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Believing in Shakespeare / Shakespeare's Beliefs: Religion and the Dilemmas of Drama

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Hello. I am Julia Lupton and I am not a biographer. I speak to you today as a new observer of Shakespearean biography, which I've come to respect, both in preparing today's remarks, and in listening to these extraordinary proceedings, as playing a vital role in our field's scholarly ecology.

I start with a text that Brian Cummings set up for us in his Anniversary Lecture, and that Larry Rhu returned to in the question period yesterday morning. (Great to be in such company!) Henry James' novella, *The Birthplace*, features an intellectually ambitious and financially stressed middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Morris Gedge, who receive an extraordinary offer to become caretakers of "The Birthplace." (Shakespeare is never mentioned by name, but the reference is clear.) Early in their adventure, Morris Gedge tells his wife, "'The more we know Him ... the more we shall love Him. We don't as yet, you see, know Him so very tremendously'" (9). Every Shakespeare biography adjudicates among love, knowledge, and the limits of knowledge in different ways, and with different consequences. Too much love reduces biography to hagiography, while too much knowledge may drain our subject of its literary interest and affective charge. Finally, the limits of knowledge function as both spur to critical investigation and as invitation to imagine, interpret, and invent. If biography combines love and knowledge in the form of history and fiction, religion nominates that area of life writing where knowledge meets its limits, and where love has no bounds. My remarks fall into three short sections. I begin with a review of current scholarship on Shakespeare and religion; I turn to an example from *Cymbeline* of what I call Shakespeare's abounding secularism, and I end by returning to James' "The Birthplace" as a critical allegory of Shakespearean biography.

When I submitted my title, “Believing in Shakespeare/ Shakespeare’s Beliefs” to the Folger a year ago, neither Richard McCoy’s *Faith in Shakespeare* nor David Scott Kastan’s *A Will to Believe* had been published. In our titles at least, we all seem to be onto the idea that “believing in Shakespeare” (as a great poet; as an articulator of things worth caring about; or, in Jonathan Bates’ expression, as the “soul” of his age) has become bound up with what Shakespeare did or didn’t believe. If the current desire is to take the pressure off determining what Shakespeare believed, this action is done in part to re-enchanted Shakespeare as the vehicle for our own secular and post-secular beliefs – our trust, for example, in the power of literature and a liberal arts education, a conviction tested by the latest phase of the perennial “crisis in the humanities.” Biographies play a role here: they both contribute to the scholarly enterprise by continuing to assemble and re-narrate the evidence about Shakespeare’s life and times, and they feed the desire for communion with Shakespeare that is often extra-scholarly in character. Religion enters as part of Shakespeare’s life requiring study and as a model for what it means to believe in an exceptional person and to read an extraordinary body of texts with a heightened curatorial and hermeneutic attention.

Oxford University Press has published four major books on Shakespeare and religion in the last year. These include works by Richard McCoy, Brian Cummings, and David Kastan, two of whom are part of this conference. To femme things up a bit, I’d like to also add Sarah Beckwith’s *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*. These books stake out a range of positions. On one end, Richard McCoy makes an eloquent new case for secular Shakespeare as the proper object of our poetic faith. On the other end Brian Cummings argues against the secularization thesis, and Sarah Beckwith demonstrates Shakespeare’s creative engagement with rites of penance and confession. David Kastan falls in the middle, distrusting overwrought confessional allegory but still aiming to show how Shakespeare “recognized and responded to the various ways in which religion

charged the world in which he lived” (2-3). All of these scholars agree on the following points, which are also starting points for me:

- a) The biographical evidence will always be inconclusive.
- b) What Shakespeare believed might be the wrong question anyway, since “the play’s the thing.”
- c) The desire to know won’t go away, and may be a necessary part of the expression of our love for Shakespeare. As Kastan puts it, “We are unable to pluck out the heart of his mystery ... nonetheless the effort to do so turns out to be useful” (37).

Useful for what exactly? There is a research dimension; an ethical or political-theological dimension; and a phenomenological dimension (in the terms of James’ story, knowing Him, loving Him, and acknowledging that we “don’t as yet know Him so very tremendously.”) Shakespeare’s beliefs became an urgent question around the issue of Catholicism, leading to a much more layered picture of uneven reform in Tudor and Stuart England than existed in the age of Shakespeare as national (secular-Protestant) poet. The most recent variant of this debate has involved the revisionist work of historians and literary scholars of English Catholicism, including Arthur Marotti, Eamon Duffy, Alison Shell, and Richard Wilson, but also Stephen Greenblatt in both *Hamlet in Purgatory* and *Will in the World*. Biography has contributed substantially to these revisitations of reformation: as Brian Cummings writes, “The new argument about Shakespeare’s religion came about as a result of engrafting a revisionist historiography of the English Reformation into the life of the national poet.”¹ We may not know more about what Shakespeare believed, but asking the question has produced new paths through Shakespeare’s alluvial landscapes.

There is an ethical as well as a knowledge-drive at work here. Moving away from confessional assertions (“was he or wasn’t he Catholic?”), much of the most recent work on Shakespeare and religion aims to construe a position for Shakespeare that is both cognizant of religious differences and in search of nondogmatic and inclusive religious settlements, whether this

is called Anglican, tolerant, messianic, Abrahamic, post-confessional, or post-secular. Thus David Kastan describes Shakespeare as a "'Parish Anglican,' a tolerant, largely habitual Christian" who ascribed to "an inclusive and theologically minimalist Christianity that resisted religious rigor and valued social accord" (37). Thomas Betteridge puts the argument more sharply, suggesting that the late plays' effort to "to rescue devotional words such as 'grace' and 'forgiveness' from confessional contamination is radical and expansive, not containing and moderate." This search for a religious sensibility that transcends the Catholic-Protestant divide comes out of the urgency of the Catholic question and owes its motives to biography.

Finally, there is a phenomenological inquiry around the nature of belief as such. Religious belief and belief in literature converge around the power of acts, images, values, and stories. Yet religion and literature cultivate different orders and qualities of commitment to these intangible things. Religion and literature are neighbors, not friends, and not always loving ones. Richard McCoy's *Faith in Shakespeare* works out these different kinds of belief with great care, first by looking at how Eucharistic debates reveal sophisticated phenomenologies of belief and then by asserting the difference between religious articulations of wonder and the more tempered and skeptical forms of belief cultivated by theater. He turns to Coleridge's "'willing suspension of disbelief'" in order to argue for "faith in Shakespeare as a fundamentally literary and human phenomenon" (16). I think McCoy is right to distinguish religious experience from literary experience, although I also think he overplays the inability of other critics to draw this distinction. Thus McCoy criticizes Sarah Beckwith for "reclaim[ing] Shakespeare's romances as a full-force form of 'sacramental theater'" (12). Yet the real originality of Beckwith's work lies in her ability to read sacrament and penance through the powerfully humanist frameworks provided by ordinary language philosophy and Hannah Arendt's action theory. This is not parish Anglicanism but rather High Theory Anglicanism, in which the Elizabethan Settlement is not a civil war waiting to happen but a fine-grained, practice-based maneuver among ways of thinking, speaking and being that still have much to teach us.

Like McCoy, Brian Cummings enjoys an argument. Each chapter of *Mortal Thoughts* overturns a received idea associated with the secular narrative: the soliloquy is Augustinian, not liberal-individual; new philosophies of chance and probability belong to providential thinking, not to the rejection of predestination; Thomas More was not a proto-liberal dissident but a creative scholastic. Yet the overall theme of the book is not the triumph of Calvin over Ovid, but the cohabitation of humanist and theological inquiries into being in the world. Cummings assembles a range of Renaissance reflections on embodiment and mortality that belong to no single faith yet draw from Scripture and the deep intelligence of the human responses to it, while also addressing the extraordinary acts of violence executed in religion's name. My sense is that Beckwith, Cummings, and McCoy would agree that Shakespeare practices an abounding secularism, a humanism unafraid to draw strength from religion's brooding depths.

2. To see this abounding secularism in action, I'd like to look at a scene from *Cymbeline*.

Cymbeline is a Nativity play: most scholars agree that Shakespeare chose the otherwise unremarkable tenure of this early British king because Jesus was born during his lifetime.² Yet the play itself is remarkably free of Nativity imagery: there is no miraculous babe as in *The Winter's Tale*, no mysterious redemptive pregnancy as in *All's Well*, no Epiphany kings as in *Othello*. It is as if Shakespeare had chosen Cymbeline's reign because of the Nativity, but then rigorously suspended direct reference to Bethlehem in order to acknowledge the multiple sources of messianism's pregnant before-time.

In Act Three, Scene Four, Innogen and Pisanio, her husband's steward, have stolen away from court, putatively in order to meet Posthumus at Milford Haven. In fact, Posthumus, beguiled into jealousy by the Italian Machivael Iachimo, has ordered Pisanio to kill Innogen. When Pisanio shares Iachimo's letter of murderous intent with his charge, incredulity yields to anger as well as to her

desire that Pisanio fulfill his master's command. Exposing herself to Pisanio's sword, she discovers Posthumus' love letters next to her breast:

The scriptures of the loyal Leonatus,
All turned to heresy? Away, away,
Corrupters of my faith, you shall no more
Be stomachers to my heart. [...]
And thou, Posthumus,
That didst set up my disobedience 'gainst the King
My father, and make me put into contempt the suits
Of princely fellows, shalt hereafter find
It is no act of common passage but
A strain of rareness... [...]

(To Pisanio) Prithie dispatch.

The lamb entreats the butcher. Where's thy knife?
Thou art too slow to do thy master's bidding
When I desire it too. (III.iv.74-98)

This speech begins with Innogen identifying her incipient divorce from Posthumus with religious schism. "Heresy" is a fighting word: its appearance here establishes the wars of religion as the horizon of the play's international politics. Some critics read Innogen as a Protestant heroine who, renamed as Fidele, draws the "Romishly" corrupted Posthumus back to the true religion. Others associate her with a Catholic-friendly irenicism that nurtures a range of comportments, including moderate Catholic ones.³ The image of the sacrificial lamb at the end of the speech works a little differently. Although one could choose to hear only Christological references in her desire for death, the fact that the sacrifice is *not* completed, I would argue, actually links the scene more closely to the Binding of Isaac than to the Crucifixion. Innogen's faith is a brooding and embodied fidelity

that, like Israel's, remains caught up in questioning, marked as wounded, and constituted as a covenant.⁴ The suspension of sacrifice incorporates delay and substitution into Innogen's martyrological and hagiographic fantasies. This other ending, moreover, conducted in the time before nativity, is what permits classical *virtù*, in the form of Innogen's courage and resilience, to unfold and flourish.

Thus the real import of the speech is Innogen's insistence that she be recognized for the courage of her actions. Innogen verbalizes, perhaps for the first time, that her choice of Posthumous as her husband established her ethical freedom. Innogen's decision may have been "no act of common passage," but it was most certainly *an act*, a life-changing deed exercised in concert with another in a fraught social and legal scene. The drama of her love choice, the stuff of *Romeo and Juliet* and *All's Well That Ends Well*, had occurred before the play began; it is the re-cognitive process of coming into some new relationship to that action that interests the author of *Cymbeline*.

But this does not mean that religion disappears. The scene ends with a *valediction* that is also a *benediction*. In a line shared between them, Pisanio says, "May the gods / Direct you to the best," to which Innogen replies, "Amen. I thank thee" (III.v.194). Benediction both confirms one's relationship to the other and acknowledges the contingency of human flourishing. Although many blessings are cyclical and repetitive (grace before meals or prayers before bed), they can also mark the milestones of birth, marriage and death as well as recovery from illness or return from travel, and thus become a form of life writing. From Pisanio's pagan plural to Innogen's Hebrew response ("Amen"), their exchange draws classical and Jewish elements into its proto-Christian flow, cultivating through speech *Cymbeline's* romance landscape of incipient nativity. Blessings in Shakespeare often occur at the end of scenes. Blessing marks the contingency of action in both life and theater, ritually marking "the rhythm of entrances and exits" that Lois Potter uses to measure the life of Shakespeare.⁵

3. Henry James' *The Birthplace* is also a nativity story, one with much to say about the Shakespeare industry and its reliance on religious metaphors and models. At the hopeful outset of the story, Gedge compares the prospect of running the Birthplace to opening a window "into a great green woodland, a woodland that had a name, glorious, immortal, that was peopled with vivid figures, each of them renowned, and that gave out a murmur, deep as the sound of the sea, which was the rustle in forest shade of all the poetry of life" (5-6).⁶ James channels the Forest of Arden as both a Stratford landform and a *locus communus* built from literary sources. It also evokes a pre-schismatic Christianity, not unlike the parish Anglicanism tapped by Orlando when he asks the Duke and his gang if they have "ever been where bells have knolled to church."⁷

Such an idyll is designed to be smashed, or at least whitewashed. Increasingly contemptuous of the tourists he serves, Gedge begins visiting the museum after hours. He is especially drawn to the "the Chamber of Birth" (24), an empty room that "contained only the Fact – *the* Fact itself ... that He had not ... *not* been born" (24). In the zero point of this empty room, however, Gedge does come to doubt that his author was born *here*. Gedge's existential crisis evokes both a vision of the English Reformation and an account of critical biography as the rejection of legendary materials in favor of documentary evidence. Just as Gedge rejects the crass idolatry of the Birthplace in order to honor him with a better, more properly Protestant, form of faith, critical biographies do not drain their subject of his religious aura so much as recapture that aura in an historical frame.

Two examples, one from Lois Potter and one from Katherine Duncan-Jones, who are present with us today. Potter's lovely first chapter, "'Born into the World'" draws both its title and its epigraph from the baptismal liturgy.⁸ Submitting parish Anglicanism to historical analysis, Potter uses this citation to accommodate the desires that made us pick up the book without compromising her evidentiary standards. In her brilliant reading of *Hamlet*, Potter returns to the play's between competing versions of the underworld, but reads that division not in relation to Shakespeare's father, but as responses to his theatrical peers: to Jonson's Catholicism, and Kyd's atheism. Potter

Duncan-Jones' "ungentle" Bard is explicitly anti-hagiographic, a man less sinned against than sinning. At the end of the book, however, she makes an interesting turn to religion. Glossing *The Tempest* as Shakespeare's farewell to his art, Duncan-Jones quotes Psalms: "Lord, make me to know mine end: and the measure of my days." Whereas Potter uses the Gospels to illumine the comic entrance of nativity, Duncan-Jones uses the Hebrew Bible to reflect on the tragic exit of mortality. Both biographers remain firmly within a critical-historical frame while allowing the existential edges of biblical writing to touch their subject with a special grace.

In the final phase of the novella, Morris Gedge saves his job by embracing the myth, becoming "The Birthplace's" most inspired tour guide. Gedge's unexpected celebrity at the end of the novella anticipates Shakespeare as multimedia Megachurch, a "gospel of prosperity" that has lost its soul on the way to the neoliberal bank. But I don't think cultural critique tells the full story. First, Gedge's performances draw on an aspect of Shakespeare largely ignored in the novella's construal of authorship: namely, the theatrical dimension.⁹ Gedge is an inspired impresario who overblows the myth to become himself a kind of artist, a vatic performer of the tradition. The theatrical dimension is accompanied by a curatorial imperative: the duty of the Gedges is to "keep it up," to conserve and promote, caretake and cultivate, the Birthplace, whether or not its legends are historically true.¹⁰ Reborn as actor-curator, Gedge becomes a "queer priest" (James' phrase) who links the man and the work by performing both their necessary split and the resonant flow between them. If Gedge's earlier skepticism corresponded to Protestant historiography, this final phase resembles post-secularism, whose forms of keeping faith are designed to coexist with science and liberalism.¹¹

I would like to risk comparing the third phase of the story with the biographical ventures of Stephen Greenblatt. Pivoting between the delicious pop romanticism of *Shakespeare in Love* and the serious scholarship of *Hamlet in Purgatory*, *Will in the World* melds New Historicism with historical fiction, above all in the chapters on Shakespeare's Catholicism.¹² In *Will in the World*,

religion as the domain of aspiration, prophesy, and conjecture becomes itself the object of speculative myth-making. But Stephen Greenblatt, like Morris Gedge, knows what he is doing. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt identifies the critic with the rhapsode, a good description of the vatic role assumed by Gedge at the end of his tale.¹³ Greenblatt-as-Gedge invites us to perform and to curate Shakespeare's possible pasts in ways that both stimulate research and contribute to Shakespeare's public life. (This weekend, we have seen some of this performative power in Joe Roach's rhapsody and Graham Holderness's call to literary invention.)

Religion plays a role in biography not only as a topic of historical investigation, but as part of biography's literary lineage and affective stakes. I am still not a biographer, but thanks to this conference, I have become a committed *reader* of biographies. And I've decided that we need it all: I want my ODNB, Schoenbaum, Potter and Duncan-Jones and my Greenblatt, Roach, and Holderness too, just as I want my First Folio and my Sabbath candles.

1 *Oxford Handbook to Shakespeare*, essay on Religion.

2 According to Holinshed, “Kymbeline or Cymbeline the sonne of Theomantius was of the Britains made king after the deceasse of his father, in the yeare of the world 3944, after the building of Rome 728, and before the birth of our Saviour 33. This man (as some write) was brought up at Rome, and there made knight by Augustus Caesar, under whome he served in the warres, and was in such favour with him, that he was at libertie to pay his tribute or not. Little other mention is made of dooings, except that during his reigne, the Saviour of the world our Lord Jesus Christ the onelie sonne of God was borne of a virgine, about 23 yeare of the reigne of this Kymbeline.” Raphael Holinshed and William Harrison, *First and Second Volumes of Chronicles* (London: John Hooker, 1587), 33.

3 Hamilton, 130. See editor Roger Warren on Innogen’s cosmopolitanism, Oxford edition, 17; 36-46. Margaret Jones-Davies provides a rather tortured version of a similar argument, “*Cymbeline and the Sleep of Faith*,” *Lancastrian Shakespeare* 197-217.

4 For a powerful new reading of the significance of Jacob’s wrestling with the Angel of a spiritualized law, see Tracy McNulty, *Wrestling with the Angel: Experiments in Symbolic Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

5 Potter, *Shakespeare: A Theatrical Life*, 16; cf. 81-3.

6 Lois Potter comments on the passage in her biography, noting James’ condensed allusion to the romances as well as to *As You Like It*. *The Life of William Shakespeare: A Critical Biography* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 439.

7 *As You Like It*, (II.vii.114) See Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, on bell controversies.

8

“A woman when she travaileth hath sorrow, because her hour is come. But as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish for joy that a man is born into the world” [John 16:21,...] The phrase “A man is born into the world,” drawn from the baptismal liturgy into the luminous space of the epigraph, refers at once to any Anglican child, to baby Will, and to Jesus, inserting Shakespeare between Everyman and The Man, filtered through literary convention (the epigraph) and historical method (the parish register). This is historical method of, but also as, parish Anglicanism.

9 Mr. May avers at one point, “‘The play’s the thing.’ Let the author alone” (46).

10 36, 47.

11 See Howard Wettstein’s recent editorial for *The New York Times*, “Is Belief a Jewish Notion?”, which might be read as a manifesto for the post-secular position conceived from a Jewish point of view. See also Adam Gopnik’s recent piece on atheism and its liberal alternatives in *The New Yorker*. For a scholarly view, see *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Philip Gorsky et al.

12 *Will in the World*, Kindle position 1305. “The vicious, murky world of Tudor religious conflict will help to explain why an adolescent boy, fresh from school, might have ventured from the Midlands of England to the north, how he could have had a connection with a powerful Catholic family there, and why that family would have bothered to employ someone like him rather than a licensed schoolmaster with an Oxford or Cambridge education.”

13 *Hamlet in Purgatory*, ****.