

## I

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## Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church

This woodcut from John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (Figure 1.1) is a perfect distillation of the way that the English Church saw itself in 1600.<sup>1</sup> Justice stands blindfolded in the center of the picture. To the left, on the established authoritative side of the image, are idealized Protestant luminaries distinguished by their beards, which signify both masculinity and a lack of bodily vanity. Above these figures stands a church and the left-hand "Protestant" side of the picture is framed by a flourishing tree. On the right-hand side of the picture is the Roman Catholic Church; a mass of disordered clerical figures all trying to tip Justice's scales against the word of God. Rosaries, crosses, papal decrees, and Eucharist wafers (and a devil) are not enough to outweigh the Bible. Above the heads of the woodcut's parodic Roman Catholics is emptiness and the right-hand side of the picture is framed by a barren tree. The distinction that is drawn in this woodcut between ordered, flourishing Protestantism and disordered, sterile Roman Catholicism was fundamental to the self-understanding of the English Church in 1600. The visually chaotic, but also dynamic, nature of the right-hand side of this picture reflects a fear of popery but also an acknowledgment of its protean, plural, and potentially attractive nature. Roman Catholicism is sterile, it leads to blasted trees, but it is also textually and visually productive. In the place of real plenty, symbolized in the woodcut by the pastoral landscape on the left-hand side of the image, the right-hand side offers a false plenitude that is both worthless and weightless. In this woodcut it is Roman Catholicism that encourages and offers to the reader the pleasures of interpretation with its multiplicity of different images and figures. And there is nothing unintentional about this. English Protestant culture during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James VI and I is replete with self-conscious representations of this dynamic, with Edmund Spenser's "The Bower of Bliss" (*Faerie Queen*, Book 2, Canto 12) being the most obvious example. William Shakespeare's drama consistently stages, albeit tangentially, the tension embodied in the woodcut above and it consistently seeks

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Figure 1.1 “A lively picture describyng the weight and substaunce of Gods most blessed word against the doctrines and vanities of mans traditions,” from John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Special and Memorable, Happening in the Church* (London: John Day, 1583), vol. 1, 294.

Source: Rare Books and Manuscripts, The Ohio State University.

to articulate a Protestant sensibility that at the same time does not reject the pleasures and plenitude of human reason and wit. In his drama, and in particular his late plays, Shakespeare imagines a religious space that is at once Christian and has room for fiction, storytelling, and play: a free theatrical Church in which the tensions embodied in the woodcut of Justice weighing the Bible are staged and reconciled.

### The Elizabethan and Jacobean Church

The Church legislated into being by Elizabeth I’s first Parliament in 1559 was a Protestant one. And by 1600 it had been established for almost fifty years. However, as John Guy has suggested, “it is a paradox that, at the time that the Elizabethan religious settlement was made, it settled little.”<sup>2</sup>

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The process by which the Church created by statute in 1559 became the largely Calvinist Protestant Church of 1600 was uneven and complex. It was partly a process of separation in which the English Church in a series of uneven steps – some brutal, as in 1559 with the rejection of papal authority, and others much slower – the demise of religious drama, separated itself from medieval Catholicism and a Roman Catholic Church invigorated by the reforms of the Council of Trent 1545–63. Peter Marshall has recently suggested that the “Reformation was a journey” and this was certainly the case in relation to the English Church, with the added complication that a number of the key figures, principally the queen and her bishops, were not only not in agreement about the eventual destination but also the length and nature of the journey.<sup>3</sup> There was also always a sense in which what really mattered to Elizabeth and her advisers in 1559 was to re-establish state or monarchical control over the English Church, a more “reformed” version of the Henrician Church settlement, rather than any particular form of post-Reformation Christianity. Alex Ryrie has suggested that “Elizabeth’s Calvinism – without-the-consistory [local church courts] was a mirror image of Henry’s Catholicism-without-the-pope.”<sup>4</sup> In many ways Elizabeth remained throughout her reign committed to some version of a Henrician Church that was, by 1600, totally anachronistic. James VI and I, when he acceded to the English throne, did tentatively seek to clarify the nature of the English Church but appears to have relatively soon reverted to accepting the basic outlines of the Elizabethan settlement. The Church established in 1559 was Protestant and Constantinian in the sense of being ultimately under secular control but little else was decided and confirmed, and even the latter was regarded by some late Tudor and early Jacobean Christians as a matter of debate.

It was this lack of closure that led to the period between 1559 and 1625 being one in which discussion, albeit within clear constraints, about the nature of the Church, its ceremonies, structures, and some of its basic teaching, became endemic. The poet John Donne was Dean of St. Pauls from 1621 to 1631. In a poem probably written in 1620, Donne’s narrator asks God to reveal the True Church – the spouse of the Lamb described in Revelation 19. During the course of the poem, however, Christ’s bride becomes scandalously converted into a prostitute or at least a woman who is “open” to all men. Donne’s sonnet perfectly captures this sense of the English Church’s provisional, partial, even unfinished nature, the extent to which it is still on a journey navigating different possible homes:

Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear.  
 What, is it she, which on the other shore

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Goes richly painted? or which robbed and tore  
 Laments and mourns in Germany and here?  
 Sleeps she a thousand, then peeps up one year?  
 Is she self truth and errs? now new, now outwore?  
 Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore  
 On one, on seven, or on no hill appear?  
 Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights  
 First travail we to seek and then make love?  
 Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,  
 And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove,  
 Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then  
 When she is embraced and open to most men. (Holy Sonnet 18)<sup>5</sup>

Donne's Church is caught between Roman Catholicism ("seven hills"), Calvinism ("no hill"), and Jerusalem ("one hill"). But what is most significant in relation to Shakespeare's drama is the way Donne defers or rejects the option of choosing or defining which "hill" is true. Instead he uses the shocking image of the Church as a prostitute to suggest that the Church's truth is practical and provisional as opposed to absolute and fixed.<sup>6</sup> It took Donne's particular vision, however, to see and articulate this idea. A far more common and indeed mainstream approach, across the religious spectrum, was to regard any lack of clarity and order in the ecclesiastical field as a sign of creeping Papistry, heresy, or anarchy.

Among the groups that would have violently rejected Donne's image of an inclusive Church were the establishment of the English Church and the Godly or Puritans. The latter, while often being sharply critical of the existing ecclesiastical settlement, almost all shared to the full the desire of Elizabethan archbishops and bishops for a Church with clear and exclusionary boundaries.<sup>7</sup> Indeed in many ways mainstream Puritans, the vast majority of whom chose to remain within the Church despite what they regarded as its manifest imperfections, were the backbone of the Church – its most committed members and defenders. It was Puritans above all in the period 1558 to 1625 who led the process of confessionalization, the development of creeds, doctrine, and denominations, in England. It was they who took on a role of driving through the process of creating a stable Protestant and Calvinist identity for the English Church. And it is a reflection of the weakness of the English monarchy that confessionalization, which was a mainstay of emerging continental absolutism, was "privatized" in this way.<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth's reported desire not to "open windows into men's souls" may sound attractively tolerant but it flew in the face of early modern religious practice and it had the effect of depriving the English monarchy and state of a key political and cultural tool – one that a number of more committed

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English Christians were more than prepared to pick up. Puritans did the heavy lifting in terms of the key confessional tasks of teaching, preaching, and organizing. Above all, they were the people who sought to take responsibility for defining the scope and shape of the godly English community – the English Church. In this they were reproducing a key shared element of confessionalization across early modern Europe. It is important to note that this also complicates any sense that the Puritans were a group apart from the English Church or even that they were an organized group. Neither was the case. It is far more useful to think of Puritanism as a continuum of religious and cultural practices and beliefs that were shared to different degrees by those English Protestants who wished to see further “reformation” of the English Church.

A fundamental flaw in some approaches to the relationship between Shakespeare’s drama and religion is a potentially reductive emphasis on its confessional status, which can be boiled down to the question, was Shakespeare a Protestant or Roman Catholic? The key difference at a cultural level in this period was not, however, between Catholics and Protestants, but between confessional and non-confessional religion. Markus Wriedt comments that

Calvinists, Catholics, Lutherans, and to a certain extent even Anglicans, all acted in remarkably similar ways. No wonder: each faced the same problem. Under the pressure of mutual competition the religious groups had no choice but to establish themselves as “churches,” i.e. stable organisations with well-defined membership. These new “churches” had to be more rigid than the old pre-Reformation Church, where membership was self-evident and required no careful preservation.<sup>9</sup>

An essential element in this process of establishment was the need for clergy to teach their congregations central elements of the new Church’s doctrines. This cut right across the different confessional groups. As John Bossy suggests, “In reality the consensus of Protestant and Catholic reformations converged ... on the catechising duties of the clergy.”<sup>10</sup> The exemplary early modern clerical figure is the devout or godly Churchman, Protestant and Roman Catholic, seeking to teach his benighted parishioners the basics of confessional Christianity, and failing. The complaints of Puritan ministers about the stupidity and ignorance of their parishioners would probably have been made by the same people about the same people regardless of whether the English Church was Protestant or Roman Catholic.<sup>11</sup>

The English Church was committed, as were all confessional Churches, to a creation of a binary world, depicted brilliantly in the woodcut from *Acts and Monuments* (Figure 1.1), but the process of creating a fully



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reformed world was left by the English state to the Godly or Puritans. This created social and cultural pressures that are consistently staged in Shakespeare's drama. In particular, Shakespeare in his drama reflects on the nature of the English Church as a community while at the same time being careful to avoid directly representing the Church's ceremonies onstage. An important exception to this is the occasional portrayal of an erring or incompetent priest, such as Sir Oliver Martext from *As You Like It*. There also are a number of representations of parodic Catholic figures behaving in disreputable ways. For example, while Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* does marry the protagonists with laudable intentions, in practice his behavior, subverting the public marriage ceremony and the authority of parents, is precisely what anti-Roman Catholic writers would expect of a friar. Shakespeare was deeply concerned about confessionalization and the kind of communities its discourses and practices produced; ones that should have been Christian and grace-full but were often marked by a violent desire to label, order, and exclude. In this chapter I will examine a number of key moments from Shakespeare's drama – *Henry VI Part 2*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Tale*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Pericles* – to illustrate Shakespeare's approach to the idea of a Church and the constitution of a Christian community of believers.

*Henry VI Part 2, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, and Practical Protestantism*

William Perkins was the doyen of Elizabethan Puritanism. From his position of influence as a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, and lecturer at St. Andrews Church, Perkins consistently argued for further reform of the English Church and against attempts by the government to impose uniformity of practice on clergymen. He was also, however, firmly opposed to those extreme Puritans whose desire for further reformation led them to separate themselves from the established Church. Perkins's copious writings, sermons, and treatises provided the backbone for devotional reading and a guide to leading a godly life. His work is voluminous and appears to seek to satisfy its reader's desire for spiritual comfort and guidance as much through comprehensiveness as through the actual teaching it contains. Perkins's *Exposition of Christ's Sermon on the Mount* (1606) is a very detailed interpretation and explanation of Matthew 5–7. In this work Perkins discusses the nature of the Church, arguing that "God's church is nothing else but a company of God's people, called by the doctrine of the prophets and apostles unto the state of salvation." He goes on to state

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that, “In the church is vocation, justification, sanctification, and the way to glorification.”<sup>12</sup> The relationship between these two statements hinges upon Perkins’s understanding of the phrase “a company of God’s people,” which was for him the Godly, the people dedicated to the reform of Church and society. The Godly were, like their Roman Catholic opponents, determined to reshape culture so that it reflected their version of the godly commonwealth. As Patrick Collinson writes, “the conscious thrust of the puritan doctrine was towards the redemption of the existing order.”<sup>13</sup> The Church as it appears in the writings of authors like Perkins is a discrete entity, the company of good men, and an image of the ideal society; the English Church as it was and also as it ought to be. The failure of the English Church as established by Elizabeth and maintained by James to live up to this ideal was a source of constant frustration and disappointment for the Godly.

In his drama Shakespeare does not represent the Church or the clergy in detail. No doubt this was largely because to do so would be to invite controversy and potential prosecution. Despite this, Shakespeare does from his earliest work produce images and moments whose meaning extends into a clearly ecclesiastical and religious direction. In *Henry VI Part 2*, possibly Shakespeare’s first play, there is a piece of Reformation drama. The royal court is visiting St. Albans when suddenly there is uproar and a miracle is proclaimed:

GLOUCESTER: What means this noise?  
 Fellow, what miracle dost thou proclaim?  
 CITIZEN: A miracle! A miracle!  
 SUFFOLK: Come to the king and tell him what miracle.  
 CITIZEN: Forsooth, a blind man at Saint Alban’s shrine,  
 Within this half-hour, hath received his sight –  
 A man that ne’er saw in his life before.  
 KING HENRY: Now God be praised, that to believing souls  
 Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair. (2.1.58–66)

Having heard about the miracle, the court party is then introduced to Simpcox, who, it transpires, has had his sight restored. King Henry, his queen, and courtiers all accept the “miracle” as real. In particular, Henry’s response is specifically religious in the sense that it locates the “miracle” within a clear pastoral context, suggesting that its meaning goes well beyond the simple restoration of Simpcox’s sight and extends to its implicit impact across Christendom.

The Duke of Gloucester, however, remains far more skeptical and through the application of some relatively simple deductive reasoning exposes Simpcox as a fraud:

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GLOUCESTER: A subtle knave. But yet it shall not serve. –  
 Let me see thine eyes: wink now; now open them.  
 In my opinion, yet thou seest not well.  
 SIMPCOX: Yes, master, clear as day, I thank God and Saint Albones.  
 GLOUCESTER: Say'st thou me so? What colour is this cloak of?  
 SIMPCOX: Red, master, red as blood.  
 GLOUCESTER: Why that's well said. What colour is my gown of?  
 SIMPCOX: Black, forsooth, coal-black as jet. (2.1.109–116)

Gloucester's approach to the miracle is to subject it to the kind of skeptical scrutiny that harks back to the work of earlier pre-Reformation writers and, in particular, Erasmus and later religious figures such as Samuel Harsnett. Having established that, despite claiming always to have been blind and lame, Simpcox can see and name different colors, Gloucester stages his own parodic miracle:

GLOUCESTER: My lords, Saint Alban here hath done a miracle; and would  
 ye not think his cunning to be great that could restore this cripple to his  
 legs again?  
 SIMPCOX: O master, that you could!  
 GLOUCESTER: My masters of Saint Albans, have you not beadles in your  
 town, and things called whips?  
 MAYOR: Yes, my lord, if it please your grace.  
 GLOUCESTER: Then send for one presently.  
 MAYOR: Sirrah, go fetch the beadle hither straight.

*Exit [an Attendant]*

GLOUCESTER: Now fetch me a stool hither by and by. – Now, sirrah, if you  
 mean to save yourself from whipping, leap me over this stool, and run away.  
 SIMPCOX: Alas, master, I am not able to stand alone: you go about to torture  
 me in vain.

*Enter a Beadle with whips*

GLOUCESTER: Well, sir, we must have you find your legs. – Sirrah beadle,  
 whip him till he leap over that same stool.  
 BEADLE: I will, my lord. – Come on, sirrah, off with your doublet quickly.  
 SIMPCOX: Alas, master, what shall I do? I am not able to stand.

*After the Beadle hath hit him once, he leaps over the stool and runs away; and they follow and cry, "A Miracle!"*

KING HENRY VI: O God, seest thou this, and bearest so long? (2.1.133–53)

In many ways this incident from one of Shakespeare's earliest plays encapsulates how throughout his writing Shakespeare positions his drama in a space between competing confessional absolutes. King Henry in this passage is at once a gullible believer and a committed reformer. When he thinks that the miracle is real he thanks God and when it is exposed as a



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fake he sees it as an example of the sinfulness of the world. Henry is a godly fool in a world of fallen humanity.

Gloucester's approach is very different. He views the miracle with skepticism and uses reason to expose it as a fraud. In the process he avoids the polarizing confessional absolutes of Henry's world. The exposure of the miracle as fake is a result not of religious or spiritual enquiry but of the correct application of the tools of social order – in this case the Beadle's whip. This is not to suggest there is anything particularly gentle about Gloucester's behavior. The command that Simpcox and his wife be whipped all the way back to Berwick, their home town, uncannily echoes the requirements of the Vagabonds Act (1572), which set down this treatment for all vagabonds including, potentially, actors; and, of course, Simpcox is indeed an actor.

Consistently in his drama Shakespeare articulates a view of the relationship between religious language and human reason, which subverts the norms of confessionalization. In the process he effectively stages a version of the Christian community, in which the Church's authority is located in the communal practice of the faithful and not in absolutist claims to scriptural or doctrinal purity.<sup>14</sup> The moment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Bottom reflects on his night-time experience with the fairies exemplifies Shakespeare's approach to the interpretation of Scripture:

BOTTOM: I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was ... The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, not his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called "Bottom's Dream," because it hath no bottom. (4.1.200–9)

As is well known, in this passage Bottom paraphrases 1 Corinthians 2.9. He also scrambles it so that it becomes nonsense, eyes do not hear nor do ears see and at the same time Bottom's words, as Hannibal Hamlin argues, can be seen as profoundly Pauline given their extrasensory mystical ethos.<sup>15</sup> The alternative to Bottom's partial and compromised understanding of what took place is articulated in Theseus's dismissal of the stories of the four Athenian lovers as the product of "seething minds." Bottom, however, not only has a better sense of what really happened but also articulates a hermeneutic approach, which in a religious context seems much more suited to the chaotic religious world of London in 1600. It is an approach to interpretation that effectively reproduces the Erasmian ideal of a textual Christian community united in and through the exchange of proverbial wisdom. "Bottom's Dream" will become a text

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that is exchanged, sold, and consumed, and in the process the Biblical truth it contains, its scriptural kernel, will circulate among those who buy and sing Quince's ballad.

The late Elizabethan Church was a site for constant and often heated debate over a whole range of issues. For example, the position and status of the altar was not fixed and often, particularly in London, altars would move around the church depending on the particular views of the resident clergyman and those of the engaged laity. As Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke demonstrate in their recent study, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship*, "the altar was a vital battleground, first between Catholics and protestants, and then among protestants themselves, about conflicting beliefs on sacramental theology, imagery, sanctity, and reverence."<sup>16</sup> It would also be possible, however, to see the altar less as the site of a battle and more as a place where the plurality or provisional nature of the Church, as celebrated in Donne's sonnet, was played out. Shakespeare consistently portrays, arguably particularly in his late Elizabethan plays, a tension between those, usually male, characters who confidently make claims to absolute truth or the ability to discern the truth in a given situation and the distinctly different reality that the audience is presented with. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus instructs the other characters on the fantastical nature of the events in the forest, but it is Bottom in his paraphrase of the biblical verse who gets far closer to the truth. A Church in which the altar, a central element of any Christian service, was on a constant pilgrimage around the space of the church was not one in which confident assertions of absolute truth or certainty could have much credence to anyone not committed to a particular understanding of where the altar should be.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* the tension between confessional certainty and the provisional truthfulness of humanity is played out around two key Puritan concerns, interpretation and social order. There are two pivotal moments in *Much Ado About Nothing* that rest on claims to be able to discern the truth. In the wedding scene, Claudio claims, on the basis of Don John's trick, to be able to see beyond Hero's "painted" virtue to the reality of her wantonness. There is an iconoclastic violence to the way in which Claudio exposes Hero in the most brutal way possible, tearing away, in his eyes, a mask of purity to reveal the corruption within. Hero understands the religious subtext of Claudio's actions, crying, "Oh God defend me, how am I beset! / What kind of catechising call you this?" (4.1.71–2). Claudio the Puritan enacts, within a religious space, the wedding ceremony, an act of iconoclastic "reform." He knows the truth hidden behind the painted veil of Hero's virtue. The Friar's confident