

Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises

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Because some thirty years ago I described Shakespeare's tragedies as written from Christian premises, I have been requested to review what those premises are, and to comment on their significance. Along the way, I shall relate some of the circumstances amid which I came to discover the presence of a Christian understanding in Shakespeare.

Let me begin by saying that literary theory is a topic whose importance caught my attention long ago. During my Graduate School days I chose for my doctoral dissertation a study of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, because the hero of this tragedy was at that time being interpreted as the author's mouthpiece for his revolutionary free thought. According to Una Ellis-Fermor, for instance, Marlowe was "on the verge of formulating the idea that the spirit and 'desire' of man are neither more nor less than God in man," an idea she welcomed.¹ To me, however, it sounded like the Prometheanism of Shelley; and I disliked, moreover, its supposition that a drama is a canvas on which an author paints his aspirations. Yet that was the premise of a whole raft of theorists then dominating the study of Marlowe. John Bakeless, for example, likened Marlowe to Thomas Hardy, and went on to explain that for such authors the tragic hero falls not because of any flaw in his character, but because he comes into conflict with "forces that grudge to humanity all that mere mortals shall not attain."² This theory, it seemed to me, turned tragedy into a story of a universe hostile to mankind.

Such was not the understanding of tragedy I found voiced by Elizabethan theorists. Most of them regarded tragedies as providing the reader an object lesson in the vanity of worldly glory and the punishment of vice. I had the good fortune in the 1930s that the prevailing horizons of scholarship had begun to be challenged by a historicist named Lily

B. Campbell. Her book on *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* issued a call to return to Elizabethan standards of judgment and supported this with a display of evidence. So I followed her lead by reading widely in Renaissance authors, noting in particular the judgments they made of Tamburlaine and their understanding of history in general. And when I had assembled evidence that the premises of Raleigh, Nashe, Whetstone, Du Bartas, and other Renaissance humanists relied on premises that governed also Marlowe's dramas, I argued this thesis in a book titled *Marlowe's Tamburlaine: A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy*, published in 1941.

Marlowe scholarship in subsequent years has become, in the main, a contest between scholars who have continued to rely on Romantic premises, such as Paul Kocher and Harry Levin, and historicists using premises held by Elizabethan Christians. The latter group has included Douglas Cole, Charles Masinton, and R. M. Cornelius. Cornelius' book on *Marlowe's Use of the Bible* (1985) catalogs more than a thousand allusions to or echoes of the Bible in Marlowe's works. It points up, moreover, how his tragic heroes are characterized by vices that contrast with the virtues of Job and Christ. Earlier, in 1962, Douglas Cole's book concluded that "Marlowe's essential view of the causes of evil in human experience is no different from the orthodox Christian one," and that Marlowe "shares ultimately with both Dante and Shakespeare" his conception of tragic fate.³

I had not claimed quite that much. I had said that Marlowe's views are in tune with those of his Protestant contemporaries, but that Shakespearean drama seemed to me to belong to a somewhat different camp. I made at that time no attempt to name that different camp. But gradually, through subsequent study, I have come to realize that Shakespeare's art is more attuned to Catholic orthodoxy than Marlowe's and rests on premises in Augustine, Dante, and Aquinas, some of which Marlowe lacks. I shall try in the present essay to describe and illustrate the premises involved.

The moral philosophy of Elizabethan Protestants, my book on *Tamburlaine* indicated, was an amalgam of Bible lore, Platonism and Stoicism. Of central importance was belief in a God who punishes. The Almighty, so Du Bartas insisted, is not a "sleeping Dormouse"; rather,

he is "the Judge, who keeps continuall Sessions / In every place to punish all Transgressions."⁴ Thomas Beard's popular *Theatre of God's Judgments* (1597) was filled with stories of the disasters visited on vicious men "by the prescription of God's will." Protestant followers of Calvin dismissed the concept of contingent events and regarded Fortune as simply "God himself disguised under another name."⁵ Sir Walter Raleigh, in his *History of the World* (1614), goes so far as to call God "the author of all our tragedies." God has "written out for us," says Raleigh, "all the parts we are to play."⁶ This metaphor comes from Plotinus, a Neoplatonist much admired in the Renaissance. He had likened God to a dramatist who assigns individual souls their roles in a stageplay. Plotinus was praised by Philip Sidney's friend, the Huguenot Philip Mornay, for having taught providence "as though he had meant to say the same thing we read in the Gospel." Mornay advises his readers, moreover, to turn to the opinions of Seneca and Epictetus and there note "how conformable the things which Christians teach, are to the wisdom of the best among the Heathen."⁷

Now this kind of apologetic, let me suggest, risks a scanting of what is unique in Christian belief, namely God's activity in redeeming mankind. When the Calvinist John Studley praises Seneca as "that . . . Most Christian Ethnike," and when Thomas Lodge says that Seneca's "divine sentences" and "serious exclamations against vices" might well put Christians to shame, these Elizabethans are forgetting to add that Christian teaching goes beyond a Senecan beating down of sin to emphasize God's intervening to rescue sinners. Calvin, of course, went beyond Seneca by teaching that God uses punishments not only to condemn sin but also to persuade sinners to flee to God's forgiveness; yet Calvin's doctrine that God forgives by imputing righteousness rather than enabling right action tends to dilute the traditional idea of conquering sin. Catholic theologians had likened God to the general of an army,⁸ but the Plotinian metaphor of God as a dramatist assigning roles is rather akin to Calvin's idea of predestination. Calvin's version of double predestination, readers may recall, was supported by England's delegates to the Synod of Dort but was disapproved by theologians such as Lancelot Andrewes.

I am mentioning these subtle points because, it seems to me, Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, involving as they do not only a punishing of the tyrant but also a deliverance of the nation by a God-serving captain, rest on premises that go beyond those of Marlowe. That is, Shakespeare relied on a more fully traditional understanding of human nature and destiny and of history in general. Let me illustrate this observation with some comparative evidence. Tamburlaine as depicted by Marlowe dies from God's visiting him with sickness, an internal heat. A physician calls it "the fury of your fit" (5.3.79),⁹ and Tamburlaine exhibits this by threatening to storm heaven. A similar fury characterizes the dying Duke of Guise in Marlowe's *Massacre of Paris*. We see this wholesale murderer refusing a suggestion that he pray to God for forgiveness; instead, he keeps shouting "*Vive la messe! perish Huguenots*" (18.86). Such death scenes take their model from Seneca—for instance, *The Thebais*, which shows Oedipus punished with his own rage, and Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, in which the hero's mad passions reach a climax in his blasphemous proposal to invade heaven. Corroborating this view of tragedy, probably, was Calvin's teaching that ungodly persons are punished with an insane self-confidence and the headlong passions that plunge them into ruin.¹⁰ In *The Jew of Malta* Barabas perishes when he boasts to the Governor of Malta how he will plunge enemies into a pot of boiling oil, whereby he prompts the Governor to turn this ruin on Barabas himself. Amid "intolerable pangs" of heat Barabas dies with the defiant cry, "Tongue, curse thy fill and die" (5.5.88-89).

The deaths of Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Macbeth* have a quality notably different. Richard, it is true, suffers torments, but they are pricks of conscience caused by ghosts who make him feel guilty of his sins. The Protestant historiographer Hall had described these visitants as "images lyke terrible develles which pulled and haled him"; the anonymous author of *The True Tragedy of Richard III* had depicted them as ghosts "gaping for revenge" and accompanied by a raven's croaking.¹¹ But Shakespeare presents them as human visitants rather than devils or croaking revengers. They simply consign Richard to despair, while for Richmond they offer prayers. They are referred to

by Richard as "holy saints and wronged souls," whose prayers betoken God's fighting on Richmond's side (5.3.241).¹²

They are indeed "wronged souls," but some readers may wonder why any of them can be called holy or saintly. Is it perhaps because each has had a contrite state of heart when dying? Henry VI, we may recall, died with the words, "O God forgive my sins" (3H6 5.6.60). Clarence we have seen blaming himself for oath-breaking and other injustices as he dies. We have seen Buckingham turn repentant and seek to join Richmond, and then accept his own death as God's just respite for the wrongs he has done. Very conspicuously, we have seen Hastings on his deathbed declare, "I now repent" (R3 3.4.88). What Hastings specifically laments is his having preferred the "grace of mortal men" (3.4.96) ahead of the grace of God. And when he later reappears in the Ghost scene, he is praying that Richmond "conquer for fair England's sake" (5.3.158). The ghost of Buckingham tells us, "I died for hope" (5.3.173), and we hear him praying to "God and good angels" (5.3.175) to aid Richmond. Since all these souls now pray for England's deliverance from evil, we may infer that this good will in them has come about through a conversion. Evidently, Richard's evil has been used by Providence to elicit a goodness in these victims.

There is a special significance, moreover, in Shakespeare's placing the ghosts on All Soul's Eve. For as Emrys Jones has pointed out,¹³ medieval Christians believed this was a time when souls in Purgatory might be expected to appear to persons on earth who had wronged them and also to petition faithful folk to redress the wrong. All Soul's Day itself was a commemorating of the faithful dead through acts of almsgiving on their behalf. Is not such a commemoration shown us in Shakespeare's play? Henry Richmond, who has said on All Soul's Eve that he accounts himself a "captain" under God's "gracious eye" (5.3.108-09) now on All Soul's Day leads his "loving countrymen" (5.3.237) to put down the tyrant "in the name of God"—and in doing so refers to his body as a "ransom" (5.3.263, 265). Evidently, a medieval Christian understanding of God's remedy for sin underlies this scene. Also, apparently, a belief in Purgatory.

In Act 3 we heard Hastings identify the basic cause of human evil as a neglecting of the grace of God by preferring "the grace of mortal

men" (3.4.96). This point reappears in the reply Queen Elizabeth gives when Richard tempts her. Richard offers the graces of worldly honor and Fortune's favors in return for the hand of Elizabeth's daughter in marriage. The death of her princelings he ascribes to ill stars and declares fatalistically: "All unavoided is the doom of destiny" (4.4.218). A canny Elizabeth replies: "True, when *avoided grace* [emphasis added] makes destiny" (4.4.219). She goes on to say that

My babes were destin'd to a fairer death
If grace had blessed thee with a fairer life. (4.4.220-21)

In other words, they have been deprived of a fair death by Richard's lack of divine grace, a blessing he avoided. To parry his present lures, Elizabeth goes on to point out that Richard has both misused himself and also wronged God. Her preferring of some other grace than Richard's is, for Shakespeare, the turning point in his defeat. The turning began when the imprisoning of her babes prompted Elizabeth to bid Dorset to flee to Richmond, who earlier had been prophesied as England's saviour in a heavenly inspiration given Henry VI. But the finalizing of Elizabeth's conversion takes place as she ponders what she has learned from Richard's Herod-like massacre of her Innocents.

Let us focus next on the role of Stanley, Earl of Derby. He has encouraged Elizabeth in her early decision; and, before that, he has tried to save Hastings by confiding to him a heaven-sent dream. Hastings in dismissing that dream was avoiding a gift of grace (in contrast, let us say, to the Bible's Magi, who escaped from Herod when warned from God in a dream). We may ask what Stanley has done to merit the dream given him. Earlier, he has knelt to beg King Edward to pardon a guilty servant; and, in a scene before that, we hear him ask Queen Elizabeth to "bear with" the arrogance Elizabeth perceived in Stanley's wife, to treat it as a "weakness" (1.3.28). My point is a theological one, namely, that Stanley by his act of gracious virtue has made himself a fit person for the gift of a saving dream. Though he has not earned it, he has merited it. Here we can see reflected the teaching of Augustine, that liberty of choice, human free will, can contribute to salvation.¹⁴ Augustine would see nothing Pelagian, surely, when Stanley acts on

his dream by proposing to Hastings, "Come, . . . let's away" (3.2.94), nor when he soon afterwards practises this counsel himself by secretly seeking out Richmond. Interestingly, this action is taken without breaking with King Richard. We see Stanley maintaining a duty to both, yielding his son as a hostage to Richard, while at the same time maneuvering to save that hostage through a victory by Richmond. Stanley's giving his son as a hostage, let me suggest, participates by analogy in the theological concept of God's offering his son as a "ransom"—and in that respect Stanley's son collaborates with the Richmond who spoke of his body as a "ransom" offered for England's deliverance.

I may here remark that I began to be interested in ransom theory around 1946, the year in which I published an article on Atonement doctrine in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. I was then a teacher in the Vanderbilt Divinity School, where one of my assignments was a course on the history of Christian doctrine. When working on this I read theologians such as Irenaeus and Gregory the Great, and discovered in them a *Christus Victor* drama of the atonement. This drama, to my surprise, I found reflected in *Measure for Measure*, a play I was including at that time in a course on English literature I was concurrently teaching. That play's movement from an initially tragic situation to an ultimately happy ending was dependent, evidently, on a sinless ransom directed by a Christian Duke who thereby reformed his city. This discovery made me realize, as my earlier studies of Marlowe and Chapman and Calvin had not, that Christianity's distinctive answer to the problem of human sin is a ransoming of sinners.

But in Shakespeare's tragedies the ransomed ones do not include the play's protagonist (except in *King Lear*, of which I shall speak later). Usually the most that we see achieved in a tragic hero before death is an experiencing of remorse. Thus in *Richard III* the hero ultimately rejects repentance by disowning conscience; yet he is brought at least to an awareness of guilt and a regret that he will die unloved. In this respect Richard's ending resembles Macbeth's. In both cases we see the hero putting on a forced bravado to cover the gnawing of an inner despair. Richard has admitted, earlier, that he is "So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin" (4.2.64). And Macbeth has described himself as so far in blood that "returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.137). Both these

men find themselves trapped by their choices into becoming like a poor player who struts and frets his hour. This kind of punishment is not that of a Senecan tragic hero, whose wicked aspiration burns him up with its excess. Rather, it is that of a hero whose misuse of himself has so hollowed out life's prospects that he can only hide from this truth with a spectacular flourish.

Marlowe has depicted no remorse in his Tamburlaine, or in his Duke of Guise, or in his Barabas. Although Barabas would seem to have much in common with Richard III—namely, a contempt for religion, a spirit modelled on Machiavelli, and a boasting of no brother and no pity, Barabas is never given a discovery of how terrible it can be to die unloved. Richard's discovering this is in accord with a premise of Aquinas, that even lost souls can experience a remorse of conscience, since sin cannot entirely destroy the good of human nature, only diminish it.¹⁵ That is apparently Shakespeare's view, whereas Marlowe may be relying on the "total depravity" doctrine of Calvin. Calvin, we may recall, spoke of sin as a "deluge" of impiety,¹⁶ and he described sinners as raging in their lusts and boiling within—language reminiscent of Seneca's.¹⁷ Such a view accounts perhaps for Marlowe's Barabas, whose wickedness is so extreme that we hear him boast of going abroad at night to "kill sicke people groaning under walls" and to poison wells (*Jew* 2.3.175). But the villainy of Shakespeare's Richard is different. His desire, he tells us, is to glorify a lumpish body unshaped for love. On his deathbed, however, he glimpses underneath his crooked back a human nature that longs for love. That longing Augustine would say, is so ingrained in human nature that some trace of it always remains.

A related observation by Augustine is that an evil-doer has, really, a will divided against itself.¹⁸ This plight is described in the Bible in Romans 7, where Paul speaks of doing "the evil I do not want." That is the situation of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, when he declares: "Alack, when once our grace we have forgot, / Nothing goes right; we would and we would not" (4.4.33-34). Angelo here both wants and does not want Claudio's execution. Other instances of a divided will occur in many of Shakespeare's dramas. King Richard II, for instance, both desires and does not desire to have justice done at Coventry. Later, he both denounces and agrees to his being deposed. The new King, Henry

IV, both wishes for and disapproves the murdering of Richard. He then promises but at the same time evades going on a crusade. Othello, similarly, is in conflict with himself when he kills Desdemona; he finds himself desiring yet not desiring to "put out the light" (5.2.7). And Macbeth, when challenged by Macduff, does not wish to fight but does so. In short, nothing goes right when once grace has been forgot and one finds oneself caught in a double bind.

Augustine traces the beginning of evil to the human will's "falling away from the work of God to its own work," thus blemishing the will's own nature by unnaturally taking itself as its end.¹⁹ In accord with this, Aquinas holds that a person's acts of sin consist of a neglecting of eternal good by preferring inordinately something temporal.²⁰ These Theologians see everyman as inheriting from Adam a sickness in the will which, unless healed by grace, makes us prone to commit actual sins of increasing gravity. I believe this understanding undergirds Shakespeare's dramas—alongside also an understanding of how grace becomes available to human beings. Medieval religious drama depicted Adam's son Abel as a seeker for God's favor by offering a firstling of his flock, whereas Cain made a niggardly offering, was angry when it brought him no benefit, and in envy of his brother slew him. For Augustine, two divergent tendencies within the human race were thus typified, one centering about a valuing of God ahead of self, the other a preferring to please the self.²¹ Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* seems to know this doctrine, when he soliloquizes about the two opposing camps of "grace and rude will" in human beings (2.3.28). This Friar, however, overlooks his duty to cultivate grace to prevent rude will from becoming predominant. Tragically, he stumbles "on abuse" by assisting what he himself has called a "doting" version of love, and thus he neglects Holy Order (2.3.20, 82).

Usually in Shakespeare's dramas a person's movement into tragedy is signaled by his neglecting or avoiding of divine grace. An invoking of night is characteristic of Lady Macbeth. She desires to prevent heaven from peeping through to cry "Hold" (1.5.54). And we hear Macbeth, similarly, beg to avoid light: "Let not the light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51). In fact, he finds himself unable to proceed against the gracious Duncan so long as he remembers Duncan's daylight virtues.

Only after Lady Macbeth has lured him, with her false ideology of manhood, to forget Heaven's cherubin and consider only self-will, does Macbeth consent to crime. Othello, likewise, can proceed against Desdemona only when this heavenly "pearl" becomes disvalued by Iago's luring him to prefer the imagined "jewel" of a self-centered good name. Desdemona's plea for a penitent Cassio, spoken with the word "If I have any *grace* or power to move" (3.3.46), is then rebuffed. Later, he brushes aside her gracious action of pity for his headache, thereby directly causing the loss of the handkerchief for which Othello will blame her. And in a final scene, he rejects not only her testimony that "Heaven doth truly know" her honesty, but also her oath "As I am a Christian" (4.2.38, 82). Thus by a series of avoidings of divine grace Othello goes to his damnation.

A similar logic of downfall is evident in the tragic phase of Shakespeare's tragi-comedies. In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes falls into sin when his self-centered imagination leads him to reject a gracious Hermione. And in that same play, Polixenes, because of a self-centered concern for courtly status, banishes a Perdita grown in grace, who models her behaviour on that of Whitsun pastoral. In *All's Well*, Bertram's sin is described by two French captains as a fleshing of his will in seducing a gentlewoman. And one of the captains comments: "Now, God delay our rebellion! As we are ourselves, what things are we!" To which the other captain replies, "Merely our own traitors" (4.3.19-21). In other words, Bertram is actually conniving against his own nobility by an act of rude will. But what Shakespeare's context makes evident, further, is that Bertram's rebellion against himself is caused by his running away from the grace of God offered him in Helena. That is the tragedy from which she rescues him gratuitously for the sake of their mutual welfare.

Regarding the punishment of sin, Augustine said that every inordinate affection is its own punishment; and Aquinas went on to explain that punishment consists of a "pain of loss," insofar as the sin turns one away from eternal Goodness, and also a "pain of sense" connected with the inordinate attachment to something temporal.²² Shakespeare's tragedies depict both these kinds of pain. Pain of loss is evident in the cry of Richard III: "I shall despair. There is no creature [that?] loves me" (5.3.200). Painful loss is evident also in Othello's lament that, like "the

base Judean" Judas, he has thrown a "pearl" away—the pearl being here Desdemona's love (5.2.347). Macbeth voices a pain of loss when he laments, "I could not say, 'Amen,' / When they did say 'God Bless Us!'" (2.2.26-27). Soon afterwards he speaks of having lost innocent sleep, the "Balm of hurt minds" (2.2.36). When he declares that now "grace is dead" (2.3.94) he speaks truer than he knows, since his inner self suffers from his having given away "mine eternal jewel" (3.1.67). Macbeth's "real tragedy," Paul Jorgensen has commented, "consists in the meaning of all he has lost." "He is unquestionably damned," says Jorgensen; but his damnation is "manifested upon this earth."²³ I could restate the same point by saying that Macbeth is experiencing, here on the bank and shoal of time, what it means to have jumped "the life to come." He has made his life hollow by neglecting life's holiness. The pain of that kind of loss I nowhere find depicted in any of Marlowe's dramas.²⁴

Shakespeare's depiction of a tragic hero's pains of sense is the subject of Jorgensen's chapter on "Pestered senses" in *Macbeth*. He notes Lady Macbeth's coming to feel pain at the smell of blood, and Macbeth's experiencing shakings of body. Macbeth is pestered also by hearing shrieks and screams, to which he reacts with fits and starts. These fits and starts are unlike the mad ragings of a Senecan or Marlovian tragic hero. Rather, they plague with a sudden fear, such as caused Richard III to get rattled and then confess a loss of alacrity. Sin is punished by an attrition, which I find strangely absent in Marlowe's dramas. His Doctor Faustus, after 24 years of pleasure-mongering, seems to have the enthusiasm of an undergraduate for Helen's lips. It's as if time has taught him nothing. But for Shakespeare, as *The Winter's Tale* tells us, truth is the daughter of time. This accords with the Bible's teaching, that time is God's creature made to glorify him, and it does so by exposing foolishness and by ripening goodness. Time is apocalyptic.

Since sin is against not only God but also the human self's welfare, Shakespeare's tragic heroes experience usually a feeling of wasted labor. This punishment Aquinas refers to by quoting Wisdom 5:7, "We wearied ourselves in the way of iniquity." Weariness is voiced by Macbeth when he declares, "I gin to be a-weary of the sun, / And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone" (5.5.48-49). A bit earlier he has told us he is "sick at heart" (5.3.19), because none of life's good things can he

hope to have. Only defective results have rewarded his labors of toil and trouble. A parallel to this is the weariness felt by the tragic hero of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. "Now all labor / Mars what it does," Antony laments (4.14.47), as he declares himself ready to lie down and stray no further. We may recall also the last words of Romeo, his reference to the "world-wearied" flesh and the "seasick weary" bark he is ready to make shipwreck of. A Christian theologian would explain such heartsickness as the inevitable result of sin plucking on sin in a series of defective actions, by which human beings diminish their natural goodness. Sin progresses as a deprivation that wastes. Thus we hear Richard II lament, "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me" (5.5.49). Those words echo Augustine's phrase, "wasting away time, and being wasted by time."²⁵ A similar sense of lost happiness is voiced by King Henry IV, when, amid his illness, he meditates on the mocks of Chance that make him want to "sit . . . down and die" (2H4 3.1.56). Also by Henry V, who on the night before Agincourt, tells us he has labored for empty titles and a loss of "heart's-ease" (4.1.236). Shakespeare's tragic heroes weary themselves.

In the Bible's teaching, the only effective answer to sin is grace. And likewise in Shakespeare's tragedies we see often, as an answer to the hero's abounding in vice, an abounding of gracious virtue in other persons. This is strikingly the case in *Macbeth*. The complete absence of pity in Macbeth's describing of Duncan's wounds alerts Malcolm to an "unfelt sorrow," from which he decides to "shift away" (2.3.136), as does also Macduff. Eventually these two meet in England, significantly in front of the palace of Edward the Confessor, a gracious king known for his healing of the sick. There Macduff is tested by Malcolm to find out whether he is motivated by genuine grace or semblance. Macduff passes the test when he cries out, "O nation miserable, / . . . / When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again" (4.3.103, 105), and invokes the saintliness of Malcolm's father and mother. Then news of the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children reinforces his resolve to serve with Malcolm as an instrument of "powers above." In the ensuing battle the tyrant is slain, and Malcolm, when hailed as king, announces he will mend disorder "by the grace of Grace" (5.9.38).

Something of this strange logic of grace overcoming sin can be seen in *King Lear*. This play ends with England delivered from the rule of a treacherous Edmund. An abused Edgar has returned in disguise as a knightly challenger who, in a trial by combat, kills Edmund. The anonymous Edgar has also intervened graciously to save his own father from despair. And meanwhile King Lear, whose selfish banishing of his daughter has been punished by hardships that cost him his wits, is sought out for healing by a Cordelia who has been prompted to graciousness by the King of France's rescue of her when outcast. Lear's story, as Christian commentators have noted, resembles that of the Bible's Prodigal son, who wasted his substance in riotous living. Unlike Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, however, Lear soon becomes repentant and undergoes with Cordelia's help a symbolic death and resurrection. The new life that then begins is marred only by the deep anguish he suffers when Cordelia is hanged. But this situation, for Christian readers, is analogous to the anguish of Christ's disciples when their saviour was crucified.

All of Shakespeare's tragedies tell of the downfall of the hero through his inordinate love of some self-pleasing good. Usually a temptation scene begins the story. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the hero is drawn into serving the excellence of courtly demeanor he idolizes in his father. Graciousness in this naturalistic sense is what we see young Hamlet preferring to Christian grace. Thus when the father's Ghost appears, although Hamlet's initial cry is the traditional Christian one, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (1.4.39), he soon breaks away from the restraints which Horatio and Marcellus attempt as ministers of grace. Declaring that his fate is calling him, he vows "by heaven" to kill anyone who hinders his following this Ghost (1.4.85). By the time the friends catch up with Hamlet, he has avidly heard the Ghost's story and pledged obedience to its revenge commandment.

The most damaging consequence of this commitment is Hamlet's acceptance of his father's interpretation of the crime, a way of construing it that rests on a false ideology. The elder Hamlet is evaluated as a "radiant angel," while Claudius is referred to contemptuously as "garbage" and Gertrude is viewed as "lust" personified (1.5.55, 57). The play's facts, however, indicate somewhat otherwise. The supposedly

ideal King Hamlet actually gambled his kingdom in a duel motivated by an “emulate pride” in both contestants. The allegedly beastly Claudius full of witchcraft is capable surprisingly of human kindness, and we see him at prayer begging for heaven’s help to repent his crime. Gertrude has remarried unaware of any crime and with approval from the Council of Denmark; her love shows itself in a wifely concern to protect her husband from danger and to correct her alienated son. But since Hamlet equates his father with model virtue, he imitates him by vilifying other persons. With satiric barbs he spreads an unhealthiness. To protect the state from this disease, Claudius feels driven, against his wishes, into plotting a murder of Hamlet. Thus corruption multiplies.

But Hamlet meanwhile suffers psychological frustration from his inability to kill Claudius, and to overcome this paralysis he works himself into a lather of loathing. Only after soaking his mind with animalistic epithets can he thrust a steel dagger—as happens when he shouts “rat” and stabs blindly, thus by mistake killing Polonius. For this act he says he repents, but instead he transfers the blame onto heaven. In a later scene, after a shameful shouting match with Ophelia’s brother, he once again shuffles off any blame:

Was’t Hamlet wrong’d Laertes? Never Hamlet!
If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away,
And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not. (5.2.233-36)

A parallel to this is the dodging of blame by Augustine, when he was under the spell of Manichean ideology. Let me quote Augustine’s report:

I still thought that it was not we that sinned, but I know not what other nature sinned in us; and it delighted my pride, to be free from blame. . . . But in truth . . . my impiety had divided me against myself; and that sin was the more incurable, whereby I did not judge myself a sinner.²⁶

The false ideology which divided Augustine against himself had its equivalent in Shakespeare’s times in a popular mixture of Neoplatonism and Stoicism that polarized reason and passion into a quasi-Manichean interpretation of human nature. I described this phenomenon in a *PMLA* article in 1951 on “Hamlet’s Apostrophe to Man,” where I was following

up Theodore Spencer's book on *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (1943). Whereas Pico and Ficino viewed man as capable of making himself into an angel or god, pessimists such as the stoic Cardan and sceptic Montaigne saw man's destiny as no other than the dusty death of an animal. Between these two moods Hamlet oscillates, concluding with the latter by meditating on his return to clay. When he confesses to Horatio an illness of heart, he has the weariness of a melancholy man. Since he lacks Christian hope, his reason and passion remain un-integrated and let him act only by fits and starts. Alternating between euphuistic courtesy and savage spleen, Hamlet has a will divided against itself—as did Augustine prior to his being healed by Christian grace. Shakespeare can depict Hamlet's tragedy because he knows Augustine, who became a convert to the Christian motto of *credo ut intelligam* (I believe so I may understand).

For understanding life, the premise Augustine found most helpful was the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. It enabled him to criticize the Manichees and also the Platonists for their view that evil has its source in the body. The flesh, he insisted, "is good in its own degree and kind," else Christ would not have assumed flesh.²⁷ In other words, human beings should not seek a melting of the flesh, as Hamlet does, or a discarding of it in order to live better with the "other half," as Hamlet insists Gertrude do; rather, they should seek a healing of the wounded self through the grace of charity. Evil is not some "mighty opposite" of the good; it is, rather, a deprivation that depends on the goodness it corrupts. This important premise enabled Augustine to describe the evil-doer as one who seeks a likeness to God, but in a shadowy way. Why did I, he asks, perversely imitate God when fleeing from Him, and thus obtain only a maimed liberty that mimicks His omnipotency?²⁸

Augustine's realization that the fate of sinners is to parody unwittingly the action of God is an insight Dante used when writing *The Inferno*. That Shakespeare also used it, I have illustrated elsewhere²⁹—for instance by pointing out that Hamlet's "mousetrap" strategy amounts to a parody of the atoning mousetrap enacted by Christ, and by noting that Antony's offering of his self-stabbed body to Cleopatra is a parody of the crucified Christ's offering his wounded body to God. Another example is the parody of a Catholic Mass we recognize when Macbeth

meditates on a dagger (in place of a cross) and declares "It is done" (his *consummatum est*) as he goes forth on a mission of murder. A parody of the Mass occurs also when Romeo, at Juliet's tomb, raises his chalice with the words "Here's to my love" (5.3.119). And of course in this tragedy both Romeo and Juliet parody their proclaimed role of holy "pilgrim" by behaving as "runaways." I must now break off, however, at least for the moment, my illustrating of Augustinian premises in Shakespeare. I hope I have made clear that these premises include all that constitute a genuinely Christian understanding of human nature and destiny.

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NOTES

¹Una M. Ellis-Fermor, *Christopher Marlowe* (1927; rpt. Hamden: Archon Books, 1967) 33.

²John Bakeless, *Christopher Marlowe* (London: Cape, 1938) 6.

³Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962) 260.

⁴*The Divine Weeks, The First Week, Seventh Day*, 119 and 184-85, *The Complete Works of Joshua Sylvester*, ed. A. B. Grosart (London, 1880).

⁵Philip du Plessis-Mornay, *A Woork Concerning the Trewnesse of the Christian Religion* (1587; rpt. Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints) 217.

⁶Preface, Sig. D^v-D2^r.

⁷Du Plessis-Mornay 213-16.

⁸For instance, Augustine, *Confessions*, end of Book VII, trans. E. B. Pusey (Rivington, 1838).

⁹Marlowe is quoted from *The Works and Life of Christopher Marlowe*, gen. ed. R. H. Case, 6 vols. (1930; rpt. New York: Gordian P, 1966).

¹⁰*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.iv.3-4, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster P, 1960).

¹¹Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 3 (London: RKP, 1960) 291 and 339. Compare Calvin's view, in *Institutes* I.xvi.5 and 8, that every adversity a man suffers is God's curse and a sign of God's "special vengeance."

¹²Shakespeare is quoted from the Riverside Edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

¹³Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 229.

¹⁴Calvin was wary of this concept. In *Institutes* II.v.11 he declared: "Any mixture of the power of free will that men strive to mingle with God's grace is nothing but a corruption of grace."

¹⁵*Summa Theologica* I-II.85.2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, rev. Daniel J. Sullivan (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952). A useful comparison of Aquinas with Calvin is provided by Alvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin & Contemporary Protestant Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹⁶*Institutes* II.i.8-9. He holds in *Institutes* II.iv.4 that a sinful man cannot of his own nature aspire to good, and in II.ii.6 he faults Peter Lombard for suggesting that man of his own nature seeks after good.

¹⁷*Institutes* II.vii.10. The Calvinist Du Bartas speaks, similarly, of "Our boiling Fleshe's fell Concupiscence," in *Divine Weeks*, First Week, Fourth Day, line 535. Such language differs from that of Augustine, who speaks of the "birdlime" of concupiscence in which the will gets stuck. See *Confessions* X.42 and compare Shakespeare's Claudius, "O limed soul . . ." (*Ham.* 3.3.68).

¹⁸See *Confessions* VIII.22-24.

¹⁹*City of God* XIV.11, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, 1887).

²⁰*Summa Theologica* I-II.77.4.

²¹*City of God* XV.1 and 7.

²²*Summa Theologica* I-II.87.1 and 4.

²³Paul Jorgensen, *Our Naked Frailties: Sensational Art and Meaning in Macbeth* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971) 214.

²⁴Douglas Cole thought he detected what theology calls pain of loss in Tamburlaine's grief for the death of Zenocrate, and in the sorrow of Edward II over losing his crown (252-54). But since those were temporal losses to which the hero responds with fury, it seems to me Cole has misapplied the theological concept.

²⁵*Confessions* IX.10.

²⁶*Confessions* V.18.

²⁷*City of God* XIV.5. Similarly, against the Stoics, Augustine argued in XIV.9 that human passions are good if rightly ordered. Reason and passion are integrated when a humble charity heals the disorder in our fallen human nature.

²⁸*Confessions* II.14 and *On the Trinity* I.xi.5.

²⁹In "Augustinian Roots in Shakespeare's Sense of Tragedy," *The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal* 6 (1986): 1-7; and in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 47-50 and 402-04.