

Learning to See  
the Theological Vision  
of Shakespeare's  
*King Lear*



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By

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## POLEMICAL PROLOGUE: CRITICISM, THEOLOGY, AND THE VALUE OF SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

"*Thou sapient sir, sit here*" (*The Fool in King Lear* 3.6.18)<sup>1</sup>

The greatness of Shakespeare's *King Lear* has long been acknowledged. In the second half of the twentieth century, *Lear* eclipsed even *Hamlet*, in many critics' minds, as the preeminent play of the Shakespearean canon.<sup>2</sup> In 1959, L.C. Knights suggestively argued that *Lear* is Shakespeare's "central masterpiece, the great exploratory allegory."<sup>3</sup> In 1993, R. A. Foakes claimed that *Lear* "speaks more largely than the other tragedies to the anxieties and problems of the modern world."<sup>4</sup> In 2009, Rene Weis wrote that *Lear* is "now commonly acclaimed as Shakespeare's greatest play."<sup>5</sup> Though clearly an exciting epic that portrays the conflict of good versus evil, as much as any Shakespearean play *King Lear* also illustrates Coleridge's claim that Shakespeare was not only a great playwright, he was a great philosopher.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From the Quarto text, *The History of King Lear*. In *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*. Ed. Rene Weis. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2010). For reasons explained later in this preface, unless otherwise noted all other references to *King Lear* are to the Folio text, *The Tragedy of King Lear*. In *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition*. Ed. Rene Weis. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Muir, *King Lear*, in *Shakespeare: A Bibliographical Guide*. Ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> L.C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> R.A. Foakes, *Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> Rene Weis, "King Lear 1606-2009." In *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, eds. Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins. (London & New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare*. Ed. T. Ashe. 1884. (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries P, 1972), p. 225.

In an important sense, Shakespeare is in fact a philosophical theologian in this play, for *Lear* is a dramatic exploration of *theodicy*, one of the most difficult problems in theology: the problem of evil, or of why a good, omnipotent God allows extensive human suffering. The characters of *Lear* are largely cast within a human epic battle, and Jan Kott is correct to note that “of the twelve major characters” in the play “one half are just and good, the other unjust and bad,” “a division just as consistent and abstract as in a morality play.”<sup>7</sup> *Lear* also frequently raises the question of whether “the gods” or, in one important line late in the play, “God” (5.3.17), have any interest or possibly even intervene in human history through the process that theologians call providence? These and other theological questions are clearly raised by the characters within the play itself, and unsurprisingly there is a substantial body of Christian criticism of the play.<sup>8</sup> Yet such criticism has often failed to unite textual criticism with theological insights, and a failure to fully perform the play or to attend with open mind to its thought has plagued *Lear*’s reception amongst diverse audiences.

It always comes as something of a shock for contemporary students, in fact, that for over 150 years, from 1681-1838, it was not Shakespeare’s *King Lear* that was performed on English stages, but rather the adaptation of the play by Nahum Tate, a Restoration era playwright and actor.<sup>9</sup> Infamously, Tate altered the play’s tragic conclusion so that Cordelia married Edgar, and the two ruled ancient Britain happily ever after. This ‘happy’ ending is equated by many with a saccharine-sweet view of Christianity in which the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer for their sins, a view that *Lear*’s text as a whole cannot support. Happily for traditional Christians, the Bible does not support such a false viewpoint, nor does the Christian theology widely available in Shakespeare’s age. In

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<sup>7</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> Much of this criticism is surveyed in the first chapter of William Elton’s *King Lear and the Gods*, 1966. (Lexington: U of Kentucky Press, 1988), pp. 3-8. Why such criticism is not compelling is well illustrated by the most detailed of such studies, Paul N. Siegel’s *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York: New York University Press, 1957). Though Siegel’s work is scholarly, it has a tendency to fail to express traditional Christian doctrine, perhaps because Siegel himself was a very committed Marxist scholar.

<sup>9</sup> See Rene Weis, “*King Lear* 1606-2009,” in *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, eds. Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 1-25. On Tate’s rationale, see Nahum Tate, “Preface: The History of *King Lear*.” In *William Shakespeare: King Lear*. Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Grace Ioppolo (New York & London: Norton, 2008), pp. 169-70.



the light of traditional Christian theology, the dark material of *King Lear* remains painful, but hope in God is still possible.

The many demerits of Tate's adaptation, from any perspective, have resulted in the rise of a predominantly atheistic or agnostic interpretation of *King Lear*, especially in Britain. There are significant differences in these two worldviews, apart from their common denial of the presence of God, and both offer literary interpretation significant strengths as well as weaknesses. It is important to explore the possibility of a dialogue between *King Lear*'s major atheist or agnostic critics and the insights made possible by a theological approach, but such a dialogue requires first a clear response such as is possible through Roman Catholic Christian theology. Such a response is the primary purpose of this book. Rather than focusing narrowly upon specific interpretative issues or secondary theological controversies, my aim here is to provide a clear outline of a Roman Catholic Christian interpretation of this great play.

By far the most important scholarly text, for the atheistic interpretation of the play that becomes common after the 1960s, is William Elton's *King Lear and the Gods*.<sup>10</sup> As Elton notes in his first chapter, to that point there was a strong tradition of Christian interpretation of the play. Elton's scholarship must be considered in relation to the text of the play itself, but its general argument is given perhaps its most eloquent form by another critic of the same time, Jan Kott, whose influential *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*<sup>11</sup> found in *Lear* an early form of the absurdist drama that Beckett and Eunesco made so popular in mid-twentieth century drama. In a chapter entitled, "*King Lear*, or Endgame," Kott wrote:

In Shakespeare's play there is neither Christian heaven, nor the heaven predicted and believed in by humanists. *King Lear* makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies: of the heaven promised on earth, and the heaven promised after death; in fact—of both Christian and secular theodicies; of cosmogony and of the rational view of history; of the gods and natural goodness, of man made in the 'image and likeness'. In *King Lear*, both the medieval and the renaissance orders of established values disintegrate. All that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth—empty and bleeding.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> William Elton, *King Lear and the Gods*. 1966. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964).

<sup>12</sup> Jan Kott, "*King Lear* or Endgame," in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 116.

Still today, no less an authority than the influential British actor Ian McKellen has recently argued, in an interview that accompanies the PBS distributed film of his leading role in the 2007-08 RSC *Lear* directed by Trevor Nunn, that *King Lear* is “the story of a man losing his faith.”<sup>13</sup> Portraying this loss, rather than the loss of Lear’s clothes that McKellen’s performance because more known for, is a primary purpose of Nunn’s production, and its interpretation is probably not possible without the preliminary scholarly work of Elton and Kott.

## Interpretation, Evaluation and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism

Faced with this history of interpretative controversy, Christian critics cannot expect simplistic arguments or ‘proof-texts’ to resolve issues or advance claims. Nor ought they to ‘impose’ their own interpretations on any text whose meaning is not Christian. Northrop Frye is quite right, moreover, that neither theology nor any other subject should be imposed on a literary text from outside, as part of an individual critic’s fanciful substitution of personal taste for universal value.<sup>14</sup> Yet the remedy for this danger cannot, as Frye also argued, be the banishing of all value judgments from literary criticism.<sup>15</sup> As for most signs of any kind, humans typically not only want to know what words might mean, but also why a literary work’s speakers, or author, might regard them as valuable.

Perhaps a better approach, as E.D. Hirsch has cogently argued, is for critics to distinguish *interpretation*, the attempt to describe accurately the plausible range of meaning expressed by a literary text, from *evaluation*, the attempt to explore the broader value or significance of a text.<sup>16</sup> Both tasks are an important part of literary criticism, though it should be obvious that some developed level of interpretative understanding must be prior to attempts to estimate a text’s value, and also that it is possible for an interpreter’s metaphysical belief or ethical values, whatever they are, to influence the selection of facts that guide any interpretation. Yet counter-evidence, counter-argument, is possible and desirable; as argued

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<sup>13</sup> Ian McKellen, Interview. *King Lear*. Directed by Trevor Nunn. Distributed by PBS Home Video, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Northrop Frye, “Polemical Preface” to *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye, “On Value Judgements,” in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 63-70.

<sup>16</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

elsewhere, it is possible to base judgments of value upon judgments of meaning, and thus to attempt what has been termed "critical realism" in both realms of criticism.<sup>17</sup>

Although it is realistic to expect that texts can have multiple meanings, and multiple potential value to multiple audiences, the possibility of inaccuracy or misinterpretation of meaning must also be acknowledged. Misreading a literary text is as possible as the misinterpretation of language by non-native speakers. Yet the "judgment" of human literary critics cannot be absolute, for "the only just literary critic is Christ."<sup>18</sup> Rather, "critical realism" intends merely an accurate and plausible interpretation of meaning which largely corresponds to the meaning expressed by the words of the text in question. "Judgments of value" are similarly non-absolute, but rather simply attempt to express an accurate, plausible statement of a text's potential value, proceeding from a reasonable judgment of that text's meaning.

Nietzschean hermeneutics of suspicion taught late twentieth-century literary critics to expect that interpretations reveal primarily an interpreter's own beliefs. "Critical realism," however, holds out the possibility that interpretative bias need not finally halt with "perspectivism," but can also confirm or nullify insights through the process of informed, often communal, interpretative judgment. Another key question remains: how should judgments of *meaning* ground or inspire judgments of *value*? In other words, by what process should the quest for truth in interpretation then proceed to the attempt to accurately evaluate the understood meaning? This is a fundamental philosophical question in many areas of human interest, but literary critics often confuse the realms of meaning and value.

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<sup>17</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 75. Our understanding of "critical realism" is indebted to many sources, foremost among them the Biblical conception of Truth. However, one could also find the approach in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, *Logic*, or *Rhetoric*; in St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Thomas Aquinas's *De Veritate*, or in 20<sup>th</sup> century works of philosophical theology such as Bernard Lonergan's *Insight* or Hans Urs Von Balthasar's *Theo-Logic*. For an account of the theory in relation to contemporary literary theory, see Jeremy Hawthorne, *Unlocking the Text: Fundamental Issues in Literary Theory* (London & New York: Edwin Arnold, 1987), pp. 97-101.

<sup>18</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. C.C. Abbott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 8.

In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that most schools of literary criticism in the twentieth century focused on one of these realms while proceeding with implicit assumptions about the other.<sup>19</sup> For much of the twentieth century, the institutional imperative of universities, in particular, demanded that each 'department' have its own realm of knowledge, and drove literary criticism towards what can broadly be termed "new criticism," the attempt to interpret literary texts with minimal reference to other fields of study. However, with the growth of literary theory in the final quarter of the century, the issue of value returned in many forms: feminism, Marxism, and eco-criticism are amongst the many forms of criticism that began to ask not only what a literary text might mean, but why that text might be valuable to particular human groups or interests.

Foundational philosophical assumptions must distinguish and divide forms of literary criticism. As argued elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> although literary theory has been a valuable way to expand the range of literary criticism, preferable to the term "theory" is a "philosophy of literature" grounded in the traditional areas of epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. So far from the once common claims of logical positivism or strictly empirical social science, that there can be "no ought from is" or the now commonplace claim of Nietzschean skepticism, that there can be no objective knowledge of reality apart from interpreter's biases because "there are no facts only interpretations," critical realism affirms that only metaphysical knowledge allows ethical evaluation. In other words, truth is the basis for goodness, as could be illustrated with a wide variety of examples; to take an obvious case, how many ill people would prefer a false rather than true diagnosis of an illness, if they hoped for an effective remedy?

For critical realists, only "being" or "what is" can help us judge what "ought to be."; in other words, only truth in interpretation can allow accurate evaluation. In the useful phrase of Catholic philosopher Bernard Lonergan, "objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity"<sup>21</sup>; in other words, subjectivity can grow towards objectivity through reason and the responsible discussion of evidence within a community of scholarly interpretation. This is the community which Christian scholars are already part of within both the Church and academy, and to which they should

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<sup>19</sup> For an excellent overview of these schools, see the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Gen. Ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature*, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. 1972. (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1979), p. 265.

attempt to contribute. Like any other real good, one must also remember that religious meaning is valuable not only to the community which produces it, but to anyone who may benefit from its beauty.

Yet it is also very important, from a Christian perspective, that there should be no desire to claim 'for the faith' even so great a genius as Shakespeare's. The traditional claims, and vital reality, of Christ's nature and the Bible's status as Scripture rule out any idolization of lesser gods, literary or otherwise, and there cannot be any point in sustaining delusional interpretations. Bardolatry is idolatry, and not an altar upon which any Christian critic should worship. When Kenneth Muir, therefore, argues that *Lear*'s final words in the play are "plainly a delusion," and those who "see a foretaste of the resurrection" in these words are "equally deluded,"<sup>22</sup> the Christian response must not be dismissal or appeal to bias, but rather textual evidence based on interpretation of the play itself. Rational, textual evidence must be used to support critical judgments of meaning, which can then allow persuasive judgments of literary value.

What then of 'pre-Christian' or 'pagan' texts? While it is a foundational doctrine of Christianity that there is no pre-Christian age, since Christ is the Word present to the Father from the beginning (John 1:1), through Whom all things were made (Colossians 1:16), the well-known Augustinian injunction to "retrieve Egyptian gold" can and must be interpreted as the reclamation of Christian truth, not the adornment of error with misleading adjectives. Augustinian retrieval is not a license to misinterpret, nor an endorsement of false claims, but rather a reclamation of God's revelation and common grace within all cultures. *King Lear* is a complex case, in that it is first written and performed within the Christian world of Reformation-era England, but it is set in the ancient, pre-Christian British world, a world often called "Albion". The importance of both worlds in the play must be acknowledged, and contribute to its critical interpretation.

Further complicating interpretation of this play is the "Acts of the Abuses," the 1606 Act of the British Parliament, given the year after the Gunpowder Plot, which banned explicit reference to Christianity in the theatre.<sup>23</sup> The intent of this act, interpreted charitably, was to prevent the theatre from promoting further conflict between the Christian groups already in conflict in England at that time. *King Lear* was first performed

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Muir, *William Shakespeare: King Lear*. Penguin Critical Studies (London: Penguin, 1986). p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Dobson, "Act to Restrain Abuses of Players," in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 3.

in 1606,<sup>24</sup> but it follows Shakespeare's late tragi-comedies, performed between 1608-1611, in that it both refers often to classical deities and includes allusions that any biblically literate person, then or now, can recognize to be references to the Christian God. In multiple ways, then, religious reference in *King Lear* is highly complex.

## Critical Issues

A study of theological meaning within *King Lear* thus offers an opportunity to reflect on fundamental issues within literary criticism. As much as any literary work, this is a text in which, as Kenneth Muir has pointed out, critics "tend to discover... a reflection of their own philosophies of life."<sup>25</sup> How, then, can any critical approach to the play avoid confirming the widespread Nietzschean assumption that all interpretation is determined by an interpreter's own beliefs? It is possible for any critic to focus upon individual lines and, removed from their context within the play, to claim that the play is "about" the subject of these lines. Yet the judgments of meaning possible from such an approach are surely inferior, as knowledge, compared to interpretations developed from a thorough knowledge of a play's intra-textual contexts, and at least somewhat aware of extra-textual elements such as linguistic change, the play's history of performance, and the historical conditions present at these performances.

Any approach raises epistemological questions related to the validity of critical methodology. How can one know the play's meaning? How should this understanding affect our evaluation of the play? What relationship should our knowledge of this play have to our understanding of the broader metaphysical world? To what extent should our answers to such challenging questions be affected by our knowledge of the play's author, or sources of the play, or by the history of the time in which the play was produced, or by the subsequent performance and critical history of the play? Authorial intention, in my opinion, is not the central question. Many works of art can convey valuable meaning beyond what their human author intended. Especially in the case of Shakespearean drama, which lacks the extensive stage directions often found in modern plays, the poetic words and concrete actions enacted by a play have their own life, apart from authorial intention, which directors and actors pursue as they set out to produce a play.

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<sup>24</sup> See Rene Weis, "King Lear 1606-2009," in *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, eds. Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 1-25.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Muir, *William Shakespeare: King Lear*, p. 46.

The more important questions are these: what should an honest, well informed interpreter of *King Lear*, of any worldview, actually believe about this complex play's potential meaning? Further, what is the value of this play's meaning in relation to the broader spectrum of philosophical and theological reality, or truth itself, in so far as this critic or any other can know that truth? By what methodology should critics pursue an understanding of both interpretative meaning and significance or value? While it is clear that interpretation, the quest for understanding, is prerequisite to any valid evaluation of a text's significance, by what methodology should critics pursue both areas of scholarly inquiry? Can critics take account of a text's general meaning and significance while also considering those elements of a play that are unique to particular productions of a play? Potential answers to these crucial questions, and many others, can be illustrated through a study of *King Lear*.

## Epistemology and Shakespearean Drama

How does one claim "knowledge of" rather than merely "an opinion" about a text such as Shakespearean drama? Is this simply a matter of reading the play closely, and reading extensively about Shakespeare's historical era, then writing up and publishing one's conclusions? How then can there be so many contrary conclusions? Without rehearsing the entirety of already published material related to this foundational question,<sup>26</sup> perhaps the most crucial concepts here relate to the nature of language, in both fictional and historical writing, and Aristotle's concept of *mimesis*.

How language works is far too large a topic for this preface, but clearly part of the answer must be the ability of words to create, for human subjects, analogous concepts that refer to objective realities in the world.<sup>27</sup> This occurs in both fictional and historical writing, and Aristotle's *Poetics* presents the concept of *mimesis* to explain both how writers create an independent aesthetic form that has its own inner reality, and yet is capable of a very broad range of reference by portraying perception, reality, or possibility; in Aristotle's words, *mimesis* represents things as

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<sup>26</sup> See David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature*, pp. 27-93.

<sup>27</sup> This thesis is developed in David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature*, pp. 39-45.

they “are or were,” things as they “ought to be,” or things as they are “perceived to be.”<sup>28</sup>

Within literary works, then, one can speak of ‘intra-textual’ reference, when characters speak to each other about the world ‘within’ the work, or one can explore ‘extra-textual’ reference, when the words of the text might speak of objective realities known to a present audience, as at a play, or be intended by an author to speak directly to later historical readers or audiences. Yet literature is not history, and its concrete words can refer not only to a historical tradition, which can be traced chronologically, but can also present the ideas of diverse ages. Drama can thus enact the universal, the philosophical, as well as representing historical reality. Given the texts we have, Shakespearean drama does have an intended order, for the order of scenes as potential texts in either quarto or folio form call for a play to be presented in a particular order to audiences, and clearly it is important to consider this order when judging intra-textual meaning, even as extra-textual reference reminds us of a play’s relationship to the world outside the theatre. Both intra-textual and extra-textual meaning must thus be considered by those committed to judgments of critical realism.<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle not only saw *mimesis* drawing on various modes of human perception, he also argued that it was a means by which literary writers creatively imitate aspects of human life through coherent artistic structures and genres.<sup>30</sup> Because the *Poetics* is primarily a study of drama, particularly the tragic drama by Sophocles known as *Oedipus Rex*, it also includes a number of other terms common to any form of drama: plot, character, thought, diction, song, spectacle. The latter two terms were Aristotle’s attempt to capture the meaning that drama expresses only in performance when, as in Hamlet’s advice to “suit the action to the word, and the word to the action” (3.217-18),<sup>31</sup> actors, directors, and a live audience give a new vitality to, and often explore new interpretations of, an old dramatic text. The great diversity of possible performance, as

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics, The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 1998), p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> See David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature*, pp. 27-93.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics, The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 1998), pp. 59-61.

<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. In *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Gen. Eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). All subsequent references to Shakespeare’s works, with the exception of the already cited edition of the *History* or *Tragedy of King Lear*, are to this pioneering edition, which revitalized Shakespeare Studies by its willingness to publish and distinguish quarto and folio texts of Shakespeare plays.



illustrated by the history of the theatre, accounts in no small part for the complexity and vitality of Shakespearean drama.

A wide variety of extra-textual knowledge is thus available to the interpreter of Shakespearean drama, but to what extent can and should such knowledge determine interpretation of the intra-textual world that also exists within a play, where characters speak to each other, and react to each other's words? To consider the complexity of both extra-textual and intra-textual reference, there is a need for clear critical method; as David Lyle Jeffrey and I have elsewhere argued:

those committed to critical realism in literary criticism should seek in every reading to develop a credible interpretation of the literary work, one which reflects awareness of both the literary conventions and artistic structures employed to create meaning within the intratextual, self-contained mimetic universe. They should also endeavor to draw upon a wide range of pertinent interdisciplinary scholarship in a candid effort to trace the possible range of reference that the literary text makes to the vast extra-textual universe.<sup>32</sup>

## Performance Criticism

Every "candid effort" to trace sources must have limits, and it is to be expected that some works of literary criticism focus more directly on the intra-textual reality of a primary text, showing how it speaks directly to a reader or audience, while other approaches to literary criticism can use more secondary sources to explore, in detail, the potential range of a text's extra-textual reference. Part of dramatic intra-textual criticism's value, we must see, can be chronological development, the scene by scene growth of meaning in a play. So far from being 'boring,' a chronological approach allows literary critics to interpret drama as it happens in the theatre; one should not, of course, treat a play as a novel to be read, but as an action to be enacted in time and space. Further, this approach allows us to focus upon individual lines, even single words, to examine how their meaning develops during a play, as often happens in Shakespearean drama.

It is particularly important for dramatic criticism to include the concrete detail of historical performance. "Performance Criticism," as it has commonly been called in Shakespearean Studies for at least the past forty years, must thus have a privileged place within intra-textual criticism of drama. It is an especially important balance to approaches, such as

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<sup>32</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet, *Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 83.

theological interpretation, that stress ideas commonly thought to be external to the theatre, for performance criticism offers a method for confirming or denying the concrete manifestation of abstract ideas within a play; in other words, does the idea found in the play by a critic also seem important to actors performing the play? If so, then the tone and gesture of their performance, or perhaps the design of a set created by a play's producer, can help one to explore a key extra-textual idea, and to limit this exploration to the actual importance of this idea within a particular play.

Christian criticism seeking the 'word' of wisdom in Shakespeare must, therefore, pay close attention to the concrete performance of the play by actors in the 'flesh'. Much of this knowledge must be second-hand, but there is an excellent history of *King Lear* in the theatre, Marvin Rosenberg's *The Masks of King Lear*,<sup>33</sup> and there are studies of contemporary film productions of *Lear*.<sup>34</sup> Scholarly interest in this topic has shown the close connections between textual interpretation and dramatic performance. As for first-hand evidence, the technology of contemporary film now allows close study of multiple performances of the play.<sup>35</sup> One can study these filmed productions as a whole, learning from their director's vision and from their actors.

## Thematic & Biographical Criticism

Yet there can be no doubt that literary criticism must also include abstract discussion of what Aristotle calls an author's "thought," a term often translated in contemporary criticism as "theme". Since the advent of literary theory in the academy, thematic criticism has often been associated with "liberal humanism," but it need not be allied with that set

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<sup>33</sup> Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>34</sup> For a good scholarly overview of 20<sup>th</sup> century productions of *Lear*, see Alexander Leggat, *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> This study considers four productions of *King Lear*. The first three are films featuring three of the greatest contemporary actors playing Lear: Orson Welles' 1953 performance on U.S. television in the *King Lear* directed by Peter Brook, filmed and distributed by the Archive of American Television; Lawrence Olivier's final Shakespearean role as Lear in the 1983 British television production directed by Michael Elliot, filmed and distributed by KULTUR; and Ian McKellen as Lear in the 2007-08 RSC production directed Trevor Nunn, filmed and distributed by PBS. The fourth is the 2014 Stratford, Ontario theatre production, directed by Antoni Cimolino with Colm Feore as Lear; this production was presented as film produced by Barry Averich, and distributed by Melbar Entertainment Group.

of intellectual assumptions. Ideas have always been an important part of great literature, and a text's ideas must be written about if these ideas are to be clarified or even partially understood. A common misconception of the challenge here suggests simply asking an author to clarify meaning, as one might respond to the writer of a letter. Literary works are much more complex than personal letters, however, and biographical criticism was debunked in the early twentieth-century since it tended to reduce literary meaning to historical detail.

Much recent scholarship has clarified the nature of religion in Shakespeare's time, showing that an age often described by Protestant historians as "the Reformation" or defended by Catholics as "the Counter-Reformation" includes far more complex, and often painful, interactions between the Holy Spirit and human reality than can be simplified within theological analysis of primary ideas. Further, a number of Shakespearean biographers have also produced evidence which suggests that the great playwright may have been raised in a Catholic household, and may even have remained a secret 'Recusant' throughout his life. This trend has a long history, dating back to the claim of a late 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican cleric, Richard Davies, that Shakespeare "dyed a Papist."<sup>36</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, according to Shakespearean scholar Edmond Malone, a Jesuit will for Shakespeare's father was found in the attic of the Stratford house where William grew up, suggesting his own father's Catholicism, though this will was subsequently lost and remains disputed.<sup>37</sup> Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century biographer A.L. Rowse asserted strongly that Shakespeare was a conforming member of the English national church in his day (or, as it is later known, the Anglican Church).<sup>38</sup> Peter Milward's research reached an opposite conclusion, however, arguing strongly in favour of Shakespeare's Catholicism,<sup>39</sup> and later 20<sup>th</sup> century Shakespearean biographer Samuel Schoenbaum, made plausible the possibility, for many scholars, that Shakespeare was raised and remained Catholic.<sup>40</sup> Much concerning this question remains controversial, despite recent television series in which

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<sup>36</sup> Qtd. In Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.45-54.

<sup>38</sup> A.L. Rowse, *William Shakespeare: A Biography*. 1963 (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Peter Milward, *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1973).

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.45-54.

learned biographers like Michael Wood and Joseph Pearce have vigorously asserted Shakespeare's Catholicism.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of their views on Shakespeare's biography, however, few Shakespeareans have thus far accepted the conclusions of Claire Asquith's *Shadowplay*,<sup>42</sup> which reads every play in Shakespeare's canon as a response to the religious and political conflicts of his age. While Asquith certainly has historical lessons for all of us, it is ironic that her 'Catholic' Shakespeare, if accepted, tends to focus attention on topical historical details of the age, and less on the 'catholic' or 'universal' meaning possible to find in his writing. The validity of Asquith's assertions should be studied individually, on specific historical terms, but there is no intrinsic reason to prefer the topical level and meaning that her approach focuses upon rather than the major themes of what she herself terms the "famously universal plays."<sup>43</sup>

Rather, one could argue that what is most 'universal' in Shakespeare's plays is also, by definition, most 'Catholic'; while one who takes this view must be wary of the vague generalities of liberal humanism, its terms can be supported by no less a Catholic than St. John Paul II. In one of his many extraordinary encyclicals, *Fides et Ratio* (*Faith and Reason*, studying the role both terms have played in the history of philosophical theology), John Paul II writes: "Every truth—if it really is truth—presents itself as universal, even if it is not the whole truth. If something is true, then it must be true for all people at all times."<sup>44</sup> If Shakespeare's works express true Christian ideas, then it is entirely reasonable to believe, in the famous words of Shakespeare's friend, fellow poet and playwright, and quite possibly fellow Catholic, Ben Jonson, that Shakespeare's art is "not of an age but for all time!" (1.43).<sup>45</sup>

While responsible critics should undoubtedly learn from biographical criticism, and historical allusion, the existing evidence of Shakespeare's own personal beliefs is not entirely clear. The preface of Shakespeare's will, and his gravestone, combined with the prevalence of biblical

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, dvd (PBS, 2004); Joseph Pearce, *The Quest for Shakespeare*, dvd (EWTN, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Claire Asquith, *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Claire Asquith, *Shadowplay*, xv.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of my Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition: The Major Authors. Gen. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York & London: Norton, 2006), pp. 648-650.

allusions throughout his works, do strongly suggest Christian belief.<sup>46</sup> Therefore it is reasonable to interpret such beliefs or allusions within the broad range of Christian thought, especially the scripture that is the Holy Bible, that is available to people of his divided age. However, it may not be possible, unless clearer evidence is found, for those living this side of heaven to know which of the conflicting Christian groups in his own age Shakespeare himself felt most closely aligned with. For better or worse, one may have to rest with the ambivalent conclusion of New Historicist Dymrna Callaghan: "we may not know decisively if Shakespeare was a Catholic; but crucially, neither do we know that he was a stalwart Protestant."<sup>47</sup> More important than biographical knowledge must be our scholarly understanding of the religious ideas found throughout his brilliant literary works, and our capacity to appreciate the aesthetic forms that Shakespeare uses to convey these ideas.

## Personal Biography

It has become a *de rigueur* element of contemporary literary criticism to admit biases that may affect one's interpretation of controversial questions, even well documented facts of history. Let me state freely that I am a Roman Catholic, committed by infant baptism and adult confirmation, unusual perhaps only in having had very significant relationships with other streams of the Christian faith; I am married to a Christian Reformed woman, teach now at a Baptist university, and was mentored professionally by a Ukrainian Catholic and by an ecumenical Anglican. Yet the importance of such labels, and the beliefs they imply, should not be exaggerated. I am not, as one might hope, a shining light of 'evangelical catholicism'; I am a sinner, saved by Christ in this life, for the next, most comfortable with the traditional Eastern Orthodox prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

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<sup>46</sup> The opening paragraph of Shakespeare's will reads, with spelling modernized: "That is to say first I commend my soul into the hands of God my creator hoping & assuredly believing through the merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made partaking of life everlasting" [spelling modernized]. Shakespeare's gravestone reads: "Good Friend for Jesus sake forbear / To dig the dust enclosed here / Blessed be the man that spares these stones / And curst be he that moves my bones" [spelling modernized]. Qtd. in "Appendix B: Records, Documents, and Allusions," in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Gen. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 1832-1835.

<sup>47</sup> Dymrna Callaghan, *Who Was William Shakespeare: An Introduction to the Life and Works*, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 51.

Intellectually, I value truth, especially as it illuminates and is illuminated by the way and life of Christ, and therefore I value the witness of disciples of Christ from a wide variety of traditions, even while giving priority to the testimony of Christ's first apostles, and continuing to trust in the capacity of the Holy Spirit to allow this testimony to be passed on from age to age within the Church. Yet there are important differences between scholars within and without of a religious tradition, and important differences dependent on one's personal experience within our broader culture.

From the outside, Protestants tend to term 'Catholic' whatever is distinct from their own tradition, but a Catholic raised under the pastoral leadership of John Paul II, and aware of the *ressourcement* theology that gave us the Second Vatican Council, commit to that which Christ and his Church reveal to be universally true. This is not new; it is what St. Paul advises when he calls us to "keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"; "whatsoever things are true," Paul exhorts us: "think on these things" (Phillippians 4:7-8). Of course, the ability to think clearly of those things which are true rather than false is an ongoing human struggle, and those within the Church, and thankful for its graces, are not exempt from the fallen nature that exists both within our own hearts and outside us, in the world. This realm would be ruled by "the prince of this world" if, in Jesus's own words, Christ were not "lifted up from the earth" and able to "draw all men unto" Himself (John 12: 31-32).

Clearly, my own biography predisposes me to a 'Catholic' interpretation of Shakespearean drama, as is both natural and expected. It is impossible to be entirely free of historical or personal bias in scholarship; it is natural that people from a specific cultural background tend to notice, in life or in art, things that are familiar to their own experience. This is true whether visiting a foreign country or reading a book; as C.S. Lewis noted, an old book, in particular, conveys elements of a culture that must be very foreign, yet in some ways is still alive.<sup>48</sup> In such experiences, it is easy to notice the familiar, or even to practice an open-minded ecumenism that learns from other streams of Christian tradition. It is harder, however, to distinguish truth and error. To borrow a key term from the philosophy of science, it is important to attempt to 'falsify' key theories, as well as confirm their validity. To aim for 'critical realism', one absolutely needs the community of scholars, academics, historians, philosophers, within and without of the institutional church.

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<sup>48</sup> C.S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 200-207.

Anyone seeking a 'catholic' understanding of *King Lear*, then, may be aware of historical contexts but must not seek a strictly 'historicist' interpretation, regardless of one's view of Shakespeare's own biography. As John Paul II says of interpreting scripture in *Fides et Ratio*,

Human language may be conditioned by history and constricted in other ways, but the human being can still express truths which surpass the phenomenon of language. Truth can never be confined to time and culture; in history it is known, but it also reaches beyond history.<sup>49</sup>

## History, Genre and Text in *King Lear*

In general, of course, neither a historical author's nor audience's worldview can prove the potential meanings of a particular work of art, but considering this important source is part of being open to the influence of a historical period upon any literary work. In that sense, extra-textual theological knowledge is similar to knowledge of Renaissance culture in general, whether political, economic, or social. *King Lear* poses a particular challenge, however, in that the play has a clear setting, the ancient world of Britain often called "Albion," yet throughout the play there are anachronistic references to later historical persons, texts, or events, such as the allusion to the "Child Roland" (3.4. 169), generally understood to be a reference to the Medieval French poem, "La Chanson de Roland". Such anachronisms give the play the feel of a universal myth rather than historical chronicle.

Complicating interpretation of *Lear* further is our knowledge of clear textual sources of the play, including a different version of the play published in 1605 but probably first performed in the 1590s, *King Leir*.<sup>50</sup> As well, there are many earlier versions of the legend of "Leir," plus the existence of two differing early texts of Shakespeare's play, the 1608 quarto and the 1623 folio texts. The play or legend of *Leir* can be studied to note Shakespeare's use or alteration of the plot and key characters, though many critics have done so and remain in conflict over fundamental interpretive questions. The textual question seems similarly unresolvable, though some choice seems necessary, if only due to the fundamental importance of genre in the interpretation of Shakespearean drama; the

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<sup>49</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), p. 139.

<sup>50</sup> "The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Three Daughters," In *William Shakespeare: King Lear*. 1605. Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Grace Ioppolo (New York & London: Norton, 2008), pp. 137-144.

quarto text's title is, "The History of *King Lear*," while the folio title is, "The Tragedy of *King Lear*."

Typically, Shakespearean history plays include political motifs indirectly relevant to the Tudor or Stuart monarchs of the day, and in this regard *King Lear* may be no exception. Yet the folio text of 1623 adds about 100 lines but also deletes close to 300 lines from the quarto text. For this reason, most subsequent publications of the play are conflated according to a contemporary editor's textual choices. While the quarto's and folio's plots are not fundamentally different, the varying lines affect some characters portrayal and, most significantly, alter key lines in the play's final act.

Given that close study of the play's texts strongly suggests that the Folio text represents some key revisions, and that Shakespeare himself had ample time to authorize this revision, the Folio text is primarily used in the discussion that follows. While the deletions possibly eased production of an already long play, they may also represent an aesthetic form that more directly conveys the play's primary tragedies, and as such includes both the original historical emphasis and lines essential to the tragic genre. Yet while our aesthetic focus is the text of *King Lear* in the First Folio, elements of the Quarto text can also contribute to the play's dramatic meaning.

On the topic of textual scholarship, and clearly important for any Christian approach to *King Lear*, the unique textual nature of the Christian Bible must also be noted. On one hand, it is an important though sometimes controversial element of Christian tradition, in contrast to Islam, that multiple translations of scripture are possible, in various vernaculars, because the referents of scriptural meaning, even in figurative language, are sufficiently clear, especially the divine and human referent Who is Christ. Words point us towards meaning through scripture, but the Word who became Flesh in history speaks clearly and authoritatively throughout time and for all eternity. This "Word," according to Christian doctrine, was "with God" and "was God" (John 1:1) before the Word "became flesh" (John 1:14), and St. Paul further explains, "by him were all things created" (Colossians 1:16). All creation thus witnesses to Christ, and His Father, and any confusion of understanding must also encounter the "Comforter" Who leads us "into all truth," (John 16:13), the Holy Spirit. Thus the Trinitarian nature of Christian doctrine fundamentally affects the reception and interpretation of any edition of Christian scripture, and for this reason multiple editions of the Bible can all be called the 'Word of God'.



On the other hand, all editions of the Bible reflect something of the historical conditions under which this 'Book of books' is compiled, and historical authors, of course, have access only to editions published during their age. Nevertheless, for biblical allusions, the text chosen here is one certainly published after the writing of *King Lear*, the 1611 King James Version, rather than earlier translations such as the Geneva or Doauy-Rheims bibles which Shakespeare almost certainly knew before *Lear* was first performed. This choice is made here not because of the possibility that the KJV may have been used for the revision of *Lear*, but rather because of the KJV's poetic capacity to illuminate the meaning of scripture.

Many will find this an odd choice for a 'Catholic' approach to Shakespeare, given King James I's treatment of Catholics, especially following the 'Gunpowder Plot' of 1605. Yet the 1611 KJV did include the "apocrypha" of books found in the Septuagint, the Greek Bible of the early Christians, which today is known as the 'Catholic' Bible because such "apocrypha" is not included in 'Protestant' Bibles. Apocryphal books do provide the Biblical names for both of Shakespeare's daughters, Judith and Susanna, yet this cannot prove Shakespeare's worldview any more than his son's name, Hamnet, who died young at 11 in 1596, can reveal the mystery at the heart of the famous play with (almost) the same name. Nor can the use of the KJV be justified by the theory that Shakespeare was part of the KJV translation team because the 46<sup>th</sup> word of its Psalm 46 is "Shake," while the 46<sup>th</sup> word from its end is "Spear". That this Psalm might have been translated in 1610, Shakespeare's 46<sup>th</sup> year, does not prove that Shakespeare was part of the translation team of the 1611 KJV,<sup>51</sup> though there are other places in Shakespeare's texts where "Gentle Will" seems to leave an "authorial signature" not unlike that practiced by other Medieval and Renaissance authors.<sup>52</sup>

Regardless of the validity of this theory, the KJV is cited here not because of its historical influence, in Shakespeare's time or subsequently, but rather due to its literary quality, its poetry or, one could say, its own 'theological aesthetic', which here is being used to comment upon the religious meaning and value of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. For this project, the theological thought, and Trinitarian reality, of the Bible, is much more important to understanding *Lear* than the letter of diverse editions. Though

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<sup>51</sup> The legend of Shakespeare as KJV translator is discussed in James Black's "Edified by the Margent: Shakespeare and the Bible," (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1979).

<sup>52</sup> The most obvious example of this is Sonnet 135, though another possibility might be *As You Like It* 5.1.

justifiable hermeneutically, this is clearly a value judgment related to my chosen approach to the play, theological aesthetics.

## Theological Aesthetics, Worldview, and Evaluative Literary Criticism

Value judgments, as argued elsewhere,<sup>53</sup> are an essential element of literary criticism. It is fundamental to the human spirit that we desire to know not only what any sign or symbol means, but whether and how such might be valuable, to ourselves or others. In terms of philosophical aesthetics, questions of meaning lead to questions of being, so that one wonders whether an imagined world portrays elements of reality, whether historical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. Drawn to the beauty of imaginative worlds, we also wonder whether they portray goodness and truth that is real in our world as well. Yet any leap from “judgments of meaning” to “judgments of value” requires more than merely speculation; rational argument and a coherent critical method are also required. Why does theological aesthetics offer such a method?

An obvious but secondary reason is clarification of the central theological issues that becomes possible when such issues are foregrounded rather than assumed in the manner often practiced by both liberal humanist or Nietzschean criticism. Further, a coherent approach allows one to bring a clear perspective to the already developed debate that exists between prior Christian approaches to *King Lear*, and the diverse evaluative arguments that themselves are often based on a developed world-view, whether religious or not. Such debate is not to be avoided, but welcomed by a Christian critic seeking to make true judgments of meaning and to know the true value of this great play. At the same time, writing or studying theology does not itself ensure being informed by the faith with the “theistic realism” elsewhere commended;<sup>54</sup> having even a fraction of “the mind of Christ” clearly requires the instruction and frequent correction of the broader Christian community.

Perhaps more importantly, one of the key insights of Eric Auerbach’s landmark book, *Mimesis*,<sup>55</sup> is that the influence of religious worldview is never reducible to historical allusions, but rather affects the form, tone, and theme of every aspect of a literary masterpiece. To some extent, the

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<sup>53</sup> Jeffrey and Maillet, pp. 85-91.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-93.

<sup>55</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 1953 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957).

relationship between worldview and the *Lear* debate can already be seen occurring amongst the most influential atheistic and agnostic critics of the play. W.R. Elton's *King Lear and the Gods* finds in the play "no redemption," "only suffering, tears, pity, and loss—and illusion."<sup>56</sup> The admittance of "illusion" is, of course, Elton's response to the conclusion of the play. In many ways, Elton's influence was related to the popularity of mid-twentieth century philosophy, most often associated with Sartre, that was often atheistic, nihilistic, and existentialist.

Rational argument against Elton, however, comes very ably from the agnostic pen of Muir, who argues that "Elton's conclusion does not follow inevitably from the evidence he has collected."<sup>57</sup> As Muir skeptically but logically asserts, it does not prove anything in particular about religious metaphysics if the play's "pagan gods, whether imaginary or not, should answer prayers."<sup>58</sup> In Muir's own agnostic viewpoint, *King Lear*

starts from the hypothesis... that the gods are indifferent, or hostile, or inexplicable, or even a man-made fiction, and there is no after-life in which the injustices of life on earth may be set right. It follows that human beings are entirely responsible for their actions, and that if these lead to disaster, the tragedy is absolute... Shakespeare seems to be saying to his audience: "Let us assume for the purposes of this play, not for other plays, that the Christian belief in heaven and hell may be a delusion; that God, if God exists, is hidden and unknowable." How should we then conduct our lives? On what principles should we try to organize society? What do men need?<sup>59</sup>

Yet, like many liberal humanists, Muir goes on to argue that the play's answers to these excellent questions are "faith, hope, and charity, the virtues advocated by all the great religious teachers"; therefore, though the play leaves us "deprived of Christian hope," Muir still believes that *Lear* teaches us to be "bound by Christian ethic".<sup>60</sup> The logic of ethics without metaphysical foundations has been so thoroughly critiqued by post-modern Nietzschean critics that no response is necessary here, except to point out that how and why Muir's conclusion follows is not clear. Muir does observe that in *King Lear* "nearly all the characters make statements about the gods," and that "the evil characters in *King Lear* are nearly all

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<sup>56</sup> Elton, p. 334.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare: King Lear*, Penguin Critical Studies (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44-45.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

atheists,”<sup>61</sup> then further argues against Elton by claiming that “in the total design of the play, Gloucester’s idea that the gods torture us for their sport needs to be answered by his son’s declaration that the gods are just.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, it is necessary to consider how the meaning of the ‘gods’ often cited in the play develops within the play, and varies according to the context in which diverse characters speak such lines. In traditional monotheistic theology, one often speaks of “greater” or “lesser” gods, as well as “the One Supreme God”. Yet Muir concludes his argument by returning to agnosticism and authorial intention: “it is not necessary to assume that Shakespeare ascribed to either view,”<sup>63</sup> that is, either an atheist or theist viewpoint. As already stated, however, it is my view that authorial intention is not the central issue; accurate interpretation and evaluation is.

It is perhaps worthwhile, at this point, to also respond to a text which, especially in Christian circles, is often brought up to object to evaluative literary criticism, C.S. Lewis’ often superb *An Experiment in Criticism*.<sup>64</sup> I am sympathetic to many of Lewis’ main points, but obviously differ with Ch. 8, “On Misreading by the Literary,” where Lewis argues that it is an error of the “literary” reader to evaluate a text according to the reader’s evaluation of an author’s “philosophy of life”.<sup>65</sup> On Lewis’ view, only the aesthetic skill of an author, an author’s ability to craft “complex and carefully made objects,”<sup>66</sup> causes one to prefer one text over another. Lewis does allow that one can gain knowledge of “a great deal of information about the world we live in” from novels read “between the age of twelve and twenty.”<sup>67</sup> However, in Lewis’ view, imaginative literature is not the place for philosophical or theological discernment; he asks, “Who in his ordinary senses would try to decide between the claims of materialism and theism by reading Lucretius and Dante?”<sup>68</sup> For his part, Lewis says, “I read Lucretius and Dante at a time when (by and large) I agreed with Lucretius. I have read them since I came (by and large) to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>64</sup> C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*. 1961. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

agree with Dante. I cannot find that this has much altered my experience, or at all altered my evaluation, of either."<sup>69</sup>

The objectivity and rationality of Lewis is always commendable, and usually persuades, but we cannot avoid the fact that many humans (Lewis himself was no exception) do not have a developed philosophy or theology by the age of twenty, and many gain such through the influence of great sacred art. One must acknowledge that there are authors, such as Lewis himself, whose art includes a highly developed philosophical theology that the living God would want to be shared with potential believers. Accurate criticism of such texts must include description of this theology, and can certainly also include evaluation of such texts within a critic's broadest horizons. This seems to me a normal and valuable process. Can one really believe that the substantive philosophy or theology found within an artistic text makes absolutely no difference to how we value that text? It can certainly be granted that there can be good reasons for critics to value an author whose worldview one largely disputes; however, to respond to the case that Lewis himself brings up, can it really make no difference whether or not one believes that purgatory exists as to how much one then values that third of *The Divine Comedy*? One can value the *Purgatorio* for other reasons, of course, or deny that Dante's vision of the afterworld could at all be accurate, but at least for Christians there must be aspects of that text—such as, for example, its presentation of how the seven deadly sins enslave human nature or how God frees our nature from these sins—which one must accept as true or reject as false. This evaluation not only affects our experience while reading the text, but perhaps more importantly helps to determine how much of the text we remember, and whether or not we allow it to substantially alter our own "philosophy of life".

## Theology and Transcendentals

If interpretation can begin, however, with intra-textual evidence aware of potential extra-textual intention, it is also possible to move the other way, from extra-textual belief that determines evaluation to intra-textual interpretation grounded in exegetics, or what we 'see' in a text. For both revelation and critical method, we should recall the poetic phrase of Heraclitus, borrowed so aptly by T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "the way up

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

and the way down are one and the same.”<sup>70</sup> This truth is at the heart of the value of theological aesthetics, but to appreciate the potential of this method one first requires, in most cases, rational explanation rather than mystical vision.

To appreciate the values and challenges inherent in a theological approach to Shakespeare, it is instructive to become aware of similar challenges faced in Biblical Hermeneutics. One might expect this field to be radically different, given that it must consider a text often regarded as sacred, while even the more religiously inclined interpreter of Shakespeare must acknowledge some secular elements of the playwright’s works. Even at the risk of over-simplification, however, one notices some striking similarities between the two fields. First, the growth of the “historical-critical” method in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries leads to the professionalization of biblical scholarship, and the subsequent tendency to focus attention upon a narrowly human author-audience relationship, and to discuss only empirically verifiable elements of the text; flora, fauna, and archeology, rather than the self-communication of the living God. As Jens Zimmerman puts it in his excellent overview of Protestant and contemporary German hermeneutics,<sup>71</sup> “modern hermeneutics,” it is fair to say, “has become extremely squeamish about the knowledge of God,” for often the “notion of revelation and particular religion are viewed with suspicion”.<sup>72</sup> In somewhat similar fashion, the initial influence of liberal humanism, through 19<sup>th</sup> century poet and critic Matthew Arnold and 20<sup>th</sup> century British academics such as F.R. Leavis, and the subsequent dominance of “New Criticism” within departments of English in universities, results in a narrow focus upon ‘the text itself,’ those empirical elements of the text that can be verified by the ‘value-free’ approach of any ‘disinterested’ critic.<sup>73</sup> Author-audience relationships are vaguely discussed, but the “self-enclosed universe” of the literary text, to use Northrop Frye’s terms,<sup>74</sup> need not be related to a broader universe of ideas, let alone to the Creator of that universe.

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<sup>70</sup> Heraclitus, Fragment 60, in T.M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Zimmerman, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> See Peter Barry, “Liberal Humanism,” in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp.

<sup>74</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 3-29.