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Shakespeare and Religions

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SHAKESPEARE AND THE PROTESTANT MIND

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Recently the orthodoxies of Reformation study have changed, several times. Electronics are disseminating access. Records of sixteenth-century Eastern Europe are showing experiences more important and flexible than had been thought:¹ central Europe was more of a cultural unity than our post-Second World War notion of East and West has implied – Wittenberg is far nearer to Prague than to London. Extraordinary things happened all over Europe, some of them only now being approached. Radical changes were either repulsed, as in Italy or Spain, or quite quickly accepted, as in Germany. The Reformation’s ‘second wind’ of Calvinism became central in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, England and Scotland. No longer does anyone think of the Reformation in England as being from 1529 to 1559: it now has a long pre-history, and an even longer reach forward, even to 1800.² Moreover, England’s Reformation emerges as something of an anomaly: in Patrick Collinson’s question, how did ‘one of the most Catholic countries become one of the least?’³ To this ‘how?’ has been added the question whether the Reformation in England was ever more than ‘a succession of legislative enactments’.⁴

Students of British history have for some years been encouraged to conclude that ‘the English Reformation was a failure’. They have been directed to two books: Christopher Haigh’s *English Reformations* of 1995, which carries forward his earlier work on local records, to show, according to him, a sixteenth-century

nation of bewildered people, baffled by the sudden changes made to their religion by their political masters, quite unable to follow what was going on or what they ought to think or do. Though the people were given the Bible in English, unofficially from 1526, officially from 1537, it was taken away again in 1543. There was no popular Reformation at all. Parishes with reforming ministers were the sixteenth-century minority (Haigh’s insistent word). The strategies of the court failed. Protestantism proved ineffective. The word is ‘failure’.

Students will then have been moved by the other key book on their reading-list, Eamon Duffy’s massive – and massively bought – 1992 *The Stripping of the Altars*, telling the story of the total destruction, by strict government edict, under Henry VIII, and Edward VI (especially), all across England, of all that so many of the people loved in their old religion, the objects and observances, leaving them grieving and even more bewildered. Protests and rebellions meant that the old religion still flourished in England. For this is the point of the new revisionism: the sixteenth-century ‘continuity of Catholicism’, hidden until now.

These revisionist readings have broken up the

¹ Andrew Pettegree, Introduction to *The Reformation World*, ed. Pettegree (London and New York, 2000), pp. 1–2, and *passim*.

² See *England’s Long Reformation: 1500–1800*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (London, 1988), *passim*.

³ Quoted in Tyacke, *England’s Long Reformation*, p. 75.

⁴ *Ibid*.

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old comfortable agreement, whereby in three decades England became God's Protestant nation. Yet, three things need to be pointed out. First, such revisionism is far from new, being laid down long ago in both historical method and dogma in books of Catholic polemic. Secondly, Haigh omits large areas of English life: the universities and intellectual life generally, and the true effect of the print culture. He does not note that under Henry's late Act forbidding bible reading there were no prosecutions. Thirdly, in Duffy's book the Reformation, rather than having its observable long pre-history, is made to arrive like an incomprehensible bolt from the blue by government edict. Evidence from some parishes is extrapolated as a national effect. Duffy, too, ignores the universities, the learned bishops, and all the intellectual life of the time.

Shakespeare's poems and plays provide no evidence about whether he was Protestant or Catholic. In the Folger Library there is, however, an interesting 1632 Folio which between 1641 and 1651 was censored for the Inquisition by an English Jesuit living in Spain: he found much to delete. Some of it was on the level of removing from Cranmer the epithet 'good', but much is doctrinal. His total excision, oddly, was not *King John*, but *Measure for Measure*, which he cut cleanly out of the volume. R. M. Frye noted, in 1963, that these expurgations 'should put us on our guard . . . against the overly eager identification of Shakespeare's plays with Christian teachings in general and with the Catholic tradition in particular'.⁵

In his fifty-two years, Shakespeare lived in a nation that was officially, aggressively and massively Protestant. It is true that after Pope Gregory XIII excommunicated and deposed Queen Elizabeth in 1570, there were the smuggled-in Seminarians, Jesuit priests hiding, and well-attended masses in barns and some great houses in the north-west and elsewhere. But the Protestant Books of Common Prayer had been in daily use in every parish in England

and Wales, including Stratford-upon-Avon, for half a century by 1600; the 39 Articles of the English Church, printed in each copy, were out-and-out Protestant, even Calvinist; and the Books of Homilies to be preached in every pulpit, mixed as they were in origin, were solidly Protestant.

Peter Lake writes:

While [some Catholics] met in barns and private households, the godly inherited the public space of the parish church. And where the altars had been effectively stripped, that was now a public space that proclaimed, at a number of levels, the alteration of religion. The prominently displayed royal coat of arms aside, wall paintings had been whitewashed over, the Ten Commandments and the odd scriptural verses replacing them. The altar was now a communion table; the rood loft with its doom images as well as the images of saints had been removed. The liturgy was in English, not Latin; the mass had been replaced with a communion service. No trace of the cult of the saints or the notion of Purgatory – such central features of the religious system described by Eamon Duffy – was left in either the service book or the outward ceremonial face of the Church. Again, whatever else this was, it was not continuity.⁶

The English war of religion, we might add, the seventeenth-century Civil War, was fought between Protestant and Protestant. Even Christopher Haigh, in three pages at the close of his *English Reformations*, gives the evidence for, and announces, a popular Reformation ('the ministers were creating a Protestant nation'). We need to remember that Protestantism is not some sort of watered-down version of 'the real thing', Catholicism gone wrong. In the sixteenth century the spectrum of belief was wide: some Protestants remained closer to Catholicism: some Catholics admired Protestant beliefs. Protestantism as it emerges in that century,

⁵ R. M. Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton, 1963), p. 293.

⁶ Peter Lake, 'Religious Identities in Shakespeare's England' in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. David Scott Kastan (Oxford, 1999), p.76.

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however, is radically, 180 degrees, different from Catholicism. The attacks on Purgatory, the cults of the saints, confession in the ear, a celibate priesthood and so on were not some sort of nibbling at the edges of Church practice. The denial of those traditions, and many more, came out of a burning core of radical – and newly available – New Testament belief. Protestantism claimed, passionately, itself to be ‘the real’ – that is, New Testament – ‘thing’ from which, from even before the supremacy of the Popes in the sixth century, the Catholic Church had departed. (We may take it as understood that sixteenth-century Protestantism throughout Europe was in the stream of lament for what were seen as the usurping powers of the Pope, an ancient water-course that had become a torrent of protest at the Pope’s most recent demands for money.) Since the Papal hierarchy did not acknowledge the supreme authority of Scripture in the Church (which, with the supreme authority of the King in the State, was the central political tenet of English Protestantism), almost the only thing in common between the two systems was some belief in ‘the redemption of the world by Our Lord Jesus Christ’. Even there, William Tyndale, grieving for all the believing Christians in the land, noted in his *Obedience of a Christian Man* in 1528 that the Pope’s Church was selling for money what Christ promised freely.⁷

So to the English Protestant mind. The very first thing is to remind us that in these islands the Protestant mind thought, wrote and spoke in English. Overwhelmingly, printed matter was in English. Latin remained, and there were Latin plays – 150 of them between 1550 and 1650 performed in Oxford and Cambridge – and Latin poems and prose works, and continued printing of the Latin Bible: but the early and later reformers powerfully cultivated skills with the mother tongue for Scripture and for the greatly developed preaching. England quite suddenly had an English literature, full, bursting at the seams, overflowing. It needn’t have been like that. Erasmus, in five visits to England

between 1499 and 1517, two of them long, and one a two-year stint teaching in Cambridge, neither spoke nor wrote a word of English. Thomas More would not have his *Utopia*, printed in Louvain in 1516, published in English, lest it be mauled by the common people. John Skelton, a poet who knew things, mocked English in the early 1500s. Yet long before the end of the century, instead of a few wills and churchwardens’ accounts being in English, as in Skelton’s time, almost everything in national life was in English, a vigorous, flexible language, more powerful than any other in Europe, and we have Sidney, Spenser, and so on – and Shakespeare. Of course, to put it too briefly, this is a Renaissance effect, particularly for the elite, for Sidney, Spenser and so on. But I shall argue that the scale and suddenness of this remarkable literature in English, and especially its spread far beyond an elite, do all owe a good deal to Protestantism.

Secondly, and again briefly, that new English Protestantism was an intellectual movement. It was powered by university men, dependent on free discussion, and, at all levels of education, on being able to read *or hear books read* (a still very under-noticed factor). It was not humanism, though distantly related to it; and the new enquiring was a release from an Aristotelian world of scholastic speculation. Enormous and demanding books in English were increasingly bought in many thousands, and read and heard and thought about. Translations from the classical and modern worlds into English poured off the presses. There was a strong element of belonging to a European movement of reform; but people freshly studied national history, aware of a new and alert English Protestant nationalism. This begins early: as a reformer, Tyndale in the late 1520s and 1530s is alert to the force of a new English history, told in English. From the middle of the century, these were large volumes of history, Protestant large

⁷ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (London, 2000), pp. 125 and 170.

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volumes. Holinshed absorbed Hall, a Protestant account of England's recent upheavals, clearly based on Bible typology. Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* gave the British a new Protestant history from long before the Reformation. In its final editions 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs' was a huge folio of over 2,000 double-column pages, and very expensive to buy: yet it has been estimated that there were sold, between the first English edition of 1563 and Shakespeare's death in 1616, 28,000 copies unabridged, and thousands more abridged. A significant number were publicly available, chained in churches: many more were read aloud in lectures and sermons. Off the coast of Mexico, we are told, Drake read it to his Spanish prisoners. A modern Foxe scholar reports that these great volumes were greatly treasured by households, and 'rather uniquely, among early modern English books, this was a book which women were encouraged to read, which did seem to be popular with them'.⁸ Foxe had two effects: he printed a large number of documents of all kinds, an invaluable resource: and the martyrologies expressed a national grief. One of the sorrows of reading Early Modern English history is watching the culling of the best minds: John Frith, Robert Barnes, William Tyndale, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, and dozens more. Laments for Jesuits executed bloodily in Shakespeare's lifetime, and claims that Shakespeare was expressing secret sympathy, have to be set in the context of the many hundreds of Lollards and Protestants burned alive not long before. In the popularity of Foxe, they were always fresh in Elizabethan and Jacobean minds.

Most Early Modern historians today, in 2001, tell us that England was a Protestant nation by 1580 (if not quite a nation of Protestants), and that the cutting edge of that Protestantism, among intellectuals and writers, was Calvinism. For centuries it has been unpopular to say so. 'Calvinist' has been a dirty word: serious modern writings on Spenser set out to 'rescue' him from Calvinism.⁹ Yet the Church of

England was largely Calvinist in Shakespeare's lifetime: five of its 39 Articles are explicitly so.

My first two points have been the new dominance of the English language in religion and national life, and intellectual enquiry expressed in it. My third is equally clear to see: the sense of liberty, the release of being able to say things without the danger of a charge of heresy. This, as we shall see, went with a new inventiveness, a release of imagination into words. There were disagreements, but Protestants did not burn Protestants alive. Too much, in any case, has been made of the factionalism. Sixteenth-century Protestants disagreed with each other, and American historians have been alert to these conflicts, for understandable reasons: the American eastern seaboard in the seventeenth century is a monument to them. Yet in most concerns, and for most of them, Protestants in these islands were facing the same way, and enjoying the very new freedom to say what they understood the Bible to tell them.

Fourthly, there is powerful energy abroad. The liberated mind and spirit ventured largely. The Latin plays were performed in a few Oxbridge halls and Inns of Court before the dons and sometimes a bored and reluctant monarch. The English plays were in state-of-the-art theatres afternoon after afternoon, performed for thousands of ordinary people right across all classifications of rank or class or education.

One of the revisionist historians' reasons for announcing failure is that the leading edge in the parishes in the Reformation, the preaching, was either all about admissions of failure, or boring, or both. Historians feel that they can make this judgement, having read the printed sermons. A Protestant trope in Reformation England was the 'Hosead' or 'Jeremiad', attacks on the lumpen people, for not waking up and

⁸ T. S. Freeman, in *Journal of British Studies* (2000), 31–2.

⁹ See Anthea Hume, *Edmund Spenser: Protestant Poet* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 4 and notes.

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embracing their religion, like those made by the prophets Hosea or Jeremiah. Such hyperbolic Protestant ‘complaint’ writing has always been common. There is plenty of evidence of preachers finding dullness in the parishes, or attacking the people for preferring football to church (substitute circuses, and that goes back to the fifth century).

Care must be taken to stay in the historical context. There is vivid English writing by preachers about the people’s indifference to their preaching, ‘like the smith’s dog, who can lie under the hammer’s noise, and the sparks flying, and yet fast asleep’.¹⁰ Yet the very vividness of that phrase opens a chink of light. What can be seen is that attending a sermon in Shakespeare’s time could be a dramatic experience. The mass performed in Latin had been distant drama, with its gestures, processions and tableaux. Church attendance was all now changed. Moreover, because some modern historians are bored readers, it does not at all mean that the original occasions were boring. It could have been dramatic for people of all kinds to go as a body to a church service in English, where everything was close at hand; particularly to take communion together (in both kinds, the New Testament tradition still relatively new again in Europe), with English words; to hear a long sermon, a speech of carefully crafted plain English delivered from only a few feet away. This view of English parish life has obvious relation to the – albeit much heightened – experience of the London theatres.

A learned ministry, which was one of the first aims of the reformers everywhere, meant ensuring instruction in preaching. Thomas Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetorique* is surprisingly early, in 1553 at the end of Edward’s reign. In this volume, his first book (out of two) about the civilising effect of rhetoric, has two threads among others, one of biblical references and one of the use of rhetoric for plain preaching – with a strong appeal to *moving* the hearers. Protestant English sermons were very popular, as the massive holdings of a library like the Bodleian

show. Large numbers indicate a market. People do not buy to be bored. We are aware of the presence of that religious English Plain Style, so cultivated by Cranmer, Latimer, Crowley and the earlier reformers, so visible in the Prayer Books, the Homilies (especially Cranmer’s) and above all the English Bible. The effect of that preaching was intellectual, emotional and spiritual energy. The aim was to be effective, to convert.

Which brings me to what has been missing in what I have said so far: the English Bible. I want to pause on this, before I come fully to Shakespeare. Reading widely in recent Early Modern history is to be struck by something odd. Writers can express themselves puzzled by how the British people became Protestant at all. They find a mystery. Offshoots of Keith Thomas’s work are made to suggest the importance of folklore. Yet hardly any of them puts into the picture the impact on the nation of the Bible newly in English. A few mention a few Bibles: use the name Tyndale, have a footnote about the 1560 Geneva Bible or the King James Version of 1611, or declare that the Geneva margins were unacceptably Calvinist, which is not true. They write as though the Bible as a force did not exist at all. As in those doctored Stalinist photographs from Moscow, its one-time presence has simply been air-brushed out.

The writing of the New Testament has nothing whatever to do with that myth of the ‘Seventy’ who ‘miraculously’ produced identical Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament was written by its Christian authors in Greek. It is the best attested ancient Greek text, with about five thousand manuscripts surviving. This Greek New Testament was, in the course of the first

¹⁰ J. Rogers, *The Doctrine of Faith* (1634), pp. 97–9; quoted by Eamon Duffy, ‘The Long Reformation: Catholicism, Protestantism and the multitude’ in Tyacke, *England’s Long Reformation*, p. 41.

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centuries, translated into Latin, several times. In the late fourth century, a secretary to the Pope, Jerome, was commissioned to produce a standard Latin version. Though even he acknowledged faults in the result, his work became the Bible text of the Church, and remained so as the 'Vulgate' or common text. The original Greek was forgotten.

In 1516, as the Greek text was again sought out, the greatest scholar in Europe, Erasmus, produced his own Latin translation to begin to correct what were increasingly seen as the many errors in the Vulgate. This caused scandal in the Church: but for confirmation of his accuracy he printed alongside his Latin the New Testament in its original Greek. This printed Greek New Testament, it can be argued, was the single most important text in the sixteenth century. It was the basis of the new printed vernacular versions throughout Europe, so denounced by the Church. Protestants were astounded that accurate translations of God's word from the original Greek should be declared blasphemous.

The first complete printed New Testaments in English, freshly translated from Erasmus's Greek text by William Tyndale, were smuggled into Britain in 1526 (one copy of an unfinished attempt in 1525 survives). The first royally licensed complete English Bible was in 1537. The only version ever authorized, the Great Bible of 1539, was placed, open, in every one of the 9,500 parishes in England and Wales. People went to the church, out of service hours, to hear the Bible read aloud. Even under Mary, when there were no Bible printings, large assemblies to hear the Bible read in cities (London, Bristol) were left untouched. Under Elizabeth the printings of Bibles were very large. Including Tyndale's first New Testament of 1526, and the 1611 King James version, there was a majestic line of eleven new translations or heavy revisions, of the New Testament or whole Bible. This did not happen to Ovid or Plutarch. Why that happened partly concerns improving textual scholarship and knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, of course; but it also has to

do with demand. (The numbers given here are taken from the standard catalogue of printed editions of the English Bible, 1525–1961, by T. H. Darlow, H. F. Moule and A. S. Herbert (1968)). To consider only Shakespeare's lifetime: there were in those years three different editions of the Rheims New Testament, the Roman Catholic version, first printed in 1582. The Bishops' Bible had first appeared in 1568: before Shakespeare died there were forty different editions of it. After 1611, and the first edition of the King James Bible, even in the five years before Shakespeare died there were twenty-six different editions of it. But in Shakespeare's lifetime alone, April 1564 to April 1616, there were printed of the Geneva Bible one hundred and forty-two different editions – editions, not reprintings, in three parallel basic states, well beyond the original 1560 to which Shakespeare scholars refer. That makes a total of two hundred and eleven Bibles or New Testaments, in English, freshly edited and produced while Shakespeare was alive. We cannot calculate print-runs, but even an over-modest estimate of 3,000 each makes 633,000 English Bibles bought, well over half a million, while Shakespeare was alive, in a population of six million. How can that fact have been airbrushed out? Further, a little recent work has been done on the publication of (Protestant) catechisms as separate books, not just as automatically printed in Prayer Books. Both total figures, for catechisms and for Prayer Books, in the sixteenth century alone, are colossal. All this is not to include the hearing of the Bible in church, as set out in the Books of Common Prayer: from 1549, the New Testament was to be read right through three times a year (later, as now, twice), most of the Old Testament once, and all the Psalms every month, as ever since. The modern airbrushing out of the Bible from English national life of the time becomes even more astonishing.

The Protestant mind was, above all things, biblical. Not everyone agreed with William Chillingworth's aphorism, 'The Bible, the Bible

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only I say, is the religion of Protestants.’¹¹ There was room in God’s plan for other works as well. But the Reformation in England *was* a popular movement, as well as intellectual, driven in both cases by knowledge of the very widely circulated Bible in English. At the court of Edward VI, the Book of Deuteronomy was vital. Edward was the young King Josiah, who led his nation to religious reform through the discovery of the lost book.¹²

Shakespeare knew his English Bible well. Work done on his biblical references for a century and a half, culminating in the devoted recent labour of Naseeb Shaheen, to which all modern editors must be indebted, makes that clear. That suggests that he was a good Protestant. He also knew his Ovid and his Plutarch very well. That suggests that he was a good pagan. Shakespeare’s use of Bible references implies that he expected his audiences and readers to take them on the spot, because they knew their English Bibles. The references were not intended to wait for explication by clever scholars. For what came in so freshly, and was available so widely, was the whole Bible, well printed, relatively cheap, and in any case open for reading in every parish church (with, also in every parish church, Erasmus’s *Paraphrases of the New Testament* in English, alongside for guidance, something rarely mentioned today). Protestants believed, as the third *sola* (after *sola gratia* and *sola fides*) in *sola scriptura*. Given the whole Bible, it would be found to interpret itself, without help from Church traditions, not to mention those secret and influential ‘unwritten verities’ on which the Church depended. The Protestants’ point was a true one. The Christian Bible does intensely cross-refer. Take the Hebrew Scriptures out of the New Testament, and it shrivels. To lift out one or two Latin words from the Apocrypha of the Old Testament on which to base a central doctrine of the Church (as with Purgatory, Protestants remarked, from a few words at the end of chapter 12 of 2 Maccabees, a book of late Jewish military history and priestly controversy) was to

make the Bible a means of superstition, not faith in Christ.

What is also not now recognized in sufficient detail is a stylistic fact of our earliest English Bibles. We know that Luther, from his first ‘September [New] Testament’ of 1522 united the states of Germany with a common language. Yet far more significant for the whole English-speaking world has been the gift, largely from Tyndale from 1526, of our Bibles, uniquely in Europe, in a direct clear language of great simplicity and power. Tyndale’s register is just a little above common English speech, with a close relation to proverbs. He can use a Latinate word when he wants, but usually he goes for short sentences in which the verb (as in Greek) is the power, not the noun (as in Latin), so that in English Plain Style someone might fear to die rather than be trepidatory of mortality. Tyndale’s syntax – subject–verb–object, with frequent use of ‘and’, avoiding subordinations – is Saxon: not ‘And when they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre, and as they went in’, nor ‘Finding the stone rolled away . . . and going in’, but ‘And they found . . . and went in.’ Tyndale’s vocabulary is Saxon, even to ‘one of the wenches’, to eighteenth-century and Victorian derision. Parallel to this, and I believe coming directly from it, is the conscious, and rhetorically controlled, Plain Style cultivated so brilliantly by Cranmer and the rest in prayers and homilies. Tyndale was alone in spreading this in 1526, and within a few years he was demonstrating a range of English styles quite astonishing for the time, particularly in translating the Hebrew Scriptures, which he was the first to do and print in English. He

¹¹ Quoted by Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford, 1982), p. viii.

¹² See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (London, 1999), pp. 14–15 and *passim*; and Christopher Bradshaw, ‘David or Josiah? Old Testament Kings as Exemplars in Edwardian Religious Polemic’ in Bruce Gordon, ed. *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 77–90.

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believed with passion and good reason that Hebrew went well into English, and that Latin makes a mess of it.

In Tyndale's translation, the Sunamite woman in 2 Kings 4 does not say to Elisha in her grief at the death of her promised son 'did I desire a son of my lord? did I not say that thou shouldst not deceive me?' All other translations that I have seen say that. But the Hebrew doesn't quite say 'deceive': she is expressing an element of having been led into a different, and false, world. So Tyndale has 'did I not say, that thou shouldst not bring me in a fool's paradise?'

Here again is Tyndale's Plain Style, from Luke 16.

And it fortuneth that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried. And being in hell in torments, he lift up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom, and he cried and said: Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue: for I am tormented in this flame.

How easy it sounds: until you begin to notice effects like the three small high 'i' sounds, 'dip . . . tip . . . finger', and how they help a good deal with the contrast of scale in the request, leading to the extended and lower 'tormented'. Tyndale can be 'modern': he says men 'sleep with' women. Hundreds of such examples can be found. We know that the King James New Testament is 83% pure Tyndale: generally where it differs, it goes back to Latin-based words.

It is good to see some long-hidden Catholic books of Shakespeare's time, some in English, now getting back into print. But they are few. Shakespeare inherited a vast, vigorous and open Protestant English literature of many kinds. A good deal of this was in the relatively new Plain English, the basic language of all the English Bibles except the Catholic Rheims New Testament, translated from the Latin (and even that has many moments of silent dependence on the 'heretic' Tyndale). English in Skelton's time

deserved his scorn: it was a shapeless mixture of Norman-French, Latin and Anglo-Saxon. It had been different in Chaucer's time. It was unthinkable in the 1520s and 1530s that it might be able to carry any large and serious freight. Yet Tyndale in those years made the Bible not only in English but in a remarkable language of great range.

The English rhetoricians hold up the English Bible as a model. Thomas Wilson is full of the English Bible, giving stories as big examples of how to do it, knowing that his readers will follow and learn, from the way the English Bible does it. There has just come into print for the first time Thomas Swynnerton's manuscript *The tropes and figures of Scripture*, dedicated to Thomas Cromwell probably in 1537–8, but clearly intended for a larger audience. Here is the first book of rhetoric in English, and it is all about Tyndale's bible translations as models. Swynnerton tells the reader to look further into the writing of 'Master William Tyndale'. Swynnerton's sixth chapter ends, 'Every man hathe a Testament in his hande, wolde to God in his harte.'¹³ That can only have been Tyndale's.

When Shakespeare wants to turn our hearts over, he is generally plain and Saxon: 'Pray you undo this button', 'I am dying, Egypt, dying'. Falstaff, before Shrewsbury, does not say, as befits a Latin-educated knight, 'the advent of the imminent hostilities elevates my apprehensions', but 'I would 'twere bed-time, Hal, and all well.' Shakespeare's ability to use such near-proverbial directness is wonderful. It is not, I believe, coincidence that the Gospels had been in such an English for seventy years, and 'every man hathe a [New] Testament in his hande'. Nor is it coincidence that our late Tudor poets were at liberty to be so inventive with words. Tyndale, needing a word, made it up, from Saxon roots: he invented words like 'scapegoat'

¹³ *A Reformation Rhetoric: Thomas Swynnerton's 'The tropes and figures of Scripture'*, ed. Richard Rex (Cambridge, 1999), p. 171.

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and 'Passover'. That freedom, and others, were sources of anger to Thomas More. Shakespeare, needing words, makes them up by the bucketful. He can do anything. Erasmus taught Tudor schoolboys how to invent – in Latin. A switch was thrown to send the current into inventiveness in English. There were many hands on the switch, no doubt, but the neglected one has been the Protestant Bible in English.

I want to come properly to Shakespeare through what I see as a Protestant inheritance, simply as an inheritance, without making any statement about his personal beliefs. I shall do the Protestant thing, and take the whole book.

In his comedies, Shakespeare, I am not alone in seeing, was unusual in that he moves his beautiful young people into love and marriage. Love comes before money and business intrigue. Perhaps they find each other in somewhere 'other', a King's park, a wood, Belmont, a forest and so on: but love means marriage and real life, as Rosalind makes starkly clear. The lovers are to join, in love, and reproduce – Rosalind longs for her child's father. My own private definition of the Reformation is 'people reading Paul', and the marriages making one flesh in Shakespeare's comedies are Pauline in doctrine. The maker and re-maker of marriages at the end of *The Winter's Tale* is called Paulina. This matter of Paul, and of Shakespearian comedy, make a large subject, ludicrously sketched here. On tragedies I shall be even more ludicrous. There are many biblical references, to English Bibles, to be taken. Judges 11 is expected to be understood in *Hamlet* 2.2 (Jephthah's daughter). On the widest canvas, the individual, as his creator is free from the threat of a heresy-hunt, is able to make his own tragic destiny in relation to whatever god he serves.

David Norbrook notes the strategies of many of the poets of Shakespeare's time to preserve, politically and religiously, a degree of independence.¹⁴ This is vital. Shakespeare does his unique things for his own poetic and dramatic reasons. Yet in choosing to write, and to

rewrite, English history, he cannot help being in a Protestant stream of Providential national historiography. Hall, Grafton, Holinshed and Foxe, to name but four, Protestant re-writers all, were doing that, and they were only the higher end of the culture. In the second half of the century, a strong tradition of anonymous chronicle-writing, often in doggerel, used the voice of the people to give historical examples, much as Tyndale does at a more dignified level in *The Practice of Prelates*: most of it was apocalyptic in direction, following John Bale.¹⁵

In her book, *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama* (1996), Pauline Kiernan discovers a sort of Shakespearian *Defence of Drama* by finding that Shakespeare rejected the mimetic aesthetic of Sidney and his late Renaissance humanist peers. Shakespeare, Pauline Kiernan finds, did something quite different, valuing instead what she notes as 'presence', the living human body on stage, with its necessarily intensely subjective set of responses.¹⁶ Also in 1996, Deborah Shuger, remarking how Shakespeare's religion has been wrongly seen as defending a conservative social order, notes that in fact he gives dramatic life to 'poor and common speech', the self, as she puts it, as suffering subject. In a memorable illustration, Professor Shuger remarks that 'Lear's pedigree does not fundamentally alter the fact that he is a powerless and hurt old man tormented by rage, guilt and thankless children . . . the displacement of social discourses of suffering and poverty on to psychological representations', as she says, is a discourse of Protestant subjectivity.¹⁷

¹⁴ David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London, 1984), p. 6.

¹⁵ See Thomas Betteridge, *Histories of the English Reformations, 1530–83* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 10, 51–79.

¹⁶ Pauline Kiernan, *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 9 and *passim*.

¹⁷ Deborah K. Shuger, 'Subversive Faiths and Suffering Subjects – Shakespeare and Christianity' in *Religion, Literature and Politics in post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, ed. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 56, 58, 59, 61.

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William Tyndale is relevant here. First, always subjective in responses to the work of the gospel, in all his writing that is not biblical translation (particularly his *Wicked Mammon* and his *Obedience of a Christian Man*, both of 1528) he allows nothing to stand between the suffering soul and God – and that suffering is so often metaphorized by him as either deep poverty or great illness, from both of which the gospel releases the ordinary man or woman or child, he insists, with glorious new and energetic liberty. Secondly, Tyndale translated the Bible for the ploughboy, as he famously remarked, that poor underprivileged, physically suffering creature. In no way am I saying that Shakespeare read Tyndale's books: but thirdly, Shakespeare *had* read Tyndale's translations of the four Gospels – Naseeb Shaheen has shown that they are easily Shakespeare's most-referred-to biblical books, and whether he read Geneva Bibles or the Bishops' Bible he is still largely reading Tyndale. The core of the Gospels is the removal of the religious rituals of exclusion: Jesus shocked the righteous by sitting down for meals with moral outcasts. His bodily presence, as a Messiah, someone with the greatest spiritual power who heals and teaches now and not in some future, was with fishermen and prostitutes and publicans. As Jesus says so often, the Kingdom of God is now. Any over-ritualized religion since the dawn of time can make its priests say that yes, it's rotten, and hard luck, but just do as we say, keep at the ritual, stick it out, give us your money and you'll end up with the angels in heaven for ever more. The Gospels do not say this. There is a future, but the world of the kingdom of God, as in so many of the parables, is now, not then. The finding of the lost sheep is now. The Prodigal Son returns now. The four Gospels are full of hard sayings, and the modern scholarly teasing-out of the relation between them as texts has been described as the most difficult problem in the humanities. Yet at the same time they are blazingly simple, being full of people, usually poor and suffering people, in the presence of an extraordinary teacher and

healer. In the healing is the sudden dramatic conflict between humanity wrong (diseased, ill, deformed) and humanity right. Here, we might say, is Pauline Kiernan's 'presence'; what, as Deborah Shuger reminds us, William Perkins called 'a person of mine own self, under Christ . . .'.¹⁸ Perkins continued what Tyndale brought to English readers from Luther, the strength of the inward, spiritual regiment, presence localized not only in the temporal and secular regiment but in the spiritual and subjective, psychologically represented, taken in to a body on a stage. The *mimesis* of the later humanists, Sidney and the rest, though Pauline Kiernan doesn't put it quite like this, pointed to some ethical value of art. Shakespeare is full of people, quite newly, and this came to him from fifty years of increasing subjectivity, particularly through everyone knowing the Bible in English, especially the Gospels, a Protestant thing.

Recent commentators express surprise about how new this was. Harold Bloom, in his introduction to his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (late 1999), writes 'In Shakespeare, characters develop rather than unfold, and they develop because they re-conceive themselves . . . [as in] no other writer . . .'.¹⁹ Professor Shuger, three years before Harold Bloom, finely related this to Samuel Johnson's modernly maligned passage about the absolute newness of Shakespeare's 'persons' in the *Preface to Shakespeare*, which Bloom also uses. We might recall that something even more basic than the idea of a psychologically represented character came to us from Shakespeare: as the Arden 3 editor of *Julius Caesar*, I was often struck by the fact that the Rome the wide public knows is still the Rome that Shakespeare gave us in his Plutarch plays.

Shakespeare's theory of drama is of bodily presence, as Pauline Kiernan shows. That body

¹⁸ Shuger, 'Subversive Faiths', p. 55.

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London, 1999), p. xvii.

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is in interior, human, conflict. Of Edgar's bedlam beggar and Lear's nakedness in the storm, Deborah Shuger writes:

Such characters acquire their psychological depth by assimilating the ancient Christian discourses of social injustice to the structures of the psyche . . . within the tragic protagonist, enabling a fundamentally new presentation of the self . . . Before Lear, kings did not hallucinate or run around half-naked with flowers in their hair, weeping over their unkind children.²⁰

We could focus the phrase 'ancient Christian discourses of social injustice' to four narratives fully available to all English people, the Gospels.

It has for a long time been noticed that Hamlet's language borrows heavily from popular speech, his images being 'drawn from the most common aspects of everyday life . . . which ally him to the lower-class figures of the Moralities'.²¹ Shakespeare had no need to walk to Coventry to see the mystery plays in order to meet ordinary people in dramatic conflict. He could find those everyday images, heavily pregnant with apparently infinite meaning, at home, in the Gospels. Of course Shakespeare inherited a great tidal wave of material from the ancient world, the European Renaissance and recent history. But the great shifting of tectonic plates in Europe which produced the Protestant *tsunami* (far greater than a 'tidal wave') which flooded Europe to such depth gave him, through the Bible in English, a Kingdom of Heaven which is immediate; bodily presence on stage. Here is a parable.

What woman having ten groats, if she lose one, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently, till she find it? And when she hath found it she calleth her lovers and her neighbours saying: Rejoice with me, for I have found the groat which I had lost.²²

What could be simpler? Language has changed: a groat is a coin to the value of a day's wage for an agricultural labourer, and 'lovers' now has only a sexual sense. Yet Jesus's story goes far beyond rational analysis. Luke tells it in the

context of the Pharisees murmuring because Jesus is with 'sinners' and eats with them. The story is not, or not only, about moral outcasts: it is more fully about losing and finding again, an existential experience that can make one weep, like finding oneself unexpectedly at home again. Jesus uses it to parallel 'joy in the presence of the angels of God', and what *that* means cannot surely be put into rational words at all.

In Hamlet's last desperate words, he is fighting for time to tell vital things to the obtuse – and thus suddenly betraying – Horatio:

Had I but time – as this fell sergeant Death
Is strict in his arrest – O, I could tell you –
But let it be. (5.2.328–30)

Shakespeare expresses what we feel we might say given less than a minute to live (unlike Ben Jonson, who expresses what we feel Ben Jonson might say). Notice in that simple language Hamlet's range of emotion and thought, and the sense of a vast revelation of what it could be like to die, beyond anything we expect. The extraordinary image of the fell sergeant strictly arresting suggests guilt, and martyrdom, and horror, and inevitability, and an arresting being who is both outside and inside the dying body, all in the end of someone's time on earth. Shakespeare is close to Tyndale in that sense of simple words bringing in a new kingdom of possibilities – 'This thy brother was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found': or 'Now abideth faith, hope and love, even these three: but the chief of these is love.'

Harold Bloom gets this wrong. He rightly says that only the Bible matches Shakespeare, but he finds that 'what the Bible and Shakespeare have in common actually is rather less than most people suppose . . . only a certain

²⁰ Shuger, 'Subversive Faiths', p. 57.

²¹ Annabel Patterson, quoted in Shuger, 'Subversive Faiths', p. 57.

²² Luke 15, in *Tyndale's New Testament: A Modern-Spelling Edition of the 1534 Translation* with introduction by David Daniell (New Haven and London, 1989), p. 116.

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universalism . . .²³ Not so. What Shakespeare and the Bible have in common is that language, at the highest moments, of elemental simplicity, from the Gospels.

Our so-familiar Plutarchan Rome from Shakespeare blinds us to the extraordinary newness, even shockingness, of Plutarch. This is not the high political 'Twelve Caesars' Rome of the sixteenth-century schoolroom and educated man's study. Plutarch's is a Rome of streets and houses and people talking and running about, of a boy house-servant sent to run to the Senate house by a Portia too desperate to remember to give the message. Our so-familiar characters in Shakespeare, so many of them, are similarly 'shocking' in their psychological interiority and bodily presence. As Deborah Shuger stresses, it is suffering and poverty that are now interiorized by Shakespeare. In the Gospels it is 'one sick of the palsy' (whose friends, so dense is the crowd, break open the roof of the house and let him down) to whom Jesus says 'son thy sins are forgiven thee.' That paralysed man got up and went out.²⁴ A desperate woman ashamed of a secret sickness came behind Jesus in a pressing crowd and touched the hem of his garment and was instantly healed.

And Jesus said: Who is it that touched me? when every man denied, Peter and they that were with him, said: Master, the people thrust thee and vex thee: and sayest thou, who touched me? And Jesus said: Somebody touched me. For I perceive that virtue is gone out of me. When the woman saw, that she was not hid, she came trembling, and fell at his feet, and told him before all the people for what cause she had touched him, and how she was healed immediately. And he said unto her: Daughter, be of good comfort, Thy faith hath made thee whole, go in peace.²⁵

Shakespeare had no need to walk all the way to Coventry to meet in a text those called, in that phrase rather shocking in its class-consciousness, 'the lower-class figures of the Moralities'. Shakespeare met suffering people, registered in the ordinary language of the people, in the texts of the Gospels in English, ultimately Tyndale's English. He interiorised their suffering, and put them on his stage. That is a great bequest of Protestantism.

²³ Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. 3.

²⁴ Mark 2, in *Tyndale's New Testament*, pp. 63–4.

²⁵ Luke 8, in *Tyndale's New Testament*, p. 104.