

Introduction

The problem of freewill from earliest times has occupied the best intellects of mankind and has from earliest times appeared in all its colossal significance. The problem lies in the fact that if we regard man as a subject for observation from whatever point of view – theological, historical, ethical or philosophic – we find the universal law of necessity to which he (like everything else that exists) is subject. But looking upon man from within ourselves – man as the object of our own inner consciousness – we feel ourselves to be free.

Tolstoy, *War and Peace*

Literary Agents

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is a play deeply concerned with the political implications of human will and action. Its first scene alerts us to the tribunes' concern that Caesar might "soar above the view of men / And keep us all in servile fearfulness" (1.1.73–4).¹ Cassius' efforts in the following scene are aimed at uncovering precisely this repressed concern in Brutus, and here he suggests that the republic's political problems are verging on the quasi-ontological: "this man / Is now become a god, and Cassius is / A wretched creature, and must bend his body / If Caesar carelessly but nod on him" (1.2.117–20). How has this mortal man – poor swimmer, vulnerable to illness, possibly epileptic – reached the threshold of apotheosis, and how have we become reciprocally diminished? Is it the will of the gods, or some other inexorable destiny? No, Cassius insists, it is our own fault.

Men at sometime were masters of their fates.
 The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
 But in ourselves, that we are underlings. (1.2.140–2)

It is only through the permissive inaction of the Roman nobility that Caesar has climbed this high; this suggests that a solution to the problem is available, and must necessarily consist of clearer will and more assertive

action. Only by decisively limiting Caesar's agency will the nobility [and everyone] regain and maintain their own.

The force of this argument might be said to lie in its rhetorical contradictions; it cannot be true that (a) Caesar is a god, and (b) we can do something about that. Cassius of course offers the first as hyperbole – obviously a deity would swim better than that – but it is what validates the second by positing some qualitative or ontological danger in Caesar's ascendancy that if fully realized might snuff out our ability to act. This is certainly the construction that Brutus articulates in 2.1.10–34 when he resolves to “kill him in the shell,” but the play's interrogation of Caesar's status is recomplicated by the ambivalence of his own behavior. The would-be god sounds like a human in 2.2.26–7 when he says, “what can be avoided / Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?” But he says this as a way of dismissing Calpurnia's bad dreams and other worrisome omens, which, he has already told us (2.2.10–12), he believes will evaporate before his glorious majesty. Even the category of danger itself is personified and subjected to the dominion of Caesar's imperious confidence: “Danger knows full well / That Caesar is more dangerous than he” (2.2.44–5). And when he finally agrees to humor his wife and stay home, he pointedly denies that his nonappearance at the Senate is due to a lack of ability or courage, or indeed to any cause external to himself. “Tell them that I will not come today,” he instructs Decius; “Cannot is false; and that I dare not, falser. / I will not come today; tell them so . . . / The cause is in my will: I will not come” (2.2.62–4, 2.2.71). Caesar's disavowal of any lack or limitation in himself, his refusal to acknowledge his own action as in any way determined by external causes or constraints (even supernatural ones), and his assertion of an absolute, uncaused, and irresistible will, are the claims of a god.

Caesar will reiterate these claims expansively in 3.1, where he declares his invulnerability to “sweet words” and flattery (3.1.35–46), his immutability and singularity (3.1.58–70), his unassailability (3.1.69), and perhaps even his infallibility (3.1.47). The conspirators, on the other hand, are dedicated to testing these claims, and, if they prove false (which they of course do), to destroying the quasi-god that has robbed them of their liberty and autonomy. Politically, the play explores the incompatibility of tyranny and republicanism, but perhaps the more complicated problem with tyranny is that it blurs the distinction between politics and theology; tyrants are in effect pseudo-deities who upset the calculus of political action by alienating and appropriating the agency and rights of their subjects. The conspirators accordingly recognize that if they are to retain their ability to act freely, the “god” must be done away with. While they succeed in the short term,

though, by the play's end their principals are both dead. True to Antony's prediction (3.1.273), the spirit of Caesar haunts the second half of the play, both figuratively and literally; Brutus laments how it "turns our swords / In our own proper entrails" (5.3.94–5), and his last words are words of propitiation addressed to it in hopes of laying this ghost for good and preserving republican liberty.

If *Julius Caesar* thus probes the vexed relations of individual human agency to a quasi-divine form of political sovereignty,² *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though at first blush a much more comic and less knotty play, digs even deeper into the problematics of agency; it offers both a withering critique of human will and action, and an encouraging vision of how such folly might be salvaged and given value. This is a play centrally remembered for its characters' tendencies to act according to defective, wandering, misguided, corrupt wills which they neither control nor recognize as such. The play's middle is built on the chaotic veerings of wills that are shown to be not just errant but drastically unstable, and the characters' confidence in their own wills often seems strongest when they are least in control of them. The love-juiced Lysander's earnest assertion of rational deliberation in 2.2.121–2 ("The will of man is by his reason swayed, / And reason says you are the worthier maid") is just one ironic instance of this constitutional misunderstanding: Demetrius and Titania too are utterly certain that their altered desires are the natural response to their incomparable objects, and even Egeus' fierce determination to control his daughter evaporates rapidly when Theseus arbitrarily reverses his position on the matter. The mirth and marriage of the play's final act should not cause us to forget the extraordinary extent to which the first four acts have taught us to, if I may generalize Theseus' initial advice to Hermia, "question [y]our desires" (1.1.67) and the actions that issue from them. Comic as the play's action is, it drives inevitably to a profoundly humbling conclusion: in their inability to control or even understand themselves, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (3.2.115).

The desires and actions interrogated by the play are by no means limited to the romantic. The rude mechanicals meet to rehearse a romantic tragedy, but they are animated by desires for material and social achievement. When Bottom exhorts his fellow thespians to "Take pains; be perfect" (1.2.88), his statement taken out of context could serve as a Pelagian maxim: if you work hard enough at it, you can generate a kind of perfection that will generate its own merit and consequent reward. But as we know, perfection, dramatic or otherwise, is not going to be attainable by this crew, however highly they may think of their abilities; they simply misunderstand themselves and what they are doing so radically that they ruin

their dramatic and social objectives at every turn. Their play will be terrible, the potential value of its performance obliterated because they misapprehend the nature of performance itself, and Bottom is really no more of an ass when under Puck's transformation than he is when reveling in his own thespian virtuosity.

So then what possible value (besides unintended comedy) can their hopelessly inept performance have? Only that which is benevolently imputed to it, and the play is explicit about this. After Egeus does his best to dissuade Theseus from having *Pyramus and Thisbe* performed, the duke decides to see it anyway, since “never anything can be amiss / When simpleness and duty tender it” (5.1.82–3). Hippolyta, aware of the potential for failure, rustic humiliation, and aristocratic mockery, is still wary: “I love not to see wretchedness o'ercharged, / And duty in his service perishing.” But her new husband assures her that their goodwill, and only that, will save the day.

The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
 Our sport shall be to take what they mistake,
 And what poor duty cannot do,
 Noble respect takes it in might, not merit. (5.1.89–92)

After the players provide prompt and plentiful evidence of the radical insufficiency of their offering (all the while convinced of its excellence), even Hippolyta gives up, exclaiming that “This is the silliest stuff that I ever heard” (5.1.207). But Theseus keeps up his generous insistence that “The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them,” to which his bride responds, “It must be your imagination, then, and not theirs.” And this is exactly the point: Bottom's painstaking and entirely self-serious pursuit of perfection is, inevitably, an utter failure because he lacks the capacity for it in a hilariously absolute way. Since his imagination fails to offer anything of intrinsic merit to the duke, the only real value his performance will have is that with which the duke's imagination and good will invest it. Critics have often focused on the patronizing elements in the final act, and they are there, but this should not obscure the importance of Theseus' remarkable act of unmerited grace, granted to people who are too incapable and confused to even grasp their need for it – of unearned favor shown to hopelessly incompetent actors that are fully confident in their ability to act.

The theology largely implicit in these Shakespearean treatments is addressed more directly in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the action of which begins with the fallen angels, after their failed revolt against God, awakening in their hellish prison and wondering what they could and should do

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next. The infernal “great consult” of Book 2, while ostensibly a discussion of strategic and tactical options, is also and really a theological discussion about the nature of God and what his subjects can and cannot do in relation to him. Moloch, still impressed with his own party’s show of force, and convinced things couldn’t get much worse than they have, advocates “open war” against a foe he conceives as a tyrant and torturer; the outcome of war won’t be worse, he says, might involve welcome annihilation or even success, and will in any case serve as revenge. Smooth Belial disputes all of Moloch’s principles as false, and argues that if they simply suffer nobly instead of fighting an unwinnable war, they will get used to their new situation, and in time God may even ease up. Mammon wants nothing to do with heaven and its hated overlord, and suggests that they “seek / Our own good from ourselves, and from our own / Live to ourselves” (2.252–4) through the “hard liberty” of peaceful, constructive work independent of God. Beelzebub the foreign-policy realist chides his colleagues for their delusional beliefs, reminds them that hell is not an independent empire but “strictest bondage” (2.321) under the dominion of God, who, “be sure, / In highth or depth, still first and last will reign / Sole King”; however, we might do him real damage via a terroristic proxy war. While the whole discussion is strategic in intent, in reality it is about the tactical implications of theology, and has many, many analogues throughout human history. The lesser demons who later get lost in divinity-mazes of “Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate, / Fixt Fate, Free will, Foreknowledge absolute” (2.559–60) are a parodically abstract recapitulation of the great peers’ more practical discussions of what God is like, and what they, and we, can (and cannot) do. Such questions are the subject of this book.

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What can I do? The question, in its straightforward, interrogative sense (“My car won’t start; what can I do?”), implies options and potentialities, a range, perhaps not yet fully realized, of possible courses of action that might actually be performed by the subject in question, and that might even effectively solve a problem or bring about a desired state of affairs. But in its idiomatically rhetorical sense (“My dog died; ah well, what can I do?”), the implication is precisely, and absolutely, the opposite: helplessness, quiescence, resignation, and surrender to an unchangeable state of affairs. On one side, agency, control, change, options, action; on the other, the empty outlines of each.

This is not just a phenomenon of linguistic coincidence or irony; it is also a real problem that we confront on a daily basis. We exercise, and study, and save for retirement, and wear seatbelts, and forego deliciously fatty foods, and these are actions that make no sense unless there is a presupposition that by doing them we can shape and control our future wellbeing to some degree. But we also buy health and life insurance, in a reluctant acknowledgement that there is much that we do not control, much that we cannot effectively do. We can't stop time, or be in two places at once, or live forever, or stop a speeding locomotive, or leap tall buildings in a single bound. The fact that the last two of these impossibilities are within the unusual capacities of Superman suggests that these limitations have fundamentally to do with humanity itself, that they are not only characteristic but symptomatic and indeed constitutive of what we are. Consider also the "Serenity Prayer" associated with Alcoholics Anonymous: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."³ Surely this is not a challenge specific to alcoholics; it is one of the central axes of human existence, an unending pursuit of a wisdom that fundamentally orders our life and actions in the world.

Indeed, the Serenity Prayer was not written by a recovering alcoholic, nor specifically for that audience, but by the great twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,⁴ and that fact indicates in turn that the tension under discussion is not just a linguistic phenomenon or a mundane difficulty, but also a philosophical and theological problem of the first order.⁵ A perceptive graduate student of mine once made the following observation: "If there's one doctrine that Christianity is widely liked for, it's grace, and if there's one doctrine that Christianity is widely disliked for, it's predestination. But the more you read up on the theology, the more inescapably you realize that they are virtually the same thing."⁶ What could be bad about grace, or good about predestination? How is it that grace, the gratuitous overflow of God's goodness, has such a grim corollary, and, conversely, how can that iron corollary itself be indicative of divine love? What, in other words, is the price of grace – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many other theologians have passionately maintained that grace, while by definition free, cannot be cheap – and what are the upsides of election and reprobation?

Theology and Agency is importantly about these paradoxes, and in a broader sense it is about even more complex questions of human agency that link concrete actions to vast and abstract principles of theology and philosophy. It will argue that while we often associate modern (and early

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modern) subjectivity with autonomy and an unconstrained freedom to act, the dynamics of subjectivity and action are much more complex than that, and the history of these phenomena do not form a linear narrative of the free subject emerging, butterfly-like, from an oppressive history of subjugation and misbelief, to act in true and rational freedom. Critics and theorists of the last half-century and more – Marxist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, poststructuralist, New Historicist – have of course recognized this, and have argued that the bourgeois or essentialist or poststructuralist subject is neither autonomous nor free. But this basic recognition – that what looks and feels like individual agency might actually be a derivative effect of larger and overwhelmingly powerful agents or causes – is not new (and indeed, some of its modern versions are considerably less sophisticated than their neglected predecessors), nor are counter-critiques of its more totalized incarnations. Dolores Wojciehowski argues persuasively that “the dominant critical paradigms of the late twentieth century recast, in numerous unacknowledged ways, earlier discussions of freedom and power. Early modern theories of will bear a striking resemblance to contemporary theories of the limitations of will, subjecthood, and linguistic expression.”⁷ Though the early modern, she contends, “functions in many ways as the unconscious of contemporary theory” – that is, what it has sought to repress or distance itself from – the two discourses share a “mutual acknowledgment of the bondage of the subject to various determinisms (such as ideology or divine Providence), together with their shared desire for a subject that is, despite its limitations, willful (e.g., capable of political resistance or ethical choice).” The basic problematics of agency, that is to say, have long been recognized, and have actually changed surprisingly little in the last two millennia, in spite of the different forms in which the problem has been conceived and discussed. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the question was pursued primarily in theological form,⁸ and in this book I will attempt to demonstrate that we can better understand early modern British literature when we read it in light of the perennial theological concerns that so compelled the culture in which it was written.

The influential work of Stephen Greenblatt is an instructive example of these dynamics. His seminal *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* ends with an epilogue of personal narrative in which he describes his initial intentions to

understand the role of human autonomy in the construction of identity. It seemed to me the very hallmark of the Renaissance that middle-class and aristocratic males began to feel that they possessed such shaping power over

their lives, and I saw this power and the freedom it implied as an important element in my own sense of myself. (256)

In the course of his research and writing, however, Greenblatt's assumptions were radically revised, as

the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact. If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force. (256)

The trajectory of this narrative indicates that Greenblatt initially intended to write a book in the vein of Pico, Burckhardt, and Cassirer (that is to say, a celebration of the emergence of a new sort of autonomous individual subjectivity in the Renaissance), but ended up compelled to write one in the vein of Althusser and Foucault (that is to say, a story of heteronomously constituted pseudo-subjects) instead. It is perhaps precisely because of this transitional evolution that *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* proved to be such a field-changing book. Fundamentally at issue here, in both historical/literary analysis and the self-conscious act of critical practice itself (with one indeed encapsulated in the other), are radically different notions of human agency and subjectivity: one that sees it as thrillingly, heroically emergent in the early modern period,⁹ and one that considers it always and perhaps increasingly constrained by political, social, economic, and psychological forces that simultaneously constitute and displace the subject, and thus eviscerate the myth of autonomy. After narrating the supersession of the first by the second in his own work, Greenblatt meditates elegiacally on his own "overwhelming need to sustain the illusion that I am the principal maker of my own identity," because "to abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of one's stubborn hold upon selfhood, even selfhood conceived as a fiction, is to die" (257).

This is a wonderfully lyrical articulation of late-twentieth-century irony and loss, caught between a compelling recognition and a price one is reluctant to pay – a subject in a cage that continues to tell itself that it is free. But despite the supersessional relation of the Burckhardt/Cassirer and Althusser/Foucault impulses in Greenblatt's narrative, he inherits from both of them a fundamentally secularized perspective that marginalizes the religious, and this is a curiously overdetermined exclusion from a subject that in the early modern period was primarily understood and disputed in

deeply religious terms. I discuss this problem with regard to Greenblatt and others in the introduction to my *Liturgy and Literature*, and in Greenblatt's (and consequently the field's) case this dynamic is ongoing. His 2010 book *Shakespeare's Freedom* addresses Shakespeare's probing of absolutes – aesthetic, social, political – in a world increasingly “pervaded by absolutist claims” (2), and perceptively suggests that “these limits served as the enabling condition of his particular freedom” (1). As we might expect from the most influential early modern scholar in a generation, Greenblatt's analyses are often brilliantly nuanced and illuminating, but it is telling that his engagement with theology ends on the book's third page. There, after a page-long overview of how in English Calvinism “divine decisions were incomprehensible and irrevocable, unconstrained by any form of mediation, contract, or law” (2; this is itself a dubious claim), he closes off the subject abruptly with an assertion that “Shakespeare was not a theologian, and his work does not meddle in doctrinal claims” (3), and the book pivots decisively to its central focus on worldly forms of constraint and normativity. In these often-wonderful discussions, religion reappears rarely, and always as something else: an analogy, a vocabulary, an ideological masking, a category of sociopolitical division or domination. Greenblatt is of course entitled to focus on whatever he wants to, but his cursory nod to (and then abandonment of) theology is a decisive indication of what really matters to him – and as Debra Shuger and others have influentially and correctly argued, this kind of analytical hierarchy gets its object all wrong: for early modern Christians (that is, virtually everyone), religion was the foundation, horizon, and primary language of their existence, not just an allegory of their psychosocial lives.¹⁰ To assume otherwise is not only condescending to the past; it virtually guarantees that one will not really understand it. And ironically, it is arguably a critical revivification of the heroic post-religious subject in the form of the secular, analytical modern critic, lifting the veil of religion to reveal the true life of things past. Is this not Burckhardt's secular bourgeois myth revenant, reborn out of the account of its own demise?

Theology and Agency engages directly and seriously with religious issues that are often ignored or marginalized in the work of Greenblatt and other early modernists. Cassirer correctly observes that Renaissance philosophy sought “intellectual formulas of balance between the ‘medieval faith in God and the self-confidence of Renaissance man,’”¹¹ but his exhilarating accounts of Valla, Ficino, Pico, and Bruno frequently seem to merge into his own excitement at the narrative of humanity liberating itself from

various bonds and becoming its own maker. Cusanus and other nostalgists may have tried to harmonize Christianity and humanism, but Bruno, for Cassirer, represented the inevitable: “the ideal of humanity includes the ideal of *autonomy*; but as the ideal of autonomy becomes stronger, it dissociates itself more and more from the realm of religion – the realm into which Cusanus and the Florentine Academy had tried to force the concept of humanity.”¹² Both Greenblatt’s displacements and Cassirer’s bias, however, seem positively benign compared to the outright hostility of figures like Alan Sinfield, who does discuss religion at length, but whose lacerating analyses of early Protestantism seem more intent on denouncing its irrationality and antihumanism than on trying to understand what Renaissance writers actually cared about and wrestled with in their texts.¹³ In some respects, there will be some overlap in this book between his work and mine, but in others, they could not be more different: *Theology and Agency* is much more interested in inquiry than in polemic, more attentive to tensions than contradictions, more in search of important problems than doctrinaire solutions, more aimed at illumination than condemnation. It will acknowledge and explore the centrality of Christianity and its theological conflicts to early modern culture, and it will do so not to denounce them or to proselytize but to better understand its subject. Practically speaking, this means that I will assiduously try to avoid fitting the astoundingly complex literary texts I treat into lopsidedly Procrustean beds of one sort or another, reducing this infinite variety to unproblematic Calvinist determinism, or to libertarian atheist humanism, or to whatever else one might want to celebrate or execrate. The texts, both individually and collectively, resist such reductions precisely because they recognize these problems *as problems*, as conflicts with which we have to live and struggle even though – indeed, *because* – they admit of no easy answer, and such irresolutions are often at the very core of what we are. I will, of course, have things to say about what I think is going on in the texts as well as around them, but in so doing I have tried to be faithful to the complexity and conflictedness of the texts and questions themselves. Shakespeare, it is true, was not himself a theologian or doctrinal polemicist. But we will never well comprehend his works, or those of his contemporaries, if we decline to attend deeply and openly to the theological principles and problems that framed his world’s view of itself and its selves. That doing so might help us understand our own world and selves a little better is an additional benefit devoutly to be wished.