an audience would not see Hamlet's reaction as excessive – they would probably have sympathised with him.

Hamlet has sought to obey the Ghost's second injunction,

Let not the royal bed of Denmark be

A couch for luxury and damned incest (1.5.82-83)

with the 'approval' of the audience, and the first injunction, to revenge 'the foul and most unnatural murder' of his father, might well have found tacit approval. In these details Shakespeare is following his sources. But in Saxo and Belleforest everyone knows the identity of the incestuous murderer, whereas in *Hamlet* no-one had witnessed the killing, which makes it necessary for Hamlet to learn of the murder, or at least, to suspect foul play, in order to be motivated to act. For this, Shakespeare introduces the 'mechanism' of

a ghost, claiming to be the spirit of Hamlet's dead father. Shakespeare's use of a Ghost to provide the 'back story' and prompt the action of revenge adds greatly to the moral ambiguities of the play. Roland Mushat Frye says of this 'questionable' Ghost: 'By the use of no other device could Shakespeare have told Hamlet of the murder of his father so as to raise so many doubts and inspire so many questions in his own mind and in the minds of the Globe audience' (p.14).

The Ghost was a spectacle and a theatrical device which clearly impressed itself on the minds of early audiences. That 'this thing' is not a figment of the imagination is established immediately, when Horatio is called on to witness its appearance. It is doomed to walk the earth at times, and can appear in specific places and only to specific people, as is demonstrated in the closet scene. It speaks to Hamlet only. At first, neither Hamlet nor the audience can be sure that the spirit speaks the truth, since no one witnessed the killing, but later Shakespeare ensures that the audience knows of Claudius' guilt in his vitally important aside:

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

Than is my deed to my most painted word. (3.1.50-53).

From this point the audience knows the truth of what Hamlet is seeking to verify, that Claudius is guilty, and they later hear Claudius confess to the murder in his prayers. Hamlet never hears a confession from his enemy. His uncertainty about the Ghost leads him to require independent verification.

The audience would recognise that Hamlet was right to be uncertain about the

nature of the Ghost, and they themselves have opportunity to speculate on whether it was 'a spirit of health or goblin damned'. The Protestant church believed that since a man went either to Heaven or to Hell when he died, it was impossible for his soul to return to the earth. In her detailed examination of Elizabethan perception of ghosts, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1971), Eleanor Prosser points out that in sermons and works of meditation people were instructed that 'a soul separated from the body cannot wander in these regions' (p.102). Thus, since a ghost could not be a human soul, it could only be a good or evil spirit. Protestants contended that since the age of miracles had passed, the spirit was almost certainly a demon masquerading as the spirit of a dead man in order to tempt the living. Roman Catholics, also, were taught to be highly sceptical about spirits; they, too, believed it was impossible for a spirit to return from Heaven or Hell, but their belief in Purgatory set them apart from Protestants. Although a ghost was most likely to be the devil in disguise, it could possibly be the true spirit of a departed soul coming from Purgatory. If it were a departed spirit, it would only have come back by divine intervention, but such an occurrence, being a miracle, was extremely rare. In only one extant Elizabethan or Jacobean play is there even a hint that a ghost might have returned from Purgatory: that play is *Hamlet* (p.105).

Prosser argues that the Ghost is a damned spirit, come to mislead Hamlet into offending against the divine injunction against revenge, a view shared by Roy Battenhouse and others. Certainly if the ghost were 'good' it would be an extreme rarity in the drama of the age. Yet the ambiguities surrounding it prompt one to surmise that Shakespeare is deliberately setting puzzles for the audience, since the ghost seems to

belong to several traditions simultaneously. P.N.Siegel in 'Discerning the Ghost in *Hamlet*' (P.M.L.A. March 1968) argues that the Ghost in *Hamlet*, superior to other Elizabethan stage ghosts in that it is both majestic and humanised, 'is a compound of the Senecan revenge ghost, the Catholic purgatorial spirit, and the popular graveyard spook created for an audience prepared by theatrical tradition, by what Cardinal Newman called "floating religious opinions" (as against official dogma), and by current folklore to give it dramatic credence' (p.148).

The atmosphere in which the Ghost makes its first appearance, in the middle of a cold and bitter night, is conducive to the audience's imaginative reception of Siegel's 'graveyard spook'. It is 'doomed for a certain term to walk the night' and has to curtail its story as dawn approaches. It must return whence it came as the cock crows, heralding the dawn, when

Th' extravagant and erring spirit hies

To his confine. (1.1.136-7)

Hamlet's declaration

'Tis now the very witching time of night,

When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out

Contagion to this world (3.2.371-3)

also reinforces the 'folklore' aura which surrounds the Ghost, as does the Ghost's moving about under the earth. Marcellus' recollection in the first scene that the bird of dawning sings all night long in the season of Christ's nativity, so that 'no spirit dare stir abroad, no planets strike, no witches have power to harm' shows a blend of Christian belief and folklore.

Yet the audience is required to accept other aspects of this spectre. It comes from a region so terrible that it cannot be described to mortal ears, and its distress at its plight:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,
No reckoning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head (1.5.76-79)

has the direct appeal of a soul in Purgatory. Purgatory is certainly a reality to Hamlet at other points in the play, although he never gives it that name. One of the 'reasons' he gives for not killing Claudius at prayer is that he might be in a state of grace, 'fit and seasoned for his passage' (3.3.86), so he will wait until Claudius is about some act that 'hath no relish of salvation in't' to ensure that

his soul may be as damned and black
As hell whereto it goes. (3.3.94-95)

He later tells Horatio that in the letter he wrote that would ensure the deaths of Rozencrantz and Guildenstern he had directed that they should be summarily executed, 'no shriving time allowed'. (5.2.47)

Stephen Greenblatt in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton Univ. Press. 2001) reminds us that the Catholic belief was that the horrors of Purgatory were as severe as those in Hell, but there was one important difference –souls in Purgatory would eventually burn and purge away their crimes, whereas the souls in Hell would be in perpetual torment. Greenblatt argues that although it was possible in the Elizabethan theatre to represent the after life in many different ways, it would have been highly risky

to represent Purgatory in any other way than to ridicule it, as Marlowe had done in *Doctor Faustus*. He argues convincingly that Shakespeare, by using a network of allusions, such as ‘doomed for a certain term’, ‘burned and purged away’ and ‘Yes, by Saint Patrick’ (the patron saint of Purgatory), comes closer to representing Purgatory as a frightening reality than any other playwright of the period. He concedes, however, that it was quite possible for an audience not to register what Shakespeare was suggesting here (p.236).

To an early audience, the ‘Senecan revenge’ ghost on one level would present no problems. It has come to urge Hamlet to avenge a concealed murder. Further complexities arise, however, in that the appearance of the Ghost *in arms* suggests a warlike, pagan past to which the figure of Old Hamlet seems to belong and where revenge was part of an accepted code. Yet in this Christian setting the Ghost returns from Purgatory to require a deed not sanctioned by Christianity. In other words, a Christian is charged with the performing of a pagan task. And the Ghost warns Hamlet not to taint his own mind in carrying out the task..

Despite the fact that it has the form and likeness of his father, Hamlet knows that
the spirit that I have seen

May be the devil, and the devil hath power

T’assume a pleasing shape. (2.2.596-8)

Certainly the task leads him to his own death and puts his immortal soul in danger. The notion that it was the devil in disguise might very well have occurred to an audience.

Catholics were taught to be extremely sceptical about ghosts, and to Protestants, such a

shape could not have been 'good'. An audience would accept that Hamlet was right to put the Ghost's veracity to the test, therefore, and for him the confirmation comes when he witnesses Claudius' reaction to the play, saying that he will take the Ghost's word for a thousand pounds. But this still does not solve the question of whether the ghost has come to lead Hamlet to Heaven or to Hell.

In a well-argued section on *Hamlet* in *Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Lewisburg: Bucknell U.P., 1976), Herbert R. Coursen Jnr. attempts to answer the question 'How can Hamlet frame a revenge that meshes with Christian practice?' He puts forward the view that it is perhaps wrong to assume that 'act' and 'revenge' necessarily require the *killing* of Claudius. Hamlet plans the play 'to catch the conscience of the king', and perhaps it could lead Claudius to make a public confession of his guilt. As Claudius watches the play there are several possible outcomes:

- i) an innocent Claudius, perhaps offended by the subject, manages to stay calm.
- ii) a guilty Claudius controls himself under pressure.
- iii) a guilty Claudius reveals his guilt by his expressions.
- iv) A guilty Claudius, unable to contain his guilt, confesses publicly to his crime. (pp.103-8).

Coursen points out that during the performance of the play, Hamlet's desire to inflict pain on Claudius leads him to interrupt the action, with Claudius storming out. If he had not, he might have been able to resolve the problem set him by the Ghost. If the presentation of the play had made Claudius confess, Hamlet's role might have been redemptive as well as avenging – 'the full potential of his play might...have been realised

had Hamlet merely retained his passive position as observer of his uncle' (p.141) – an intriguing possibility, although, perhaps, not one that an audience sitting (or standing) at Shakespeare's play might easily grasp!

They are witnesses, however, to Claudius' private reaction. The words of the General Confession of sins ('the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable') might come to them as they see a man conscious of his sin and longing to be rid of it. He knows that the only way to relieve his torment is by genuine contrite confession. Claudius foreshadows Macbeth in his realisation that he can save his soul only by true repentance and God's grace:

What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

To wash it white as snow?

(3.3.43-46)

He calls on angels to help him to repent, but he cannot be pardoned and retain the offence. Shakespeare shows us a man aware of his own damnation, and this gives another dimension to the play, one which he explores in much greater depth in *Macbeth*.

Neither in Saxo nor in Belleforest does the wicked uncle show any sign of remorse, and the introduction of the prayer scene indicates that this play has religious implications not present in the old saga. This scene allows Shakespeare to 'humanise' Claudius by giving us a glimpse into his inner life, the life of a soul in torment. It is interesting that both Claudius here, and Laertes in the last scene of the play, articulate their acknowledgment of guilt in a way that Hamlet never does. He feels no guilt at

sending Rozencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, and his killing of Polonius does not seem to trouble him greatly. It is difficult for any audience to reconcile their sympathetic appreciation of his plight with his stated reason for not killing Claudius at prayer- namely that he wishes to send him to hell – when he could easily have made it his intention to let the world know of Claudius’ guilt before he took his revenge. This is, in fact, what happens in the last scene of the play.

A sense of guilt was believed to be one of the ways in which God’s justice operated for the punishment of sin and the amendment of life. Gertrude , as Shakespeare portrays her, displays no sense of wrongdoing in her o’erhasty marriage to her brother-in-law. The Ghost had told Hamlet to

Leave her to heaven

And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge

To prick and sting her, (1.5.86-88)

but he takes it upon himself to make her face her sin of incest, albeit in a violent and emotionally charged encounter. In the closet scene he describes himself as a ‘scourge and minister’, claiming

I must be cruel only to be kind. (3.4.179)

In this, Hamlet is following the Christian exhortation to assist in bringing sinners to repentance. Roland Mushat Frye in *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton U.P., 1984) argues that Hamlet, the Wittenberg scholar, is performing a Protestant version of ‘shriving’ (p.66). ‘Shriving’ was not a word used in the Protestant faith; words such as ‘a consultation’ or ‘a reproof’ were used instead. Hamlet is attempting to help his mother save her soul, and he fears that her heart might be too

hardened for her to repent. Her reaction to his impassioned words:

Thou turnest mine eyes into my very soul,
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct, (3.4.90-93)

shows that he has succeeded in confronting her with her sin, but we do not see her much further on the road to true penitence. Indeed, her subsequent demeanour in the play, particularly her behaviour towards Claudius, is open to dramatic interpretation, since Shakespeare does not provide us with a revealing soliloquy from her. Frye concludes: 'regardless of whether Hamlet was or was not very successful in appealing to his mother, he has quite clearly discharged his own moral obligation in her case' (p.166).

If Gertrude does not use the word 'conscience', the metaphorical, or indeed real glass that Hamlet has set up

Where you may see the inmost part of you (3.4.19.)

would have served as a vivid image to the audience of the importance of self-knowledge. Although Hamlet himself does not display 'conscience' in relation to the killing of Polonius and the fate of Rozencrantz and Guildenstern, he is, nevertheless, supremely aware, throughout the play, of the need to acknowledge, or recognise the moral quality of one's motives and actions, to have a sense of right and wrong in regard to those things for which he is responsible. He is never in doubt that *he* is the one who is 'born to set it right', that the Ghost's task places a moral obligation upon *him*, but, of course, this presents him with another moral dilemma, one which the audience sees him wrestle with as the play progresses.

The audience is aware that Hamlet is beset with moral dilemmas, and the ambiguity of the situations that he is faced with admits no easy answers. The option of suicide, for a Christian, is impossible, since the 'Everlasting' has 'fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter'. Moreover, Hamlet speaks of the dread of what might come 'when we have shuffled off this mortal coil'(3.1.67.) in the region from 'whose bourne no traveller returns'. Yet, here again is a contradiction, since his father's ghost has come back from beyond the grave, doomed to walk the earth at night until the foul crimes he committed in his life are burnt and purged away.)

It is in the creation of this supremely fascinating hero that Shakespeare departs so brilliantly from his sources, and undoubtedly, as gallons of ink have subsequently proved, he did not intend to elicit a 'consensus' response in his first audience to his central character. For actors and audiences alike, the Hamlet figure and the play itself have remained popular, intriguing and important from the first production.

While it is abundantly clear that *Hamlet* as a play contains something for everyone, much of it seems to be designed for a learned and thoughtful audience. The important use of the soliloquy forces the audience to listen attentively to the revolutions, if not the resolutions, in Hamlet's mind. Very clearly, and on several occasions, they are reminded that Hamlet is a student of Wittenberg, and the educated among them would recognise this as Luther's university, a cradle of the Protestant faith. It is also true that in some theatre-goers' minds, the name of Wittenberg would be associated with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, since that play had remained popular with the public. Like Faustus, Hamlet has a trained scholar's mind; his 'Wittenberg scepticism' would lead him to

believe only what he himself can prove.

The increasing emphasis on the importance of the individual conscience encouraged the growth of interest in introspection that is a characteristic of both sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestantism and of what can be called 'Renaissance Man'. Self-scrutiny was very important to all ethical beliefs, as was the examination and weighing up of ethical issues. Shakespeare's audience would have recognised this in Hamlet. Mushat Frye (*Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine*. Princeton Univ. Press 1963) refers to a lecture given by Luther at Wittenberg. Discussing man's free use of the means which God has provided, Luther singles out reason as one of these, and comments: 'for God certainly did not give us our reason and the advice and aid which it supplies in order to have us contemptuously disregard them' (p.162). Hamlet's soliloquy on viewing Fortinbras' marching army is very similar to this; indeed, it could almost be a verse paraphrase of Luther's words:

Sure he that made us with such large discourse,

Looking before and after, gave us not

That capability and godlike reason

To fust in us unus'd. (4.4.36-39)

His use of his 'godlike reason' on this occasion leads him to believe that whereas there might be something to admire in the martial virtues displayed by Fortinbras, the old notions of heroism do not fit into the Christian world he himself inhabits.

The supreme importance of using reason, that faculty which differentiated man from the animals, was not, of course, solely a Christian concept. Hamlet sees the conflict

between reason and the passions at the heart of men's actions. He admires the Stoic, Horatio, one who is not 'passion's slave', but until the final act of the play, he cannot muster such self-control, and indeed in the extreme moment he kills Claudius in a passion of anger. A man of his temperament would find cold-blooded murder impossible.

Hamlet's intellectual 'mind set', that of a thoughtful, sceptical young man, would be attractive and intriguing to an audience, many of whom would also understand and appreciate the notion that he was by nature prone to melancholy. This tendency is greatly aggravated by what has befallen him. Many facets of his behaviour accord with Burton's picture of the melancholy man, particularly one for whom the world appears 'weary, stale, flat and unprofitable'. It was no great leap from melancholy to madness, whether real or feigned. Shakespeare makes much use of the 'antic disposition' of the hero, which is common to all the sources, although the device is not really essential to Shakespeare's own plot. Many modern productions have shown a Hamlet who does in fact become mad at certain moments in the play, perhaps drawing on such lines as 'Go to, I'll no more on't. It hath made me mad,' in the nunnery scene, with the emphasis on 'hath', as in the B.B.C. television production of 1990. But Shakespeare makes Hamlet declare very specifically to Gertrude that he is sane:

I essentially am not in madness

But mad in craft. (3.4.88-89)

Gertrude keeps his secret, declaring that he is 'mad as the sea and wind' in order to excuse his killing of Polonius. Claudius finds his mad behaviour a convenient excuse for sending Hamlet away, giving out, and believing, that he has slain Polonius 'in madness'.

you must needs have heard,
How I am punished with a sore distraction.
What I have done
That might your nature, honour and exception
Roughly wake, I here proclaim was madness. (5.2.222-226)

Christians believed that if a man were mad, he was not morally responsible for his actions, and an early audience would undoubtedly have found intriguing the comic dialogue between the gravediggers on the burial of Ophelia. Suicides were not allowed to be buried in consecrated ground, but 'the crowner hath sat on her, and finds it Christian burial', since there is no clear evidence that she wilfully took her own life. The second clown comments wryly: 'If she had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial' (5.1.23-25). The priest seems to confirm this when Laertes confronts him with the lack of ceremony at the funeral, and his sister's 'maimed rites':

Her obsequies have been as far enlarged
As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful,
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
Till the last trumpet...

(5. 1. 222-26)

80

We should profane the service of the dead

To sing a requiem and such rest to her

As to peace-parted souls.

(5. 1 232-234)

The graveyard scene, entirely Shakespeare's invention, is one of the major episodes in the play which explores the theme of death. Actual death, the thoughts of death and what happens after death pervade the play. (We recall that Shakespeare himself had ample cause to contemplate death at this time, with the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596 and of his own father in 1601). Hamlet believes in the reality of heaven and hell and is fascinated by death. His return from his adventure with the pirates takes him straightway to a graveyard where, amongst the graves he meditates on death. This kind of meditation, far from being macabre, was one which was encouraged in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Roland Mushat Frye has the splendid Portrait of a Young Man with a Skull by Frans Hals as the illustration on the cover of *The Renaissance Hamlet*, and there are scores of such portraits and sculptures belonging to the period where a skull as a potent memento mori is to be seen. Even watches were made in the shape of skulls as reminders of one's ultimate fate. Shakespeare's contemporaries would not have been appalled by Hamlet's holding Yorick's skull. Nevertheless, there is a thrill of horror in any audience in the graphic illustration of the 'favour' to which all must come.

In the last act, Shakespeare concentrates the hero's mind on death. In the next scene Hamlet's meditation is not confined to the physical processes of death and decay. With masterly dramatic skill, those aspects of Hamlet's behaviour and actions (notably

the dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) which might lose the audience's sympathy with the hero are dealt with in reported speech, so that their concentration can be focussed on the present. Hamlet now speaks with a calm confidence; he seems to have reached a philosophical and religious certitude so that he can say:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.9-10).

Horatio suspects, with reason, that Hamlet will lose Claudius's wager, but Hamlet is removed from the fray in his thoughts. The words from the New Testament in the Geneva Bible:

Are not two sparowes sold for a farthing, and one of them shal not fal on the
ground without your father... (Matt.10.29)

become Hamlet's

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. (5.2.166)

'Providence' here may have the meaning of 'a particular act of divine intervention', which suggests that Hamlet is willing to play his part in the design of the Almighty. What matters is the *readiness*. Christians have taken this to mean that Hamlet is acknowledging that God, in his omniscience, gives a purpose and direction to human life, even to death itself, however mystifying His ways seem to human beings. As Walter N. King says in *Hamlet's Search for Meaning* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1982), 'to be ready for death means to will an affirmative attitude towards it, and this Hamlet wills in the face of the threat to his own life' (p.12). 'Readiness' for death is essentially and specifically Christian.

It is clear that Shakespeare has not only departed from his sources by the fifth act, but that he is making even more frequent and potent use of biblical and homiletic references than earlier in the play. Scriptural allusions were, of course, common to most playwrights at a time in which they could assume that the audience would supply for themselves the implications of such references. In his *Biblical and Liturgical References in Shakespeare's Tragedies* Naseeb Shaheen painstakingly notes the numerous references and verbal allusions in *Hamlet*, from the Bible, from the Homilies and from the prayer book – the catechism, the marriage service and the burial service. Most of these allusions come from the mouth of Hamlet himself. (It is an interesting observation that Polonius, in his homespun homilies, does not mention God or the Bible once – his advice on how to behave in the world is purely to do with self-preservation and maintaining a reputation.)

As the play reaches its climax, with the emotions of the audience fully engaged, Shakespeare continues to involve them intellectually as well. Martha Tuck Rozett in *The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton U.P., 1984) observes that those members of an audience who were schooled in rhetorical theory would have minds that instinctively sought out multiplicity and revelled in contradictions: 'An essential part of the pleasure they experienced watching a play was due to the encounter of conflicting ideas' (p.38). Shakespeare shows us a man finally avenging his father's death and committing murder in the process. Throughout the play the revenge motif taken from his sources has inevitably been at odds with the Christian persona of the hero, and it is obvious that this ambiguity is intended. As in any great tragedy, the audience would experience pity and fear at the awesome questions it has

raised, particularly about the nature of man and his relationship to God, whose mysterious designs for man remain hidden.

Hamlet has purged the evil from the kingdom at an appalling cost to himself; we only have glimpses of what he might have been, in a play that explores the discrepancy between what a man might have been and what he must become in order to fulfil his destiny. And yet Shakespeare has ensured that his hero retains our sympathy. As Herbert R. Coursen says, ‘we continue to love him in spite of what he has done, in spite of what he may have become’ (p.162). Angels, the ‘ministers of grace’, the ‘host of Heaven’, still familiar in paintings and statues from a Catholic past, are invoked by the Stoic Horatio to sing Hamlet to his rest – this is an almost literal translation of the antiphon in the Roman Catholic service of the dead –

‘In paradisum deducant te angeli’ –

- ‘May the angels lead thee into Paradise’ –

-words which might still be familiar to a writer who could remember a Catholic upbringing.

It is one thing to observe that a Stoic is invoking the angels, but it is another to assert that the hero’s soul is saved. ‘The rest is silence’ – the hero himself, unlike Othello and Macbeth, who both feel that they are damned, says nothing. We cannot determine the destiny of Hamlet’s soul, but the fact that Horatio knew of Hamlet’s ‘readiness’, might prompt the audience to believe that it is saved.

In *Hamlet*, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare has added richly to the sources

of his play by his complex use of Christian ideas. Much of the barbaric nature of the original sources is discarded, which allows for the dramatic advantages accorded to the presentation of a reflective, learned Christian prince.¹ The Christian perspective of *Hamlet* does not narrow the ethical basis of the play; rather, it broadens it, since Christian doctrines and symbols were still the familiar signs by which the basic view of man was recognised in a rapidly changing world.

Notes

¹ The Catholic writer, Christopher Devlin, claims of Hamlet in *Hamlet's Divinity and Other Essays* (London: Hart-Davis. 1963. p.50):

He was a conforming Protestant, with Catholic inclinations counterbalanced by an increasing tendency to scepticism – a man, for example, like... Shakespeare himself.

- This is a perfect example of how scholars have sometimes attempted to see in the presentation of this hero a true reflection of the dramatist himself.

CHAPTER 5: OTHELLO

While it is not possible to produce positive links in composition between the four tragedies under discussion in this thesis, Geoffrey Bullough's suggestion that in the first few years of the new century Shakespeare was much occupied with themes of hypocrisy, treachery and intrigue against innocent people could provide a link between *Hamlet* and *Othello*. He points out that in *Hamlet* the villain Claudius has already succeeded in his plot before the play begins; his campaign against Hamlet is a consequence of this, forced on him to avert discovery and punishment. He argues that Shakespeare might have been attracted to Giraldi Cinthio's *Story of Disdemonia of Venice and the Moorish Captain* (the seventh story in the third decade of the *Hecatommithi*, first published in Venice in 1566) because 'it would let him show ... an intriguer of even greater malevolence, initiating and carrying out his plot to the end'. (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources in Shakespeare*. Vol.V11. p.206)

But there were also other, more political reasons, why this subject might have claimed Shakespeare's attention at this time. Since *Othello* was probably written between 1603 and 1604, it was being composed around the time of the death of Elizabeth and the early months of the reign of James, who was crowned in August 1603. The Lord Chamberlain's Men had become The King's Men, and the dramatist had chosen a setting and a situation that might well be of considerable interest to a Whitehall audience in 1604, who looked at the wider concerns of the nation, among which were the Turkish threat to Europe and the effort to maintain and expand European civilisation.

To people in England, Venice had long stood for an ideally ordered Christian state, a model of civilisation and a bastion against the Infidel. Some of the audience might have recalled that Cyprus had been lost to the Turks some thirty two years earlier, and would recognise the importance of its strategic position in the fictional story. In the play, Cyprus is a Venetian colony, a Christian frontier on the edge of western civilisation. Even after the destruction of the Turkish fleet, it remains alert to the threat of war. During the second act, 'The Turk' is transformed from the enemy without to the representation of the enemy within. Othello himself asks, 'Are we turned Turks?' at the fracas in Cyprus, and orders the participants 'for Christian shame' to 'put by this murderous brawl'. To 'turn Turk', an audience would readily accept, was to become uncivilised, barbaric, unchristian. Othello's final speech, culminating in his suicide, shows a last victory over 'the Turk', as Virginia Mason Vaughan observes in *Othello: a Contextual History* (C.U.P.,1994) :

On the microcosmic level Othello reasserts the myth of Venice; his rational and virtuous self confronts and destroys the irrational and cruel Turk within (p.31).

Venice as a setting intrigued several Renaissance dramatists; Shakespeare himself had, earlier, chosen to explore in *The Merchant of Venice* a rather different confrontation of Christians with those of another faith.

There is no known English translation of Cinthio's novella before 1753, but it is possible that Shakespeare had acquired enough Italian to have read it in the original. A French translation, which he might have read, was published in Paris in 1584. He may, of course, have looked at both. The story, which is the principal source for the play, is told

in a plain narrative style, interspersed with brief conversations. The choice of a work of fiction for the basis of a tragedy marks *Othello* as different from Shakespeare's other mature tragedies, whose plots are taken from legend and history. His departures from and additions to Cinthio's novella show much about his dramatic purposes. The play is full of paradoxical ideas to do with moral and spiritual values which have engaged audiences from its first appearance to the present day. These ideas are hardly to be found at all in Cinthio's tale.

Cinthio's melodramatic tale stresses the theme of sexual jealousy. The wording of the title suggests immediately an interest in a clash of cultures. Desdemona is already happily married to the Moor (he is given no name) and living in Venice. Her family had reluctantly agreed to the match. When the Moor is appointed to command in Cyprus, she travels there with him. The Ensign (Shakespeare's Iago) is motivated solely by his unsuccessful love for Desdemona, and his plot is directed against her. He is sexually, but not professionally, jealous of the Captain (Shakespeare's Cassio). When he imagines that Desdemona is in love with the Captain, 'the love he bore the lady changed to bitterest hate; and he gave himself... to pondering how he could bring it about that, after the killing of the Captain - if he was not to enjoy the lady, the Moor should not enjoy her either'. (p.199). (The quotations are taken from T.J.B.Spencer's translation of Cinthio's story in his 1968 Penguin volume, *Elizabethan Love Stories*.) He decides that he will accuse her to her husband of adultery, and give him to understand that the Captain is her lover.

The Captain is deprived of his rank by the Moor when he draws his sword on a soldier. Desdemona tries constantly to reconcile her husband to the Captain, and from

this, the Ensign conceives his plot, saying:

‘Perhaps Disdemona has good cause for looking kindly on him.’

‘And why so?’ said the Moor.

‘I would not like to come between man and wife,’ replied the Ensign, ‘but if you would keep your eyes open you would see for yourself.’ (p.200).

Cinthio says that these words leave such a thorn pricking in the mind of the Moor that he grows deeply melancholy. The Ensign, emboldened by the change in him, tells him that Disdemona has embarked on a love affair with the Captain, and that ‘this black colour of yours’ has become disgusting to her. The Moor demands proof, and one day the Ensign is able to steal a handkerchief from Disdemona and place it in the Captain’s house. Later, having worked the Moor into a frenzy, the Ensign says of the Captain, ‘he has concealed nothing from me, and he has told me that he has had his pleasure with your wife every time that you have given him an opportunity by being away from home; and that the last time he was with her she gave him that handkerchief which you gave her as a gift when you married her.’ (p.204). The Moor decides that if Disdemona cannot produce the handkerchief, it will be a sign of her guilt; when taxed, she is, of course, unable to find it and he begs the Ensign to arrange matters so that he can actually see the handkerchief in the Captain’s possession. It so happens that a woman in the Captain’s household has set herself the task of copying the fine pattern of embroidery on the handkerchief, and is sitting near a window overlooking the street. The Ensign arranges for the Moor to see her, and this confirms to him that his wife is an adulteress. He then agrees with the Ensign a plot to kill both Disdemona and the Captain.

The catastrophe of the story is crudely melodramatic: the Ensign attacks the Captain under cover of darkness, and badly mutilates his leg. When she hears of his injury, Disdemona is full of compassionate concern for the Captain: this reaction makes the Moor determined to kill her. The Ensign suggests a plan whereby the Moor will not be suspected of her death. He hides in a cupboard in the Moor's closet, and, at a given signal, emerges from it and deals a terrible blow to Disdemona's head with a stocking full of sand. As she staggers to the Moor to help her, he declares: 'You loathsome woman, you are paying the price of your dishonour! This is the right treatment for those who, while pretending to love their husbands, put the cuckold's horns upon their heads'. (p.208). After another blow from the Ensign, Disdemona appeals to the justice of God, since she has no justice on earth, and after a third blow, she dies. They put her body on the bed, split her head open and then make the ceiling timbers of the room fall down on her. The Moor calls out for help; neighbours arrive and find the lady under the beams, dead. She is buried next day amid the universal grief of the people.

This novella has little in the way of authorial comment, and the reader, on the whole, is left to draw his own conclusions. The Almighty is rarely mentioned, but towards the end, after the death of Disdemona, Cinthio comments: 'But God, who looks with impartial justice into the hearts of us all, did not intend that such a terrible crime should go without due punishment'. The story rather straggles to its conclusion after this. Although the Moor begins to hate the Ensign for his part in killing Disdemona, he never realises that she was innocent. He is later slain in exile by her relatives. The Ensign is eventually put to torture and death for another offence. Cinthio concludes, somewhat perfunctorily, 'In this way did God revenge the innocence of Disdemona'. The most

interesting moral comment, however, comes from Desdemona herself, in the midst of her perplexity over her husband's altered behaviour. She says to the Ensign's wife, 'I very much fear that I am one who gives an example to young women not to marry against the will of their families. Italian ladies may learn from me not to link themselves to a man whom nature, climate and manner of life separates from us' (p.205).

Shakespeare's decision to add a specifically Christian dimension to *Othello* ensured that his drama would be elevated above the crude examination of sexual jealousy. It suits his dramatic purposes at the beginning of the play to introduce the need for an immediate response to the threat from the Turks. Some of his first audience would have understood the Venetian practice of employing 'strangers' as the main part of a professional standing army. (Many countries at this time, England included, were wary of creating permanent fighting forces, for fear of their subversive potential, and they commonly disbanded their troops when dangers subsided.) The status of non-Venetian military officers was necessarily ambiguous: they were vital to the safety of the state, but seldom a fully accepted part of it. In the play, although Othello himself has embraced Christianity, he is manifestly different by race. It is significant that as soon as the immediate threat from the Turks is over, Cassio is deputed to take over the government of Cyprus from Othello.

We can already see something of the deeper response to the tale that Shakespeare's play invokes. His skill in transforming a melodramatic story into a great tragedy lies primarily in his presentation of the two main characters (unnamed in the original tale) Othello and Iago, and also in the development of the character of the saint-

like Desdemona. As is always obvious from a comparison of the sources with his plays, we see Shakespeare creating, often from fairly lifeless material, dominant characters whose destiny is of importance to the audience. Here, the unnamed Moor is transformed into an eloquent, tragic figure, a noble hero who is driven to kill the innocent woman he loves.

There can be no sympathy for Cinthio's Moor; he has no spiritual dimension, although he is a man of great personal courage, and high reputation. Shakespeare endows Othello, chiefly by the poetry he gives him to speak, with noble, magnanimous and exotic qualities. An early audience's conception of the Moor would very likely have been shaped by preconceptions of a 'type'. London was not entirely unacquainted with Moors. The most famous North African to visit London during Shakespeare's lifetime was the Moorish Ambassador from the King of Barbary to Queen Elizabeth in 1600; his portrait was painted at the time of his visit. John W. Draper, in *The Othello of Shakespeare's Audience* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), quotes from a book called *Description of Africa* which had been translated into English in the same year. Its author, Leo Africanus, was a Moor of noble birth who had been captured by pirates and sold into slavery in 1520. He was presented as a gift to Pope Leo X, who converted him to Christianity. Writing of the Moors of Barbary, he says:

No nation in the world is so subject to jealousy; for they will rather lose their lives than put up with any disgrace in behalf of their women. (p.169).

In *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Univ. of Florida Press, 1991), Jack D'Amico points out that many sixteenth century travellers depicted Moors as belonging

to an exotic world, enhanced by the notion of great riches, but also often as a physical type with certain characteristics such as dark skin colour, woolly hair, thick lips, flat nose, pinched belly, broad chest and thin legs. Darkness of complexion was almost automatically associated with uncouthness and ugliness, and therefore was somewhat frightening. Moors were often depicted as being sexually unrestrained, though not necessarily passionate:

The conventional European judgement [was] that black cannot be beautiful and that a dark-complexioned individual... [was] by nature dangerously sensual.(p.70).

Travellers reported that they were naturally promiscuous and lustful. The same travellers frequently represented Islam as a religion encouraging the release of those potent sexual forces that Christianity attempted to check .¹

By the time *Othello* appeared, African characters, generally called Moors, were becoming a familiar part of the London stage tradition, and while some, such as Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, lived up to the conventional stereotype of the evil black man, some dramatists were beginning to provoke the audiences to become aware of their own preconceptions. Among these was Thomas Dekker, who, in *Lust's Dominion* (1599-1600) depicted Eleazor, the exotic Moor, being lusted after by the Queen of Spain. There is some sympathy for Eleazor, since his own father had lost his empire to the Spaniards, leaving his son captive in a foreign land. In *Othello* Shakespeare shows considerable awareness of the ideas about Moors which might be present in the minds of his audience, and indeed he exploits them by continually showing the man and the type, as it were, side by side. One set of characters continually uses or invokes the clichés of

common belief, while the hero himself, with other characters who see him differently, sets up a quite different image.

The most notable change from Cinthio is that Shakespeare's Moor has embraced Christianity, and this has profound implications for the way in which an early audience would have perceived him. John W. Draper points out (p.172) that Othello's lines are full of Christian references and concepts. Othello refers to 'fasting and prayer' and to the importance of confession. In the last scene he repeatedly urges Desdemona to confess herself to heaven. He does not wish to kill her soul. (Unlike Hamlet, who says that he will not kill Claudius at prayer, since he might be in a state of grace, and therefore be sent to heaven). Words such as 'damned', 'devil', 'heaven' and 'soul' appear frequently in the play. Othello himself alludes to 'rose-lip'd cherubin' and to 'Christian shame'; when, in the fifth act, Desdemona says, 'Then heaven have mercy on me', he replies, 'Amen, with all my heart', as though in prayer. (5.2. 34-35).

And yet there is inconsistency in Othello's Christian behaviour. In the third act, he kneels 'in due reverence of a sacred vow' to take revenge on Desdemona and Cassio by having them both killed. What would an early audience make of this?

In the 1964 production of *Othello* Laurence Olivier left his audience in no doubt. On his first appearance, he had worn a very large crucifix. In act 3, it was a smaller version, but still highly visible. In the 'Like to the Pontic sea' speech, as he reached 'Now by yon marble heaven', he tore the cross from his neck and flung it away. The message was obvious: Othello was a Moor again.

In 'Egregiously an Ass: The Dark Side of the Moor. A View of Othello's Mind' (*Shakespeare Survey* 10 1957), Albert Gerard believes that Othello's 'superficial acceptance' of Christianity should not blind the audience to his fundamental paganism. (p.99). Although Othello thought of himself as a civilised Christian, his attitude to Brabantio over the secret marriage shows that he is 'completely unaware of infringing the mores of Venetian society, the ethical code of Christian behaviour'(p.101). Othello's address to the Senate, begun with great respect and decorum, suggests a total disrespect for Brabantio's feelings, and a confidence that what he has done will not incur their displeasure:

That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true; true, I have married her;
The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more. (1.3. 78-81)

There are certainly enough grounds to suggest, even to a first audience, that Othello's conversion to Christianity is just that, a conversion; it is not that his beliefs are superficial, but that the faith into which he was born still has important resonances for him. For example, his attitude to 'witchcraft' seems to shift from the early moment in the play where he refers with a kind of ironic amusement to the witchcraft Brabantio charges him with. Later, he talks of the magical properties of the handkerchief in terms which have nothing to do with Christianity. The handkerchief as an emblem of magic clearly predates his conversion – its power to enforce marital fidelity is a pagan analogue to the vows embraced in Christian marriage. Othello's use of the handkerchief to determine Desdemona's guilt shows his denial of the Christian precepts he has adopted.

Convinced of Desdemona's guilt, Othello regards himself as an agent of divine justice:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul . (5.2.1).

Desdemona must die before she betrays more men. This is not a Christian concept, but neither is it a precept of Islam. It would seem that either Shakespeare's understanding of Othello's former religion is incorrect, or that he deliberately confuses Islamic and Christian thought here. At all events, Othello has no doubt that he has an act to perform which is sanctioned from above.

The Othello of the final scene presents the audience with a dilemma; he commits a murder, and then takes his own life. To those who see this as a tragedy without meaning, there is very little of a redemptive nature in what happens to the hero in the last scene of the play. And yet its awful grandeur demands a deeper response. As he prepares to carry out what he sees as an act of justice he also desires that Desdemona should be spiritually prepared for her death: she should confess her sin of adultery –

Have you prayed, tonight, Desdemona?...

If you bethink yourself of any crime

Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,

Solicit for it straight...

I would not kill thy unprepared spirit;

No - heaven forbend! - I would not kill thy soul. (5.2. 26-28)

When she denies the clear charge of adultery, his belief that she has now perjured herself

converts his mood to anger, and he smothers her in a great rage. At that very moment Emilia enters and reveals that Cassio is still alive; he exclaims:

Not Cassio kill'd! Then murder's out of tune

And sweet revenge turns harsh. (5.2. 115-116)

Desdemona's 'cry from beyond the grave' in which she takes upon herself the guilt for her own death prompts him to admit that he has killed her, defending himself against Emilia's charge that Desdemona was 'heavenly true' by saying:

O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell,

But that I did proceed upon just grounds

To this extremity. (5.2. 138-140)

When he finally realises the truth, he feels that he is indeed damned. The sight of his innocent dead wife convinces him of his own damnation in the next world:

When we shall meet at compt

This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven

And fiends will snatch at it. (5.2. 271-3)

The physical torments of hell he sees as his just punishment:

Whip me, ye devils,

From the possession of this heavenly sight!

Blow me about in winds ! Roast me in sulphur!

Wash me in steep down gulfs of liquid fire! (5.2. 275-278)

In his anguish of mind, and cornered as he is, Othello manages to exact upon himself the just sentence which he knows would be exacted on him by the courts for his crime, but in so doing, he commits the ultimate Christian sin of suicide. Modern critics

with an opinion on the subject believe that he is damned. Bethell in 'Shakespeare's Imagery; the diabolical images in Othello' (in *Aspects of 'Othello': Articles Reprinted from Shakespeare Survey* edited by Kenneth Muir and Philip Edwards. Cambridge; C.U.P.,1977.), believes that Othello is damned, and he thinks that Jacobean would believe that he goes to Hell:

His suicide, since he is Christian, seals his fate...Shakespeare does not leave us in much doubt about the eternal destiny of his tragic heroes...Othello shows no sign of penitence, only of remorse, which is another thing...self-willed to the last, [he] commits the final sin of taking his own life (p.45).

David Jeffrey and Patrick Grant in 'Reputation in Othello' (reprinted in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension –An Anthology of Commentary* edited by R. Battenhouse. Indiana U.P., 1994) also believe that the audience would see Othello as damned because he is at the end concerned with his own reputation. They quote St. Augustine, who distinguished between the concept of good fame, or reputation, which is good because it is based on the referral of personal glory to God, and the concept of fame which is bad because it is based on the glorification of the self, and they cite Erasmus who claimed that the 'sole honour that a Christian must look for is to be approved by God, not by men' (pp.418-9).

Yet these comments on Othello's concern for his name do not take into account the fact that now the central point of his life is his love for Desdemona. Shakespeare has created a love which is overwhelming, not unlike that of Romeo and Juliet. Desdemona has become the centre of Othello's universe, and his love for her is a version of Christian

faith. Indeed, the love between Othello and Desdemona is a great venture of faith. Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, this play begins with a marriage. 'My life upon her faith', he declares, and when he ceases to believe her, 'chaos is come again'. For such a one as Othello, there can be no middle way between extremes:

No, to be once in doubt
Is once to be resolved. (3.3.183-4)

As Norman Rabkin says in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York: The Free Press, 1967. p.67), 'he has traded all the mobility he had before the play began':

But that I love the gentle Desdemona
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumspection and confine
For the sea's worth. (1.2. 25-28)

This total commitment to the beloved, which paradoxically makes one more free is, of course, one of the most familiar Christian paradoxes. But Othello's freedom is short-lived as he comes under the influence of Iago. While Desdemona keeps her faith to the end, he compacts with evil, and his end is the suicide of a man in despair.

Helen Gardner argues that of all the suicides in Shakespeare, Othello's is the most morally defensible, because it is not primarily to escape from an intolerable life but an act of justice; he declares his own responsibility for what he has done, and stigmatises himself as a criminal. In her admirable examination of the play in *Aspects of 'Othello'*, she goes on to say that as he sacrificed Desdemona to his ideal of faithfulness, now that

he sees the truth he sacrifices himself 'to die upon a kiss':

No other ending can leave them together in the value they both set upon loyalty in love as a supreme virtue... The play must end by justifying Othello's 'my life upon her faith' (p.6).

Unlike Hamlet, Othello has no Horatio to tell his story, and Shakespeare skilfully weaves Othello's *apologia pro vita sua* into the dramatic way in which he is able to take his own life while his hearers, once again, are beguiled by his rhetoric. In it he acknowledges that he, like the base Indian, threw away a pearl richer than all his tribe, and in so doing he lost his own soul.

We turn now to the 'hellish villain' placed in this Christian context. Cinthio's unnamed Ensign of a 'depraved nature', becomes Iago, perhaps Shakespeare's most consummate villain. Three aspects have been suggested as keys to his character : in part Stage Villain, or Vice, in part a Machiavel in his self-interest and perhaps a representation of the Devil himself, Satan. Indeed, he embraces all three simultaneously.

An early audience would soon recognise in Iago characteristics belonging to the Vice, common in the mystery and morality plays of an earlier age. The Vice acts as a nimble operator, often good with words, who entertains the audience even as he outrages them. Shakespeare had already used this kind of figure to great effect in the characters of Richard the Third and Falstaff. A Vice can be alluringly dangerous and witty, and is often full of overweening pride in his own abilities. Iago's frequent direct addresses to the audience ensure that they feel the thrill of his conspiratorial behaviour, even as they

perceive his appalling wickedness. 'I am not what I am' ensures that they are involved, as he practises his deceit on all the characters in the play.

A stage villain always uses hypocrisy and deceit, with which he misleads his dupes. Shakespeare invents the character of Roderigo, 'this poor trash of Venice', whom Iago uses throughout his plotting. Iago is candid with the audience about his nature and his purposes, although his motives are far less easy to read, since he seems hardly to know what they are himself. Unlike a 'typical' stage villain, he does not rant and rave, but, like a typical villain, he shows exaggerated wickedness and hypocrisy.

Yet Iago is much more than merely a personification of Vice: he is an animated, vindictive arch-deceiver, who plays many different parts as the play progresses. The audience is aghast at his skilful rhetoric and the stage trickery by which he works on his victims, particularly Othello.

If he has much more animation than a stage Vice, although showing many of his characteristics, Iago has another, more recent, theatrical attribute which a Jacobean audience might be familiar with: that of the atheist- Machiavel. What associations this term had come to acquire by the time of the presentation of *Othello* it is difficult to determine, but there is one 'Machiavellian' quality that Iago displays clearly – that of overwhelming self-interest:

I follow him to serve my turn upon him , (1. 1. 39)

In following him I follow but myself.

Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,

But seeming so for my peculiar end. (1.1.55-57)

He is highly contemptuous of 'duteous and knee-crooking knaves', and in a later scene he declares cynically that in all his twenty eight years, he 'never found man that knew how to love himself'. (1.3. 309). His unscrupulous greed, demonstrated throughout, as he acquires money from the rich and foolish Roderigo, is linked with his general dishonesty displayed by the fact that he has often tried to persuade Emilia to steal the handkerchief.

More seriously, Iago is absolutely ruthless in attempting to overthrow the Moor: he has no 'compunctious visitings of nature', and is never concerned about the harm he has caused to his victims. When Roderigo becomes a threat, he kills him, and he manages to kill Emilia as she reveals his guilt. Spivak, in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (Columbia UP., 1958. pp.35-47), identified four Shakespearean criminals who stand apart from the rest: Aaron, Richard the Third, Don John and Iago, because there is no element of resistance to the evils they attempt to commit; they show no remorse, and no repentance, and in their soliloquies there is no element of tension in what they do or are planning to do.

In the last scene, when Iago's villainy is exposed, Othello declares:

I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable.

If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee (5.2. 282-3)

and asks:

Will you, I pray you, demand that demi-devil

Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body? (5.2. 297-8)

This question never receives an answer. If Iago is a devil (which might be demonstrated by a cloven foot) he cannot be destroyed.

Since so much of goodness has been destroyed by the end of *Othello*, it has been suggested that Iago is either the Devil or the Devil's agent. Bethell points out that Iago uses eighteen powerful diabolical images in the play. Bethell rejects the notion that Iago is an atheist, since, because he seems to believe in the Devil, it could be said that that implies his acceptance of 'a Christian scheme'. In Cinthio's tale there are no diabolical references but in *Othello* Shakespeare 'assails our ears with diabolical images throughout the play' (pp.36-40).

From the opening of the play Iago's relationship with the powers of darkness is continually emphasised:

I ha't, it is engendered. Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light . (1.3. 400-402)

Divinity of Hell!

When devils will their blackest sins put on,

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,

As I do now. (3.41-3)

Yet if we regard Iago solely as the Devil or the Devil's representative, the power of this drama is considerably diminished. Herbert Coursen Jnr. argues convincingly that to make Iago a devil is to diminish Othello's role in his own fall. Moreover, 'To make Iago a devil is to create an inconsistency in Shakespeare's characterisation - to place an otherworldly character within the dramatic flow, rather than placing him at the edge of

the central human drama, as he does the Ghost in *Hamlet* and the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*.' He goes on to maintain that if Iago is a literal rather than a figurative devil, Desdemona must become a 'Christ figure', and *Othello* becomes a morality play with an allegory of good and evil angels lurking at the right and left ears of a 'precariously balanced' hero. (*Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Lewisburg: Bucknell U.P., 1976. p.178.)

In fact, Shakespeare has drawn on all these notions to create Iago as a truly evil character. R.M. Frye points out, in *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (p.142) that although human beings may not be devils, they can still do the devil's work. Iago does seem to be eternally fixed in a posture of hatred and envy, but this is not expressed in universal terms as it would be if he were the Devil; rather, his enmity is focussed on the destruction of Othello's happiness. He takes great delight in the thought of ruining the happiness of others :

O, you are well tuned now!

But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,

As honest as I am. (2.1.194-6)

Iago's sin of hatred means that his whole life becomes in all senses antithetical to Christian ideas. He concentrates his wit and energies on making fools and victims out of human beings who express the highest human values – virtue, loyalty and love. Indeed, his speciality is the destruction of unity and love, and one of the bleakest aspects of this play, for any audience, is that, in the world's terms, he accomplishes his task. Iago is the only Shakespearean villain in the tragedies who is alive at the end of the play, and since

he has vowed to keep silence, the other characters will only know what has happened. They will never know why.

Shakespeare's characterisation of Desdemona in this Christian context is the complete opposite: a study of virtue. In Cinthio's story, Desdemona, the only named character, is a virtuous beauty with a noble mind. Shakespeare enhances her virtuous characteristics and emphasises her Christian faith. For his dramatic purposes, it is essential that the catastrophe comes about with speed, and to make the story more powerfully credible, the hero and heroine must be at the very beginning of their life together.

The reason for the secrecy of their marriage is not explained, but the assumption is that both knew that such a union would have been prevented. Everything in the social world of Venice would have been against it. In the opinion of Roderigo she

hath made a gross revolt,

Tying her duty, beauty, wit and fortunes (1.1. 32)

to this 'extravagant and wheeling stranger' who is declined into the vale of years, as well as being of an alien race.

The Venetian state, as Virginia Mason Vaughan observes, kept its aristocracy pure by rigid control over marriage, and the subjugation of the female was a fundamental building block of this patriarchal state. In the play, therefore, Desdemona's elopement might be considered to be subversive to the state as well as to her family. The audience learns from her father that she was a tender, fair, happy maiden, who had not been eager

to marry, having shunned several 'wealthy curled darlings' of the nation; that she was not bold, but of spirit

so still and quiet, that her motion

Blushed at herself. (1.3. 95-96.)

So convinced is Brabantio that her behaviour is totally out of character that he is sure that Othello has practised some kind of witchcraft on her. Othello tells the story of his wooing of Desdemona before she appears, and, revealing that she made the first move towards him, in her broad hints of her feelings towards him – 'upon this hint, I spake' - sums up:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed

And I loved her, that she did pity them. (1.3. 165-166)

Before the Senate Desdemona is calm, grave and sure of her position. Although she perceives a 'divided duty', her husband now has the superior claim to her loyalty. Such a position would be recognised in law, since through marriage a woman became the 'possession' of her husband, but the manner of her marriage, along with all the other reservations about it, would undoubtedly have alerted an early audience to dangers ahead. Members of a Jacobean audience might have known some of the popular Elizabethan treatises on household government, which stressed patriarchal ideology, and a mistrust of 'feminine passions and sexual appetites', for example, Edmund Tilney's *The Flower of Friendship*, published in 1568, and Robert Cleaver's *A Godly Forme of Household Government*, printed in London in 1603. Desdemona obviously has violated the codes which emphasised the need for parental permission for marriage. Iago seizes upon Brabantio's parting shot:

Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see:

She has deceived her father, and may thee, (1.3. 289-290)

for use in his later plotting.

When she urges her desire to travel with Othello to Cyprus, she is again violating codes of behaviour, since wives were always discouraged from following their husbands on military campaigns. Virginia Mason Vaughan states:

Military codes seldom distinguished between wives and prostitutes. Like Emilia, who seems to accompany Iago wherever he goes, Desdemona subjects herself to misconstruction as a loose woman. (p.46).

Yet Shakespeare shows that not only are Othello and Desdemona transported by their love, but that she inspires the highest, purest respect in others. Cassio speaks of 'the divine Desdemona' who

Paragons description and wild fame. (2.1.62)

The reunion of Othello and Desdemona is one of the most sublime expressions of love in the whole of Shakespeare. She herself says little, but what she inspires in others is awesome. Shakespeare has created what he created in *Romeo and Juliet*, a love which elevates the couple above the ordinary world.

But out of Desdemona's virtues, Iago can work his mischief. He lists to Cassio those qualities that will make her especially strong in urging his reinstatement:

She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, that she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested. (2.3. 315)

In her new-found freedom in her love for Othello, she is convinced that she can plead successfully for the disgraced officer, even declaring to Cassio:

thy solicitor shall rather die

Than give thy cause away. (3.3. 27-28)

The fact that she is concerning herself with matters that are outside the domestic domain is ominous, but even more dangerous, as an audience perceives well before she does, is her persistence in speaking up for Cassio when it is clearly not the right time, and to her husband's obvious displeasure. She does not yet know her husband well. Established married couples can read danger signs more quickly than she does.

At first when she discovers that she has lost the handkerchief, Desdemona responds to Emilia's suggestions that Othello is jealous with flat denial:

My noble Moor

Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness

As jealous creatures are. (3.4.26-28).

When Othello's raging against her continued, ill-judged pleading for Cassio prompts Emilia to repeat

Is not this man jealous?

Desdemona then tries to rationalise his behaviour, thinking that something in his professional life is weighing on his mind:

and in such cases

Men's natures wrangle with inferior things ,

Though great ones are their object. (3.4. 139-141)

Sadly, after so short a time of marriage, she observes:

We must think men are not gods,
Nor of them look for such observancy
As fits the bridal. (3.4. 144-146)

She blames herself for accusing him in her mind of unkindness.

Such saint-like behaviour here, and as the play progresses, has led to suggestions that Desdemona resembles the patient Griselda of medieval stories. Her dignity when Othello strikes her in public is the more impressive because of the two responses she does make: 'I have not deserved this' (4.1.240), and 'I will not stay to offend you'. (4.1.247).

Herbert Coursen Jnr., in *Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976) comments that as Othello moves towards bestiality Desdemona increasingly demonstrates virtue:

One descends; the other in affliction grows. In her behaviour Desdemona follows the precept of the *Homilie on the State of Matrimonie* – 'if thou can'st suffer an extreme husband, thou shalt have a great reward therefore... But I exhort... women that they would patiently beare the sharpnesse of their husbands'. (p.221).

In the same homily, on the subject of a man striking or beating his wife, the speaker says:

God forbid that, for it is the greatest shame that can be, not so much to her that is beaten, as to him that does the deed. But if by such fortune thou chancest upon such a husband, take it not too heavily, but suppose thou, that thereby is laid up no small reward hereafter; and in this lifetime no small commendation to thee, if

thou canst be quiet... (p.222).

Male dominance is nowhere more evident than in 'the brothel scene'. Desdemona kneels to implore the meaning of Othello's furious words, declaring that she is his true and loyal wife; he commands her to swear it, and so damn herself. From this point in the play, her imprecations and sentiments become much more obviously Christian – 'Heaven doth truly know it'... 'As I am a Christian'... and she calls continually on Heaven as a witness. By the end of the scene she is completely submissive, almost in the attitude of a victim. Before Iago and Emilia she kneels and declares:

by this light of heaven,

I know not how I lost him. (4.2.149-150)

Yet despite his treatment of her, she says:

Unkindness may do much,

And his unkindness may defeat my life,

But never taint my love. (4.2. 158-160)

She vows her unending love and devotion to Othello, no matter what he does to her.

In the final scene, so different from Cinthio's narrative, when Desdemona is given the opportunity to repent, she is acutely fearful; she makes a clear denial of the charges against her. Her reaction when Othello declares 'Thou art to die' is:

Then Lord have mercy on me , (5.2.56)

and then:

And have you mercy too. (5.2.58)

This is a crucial moment: instead of embracing the lord's prayer and displaying mercy

himself, Othello grows more angry. He refuses her request to say one prayer and kills her in haste at the sudden arrival of Emilia. Paradoxically, when he thinks that she might not be quite dead, he 'puts her out of her misery':

I that am cruel am yet merciful;

I would not have thee linger in thy pain. (5.2.86-7)

Her words 'from beyond the grave' - 'a guiltless death I die' and 'nobody; I myself' put Desdemona in a category of near-sainthood. By them she both proclaims her innocence and forgives her husband.

Her dying words are a summation of what her love for Othello has meant – she had defied all convention in marrying him, freely choosing him despite daunting opposition. Her last words:

Commend me to my kind lord (5.2.126)

are testimony to the fact that she had freely consented to live with Othello, that in the 'downright violence' of her love, as she had declared it before the Senate:

my heart's subdued

Even to the very quality of my lord. (1.3.247-248)

It is easy to agree with Paul Siegel in *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957), who feels that Desdemona represents a much wider force for good within the play. Desdemona 'raises and redeems such earthly souls as Emilia'; Emilia redeems herself by her loyalty, and does indeed 'lay down (her) soul at stake' for her mistress's honesty. In a play where evil is so powerful, there is the assurance that virtue can flourish in quite ordinary human

beings. Siegel argues that 'belief in her, the symbolic equivalent in the play of belief in Christ' is a means of salvation for Cassio, too. He rejects every invitation from Iago to denigrate the purity of Desdemona, whom he calls 'divine':

if, in *Othello* Shakespeare's audience had a terrifying reminder of the possibility of even the noblest of men succumbing to the wiles of the devil, in Cassio it had a hopeful reminder of the possibility of the ordinary man achieving salvation through faith and repentance. (p.134).

There are numerous Christian symbols and parallels in this play. Shaheen's exhaustive *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* cites the many biblical and liturgical references in *Othello* with which his original audiences would have been familiar. Some, however, have more significance than others. For example, Shaheen takes the line:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them' (1.2. 59)

to have a strong parallel with Matthew Ch26, v.52: 'Put up thy sword in its place'. He argues that this scene, entirely Shakespeare's invention, in which men with torches and armed with swords come at night to arrest Othello parallels the gospel accounts of the incident in which Jesus is arrested. The inference is that Shakespeare intended Othello's arrest to pattern that of Christ, but the implications for the drama, apart from persuading the audience to sympathise with Othello, are not immediately obvious.

This perceived parallelism is seen once more in Act 5:

I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,

Killing myself, to die upon a kiss. (5.2. 358-59)

Shaheen and others see this as an obvious parallel between Othello and Judas, who first betrayed Christ with a kiss and afterwards killed himself. If we take the reading of

‘Like the base Judean’

found in F1, we can conclude that Othello himself saw a parallel between himself and Judas, in that each threw away the most precious jewel he possessed.

Yet although a familiarity with the scriptures and liturgical writings would enrich an audience’s response to the play, excessive ‘truffle- hunting’ for scriptural parallels is not always productive in *Othello*. This play, like all other Shakespearean tragedies, presents the audience with far more questions than it answers. In a period where the fascination with paradox inherent in the Christian faith ran through drama as well as sermons, *Othello* presents many examples: the hero himself is unable to reconcile extremes – he can find no middle ground between heaven and hell (indeed, this is at the heart of his tragedy); at the end of the play the saint-like Desdemona is dead, but the evil Iago is still alive. Bryan Crockett in *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England* (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) points out that exclusive ideological categories are not adequate as responses to *Othello*:

The action of the play calls for the audience to respond by embracing contrary terms (p.195).

Such a demand was likely to be met in a period where the intermingling of classical and Christian influences engendered this kind of thinking and was pervasive in many modes of Renaissance discourse, not only from the mouth of the preacher, but also from the pen of the dramatist.

Notes

¹ Barbara Everett, in "'Spanish" Othello; The Making of Shakespeare's Moor', *Shakespeare Survey* 35 (1982), 101-12, challenges the view that Moors would only be perceived as coming from North Africa. She claims that the Spanish Moors, principally of the Berber strain, 'flooded Shakespeare's London', and that 'there can have been very little difference between a dark-skinned Spaniard and an olive-skinned Moor'. Enhancing the 'Spanish' associations with the play, she points out that Roderigo and Iago are both Spanish names. Iago shares the same name as Santiago de Compostela, who fought a successful battle against the Spanish Moors in the 11th century and was known as 'the Moor killer'. She claims: 'Every time the name Iago drops... from the Moor's lips, Shakespeare's audience remembered what we have long forgotten: That Santiago's great role in Spain was as enemy to the invading Moor, who was the figurehead there of the Moslem kingdom'. (p.103).

CHAPTER 6 : MACBETH

Macbeth is the only one of the four tragedies under discussion in this thesis in which the battle of the forces of good and evil is located in one man – the villain who is also the hero. R.A.Foakes, in the introduction to the Applause edition of *Macbeth* (New York, 1996) calls Macbeth a ‘killer with a Christian conscience’. (p.xiv).

There is no evidence of a printed text of *Macbeth* until the First Folio edition of 1623, but there is a substantial body of evidence to suggest that it was written in 1606, three years after the accession of James to the English throne. It has long been accepted that Middleton was responsible for the songs in the Hecate scenes, incorporating new material into an adaptation of the play in the second decade of the seventeenth century. Yet it is by far the shortest of the great tragedies, and it has been suggested that certain issues and themes that are introduced are not fully explored, possibly because of their politically sensitive nature.

Nevill Coghill in ‘*Macbeth* at The Globe, 1606-1616(?)’ (In *The Triple Bond*, edited by Joseph E. Price. The Pennsylvania State U.P.,1975. pp.230-234) argues that Shakespeare’s original intention was to present Edward the Confessor in Act 4, touching the sick and miraculously healing them of scrofula, as celebrated in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, his chief source for the play. But despite the build-up to his appearance, Edward does not appear, and there is, according to Coghill, a sense of incompleteness, which suggests that lines have been cut. It was known that James was sceptical about the monarch’s powers to heal; he had declared, as a Protestant, that miracles had ceased, and that therefore the practice of healing was idolatrous. Janet Clare, in *Art Made Tongue-tied*

by Authority, goes further in suggesting that there could well have been ideological implications in the presentation on stage of a meeting between an English monarch (Edward) and a potential Scottish monarch (Malcolm) which were better avoided in the presence of James. The censor, in deference to James, might have censored any scene which indulged English nationalism by depicting Malcolm paying homage to Edward:

Shakespeare's circumspect redaction of his sources and the play's silence on those ideological issues which were anathema to James may well have sprung from judicious self-censorship. (p.138).

It is possible, however, that these scenes, if they ever did exist, were cut when Middleton made his adaptation.

The main written source for *Macbeth* is undoubtedly Holinshed's *Chronicles*, published in 1587, but other materials, such as certain passages from Seneca (as well as his modes of characterisation and rhetorical style) and the medieval Mysteries are relevant to a discussion of Shakespeare's treatment of his sources in this tragedy with a Christian background, as are also the contemplation of Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes to witchcraft and the use of allusions to topical events. The shaping of this material into a compact tragedy shows again Shakespeare's supreme powers as a dramatist.

While it is relatively easy to show that *Macbeth* has its origins in Renaissance chronicle and medieval drama, as will be discussed later, Shakespeare's debt to Seneca is less easy to demonstrate. The influence of Senecan drama in *Macbeth* is to be found

chiefly in rhetoric, characterisation and design. Such influences would have found resonance in the minds of well-informed playgoers of the period. The esteem in which Seneca was held by Renaissance playwrights, whether read in the original Latin or in translation, is to be found in the many quotations in the texts of their plays. In *Macbeth* the most frequently instanced is Macbeth's 'Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill' (3.2.55.), a recasting of Seneca's 'per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter' (Agamemnon. 115).

Macbeth's constant self-analysis is typical of Seneca's tragic characters. In his chapter on *Macbeth in Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (O.U.P., 1992. pp.92-121), Robert S. Miola points out that the lure of the forbidden unknown, evident in Seneca, is clear in *Macbeth*: 'like the potent, wilful figures of Senecan tragedy, Macbeth yields to the monstrous and mysterious impulse of the soul in terrible fascination' (p.96). Miola gives many examples of heightened rhetoric in the play, suggesting they are probably modelled on Seneca. He regards Seneca's *Medea* as a model for Lady Macbeth, but with an important difference:

whereas *Medea* is transformed by her experiences into something wonderful and powerful, Lady Macbeth experiences a doomed spiral from passionate protagonist to broken insomniac. (p.104).

Miola argues convincingly that in this 'tyrant-tragedy' Shakespeare, in searching to retain the audience's sympathy and admiration for Macbeth, endows him with an elegiac eloquence which is to be found in *Hercules Furens* when Hercules voices his despair, loss and isolation. George Chapman used the passage, too. He translates Seneca's Latin thus:

Why should I keep my soul in this dark light,
Whose black beams lighted me to lose myself,
When I have lost my arms, my fame, my mind,
Friends, brother, hopes, fortunes, and even my fury. (*Tragedy*. 5.4.69-72).

Macbeth declares:

I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have. (5.3.22-26).

Miola argues that Christian ideas on despair, sin and conscience, which are implicit in Holinshed, 'recontextualise Senecan configurations' (p.118). His conclusion that it is Shakespeare's singular achievement to join sinner, hero and Senecan tyrant into one agonised character is an important and convincing argument.

Like all Senecan characters, Macbeth shows resolution in the face of death, but his rejection of suicide, refusing to 'play the Roman fool' as a Stoic would have done, increases the impact of his desperate fortitude. Shakespeare, like other Renaissance dramatists, felt able to pick and choose among acceptable and unacceptable doctrines. So, paradoxically, in this Christian tragedy, the protagonist's refusal to destroy himself, even though he is aware that he is destined for hell, is the more terrifying to the audience.

Holinshed's chronicle depicts Macbeth as 'a valliant gentleman, and one that if

he had not been somewhat cruell of nature, might have been thought most woorthie the government of a realm' (p.488). (The quotations are taken from Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol.V11.) In the first part of his career, he is a successful warrior, loyal to king Duncan. Duncan, although praised for being 'so soft and gentle of nature', is criticised for being 'negligent in punishing offenders'. Because of this negligence many 'misruled persons took occasion thereof to trouble the peace and quiet of the commonwealth, by seditious commotions' (p.489). Holinshed describes several of these skirmishes, often very bloody, after which the Scots are victorious. He recounts the meeting of Macbeth and Banquo with three women. He seems unsure of their identity, 'weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destiny, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie, by their necromanticall science, bicause everie thing came to passe as they had spoken' (p.495). The predictions of Glamis, Cawdor and King are made to Macbeth and Banquo is told that although he will not reign, his line will govern the Scottish kingdom 'by long order of continual descent' (p.496).

In Holinshed, Macbeth never sees the weird sisters again, but he later employs 'certain wizards in whose words he puts great confidence' to find out the danger from Macduff, and 'a certain witch, whom he had in great trust' gives him the final predictions.

In the chronicle, Macbeth's wife, although burning with ambition to bear the name of queen, takes no part in the king's murder. In his play, Shakespeare uses a story from events 'some a hundred years' earlier in the chronicle, in which the wife of

Donwald helps her husband to murder King Duff in their castle. The complicity of the ambitious wife thus intensifies the tragic action of the play.

The Macbeth of the chronicle then rules Scotland well for ten years, until he murders Banquo, after which, nothing prospers in his reign. The Macduff quarrel in Holinshed is attributed to a disagreement about the building of Forres castle, something Shakespeare ignores, apart from the antagonism between Macbeth and Macduff. The discussion between Macduff and Malcolm is to be found in Holinshed, and Shakespeare uses it to effect the slowing down of the pace in the fourth Act.

The final battle in Act 5 is greatly compressed from the long-drawn-out campaign depicted in Holinshed. At the conclusion in Holinshed, Macduff declares to Macbeth: 'I am even he that thy wizzards have told thee of, who was never born of my mother, but ripped out of her wombe'. (p.505). At this, he steps up to him, kills him, cuts his head off and sticks it on a pole. Holinshed concludes that Macbeth, although having performed many worthy acts in the first part of his reign, afterwards 'by illusion of the divels ... defamed the same with most terrible crueltie' (p.505).

Holinshed was as much interested in the prophecies to Banquo as in those to Macbeth. Shakespeare, the dramatist, whilst including this in the 'show of kings' in Act 4, sc.1, concentrates on the moral and spiritual struggles of Macbeth.

As we have seen in the way in which Shakespeare uses his source material in *Othello*, we see again how he creates dominant characters who command the action on the stage. The two dominant figures, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are created out of the

shapeless material found in the chronicles, and are given a dramatic voice through their powerful verse, particularly in soliloquy. All the other characters in the play are in some sense illustrative comments on Macbeth's predicament. The focus on these two characters gives a special force to what R. A. Foakes calls 'Shakespeare's most profound exploration of the psychology of evil'. (Introduction to the *Applause* edition, p.ix).

Some critics have argued that *Macbeth* is not concerned with religion. Brian Morris in an article in *Focus on Macbeth* (ed. John Russell Brown, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) says Shakespeare's play is

hardly concerned with religion at all. There is no Church, there are no priests, God impinges but slightly on the affairs of humankind. The play is deeply involved with the supernatural, with prophecies and portents, with "auguries, and understood relations", above all with piercing analysis of evil, but the other side of the religious coin – sin, repentance, forgiveness, salvation and grace – is no more seen than the dark side of the moon. Macbeth's perspective is from "this bank and shoal" to "the last syllable of recorded time", but not beyond. (p.30) .

He goes on to say that the play

focuses on the rise and fall of a temporal tyrant, whose religious experience is presented as minimal. Macbeth does not so much oppose God as ignore him. (p.33).

But this view would have found no credence with an early audience. Every part of *Macbeth* is suffused with the eschatological concerns of the Christian 'four last things': death, judgement, heaven and hell. Many would have been familiar with Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, a perennially popular play, in which the protagonist, like

Macbeth, elects to pursue a course of action which he knows will lead to the damnation of his soul. Unlike Faustus, who is offered opportunities to reverse his decision during the course of the play, Macbeth, after the initial murder, is unable to retract.

Macbeth is a fundamentally religious play in that its main area of interest is in the struggle in a man's soul between good and evil courses. Here, much more obviously than in Shakespeare's other great tragedies, is a hero who is presented as consciously choosing to commit a horrifying sin, fully aware that he will forfeit his immortal soul. It is possible to argue that an audience would perceive the terrible mental suffering he endures as the result of this action as the just punishment for an evil man. Such a situation is not necessarily regarded as tragic.

Shakespeare presents Macbeth at first as noble and gifted, with the potential for great good. He is not deluded into believing that he has any justification for his deeds, always fully recognising them as evil. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare presented a hero who risked damnation by killing a king, but who also had to obey the injunction of the ghost. Macbeth has no such dilemma. King Duncan is presented as a saint-like figure, devoid of the weaknesses of character that Holinshed had dwelt upon. To murder him, as Macbeth contemplates, is to ensure damnation:

Besides, this Duncan

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been

So clear in his great office, that his virtues

Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against

The deep damnation of his taking-off. (1. 7. 16-20).

The word 'damnation' is of great significance here. Richard Waswo in *Damnation, Protestant Style: Macbeth, Faustus and Christian Tragedy* (Journal of Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies, 4.1974. pp.63-99), argues that the conceptual foundation of *Macbeth* is genuinely Christian and that the aesthetic development of the play is genuinely tragic. The soliloquy from which the preceding lines are taken is a moment of self-scrutiny, and were it not for the arrival of his wife, Macbeth might have resumed his proper role as host, kinsman and subject. But he is weak, and his weakness is one which would have been entirely recognised by an early audience. Waswo points out that the ethical problem, 'video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 7. 20-21) was one which many a Renaissance schoolboy would have known by heart. (p.68). Golding translated it as 'the best I see and like: yet I follow the worst'. Probably the schoolboy would have been taught to regard it as a pagan foreshadowing of a Christian truth. It had become an ethical principle in the Protestant development of the teachings of St. Paul, and was asserted by Calvin and his followers to be a consequence of original sin. Waswo quotes from the Calvinist poet Fulke Greville lines which are a succinct summary of man's dilemma:

But there remaines such naturall corruption
In all our powers, even from our parents seed,
As to the good gives native interruption;
Sense staines affection; that will; and will, deed:
So as what's good in us, and others too
We praise; but what is evil, that we doe.

(Fulke Greville, *The Remains*.ed. G.A, Wilkes.Oxford,1965. p.69).

Macbeth's descent from noble kinsman to bloody tyrant is, in dramatic terms, an intense form of dramatic irony: because he has an accurate moral awareness, and because he has a revulsion for what he is doing, his damnation is the more assured. Waswo (p.70) quotes also from a powerful sermon by Bishop Robert Sanderson which enforces the view that a man who knows his deeds are evil is indeed damned:

how much more inexcusably then is it sinne to him, that knoweth the evil he should not doe, and yet will doe it? There is no proner way to hell, then to sin against conscience.

(*Two Sermons*. London. 1635)

Shakespeare shows the process of transformation in his once-noble character: after the murder he will gradually inhabit a living hell. Macbeth fully realises the tragic ironies of his choice as he contemplates the fact that he has 'filed' his mind for Banquo's issue, and has given his immortal soul to the common enemy of man that they might become kings. The audience thereafter watches his increasingly solitary journey towards his end; indeed, it is witnessing damnation on earth. In this play, the Protestant emphasis on self-scrutiny and the importance of the individual conscience in repentance and regeneration as the only remedy for original sin, serves to help to envisage hell less as a place than as a state of mind. Waswo quotes the theologian William Perkins, considered to be perhaps Calvin's greatest disciple in England, who describes in his *Works* (1.112) what 'reprobates' are like when they die. They 'do become without sense and astonished like unto a stone' (p.97). In *Macbeth* we see what it means to be without sensations – to feel nothing, and to see nothing as having any significance. Macbeth has 'supped full of horrors' and has 'almost forgot the taste of fears'. (5.5.9). His response to the news of his

wife's death is to speak of existence, the passage of human life, as being utterly meaningless, a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury

Signifying nothing. (5.5.27-28)

John Wilks in *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy* (Routledge, 1990) quotes from a 1593 sermon of Henry Smith, whose words Shakespeare seems to have known.

Speaking of the wicked man, he says:

All his lights are put out at once; he hath no soul fit to be comforted... our fathers, marvelling to see how suddenly men are and are not, compared life... to a player who speaketh his part upon the stage, and straight giveth his place to another... If any of you go away no better than you came, you are not like hearers, but ciphers, which supply a place, but signify nothing. (p.142).

In a play full of images of light and darkness, the light of Macbeth's conscience diminishes, and finally becomes extinct, except for the flicker as he refuses to fight with Macduff because his soul is already 'too much charg'd' with his family's blood.

The last the audience sees of Macbeth is his severed head, a brutally physical reminder of human disintegration. It would be too easy to state that Shakespeare has created a hero for whom there can be no sympathy. Despite the fact that Macbeth has wilfully damned himself, there remains a conviction that damnation can have a tragic force. The framework of this play, as we have seen, is specifically Christian. Miguel A. Bernad, S.J. argues in 'The Five Tragedies of Macbeth' (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 13

1962) that there is a sense in which Macbeth is theologically a tragic figure. Although he realises the enormity of his sins and their consequences, his self-knowledge does not lead to repentance, and ultimately he gives way to despair. His soul is damned: 'Having gained the world, he has lost his soul. To the Christian that is the greatest tragedy'. The play demonstrates how 'noble Macbeth' has turned into a 'hell-hound'; it shows 'the fearful downfall of a spirit that had the makings of greatness' (p.61).

There is no eulogy for Macbeth, only a sense of relief that 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' (5.7.99) have been removed from the stricken land. Yet Macbeth is not a Machiavel, and an early audience could empathise with him because he had engaged in a struggle with evil. It would be far easier for them to regard Lady Macbeth as an embodiment of evil. Her motive in the play is burning ambition for her husband and herself, and her methods to achieve the ambition require her to invoke evil spirits to rid her of her scruples. A Renaissance audience would recognise the belief that there was an active power of evil in the universe, and her invocation to darkness and the smoke of hell to obscure their purpose:

Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes (1.5.50-52)

would show them at once that she had allied herself to diabolical forces. She seems to have achieved the cold-bloodedness she prayed for. Even though she retained some kind of humanity when she could not kill the sleeping king because he resembled her father, she is quite prepared to return the daggers to the murder scene, and declares that 'a little water clears us of this deed', as if that will clear them of the consequences of their

actions. After Duncan's murder, she turns herself into the driving force behind keeping Macbeth in power. The glimpse the audience has of the cost to her soul in Act 3.2. is brief, but important:

Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (3.2. 4-8)

It is the first time we see her alone after she has become queen.

The growing isolation of each is shown by the fact that Macbeth no longer needs her in his plans. Shakespeare, in her character as well as in Macbeth's, is demonstrating the wages of sin in this life. The sleep-walking scene illustrates to the audience the essential loneliness of damnation, and they watch in fear and awe the consequences to the mind of concealing an evil deed. The fact that she requires a light by her continually reminds the audience of her deliberate evocation of darkness and evil spirits at the beginning of the play. The Doctor declares that she is in more need of the divine than the physician, and admits later to his king that he cannot 'minister to a mind diseased' or

Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart. (5.3.39-41)

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth cannot minister to themselves; they are already fixed in a state of damnation. So irrelevant is she to him by the end of the action that her death merely provokes his soliloquy on the pointlessness of human existence. Malcolm lets the audience know that it is rumoured that the 'fiend-like queen' has committed suicide (this

is not found in Holinshed):

'tis thought, by self and violent hands

[she] Took off her life.

(5.9.36-37).

Renaissance man regarded the sin of suicide as the ultimate act of despair. The audience would conclude that she exchanged a living hell for an eternity in Hell.

While Lady Macbeth's influence as a human being is for evil on her husband, there is plenty of evidence of the many other ways in which evil pervades the world of *Macbeth*. Mention of the Devil, 'the common enemy of man', of evil spirits, visions, apparitions, abound, and the atmosphere created by the Weird Sisters in the first scene prepares the audience for the evil which is to come. The development of the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's play owes much initially to Holinshed's description. Macbeth and Banquo encounter three women 'in strange and wild apparell resembling creatures of elder world'. Shakespeare uses the precise words of the prophecies that he found in the source. When they disappear, Macbeth and Banquo first believe that they were some fantastical illusion, but afterwards they think that they were either 'the Weird Sisters, the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause everie thing came to passe as they had spoken' (p.495).

Shakespeare's audience would be familiar with notions of witchcraft, and chiefly with the idea that most witches were influences for harm. Tales of witches in folklore were common; the study of the subject by the Elizabethan writer Reginald Scott, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) had been very widely read. Scott attacked belief in

witchcraft, giving many examples of instances where personal revenge and unfounded prejudice had lead people to persecute and convict harmless women. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, Ch14-17.), Keith Thomas shows clearly that misogyny and personal animosity played a great part in the persecution of witches at the time of the writing of this play; there is no doubt, despite what Scott had concluded, that in the common mind, witches were influences for evil, and could effect harm. The subject had an added topical interest, since the King, while in Scotland, had himself published *Demonology* in 1597, in which he stated his belief that the Devil could enlist the services of ignorant women and turn them into witches. In his own life he had encountered a woman called Agnes Tompson, who confessed to conjuring up a tempest at sea when James was returning to Scotland from Denmark with his bride. She also confessed to using the venom of a black toad to try to poison him. (The details of her activities are given in *Witchcraft* edited by Barbara Rosen. London: Edward Arnold, 1969. pp.190-203.)

In the play, Banquo quickly recognises the Weird Sisters for what they are, and is minded to be wary of them. When Macbeth is pronounced Thane of Cawdor, he exclaims:

What! Can the Devil speak true? (1.3.107)

and warns Macbeth:

oftentimes, to win us to our harm,

The instruments of darkness tell us truths,

Win us with honest trifles, to betray's

In deepest consequence. (1.3.123-126).

Throughout the play, their nature, like the extent of their powers, remains uncertain. They seem palpable, yet they can disappear into thin air. They seem very much like the crude, vengeful women of folklore. One complains of being denied chestnuts by a sailor's wife; she can conjure up a tempest to scare the woman's husband on the high seas, but, significantly, although she can cause him great harm, she cannot actually destroy him:

Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it may be tempest-tossed. (1.3.25-26)

The implication for Macbeth is that although they can predict the future, they cannot force him to a course of action that might destroy him. Banquo, to whom predictions are also made, does not entertain evil thoughts; indeed, when he dreams of the Weird Sisters, an act over which he has no control, he importunes 'merciful Powers' to help him restrain

the cursed thoughts that nature

Gives way to in repose. (2.1.8-9).

'Powers' were the order of angels that God had deputed to be especially concerned with the restraint of demons. Thus Shakespeare creates him as an honourable man, who does not yield to treacherous thoughts, in contrast to Macbeth.

The origins of evil in Macbeth are never fully disclosed – it could be that the encounter with the Weird Sisters activates ambitious and evil thoughts that he already harboured. At all events, the audience would recognise that he has free will, since the predictions do not suggest evil means as a way of making them come true. The Sisters prophesy that he will become king, but not how. But once he has murdered Duncan, with the subsequent necessity to kill others, he is embroiled:

I am in blood

Stepped in so far, that should I wade no more

Returning were as tedious as go oe'r. (3.4. 137-9)

Macbeth's deliberate act of searching out the Weird Sisters shows that he has given himself over to evil. The contents of the cauldron, the ritualistic chanting, even the presence of Hecate, are elements belonging to the witchcraft of folklore, which an audience would recognise. Macbeth demands answers from their 'masters', whom they conjure up as three apparitions. Their highly equivocal words form the basis of his belief in his own invulnerability till the end of the play. The Weird Sisters are loath to answer Macbeth's last question, knowing that the show of kings will 'grieve his heart'; after they vanish, his reaction here, and later, is to curse them:

Infected be the air whereon they ride,

And damned all those that trust them. (4.1.154-5)

As the equivocation of the apparitions starts to become apparent in the last Act, he begins 'to pull in resolution' and to

doubt th' equivocation of the fiend

That lies like truth. (5.6.43-5).

His reliance on the words of the apparitions is finally shattered when he learns that Macduff was 'untimely ripp'd' from his mother's womb:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed

That palter with us in a double sense,

That keep the word of promise to our ear

And break it to our hope. (5.7.49-52)

As we have seen in the discussion of the ghost in *Hamlet*, Christians believed that the Devil could assume many forms; indeed, he often appeared in a good light, operating through deceit and disguise. 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' demonstrates exactly this. The Devil's ministers, whether women or lesser demons, are 'juggling fiends'. Yet Shakespeare's Weird Sisters, partly composed of folklore characters, partly owing allegiance to classical figures, such as Hecate, cannot solely be regarded as agents of evil: they are a terrifying amalgam of several traditions.

The two 'visions' that are seen only by Macbeth, the air-drawn dagger and the ghost of Banquo, serve to illustrate his state of mind. An audience would understand that the first was a figment of Macbeth's imagination as he contemplated the murder of Duncan, but they can see the ghost, which the other characters in the banquet scene cannot see. On this occasion, an audience's notion of ghosts returning with a message, as in the revenge tragedies, does not quite serve. Although the ghost is real enough to Macbeth, it is more likely that it is what Stephen Greenblatt calls 'the hallucinatory production of his inward terror' (*Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton U.P., 2001. p.191). As a theatrical device, the spectacle of this ghost is unsurpassed, since Macbeth assumes, wrongly, that everyone else can see 'the blood-boltered Banquo'. Lady Macbeth, seeing her husband 'unmanned' with fear, declares:

O, these flaws and starts,
Imposters to true fear, would well become
A woman's story at a winter fire
Authorised by her grandam. (3.4.62-65)

Ghost stories, like stories of witches, were part of a narrative tradition passed down by

one generation to another (usually by women); they generated a kind of fearful excitement. Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare's use of folklore here is in accordance with the uses he puts it to in relation to the Weird Sisters:

if ghosts or witches could be definitively dismissed as fantasy, fraud or metaphor, we would at least have the clear-eyed certainty of grappling with human causes in an altogether secular world. But instead Shakespeare achieves the remarkable effect of a nebulous infection, a bleeding of the spectral into the secular and the secular into the spectral. (p.194).

Reginald Scot in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* had observed, speaking of witches, that although he had read a number of their conjurations, he 'never could see any devils of theirs, except it were in a play' (p.258). Certainly, in his presentation of both the Weird Sisters and the Ghost of Banquo in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows that he was fully aware of their theatrical potential, whatever an audience's opinion of such phenomena might be.

It is evident that Shakespeare makes important use of English folklore memory in *Macbeth*, from a time when angels and demons were thought of as real, able to communicate some of their powers to men, and to join with them to accomplish certain forms of good and evil. Just as evident is it that in this play he drew on the traditions of English Christian drama from medieval times. Although the miracle and mystery plays were no longer part of the church's propagation of the scriptures, the memory of them remained, and certain scenes of *Macbeth* are strongly influenced by them. Glyn Wickham in *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage* (Routledge, 1969. pp.214-231) points out the similarity of the Porter scene to the medieval Harrowing of Hell. On the medieval

stage, hell was presented as a castle or dungeon, guarded by a porter. Christ, after the crucifixion, but before the resurrection, came to the castle to demand the release of the souls of the patriarchs and prophets. Christ's arrival was signified by a loud knocking at the door. In the various medieval cycles, the door-keeper of hell had comic potential – in the York and Townley plays he is called 'Rybald'. In the Townley play he takes orders from Beelzebub. (n.b. 'Who's there, in the name of Beelzebub?' *Macbeth* 2.3.3) .

Wickham comments that Macbeth's violent reaction to the words that he must beware Macduff is similar in kind to Herod's rage in the plays as he orders the slaughter of the innocents. Like Herod, Macbeth employs hired assassins to kill the innocents in Macduff's castle. The parallels continue:

As Christ harrowed hell and released Adam from Satan's dominion, so afflicted subjects of mortal tyranny will find a champion who will release them from fear and bondage. This Macduff does for Scotland; and in due season, Fleance, who escaped the murderer's knife, just as Jesus did by flight, will have heirs who will become kings.

In an earlier article, 'Hell Castle and its Doorkeeper' (Shakespeare Survey 19.1966 pp.70-72), Wickham emphasised that there is ample evidence in the text of *Macbeth* of a conscious attempt on Shakespeare's part to remind his audience of this ancient and familiar story so that they might discern for themselves the moral meaning of the play. He points out, for example, that Lennox's words describing the strange noises would remind an audience of the strange noises in the Harrowing of Hell plays which warned the devils of impending disaster, and that the figure knocking at the gate was Christ, the Saviour; in this play it is Macduff, the eventual saviour . At the end of the play,

Scotland has been purged of a devil who, like Lucifer, aspired to a throne that was not his, committed crime upon crime , first to obtain it and then to keep it, and was finally crushed within the refuge of his own castle by a saviour-avenger, accompanied by armed archangels. Hell has been harrowed: 'the time is free' (p.81).

In *The Origins of Shakespeare* (O.U.P., 1977.) Emrys Jones, like Wickham, detects the influences of the mystery plays on *Macbeth*, particularly noting Shakespeare's debt to the Coventry cycle. (pp.79-83). He refers to an episode called 'The death of Herod' where, as Herod is celebrating a feast, Mors (Death) enters, unnoticed by anyone. When the feast is at its height, Death strikes and carries Herod off to hell. It is a powerfully dramatic situation, argues Jones, and despite the very different circumstances in *Macbeth* 'it can be felt as persisting in Shakespeare's tragedy'. (p.81). In an earlier play, 'The Adoration of the Magi', Herod meets the three kings on their way to worship the new-born child, who promise to return when they have found him. After their departure, he rages, vowing to find the child. In the next play, his rage increases when the kings fail to return, and he puts into operation his plan for the massacre of the innocents. Warned by an angel, Mary and Joseph go into exile, thus saving the infant Jesus. Jones points out that Macbeth, on hearing the prophecies, rages like Herod, and arranges the deaths of the innocent family of Macduff. (Fleance, earlier in the action, escapes slaughter by flight, as did Jesus). Jones convincingly argues that Herod in the mystery plays is a prototype for Macbeth, and suggests that it is likely that it was some sort of memory of a play about Herod's death at his own feast that inspired Shakespeare to

conceive the banquet scene in *Macbeth*.

He also sees Macbeth as Judas to Duncan's Christ, arguing that while Duncan is taking what is indeed his last supper, Macbeth is contemplating:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well

It were done quickly. (1.7.2)

He observes that Jesus said to Judas, 'That thou doest, do quickly'. (John.13.27). (p.83).

An audience familiar with the scriptures could possibly make such an inference.

Indeed, in *Macbeth* there is an abundance of biblical and religious references, which adds to the view that this is a profoundly religious play. Once again, Naseeb Shaheen provides an exhaustive list. Many of these are closely integrated into the imagery of the play, a notable example being the soliloquy at the beginning of Act Scene 7., with 'the life to come' (1.7.7) and the words in the Nicene Creed – 'The life of the world to come'; 'will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued' (1.7.22) - The New Testament frequently depicts angels blowing trumpets; 'Heaven's Cherubim horsed / Upon the sightless couriers of the air' – see Books of Psalms, 18.10.-'He rode upon the Cherubims and dyd flee: he came fleeing upon the wings of the wynde'.

Many phrases can be regarded as analogies rather than references:

A little water clears us of this deed (2.2.64)

is an obvious reminder of Pilate washing his hands, declaring that he was innocent of the blood of Jesus. Shakespeare's audience would infer that this suggests that Lady Macbeth thinks she can clear away their responsibility for the murder of Duncan by this action. Macduff regards the sight of the dead king as 'the great Doom's image'

(2.3.61), and this association of the last judgement day with Duncan's death is fitting, since it is in reality judgement day for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. His earlier words,

hath broken ope

The Lord's anointed Temple, and stolen thence

The life of the building (2.3.67-69)

emphasise to the audience the sacrilege that has taken place by the murder of an anointed king. Ross's description of the eclipse serves as a powerful indication of the destruction of the natural order after the death of Duncan:

by the clock 'tis day,

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp...

...darkness does the face of earth entomb,

When living light should kiss it (2.4.6-10),

and it might remind the audience that there was darkness over all the land after the crucifixion of Christ.

Much of the imagery that puts an audience in mind of biblical stories has also strong links with the medieval notion of the natural order of the world established by God - the idea of the Christian Cosmos. Macbeth's disruption of this world order by the killing of a king soon has repercussions in the physical world, as we have illustrated. In his presentation of Duncan, Shakespeare has departed from Holinshed by presenting him as a saint-like figure. Although it cannot be argued that Duncan's piety had resulted in a peaceful kingdom, nor that his judgement of men was sound, (witness his distress at the treachery of the Thane of Cawdor), yet it is obvious when Macbeth acknowledges

that he has been 'so clear in his great office' that the consequences of his murder will be the greater because he has been all that a king should be. The ordered relationship between man and nature in God's world is exemplified by the harmonious relationship between Duncan and his thanes. It is the Natural Law, this 'bond of nature', that Macbeth breaks. The greatest sufferer is the country itself. At the end of the third Act, the audience is told of the 'most pious Edward' of England who has received Malcolm at his court. Macduff begins to be regarded as the possible saviour of 'this our suffering country' as he seeks help from 'the holy king'.

At the English court, Macduff enlarges on the sufferings of his country:

Each new morn,
New widows howl, new orphans cry; new sorrows
Strike Heaven on the face, that it resounds
As if it felt with Scotland, and yell'd out
Like syllable of dolour. (4.3.4-8).

The contrast between the tyrant Macbeth and the saintly Edward is obvious. The image of Edward the Confessor as the divinely appointed king, endowed with powers of healing, marks him as God's servant on earth:

How he solicits Heaven,
Himself best knows; but strangely-visited people,
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures;
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,

To the succeeding royalty he leaves

The healing benediction.

(4.3.149-156)

A righteous, lawful Christian king is contrasted with a murdering usurper.

The image of Scotland as a broken and diseased body continues in the last Act. It is apparent that the only way to 'purge it to a sound and pristine health' (5.4.51) is to remove the 'abhor'd tyrant'. When this is accomplished by the saviour, Macduff, 'the time is free', the 'exiled friends abroad' will return and the rightful heir will reign. Such an ending restores the stability considered as ideal in the medieval Christian Cosmos.

The brevity of *Macbeth* does not exclude the opportunity for significant topical allusion touching on both church and state. One theme, treason, pervades the play and is enriched by an audience's familiarity with the events alluded to by its characters. The King himself had been the target of an assassination attempt in Scotland in 1600, when the Earl of Gowrie, violating the codes of hospitality and loyalty, tried to kill James while he was a guest in his house. Gowrie was subsequently slain. In an article entitled 'Lying like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England' (E.L.H.47,1980), Steven Mullaney records the extraordinary events surrounding the death of Gowrie. Apparently, Gowrie's body refused to bleed until James, while searching it for letters or documents that might explain Gowrie's actions, discovered a parchment bag in Gowrie's pocket, and removed it. Immediately, blood gushed from the corpse. The bag was found to be 'full of magicall charms, and words of enchantment, wherein, it seems, he put his confidence'. (*Gowrie's Conspiracie*.1600). The body was taken to Edinburgh, duly found guilty of treason, hanged, drawn, quartered and afterwards exhibited.

Mullaney declares that there seems to be a kind of ritual attached to treason in the Renaissance:

Confession and execution mark the return of the traitor to society, and to himself, even in death. 'Nothing in his life,' as Malcolm says of the repentant Cawdor's execution, 'Became him like the leaving it' (1.4.7). His death was fitting and becoming, in a sense, because it was only in leaving life that he again became *himself* and achieved again a certain decorum of self – as Gowrie did even in death when his bag of riddles was removed. (p.33).

Confession, execution and dismemberment were to Elizabethans and Jacobean a clear demonstration that what had been a traitor was so no longer.

In December 1604 the Gowrie plot was enacted on the London stage in *Gowrie*, a lost play, performed at least twice by the King's Men, and then banned, presumably partly because it represented the monarch on stage. It is likely that this play made some reference to Gowrie's 'magicall characters' and 'wordes of inchantment'. Two years after that, Shakespeare, a King's Man, wrote *Macbeth*, a play in which a Scottish king is killed by a kinsman and a subject while 'in double trust'. The treatment of the subject of treason had obvious significance to audiences, as did several other themes of contemporary concern.

The intervening year, 1605, had seen the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, an event which had resounding implications for both the state and the church, and must have been clearly in the minds of the first audiences of *Macbeth*. The Catholic recusants who attempted to blow up the King and the House of Commons were apprehended and

brought to justice. The Porter's black jokes in Act 1. 3. about equivocators are generally thought to allude to the use of equivocation by the Jesuit, Father Henry Garnett, during his trial for complicity in the plot. Before his trial started, the Attorney General, Sir Edward Coke, said of the Jesuits:

Their dissimulation appeareth out of their doctrine of equivocation... wherein, under the pretext of the lawfulness of a mixt proposition to express one part of a man's mind, and retain another, people are indeed taught, not only simply lying, but fearful and damnable blasphemy. (*A Complete Collection of State Trials* ed.

T.B.Howell,1816. p.324).

Garnett was found guilty and was hanged.

Shakespeare must have been well aware of Jesuitical equivocation; his proximity to some of the men and places connected with the Gunpowder Plot would at least have ensured that. His decision to include such a topical reference might well owe something to the way in which the wind seemed to be blowing as far as the treatment of dissenters was concerned after the events of 1605. The grim humour of the Porter on the subject of equivocation seems to support the Protestant view that equivocation is damnable perjury.

The striking and subtle ways in which Shakespeare intermingles the different dramatic traditions, both classical and Christian, in *Macbeth* could be readily appreciated by the diverse members of the audiences which saw its earliest performances. *Macbeth* is a fundamentally religious play in that its main area of interest is in the struggle in a man's soul between good and evil courses. The war between good and evil is, of course, older than Christianity, but Christian beliefs formulate the moral issues in the play in terms of

the soul's destiny in the hereafter. The audience witnesses what happens when a man cuts himself off from God. From the moment he stood 'with these hangman's hands' in Duncan's chamber and could not pronounce 'Amen' when the servant cried 'God bless us!', his retreat from grace was inevitable.

We do not know much about the early stage history of *Macbeth* but it has, by its powerful themes, remained one of the most frequently revived of all Shakespeare's plays. Perhaps the fascinated concern for the destiny of a man's soul has a greater potency than many would admit. Of the four plays examined in this thesis, *Macbeth* contains by far the clearest moral message. Shakespeare has, as it were, contained a morality play within the setting of a Jacobean tragedy.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In his provocative *Radical Tragedy: Religion and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), Jonathan Dollimore argues that many Renaissance writers were more actively engaged in challenging accepted ideology than has previously been thought, and he examines the dominant ideologies of religion, state power and politics from this perspective. On matters of religion he quotes Marlowe's reputed blasphemy to the effect that 'the first beginning of religion was only to keep men in awe' (p.9), and Shakespeare's Richard the Third's comment that conscience

is but a word that cowards use,

Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe. (5.3.309-10)

Dollimore sees Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* as 'an exploration of subversion through transgression' (p.108), and argues that after the production of this play, dramatists were much more cautious, 'it being forbidden thereafter to interrogate religious issues so directly' (p.119). Since punishments meted out for religious unorthodoxy could include death by torture, it is not surprising that there are few known agnostics or atheists of the period. He contends that dramatists 'inscribed' a subversive discourse within an orthodox one, and he sees Protestantism as intensifying religious paradox.

My examination of four of Shakespeare's tragedies with Christian backgrounds, while recognising that Shakespeare raises many theological issues, and invites the audience to consider them anew, would not support the view that he was aiming to subvert accepted Christian ideologies. It is clear that he knew what he could and could

not criticise openly. The fact that *Romeo and Juliet* legitimately had a Catholic setting meant that he was safe from any accusation of openly supporting the Catholic faith. At the time of writing *Macbeth*, it was obviously politically correct to include in the Porter scene allusions to the recent discovery of the gunpowder plot, and the subsequent treatment of its Catholic perpetrators. Shakespeare knew how to please the patron of The King's Men.

Protestant England approved of art which represented to people aspects of existence that they could identify with. Huston Diehl in *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England*. (Cornell University Press, 1997), claims that Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights invented a new theatre that was, in the broadest sense, Protestant. She points to Hamlet's own use of a play, *The Murder of Gonzago* which he hopes 'will have the power to stir the conscience and move the soul' (p.66). She refers to Protestant distrust of the imagination, and cites Hamlet's praise of actors who refrain from exploiting their creative powers, and of audiences who distance themselves from spectacle and focus on the meaning of the play (p.82). Finally, she claims for Hamlet, and indeed, Shakespeare, that concern for moral values that Samuel Johnson thought was lacking in Shakespeare's drama:

Ideally for Hamlet (and Shakespeare?) watching a stage play is... an experience that develops moral awareness, deepens self-knowledge (p.88).

Diehl admits, however, that Shakespeare is 'aware of the allure of the old images, the power of the old mysteries, the magic of the old theater' and argues that some of the plays explore what is lost when the medieval world breaks apart, and they dramatise the

fear and confusion that ensue:

Iconoclasm is liberating and exhilarating, it is also disturbing and even terrifying (p.217).

In her discussion of iconoclasm, she names Iago as the supreme iconoclast. The relationship of Othello and Desdemona is something almost holy which Iago delights in destroying. The inference is that this could be a reminder that many of the images Protestants destroyed were of idealised representations of holy women (p.159). She speaks of several Renaissance tragedies, and *Othello* in particular:

The violence against beautiful and beloved women that is repeatedly enacted in these tragedies may, in fact, be informed by the iconoclastic violence against beautiful and beloved images that was such a significant, and disruptive, dimension of the English Reformation (p.158).

This argument persuades us to believe that the distress an audience experiences at the destruction of 'the divine Desdemona' (an epithet which, I argued in Chapter 5, was deliberately intended to raise her above the common perception of womankind) could, in part, be caused by the reminder of the violent breaking of sacred images in the Reformation.

In the plays discussed in this thesis, there is some evidence to suggest that Shakespeare is harking back to a time when ritual and ceremony were a more important part of religious observance, and this can be seen most clearly in *Hamlet*. For over fifty years Protestant priests had been attempting to wean their flocks away from elaborate ceremonial; images had been smashed, the altars had been stripped, and excessive mourning for the dead had been discouraged. Greenblatt in *Hamlet in Purgatory* (pp.245-

254) has pointed out that Catholics had important rituals for managing grief, such as praying for the souls of the dead, wearing mourning clothes and the observance of known funeral rites. He cites the dispute over Ophelia's funeral ceremony in *Hamlet* as an 'overarching phenomenon' in the play: 'the disruption or poisoning of virtually all rituals for managing grief, allaying personal and collective anxiety, and restoring order'. He notes that it is Claudius, the poisoner and usurper, who uses the language of Protestant mourning when he upbraids Hamlet for his 'obstinate condolment':

It is a course
Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschooled. (1.2.93-97)

Greenblatt poses the question: why should Shakespeare have given the Protestant position to his arch-villain?

He goes on to explore the arguments for Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies which I have outlined in the first chapter, putting forward the possibility that Shakespeare felt a 'covert loyalty' to the weakened and damaged structures of the Catholic faith. This is a view with which I would agree .

The plays I have examined were probably written and first performed between

1594 and 1606, and the diversity of their subjects testifies to the ease with which Shakespeare was exploring the tragic mode. The reality of censorship promoted the need to explore ways of employing ambiguity, and Shakespeare's extensive use of metaphor and paradox meant that he left open the possibility of many interpretations of his words – herein lies a large measure of his genius. As Bryan Crockett has pointed out in *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England*. (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), the fascination with Christian paradox runs through the Reformation/Renaissance period, and numerous examples are to be found in sermons and in plays:

The period's peculiar intermingling of Classical and Christian influences engenders and nurtures this kind of thinking, so that paradox becomes pervasive in various modes of Renaissance discourse... Part of the appeal of paradox in a time of considerable censorship may have been its ideological slipperiness... Whether employed by the philosopher, the politician, the preacher, or the playwright, the paradox becomes an extremely versatile and effective rhetorical tool (p.21).

Shakespeare's ability to appropriate and transform the materials he had at his disposal for the creation of these tragedies shows how well he understood the craft of the playwright and the power of the drama. Ambiguity frequently lies at the heart of all great works of literature. In *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* we see the paradox of sublime love causing catastrophe and death, as well as reconciliation; in *Hamlet* we see the dilemma of a man who, in order to fulfil a binding command, initiates the overthrow of a usurper but at the cost of the destruction of many; in *Macbeth* we see a soul damned by his

deliberate choice of evil over virtue. In these four plays Shakespeare is working within the framework of the Protestant order, with, I believe, some Catholic sympathies, but while there is evidence of the Renaissance man's growing scepticism, there is no evidence of an attempt to subvert in matters of faith. There was much for early audiences to ponder in these plays. The Christian dimension enriches, but does not simplify, the issues they explore.

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