



2016

The Coventry Mysteries and Shakespeare's Histories

Clifford Davidson

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/early_drama

 Part of the [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), [Medieval Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Davidson, Clifford, "The Coventry Mysteries and Shakespeare's Histories" (2016). *Early Drama, Art, and Music*. Paper 6.
http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/early_drama/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Medieval Institute at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Drama, Art, and Music by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



The Coventry Mysteries and Shakespeare's Histories¹

“Your wyll nedefully in this realme mvste be wrought.”²

The Coventry Corpus Christi plays, perhaps the most famous mysteries of late medieval England, were at last suppressed after their final performance on 18 June 1579 when, as the Coventry Annals explain, “the padgins were layd downe.”³ The mysteries had survived and perhaps even thrived in a municipality which, however reduced in population and importance by a long-lasting and severe economic crisis,⁴ still regarded itself as the third city of the realm, only after London and Bristol. It saw itself as having a special relation with the Crown; as London depicted itself as the “king’s chamber,” so it declared itself to be the “prince’s chamber” — terms which were intended to evoke the *sponsus-sponsa* imagery of the Song of Songs.⁵ When Queen Margaret with her son Edward came to Coventry in 1456, she was welcomed “[t]o this conabull cite, the princes chaumbur” by a pageant at the city gates at which there was placed a Jesse tree and

¹ This study is a revision of the article originally read at the Shakespeare Institute at Wheaton College and subsequently published in Beatrice Batson, ed., *Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1989). Permission to reprint the article has been granted by Professor Batson.

² *Pageant of the Sheremen and Taylors*, in Pamela King and Clifford Davidson, eds. *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 106 (l. 752). Spoken by Herod’s retainer, having been ordered to carry out the Slaughter of the Innocents.

³ R. W. Ingram, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 294; hereafter *REED Coventry*. The entry in the Annals continues, reporting an earthquake and that “this yeare [1580] was a disease all the land ouer called speedy repentance.”

⁴ See Charles Phythian Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 33–35, 281.

⁵ Gordon Kipling, *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 11–21.

prophets praising the prince as one who had brought gladness to the realm “as mankynde was gladdid by the birght of Ihesus.”⁶ The nineteenth-century antiquarian Thomas Sharp reported in his 1825 monograph *Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* that as late as 1565 Sir John Throgmorton, the Recorder of Coventry, welcomed Queen Elizabeth I with the explanation that “this auncient Citie hath bine of longe tyme called the princes Chamber the iij^{de} Citie of youre Realme.”⁷

Imagery of this type was deeply rooted and long-lasting. In its pageantry for Richard II’s second entry into London which marked his reconciliation with the city in 1392, the city had affirmed its connection to the sacred when it envisioned itself as a “type” of the New Jerusalem descending from heaven.⁸ Coventry in its presentation of religious plays at Corpus Christi nearly every year also would affirm its participation directly in sacred history even after its radical swing to Protestantism in the course of the sixteenth century and during a time when the feast of Corpus Christi had been officially suppressed.

Two facts are incontrovertible with regard to the project in hand. One fact is that Coventry was only a short distance from Stratford-upon-Avon, where William Shakespeare spent his boyhood, and that the larger city was still a commercial magnet for nearby villages and towns. For someone like the future playwright’s father, the glover John Shakespeare, Coventry with its diverse guilds and crafts would have been a primary source for many of the materials that he needed in his business and in his home. And especially useful would have been the wide availability of such goods at the Corpus Christi fair held concurrently with the plays at Coventry

⁶ King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 154–55, 157.

⁷ Thomas Sharp, *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry* (Coventry, 1825), 148n; see also *REED: Coventry*, 233.

⁸ Kipling, *Enter the King*, 15–18. In a footnote Kipling also cites Ernst Kantorowicz, *Laudes Regiae: A Study in Liturgical Acclamations and Mediaeval Ruler Worship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 71–72, who suggests a tradition influenced by St. Paul, who used the terminology of “imperial reception” or *adventus* in describing “the eschatological return of Christ.” He makes reference to the Commendation of Souls from the Office of Dying, in which the patriarchs and virgins and all the company of heaven are singing while St. Michael comes to meet the soul at the gates of the celestial city.

each year. Indeed, the double attraction of the fair and plays was reliably reported to have attracted people from all across England,⁹ and the pageants even lured kings and queens to the city as spectators. Richard III and Henry VII saw the plays in 1485 and 1493 respectively, and the latter monarch gave them “great commendacions.”¹⁰ Shakespeare, as a boy and youth destined to be an actor, playwright, and theater entrepreneur, would have had ample opportunity to see the plays on more than one occasions, for he was fifteen years of age at the time of their final performance.¹¹

Yet another fact is that the Corpus Christi plays, presented on pageant wagons at stations in the streets of Coventry, began their progress toward the city center from Gosford Street, presumably performing pageants there in order.¹² This location is identical to that chosen for the tournament which provides the defining moment of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. The city annals report that this combat, arranged by the king between Bullingbroke and Mowbray, was “to be fought at Coventre upon gosford green the 7th of September,”¹³ a slip for the 17th, a Monday, and also misdating the event as occurring in 1397 instead of 1398. The day was the feast of St. Lambert, which still appeared in the calendar in the 1562 *Book of Common Prayer*.¹⁴

The object of the present chapter, then, will be to consider some possible connections between the playwright Shakespeare’s second tetralogy and the civic plays which were staged in the streets of Coventry, not impossibly at the very location where King Richard II broke off the contest between Bullingbroke and Mowbray before banishing them from his kingdom. In this we

⁹ William Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London, 1656), 116.

¹⁰ REED: *Coventry*, 66, 77.

¹¹ For discussion of play production in the mysteries and on Shakespeare’s stage, see Clifford Davidson, *On Tradition: Essays on the Use and Valuation of the Past* (New York: AMS Press, 1992), 56–69.

¹² See King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 10.

¹³ Birmingham Public Library MS., quoted in F. Bliss Burbidge, *Old Coventry and Lady Godiva* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, n.d.), 217.

¹⁴ William Keatinge Clay, ed., *Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer Set Forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1847), 452.

must give special attention to Shakespeare's treatment of history and of kingship — matters which seem much more complicated now than they did many years ago when I was a graduate student. It is currently impossible to interpret his plays merely as affirming the royalism promoted by the Crown or as repeating the Tudor bending and shaping of history. To be sure, Shakespeare's view of the English monarchy emerges as inconsistent and complex, as we ought to expect from one who emerged from an artisan family with Roman Catholic connections and possibly loyalties to the Old Religion in a Midlands market town.¹⁵ He must not be expected as a playwright to have been a rigorous philosophical thinker, a political theorist, or, for that matter, a modern historian with a consistent view of the unfolding events of history. Instead, in his four plays on the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V he seems to have attempted as a dramatist to re-create and memorialize a period of turmoil which he undoubtedly saw as a backdrop to his own age. He was not writing mystery plays, but certain aspects of his work for the professional stage benefit from close analysis in relation to the drama that he presumably saw when he was young in the streets of Coventry, where likewise the actors were concerned with some of the same problems and even in some cases the same types of characters that resonated in the work of the bard.¹⁶

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare depicted a troupe of "rude mechanicals,"

¹⁵ Arguments for Shakespeare's family's Roman Catholic connections are set forth by H. Mutchman and Karl Wendersdorf, *Shakespeare and Catholicism* (1952; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1969), and Peter Milward, *Shakespeare Religious Background* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), as well as others (see Chapter V, below). These arguments are controversial, not all of them generally accepted. Some other aspects of Shakespeare's handling of kingship are explored by Grace Tiffany, "Elizabethan Constructions of Kingship and the Stage," in Gyry E. Szanyi and Rowland Wymer, eds., *The Iconography of Power: Ideas and Images of Rulership on the English Renaissance Stage* (Szeged: Institute of English and American Studies, University of Szeged, 2000), 89–115.

¹⁶ Different approaches to connections between the mystery plays and Shakespeare's work appear in Emrys Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), and in Cherrell Guilfoyle, *Shakespeare's Play within Play: Medieval Imagery and Scenic Form in Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990). Jones's stimulating study is dated, with many conceptions about the mysteries being no longer viable. On this, see Clifford Davidson, *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), esp. 49–53. Unfortunately, Jones also fails to stress the importance of the Coventry plays for Shakespeare or even to mention them.

tradesmen actors, who seem verifiably to be caricatures of the artisans who performed such dramas as the Coventry Corpus Christi plays.¹⁷ And in Hamlet he would condemn acting and actors who overdo their roles: “it out-Herods Herod” (3.2.13–14). Few would want to maintain that the playwright did not have in mind the Herod of the Coventry Shearmen and Taylors’ play who, according to the stage direction, “*ragis in þe pagond and in the strete also*” (728 *s.d.*). Even more convincing as a connection with the Coventry tyrant is the terrible threat by Henry V to the people of Harfleur:

Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confus’d
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod’s bloody-hunting slaughter-men.

(*Henry V* 3.3.38–41)

“Who hard eyuer soche a cry / Of wemen thatt there chylder haue lost,” remarks the first soldier in the Shearmen and Taylor’s pageant (816–17).¹⁸

Because the extant Coventry plays are only two in number — the Shearmen and Taylors’ pageant of the Annunciation, Nativity, Magi, and Slaughter of the Innocents, and the Weavers’ play of the Presentation in the Temple and Jesus in the Temple at Twelve Years of Age — the full treatment of history presented in this city’s Corpus Christi cycle of course cannot be known. The dramatic records do indicate a complete set of New Testament plays but no evidence of the Creation, the Fall, and other Old Testament plays such as those mounted at Chester and York.¹⁹

¹⁷ Quotations from Shakespeare’s works are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

¹⁸ Such callousness may find a parallel in Queen Elizabeth’s England, as John Guy demonstrates (*Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years* [New York: Viking, 2016]).

¹⁹ The revised second edition of William Dugdale’s *Warwickshire* claimed Old Testament as well as New Testament subjects for the plays, but the dramatic records give no evidence of the former; see King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 14–52.

Prophets, however, are included as speaking characters in the extant Coventry plays, and the sweep of events from the Annunciation to the Ascension and the Assumption seems to have been maintained, though the latter pageant, presented by the Mercers, would have been discontinued in Protestant times.²⁰ The Cappers' Harrowing of Hell and Resurrection may have included a popular devil who served as the porter at hellgate at the entrance to the hell mouth specified in the guild's records.²¹ Particularly unfortunate is the loss of the text of the Smiths' Passion play, since from it Shakespeare could well have drawn echoes for his presentation of Richard II during the course of his torment leading up to his murder. The cycle concluded with a Doomsday play presented by the Drapers, Coventry's most affluent guild — an extension of history to its final moments after skipping over everything between the biblical period until the appearance of some of the signs of the expected end as described in the influential *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine and other sources.²² The records that are available for these lost plays may, however, be usefully compared to the texts from York or Chester that had civic pageants or to the plays in the N-Town and Towneley collections.

The extant Shearmen and Taylors' and Weavers' playtexts were undoubtedly the basis for the productions of these plays up to their suppression in 1579 and represent the work of Robert Croo, a Capper, who in revising and writing out the plays in 1535 seems already to have introduced something of a Protestant drift to them.²³ The fragments of an earlier text of the Weavers' pageant which Croo used (and on which he wiped his pen) inexplicably survived, but

²⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹ Ibid., 35–36.

²² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1:8.

²³ King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 52–53, and Pamela M. King, "Faith, Reason and the Prophets' Dialogue in the Coventry Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors," in *Drama and Philosophy*, ed. James Redmond, Themes in Drama 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 37–46. For the change in mentality during the Reformation, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

these do not tell us as much as we would like to know about his rewriting.²⁴ If one of his purposes was already at that date to sanitize the plays to make them safe for Protestantism, the ultimate result was failure. Though in his highly partisan *Acts and Monuments* John Foxe described a weaver named John Careles who had been jailed for his Protestant activism but was let out of prison to play in the Corpus Christi plays, finally this same Protestantism would be the major force in causing the mysteries at Coventry to come to an end.²⁵ The Coventry mysteries were abandoned a decade later than the York plays,²⁶ and, unlike in the case of more traditionalist York, their survival this long may be attributed to the city's known preference for the Reformed religion, which would have made the plays seem less dangerous to the authorities of Church and State. But at the last the plays were seen for what they were — remnants of a Roman Catholic tradition that had brought religious images onto stage as visible representations displayed before audiences. Already in May 1559 Queen Elizabeth I had issued a proclamation forbidding “either matters of religion or of the gouernaunce of the estate of the commonweale . . . to be handled before any audience, but of graue and discreete persons.”²⁷ The authorities became progressively more nervous over time, particularly as international tensions rose and British xenophobia increased. As

²⁴ For the text preserved in the fifteenth-century fragments, see King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 150–53.

²⁵ Foxe's account of Careles's temporary release from jail “to play in the Pageant about the City with his other companions” is excerpted in *REED: Coventry*, 207–08. The classic arguments concerning the suppression of the mysteries are those of Harold C. Gardiner, *Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage* (1946; reprint, Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1967). His views have been challenged but at their core are made more credible by recent research. For the antagonism to the visualizing of biblical subjects and playing of biblical scenes, see my contributions in Clifford Davidson and Ann Eljenholm Nichols, eds., *Iconoclasm vs. Art and Drama* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989).

²⁶ For the demise of the Coventry plays, see R. W. Ingram, “Fifteen-Seventy-Nine and the Decline of Civic Religious Drama at Coventry,” in G. R. Hibbard, ed., *Elizabethan Theatre VIII: Papers Given at the Eighth International Conference at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, in July 1979* (Port Credit, Ontario: P. D. Meaney, 1982), 114–28.

²⁷ E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 4:263–64.

a result, biblical drama seems only to have survived into the seventeenth century in out-of-the-way and heavily Catholic Lancashire.²⁸

The Coventry pageants, though as we have seen they apparently lacked the plays of the early history of the world, nevertheless shared with the other extant mystery cycles a dependence on the Genesis myth of the Creation and Fall to establish a need for redemption, which, as the prophets predicted, would be forthcoming in the person of the Savior whose entry into time was to culminate in his suffering as a means of redeeming the time. Hence the Shearmen and Taylors' pageant begins with a monologue by the prophet Isaye (Isaiah), who remarks on the "grett mesere" in which the human race is bound due to the "sarpent" Satan in the garden (4–5). Speaking as if he were making his pronouncement prior to Jesus' birth, the prophet explains that this unhappy condition of the race might need to continue indefinitely, unless "myrthe and joie" (8) are brought through the one who will be the bearer of salvation. He will be born of a Virgin, and he will be the conduit of grace to make all people glad:

Beholde, a mayde schall conseve a childe
And gett vs more grace then eyuer men had.
(24–25)

Adam and Eve, lying in bondage in Limbo, and the prophets and patriarchs are to be released from bondage through the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and also people who are born after Jesus' sacrificial act on the cross, including those in attendance at the play which is being presented, are extended the opportunity to be free from servitude by means of grace.

Isaye's monologue introduces the scene of the Annunciation in which the angel Gabriel comes to Mary with words that verify her role as a virgin and mother of the one who will "the fyndis powar dystroie" (73). Upon Gabriel's departing, Joseph enters and registers his shock at seeing Mary obviously pregnant — a scene, derived from apocryphal sources, that telescopes time,

²⁸ See David George, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Lancashire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), xliii, 29.

for several months have passed in a moment. Joseph is comic, a figure introduced here and also later in the Weavers' play to be the object of laughter — but not hostile laughter. He is therefore less broadly dramatized than other comic figures in the religious vernacular drama such as the wife of Noah in the Towneley play, but perhaps it is fair to say that he represents a precedent for comedy within historical drama. Unlike Falstaff, however, his presence in the play is in the final analysis benign, a sign of human fallibility without viciousness. In the Shearmen and Taylors' play Joseph's doubts are quickly corrected by the miraculous appearance of the angel, and the scene shifts, without a stage direction, to the shepherds who, on a cold night, share a meal and then hear the announcement of the birth of Christ in the singing of angels. Croo's 1535 revision of the play thus moved quickly from its beginning in the speeches by Old Testament prophets through the episodes of the rich Nativity sequence; already by line 269 the "Kyng of blys" will be born. The remainder of the play, totaling fewer than nine hundred lines in length, stages the coming of the Magi, the slaying of the Innocents, and, briefly, the flight to Egypt.

The Shearmen and Taylors' pageant, like the Weavers' play, is surprisingly theatrical and plays well, as those who have produced it or witnessed it as spectators have reported, and it is particularly well suited to amateur players who have a limited capacity to learn lines and to master the gestures and movements required on stage. Both extant plays thus share radical differences from Shakespeare's histories and his other plays, designed as the latter were for professional actors on the London stage. But there are similarities that are striking. Shakespeare's contributions to the theater have in common with the Coventry plays the effect of stimulating cultural memory, of bringing the past into the present in a way that will appeal in a deep psychological sense to the members of the audience. The extant Coventry mysteries, revisions dating from the earliest years of the Reformation, were not so very different from the devotional and mnemonic plays that had been presented in pre-Reformation times, and though the devotional element was under suspicion by Protestants, the pageants still were participants in a memory theater with the serious purpose of making visible scenes of history of the greatest significance for audiences to see.

At the time when Shakespeare was a schoolboy in the mid-1570s at the Stratford Grammar School he would already have been mature enough to see the Coventry plays with comprehension.

It is sheer conjecture to say that his schoolmaster, Simon Hunt who was to leave Stratford for Douay in 1575 and would eventually be inducted into the Society of Jesus,²⁹ may have encouraged his students to attend this show of visible scenes from religious history, including the Smiths' Passion, the Cappers' Harrowing and Resurrection, and the Drapers' Doomsday along with the scenes shown by the Shearmen and Taylors and the Weavers. In any case, the pageants may have taught a powerful lesson in addition to their appeal for their devotional content. If we may judge from extant English plays of the trial and execution of Christ, the presentation of authority in figures such as Herod, Pilate, and the chief priests was highly problematic. Power is arbitrary, wilfully, and selfishly displayed, and it is demonic. In the extant plays of the Passion from elsewhere in England, the procedural safeguards already in place in English common law were openly flouted, as scholars have shown. If the Herod Antipas of the Smiths' play was under better control than the Herod the Great who attempted to betray the Magi or ordered the slaying of the Innocents, he nevertheless likewise established kingship as untrustworthy. The Coventry dramatic records indicate that Herod in the Smiths' play appeared either wearing a mask or having a painted face which would indicate his inherent evil, and that he held a "fawcion," a type of curved sword not indicative of justice or consistent behavior.³⁰ In the visual arts, a falchion was the weapon associated with Saracens and pagans. A cast list from 1477 also included Annas and Caiaphas — the sinister high priests who traditionally were shown to have been willing to use any means to destroy Jesus and bring him to his death — and Pilate along with his wife Procula.³¹ Procula's role was to serve as the devil's agent, as a temptress, comparable to her appearance in the York play, and also as a foil to her husband's legally irresponsible but necessary action in allowing the Crucifixion to go forward.³²

²⁹ Milward, *Shakespeare's Religious Background*, 39; Mutschmann and Wentersdorf, *Shakespeare and Catholicism*, 78.

³⁰ *REED: Coventry*, 73.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² For discussion of Procula, see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 243–45.

The untrustworthiness of rulers and authority figures is a quality that emerges time and again in Shakespeare's plays, including the second tetralogy. Richard II, though not a thoroughgoing hypocrite like Richard III, nevertheless is shown at first to be a false friend and a ruler capable of unlawful acts of pillage and murder, if we accept that he was responsible for the death of his uncle Thomas of Woodstock. Wrapping himself in absolutist theology, he certainly grasped as much wealth as he could squeeze from his realm through the issuing of his infamous blank charters and through confiscation of the property of John of Gaunt, and he was doing this in order to support his famously stylish court and his imperial pretensions.³³

The ruler who usurps the throne and succeeds Richard fares no better. Henry IV's attempt to pass the blame for Richard II's murder onto those who physically performed it, excused lamely by his statement "They love not poison that do poison need" (*Richard II*, 5.6.38), is hypocritical, and Shakespeare in the subsequent play of *I Henry IV* presents him as guilt-ridden, as well he should be. By way of expiation he wishes to go as a crusader on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in penance for his sins against Richard and the realm. In *2 Henry IV*, John of Lancaster, Prince Hal's brother, deals with duplicity against the rebels led in the play by the Archbishop of York, Richard Scrope, the former bishop of Coventry and Lichfield for whom there had been enough sympathy in pre-Reformation Coventry that he had been depicted as a saint in a window in St. Mary's Hall.³⁴ It is tempting to believe that this image disappeared from the window as part of the long Tudor campaign against rebellion which had declared Thomas Becket to be no "saint, but rather esteemed to have ben a rebell and traytour to his prynce."³⁵ So too Archbishop Scrope was denigrated, and the movement to venerate him as a saint was frustrated by the Crown. Both Becket and Scrope

³³ See Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London: John Murray, 1968), 17 and passim.

³⁴ Clifford Davidson and Jennifer Alexander, *The Early Art of Coventry, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwick, and Lesser Sites in Warwickshire* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), 50, citing the early nineteenth-century local historian William Reader. The glass was located prominently in a window on the east side of the Great Hall.

³⁵ Tancred Borenius, *St. Thomas Becket in Art* (1932; reprint, Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, n.d.), 110.

would be not saints but traitors, according to the criteria introduced in the sermon *Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* added to the *Book of Homilies* in 1574. Prince Hal himself in Shakespeare's second Henriad is also certainly not immune from the charge of duplicity and underhandedness, while in *Henry V* he comes across as a king who is fully capable of cruelty (see especially the deplorable "Then every soldier kill his prisoners" [4.6.37]). Yet historically his acts could include those of a sort that we would expect of an ideal Christian monarch, including his founding of Syon Abbey, a double monastery of the order founded by St. Birgitta of Sweden.³⁶ This was to be one of the two chantries established by the king "where the sad and solemn priests / Sing still for Richard's soul" (*Henry V*, 4.1.301–02).

Such a Catholic moment, like the references to pilgrimage and crusade, suggests Shakespeare's openness to the Old Religion, at least in some aspects of its practices outlawed in Protestant England. It is, then, important to remember that he grew up in a family with ties to the Catholicism, and that he appears to have been in close contact with Catholics in the Stratford Grammar School and elsewhere as a boy. Had he then found the scenes of royal and ecclesiastical authority shown in the Coventry mysteries to have a special resonance for him? Would his early sympathies, about which we can only speculate, influence his feelings toward a government like that under Elizabeth I, whose regime fiercely persecuted those loyal to Catholicism and the Pope and charged priests ordained abroad with treason, punishable by imprisonment, torture, and capital punishment? Her government had reacted with draconian actions against the Catholic community following the ill-timed rebellion in the North in 1569 and the Pope's bull *Regnans in excelsis* (1570) purporting to release her subjects from allegiance to her.³⁷ Possessing Catholic vestments or service books was prohibited, and harboring Roman priests was declared a crime that could result in persecution and even death, as the case of the martyr Margaret Clitheroe would prove

³⁶ William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. John Caley, Henry Ellis, and Bulkeley Bandinel, 6 vols. (1693; rev. ed. London, 1830), 6:540–41; David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948–77), 2:

³⁷ The document is translated in Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 3:418–20.

(executed 1586).³⁸ It is hard to believe otherwise than that Shakespeare was conflicted about matters of authority and religion. There is no hard evidence that he was himself either actively or passively an actual Roman Catholic in the years before he emerged as part of the London theater scene, even if during the so-called “lost years,” as Ernst Honigmann proposed, he had moved in Catholic circles in Lancashire.³⁹ That he was willing to give audiences what they wanted to see and hear is not denied, but influence upon him by the Augustinian handling of history in mystery drama wherein secular and religious leaders are aligned with Babylon rather than the City of God — the very history that was told in the Coventry mysteries⁴⁰ — is quite credible. Yet he clearly did not follow radical Protestants in identifying the Catholic hierarchy in its entirety with Babylon; that is, he was, we may believe, favorable toward a more Catholic political and social order in which religious orders were not the object of ridicule and in which the Catholic Mass was not regarded as subversive.⁴¹

In *Richard II*, however, Shakespeare had treated the king who has espoused an absolutist understanding of the monarchy with surprising sympathy *after* his deposition when he is taken away to prison, tormented, and murdered — a rehabilitation of the protagonist which makes the play more like a tragedy than a mere history play. As the pageants presented in 1392 for Richard’s second triumphal entry into London had indicated, this king was a political theologian who saw his role in the kingdom as sacred — that is, as an affirmation of *sancta majestas* and of the king’s role

³⁸ See Claire Wilder, “Margaret Clitheroe,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004–15) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5692>>. See Chapter V, below, for further discussion of Shakespeare and Catholicism.

³⁹ E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: “The Lost Years,”* 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), and see also Richard Wilson, “Shakespeare and the Jesuits: New Connections Supporting the Theory of the Lost Catholic Years in Lancashire,” *Times Literary Supplement* (19 Dec. 1997): 11–13.

⁴⁰ Cf. the examination of the York plays by Alexandra F. Johnston, ““The word Made Flesh: Augustinian Elements in the York Cycle,” in *The Centre and Its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor John Leyerle*, ed. Robert A. Taylor et al. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 225–46.

⁴¹ See Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, 3:350–53.

as “the vicar of the highest King.”⁴² Shakespeare would not have access to the Wilton Diptych, now in the National Gallery in London, in which a deeply pious-appearing Richard, accompanied by his patron saints John the Baptist, Edmund, and Edward the Confessor, kneels with his hands raised in veneration as he is presented by them to the Virgin Mary and Child, who are accompanied by the angels of the court of heaven who wear his white hart emblem.⁴³ However, the playwright in his reading of his sources understood implicitly that Richard perceived the anointing of the monarch to be a holy act, a commissioning as God’s representative not only for the city of London-Jerusalem but also for the kingdom as a whole. In his view, the anointing at the king’s coronation is not reversible: “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king” (3.2.54–55). Shakespeare will inconsistently turn away from the skepticism he has expressed earlier in the play concerning the validity of Richard’s absolutism and his *de jure* right to the throne as well as his absolute right to royal power which might be used as it suits him. Shakespeare hence is able to link Richard’s political theology with the plight of the suffering Christ, whose representative Richard claims to be. Was Shakespeare playing to a public in which there was residual nostalgia for the loss of the last of the Plantagenet rulers of England?

The Passion was presented to the eyes of the spectators of the Coventry Smiths’ pageant, no doubt vividly, at the same time that the Elizabethan government and the Protestant hierarchy of the Church of England had tightened the iconoclastic screws against depictions in the visual arts.⁴⁴

⁴² Quoted from the so-called “Laws of Edward the Confessor,” as translated in Bruce O’Brien, *God’s Peace and the King’s Peace: The Laws of Edward the Confessor* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 174–75. For the argument that the polemical Protestant-imperialist historian John Foxe was responsible for promoting a different and “peculiar form” of “Sacred Monarchy” in late Tudor England that replaced the earlier formulation of the theology of kingship and its relation to history, see Frances Yates, “Foxe as Propagandist,” *Encounter* 27 (1966): 78–86. Importantly, Shakespeare’s attitude toward the late Tudor theory of monarchy seems equivocal as illustrated in his plays.

⁴³ See Francis Wormald, “The Wilton Diptych,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 17 (1954): 191–203.

⁴⁴ Destruction of ecclesiastical art continued, though at the Queen’s command sparing memorials and glass, which was too expensive to replace. The theologian William Perkins was hardly alone in claiming that even *mental* images of God were to be avoided: “So soon as the mind

Undoubtedly in response to official pressure to official pressure, Shakespeare's father as Stratford chamberlain in 1563–64 had supervised the partitioning off and whitewashing over of the wall paintings that included religious scenes in the Guild Chapel, from which the rood with its crucified Christ and attendant figures were removed.⁴⁵ It may be that the father's guilt was shared by the son in that he felt his family implicated, if we see a personal statement in *Richard III* 2.1.123–24; here Edward IV speaks the words “. . . and defac'd /The precious image of our dear Redeemer.” The Crucifixion and the events of the narrative leading up to it, presented in living images, were central components of the Coventry Smiths' pageant, as indicated, if sketchily, by the fragmentary guild accounts. A devil mask was recorded in 1490 along with a pillar and four scourges for the Scourging, black garments for “tormentors,” a crest, falchion, and scepter for Herod, miters for “the bysschoppis,” a gilt wig for Jesus and possibly another for Peter, who denied his Lord.⁴⁶ In 1578, the final accounts before the pageant was suppressed included reference to Judas's hanging and a “trwse” (a frame from which he was suspended) as well as the hook that was used for this act.⁴⁷ These are signs of realism in the production. Judging from extant plays of the Passion in other cities, we would expect that the events of the Crucifixion itself exhibited considerable brutality and blood. The plays of York and Chester as well as the Towneley and N-Town pageants even establish a resemblance between the tormenting and execution of Jesus and actual judicial cruelty and execution in England.⁴⁸ Likewise, the terrible final scenes in *Richard II*, along with the

frames unto itelf any form of God (as when he is popishly conceived to be like an old man sitting in heaven in a throne with a sceptre in his hand) an idol is set up in the mind” (William Perkins, *Warning Against Idolatrie* [1601], 107–08, as quoted by Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts, I: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 453.

⁴⁵ Richard Savage, ed., *Minutes and Accounts of the Corporation of Stratford-upon-Avon*, Dugdale Society 1 (1921), 128. See also Clifford Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings at Stratford-upon-Avon* (New York: AMS Perss, 1988).

⁴⁶ *REED: Coventry*, 73–74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴⁸ See Elza Tiner, “English Law and the York Trial Plays,” in Clifford Davidson, *The Dramatic Tradition of the Middle Ages* (New York: AMS Press, 2005), 140–49, and, for the

politically sensitive deposition scene which was not allowed to see print in the early quartos, offer acts of extended cruelty directed at a king, whom official Elizabethan political thought had identified as God's viceregent in the kingdom. As inevitably to have been the case in the Smiths' play, the audience's sympathy is directed to the victim, albeit in the instance of Richard *not* one who is guiltless in the earlier part of the drama. In a moment of self-knowledge, the king's murderer himself admits that what he has done is a "deed . . . chronicled in hell" (5.5.116). To be sure, in Shakespeare's time the presentation of divine authority as at once humble and afflicted against the brutality of official or usurped power would seem especially to have had appeal for those who sympathized with the adherents of the Old Religion who were suffering for their faith.

The two plays of *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* show the usurping king afflicted with guilt and longing to go on a crusade to set free Jerusalem, where Jesus' feet trod and where "for our advantage on the bitter cross" those same feet "were nail'd" (*1 Henry IV* 1.1.25–27). This would be an act of penance — a pilgrimage to a site, the Holy Sepulcher, which had been popular among English pilgrims before such acts of piety were outlawed by the Reformation. Unfortunately, Henry is faced with revolt against his authority in the West and North that forces cancellation of his plans. The official Tudor view was that the rebellions which occurred in England at this time were in divine retribution for his usurpation, and in the character of Henry IV Shakespeare offers a king who himself accepts this view. Henry V, appearing to agree with this assessment, will attempt to expiate his father's "fault" by re-interring the body of Richard II in Westminster Abbey and establishing prayers for his soul in Purgatory.

Retribution is, however, also something with which Henry V must be concerned. The commoner William in *Henry V* speaks explicitly of the Last Day when the severed body parts of soldiers will be joined together again and when those who have not had a good death will accuse

response to cruelty in the Crucifixion, see my essay "Sacred Blood and the Medieval Stage," in Clifford Davidson, *History, Religion, and Violence: Cultural Contexts for Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 180–204. Violations of justice at the highest levels in the trial of Archbishop Scrope are discussed with regard to the York plays by Pamela King, "Contemporary Models for the Trial Plays in the York Cycle," in Alan Hindley, ed., *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 200–16.

the king who sent them into the fray in France (4.1.134–46). Seemingly, on a different register, the king before the battle at Agincourt on St. Crispin’s day (25 October 1415) claims that the event will be remembered in connection with this feast “[f]rom this day to the ending of the world” (4.3.58). So too in one of Shakespeare’s earlier histories, Henry is described as “blest” and also as one who appeared to the French at Agincourt like the Judge at “the dreadful Judgment Day” (*I Henry VI* 1.1.28–30). In spite of the seeming contradictions here, there is no denying the shadow cast by the traditional view that would presumably have been expressed in the Coventry Last Judgment play — a view shared by Dante in the *Commedia* — that would not make rulers of either church or State immune from judgment. The Chester Whitsun cycle’s Doomsday, for example, has among the damned a pope, emperor, king, queen, judge, and merchant, while such wall paintings of the Doom as the fourteenth-century (restored) example at the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury at Salisbury might show high ecclesiastical and secular figures among the damned being rounded up and dragged off to hell by means of a red-hot chain.⁴⁹ In the Dance of Death iconography on the wall painting on the north wall of the Stratford Guild Chapel, the Emperor, King, Cardinal, Archbishop, and Bishop alike received the summons of Death as a prelude to the judgment of God.⁵⁰ The specifics concerning the characterization of the Coventry Drapers’ play of Doomsday are lost so we do not know precisely which secular or ecclesiastical officials might have been included among the “iij blank [black] Sowles” destined for hell — color-coded to

⁴⁹ R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS s.s. 3, 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974–86), 1:444–50 (play 24.173–356); Albert Hollaender, “The Doom-Painting of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Salisbury,” *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 50 (1942): 351–70, esp. 359. This wall painting has been frequently cited and illustrated as an example of Doomsday iconography; see, e.g., Margaret Rickert, *Painting in Britain in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 188–89, pl. 193.

⁵⁰ Wilfrid Puddephat, “The Mural Paintings of the Dance of Death in the Guild Chapel of Stratford-upon-Avon,” *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society* 76 (1960): 29–35; Davidson, *The Guild Chapel Wall Paintings*, 33–34, 51–55, figs. 19–20; and Kate Giles, Anthony Maniston, and Geoff Arnott, “Visualizing the Guild Chapel, Stratford-upon-Avon: Digital Models as Research Tools in Buildings Archaeology,” *Internet Archaeology* 32 (2012): sec. 4.6. Because of their moral significance these wall paintings may have been spared when the other religious paintings were defaced in 1564, and if so they would have been seen by Shakespeare in his childhood.

provide immediate recognition and to distinguish them from the pure (white) souls of those about to be saved.⁵¹ The eschatological thrust of the Coventry pageants, however, was congruent with what was in Shakespeare's mind when he was writing the histories that treat Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V.⁵²

The Coventry Drapers Doomsday play may have been the most spectacular of all the Last Judgment pageants in England. The play was apparently introduced by a sign, a pyrotechnic device in which a "world" was burned at each of the three stations where the drama was presented in the Coventry streets in expectation that at Last Day the world would be destroyed by fire.⁵³ The Drapers' financial records indicate that there were also an earthquake made by a barrel device, the sounding of trumpets, and the appearance of God descending from above by means of a windlass or similar mechanism. He wore a gown of "Redde Sendall"⁵⁴ and very likely, as in Chester's Whitsun plays and in various depictions in the visual arts, came with hands and side bleeding his sacred blood.⁵⁵ The use of these pyrotechnic and visual effects would have been all the more effective since the timing of the performance, coming at the end of the day, was probably at dusk. The Coventry Drapers provided cressets and other forms of lighting, apparently in the event that their play would require them,⁵⁶ but in 1457 playing had to be suspended when overtaken by dark: "alle the Pagentes [were] pleyde saue domes day which myght not be pleyde for lak of day."⁵⁷

Nor was the topic of the play expected to be remote from the lives of those who watched as

⁵¹ REED: *Coventry*, 217.

⁵² See especially John W. Velz, "'Some shall be pardon'd and some punish'd': Medieval Dramatic Eschatology in Shakespeare," *Comparative Drama* 26 (1992–93): 312–29.

⁵³ See King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 48–49.

⁵⁴ REED: *Coventry*, 230, 474.

⁵⁵ Lumiansky and Mills, eds., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 453 (play 24.429 *s.d.*); REED: *Coventry*, 230. See also above, Chapters I and II, pts. 1–2.

⁵⁶ REED: *Coventry*, 465.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

spectators. For the Protestant-leaning citizens of Coventry and also for traditional Christians at that time, the end of history was believed to be imminent and the Last Judgment at hand at any moment, but, aside from the expectation of a conclusion to history, it should not be forgotten that individual human life was itself fragile and extremely unpredictable with regard to its earthly ending. The anxiety of living in such a temporary world in such a temporary human body is an important element lying behind the presentation of character and event in Shakespeare's second Henriad as well.

In such a transitory world, Hal's flirtation with Poins, Bardolf, and especially Falstaff will seem all the more ambiguous, however wonderfully amusing are the antics of the prince and his friends. Hal's promise early in *1 Henry IV* to cast off his disguise of dissoluteness and to redeem the "time when men think least I will" (1.2.217) provides assurance to the audience that he will reform. But Falstaff, that misleader of youth, has also talked, in cadences like a Puritan, of psalm singing and reformation, and on his deathbed will be reported in *Henry V* to have been attempting (if Theobald's widely accepted emendation of the Folio's "a Table of green fields" is accepted) to repeat the twenty-third psalm (*AV* numbering) — a very ambiguous end. He is "that reverent Vice, that grey iniquity," as Prince Hal calls him (*1 Henry IV* 2.4.453–54) — a development of the vice figure into the fat knight, derived from the examples which had appeared in earlier plays such as *Cambyses* but not in the mystery cycles and pageants. Falstaff's very name signifies his falsehood in private life, and especially when he takes on the role of military adventurer he emerges as nastily predatory. His ambition to be made Lord Chief Justice under King Hal is truly sinister, though it is of course amusing today as it must have been in Shakespeare's time when judicial corruption was commonly expected.

However, Falstaff, designated as "that old white-bearded Sathan" by Prince Henry in *1 Henry IV* 2.4.463, may stand alongside a set of characters that appeared in the Coventry plays. These are the devils' roles that we know were played by actors in the Drapers' Doomsday pageant and whose role was to round up the wicked and to take them away to the entrance of hell, which appeared on stage as a gaping hell mouth.⁵⁸ Perhaps the devils roared — an attribute of the "devil

⁵⁸ In the Coventry records, the hell mouth, or "hell hede," is frequently painted, sometimes

i' th' old play" identified in *Henry V* 4.4.71. The Drapers made payments to three "Demones" in c.1539, and previously, in c.1538 (the accounts are somewhat confused for this period) two "demens heeds" or masks were painted and made new at their expense.⁵⁹ In c.1567 only two demons were being retained, and two shillings were laid out "for a demonys face."⁶⁰ These devils were undoubtedly grotesque, as illustrations in the visual arts from medieval Coventry and elsewhere demonstrate.⁶¹ In 1572 the Drapers paid "for mendyng ye demens cotts and hose" and "for ij pound of heare for ye Same," which may have referred to the devil's costume.⁶² Falstaff's grotesquely fat body — a role played by the clown William Kempe — was not so far as we know hairy like the devils in the Coventry play, nor did he wear a mask; however, among the audience a mixture of the laughter and anxiety connected with seeing the appearance of demons on the civic stage also likely was present among viewers of Falstaff.⁶³ Who, at least among the commoners watching Shakespeare's play, would have felt comfortable being conscripted into Falstaff's

requiring to be made "newe"; see, e.g., *REED: Coventry*, 465–66.

⁵⁹ *REED: Coventry*, 464, 466. Devil masks are discussed by Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 201–16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 474.

⁶¹ Devils had appeared in the Doom painting in Coventry's Holy Trinity Church; see Chapter I, above. An early sixteenth century devil, now lost, appeared in painted glass in the church of St. John Bablake which had an oversize head, extended nose, and shortened legs; see Davidson and Alexander, *The Early Art of Coventry, Stratford-upon Avon, Warwick, and Lesser Sites in Warwickshire*, 17; fragments of the glass remained as late as 1930 and were reported by Mary Dormer Harris, *Some Manors, Churches, and Villages of Warwickshire* (Coventry: Coventry City Council, 1937), 232. For general treatment of the appearance of devils, see Barbara Palmer, "The Inhabitants of Hell: Devils," in Clifford Davidson and Thomas Seiler, eds., *The Iconography of Hell* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 20–40.

⁶² *REED: Coventry*, 259.

⁶³ Twycross and Carpenter argue for seeing actors in devil costumes as "alien" and audience reaction as an "ambivalent interaction of humour and fear, delight and awe" at witnessing masked devils (*Masks and Masking*, 213).

company of soldiers in preparation for the battle at Shrewsbury?⁶⁴ Who would appreciate having his horses taken as Falstaff and his friends race off from the West Country to be present at the coronation of Henry V? This is, of course, not to deny the great fun of the scenes in which Falstaff appears or the pleasure of witnessing the other dimensions of this character.

One of these other dimensions was the curious association which Shakespeare seems to have developed between Falstaff and Puritanism for which the playwright had contempt. Undoubtedly this was in part on account of the presumption with which the Puritan faction spoke of themselves as “saints,” however much they worried about their own election, and their inflexibility. The extreme wing of the English Reformation made the role of demonic seem much more serious and humorless, and it was the more radical Puritans who were the most determined enemies of the theater where evil and human fallibility were displayed and judged.⁶⁵ Members of this faction often tended, like their Calvinistic counterparts on the Continent, to be intolerant and hence were regarded by moderate Anglicans to be an unwelcome source of dissension. In some towns they caused the community to split apart into factions with something other than Christian charity, as Robert Whiting has shown in his study of the Southwest in the sixteenth century.⁶⁶ The hypocrite Falstaff, however, is an inspired parody of Puritanism. Originally designated as Sir John Oldcastle until the playwright was obligated to change his name, he was modeled on this historical figure who was seen by John Foxe as a crypto-Protestant martyr.⁶⁷ Thereby the playwright was

⁶⁴ Military conscription was hated and feared; see Guy, *Queen Elizabeth*, 202. Falstaff as muster-master was a reflection of corruption in the system.

⁶⁵ More or less all the Puritan arguments, and an exhaustive number further drawn from history, were marshaled by William Prynne, *Histrio-mastix* (London, 1630). To be anti-theatrical was not necessarily to be a Puritan; many more moderate Protestants were uncomfortable with the stage.

⁶⁶ See Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁶⁷ See Paul White, “Shakespeare and Religious Polemic,” in Beatrice Batson, ed., *Shakespeare’s Second Tetralogy* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2004), 147–64. Shakespeare’s attempt to dissociate Falstaff from the name originally chosen for him appears in the last lines in the epilogue to *2 Henry IV*: “Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man.”

able to make his ridicule against extreme Protestantism even more biting by choosing a name that could serve as an emblem of such a disreputably amusing character.

The rejection of an upside-down world by Henry V — necessary if he is not to rule absolutely as a criminal king — at the end of *2 Henry IV* locates the new monarch on the side of law and justice rather than of misrule. The much discussed conclusion of this play thus may be seen as a very pale reflection of the Last Day of history when absolute justice will prevail among all the people who have ever lived on this earth. To be sure, perfect justice also cannot be achieved in the next play, even with the king's "zero tolerance" for infractions among his soldiers that results in Bardolph and Nym's hanging for theft (*Henry V* 4.4.70–73). Only on Doomsday at the end of history can all human imperfection be resolved, and this is not yet the time certainly. Together the plays in the second Henriad reveal no breaking through to a Golden Age after Agincourt. His view of history, however inconsistent, also is not merely to be identified with that of his sources, although he was entirely willing to make drama even out of some of the official political theories — and out of popular chauvinistic feeling — at his disposal as well as to betray his scepticism about rulership among mere human beings.

If, then, we can credibly assume that Shakespeare betrays his background and experiences — including familiarity with the Coventry plays — as suggested above, a rationale for his rejection of absolutism becomes clear, and he emerges as a man who saw monarchy very differently than those, among whom the most visible was Edmund Spenser, who most elaborately celebrated the literary cult of the Virgin Queen. In fact, the Virgin Queen whom Shakespeare celebrates is Katherine of Aragon, in words he added to his source, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and put into the mouth of her husband, Henry VIII: "Thou art alone / . . . Thy meekness saintlike, / . . . The queen of earthly queens" (*Henry VIII* 2.4.137–42).⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the infant Elizabeth is also praised by Archbishop Cranmer as one who will be a virgin queen when grown to adulthood and as one who will be a bringer of peace (5.14–76), an obligatory speech in a play such as *Henry VIII*

⁶⁸ See especially the discussion by Thomas Merriam, "Queen of Earthly Queens," *Notes and Queries* 245 (2000): 461–64, for liturgical echoes suggesting allusions in the text to the *Salve Regina* and to the Annunciation.

during a time when political discourse tended to be panegyric. This passage, however, may have been written by John Fletcher, whose hand also was present in the play as a collaborator.

The reality of Elizabeth's rule was quite different, as Shakespeare knew, with the confiscation of property and confiscatory fines against Roman Catholic adherents as well as the imprisonment, torture and even execution for those who celebrated the Roman Catholic Mass — or allowed such services to be celebrated — in private houses. Many of Elizabeth's own Anglican clergy were time-servers or, worse yet, profiteers who allowed curates to do their work while they pocketed the larger share of the priest's stipend, and so the center of activity in many parishes migrated from the church to the alehouse. On the other hand, intolerant radical Protestant clergy introduced a theology which emphasized the individual as either saint or sinner, predestined sometimes in the sense of double predestination to heaven or to hell,⁶⁹ with the effect of robbing communities of their peace. For those who, like Shakespeare, apparently looked back with nostalgia at the medieval past — though not with a nostalgia blind to the turmoil of the late Middle Ages — the Crown would need to bear responsibility for a great deal, including, we might suspect, the iconoclastic program that had destroyed so much beauty in so many churches, chapels, and cathedrals, the program that had erased so many images of the Redeemer from the walls, chancel arches, and windows. Presumably Shakespeare made his peace — or at least declared a truce — with the New Religion, as his knowledge of the liturgy and the homilies testifies, but there seems to have been no wholehearted acceptance of unlimited royal power, which could be either beneficent or demonic. It is unlikely that Shakespeare could have agreed with John Donne, the protégé of king James — the monarch who was to be also the patron of the bard's acting company, the King's Men — in accepting the conception of the king as a link in the exercise of God's power, or that God's power is not limited by human law but only by his will.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ On double predestination, see Paul White, *Predestination, Polity and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The doctrine was incorporated in the Lambeth Articles, which, because of Queen Elizabeth's opposition, were never disseminated.

⁷⁰ See Deborah Kuller Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (1990; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1997), 169, 171, citing John Donne, *The Sermons*, ed.

History, therefore, might work its way through periods of chaos and suffering, as during the coups and rebellions in the time of Richard II and Henry IV, or during the Wars of the Roses, but through merit or grace might achieve stability and progressive improvement in the realm. So when Henry VII at Bosworth Field defeated Richard III, who had been charged with being a tyrant, and united the houses of Lancaster and York, he was promoted as a providential blessing for the land, though in fact his reign was unstable and his person untrustworthy and avaricious. Among many he was highly unpopular, often for good reason. Indeed, his rule was marked by serious corruption.⁷¹ The reign of his son Henry VIII consolidated the kingdom, though not without conflict and a rapacious attack on the Church, both its authority and its property. Though the playwright demonstrated sympathy for Queen Katherine in the late play of *Henry VIII*, as we have seen, the infant Elizabeth is allowed to emerge as destined for greatness, however flawed her reign would be in reality. Even if Shakespeare (rather than Fletcher) had some responsibility for the speech, it needs to be remembered that throughout his work his characters represented people living in the world not as saints, imperfect, in the same person being capable of charity and malice, of acts of goodness and of terror. And those in high places in the first century C.E. could, as dramatized in the Coventry Corpus Christi plays, have an immense influence on history for long periods of time, even over the centuries up to the present moment.

One very hard lesson for proponents of proponents of sacral kingship comes from the mystery plays, for there it is the sacred that is under attack from the corrupt powers, ecclesiastical and secular, of this world. In representations of the Passion, Jesus is the one who is accused of

George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954–62), for the view that God’s “Power hath no limitation but his owne Will” (8:1:744–45) and “To be absolute Lord of anything, gives that Lord a power to doe what he will with that thing. God, as he is *Adonai, The Lord*, may give, build and throw downe, where and whom he will” (8:1:744–45). For further comment on King James’s political theology, see Chapter V, below.

⁷¹ See the biographical survey in S. J. Gunn, “Henry VII, King of England and Lord of Ireland,” in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12954>> accessed 9/9/2015. There is every reason to believe that the lack of any play by Shakespeare on the reign of Henry VII was a deliberate omission on his part.

rebellion and treason. We do not know the playwright's mature attitude toward the 1569 rebellion in the North against Elizabeth which prompted the writing of the homily *Against Rebellion and Wilful Disobedience*, but a careful look at Archbishop Scrope's role in *2 Henry IV* suggests a need for nuance in commenting on his rising against a monarch who had sneaked his way onto the throne and along the way had deposed a legitimate ruler, however imperfect. The rebels against Henry IV are responsible for a "plot," an action which too is seen as illegal and in which not all the plotters have good motives, but from the archbishop's point of view it is raised against the new king's abuses that he has itemized ("[t]he parcels and particulars of our grief" [*2 Henry IV* 4.2.36]) with the hope that these will be redressed. Thereupon the archbishop expects his submission to be sufficient to achieve reconciliation. His arrest and the arrest of his compatriots is indeed a breach of faith in spite of Prince John's words in defense of his action. Archbishop Scrope, a man remembered for his holiness, was long the subject of veneration and believed to be a "martir Christi,"⁷² and a hagiography prepared in connection the unsuccessful campaign for his canonization gives details of the grievances.⁷³ The historical account of the archbishop's sentencing is a demonstration of the cruelty and injustice of the king, who defied his own court-of-law and installed a pliant judge when the judge on the bench refused to convict.⁷⁴ If in Shakespeare's play the archbishop's actions were nevertheless of a kind that would have been treasonous under English law — and if John of Lancaster's duplicity was the sort of shiftiness

⁷² Oxford, Bodley MS. lat. liturg. F.3, as quoted by J. W. McKenna, "Popular Canonization as Political Propaganda: The Cult of Archbishop Scrope," *Speculum* 44 (1970): 616n.

⁷³ See Clement Maidstone, *The Martyrdom of Archbishop Scrope*, trans. Stephen K. Wright <<http://arts-sciences.cua.edu/engl/maidstone/htm>>; Latin text in James Raine, ed., *Historians of the Church of York*, Rolls Ser. 71 (London, 1886), 304–11. Shakespeare's depiction of the archbishop, however, focuses on him as a flawed politician but highly intelligent, not as a hero of faith; see Stephen K. Wright, "Genres of Sanctity: Literary Representations of Archbishop Scrope," in P. J. P. Goldberg, ed., *Richard Scrope: Archbishop, Rebel, Martyr* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2007), 126–37.

⁷⁴ See McKenna, "Popular Canonization," 611. For evidence that Scrope's trial influenced the Passion plays in the York cycle; see King, "Contemporary Models."

practiced by both sides in Elizabeth's Irish wars — the conviction and execution of the Archbishop of York in 1405 were still widely seen at the time as outrageous treatment of a very distinguished subject of an English king. It is certainly of interest to compare a later play such as *Macbeth* in which a rebellion is raised against a man who has made himself king by duplicitous and criminal means. There the rebellion against Macbeth is depicted as a holy crusade against evil, with Macbeth himself demonized and consigned to the left hand of God, where those who despair and do not repent will surely be destined at the Last Day for the fires of hell. To be sure, the idea of rebellion as presented in the second Henriad is hardly so simple as this (nor, indeed, is it in *Macbeth*), but however we interpret the matter we would do well to evaluate the second Henriad in all its complexity against the dramatization of rebelliousness against God's Son in the mysteries presented at Coventry — performances that were continued until the playwright was fifteen years old.