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SHAKESPEARE'S PENITENTS

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Shakespeare's Penitents¹

According to Old Testament tradition, the Lord gave Moses certain rules to be followed by the Israelite community. One of these rites, the atonement of the sanctuary, was concluded with the scapegoat sacrifice: "And Aaron shall put his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their trespasses, in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away (by the hand of a man appointed) into the wilderness" (Leviticus 16:21).² The goat was then sent into the desert carrying the peoples' iniquities away from the community. This ancient ritual demonstrates the first biblical acknowledgment of the need for a ritualized penance³ ceremony.

The traditional Catholic sacramental structure of confession was developed by Irish monks and adopted as standard practice with the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).⁴ The Council of Trent (1546-1563), held in response to the growing Reformation movement, extensively treated the sacrament of penance⁵ (one of the major points of contention for Protestants). While a sacrament in its own rite, penance also became an integral part of the other sacraments as a way of reconciling and unifying the community.⁶ With the rise of Protestantism came skeptic sentiment toward the sacramental practice of confession, particularly as it both required and supported the concept of priestly power.⁷

William Shakespeare lived during England's Renaissance, a period of great change marked by the rise of the Church of England and the fusion of the powers of Church and State in the form of the monarch.⁸ Literary or artistic work that did not agree with the ruler's religious beliefs was usually suppressed. An artist too vocal in his dissension risked much more than censorship; with no protection of free expression, he could be found guilty of treason, tortured, and hanged.⁹ Shakespeare's early life was spent in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small town

somewhat isolated from the bustle and shifting atmosphere of London. In such country provinces, old-fashioned sentiments were still rather commonly accepted and held, and during Shakespeare's lifetime, there was a movement to weed out those who clung to the old ways.

There are many arguments already in print regarding Shakespeare's personal beliefs.¹⁰ While Shakespearean historic evidence as a whole is lamentably scant, what we have does indicate some sympathy for the Catholic plight. Through his Catholic relatives, Shakespeare most likely had some knowledge of Church doctrine, amidst which the practice of confession is central. It can safely be stated that he, a great student of Man, would have been keenly aware of the religious turmoil and at least sympathized with the plights of good people persecuted (regardless of doctrinal beliefs). In his texts, he frequently is nostalgic of former times¹¹, rails against injustice, and praises the quality of mercy.

The only texts the great bard left, and the only clues to the true nature of his mind, are in his fictional works (his poems and plays). This paper only treats the dramatic works¹² for brevity's sake and because the plays would have reached a wider and more diverse audience. The repercussions of this fact must have some bearing on how he conveyed his own sentiments—in one sense the danger would have been greater in such a public arena, but in another sense he may have been able to get away with more: Fiction can be quite liberating, masking reality in fantastic lies.

One must be careful drawing conclusions about the author's views based exclusively on fictional texts. Indeed it is difficult to make any definitive statements, for Shakespeare's words are cloaked in ambiguities. Take, for instance, Act II Scene iii of *Measure for Measure*, later analyzed in this paper. It has all the appearance of a confessional scene, yet the confessor is the

Duke disguised¹³ as a priest. Does this falsehood entirely negate the confessional quality of the scene? One might argue that the scene cannot be regarded as completely baseless, because Juliet believes she is making her confession to a true priest, thus it should carry its own merit. But is she truly sincere? Her words have every appearance of true penitence, yet when the Duke is teaching her about contrition¹⁴ she interrupts him. While her impatient interruption may seem a trifling detail, it leaves wide enough room for a variety of interpretations regarding Juliet's character and conscience (treated later in this paper).

Not all penance scenes are ambiguous (indeed, the previous analysis is rather near-sighted, as is explained later), and many reveal interesting sub-textual threads of meaning that, in view of their high frequency, could shed light on Shakespeare's own perceptions and insights. In these moments, Shakespeare seems to express an understanding for the psychological healing power of sacramental confession, and for its power to restore unity to the community. He perhaps fears the loss of these old practices, and with them the loss of their unifying and curative powers. He may be attempting to preserve the crucial aspects of the custom in his plays; he may also be trying to educate his audience, to perhaps open their eyes to the importance of maintaining a unified community, and counseling against the persecution of any one person or group of persons because of a religious disagreement. His boldest statements usually occur in brief scenes wedged between major dramatic and climactic moments that the casual observer might not fix upon.

This paper reflects on moments in representative texts of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, and romances from throughout his career that contain the language or moments of penance. Scenes that contained any of the following were selected for further analysis:

(1) The traditional penitential rite consists of three parts¹⁵: Full knowledge of the sin¹⁶ and remorse for committing it, confession of the transgression, and restitution or satisfaction¹⁷ made as penance for the sin.

(2) Confession may be performed without a confessor because the character is in a play and is essentially confessing to the audience. These confessions might suggest a protestant undertone if God is in some way invoked or implied, because protestant confessions are performed directly without priestly intermediate. By Roman Catholic standards, these would simply be considered the preliminaries of penance– the Examination of Conscience¹⁸– conducted prior to the sacramental rite.

(3) If a confessor is present during confession, there may be Catholic undertones if the individual examines the penitent's conscience and offers guidance, and if the confessor has the power to offer absolution (as the Duke says in *Measure for Measure*: “To advise you, comfort you, and pray with you” [IV.iii.51-52]). He may act in any of the key roles of a priestly confessor: As advisor for proper action, as healer of the penitent's conscience, and as a representative of divine judgment.¹⁹ As in Shakespeare's own times, the confessor role may blend both religious and secular aspects if he is a member of the political institution and acts in this role. Penance as an institution cannot be isolated as solely religious; it serves as the foundation for legal interrogation practices and for the practice of psychological therapy. As such, it touches on divers aspects of human experience, some of which are given brief treatment in this paper (i.e. the use of torture to obtain confession, the nature of a good ruler, the rite as an integral part

of other sacraments, etc.).

(5) The most practical outcome of true confession is the outcast rejoining the community, or sacramental reconciliation²⁰. This aspect of the penance rite is seen to be most crucial as it extends beyond the individual.

What follows is a series of musings on the possible implications of penance scenes in Shakespeare's works, any common threads running through several or all of the plays, and what may be inferred from these commonalities. These penance moments are scrutinized in the hope that they will lead to a more complete and cohesive understanding of Shakespeare's own ponderings.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595)

The early comedies do not plumb the depths of human experience as do the later tragedies and romances, but they do delicately illuminate some subjects that Shakespeare later treats more fully. While penance is by no means a major aspect of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there are some key scenes where the astute audience can see Shakespeare's early ruminations on penance.

When the young couples escape into the forest, nature and the fairies set things in their proper order (after initially botching things a little and creating more chaos). The fairy rulers Oberon and Titania have their own dispute that throws the natural world out of whack (II.i.88-117). She is not a mortal, yet Titania realizes her guilty part in the disruption of nature. The union between Titania and Oberon is fractured, destabilizing the community and resulting in an unnatural and destructive force:

Rheumatic diseases do abound.

And thorough (*sic*) this distemperature we see
 The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
 Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
 And on old Hiem's thin and icy crown
 An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
 Is, as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,
 The childing autumn, angry winter, change
 Their wonted liveries, and the mazed world
 By their increase now knows not which is which.
 And this same progeny of evils comes
 From our debate, from our dissension.
 We are their parents and original. (105-117)

Her language is full of decay, contagion, and stagnation. It is a stark contrast to her next speech about when she and Oberon were in harmony before the changeling child (the object of their contention) was born (123-137). In order for the natural order to be restored to something resembling this fruitful and glorious state, their own marital discord must be resolved.

Shakespeare glosses over the resolution between Titania and Oberon. Oberon might feel some sympathy for Titania's pitiful position (IV.i.46), but he still takes the changeling child from her, and he does not ask forgiveness for cruelly disgracing her. Perhaps he chooses to tread cautiously as a relatively new and unknown artist, avoiding censure until he can have the protection that comes from mass popularity and from having wealthy, powerful friends.²¹ When the fairy king and queen are reconciled, they bless the marriages of the mortal couples with fertile abundance (V.i.396-417), representing the restoration of productive natural harmony.

Crucial to Shakespearean philosophy is the balance between mercy and justice in divine law.²² In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia's father Egeus calls for merciless justice if his daughter refuses to marry Demetrius, invoking an ancient law that she be put to death for

disobeying her father. His inability to recognize the virtuous nature of Hermia's and Lysander's love (I.i.26-38) signifies that he is grievously in the wrong (bordering on the sinful by desiring the utmost penalty of her life). Hermia begs for mercy from the Duke of Athens: "I do entreat Your Grace to pardon me" (58). Theseus is more merciful and offers her the alternative of taking religious orders. Though certainly not an appealing option for the young woman, at least it spares her life from such harsh punishment. Egeus again calls for justice when the young couples are discovered: "I beg the law, the law, upon his head" (IV.i.150), but the good ruler Theseus shows mercy for the reconciled couples.

The play of Pyramus and Thisbe by the rude mechanicals opens with a stuttering prologue: "If we offend, it is with our good will. / That you should think, we come not to offend, / But with good will" (V.i.108-110). The same sentiment can be seen in many of Shakespeare's epilogues, begging forgiveness for any shortcomings. For instance, examine Puck's epilogue:

If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended,
 [.]
 Gentles, do not reprehend.
 If you pardon, we will mend.
 [.]
 Now to scape the serpent's tongue,
 We will make amends ere long;
 [.]
 Give me your hands, if we be friends,
 And Robin shall restore amends. (419-433)

The speech is permeated throughout with the language of a penitent, asking forgiveness for the transgression of displeasing the audience. It is an interesting method: Deprecating oneself and one's company to the audience and begging applause. It is a stretch, but "scape"²³ may carry the

dual meaning of the Old Testament “scapegoat,” the sacrificial representative carrying the sins of the community into the desert. Its secondary meaning works in the contextual sense as escaping “the serpent’s tongue,” which is perhaps symbolic of Satan or punishment for one’s sins (this subject is treated later in the analysis of *A Winter’s Tale*).

The Merchant of Venice (1594-1598)

Shakespeare draws greatly from biblical proverbs and parables for his plays, and *The Merchant of Venice* is no exception. The parable of the prodigal son resonates and is inverted in Jessica’s escape from her father’s house and marriage to Lorenzo. The parable itself contains penitential elements: The prodigal leaves the family and wastes his wealth in sinful excesses. He returns to his father as a penitent destitute, “And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son”(Luke 15:21). His father embraces him and celebrates his restoration to the family. In Jessica’s first scene, she exclaims, “Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father’s child!” (II.iii.15-16). When Lorenzo comes, she takes some of Shylock’s wealth with her, of which Shylock seems more to lament the loss than of his daughter: “I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!” (III.i.83-84). While the father of the prodigal son responds with mercy, with Shylock’s loss he begins his cry for justice. The parable becomes all the more relevant because Shylock repeatedly refers to Antonio as “prodigal” (II.v.16, III.i.41), blending the religious and the political implications of the word.

The Old Testament law of the Jews is thought to be more concerned with justice while the Christian law of the New Testament is supposedly more merciful. *The Merchant of Venice* contends with these conflicting principles. Portia’s eloquent “The quality of mercy” speech²² is at variance with Shylock’s speech on revenge (IV.i.89-103). Religion and the law are at odds in

this play, which becomes very visible in the central struggle between the Christian Antonio and the Jewish Shylock. The situation is unstable and quite beyond the powers of the Duke, as both Antonio (III.iii.26-31) and Portia (IV.i.216-220) state, and as Shylock knows (35-39, 101-103).

Religious confessors acted, in one respect, as physicians to the soul in that they acted as pre-modern therapists.¹⁹ The center of the Catholic Church is in Rome, so the title bestowed on disguised Portia of, “A young doctor of Rome” (IV.i.153) would be appropriate for a priest confessor. This interpretation is quite a stretch, but it is supported by Portia’s conduct as Balthasar. She examines the bond and advises Shylock three times to take the offered money and have her destroy the bond, to show mercy to Antonio.²⁴ Bassanio (with Gratiano) and Shylock illustrate two ends of a continuum, in that they represent the two extremes of mercy without justice (“Wrest once the law to your authority. / To do a great right, do a little wrong” [213-214]), and of justice without mercy (“I crave the law” [204]). However Bassanio’s mercy excludes Shylock, whom he may view with prejudice as unworthy of mercy. He would exclude Shylock from mercy, just as Shylock would exclude himself from justice: Both viewpoints are inherently flawed.

Portia’s ruling and the Duke’s judgment should then represent some balance between these two extremes. When Shylock continues to cry for justice, Portia makes sure he fully understands what he is asking, “For, as thou urgest justice, be assured / Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desir’st” (313-314). When Bassanio offers Balthasar recompense for saving Antonio’s life, Portia speaks of satisfaction in a manner that contains connotations from its role in sacramental penance: “He is well paid that is well satisfied, / And I, delivering you, am satisfied, / And therein do account myself well paid” (413-416).¹⁷

It is difficult to say whether Shylock would have called for the flesh payment of the bond, had he not lost “His daughter and his ducats” (II.viii.24), or whether he experiences any repentance²⁵ for his earlier demands of justice. He is certainly a pitiful and tragic figure, treated with cruelty and disrespect by the supposedly merciful Christians, losing his daughter and his wealth. He seizes on this one opportunity for revenge (III.i.51-69), and his final downfall comes from clinging to his bond, his last desperate hope, to the bitter end. In the end, Shylock finds himself in a position where he must beg mercy for his actions against Antonio. What he experiences is attrition, the fear that he might receive the same treatment that he had demanded of Antonio. He remains infuriatingly silent after he is trapped by Portia’s justice with his unsatisfactory “I am content” (IV.i.391). He seems to fade into the background and he appears to acquiesce to the community. Perhaps he has gone the way of many literary sinners before him, losing his hold of the audience’s attention once he no longer has the captivating aspect of a rebel.²⁶

Shylock is shown Christian mercy by both Antonio and the Duke: His life is pardoned, he must pay a fine to the state, restore his prodigal daughter to her inheritance, and convert to Christianity. It does not seem proper, however, that mercy and reconciliation are forced upon him. How can the productive, healing power of forgiveness work if reconciliation does not spring from unconstrained, natural grace? There might be some clue as to why the dialogue in the final scene between Jessica and Lorenzo shifts so quickly from loving to strained discourse (V.i.14-23). The strain in their relationship may be a symbolic repercussion of Shylock’s unnatural forced reconciliation, moving like a tremor through the community and affecting his daughter’s marriage.

Penitential language is employed throughout *The Merchant of Venice* in passing

references. Portia says of her suitor the Prince of Morrocco: “If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I would rather he should shrive me than wive me” (I.ii.127-129).²⁵

The dialogue between Bassanio and Portia in the casket scene employs the metaphors treason, torture, and confession in an unusual discourse on love:

BASSANIO

Let me choose,
For as I am, I live upon the rack.

PORTIA

Upon the rack, Bassanio? Then confess
What treason there is mingled with your love.

BASSANIO

None but that ugly treason of mistrust,
Which makes me fear th’enjoying of my love.
There may as well be amity and life
‘Tween snow and fire, as treason and my love.

PORTIA

Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack,
Where men enforced do speak anything.

BASSANIO

Promise me life, and I’ll confess the truth.

PORTIA

Well then, confess and live.

BASSANIO

“Confess and love”

Had been the very sum of my confession.
Oh, happy torment, when my torturer
Doth teach me answers for deliverance! (III.ii.24-38)

The scene is building up tension for Bassanio’s choice, using words that carry uncomfortable connotations to make the audience squirm a bit. The scene is in Portia’s

Belmont, where she has domain. Therefore the odd flirtation between herself and Bassanio employing the tortured confession metaphor may stem from some male discomfort of being under the rule of a woman, which certainly echoes Shakespeare's England under the rule of Queen Elizabeth.²⁷

Much Ado About Nothing (1598-1599)

Much Ado About Nothing, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, explores penitence as an important part of marital harmony and marital harmony as an essential element of a unified community.⁶ Claudio upsets this harmony when he demonstrates a lack of faith in Hero's honor. On his wedding day, he examines the consciences of both Leonato and Hero, asking his would-be father-in-law if he gives away his daughter, "With free and unconstrained soul" (IV.i.23). The natural order of the state is also threatened because Don Pedro joins Claudio in his accusation of Hero. Claudio demonstrates a lack of faith in his friendship as well, when he believes Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. These two incidences demonstrate a flaw in Claudio's character of too-hasty lack of trust in his loved ones, and a willingness to publicly accuse and humiliate them (rather than speaking to them in private and finding the truth for himself). Shakespeare is fascinated by this character flaw, which he treats to a great extent in his later plays *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *A Winter's Tale*.

When Claudio and Don Pedro realize they have falsely accused Hero, they express repentance to Leonato:

CLAUDIO

Choose your revenge yourself;
Impose me to what penance your invention
Can lay upon my sin. Yet sinned I not
But in mistaking.

DON PEDRO

By my soul, nor I.

And yet, to satisfy this good old man,

I would bend under any heavy weight

That he'll enjoin me to. (IV.i.266-272)

Don Pedro and Claudio claim they were deceived by Don John, and that their sin is lessened by the fact that they did not have full knowledge. Their confessions are rather defensive, lacking in some of the sincerity of Borachio's confession. It is obvious from his accusation of Hero that Claudio did not learn from his earlier sin of distrusting his friend Don Pedro. Does he learn the lesson this time, when the consequences (Hero's counterfeited death) are much more severe? He may have some sense of guilt, as evidenced by his decision to make Leonato's prescribed penance a yearly rite (V.iii.23). Both Don Pedro and Claudio offer to make satisfaction for the wrongs done to Hero.

Leonato (of course knowing that Hero is alive) is merciful in his absolution of the two men. Earlier he had been in danger of committing the same wrong as Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, of calling for the utmost punishment of Hero for her accused infidelity (IV.i.154). The Friar acts as a good advisor and confessor. He stays Leonato's overzealous hand ("Pause awhile, / And let my counsel sway you in this case" [200-201]) and astutely examines Hero, observing signs of her innocence (156-170). He essentially keeps the play from becoming a tragedy, devising the counterfeit plot that results in the penance of the princes and the restoration of natural order.

Once the ceremony begging forgiveness of the dead Hero is performed (V.iii), communal restoration and productivity proceed through the marriages at the end of the play. A shadow of

the later *A Winter's Tale* can be seen in this play; once the penance rite is performed, Hero is resurrected. Her resurrection symbolizes the return of life and productivity to the community stagnated by sin, and she gracefully forgives Claudio and embraces him.

In Act III Borachio confesses his role in Don John's plot to Conrade, though at this point it is more of a boast than a confession. Later to Don Pedro and Claudio, he "Confessed the vile encounters they have had / A thousand times in secret" (IV.i.93-94). Borachio makes a truly remorseful confession to Don Pedro at the beginning of Act V:

Do you hear me, and let this count kill me. I have deceived even your very eyes. [. . .] My villainy they have upon record, which I had rather seal with my death than repeat over to my shame. The lady is dead upon mine and my master's false accusation; and, briefly, I desire nothing but the reward of a villain. (V.i.226-238)

He asks for death as punishment, which may signify his conscience weighing heavily upon him.

Shakespeare's plays often speak of disease or sickness. Some see this as evidence that Shakespeare had some lingering disease that troubled his thoughts and lead to his early retirement and death. This repeated imagery might also signify, not the sensation of earthly illness, but of moral or spiritual illness. Don John speaks of his hatred for Claudio in these terms: "Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be medicinable to me. I am sick in displeasure to him" (II.ii.4-5). When the Friar describes his plan to restore Hero's reputation, he says alliteratively, "For to strange sores strangely they strain the cure" (IV.i.252). The theme of sin as a permanent stain is in Leonato's words when he is taken in by Don John's plot: "Why, she, oh, she, is fallen / Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea / Hath drops too few to wash her clean again" (139-141).

As in *The Merchant of Venice*, there are several passing references to penance and its parts. Benedick tells Don Pedro to "Examine your conscience" (I.i.276) in their light jesting. Hero makes reference to "catechizing." In the late Medieval and early Renaissance times, priests

often included catechism in the penitential rites, using the penance frame-work to teach as well as advise.¹⁹

As You Like It (1598-1600)

As You Like It is a sweet, innocent play, with few confessions save those of love (Orlando carves confessions of his love on the trees in the Forest of Arden). The play deals more with the subject of conversion than with the penitential motif. Conversion is directly linked to penance: Both involve the individual (convert or penitent) uniting with the community.

In the opening scene Oliver confesses hatred for his brother Orlando: “For my soul, yet I know not why, hates nothing more than he” (I.i.156-157). It is voiced in a soliloquy to the audience; there is no solid evidence of remorse in his words. Oliver encounters Rosalind and Celia in the forest and relates his fantastical reunion with his brother; the tale is saturated in biblical imagery. He says of his conversion of heart: “From miserable slumber I awaked.[. . .] I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion / So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am” (IV.iii.133, 136-138).

Touchstone speaks with Corin the Shepherd and claims that, since Corin never learned the good manners of court, “then thy manners must be wicked; and wickedness is sin, and sin is damnation” (III.ii.40-41). Touchstone tries to extract wit from the shepherd in a mock examination of conscience, accusing the shepherd of being a bawd because he earns his living from the copulation of his sheep.

Duke Frederick has usurped his brother’s dukedom and banished him (Shakespeare treats the sin of usurpation to a great extent in his later plays, particularly in *Hamlet*). His unsuitability to reign is reflected in Duke Frederick’s rash and unjust banishment of Orlando. The exiled Duke

Senior, by contrast, demonstrates charity to Adam in the woods and proves his right as ruler through his mercy. He possesses those qualities of a ruler which Shakespeare so clearly valued.⁸ Frederick goes to the Forest of Arden to find and kill his exiled brother. But as is the case with Oliver, the Forest works its healing power on him, and “Meeting with an old religious man, / After some question with him, was converted / Both from his enterprise and from the world” (V.iv.159-161). One could interpret this renunciation of his power and taking on the life of a mendicant as a self-imposed penance.

Twelfth Night; Or, What You Will (1600-1602)

Twelfth Night contains several penance instances of note, particularly in the final act of the play. Sebastian begs pardon of Olivia for fighting with Sir Toby. Viola confesses who she is, uncovering the minor deceit of her disguise.¹³ It is a troublesome play, written around the same time as *Measure for Measure*, containing many parallels with that story. Compare Olivia’s confessional soliloquy of her infatuation with disguised Viola to Angelo’s speech regarding his lust for Isabella: “How now? / Even so quickly may one catch the plague?” (I.v.289-290). The metaphor of lust as a disease is directly related to Shakespeare’s use in other, more general instances of sin as a contagion. The metaphors are meant to reflect the unnatural and destructive effects of sin.

Malvolio’s tragi-comic role requires some consideration in its bearing on our understanding of Shakespeare’s penitents. There is some debate as to what extent Malvolio represents “a kind of puritan” (II.iii.139). He is very similar to the character of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, in that he is criticized for his overly harsh punishments (I.v.87-90) and is disliked by the common, comic characters for his holier-than-thou attitude and lack of good humor. When Malvolio appears mad in following the directions of the fake letter, Sir Toby

makes a noteworthy comment: “We may carry it thus for our pleasure and his penance till our very pastime, tired out of breath, prompt us to have mercy on him” (III.iv.139-141). The fool Feste, disguised as Sir Topas the curate, examines Malvolio in a mock exorcism scene, a grotesque of the proper confession rite.

In the final scene, Malvolio shows no mercy for his captors, storming off-stage and craving revenge. Fabian and Feste confess what they did to him. When Olivia hears the truth, she begs of Malvolio: “Prithee, be content. / This practice hath most shrewdly passed upon thee, / But when we know the grounds and authors of it, / Thou shalt be both the plaintiff and the judge / Of thine own cause” (V.i.351-355). She offers him legal justice to deal out punishment (the secular synonym for restitution) as he desires; this does not satisfy him. Or perhaps he distrusts them all so much that he will not employ their system of justice. He is quite hypocritical in his judgment; earlier in the same scene it was revealed that the sea captain who rescued Viola, “Upon some action / Is now in durance, at Malvolio’s suit” (274-275). There is absolutely no reason given for the kind sea captain’s arrest. Malvolio feels slighted by his abuse at the hands of the bawdy characters, but he thinks himself above the same conduct in his treatment of others.

Measure for Measure (1603-1604)

The disguised Duke says of the state, “I have seen corruption boil and bubble / Till it o’errun the stew” (V.i.326-327); *Measure for Measure* is an interesting play to consider in that the legal implications are closely linked with the religious (as they were in Shakespeare’s England). The civil ruler takes on the garb of a religious authority.

Claudio confesses, under the scrutiny of Lucio, that he has begot Juliet with child out of wedlock:

As surfeit is the father of much fast,
 So every scope, by the immoderate use,
 Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,
 Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
 A thirsty evil, and when we drink we die. (I.ii.126-130)

While Claudio and Juliet's sin is of a moral nature, it is written in the old laws. Perhaps this indicates Angelo as executor of out-dated laws is symbolic of Old Testament principles, which do dictate moral conduct and just retribution for violations of the moral rule (recall the discussion in *The Merchant of Venice* where this concept is thoroughly explored).

Claudio does not demonstrate any remorse for his actions and instead seems bitter about his overly severe punishment:

Thus can the demigod Authority
 Make us pay down for our offense, by weight,
 The words of heaven. On whom it will, it will;
 On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just. (120-123)

Angelo's soliloquies reveal the tormented soul of a man who had been virtuous (almost to a fault), and whose mind is now filled with very disturbing thoughts, using the metaphor of flesh rotting ("Corrupt with virtuous season" [II.ii.175]) next to a flourishing violet. He cannot understand why he is now enamored with the virtuous Isabella (while in the past he had never before been tempted): "What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?" (179). His sin has an added dimension of horror because he desires to corrupt her: "Having waste ground enough, / Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary / And pitch our evils there?" (176-178). The speech illustrates the destructive, stagnating power of sin (in contrast to the productive power of grace). In the medieval catalogues of sins, adultery with a person who had taken holy orders (a nun or priest) was one of the worst forms of adultery.²⁹

Because of his sinful lust, Angelo is unable to pray (“Heaven hath my empty words”

II.iv.2). His first sin breeds other sins (denying Isabella’s plea and having Claudio executed, lying to the returned Duke), as evidenced by his mentioning two of the seven deadly sins in one breath:

Yea, my gravity,
Wherein— let no man hear me- I take pride,
Could I with boot change for an idle plume,
Which the air beats for vain. (9-12)

His words (“tongue”, “mouth”, “chew”) invoke imagery of the hell-mouth, on the brink of which Angelo now finds himself hovering. He also repeats the word “blood” several times, perhaps recalling his own humanity and fallibility. These are all signs of his severely troubled conscience in a state somewhere between attrition and contrition.

The theme in *Measure for Measure* of a guilty conscience troubled yet unable to amend recurs throughout many of Shakespeare’s plays (*Macbeth* is probably the most thorough treatment of the subject). These characters examine their consciences in soliloquies, with only the audience to listen. We are merely mute ears, unable to offer any consolation or council, let alone absolution. Penance is a healing sacrament that requires (in its traditional form) that confession be made to an actual person, who can counsel and sympathize with the penitent, relieving the soul’s burden.

The Duke (in disguise) hears Juliet’s confession in the most explicit representation of the sacrament of penance found in Shakespeare, complete with a priestly confessor. When scrutinized, however, there seems to be something not quite so clear-cut about this scene. The confessor priest is actually the Duke in disguise. He employs deceit to maintain his disguise,

which could be justified by the good he does, but still calls into question his validity as a confessor.¹³ He is endowed by God with earthly rule⁸, yet perhaps he is a little out of his jurisdiction in this situation. For instance, would he be able to grant absolution? He could grant her reprieve in state matters, and her transgression is written in the law (since Angelo was able to charge her and Claudio for the crime). The Duke uses secular-legal terminology when he directs Juliet to examine her conscience: “*Arraign* your conscience, / And *try* your penitence” (II.iii.21-22). He scrutinizes her to see if she is truly contrite (“if it be sound”[22]) or simply attrite (“or hollowly put on” [23]). Juliet interrupts the Duke as he is going into an analysis of these two principles (30-34). She appears to be contrite (“I do repent me as it is an evil, / And take the shame with joy” [35-36]), but because she interrupts the Duke, her repentance may be tinged (as Claudio’s is) with bitterness for Angelo’s severe punishment. The Duke ends the scene with the salutation “Grace go with you. Benedicite” (40). He offers no form of absolution, although “Grace” could contain a subtle reference to absolution.³⁰ By saying “go with you” he is taking the position that she is indeed contrite of heart, and that she therefore possesses God’s grace. Perhaps Shakespeare felt he was already risking it by having a flat-out confession scene (with positive Catholic resonances and with no hint of derision) and, instead of touching on the very controversial concept of priestly power¹⁹, simply wrapped up the scene and moved on.

At the beginning of Act III it appears that the disguised Duke has heard Claudio’s confession (in his last scene the Duke said that he was, “Going with instruction to him” [II.iii.39]). The Duke counsels Claudio to prepare for his impending execution, painting a peaceful image of death in an attempt to give the condemned man hope and courage. His command “Go to your knees and make ready” (172) may indicate that the Duke gave Claudio prayers for his penance.¹⁷

Pompey's character is an interesting portrayal of a penitent from the lower classes.

Escalus attempts to extract the bawd's confession by interrogating him (II.i), but Pompey is evasive. The scene demonstrates some of the difficulties in obtaining legal confession, and the flaws in the system. Pompey has absolutely no reason to confess: A guilty conscience does not burden him. Even if he was to experience a change of heart, fear of punishment would keep him silent. The legal system has only a very primitive hold on citizens, that of fearing punishment, which can only be exacted if evidence is found or the guilty person confesses. The best course of action for a guilty person is not to confess, but to conceal the evidence. The Duke, disguised as a spiritual leader, later examines Pompey and tells him to "Go mend, go mend" (III.ii.28), a cry for penance. Pompey has a change of heart, saying: "I have been an unlawful bawd time out of mind, but yet I will be content to be a lawful hangman" (IV.ii.14-15). His restitution is in legal form, acting as the executioner for the condemned: "I do find your hangman is a more penitent trade than your bawd: he doth oftener ask forgiveness" (49-51).

Barnardine, another representative of the lower classes, is a murderer without a guilty conscience. The Duke inquires "Hath he borne himself penitently in prison?" (IV.ii.141) and the Provost answers that he shows no signs of concern for his life. How is the law to deal with a perpetrator who is not afraid to die, the utmost threat of punishment? In fact, they are unable to execute him in Claudio's place because he simply refuses to participate. The Duke tries to act as confessor to Barnardine: "I will give him present shrift and advise him for a better place" (206-208). Perhaps spiritual guidance can succeed where the legal system failed. But the Duke is not a true spiritual leader, and his motives in Barnardine's case are not as motivated by charity as he claims. Barnardine is unmoved by the Duke's words. At the end of the play the Duke declares

what is to be done with Barnardine:

Thou'rt condemned;
But, for those earthly faults, I quit them all,
And pray thee take this mercy to provide
For better times to come.— Friar, advise him;
I leave him to your hand. (V.i.493-497)

The Duke acquits Barnardine as much as he can, as an earthly lord. He then gives Friar Peter the task of counseling Barnardine to save him spiritually.

Lucio, another example of a sinner from the lower classes, unwittingly confesses to the disguised Duke that he has got Kate Keepdown with child (IV.iii.169). He expresses no remorse for his actions. In Act V, Lucio is called to answer for this sin. The Duke uses his civil power to forgive Lucio for slandering his name, but requires that he marry Kate to make satisfaction for his sin.

Angelo gives a third soliloquy (IV.iv); knowing that the Duke is to return, he is now afraid that Isabella will come forward and expose his sin. This fear is akin to attrition, the lesser form of sorrow for one's sins.¹⁴ His conscience begins to work within him: "Alack, when once our grace we have forgot, / Nothing goes right; we would, and we would not" (33-34).

The final act contains a series of confession scenes culminating in a glorification of mercy. It opens with Isabella asking for justice against Angelo, confessing to the Duke that she had yielded to Angelo in exchange for her brother's life. The confession is false because she had exchanged places with Mariana, but the purpose of the scene is to test Angelo. As previously stated, Shakespeare seems to allow for the use of some deception, so long as the outcome is good. The Duke commands Isabella to "Confess the truth" (V.i.118). Mariana enters and confesses that it was not Isabella but she who was with Angelo. The Duke bids Angelo "Be you judge / Of your

own cause” (172-173), as the penitent is supposed to examine his own conscience.

Escalus demonstrates how an unchecked civil authority may obtain confession: “To th’rack with him!– We’ll touse you / Joint by joint, but we will know his purpose” (319-320). He becomes so flustered with the proceedings that he calls for everyone involved to be sent to prison (353-356). His comments would have resonated particularly with Shakespeare’s audience.²⁷

Angelo makes his Act of Contrition³¹ to the Duke, divided in two parts:

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. Then, good prince,
 No longer session hold upon my shame,
 But let my trial be mine own confession.
 Immediate sentence then and sequent death
 Is all the grace I beg. (374-382)
 I am sorry that such sorrow I procure,
 And so deep sticks it in my penitent heart
 That I crave death more willingly than mercy.
 ‘Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it. (485-488)

“O my dread lord” and “Your Grace, like power divine” imitate a prayer to God. “Dread” would suggest that Angelo only has attrition, that he is compelled to confess not out of love, but fear.

He does say that his heart is “penitent” (486), which may suggest he has achieved some contrition. Most likely he falls somewhere between contrition and attrition, so he must perform some deed to make satisfaction.¹⁷ For his treatment of her, the Duke commands that Angelo and Mariana be immediately wed, and for his treatment of Isabella and Claudio, he calls for Angelo’s death. His sentence is of an earthly judge: “The very mercy of the law cries out / Most audible,

even from his proper tongue, / ‘An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!’” (415-417). His words are merciful towards the wronged Mariana, saving her honor through marriage and, as his widow, giving her Angelo’s possessions upon his death. There is, however, no mercy for the criminal Angelo, and in this lies the difference between earthly (limited) and divine (boundless) mercy. The Duke knows that Claudio is still alive; this is a test of Isabella, of whether she fully comprehends the difference between earthly and divine mercy. To earthly justice, it would make no sense for Isabella to kneel with Mariana and plead for her brother’s killer’s life, but to divine justice, it would be the greatest example of charity.²² Mariana’s plea is beautifully worded: “They say best men are molded out of faults, / And, for the most, become much more the better / For being a little bad” (447-449). The Duke says of Mariana, “I have confessed her, and I know her virtue” (538). Isabella begs pardon for Angelo, which the Duke immediately grants: “Not changing heart with habit, I am still / Attorneyed at your service” (392-393).

The key lesson of the play, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, is mercy. We must not judge Isabella too harshly. If she had given in to Angelo to spare her brother’s life, her brother certainly would not have lived (Angelo hastened his execution in spite of her seeming repayment of debt). In light of these musings, some sense can be made of the Duke asking for Isabella’s hand in marriage. Their union is the personification of earthly justice becoming joined with divine mercy and of the religious leadership uniting with the secular state leadership (refer to Portia’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice*). Marriage is also used to symbolize (as discussed in earlier plays) the reconciliation of the community and the restoration of productivity. Isabella’s intention to become a nun and make vows of chastity is symbolic of swearing off her ability to procreate.

The Duke in disguise is referred to twice as a “ghostly father” (IV.ii.48, V.i.131).³² There may be some double meaning implied: “Friar Lodowick” is like a ghost, in that he does not truly

exist (compare to the possible double meaning of Portia's disguise in *The Merchant of Venice*).

Romeo and Juliet (1594-1596)

Penance is used in *Romeo and Juliet* as a ruse for avoiding suspicion while meeting in secret. Its employment in this manner may suggest the principle of the sanctity of the confessional.³³ Romeo and Juliet both use the guise of confession to secretly meet and to gain counsel of Friar Laurence. Romeo has the go-between Nurse relate a message to Juliet: "Bid her devise / Some means to come to shrift this afternoon, / And there she shall at Friar Laurence' cell / Be shrived and married" (II.iv.176-179). When Juliet finds herself alone and forced to wed Paris she uses subterfuge to seek Friar Laurence's counsel. She orders her former confidante the nurse: "Tell my lady I am gone, / Having displeased my father, to Laurence' cell / To make confession and to be absolved" (III.v.232-234). She is advised by Friar Laurence but they do not actually perform the formal sacrament. The nurse is an interesting character because she initially functions as Juliet's advisor and in a general sense as her confidante and confessor. Yet she is a bad advisor, as Juliet realizes in her crucial maturation scene of Act III Scene V.

Friar Laurence is referred to throughout the play as "My ghostly friar" (II.ii.189), "My ghostly father" (II.iii.45), and "My ghostly confessor" (II.vi.21), terms that refer to the Holy Ghost and denote in the Catholic community one's personal confessor.³² Though Friar Laurence does not act as confessor in an actual penance rite on-stage, he does act as an advisor to Romeo and Juliet. In his first scene when he believes Romeo has spent the night with Rosaline, he exclaims "God pardon sin!" (II.iii.44). In the same scene he says, "Riddling confession finds but riddling shrift" (56).²⁵ He most likely refers to the need for a complete confession of one's sins for complete forgiveness. He frequently advises Romeo against haste in the first acts of the play;

ignoring this advice could arguably be the reason for the young couple's tragic end. Romeo hides in Friar Laurence's cell after he has killed Tybalt. When Romeo is told of the punishment the Duke has proclaimed for him, he rails:

“Banished”?

Oh, Friar, the damned use that word in hell;
Howling attends it. How hast thou the heart,
Being a divine, a ghostly confessor,
A sin absolver, and my friend professed,
To mangle me with that word “banished”? (III.iii.46-51)

It might be assumed that Romeo has already confessed the sin of murder to Friar Laurence. Yet if he has not (and there is no direct evidence for it in the text), this may be one crucial place in which Friar Laurence fails the couple: He too hastily sends Romeo to Juliet without first performing the full penance rite (absolving Romeo of his sin and advising him in proper atonement).

In the final scene, Friar Laurence acts not as the confessor but is himself the penitent, inverting traditional penance roles. Friar Laurence confesses his part in the events and relates all that has occurred: “And here I stand, both to impeach and purge / Myself condemned and myself excused” (V.iii.226-227). He wants to make amends for his part in the destructive acts. He ends his speech: “And if aught in this / Miscarried by my fault, let my old life / Be sacrificed some hour before his time / Unto the rigor of severest law” (266-269). In a way, the friar's situation is a blending of the secular-political and the religious. His sins are not political in nature, yet he seeks the authority of the earthly Prince for his penance. Friar Laurence's conscience is greatly conflicted by his guilt, and he asks for the fullest punishment (recalling Angelo's plea for death in *Measure for Measure*).

The prologue indicates that the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues has fractured the community and is the cause of the public brawls that occur throughout the play. It results in the blood-shed of the young, signifying reproductive stagnation and destruction of the community's future. The unreconciled breach in societal structure is also at the root of Capulet's cruel treatment of Juliet (III.v), demanding that she either marry Paris post-haste or be disowned. When Juliet returns home after hearing Friar Laurence's plan to prevent the marriage and Capulet asks her where she was, Juliet replies:

Where I have learned me to repent the sin
Of disobedient opposition
To you and your behests, and am enjoined
By holy Laurence to fall prostrate here,
To beg your pardon. Pardon, I beseech you!
Henceforward I am ever ruled by you. (IV.ii.17-22)

She pretends to repent her disobedience, as if she were serving some penance Friar Laurence had requested of her.

Romeo, Juliet, Benvolio, and Tybalt are the scapegoats for the adults' grudge. When Tybalt is slain, Capulet's wife calls for justice (echoing many of Shylock's and Egeus's sentiments). When compared with Shylock's story, her cries for justice may, at least on an allegorical level, be one of the causes of the lovers' untimely deaths. It is quite appropriate that Justice is represented as being blind, for it metes out punishments without sympathy and with a heavy hand.

At the masked ball, the kiss scene between Romeo and Juliet is conducted under the holy metaphor of pilgrimage to a saint's shrine:

ROMEO

Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged

JULIET

Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

ROMEO

Sin from my lips? Oh, trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again. (I.v.108-111)

Shakespeare loves double meanings, as in this discourse “trespass” means both a sin and interloping. Shakespeare very frequently uses his young heroines as heavenly intercessors imbued with purity and grace.³⁴ Juliet forgives Romeo for having killed her cousin: “God pardon him! I do, with all my heart” (III.v.82). This exclamation may easily be glossed over, a brief and hasty aside during the tense scene where Juliet stands up to her parents. It is a very important statement if such words carry more weight than their general meaning (as this paper argues Shakespeare is doing). To completely and whole-heartedly pardon one who has murdered a kinsman would be an action full of grace.

The Prince tries to be both just and merciful in his proclamation of banishment for Romeo: “Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill” (III.i.196). If he is totally merciful and forgives Romeo for his crime, as Portia explains in *The Merchant of Venice*, the state becomes impotent and all becomes chaos. If he sides with either of the two families, his own family will become fully embroiled in the feud and more blood will be shed. The Prince gives the epilogue, saying “Some shall be pardoned, and some punished” (V.i.308). He seems to embody the ideal quality of a leader in whom, “Mercy seasons justice”, yet Verona is an uneasy state, with fights breaking out in the streets. The main source of this strife is the feud between the leaders of the two major families, the Capulets and the Montagues, and their lacking the proper balance of mercy and justice; as a result, “All are punished” (295).

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (1599-1601)

Penance as a theme runs throughout *Hamlet*, but something is quite wrong with the way it is enacted. Many of the scenes lack the crucial qualities of a true confession. The initial sin of usurpation is at the root of corrupt and unnatural occurrences throughout the play.³⁵

The medieval term “ghostly father”³² might reveal some deeper meaning about the ghost of King Hamlet, who is literally Hamlet’s ghostly father. By looking at how the ghost functions in the play, in an interpretive stretch one could make the argument that he does to some extent take on the role of a ghostly confessor. He relates the tale of his murder, mourning the fact that he was killed without properly preparing his soul through confession:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,³⁶
No reck’ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.
Oh, horrible! Oh, horrible, most horrible!” (I.v.77-81)

The ghost charges Hamlet to take revenge against the usurper Claudius, but he warns: “Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, / To prick and sting her” (85-89). Hamlet is to show his mother mercy, whose conscience will work against her peace of mind and serve the best punishment for her part. She is ignorant of her sin, if sin it is, marrying her husband’s murderer. According to Church doctrine her ignorance diminishes her guilt in the act. The ghost is most unusual; his cries for vengeance are fiendish. In Shakespeare’s other plays, demanding revenge is essentially elevated to the level of sin and results in destruction. Indeed, in *Hamlet* revenge yields only death, particularly of the rising generation. Recall that the same occurred in *Romeo and Juliet*,

representing sterilization of the community's future.

Hamlet seems quite a fallible agent of such vengeance, as he himself states:

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things
that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud,
revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts
to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.
(III.i.123-128)

It is shady business that Hamlet has been enlisted to perform, and his own wits do indeed seem to suffer for it. In Gertrude's bedroom he becomes too zealous in his task, and the ghost appears to remind him of his true purpose and to show his mother mercy.

Claudius's conscience is piqued by Polonius's words:

POLONIUS

We are oft to blame in this—

'Tis too much proved— that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

CLAUDIUS

Oh, 'tis too true!

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
Oh, heavy burden! (III.i.46-55)

This sentiment is also evident in the unsettled minds of Lady Macbeth and Angelo: That of an overwhelming sense of guilt with no alleviation. They are unable to perform the rite of penance because they fear the repercussions of confessing the sin and they would not relinquish their earthly gains (in Claudius's case, his kingdom and his queen).

Claudius again feels his conscience disturbed by Hamlet's play. His following attempt at

prayer and penance recalls Angelo's failed attempts in *Measure for Measure*. The very lengthy speech is important to the current discussion, and is included almost in full:

Oh, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven.
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will

[.]

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offense?
And what's in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardoned being down? Then I'll look up.
My fault is past. But oh, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murder"?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th'offense?

[.]

Try what repentance can. What can it not?
Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?
O wretched state, O bosom black as death,
O limed soul that, struggling to be free,
Are more engaged! Help angels! Make assay.
Bow, stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!
All may be well.

[.]

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.

Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (III.iii.37-72, 97-98)

The final couplet suggests that his mind is not entirely resolved in the prayer act, perhaps due to his lack of contrition. Claudius will find no solace until he completes the reconciling rite of penance, but his knowledge of what confessing his sin would cost keeps him silent. He must live with his troubled mind and become more sickened by it. At Claudius's next entrance he says, "My soul is full of discord and dismay" (IV.i.45). His mind becomes sickened until he can no longer rule wisely. He tries to have Hamlet killed, "For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me" (IV.iii.70-71). When Claudius sends Hamlet to England, he tells him, "Prepare thyself" (44), with the double meaning that he should prepare for the voyage and that he should perhaps examine his conscience, for he plans to have Hamlet executed. He encourages Laertes to seek revenge against Hamlet (128-139), demonstrating that the unconfessed sin has festered to such an extent, that his conscience can no longer check his actions.

Hamlet's vengeful hand is stayed when he comes across what he believes is Claudius praying. His reason for not taking Claudius's life at this moment is quite chilling: He would not have him die with a clear conscience, but have him damned eternally for his sins. It is particularly nasty because earlier King Hamlet's ghost greatly lamented being murdered without last rites.⁶ He later has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who were once his friends, sent to sudden death, "Not shriving time allowed" (V.ii.46). True they were to betray him in this same way, and he is simply repaying them in kind. But the act of condemning his former friends to eternal torment reveals a distortion in Hamlet's own psyche.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play an intriguing role; their sin is that most worst of sins, Judas's sin, the betrayal of a friend and leader.³⁵ They (under the direction of Claudius) attempt

to commit the same sin of betrayal that he committed against his brother. Shakespeare addresses, through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, an interesting theological argument: Is guilt lessened if the person committing the sin does not have the original intent, but is following someone else's orders? They do stand to gain from Hamlet's death, because Claudius has hinted at some payment for their services. But Hamlet was their school friend, whom they were originally supposed to cheer from his melancholy. In a certain way, it seems to worsen their crime that it was committed for such a trifling reward (recalling the thirty pieces of silver that Judas received for betraying Christ). When Hamlet meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he examines them, suspecting (correctly) that they were brought to spy on him: "You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks which your modesties have not craft enough to color" (II.ii.279-281).

Hamlet examines Gertrude in a mock confessional scene, but he gets so caught up in the process that the ghost must intercede to prevent him abusing her: "Oh, step between her and her fighting soul!" (III.iv.117). When Hamlet has been somewhat calmed, and after the ghost leaves, he continues the task of pricking her conscience and begging her to repent:

Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven,
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,
And do not spread the compost on the weeds
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue;
For in the fatness of these pursy times

Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good. (151-162)

The speech sounds eerily like an inverted “Hail Mary,” with calls for repentance in place of prayers for intercession.³² The similarity is increased by line 159, a distortion of the Lord’s Prayer’s “Forgive us our sins.” There is also, in lines 156-157, an echo of the three vows in the Act of Contrition: “To do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid what leads to sin.”³¹

Gertrude senses her sin and uses Shakespeare’s recurring metaphor of a stain: “Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul, / And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct” (III.iv.91-93). Yet she never actually unburdens her conscience nor admits openly to her sin. Later, she speaks about her troubled conscience, “To my sick soul, as sin’s true nature is, / Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss. / So full of artless jealousy is guilt, / It spills itself in fearing to be spilt” (IV.v.17-20).

Hamlet’s own lack of penitence for killing Polonius, and later for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, certainly calls his advice to Gertrude into question. He says of his murdering Polonius (who has been forgotten during Hamlet’s discourse with his mother): “For this same lord, / I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister. / I will bestow him, and will answer well / The death I gave him” (III.iv.179-183). He justifies his actions, since he acts as a retributive agent for the ghost. Instead of answering for Polonius’s death, he goes to England, escaping punishment. On a metaphysical level, his failure to make proper satisfaction for the murder of Polonius may be the cause of Ophelia’s madness and his own death at Laertes’s hands. For his own conscience regarding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet concludes:

They are not near my conscience. Their defeat

Does by their own insinuation grow.
 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
 Between the pass and fell incensed points
 Of mighty opposites. (V.ii.58-62)

Laertes, seeking revenge on Hamlet for his father's and sister's deaths, gives a death-bed confession of his role in Claudius's plans:

Hamlet, thou art slain.
 No med'cine in the world can do thee good;
 In thee there is not half an hour's life.
 The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,
 Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice
 Hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie,
 Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned.
 I can no more. The King, the King's to blame. (V.ii.316-323)

In Shakespeare's plays, vengeful justice often strikes back at the hand that executes it. The deaths of Hamlet and Laertes represent the end of hope for the next generation's future as a result of the strife between the two brothers King Hamlet and Claudius. While Claudius committed the initial destructive sin of usurpation, the ghost of King Hamlet commits the equally detrimental sin of seeking selfish revenge. This sin springs from hypocritical pride (one of the deadliest sins) because one feels above others in deserving just retribution for some slight while simultaneously desiring mercy for one's own sins.

Hamlet and Laertes are manipulated to become the two kings' representatives in combat. The undying feud prevents what could have been a flourishing time for Denmark, had Hamlet married Ophelia and he and Laertes become brothers and leaders. Instead the sins of the fathers are punished through their children³³, Ophelia becomes insane and commits suicide, and Hamlet

and Laertes die in a duel made all the more sinister by the invisible threat of the poisoned blade.

The promising future stagnates under the burden of royal sins and impenitent kings: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.90).

Othello, the Moor of Venice (1603-1604)

Othello is another tale of the destructive effects of unrepentance. The play opens on uneasy ground as Brabantio cries for justice against Othello (I.ii.87-89, 97-101), an action which usually ends in the destruction of the community (as has been covered in the analyses of earlier plays). Iago’s betrayal of Othello is a deadly sin against one’s leader and professed friend.³⁵ The ancient³⁷ betrays his commander, to whom he swears the utmost fealty and love (III.iii.226-227, 479-485). Iago has several mock confessional soliloquies in the play describing his plans and his supposed reasons for his hatred towards Othello and Cassio (I.iii.387-406, II.i.287-313). None of his confessed purposes seem to warrant such extreme hatred; as he himself says, “‘Tis here, but yet confused” (312). There is some flaw in these examinations of conscience, made to himself and to the audience confessor. The most likely explanation might be that he gives the audience and himself these other reasons because the true reason for his hatred is something that he cannot even admit to himself, perhaps reflecting poorly on his own nature.³⁴ Perhaps his hatred of Othello stems from some racial prejudice, some sense of his own inferiority or superiority to Cassio and Othello. It is difficult to say what this other reason could be, convoluted and false as Iago’s words are, but for such extreme cruelty something must fuel his actions. He commits his most false confession, “But I am much to blame. / I humbly do beseech you of your pardon / For too much loving you” (III.iii.225-227), when he is in the midst of unsettling Othello’s mind regarding Desdemona’s love. Indeed, his speech is full of confessional language, with “But pardon me” (250), “I do repent me that I put it to you” (407).

Othello warns Iago to be certain with regard to his accusations against Desdemona:

If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more; abandon all remorse;
On horror's head horrors accumulate;
Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed;
For nothing canst thou to damnation add
Greater than that. (384-396)

In this speech, Shakespeare's common sin motif of the inability to pray is expressed here as a warning. Othello says he is tortured by Iago's accusations, and indeed his mind's turn to frenzied obsession bordering on madness (from Iago constantly prodding his mind) lends the statement credence. Iago defames Desdemona just as Angelo wished to corrupt Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, the desire of which Shakespeare regards as greatly increasing the severity of already weighty transgressions.

Roderigo, who lusts after Desdemona, suggests the language of the traditional confiteor³¹ in his words: "I confess it is my shame to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue to amend it" (I.iii.320-321). He feels some remorse for his actions, yet he cannot make amends and is therefore incompletely penitent. Iago uses Roderigo to achieve his own ends in a perversion of the confessor's role: "Let thy soul be instructed" (II.i.223). Roderigo begins to sense that Iago has played him false: "I will make myself known to Desdemona. If she will return my jewels, I will give over my suit and repent my unlawful solicitation; if not, assure yourself I will seek satisfaction of you" (IV.ii.204-208). Cunning Iago is able to turn Roderigo away from repentance and towards the further sin of murdering Cassio.³⁵

Iago acts in the role of a bad confessor throughout the play. Roderigo, Cassio, and

Othello all come to him, praising his honesty and seeking his counsel. The most obvious example of this is in his treatment of Othello. When Othello calls for revenge against Cassio and Desdemona, Iago plays at being a good confessor, telling him to be patient, and to not harm Desdemona (“But let her live” [III.iii.490]; “If they do nothing, ‘tis a venial slip” [IV.i.9]), while simultaneously plotting how to give Othello the “ocular proof” (III.iii.376) that he demands. Just before Othello is overtaken with an epileptic seizure, his mind is so muddled by Iago’s poison that he falls to stuttering: “To confess and be hanged for his labor– first to be hanged and then to confess” (IV.i.38-39). He speaks of Cassio, that he might be killed without confession and eternally damned for it (as Hamlet muses when he finds Claudius praying).

Othello also acts in the role of the bad confessor when he examines Desdemona and Emilia, trying to extract confessions from them:

DESDEMONA

Upon my knees, what doth your speech import?

I understand a fury in your words,

But not the words.

OTHELLO

Why, what art thou?

[.]

Are not you a strumpet?

DESDEMONA

No, as I am a Christian.

If to preserve this vessel for my lord

From any other foul unlawful touch

Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

OTHELLO

What, not a whore?

DESDEMONA

No, as I shall be saved. (V.ii.33-90)

He keeps in this vein: “Think on thy sins” (41), “Take heed of perjury” (54), “Confess thee freely of thy sin” (57). She insists that she is innocent, “A guiltless death I die” (125). Othello inverts the traditional penance: He first confesses to murdering Desdemona, then later he feels remorse for his actions.

If I have any grace or power to move you,
His present reconciliation take.
[.]
In faith, he's penitent;
And yet his trespass, in our common reason—
[.]
Is not almost a fault
T'incur a private check. (48-49, 69-73)

Her final comment means that the role Cassio played in the brawl was only a minor fault, one that barely warrants a reprimand. Iago abuses Desdemona's grace, convincing Othello that her petitions for Cassio imply adulterous sin. Iago describes these actions in a way that again echoes Angelo's speech about Isabella in their desires to contaminate innocence: "So will I turn her virtue into pitch" (II.iii.354). As testament to Desdemona's grace, she forgives her unknown offender who slanders her virtue to Othello: "If any such there be, heaven pardon him!" (IV.ii.142)

When Emilia realizes her husband Iago is the orchestrator of all the disastrous chaos and that she herself played a part, she confesses everything: "'Twill out, 'twill out! [. . .] Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (V.ii.226-229). In so doing, she fulfills her husband's earlier words: "Guiltiness / will speak, though tongues were out of use" (V.i.111-112). Iago never expresses repentance; his conscience does not seem at all troubled by his schemes nor by his deeds. His silence is frustrating, particularly because he gloats throughout the play over his triumphs and readily confides his plans to the audience. Several of Shakespeare's villains, once they are caught, are mute about their sins (Iago in *A Merchant of Venice* and later Antonio in *The Tempest*).²⁶

King Lear (1605)

Edmund's "By an auricular assurance have your satisfaction" (I.ii.93-94) recalls Othello's "ocular proof" and his cries for "satisfaction." In both plays, satisfaction contains two important connotations: The secular of proving the truth without a doubt, and the religious of a penitent's reparations. The parallel is heightened by Edmund's performance as Iago's shadow, betraying both his brother and his father as Iago betrayed Othello.

The interrogation of Gloucester has the makings of a secular confession scene, yet it is distorted by its senseless nature. Regan and Cornwall torture Gloucester after he confesses what he has done for the king. It is a grotesque perversion of natural satisfaction made all the more disturbing because they already possess the information extracted from him. In this gruesome scene Shakespeare illustrates the consequences of rule with neither justice nor mercy. The images of Gloucester's torture are meant to become fixed in the audiences' minds, in the hopes that the message is heeded.

Lear and Gloucester represent an inversion of the Prodigal Son motif: Their foolish judgments sever them from their loving children, and they must repent their deeds before they are reunited with Cordelia and Edgar. When Gloucester learns that Edmund deceived and betrayed him, he realizes that Edgar was unjustly accused: "Oh, my follies! Then Edgar was abused. / Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!" (III.vii.94-95). Gloucester's desire to throw himself from the cliffs recall Angelo's earlier desire for the punishment of death. This desire for ultimate punishment may seem unsettling, particularly to moderns. On a literal level, suicide was considered a mortal sin that would eternally damn the soul. On a metaphoric level, the desire for death signifies the total realization of "Mea maxima culpa," complete contrition for one's transgressions and knowledge of one's unworthiness of God's mercy. Yet in the cases of both men, God is merciful, giving them each the chance to make amends. Edgar forgives his father for his unjust treatment: "Bear free and patient thoughts" (IV.vi.80).

Kent explains Lear's madness and avoidance of Cordelia: "A sovereign shame so elbows him [. . .] These things sting / His mind so venomously that burning shame / Detains him from Cordelia" (IV.iii.43-48). Cordelia is another one in that order of Shakespeare's grace-filled

heroines: “There she shook / The holy water from her heavenly eyes” (30-31); she is “A soul in bliss” (IV.vii.47).³⁴

When the petulant Lear feels his daughters’ abuses, he mocks confession as he says:

Ask her forgiveness?
Do you but mark how this becomes the house:
Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg
That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food. (II.iv.152-156)

They should beg forgiveness for their abuse of him, not only because he is their king and they owe him their allegiance, but because he is their father and they owe him filial piety. The sarcastic words foreshadow the moment when Lear is brought low by fate, falling at Cordelia’s feet and begging her forgiveness.

Cordelia’s reunion with Lear is most beautiful. Until this scene, there are only hints of remorse for his rash disowning of her; he is obsessed with his own abuses from Regan and Goneril. Now he tries to kneel before her as if a contrite penitent:

LEAR
I am a very foolish fond old man
[.]
If you have poison for me I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.

CORDELIA
No cause, no cause.
[.]

LEAR
Pray you now, forget and forgive.

I am old and foolish. (IV.vii.61, 74-78, 88-89)

He is confused, yet the sleep and kind treatment have restored his wits enough to become conscious of his rash judgment against her. Cordelia more than forgives him; she refuses to acknowledge the fault in the first place. Father and daughter are reconciled, united against the cruel world until her death.

The Trial by Combat between Edgar and Edmund is a medieval form of justice.³⁵ After Edmund loses the fight, he confesses to the charges Edgar makes against him. His words seem to be tinged with regret:

What you have charged me with, that have I done,
And more, much more. The time will bring it out.
'Tis past, and so am I. (V.iii.165-167)

Edgar may feel some regret for his past deeds, perhaps a degree of attrition. It is not a perfect confession, and it is difficult to believe him, given his chameleon nature and earlier deviousness.

Edgar's dying confession must be addressed. It appears that he attempts to make satisfaction for his transgressions:

Some good I mean to do,
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send—
Be brief in it— to th' castle, for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia (V.iii.248-251)

There does not seem to be much repentance in his words, for as he says, he does it despite his nature. Yet he acts bravely in accepting his brother's challenge: He does not have to fight, according to chivalric code, without first knowing the identity of his opponent and that he is not of lower rank (155-156). His last-minute confession is fruitless and in some ways rather cruel:

He gives us a false sense of hope. Perhaps he means well by it, but as often happens in Shakespeare, it is difficult to say for certain.

With Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, there is little question that they lack contrition. Regan and Cornwall die prematurely without any opportunity to make confession. Goneril's final words on stage are a bitter refusal to confess: "Ask me not what I know" (V.iii.163). The man who enters with news of her death says that she confessed to poisoning her sister (231). Knowing the competition between the two sisters over Edmund, her confession appears more triumphant than repentant.

Is there mercy for Lear? To a certain extent. For a brief time, he is reunited with his true-loving daughter Cordelia. Perhaps his earlier cries for justice do not go unheeded by the gods, to his final sorrow. The indifferent and heavy hand of justice falls on all, blinding Gloucester for a youthful transgression and taking the life of innocent Cordelia for seemingly "no cause, no cause" (IV.vii.78). It acts without regard to human repentance and forgiveness: Lear is a penitent when Cordelia is killed. Her death is reminiscent of the punishing plague of the first-born of Egypt: Ancient, leveling justice that indiscriminately wreaks vengeance.

The pagan setting of *King Lear* is meant to contrast the cold, indifferent justice of the gods with Christianity's ideal of God's limitless mercy. The play warns against too light an appreciation for mercy and too hasty a call for justice:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us. (V.iii.173-174)

Macbeth (1606-1607)

There are no true confession scenes in *Macbeth*, but in this play (as in *Hamlet*)

Shakespeare demonstrates the consequences of a guilty, unrepentant conscience. At the beginning of the play the traitorous Thane of Cawdor is executed for his crimes against the throne. Malcolm reports of his death:

That very frankly he confessed his treasons,
 Implored Your Highness' pardon, and set forth
 A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
 Became him like the leaving it. He died
 As one that had been studied in his death
 To throw away the dearest thing he owed [owned]
 As 'twere a careless trifle. (I.iv.5-11)

This report foreshadows Macbeth's own rather noble ending, and recalls Edmund's character in *King Lear*.

Macbeth's mind is overcome with fear, as he considers the planned assassination of Duncan:

That this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all!-- here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
 We still have judgment here, that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague th'inventor. (I.vii.4-10)

Macbeth claims he does not fear eternal damnation; he is much more worried about earthly retribution. The crime he would commit is heinous by secular standards and punishable by death. He does comprehend that the murder would be a terrible sin, committed against his kin, his king, and a guest in his home. These three ties demand from Macbeth both fealty and protection. Duncan is, by Macbeth's own report, a great and virtuous king. It goes against nature that

Macbeth should orchestrate any action against his earthly lord: “Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord’s anointed temple and stole thence / The life o’th’building” (II.iii.67-69).

Macbeth’s mind is immediately troubled after he kills Duncan: “I am afraid to think what I have done [. . .] To know my deed, ‘twere best not know myself” (II.ii.55, 77). He fixes on the fact that he could not speak “Amen” (as previously noted in *Measure for Measure*, the guilty cannot pray in Shakespeare’s plays). Neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth has peaceful sleep after the dark night of Duncan’s murder (inability to sleep is another symptom of a troubled mind, as seen in *Othello*). Macbeth and Lady Macbeth obsess over their bloody hands, physical manifestations of sinful deeds.

While both feel the weight of their guilt, they are troubled by it separately and cannot even find solace in each other. At first Lady Macbeth tries to sooth Macbeth’s worried mind: “What’s done is done” (III.ii.14) and “A little water clears us of this deed” (II.ii.71). She is aware that, if the mind becomes overcome with guilt, it will break: “These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad” (II.ii.37-38). Yet when he endangers them by his outburst in front of the nobles, she chastises him. Afterwards, he begins to withdraw from her. He becomes obsessed with the prophecies of the witches, and he leaves her alone in her madness. They become isolated despite the mutual nature of their sin and cannot be reconciled to each other (by sacramental penance directives) unless they become remorseful and seek forgiveness.

Macbeth’s mind is the first to become unsettled; even before the assassination, his conscience is piqued. “Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (III.ii.39) he exclaims to Lady Macbeth after plotting the murders of Banquo and Fleance. Macbeth’s “strange infirmity” (III.iv.86) overcomes him when he sees Banquo’s ghost at the feast:

It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood.
 Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;
 Augures and understood relations have
 By maggotpies and choughs and rooks brought forth
 The secret'st man of blood.

[.]

I am in blood
 Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
 Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
 Which must be acted ere they may be scanned. (123-127, 137-141)

His mind is overcome with the image of blood. He has some degree of attrition, fearing that his deeds will be revealed, but he lacks true remorse for his actions. He thinks it is too late for him to turn back, especially since he knows he must commit more murders to secure his position. His resolve to act without thought is part of his undoing, for it is evidence of a mind unguided by conscience. It is a terrifying prospect and the sign of a tyrant that Macbeth can commit any deed without the slightest pause. After he seeks the council of the weird sisters, he becomes intent on his course of action:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
 Unless the deed go with it. From this moment
 The very firstlings of my heart shall be
 The firstlings of my hand. (IV.i.145-148)

Macbeth loses any remnants of attrite fear that may have stayed his hand as he becomes instilled with the false sense of security from the apparitions' prophecies: "I have almost forgot the taste of fears.[. . .] I have supped full with horrors; / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me" (V.v.9, 13-15). Macbeth's final hint of goodness is demonstrated by his noble bravery in battle. After realizing that Macduff fulfills the apparitions' prophecies and that

he is doomed, he continues to fight to his death.

At the same moment Macbeth's perturbations are eased by the weird sisters' prophecies, Lady Macbeth's strong constitution finally fails her. The attending gentlewoman and the doctor witness her sleepwalking and reliving the night of Duncan's murder. Lady Macbeth's unconscious mind uses this method to reveal its guilt, but because she has not consciously and completely confessed, her mind gets worse and worse. The attending doctor remarks:

Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
More needs she the divine than the physician.
God, God forgive us all! (V.i.71-75)

In an uncharacteristically touching moment, Macbeth inquires of the doctor regarding his wife's health if there is any way to cure her troubled mind (V.iii.42-47). Her screams are heard off-stage, and it is reported that Lady Macbeth has killed herself. She commits a final bloody act, overwhelmed by the weight of her guilt and her loss of sanity.

Macbeth is shot through with this theme of sin's physical manifestation as a disease. The unnatural murder of the true anointed king (an earthly representative endowed with divine right) becomes manifest in various forms affecting the entire state (II.iv; III.vi). Lady Macduff senses the topsy-turvy nature of the usurped kingdom: "I am in this earthly world, where to do harm / Is often laughable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly" (IV.ii.75-77). Macduff goes to England in the hopes that Malcolm, Duncan's eldest and rightful ruler of Scotland, will return from exile and claim his throne. Malcolm is wary of treachery. He employs a ruse of false confessions to test Macduff, claiming guilt for sins of lust (IV.iii.61-67), avarice (77-85) and worse:

The king-becoming graces,
 As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
 Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
 Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,
 I have no relish of them, but abound
 In the division of each several crime,
 Acting it many ways. Nay, had I power, I should
 Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
 Uproar the universal peace, confound
 All unity on earth. (92-101)

When Macduff responds with outrage and despair, Malcolm retracts his self-accusation. He then describes (in a minor detraction from the story line) the strange and miraculous healing powers of the English King Edward the Confessor:

There are a crew of wretched should
 That stay his cure. Their malady convinces
 The great essay of art; but at his touch—
 Such sanctity hath heaven given his hand—
 They presently amend.
 [.]

‘Tis called the evil.
 A most miraculous work in this good king,
 I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven
 Himself best knows; but strangely-visited people,
 All swoll’n and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
 The mere despair of surgery, he cures,
 Hanging a golden stamp about their necks
 Put on with holy prayers; and ‘tis spoken,
 To the succeeding royalty he leaves
 The healing benediction. With this strange virtue
 He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
 And sundry blessings hang about his throne

That speak him full of grace. (143-146, 147-160)

Edward's miraculous healing skills prove an illuminating contrast to Macbeth's own path trailing only death and destruction. The divine king God endows the true monarch of the earth realm with a physical manifestation of his role: Through grace he cures the spiritual ills of the kingdom as Christ used his power to cure the ill during his brief mortal life.

The Winter's Tale and *The Tempest* (1610-1611)

The Winter's Tale and *The Tempest* are similar in the themes they address, so I treat them together. Both are filled with magic and miracles, with delightful mysteries. These late romances are as much Shakespeare's representations of heavenly paradise as the tragedies are those of God's wrath and perdition. Both explore the apparent contradiction that natural forces serve the dual purpose of destruction and purification.³⁸ They glorify grace, on all its levels of meaning,³⁰ and explain how reconciliation can restore grace to humanity. The children are able to heal the breach in the community created by their parents through marriage, a symbol of prolific unity.

Faith is huge in *The Winter's Tale* as it is needed for restoration and reconciliation. A loss of faith in the honor of his gracious queen is at the heart of Leontes's devastating sin. As Paulina states regarding Hermione's miraculous resurrection on-stage, "It is required / You do awake your faith" (V.iii.93-95).

Leontes's belief that Hermione and Polixenes have committed adultery is very irrational, along the same vein as Lear's foolish "How much do you love me?" game. Why do these good kings make such wild missteps of judgment? Perhaps that is the point: Shakespeare is portraying how man's deeds are folly in the eyes of an omniscient God (or gods in Lear's case). Leontes

seeks the aid of his good counsellor Camillo, here described through the metaphor of a confessor priest:

I have trusted thee, Camillo,
With all the nearest things to my heart, as well
My chamber councils, wherein, priestlike, thou
Hast cleaned my bosom. I from thee departed
Thy penitent reformed. (I.ii.234-238)

As in previous plays, Shakespeare employs the metaphor of sin as stain that can be cleaned by a spiritual authority. A slight variation of this metaphor, "How he glisters through my rust!" (III.ii.170-171), is spoken by Leontes to describe the honest Camillo. Rust is a corruption of metal, as sin is a corruption of goodness. It weakens the integrity of the metal if left unattended, as sin weakens the person's integrity. Yet it can be removed with vigorous and immediate action to reveal a spotless metal surface beneath, as the soul can be cleansed of sin.

Antigonus also serves as an advisor of reason (indeed, he and Camillo are quite similar and seamlessly occupy the same roles). He prophetically warns Leontes: "Be certain what you do, sir, lest your justice / Prove violence, in the which three great ones suffer: / Yourself, your queen, your son" (II.i.128-130). Leontes's fault (after his unfounded accusation of Hermione) lies in his unwillingness to hear good counsel. He is in danger of becoming a tyrant, as the acute Paulina observes:

I'll not call you tyrant;
But this most cruel usage of your queen,
Not able to produce more accusation
Than your own weak-hinged fancy, something savors
Of tyranny and will ignoble make you,
Yea, scandalous to the world. (II.iii.116-121)

Camillo uses the metaphor of disease to encourage Leontes against his suspicions: “Good my lord, be cured / Of this diseased opinion, and betimes, / For ‘tis most dangerous” (I.ii.259-257). Disease as a metaphor for the spiritual illness of sin continues in the Sicilia scenes, hinting that there is something insidious in Leontes’s suspicions that will prove deadly. Mamillius becomes ill with a strange disease when Hermione is unjustly imprisoned (II.iii.12-17), reminiscent of the illness in *Macbeth*. Mamillius and Perdita, the two innocents, function as scape goats in the play, suffering for their father’s sin.³⁹ At the climactic moment of Leontes’s sin (III.ii.140), his son Mamillius is stricken dead.

“I / Do come with words as medicinal as true, / Honest as either, to purge him of that humor / That presses him from sleep” (II.iii.36-39), Paulina says as she begs her testimony of Hermione’s innocence be heard. Florizel later gives Camillo the title of “The medicine of our house” (IV.iv.590). The metaphor of sin as disease is brought to fulfillment at the end of the play:

The blessed gods
Purge all infection from our air whilst you
Do climate here! You have a holy father,
A graceful gentleman, against whose person,
So sacred as it is, I have done sin,
For which the heavens, taking angry note,
Have left me issueless [. . .] (V.i.168-174)

Leontes does not realize how near the truth his words strike, but he inadvertently begins the reconciliation process through this confession. His first exclamation recalls how divine healing occurs when things are in their proper order. This order, disrupted by Leontes’s accusations, is restored through the union of the children.

In the second half of the play, Polixenes runs the risk of losing his son because he does not heed the lesson of “That penitent [. . .] and reconciled King” (IV.ii.22-23). Like Leontes’s misunderstanding of the platonic love between his wife and his friend, Polixenes fails to recognize the young couple’s true and virtuous love.⁴⁰ He is rash in his condemnation of Florizel and Perdita (IV.iv.419-443).

Perdita as the abandoned infant functions symbolically as the Old Testament scapegoat. Leontes commands that the infant should be left by Antigonus in some far-removed place:

To some remote and desert place quite out
Of our dominions, and that there thou leave it,
Without more mercy, to its own protection
And favor of the climate.
[.]
I do in justice charge thee,
On thy soul’s peril and thy body’s torture,
That thou commend it strangely to some place
Where chance may nurse or end it. (II.iii.176-183)

Perdita is protected by Hermione’s grace as symbolized in Antigonus’s dream-vision of Hermione, “In pure white robes, / Like very sanctity” (III.iii.21-22). When Perdita is left exposed to the natural elements, she is immediately discovered by a shepherd and his son. The shepherd repeatedly refers to her as a “scape” (70, 71).²³ The pastoral nature of the play underscores this interpretation. The shepherd is searching for his lost sheep, which also holds many biblical allusions.⁴¹ There is also the opening descriptions of the boyhood of Leontes and Polixenes, frolicking like innocent twin lambs (I.i.67-75). The pastoral setting is part of an intriguing depth of meaning in this play. There are two levels of innocence operating throughout the play: youthful, inexperienced innocence (seen in Perdita, Florizel, and Mamillius) and

mature, grace-filled purity (exemplified by Hermione). The former (blissful and unvarnished ignorance) is exemplified in the pastoral image of kind and nurturing nature, while the latter (tested by experience, aware of evil's existence yet facing it without fear) operates in the image of fully realized nature of destruction and healing.

Hermione's gracious purity can be seen clearly in the trial scene. She eloquently defends herself at Leontes's joke of a "just and open trial" (II.iii.205). She confesses that she loved Polixenes as a friend, and as Leontes himself charged her to do; if she did not love him, she would be guilty of disobedience (III.ii.61-71). He threatens, "So thou / Shalt feel our justice, in whose easiest passage / Look for no less than death" (89-91). He is perilously close to the tyrannical edge with his passionate, blind call for justice. Leontes's messengers return from Apollo's temple, the advice of which Leontes had sworn to follow: "Whose spiritual counsel had / Shall stop or spur me" (II.i.187-188). The oracle clears Hermione's name, yet Leontes is so incensed with his own suspicions that he makes the blasphemous statement: "There is no truth at all i'th'oracle" (III.ii.140)." The cascade of disasters that follow are a direct result of Leontes turning a deaf ear on divine counsel: "Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice" (146-147).

Leontes immediately repents his folly, but his faith is late-returned and the unified family is fractured. Leontes hopes that he may reconcile the family, but he must learn the hard lesson that actions do have consequences and no amount of forgiveness can completely undo a grave wrong. When Paulina reports that Hermione is dead, she cries out that no amount of repentance can make satisfaction for his grievous sin: "A thousand knees / Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting, / Upon a barren mountain, and still winter / In storm perpetual, could not move the gods / To look that way thou wert" (III.ii.210-214). Leontes vows to devote the rest of his life in

penitent, sorrowful devotion at the graves of his dead queen and son. His repentance is now fully contrite, but unfortunately the sacrifices of his son and wife were required for complete heartfelt repentance: “He is touched / To th’noble heart” (221-222).

Unlike the repentant kings of *A Winter’s Tale*, penitents play only minor parts in *The Tempest* until the play’s conclusion. In this respect the play represents a return to the simplified structure of the early comedies, sweet pleasant plays that light briefly on the material that is dissected to the marrow in the great tragedies. The sin of usurpation is revisited, but in the light of Prospero’s power the audience may face it not with fear, but with laughter. The usurpers are bumbling and flat characters, serving as only minor irritations to the Eden-like peace of the island. Antonio, by his own admission, ignores his conscience and is not troubled by his sin (II.i.278-282), but he seems rather impotent in the face of Prospero’s magic (the scene of Ariel’s vanishing banquet, accusation of sin and proclamation of punishment serves as an apropos illustration [IV.i.53-82]).

Prospero represents a right and proper ruler exiled by a usurping brother. Yet he says himself that he was not actually a very strong ruler, and that his neglect of his duties may have lead to his being overthrown (I.ii.89-110). The island serves as a classroom, a dukedom in miniature for Prospero to gain the qualities of a ruler that he lacked in his earlier rule. Among these qualities is that of mercy, the one most exalted by Shakespeare:

ARIEL

Your charm so strongly works ‘em
That if you now beheld them your affections
Would become tender.

PROSPERO

Dost thou think so, spirit?

ARIEL

Mine would, sir, were I human.

PROSPERO

And mine shall.

[.]

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th'quick,

Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury

Do I take part. The rarer action is

In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent,

The sole drift of my purpose doth extend

Not a frown further. (V.i.17-32)

Prospero learns from his experience that he must keep a clear head in judgments even (and especially) when he most passionately feels personally sinned against. Instead of becoming overcome by the sense of his slight and seizing the opportunity to have revenge, Prospero allows his wisdom to reign. He also sees that his most important aim in enchanting the usurpers is to bring about their penitence in order to reunify and strengthen the community, rather than fracture it further with his personal vendetta. The spirit Ariel aids Prospero in the realization of this lesson. Their relationship recalls Puck and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and both serve as illustrations of the close companionship between master and servant and as antitheses to the twisted relationship of Iago and Othello.

Gonzalo parallels the good advisors of *A Winter's Tale*, and his metaphor of sin and poison is very similar to the disease metaphor from earlier instances: "Their great guilt, / Like a poison given to work a great time after, / Now 'gins to bite the spirits" (IV.i.105-107). Prospero also uses the disease metaphor in the judgment of his brother Antonio:

Flesh and blood,

You, brother mine, that entertained ambition,

Expelled remorse and nature

[.]

I do forgive thee,

Unnatural though thou art.— Their understanding

Begins to swell, and the approaching tide

Will shortly fill the reasonable shore

That how lies foul and muddy.

[.]

For you, most wicked sir, whom I call brother

Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive

Thy rankest fault— all of them [. . .] (V.i.74-82)

It is similar to the description of Edward the Confessor in *Macbeth*, the hagiographic tale of a true ruler's divinely endowed power to heal evil. Alonso is repentant for his part: "The'affliction of my mind amends, with which / I fear a madness held me. [. . .] Thy dukedom I resign (in paying tribute to his kingdom Naples), and do entreat / Thou pardon me my wrongs" (V.i.115-119).

Antonio says very little and nothing to the point after Prospero's speech.²⁶ Does he experience contrition or any repentance?

Caliban is the most interesting of the attempted usurpers and the only one who actually poses a serious threat to the island community's stability. He is inherently a trickster (something like a benign Iago), which makes it nearly impossible to say if there is any sincerity in his words as Prospero calls for him to ask pardon: "Aye, that I will; and I'll be wise hereafter / And seek for grace" (V.i.298-299). He could be portrayed as a true penitent, or he may only pretend to be reformed and bide his time until Prospero gives up his powers, releases Ariel, and is totally defenseless. Most likely he is somewhere in between, experiencing some sense of attrition, yet resentful of being forced into a position of humility (in this respect he is also similar to the abstruse character Shylock).

Prospero's Epilogue contains pleas for forgiveness and begging applause common in an epilogue (compare to Puck's epilogue in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*):

And my ending is despair,
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,
 Which pierces so that it assaults
 Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardoned be,
 Let your indulgence set me free. (V.i.14-20)

It is an eloquent speech. Prayer has an active role and has the power to affect "Mercy itself".

"Crimes" puts the final couplet in a more secular light, as he asks the audience to be sympathetic to his plight and merciful in their judgment of him. The final line must be addressed;

"indulgence" carries divers connotations¹⁷, some religious and some neutral.

When *A Winter's Tale* returns to "that fatal country, Sicilia" (IV.ii.20), Leontes is true to his vow of perpetual penitence, to the chagrin of some of his advisors:

CLEOMENES

Sir, you have done enough, and have performed
 A saintlike sorrow. No fault could you make
 Which you have not redeemed— indeed, paid down
 More penitence than done trespass. At the last,
 Do as the heavens have done: forget your evil.
 With them, forgive yourself.

LEONTES

Whilst I remember

Her and her virtues, I cannot forget
 My blemishes in them, and so still think of
 The wrong I did myself, which was so much
 That heirless it hath made my kingdom and
 Destroyed the sweet'st companion that e'er man

Bred his hopes out of. (V.i.1-12)

“The wrong I did myself” recalls the religious belief that sin leads to perdition of the soul, without complete penance and reconciliation. The loss of his sweet companion recalls the religious definition of sin as a turning away from God.¹⁶ Shakespeare is making a point on the distinction between forgiving and forgetting. The good Paulina does not let Leontes forget either his wife or his lost son, though it pains him to hear it. He feels it is part of his punishment, but one should not forget past transgressions, because one then runs the risk of losing their valuable lesson and committing them again. Through the pain and remembrance of former sins, penance becomes a circular structure, beginning and ending in full knowledge of the nature of the sin. “Heirless” is important, as it refers to the stagnation of the state with the Leontes’s sin. *Macbeth* contained a similar message: Disruption of the natural and proper order of the state symbolically freezes fecundity, and by turning away from God through sin, divine power cannot heal this wound. While *Macbeth* ends with the warning, *A Winter’s Tale* goes further and illuminates how healing may be brought about by penitence and reconciliation. It is only after the contrite Leontes confesses that life may once again enter the play, as seen in Hermione’s resurrection:

Both your pardons,
That e’er I put between your holy looks
My ill suspicions. (V.iii.149-151)

Camillo imagines the reconciliation of Leontes with his dear friend’s son in Polixenes’s place, another variation of the Prodigal Son parable (recalling the earlier analysis in *The Merchant of Venice*):

Methinks I see
Leontes opening his free arms and weeping
His welcomes forth; asks thee there “Son, forgiveness!”

As 'twere i'th' father's person [. . .] (IV.iv.550-553)

It is interesting that the audience is never actually told that Polixenes and Florizel are reconciled. Perhaps Shakespeare thought that describing five reconciliations would suffice, and that the rest would be inferred. He may also have been aware that he was getting too blatant and needed to reign it in a little bit.

The reconciling power of contrite penance is at the heart of *The Winter's Tale*. Act V Scene II is abundant in reconciliation accounts: First the reunion of master and servant (Leontes and Camillo), then of daughter and father (Perdita and Leontes), of the two brothers and penitents (Leontes and Polixenes), and finally of surrogate mother and daughter reunion (Paulina and Perdita). They are simply reported (not enacted) and as such seem anticlimactic as they represent the anticipated climax. Of course the true climax comes with the resurrection of Hermione, but at this point the naive audience may feel cheated out of the promised reunion scene. Perhaps Shakespeare doesn't trust the actors to get such extremity of true emotion correct, which "lames report to follow it and undoes description to do it" (V.i.58-59). Duality of emotion is a common thread in these reports, beautifully expressed in the reunion of Leontes and Camillo: "They looked as they had heard of a world ransomed, or one destroyed" (V.ii.15-16). "Bittersweet" would be one way to describe the union of extreme joy and extreme sorrow in the freshly reconciled community: Sorrow for former sins that lead to the separation and for lost time and for loved-ones irrevocably lost. The same sentiment is described in *The Tempest*, when Prospero observes Miranda weeping in joy:

Fair encounter
Of two most rare affections! Heavens rain grace
On that which breeds between 'em! (III.i.73-75)

“Wonder” is also repeated frequently in the reconciliations scene, used to express a sense of the miraculous and beyond belief. “Performed in this wide gap of time since first / We were dissevered” (V.iii.156-157), at the opening of the play the community built by the relationship of the two kings is figuratively described as maintaining a tenuous hold across a divide (I.i.24-31). The underlying message contains the warning that people in a community are only connected through their relationships, and when these are jeopardized by sin one becomes isolated, and the fragile community structure fractures. There is also a message of hope that through repentant and merciful reconciliation the community may again become unified.

A comedic illustration of attrition is seen in the Shepherd and his son: “She being none of your flesh and blood, your flesh and blood has not offended the King, and so your flesh and blood is not to be punished by him” (IV.iv.696-701). They fear Polixenes’s vengeful wrath may fall on them. There is a passing description of secular-political confession when they are discovered in Sicilia by Polixenes, Camillo interrogates them, and Polixenes threatens them:

Never saw I
Wretches so quake. They kneel, they kiss the earth,
Forswear themselves as often as they speak. (V.i.198-201)

Autolycus’s story is one of conversion, reminiscent of Oliver in *As You Like It*. He begins as a trickster and thief, trying to manipulate every situation for his betterment. He inadvertently does good in assisting Florizel, and he is converted after the fulfillment of the oracle and the restoration of grace through the reconciliations. Sweet, light confession scene with Autolycus and the Shepherd and his son: “I humbly beseech you, sir, to pardon me all the faults I have committed to Your Worship [. . .]” (V.ii.150-151). Autolycus promises to amend his life, and the Shepherd’s son addresses him as his friend. There is something so pure and innocent about

this scene that conveys a tone of simple honesty tinged with lightheartedness. It can easily be overlooked, stuck between two miraculous and climactic scenes.

In both *A Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, the community is rebuilt through the union of the next generation, signifying the beginning of new growth in the shattered communities. The final scene of *A Winter's Tale* is the true, miraculous climax where the fruitful union breathes new life into Hermione. To some extent it seems incomplete as Paulina mourns the loss of Antigonus, and Leontes and Hermione mourn the loss of their son Mamillius. The absent dead signify the imperfection of earthly joy that will be brought to fruition when all are reunited in the heavenly realm. Divine mercy may absolve the sin-fractured community and allow healing through forgiveness if the sinners are truly contrite, confess their wrong-doings and work wholeheartedly at making restitution. Yet the lesson would be lost and the story pointless if everything is restored and if there are no irreparable consequences for one's transgressions. A sacrifice must be made, a scapegoat must be sent into the wilderness to suffer for the sake of preserving the whole.

One might say, when looked at in a different light, that the sacrificed characters have been reborn (Antigonus as Camillo and Mamillius as Florizel), just as Hermione has returned from her own death. These final scenes contain the rich pageantry of Easter celebrations, in which the Christ-like scapegoats are resurrected to new life and the hope of a more glorious unity: "Every wink of an eye some new grace will be born" (*A Winter's Tale* V.ii.111-112).

NOTES

1. Reference used and quoted throughout this paper, as well as proposed dates for the plays: William Shakespeare, *The Necessary Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson, 2005).
2. All biblical quotes from the 1560 Geneva Bible: *The Geneva Bible, a Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*. (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1969).
3. Confession is defined by *Oxford English Dictionary*:
 1. The disclosing of something the knowledge of which by others is considered humiliating or prejudicial to the person confessing; a making known or acknowledging of one's fault, wrong, crime, weakness, etc.
 2. As a religious act: The acknowledging of sin or sinfulness; especially the confessing of sins to a priest, as a religious duty; more fully, *sacramental* or *auricular confession*.

According to *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the “sacrament of confession” is often used synonymously with the “sacrament of reconciliation” and the “sacrament of penance” although there are fine distinctions amongst these titles. “Sacrament of confession” specifically denotes disclosing sins to a priest.

4. The “omnis utriusque sexus” portion of the Fourth Lateran Council commanded that Christians who had obtained the age of discretion must make confession to their parish priest once a year (Easter Duty) (QUOTE, cite). Material quoted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is frequently referred to as synopses of the Council of Trent.

5.

Quoted from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Jesus’ call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, ‘sack-cloth and ashes,’ fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain *sterile and false* (emphasis added) (*Catechism* 359).

During the first centuries the reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitents had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving reconciliation. To this “order of penitents” (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was only rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime. During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the “private” practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this

sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main line this is the form of penance that the Church has practiced down to our day. (363)

6. Sacrament of last rites (extreme unction, the anointing of the sick— last chance for absolution), sacrament of marriage (“If either of you know any inward impediment why you should not be conjoined, I charge you on your souls to utter it” [*Much Ado About Nothing* IV.i.11-13]), and the sacrament of the Eucharist (communion— at beginning of the mass, the Confiteor is recited by the community [see note 31] as a vestige of the ancient practice of public penance)

7. For information on the Protestant reaction to Confession, selling of indulgences, and sacerdotal suspicions, see *Why Men Confess* (33), *Reformation England* (15,46-47,75,148), and *The Catholic Priesthood* (33-34).

8. “The Divine Right of Kings”— noble, majesty, sovereignty, etc. are terms that have royal and divine connotations (“King of Kings and Lord of Lords” is used to refer to Christ).

Shakespeare describes the qualities of a great ruler— nobility, mercy, etc.— in *Macbeth* in his descriptions of Edward the Confessor and Malcolm. He frequently uses the motif of the usurpation of the divinely-endowed king by a sinful usurper. Chaos ensues until the correct balance of power is restored.

9. For more information on the suppression of Catholic art, refer to Milward (*Shakespeare’s Religious Background* 10,12-13,16,18 and *Medieval Dimensions in Shakespeare’s Plays* 18,23-24), Marshall (*The Catholic Priesthood* 28,31).

10. There are numerous sources that describe Shakespeare’s familial ties to Catholicism. For a few accounts, see Milward (*Shakespeare’s Religious Background* 15,19-21,39-40 and *Medieval Dimensions in Shakespeare’s Plays* 12-13) and Devlin (*Hamlet’s Divinity* 12-13,18,20).

11. Quotes from plays express nostalgia for old ways. Often Shakespeare’s characters lament the current state of affairs, they are reminiscent of olden times and are hopeful of a return to goodness and order in the future (both are perhaps illustrated, although difficult to decipher to what extent, in the Fool’s prophecy [III.ii.81-94]). From *A Winter’s Tale*: “As every present time doth boast itself / Above a better gone” (V.i.100-101).

“We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves” (I.ii.115-117): Gloucester sums up the dark spirit of *King Lear* in these words. It is a play about the deaths of innocence and medieval ways, embodied in the characters of Cordelia and of Lear himself.

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long. (*King Lear* V.iii.329-332)

Hope for a future time when things will be better is described in *King Lear*, but it also contains a

hint of bitter desire for divine retribution: “The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell, / Ere they shall make us weep. We’ll see ‘em starved first” (V.iii.24-25).

12. The poems are neglected in this analyses not for lack of evidence (*The Rape of Lucrece* contains a very interesting confession scene, and the Sonnets are considered by some scholars to be extremely confessional in nature). The concern is one of brevity, and that the poems may pose the challenge of relying on nonexistent historical evidence. The histories were also omitted, again due to brevity and a desire for more in-depth analysis of each scene. There certainly are penance scenes in the histories (*Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry VI* come to mind), but the histories are different in that one must be careful to distinguish between what is based in historical fact or myth, and what is of Shakespeare’s own invention. It would be a fascinating scholarly endeavor (perhaps the subject of future research), but unfortunately the current situation does not permit either the time nor the resources for such a task.

13. Disguise in Shakespeare— Shakespeare’s theme of “seeming”, his frequent use of protagonists in disguise to conceal their true natures (counterfeiting)— is he hinting that he conceals something? Confiding to the alert reader/audience member?

Shakespeare’s protagonists very frequently employ disguise and counterfeiting, to conceal their true identities. Preachers from the pulpit warning against the play-houses, claiming that fiction, as it is not based in reality, is full of easy and attractive lies that would lead the virtuous astray. Shakespeare obviously did not share these beliefs, performing and writing for the theater for twenty years, his recurring comparisons of life to a play, through the virtuous Perdita: I see the play lies / That I must play the part” (*The Winter’s Tale* IV.iv.658-659)

Keeping in mind the arguments of the day against the playhouses (Bevington xlii-xliii), Shakespeare champions the theater in all his plays and may be doing so when he uses the disguise motif. The offense may be excused in that the result is beneficial to all and productive, not destructive (“You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes or thorns? or figs or thistles?” [Matthew 7:16]).

Mad words are used to veil dangerous truths. Lear, broken by his daughters’ cruel treatment, shrinks into his madness as a defense mechanism. Edgar disguises himself as the mad Tom o’Bedlam, The Fool’s prating strikes awfully close to the truth, as Kent notes: “This is not altogether fool, my lord” (I.iv.149).

14. Refer to Crotty (110,116), Rogge (209,238), and Tentler (87,128-129) for information on attrition. Refer to Crotty (117), Milward (*Shakespeare’s Religious Background* 30), and Hunter (17-18) for information about contrition. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the first part of the sacrament of penance:

When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called “perfect” (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial (minor) sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.

The contrition called “imperfect” (or “attrition”) is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin’s ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution.

By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance. (364-365)

Indulgences are also explained by the *Catechism* (quoting Pope Paul VI's explanation [1967]). They are of note because they constituted one of the reasons why Protestants broke away from the Catholic Church:

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.

15. According to the Council of Trent, "Penance requires . . . the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction" (Quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

16. Sin is defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as "An offense against reason, truth, and right conscience," "It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity," "like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become 'like gods,' knowing and determined good and evil. Sin is thus 'love of oneself even to contempt of God.'" (453). The *Catechism* also quotes Saint Augustine as saying:

While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not despise these sins which we call "light": if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession. . . (456)

17. Satisfaction is making reparation for the damage done by the sinner. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes satisfaction:

Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin. . . . The penance the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, "provided we suffer with him." (366-367)

18. An Examination of Conscience is a review of a catalogue of possible sins, used by the confessor priest to jog the penitent's memory of possible sins committed since their last confession. It is also the precursor to the penance rite, when the penitent becomes aware that he has committed a sin.

19. For more information of the roles of the priest as judge, advisor, healer, refer to *The Catholic Priesthood* (19) and *The Medieval Sinner* (22,28,38,57). The confessional was also used to catechize to examine the extent of the penitent's knowledge of doctrine. Refer to *The Catholic Priesthood* (30).

20. Reconciliation is used synonymously with penance, yet refers specifically to the sacrament's unifying power (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 362-363).

21. Shakespeare had several friends of the gentry class. Refer to Bevington's Introduction for details from Shakespeare's life (xliv-lxvi).

22. Divine law serves as the paradigm for just earthly law. Mercy is an earthly shadow of God's boundless forgiveness (demonstrated in the sacrament of penance as absolution for contrite sinners). True and complete justice is a death sentence for flawed mortal man born with Adam's inheritance of original sin and concupiscence. Man craves justice after he senses some injury to his ego; he is selfish and sinful to do so, because he himself is a sinner ("If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and truth is not in us" 1 John 1:8). The wise and patient man shows the same mercy that he himself would like to be shown. Pompey puts it best in *Measure for Measure*: "If you head and hang all that offend that way but for ten year together, you'll be glad to give out a commission for more heads" (II.i.237-239). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's famous speech is a discourse on mercy and justice and their roles in earthly law:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy. (IV.i.182-200)

23. "Scape" has two definitions from *Oxford English Dictionary* that are most relevant to this paper:

1. An act of escaping
2. A transgression due to thoughtlessness; also, with different notion, a breaking out from moral restraint, an outrageous sin; often applied to a breach of chastity.

24. Antonio might be seen as Christ-like, offering his own life for Bassanio's sake. The triple denial may also contain some biblical echoes as in Peter's denial of Christ. Antonio's farewell to Bassanio and is evocative of divine grace: "Repent but that you shall lose your friend, / And he repents not that he pays your debt" (IV.i.276-277). See Battenhouse (J.A. Bryant, Jr., "Bassanio's Two Saviors" and Barbara K. Lewalski, "Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," *Shakespeare's Medieval Dimension*).
25. "Shrift" is a Medieval term for "The penance imposed by a priest after confession" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). See *Why Men Confess* (168) and *The Medieval Sinner* (94,98,103) for more information.
26. At least in regard to literature, sin lends a creative element. The individual stands out from the community because of some transgression rose as the subject of fiction (itself stemming from lies) during the Middle Ages. When the sinner becomes penitent and rejoins the community, he no longer stands out and is no longer fascinating to the audience. Refer to Brasswell (*The Medieval Sinner* 40-41), Little (*Confession and Resistance*), and Schumaker (*Religion and Mental Health* 114-116).
27. Confession, with its reconciliation and healing benefits, becomes warped when it is coerced. Like Shylock's forced penitence, it is an affront to the natural gift of grace (the source of contrition from which confession should freely spring). See Rogge (*Why Men Confess*), Berggren (*The Psychology of Confession*), and Hepworth (*Confession*) for further analyses of the effects of torture for confession; see Marshall (*Reformation England*), Milward (*Shakespeare's Religious Background* and *The Medieval Dimension in Shakespeare's Plays*), and Bossy (*The English Catholic Community*) for historical information about the treatment of Catholic recusants during the English Reformation.
28. "Repentance" is a general term for a person's experience of contrition. See note 14 for a more detailed description. Also see Wilks (*The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy* 22).
29. The Medieval catalogues of sins assigned different levels of weightiness for sins. Adultery with one who had taken Holy Orders was considered a terrible sin. Refer to Tentler (*Sin and Confession* 138,166) and Brasswell (*The Medieval Sinner* 46) for more information.
30. A general definition of grace is mature goodness. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines grace as a doctrinal principle:
Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. . . . The grace of Christ is the gratuitous give that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. . . . Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love" (483-484). *A Winter's Tale* illustrates through the progression of the play the ideal growth of man's soul from child-like innocence (Act I) to mature grace (Act V). For more information, see Crotty (*Law's Interior* 114,118), Milward (*The Medieval Dimension in Shakespeare's Plays* 105,117,121-123), and Devlin (*Hamlet's Divinity* 28).

31. I actually could not find a date for when the modern Act of Confession was written, although most of the sources I read suggested vaguely that it was enacted at the Council of Trent (1551). English translation of the Roman Catholic Act of Contrition:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of Hell, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen.

The confiteor is a public penitential prayer that was added to the mass in the 11th century (spoken in unison). The English translation of the Latin text follows:

I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin, to blessed Michael the Archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy apostles Peter and Paul, and to all the saints that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. Therefore, I beseech blessed Mary ever Virgin, blessed Michael the Archangel, blessed John the Baptist, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, and all the saints to pray for me to the Lord our God. Amen.

32. "Ghostly father" is an archaic term for a priest ("ghostly" refers to the Holy Ghost). Refer to Marshall (*The Catholic Priesthood* 14-17) for interesting details about ghostly fathers and to Milward (*Shakespeare's Religious Background* 233,254,73) and Battenhouse (Eleanor Prosser, "Spirit of Health or Goblin Damned?," *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* 386-391) for analyses of King Hamlet's ghost.

33. The Roman Catholic concept that a priest cannot repeat details of one's confessions. For more information on the sanctity of the confessional, see Marshall (*The Catholic Priesthood* 19-20).

34. For more analysis of Shakespeare's heroines as Marian figures, see Milward (*Medieval Dimensions in Shakespeare's Plays* 14,84-86) and Battenhouse (M.D.H. Parker, "Nature and Grace in The Romances," *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* 40-44). Shadows are seen in the early comedies (consider the role Portia plays in *The Merchant of Venice*), but Shakespeare's heroines possessed with grace are in full flower in late tragedies and romances (most notably *A Winter's Tale*). Perdita is one of these grace-filled women: "There shall not at your father's house these seven years / Be born another such" (IV.iv.581-582). Her mother Hermione is a mature Marian symbol: "Oh, my most sacred lady" (I.ii.76). Her name means "Pillar queen" and at the end of the play we see her elevated on a pedestal. "And do not say 'tis superstition, that / I kneel and then implore her blessing" (V.iii.43-44) Perdita kneels at her mother's statue. A gentleman describes Perdita's allure in terms of religious fervor, and could be compared to the Medieval rise in Marian devotees:

This is a creature,
Would she begin a sect, might quench the zeal
Of all professors else, make proselytes
Of who she but bid follow. (V.i.106-109)

35. Betrayal of a friend and superior is repeatedly lamented as a very destructive sin. Usurpation is an affront to the natural order by unseating the proper and divinely appointed ruler. Dante, in his *Inferno*, places such sinners (Judas, Brutus, and Cassius) at the center of hell hanging from Satan's mouth. It is interesting to note how Dante links the earthly and divine through common punishment for transgressors: Judas betrayed Christ (the heavenly king) while Brutus and Cassius betrayed Caesar (an earthly king).

36. "Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled" is defined in a textual note (Bevington's *The Necessary Shakespeare*) as "Without having received the Sacrament of other last rites including confession, absolution, and the holy oil of extreme unction" (Bevington 563).

37. "Ancient" is defined in a textual note (see Bevington's *The Necessary Shakespeare*) as "standard-bearer; ensign" (Bevington 612).

38. For an example of nature as merciful and healing, see Camillo's speech encouraging Florizel and Perdita to embark on a sea voyage to Sicily to solicit Leontes's protection (*The Winter's Tale* IV.iv.569-580). For examples of nature as destructive and meting out justice, see the first scene in Bohemia in *A Winter's Tale* involving the shipwreck and Antigonus's death by bear "For this ungentle business" (III.iii.33). The dual sides of nature are seen on a continuum throughout the plays: Mercy and justice equally blended in *The Winter's Tale*, while *The Tempest* focuses almost exclusively on the merciful side (cleansing the shipwrecked sinners, with baptismal undertones) and *King Lear* on the side of justice (the punishing storm).

39. "...The Lord, strong, merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in goodness and truth. Reserving mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and not making the wicked innocent, visiting the iniquity upon the children, and upon children's children, unto the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7).

40. In the process of researching this paper, an interesting theme running through many of the plays was noted by the author. Many of the sinners in Shakespeare's plays have difficulty distinguishing the difference between virtuous love and vicious love. It may signify some connection with Medieval courtly love tradition (and perhaps Marian devotion as well since the couples usually involve Shakespeare's gracious heroines). Take, for instance, Florizel and Perdita in *A Winter's Tale*: "How prettily young swain seems to wash / The hand was fair before!" (IV.iv.382-383). It would be a fascinating subject for future research. Some sources of related interest include refer to Milward (*Medieval Dimension in Shakespeare's Plays* 10), Brasswell (*The Medieval Sinner* 63,81), and Crotty (*Law's Interior* 121,129,131).

41. There are countless references to Christ as the "Lamb of God" or "The Good Shepherd". One New Testament parable is particularly relevant to the scene in *A Winter's Tale*: "What man of you having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave ninety-nine in the wilderness, until he find it?" (Luke 15:4-7).

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