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“Papists and poets of like conscience for fictions”: religion and responsibility in the plays of Shakespeare

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“‘Papists and Poets of like conscience for fictions’: Religion and Responsibility in the Plays of Shakespeare’

At a crucial moment in *Hamlet*, Claudius, faced with a furious and vengeful Laertes, orders Gertrude to let Laertes go on the grounds that ‘There’s such divinity doth hedge a king / That treason can but peep to what it would’.¹ Claudius’s words go to the heart of the question which I wish to discuss in this paper, which is the relation between political and religious authority in the plays of Shakespeare. I shall also tentatively consider what bearing Shakespeare’s own possible religious affiliation may have had on this question.

In a recent article on Shakespeare’s two tetralogies, Jean-Christophe Mayer observes that

In the 1611 edition of *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain*, Speed denounces [the Jesuits Robert] Parsons’s ... unwarranted accusations against the proto-Protestant martyr Sir John Oldcastle [the original of Falstaff], these being ‘taken from the *Stage-plaiers*’. Parsons and Shakespeare – ‘this Papist and his Poet’ – had in fact a lot in common, according to the historian; they were ‘of like conscience for lies, the one euer faining, and the other euer falsifying the truth’. The marginalia sum up these statements laconically; one reads: ‘Papists and Poets of like conscience for fictions’.²

Although Mayer appears to imply that the phrase ‘this Papist and his Poet’ refers to Parsons and Shakespeare, the ‘Papist’ part of the tag was in fact applied originally to the poet and Jesuit Robert Southwell, and Michael Wood amongst others has argued for a significant connection between Southwell and Shakespeare, who were distant cousins (amongst other

things, Wood argues that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the remark that 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact ...' is 'a curiously precise echo of Southwell'),³ an idea supported by Frank Brownlow who suggests that Southwell is echoed in both *Dream* and *Lear*.⁴ Specifically, Wood argues for seeing Shakespeare as the target of Southwell's injunction in *St Peter's Complaint* to his 'worthy good cousin, Master W. S.' write sacred verse; Wood and others suggest that the reproach was prompted specifically by the recent publication of *Venus and Adonis*, whose verse form *St Peter's Complaint* imitates. This was an injunction which was both deeply felt – Anne Sweeney argues that 'If his poetry is read in the light of his mission, Southwell clearly took his authorship very seriously indeed, even that of his lighter poetry' –⁵ and which, if it was indeed directed at Shakespeare, was studiously ignored: indeed Alison Shell argues that 'Shakespeare's work exhibits a high level of silence and evasion where religion is concerned'.⁶

Richard Wilson has already done a good deal of work exploring the implications of Shakespeare's apparent refusal to obey Southwell's injunction. Wilson introduces his argument by declaring that

in the days before his arrest in June 1592, the Jesuit poet Robert Southwell responded to one of the manuscripts of *Venus and Adonis* which circulated, we know, in recusant households, with a poem of his own in identical stanzas, entitled *Saint Peter's Complaint*, which he prefaced with a dedication rejecting Shakespeare's image of poetry as a passive distillation of experience and deploring the waste of his artistic gifts.

For Wilson, this is 'the clearest indication of how the "finest wit" and "sweetest vein" of his generation had been expected to produce "Christian works" that "lent his talent" to the Catholic cause'.⁷ Alison Shell develops this: noting that 'Simon Hunt, Shakespeare's first

schoolmaster, who subsequently became a Jesuit, knew Southwell intimately', she points out that

The allusion to Shakespeare in the religious poem 'Saint Marie Magdalens conversion', published around 1603-04, was noted long ago by the editors of the *Shakespeare allusion-book*. But neither they, nor anyone else to date, has addressed the three most suggestive facts about this poem: that, like several other long religious poems of the late 1590s and early 1600s, it is a very obvious pastiche of 'St Peter's Complaint', that it was published by a Catholic secret press; and that it is very critical of Shakespeare. The author, designated only by the initials 'I.C.', uses Shakespeare as an example of the secular poet, and argues that instead of writing as profane poets do, one should renounce secular subject-matter in favour of the topics of religious conversion and repentance.

Shell calls Shakespeare 'a secular writer' and argues that 'Though secularism conceptualises religion in various ways – as a private matter, as a virus or as an irrelevance – these can all be subsumed under one heading: that the public statement of doctrinal conviction is something to be avoided'.⁸ I want to pursue a related line of enquiry, which is to examine Shakespeare's representations of the relationships between spiritual and secular power. Despite his suggestion, in the quotation with which I began, that papists and poets had similar agendas, Mayer implies a difference in this respect, for though he argues for a close relationship between Shakespeare's two tetralogies and Parsons' *Conference about the Next Succession*, which proposed the Infanta of Spain as the most suitable successor to Elizabeth I, he nevertheless thinks that 'Parsons's implicit aim in writing the *Conference* was to oppose the idea of a possible separation between matters of religion and matters of state', while he suggests by contrast that 'Henry V, Shakespeare's last Lancastrian king, is one who believes in a just war. Yet again, Shakespeare's view of the collusion between temporal power and a

politicized clergy leaves theatre audiences uneasy'.⁹ In what follows, I want to consider Shakespeare's representation of that tension in a number of plays, starting with *Henry V* itself and moving on to *Measure for Measure* and *Julius Caesar*, and concluding with *King John*.

At the opening of *Henry V*, the Archbishop of Canterbury seems to be under the impression that he is manipulating the king by offering him money for his campaigns in France which will induce him to take the side of the clergy in a bill currently being brought before Parliament. As the Archbishop explains to the Bishop of Ely,

He seems indifferent,
Or rather swaying more upon our part
Than cherishing th'exhibitors against us;
For I have made an offer to his majesty –
Upon our spiritual Convocation,
And in regard of causes now in hand,
Which I have opened to his grace at large
As touching France – to give a greater sum
Than ever at one time the clergy yet
Did to his predecessors part withal.¹⁰

However, when the king actually appears, one might well wonder who is manipulating whom, as he says to the Archbishop,

My learnèd lord, we pray you to proceed,
And justly and religiously unfold
Why the law Salic that they have in France
Or should or should not bar us in our claim.
And God forbid, my dear and faithful lord,

That you should fashion, wrest, or bow your reading,
Or nicely charge your understanding soul
With opening titles miscreate, whose right
Suits not in native colours with the truth;
For God doth know how many now in health
Shall drop their blood in approbation
Of what your reverence shall incite us to.
Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword of war.
We charge you in the name of God, take heed;
For never two such kingdoms did contend
Without much fall of blood, whose guiltless drops
Are every one a woe, a sore complaint
'Gainst him whose wrongs give edge unto the swords
That makes such waste in brief mortality.
Under this conjuration speak, my lord,
For we will hear, note, and believe in heart
That what you speak is in your conscience washed
As pure as sin with baptism.

(I.2.10-32)

When Henry says 'we pray you to proceed', he is effectively giving the Archbishop his cue, ordering him to produce language. This is made particularly clear in the Laurence Olivier film, where we have seen the king readying himself for his part, but it is a fact already implicit in the scene. Henry does not let the Archbishop speak at once, though; instead he first clarifies what *kind* of language is to be produced. It should be unfashioned, unbowed,

unwrested – in short, spoken from the soul, but at the same time there can be no doubt of what message will be most welcome: as when Henry woos Katherine, he wants her to say she loves him, yet it is abundantly apparent that everything she says and does is already predetermined by pressing political necessities. Here, too, Henry wants to sentimentalise and present as spiritual what are essentially matters of secular power, prestige, and money. As he does so, he also repeatedly shifts agency and responsibility for everything he himself may be about to do firmly onto the shoulders of the Archbishop: ‘what your reverence shall incite us to’, ‘take heed how you impawn our person’, until, in an even more audacious role reversal, it is actually he who exhorts the Archbishop ‘in the name of God’, as if he were the spiritual authority and the Archbishop the secular one – something to which the Archbishop’s worldly interest in finance has of course left him wholly vulnerable. In the end, then, any complaints made by the souls of the dead must be directed not against the king – as he will later confirm to Williams, ‘The King is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers’ (IV.ii.51-2) – but against the Archbishop.

Moreover, not only must the Archbishop speak ‘under this conjuration’, but Henry blandly tells him that ‘he will hear, note, and believe in heart / That what you speak is in your conscience washed’. The logic here is precisely similar to that of ‘I do believe her though I know she lies’ in sonnet 138,¹¹ except that the speaker in this case directs the animus of his words not at himself, as the self-mocking speaker of the sonnet does, but at his hapless auditor, trapped in a hopeless double-bind. Later, Henry goes one better and takes a similarly hectoring tone with God himself:

O God of battles, steel my soldiers’ hearts;
Possess them not with fear; take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if th’opposèd numbers

Pluck their hearts from them. Not today, O Lord,
 O not today, think not upon the fault
 My father made in compassing the crown!
 I Richard's body have interrèd new,
 And on it have bestowed more contrite tears
 Than from it issued forcèd drops of blood.
 Five hundred poor have I in yearly pay,
 Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
 Toward heaven, to pardon blood: and I have built
 Two chantries where the sad and solemn priests
 Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do,
 Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
 Since that my penitence comes after all,
 Imploring pardon.

(IV.i.282-298)

By the end of this speech, though, a distinctly less confident tone has crept in. 'Though all that I can do is nothing worth' clearly recalls the controversy over the role of works in Renaissance theology, since Martin Luther had declared that salvation was accomplished *sola fide*, by faith alone, challenging the whole idea of 'buying' grace, which is what Henry is so clearly attempting to do. In doing so, it raises the very issue which bedevils Claudius in *Hamlet* when he tries and fails to pray, and which troubled so many conscientious Renaissance thinkers: no one, not even a king, could command an access of grace if God decided to withhold it. For one bleak moment, Henry contemplates the existence of a real spiritual power which is far greater than he is and may not do what he wants.

The duke in *Measure for Measure* tries a different approach. He recognises that he has been a complete failure as a secular ruler:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds,
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip;
Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave,
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch,
Only to stick it in their children's sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
Becomes more mocked than feared, so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.¹²

Consequently, he tries his hand as a spiritual figure instead, and succeeds superbly, as Angelo shows when he says

O my dread lord,
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness
To think I can be undiscernible,
When I perceive your grace, like power divine,
Hath looked upon my passes.

(V.1.363-7)

Shakespeare has set this play in Vienna, something of which we are reminded when Lucio says 'If the Duke, with the other dukes, come not to composition with the King of Hungary,

why then all the dukes fall upon the King' (I.2.1-3), and Leah Marcus has argued that we should read the play in terms of the so-called Archdukes, Albert and Isabella, joint rulers of the Netherlands,¹³ who had both forsaken a religious life for marriage and a political one. One might think too of the prince-bishopric of the independent state of Salzburg, which took up a significant part of what is now Austria, who combined in his own person both secular and spiritual power. After all, Machiavelli, with characteristic mischievousness, had said of ecclesiastical principalities that

here the difficulties which have to be faced occur before the ruler is established, in that such principalities are won by prowess or by fortune but are kept without the help of either. They are maintained, in fact, by religious institutions, of such a powerful kind that, no matter how the ruler acts and lives, they safeguard his government. Ecclesiastical princes alone possess states, and do not defend them; subjects, and do not govern them. And though their states are not defended they are not taken away from them; and their subjects, being without government, do not worry about it and neither can hope to overthrow it in favour of another. So these principalities alone are secure and happy. But as they are sustained by higher powers which the human mind cannot comprehend, I shall not argue about them; they are exalted and maintained by God, and so only a rash and presumptuous man would take it on himself to discuss them.¹⁴

The fact that Shakespeare stayed out of prison when so many of his fellow playwrights spent time there seems in itself to suggest that he was not a rash and presumptuous man, but nevertheless I wonder whether in *Measure for Measure* he might in fact be glancing obliquely at the question of whether principalities governed by a secular power really are 'alone ... secure and happy'. Certainly the state at the end of *Measure for Measure* is better ordered than it was at the beginning, but one might think that it is an order rather

mechanically achieved and sustained, and that what has been produced is essentially modification of behaviour rather than improvement of character – which is in some sense the exact opposite of what one might hope for from genuine spiritual instruction.

I want to turn now to *Julius Caesar*. The very name of Julius Caesar evokes a divide between the secular and the spiritual, since it evokes the Biblical injunction to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and indeed Anne Sweeney titles her discussion of Southwell's poem 'Josephs Amazement' 'Caesar or God's?'.¹⁵ Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, however, shows us a state in which the boundaries between secular and spiritual are unclear. This is apparent from the very outset, when Flavius exclaims 'Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home: / Is this a holiday?'.¹⁶ The etymology of 'holiday', to which Shakespeare's audience were far closer than we are now, is of course 'holy day', and this thus raises a crucial question: is Caesar, in whose honour these citizens have assembled, a secular figure or a spiritual one or both? Flavius has no doubt: he says 'Disrobe the images, / If you do find them decked with ceremonies' (I.1.64-5), and it is notable that Brutus says 'we are contented Caesar shall / Have all true rites and lawful ceremonies' (III.i.240-1), implying that what he has previously received has exceeded his due. However, Caesar clearly wields spiritual power of some sort. He can issue the command 'Go bid the priests do present sacrifice, / And bring me their opinion of success' (II.2.4-5) and also seems at home dealing with questions of the numinous when he orders

Forget not, in your speed, Antonius,
To touch Calphurnia; for our elders say,
The barren, touchèd in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse.

(I.2.6-9)

He is, it seems, even coming to believe his own publicity: Cassius says,

But it is doubtful yet
Whether Caesar will come forth today or no;
For he is superstitious grown of late,
Quite from the main opinion he held once
Of fantasy, of dreams, and ceremonies.

(II.i.193-7)

Cassius in his first mention of Caesar calls him ‘immortal Caesar’ (I.2.60), and though there is clearly satiric intent here, there is in fact a marked will in Rome to believe in a link between the secular state and the spiritual world: Casca asks ‘Are not you moved, when all the sway of earth / Shakes like a thing unfirm?’ (I.3.3-4), and even Cassius himself thinks that ‘heaven hath infused them with these spirits / To make them instruments of fear and warning’ (I.3.69-71), while Calphurnia more simply asserts that ‘When beggars die, there are no comets seen; / The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes’ (II.2.30-1). Finally, Cassius concedes defeat entirely:

You know that I held Epicurus strong,
And his opinion; now I change my mind,
And partly credit things that do presage.

(V.1.76-8)

The idea that there is a correspondence between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic is most suggestively explored in Brutus’s speech,

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream:
The genius and the mortal instruments

Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.

(II.1.63-9)

‘The dreadful thing’ which Brutus is contemplating is an act which some might term regicide, yet his own language implies that the existence of a kingdom is natural and indeed something inherent in ‘the state of man’ (a phrase in which the word ‘state’ is of course itself already weighted).

Nor are the audience able to contemplate this idea in the abstract, outside of their own cultural and historical positioning in a monarchy, because the way in which it is expressed has a strongly contemporary resonance. Twice in the play, the idea of the rising or setting sun is evoked, firstly in a conversation amongst the conspirators:

Decius. Here lies the east; doth not the day break here?

Casca. No.

Cinna. O pardon, sir, it doth; and yon grey lines

That fret the clouds are messengers of day.

Casca. You shall confess that you are both deceived:

Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises.

(II.1.101-5)

Later, towards the end, Titinius laments,

But Cassius is no more. O setting sun,

As in thy red rays thou dost sink to night,

So in his red blood Cassius’ day is set.

The sun of Rome is set.

(V.3.60-3)

Elizabeth herself used the trope of the rising sun to figure her successor: in conversation with the Scottish ambassador, William Maitland of Lethington, she observed,

I know the inconstancy of the people of England, how they ever mislike the present government and has their eyes fixed upon that person that is next to succeed; and naturally men be so disposed: *Plures adorant solem orientem quam occidentem*.¹⁷

The Latin quotation, as Elizabeth certainly knew, is from Plutarch's Life of Pompey. The same idea is found in the anonymous university tragedy *The Tragedy of Caesar and Pompey*, also known as *Caesar's Revenge* (difficult to date, but probably from the 1590s), in which Brutus says of Pompey 'The rising sun, not setting, doth men please'.¹⁸ The Victorian novelist Hall Caine, whose close friendship with Bram Stoker, manager of Irving's Lyceum, had perhaps made him sensitive to staging considerations, suggested that a similar conceit might be at work in *Julius Caesar* too; he observed to his biographer that 'when Casca in *Julius Caesar* says "Here as I point my sword, the sun arises; ... some two months hence, up higher towards the north, he first presents his fire", the actor should point his sword first at the house of Caesar and then at that of Brutus'.¹⁹

In a way, Caesar by the end of the play has indeed moved up into the sky, configuring everything which lies below him. In Roman history, Julius Caesar was deified; in Shakespeare's play, his ghost appears to Brutus (IV.iii.279-81), who subsequently exclaims,

O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords
Into our own proper entrails.

(V.3.94-6)

In fact, Brutus says that ‘The ghost of Caesar hath appeared to me / Two several times by night’ (V.5.17-18). We, however, have only seen it once, perhaps suggesting that Brutus has internalised the vision just as Angelo in *Measure for Measure* has internalised his sense of the duke’s omniscience and omnipotence; indeed for Richard Wilson, Shakespeare, writing more or less contemporaneously with the invention of the confessional, anticipates Foucault by tracing the ways in which a culture of state-sponsored surveillance becomes internalised to the point that its actual external trappings are no longer needed.²⁰

Of particular interest in any discussion of religion and politics is *King John*. This was a narrative with huge contemporary political resonance which Shakespeare, as John Klause points out, treats in a notably apolitical way:

So little partial was he ... that Colley Cibber, in the eighteenth century, finding Shakespeare too “cold” on the conflict between John and the papacy, gave the subject more heat by rewriting *King John* from the point of view suggested in the revised title: *Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John*.

Shakespeare’s “objectivity” is generally considered to stand in contrast, then, to the special pleading of authors before and after him who found reasons to cast John as exemplary of some kind of good or ill. Since he apparently composed *King John* in acute awareness of the parallels between thirteenth-century English history and that of his own time, and indeed altered received versions of character and event in order to enhance these resemblances, it may seem that Shakespeare wished to bring to contemporary political and religious conflicts an honesty and sanity that they often lacked.

Nevertheless, Klause suggests that ‘Shakespeare should at least be seen as giving weight to opposing interpretations of the issues which his play evokes. Among these are the relationship of religious to political authority’,²¹ which is of course central to my theme.

Klause also argues that

in composing *King John*, Shakespeare had in mind part of his “Catholic” reading, which helped to give the play some of its verbal texture as well as its dramatic and conceptual content and its tonal equity ... The body of work in question is that of the Jesuit missionary, controversialist, poet, devotional writer, and martyr, Robert Southwell.

(He observes that ‘the religious dimension of political choice, of paramount importance in Shakespeare’s play, is one of Southwell’s ruling concerns’). A number of the Southwell echoes Klause identifies in *King John* are about eyes: for instance, he traces to *Saint Peters Complaint* the eye imagery of the following passage:²²

I do, my lord; and in her eye I find
A wonder, or a wondrous miracle,
The shadow of myself form’d in her eye;
Which, being but the shadow of your son,
Becomes a sun and makes your son a shadow:
I do protest I never lov’d myself
Till now infix’d I beheld myself
Drawn in the flattering table of her eye.²³

Eyes tend to constitute an important motif in writing of this period which reflects on religious controversy, in ways which are perhaps influenced by the story of St Paul on the road to Damascus. In *King Lear*, which clearly reflects on the controversy sparked by the exorcisms

at Denham,²⁴ of which Protestants and Catholics took different views, Gloucester is blinded. In Rowley's *A Shoemaker, A Gentleman*, a play which is strangely like *Cymbeline* – there are three disguised princes, a princess who apparently marries beneath her, and a fight featuring Romans and Britons, as well as an excursus to Wales and several references to eagles (3.4. passim) – Lutius is temporarily blinded by water from the pool but Winifred restores his sight.²⁵

In *King John*, eye imagery abounds. King John speaks to the citizens of Angers of 'your city's eyes, your winking gates' (II.i.215), and eye imagery occurs in a number of other contexts which considerations of time forbid me from exploring in full. Inevitably, the use of eye imagery reaches its climax in the story of the attempted blinding of Arthur. John introduces the subject by saying that he could broach the subject of Arthur's death to Hubert 'If that thou couldst see me without eyes, / Hear me without ears' (III.ii.58-9); next, he implores,

Good Hubert, Hubert, Hubert, throw thine eye
On yon young boy; I'll tell thee what, my friend,
He is a very serpent in my way

(III.ii.69-71)

To Arthur himself, Hubert says,

Hubert ... I must be brief, lest resolution drop
Out at mine eyes in tender womanish tears. –
Can you not read it? Is it not fair writ?
Arthur. Too fairly, Hubert, for so foul effect:
Must you with hot irons burn out both mine eyes?

(IV.i.35-9)

Arthur then pleads piteously

Will you put out mine eyes?

These eyes that never did nor never shall

So much as frown on you.

(IV.i.56-8)

Seeking to change Hubert's mind, Arthur plays insistently on the various connotations of eyes:

The iron of itself, though heat red-hot,

Approaching near these eyes, would drink my tears

And quench this fiery indignation

Even in the matter of mine innocence;

Nay, after that, consume away in rust,

But for containing fire to harm mine eye.

(IV.i.61-6)

Later, he says, 'O, save me, Hubert, save me! my eyes are out / Even with the fierce looks of these bloody men' (IV.i.72-3), and asks,

Arthur. Is there no remedy?

Hubert. None, but to lose your eyes.

Arthur. O heaven, that there were but a mote in yours,

A grain, a dust, a gnat, a wandering hair,

Any annoyance in that precious sense!

Then, feeling what small things are boisterous there,

Your vild intent must needs seem horrible.

Hubert. Is this your promise? go to, hold your tongue.

Arthur. Hubert, the utterance of a brace of tongues

Must needs want pleading for a pair of eyes:
Let me not hold my tongue, let me not, Hubert!
Or, Hubert, if you will, cut out my tongue,
So I may keep mine eyes: O, spare mine eyes,
Though to no use but still to look on you!

(IV.i.90-102)

No sooner has Hubert yielded than we switch to John, who announces,

Here once again we sit, once again crown'd,
And look'd upon, I hope, with cheerful eyes.

(IV.ii.1-2)

Later, seeing Hubert and believing that he has indeed blinded the boy, John reproaches him,

my rage was blind,
And foul imaginary eyes of blood
Presented thee more hideous than thou art.

(IV.ii.264-6)

Finally, John on his deathbed says to the Bastard, 'O cousin, thou art come to set mine eye'
(V.ii.51).

Strikingly, however, what Hubert actually says to Arthur when he relents, after all the extended discussion about the possibility of blinding him, is 'Your uncle must not know but you are dead' (IV.i.127). This suggests that all the talk of eyes is in fact something of a disguise, a metaphor for something else, and one might in fact suggest that the play's sustained attention to eyes is part of a wider interest in Shakespeare's plays as a whole in what it is and is not useful and productive to see. Shakespeare himself, as we have seen, might have been considered open to accusations of selective vision. *King John*, however,

sees two things with great clarity: firstly, it registers the suffering of the victims of war, most notably Arthur, Constance and Blanche, and secondly, it acknowledges the force of John's rhetoric when he affirms the superiority of secular over spiritual power:

What earthy name to interrogatories
Can taste the free breath of a sacred king?
Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name
So slight, unworthy and ridiculous,
To charge me to an answer, as the pope.
Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England
Add thus much more, that no Italian priest
Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;
But as we, under God, are supreme head,
So under Him that great supremacy,
Where we do reign, we will alone uphold
Without th'assistance of a mortal hand:
So tell the pope, all reverence set apart
To him and his usurp'd authority.

(III.i.73-86)

Simultaneously foreshadowing and echoing Henry VIII's defiance of the Pope and the spirit of the Elizabethan Settlement, John here sets out a statement of intent to which Shakespeare himself might, I think, well have subscribed.

This is especially clear if we compare *King John* with the anonymous Queen's Men play *The Troublesome Reign of King John*. This is similar to Shakespeare's play in many ways, not least in that Hubert appears here too, and here too spares Arthur's eyes. However, it is wildly

anti-clerical. We hear a great deal about the misbehaviour of nuns and friars, and John is poisoned by a monk, after observing that

Philip, I tell thee man,
Since John did yeeld vnto the Priest of Rome,
Nor he nor his haue prospred on the earth.²⁶

Finally it closes with the Bastard saying ‘If Englands Peeres and people ioyne in one, / Nor Pope, nor France, nor Spaine can do them wrong’ (M1v). Shakespeare’s play retains the idea of poisoning but moves it to the metaphorical rather than the literal realm. John himself says

This fever that hath troubled me so long
Lies heavy on me. O, my heart is sick!

(V.3.3-4)

His self-diagnosis is later confirmed by his son:

It is too late. The life of all his blood
Is touched corruptibly, and his pure brain,
Which some suppose the soul’s frail dwelling-house,
Doth by the idle comments that it makes
Foretell the ending of mortality.

(V.7.1-5)

It is true that John later says he has been poisoned (V.7.36), but we have already been told that he is rambling and what he goes on to say supports that.

It is also worth noting the exchange between Blanche and Constance in III.i:

Blanche. The Lady Constance speaks not from her faith,
But from her need.

Constance. O, if thou grant my need,

Which only lives but by the death of faith,
That need must needs infer this principle,
That faith would live again by death of need.

(III.i.136-140)

Perhaps in Shakespeare too, need ultimately takes precedence over faith, and perhaps the most profound articulation of such a philosophy comes in the closing lines of *King John*, which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of the Bastard, arguably the most sympathetic character in the play:

This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.
Now these her princes are come home again
Come the three corners of the world in arms
And we shall shock them! Nought shall make us rue
If England to itself do rest but true!

(V.vii.112-18)

For Shakespeare too, I think, as indeed for many English Catholics, patriotism took precedence over faith, and a quietly ironic appreciation of the absurdities and contradictions of the political system and the official religion it enforced seemed to him preferable to openly challenging it.

Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), IV.v.123-4).

² Jean-Christophe Mayer, “‘This Papist and his Poet’: Shakespeare’s Lancastrian kings and Robert Parsons’s *Conference about the Next Succession*’, in *Theatre and religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, edited by Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 116-129, p. 116.

³ Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2003), pp. 153-4 and 162. Scott R. Pilarz also speculates on Southwell’s influence on Shakespeare, though without reaching any particular conclusion. (Scott R. Pilarz, S. J., *Robert Southwell, and the Mission of Literature, 1561-1595: Writing Reconciliation* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004], pp. 255-6).

⁴ Frank Brownlow, ‘Southwell and Shakespeare’, in *KM 80: A birthday album for Kenneth Muir* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987), pp. 27-30, p. 27.

⁵ Anne R. Sweeney, *Robert Southwell. Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English Lyric Landscape, 1586-95* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 15.

⁶ Alison Shell, ‘Why Didn’t Shakespeare Write Religious Verse?’, in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, edited by Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 85-112, p. 85.

⁷ Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in theatre, religion and resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 126.

⁸ Shell, ‘Why Didn’t Shakespeare Write Religious Verse?’, pp. 90, 93 and 105.

⁹ Mayer, “This Papist and his Poet”, pp. 127 and 123.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, edited by A. R. Humphreys (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), I.i.73-81. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, Sonnet 138, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited by Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 118-9.

¹² William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, edited by J. M. Nosworthy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), I.3.19-31. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

¹³ Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 190-191.

¹⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), pp. 73-4.

¹⁵ Sweeney, *Robert Southwell*, p. 129.

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, edited by Norman Sanders (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), I.1.1-2. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

¹⁷ *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, edited by Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 66.

¹⁸ *The Tragedy of Caesar and Pompey*, edited by Julia Daly, II.iv.36.

¹⁹ C. Fred Kenyon, *Hall Caine: The Man and The Novelist* [1901] (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1974), pp. 35-6.

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²⁰ Richard Wilson, *Will Power* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 156.

²¹ John Klause, 'New Sources for Shakespeare's *King John*: The Writings of Robert Southwell', *Studies in Philology* 98.4 (Fall 2001): 401-427, p. 402.

²² Klause, 'New Sources for Shakespeare's *King John*', pp. 403, 408, and 405.

²³ William Shakespeare, *King John*, edited by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Routledge, 1967), II.i.496-503. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

²⁴ F. W. Brownlow, *Shakespeare, Harsnett, and the Devils of Denham* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993).

²⁵ William Rowley, *A Shoemaker, A Gentleman*, edited by Trudi L. Darby (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), 3.1.

²⁶ *The first and second part of the troublesome raigne of Iohn King of England* (London, 1611), L4r.