Shakespeare, Christianity and Italian Paganism

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By

Eric Harber

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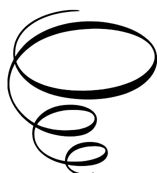

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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-5444-9
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-5444-3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research began as an exploratory work-in-progress offering at Sussex University with A. D. Nuttall. It could never have been written without the work of Philip Hughes, Patrick McGrath, Quentin Skinner, Susan Brigden, Christopher Haigh, Arthur Monahan, Eamon Duffy, and Questier and Lake, to name but a few.

The first draft was discussed and circulated privately more than twenty years ago. Early criticism and advice came from Nicholas Boyle, the late Colin Gardner, Prof. Keith Hanley, and the late Anne Barton; from Dr Dermot Fenlon who has also looked at a revised version; the late Geoffrey Durrant, *mens praeclarus.* George Hunter saw early versions, as did Jacques Berthoud and Graham Pechey. Alan Griffiths gave advice on the Latin translations. Thanks are due to Prof. Philip Payne, who gave encouragement and made crucial suggestions for correcting and improving the text in all its stages. Especial thanks are also due to Gary Peters for reading the manuscript, and to Amanda Millar of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for her help in its preparation. Mary Harber made copious notes for me on each chapter.

A Conference at the University of Montpellier, heard aspects of the mythology used by Shakespeare across his plays, including what he took from Italian sources.

More recently, incidental to a Conference at Rhodes University in South Africa the opportunity arose for similar discussions on sources to take place.

Since then, much has been written on the religious influences on Shakespeare's plays—or on making claims of their absence. These have taken into account the shifting sands that imperilled Christianity in Shakespeare's lifetime, of which he was aware.

If 'there have been reservations about performance as a means of interpreting the dramatic text,'[1] this study has attempted to 'recover meanings'. But the myths Shakespeare used will determine how the text should be performed. Most texts and interpretations follow 'the way of the chameleon,' to borrow Yeats's phrase, and can have a contemporary reference as well as being of universal significance.

The quotations in this book are taken from: The Riverside Shakespeare (Second Edition); The Complete Text, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston New York (1997), general and textual editor: G. Blakemore Evans, assisted

by J.J. M. Tobin. Editors: Herschel Baker; Anne Barton; Frank Kermode; Harry Levin; Hallett Smith; Marie Edel.

Notes

1. W. B. Worthen, 'The Rhetoric of Performance Criticism,' in *Shakespeare in Performance*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 63.

FOREWORD

In discussing the religious background to Shakespeare's plays, criticism is as good as its scholarship; that is, as good as its sources. The reference to the 'fall of a sparrow' in *Hamlet* could be taken only as far as Matthew 10:29, as Randall Martin does in his chapter in *Renaissance Shakespeare*,[1] but if the source is traced further, to Calvin's *Institutes*, then a different consideration of the 'Providence' that determines the 'fall' will command attention. If the plays are seen to be many-faceted, as Hannibal Hamlin describes *King Lear*, it might be thought that readings are uncertain, however well-researched. Yet, final or not, a reading that considers the religious pointers will speak to a receptive reader's convictions, just as the play does, and be judged accordingly.

From a modern perspective, a critic might talk of a character in a play suffering 'delusions,' not having 'developed the habits of mind' necessary to cope with a sudden crisis: 'he is not a person well-trained in self-control.'[2] Treating characters as if they were contemporaries frees the critics from the need to see them in dialogue with their historical context. They invent dramatic fictions that hardly address the text at all.

Though close textual analysis is attempted in this book, the 'kind, of awareness that is received from an image is, of its essence, not wholly delimitable by words and not always appreciated in the sense of revealing a conscious grasp of patterns of composition and allusion.'[3]

Some critics reserve the right to be the exception to what they claim to be the rule. Malcolm Evans, quoted in 'Maimed Rites/Signifying Nothing,'[4] repeatedly attacks a soft target: what he calls A. D. Nuttall's 'mantra,' 'experience,' as if 'decentring the human' experience in criticism were not itself choosing the locus of 'experience' itself. Jonathan Bate has suggested that there is nothing conclusive in interpreting Shakespeare's plays: they are subject to 'undecidability...a condition of nature.'[5] Yet, like a number of relativists, he has his own Archimedes lever: the definable variables that are at the basis of this 'condition.' These decide what is undecidable.

It is daunting to traverse the minefield of some recent critical tendencies. Establishing the context of a play in order to elucidate its content must avoid 'the kind of antiquarianism' supposedly found in some 'post-historicist evaluations.'[6] But the substrate of contemporary ideologies cannot be ignored; the prevailing—or minority—views are different from those of the present. 'Texts and contexts are related dynamically.'[7] Speculation, such as

linking 'the *Jews*' journey from slavery to freedom' to Othello's account of his being 'redeemed' from captivity into slavery, is not supported with evidence;[8] it might seem far-fetched.

There are critics who are intent on showing the strands of a Christian pattern in several of the plays, going even as far as straining the meaning to see a 'parody of the Christian Mass in Macbeth's instruction to 'strike up the bell,'' as Maria Fahey does, referring to Roy Battenhouse in *Metaphor and Shakespearean Drama.*[9] Sarah Beckwith comes closest to describing the debate in Shakespeare's plays as being between the contesting versions of early modern Christianity, though she does not show how this unfolds in tragic roles, such as that of Banquo who is in such contrast to Macbeth.

In discussing *The Winter's Tale,* she goes as far as to suggest that it is a Christian play, tending towards Catholicism.[10] It is 'in the final resurrection of his hopes and loves that Leontes' 'remorse has awakened him to the reality of Hermione…her new presencing.' This 'must come, like grace, through the very medium of religious theatre.' Beckwith does not explain the nature of this 'Resurrection.' The power of this 'new presencing' is brought about with the recuperative power of Hermione, at least in part, as a type of Ceres, a *Ceres Hermionensis*, the pagan goddess of renewal in nature, which is a force that supplants the rites of Christianity (as is shown in Chapter 20).

There is a radical view implicit in most of the plays, so it cannot be assumed that Shakespeare's political ideology, drawn from his day, is conservative, as is suggested by Ton Hoenslaar:[11] the opposite may be true. The plays inevitably gives attention to different kinds of 'conflict' as their common subject, though the structures, within which solutions are to be found, vary widely. D. S. Kastan[12] has claimed that Shakespeare's religious belief 'is not the master narrative that either motivates or explains the plays' narrative.' There are several religious perspectives; several religious beliefs. Which is he referring to? Critics such as Kastan cannot see the trees for the wood. Shakespeare was aware of the sharp edges of Elizabethan and Jacobean religious controversies. These contributed to the formation of his plots and his characters. Competing versions of Christianity made him turn to 'pagan' mythology to restore the 'miracle' of life that the new religion denied: for example, '*tempestatem averter*.' This eliminates the claimed relevance of 'Pygmalion' or 'Memory Theatre' to *The Winter's Tale*, a claim that appeals to more than one critic. In *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre*,[13] Lynda Perkins Wilder is concerned only with the 'past', and how a character might have been controlled; not with the freedom of the present and the life it brings. The regeneration of nature in inauspicious circumstances cannot be ignored. The present is free only because the past has transformed it.

There is a 'cyclic' or 'dichotomising' tendency in historical scholarship concerned with that period, alternatively denying or emphasising the similarities of Catholic and Protestant beliefs. The 'Reformation' maintained continuity with the past, or was a break with the past, introducing new doctrines[14] (which were challenged by theologians of the traditional religion) that were inseparable from politics, something Catholics, with whatever motives, could hardly ignore. It has to be decided whether 'the plays are primarily functions of history or of the ideological moment of the turn of the seventeenth century.'[15] In what way did the 'free play of Shakespeare's creative intelligence'—in his plays—focus on resolving the widely diverse issues of the day? It is not incumbent on this writer to 'disentangle polemic from reality.' Both would determine the perspectives borrowed from the theological writings, Protestant and Catholic that Shakespeare might have used or rejected. This would entail, not merely showing the differences and the sharp arguments that defined them as well as 'the huge area of overlap,'[16] but also which doctrines were the basis of the arguments that seem to have escaped the attention of modern specialist writers on the period.

Paul Stevens has taken issue with Anthony Dawson's claim[17] that, in Shakespeare's time not only was the theatre's purpose secular but, more importantly, in its *performance*, that is, in its principal mode of communication. 'It was irremediably alien to all authoritative discourse, not least the sacred discourse of religion—for the truth is that no authoritative discourse could withstand the essentially unstable dialogism of theatrical performance, the constant play of competing and contradictory voices. The epiphanic moments it offers are real, but not other-worldly.'[18] However, there are exceptions to this in plays as different as *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter's Tale.*

For Shakespeare, the staging of history, including mythological enlargements of history, was a conscious reforming and transvaluing of the past.[19] H. R. D. Andes, in his Preface to *Shakespeare's Books*, asks the question: What were Shakespeare's chief sources? He mentions Holinshed, Plutarch, the Bible and Ovid. After providing an exhaustive list of the others, he comments: 'There is no saying where we should stop.'[20] L. G. Gyraldus[21] pre-eminently should be added to the list. John Wilks has shown that the challenge Shakespeare faced was the antinomianism of Protestantism. For this an answer outside the Christianity of the day had to be found. John Mebane, in his book *Renaissance Magic*, [22] examines Cornelius Agrippa and Ficino in some detail to show alternatives to a Christian spirituality, but he does not have the perspective he would have found in L.G. Gyraldus. This mythographer is Shakespeare's main source of magic and myth for two

of the last plays. Having traced some of the sources, Colin Still has argued that there was a 'close affinity between pagan myths and ritual on the one hand, and the mysteries of the Christian religion on the other.'[22] He notes that 'the aspirant initiate in the mystery and fertility rites was searching for Persephone,'[23] and links Miranda with Persephone.[24] A recent book, *The World of Mr Casaubon,*[25] taking its cue from the 'Casaubon' of *Middlemarch*, has looked at the literature of the nineteenth century that attempted to discover the 'key to all mythologies.' As with those studies, the author overlooks the successful quest for the 'Samothracian' religion achieved by the Italian mythographer L. G. Gyraldus. Kidd's only note in that connection is a reference to the 'Cabeiri' (p. 7),[26,] but he does not follow it up.

The pagan mythology that was collected under the grouping of 'Samothrace' was used by Shakespeare. Recently the island of that name has attracted interest with the mapping of places where relics of friezes of dancers and a dance floor are described as a 'locus with magnetic power to attract a divinity or lover...; in short, a theatron for recreating and manipulating the natural and supernatural worlds.'[27] So, 'Demeter and Persephone or Kybele played a major role' in the dancing of the mystery rites in honour of the Great Gods of Samothrace.[28] W. B. Yeats had an inkling of this in 'Byzantium,' where he refers to the 'marbles of the dancing floor.'

The use of the mystery religion can be seen to resolve the antinomianism of Protestant theology and the exclusively male presence in both Catholic and Protestant religious ritual; possibly an underlying purpose of the last plays. The introduction of pagan mythology serves this purpose. Consulting Gyraldus would answer the question whether 'new research on the sources of *The Tempest*' should be pursued or not.[29] In the last chapter a theory of drama has been outlined here which shows how role-playing was used (something Mebane touches on), aided by symbolic language. This countered the view of Elizabethan Puritanism, with its literal approach to language that served a spirituality that was to be primarily ethical; and directed 'inward'. A Catholic appraisal of this is touched on in the Conclusion.

This work is based on a close reading of the text but asks wider questions; bearing in mind John Russell Brown's belief that, 'in Shakespeare's texts, a sub-textual reality is nearly always present. What is said may only be part of an inner drama'.[30] The unconscious drift of a character's mood might give a different message. If the 'new criticism' 'discriminated against 'performance' as a means of interpreting the dramatic text,'[31] the myths Shakespeare used affirm 'performance' as essential to express meaning.

Notes

1. *Renaissance Shakespeare: Shakespeare's Renaissances*, ed. Martin Prochazka et al. (Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2014), p. 46.
2. Gregory Currie, 'Agency and Repentance in '*The Winter's Tale*,' in *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, ed. Michael Bristol (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 180.
3. Stuart Sillars, 'Close Reading,' in *Shakespeare Closely Read*, ed. Frank Occhiogrosso (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), p. 47.
4. Malcolm Evans, 'Language Overview,' in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. Emma Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 183.
5. Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, (London: Picador, 1997), p. 331.
6. Cary DiPietro, 'Presentism, Anachronism and the Case of Titus Andronicus,' in *Shakespeare and the Urgency of the Now*, ed. Cary Dipietro and Hugh Grady (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 19.
7. David Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 163.
8. Nicholas Tredell referring to a claim by Julia Lupton in his chapter 'Religions and Reformations,' in *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), p. 156.
9. Maria Fahey, *Metaphor and Shakespearean Drama*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 94.
10. Sarah Beckwith, 'Shakespeare's Resurrections,' in *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), Ch. 6 passim, and p. 141.
11. Ton Hoenselaar, 'Shakespeare's History Plays,' in *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Magreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 210.
12. David Kastan, *A Will to Believe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 40.
13. Lynda Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre*, (Cambridge: C. U. P. 2010), p. 172.
14. See, Erica Birrell, 'A Midsummer Night's Symposium,' in *Shakespeare and the Translation of Identity,* ed. Liz Oakley-Brown, (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 51. (This play is an exception).
15. Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 81.
16. Michael Lake and Peter Questier, eds., *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church: c.1560-1660* (Boydell & Brewster, 2000), p. xvi.
17. Anthony Dawson, 'Shakespeare and Secular Performance,' in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Performance*, ed. Patricia Badir and Paul Yachnin (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 86.
18. Paul Stevens, 'Hamlet, Henry VIII and the question of religion,' in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. Paul Loewenstein and David Witmore, (Cambridge: C. U. P. 2015), p. 236.
19. DiPietro, *Shakespeare and the Urgency of the Now*, p. 19.
20. H. R. D. Andes, *Shakespeare's Books*, (Berlin: G. Remer, 1903), pp. xx-23.
21. L. G. Gyraldus, *Opera Quae Extant Omnia*, (Basileae, 1580).

22. Colin Still, *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). 23. Cecil Palmer, 'A Study of 'The Tempest,' (1921), in Still, *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, p. 206.
24. Still, *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, p. 115.
25. Colin Kidd, *The World of Mr Casaubon*, (Cambridge: C. U. P. 2016), e.g. p.13.
26. Ibid. p. 7.
27. Steve Lonsdale quoted in Bonna Wescoat, 'Coming and Going in the sanctuary of the great gods,' in *Architecture of the Sacred,* ed. Bonna Wescoat and Robert Ousterhout (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 86.
28. Clemente Marconi, 'Choroi, Theoriai,' in *Samothracian Connections,* ed. Olga Pallagia and Bonna Wescoat (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010).
29. Roger Stritmatter and Lynn Kositsky, *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's The Tempest*, (Jefferson: North Carolina: MacFarland and Company, 2013), p. 199.
30. John Russell Brown, *Studying Shakespeare*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), p. 82.
31. W. B. Worthen, 'The Rhetoric of Performance Criticism,' *Shakespeare in Performance*, ed. R. Shaughnessy, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) p. 63.

PREFACE

A SELECT SURVEY OF CRITICISM

In the last fifty years opinions have multiplied regarding Shakespeare's religion or the lack of it. To a greater or lesser degree, these opinions have taken into account the shifting sands that imperilled religion of different shades in his lifetime, all of which he was able to discern.

'I don't think that Shakespeare wrote Christian plays, or unchristian ones either...'[1]It has been said he was a 'conformist' who 'took the outer world for granted and hardly troubled [himself] with religion.'[2] One of the root principles of Shakespeare's art, it was thought, was that the religious element should be diffuse, and provisional[3] given that the action of the plays mostly took place in secular surroundings. There are critics who would not be satisfied with that. Recently, Brian Cummings has said of his current research on the playwright, that religion is the last great mystery of Shakespeare studies. He believes this has long been one of the most controversial subjects: to know his religious beliefs, as to know his political views, has seemed like the holy grail.[4]

In the introduction to their recent collection of essays on *Shakespeare and Religion*, [5] Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti describe the lengths to which persecuted Catholics were forced to go to adhere to their faith. An essay by Sarah Beckwith on the Catholic — Augustinian — elements in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, and one by Hannibal Hamlin on the Protestant—Job and Calvinistic—elements in King Lear, give some idea of the versions of Christianity that contribute to the make-up of the characters of the plays. Julia Lupton makes a connection between Othello's state of mind and Job. No writer shows how Christianity is modified by paganism in the plays: when, for example, Lear swears by the 'sacred radiance of the sun'; Othello identifies with 'Prometheus.' 'Regeneration' is as much a pagan process as a Christian one.

It has been suggested that Shakespeare belonged to an established Reformation culture that had made Roman Catholicism redundant, his plays touching on only such elements of theology as were shared by Anglican, Puritan and Catholic beliefs. Moderate Anglicans looked back to the traditions and authority of the Catholic order: 'The age which nurtured

Shakespeare's own beliefs still inherited its doctrines and cosmology more or less unchanged from the Middle Ages.'[7] Shakespeare saw the Reformation as, if not a rupture, then a break with the past: each variety of Christianity dissenting from the other, sometimes violently. He used the secular views that emerged from these disagreements, as well as their beliefs. In *The Passions of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*,[8] Arthur Kirsh repeats the view that 'the fidelity of Shakespeare's representation of the soul of his age is at least part of what enables his plays to live beyond that age,' so if the 'emotional and spiritual roots' of the plays are sought, then the religious foundation of the plays cannot be overlooked. They are Christian and pagan; Protestant, Catholic, and 'Samothracian.'

It was impossible for Shakespeare to have been unaware of the polemical outpourings that resulted from the 'religious controversies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods that affected the course of their everyday social interactions.'[9] If Peter Marshall is correct in discerning an 'apparent quiet determination in the age of confessional choices [on Shakespeare's part] to choose to refuse to choose,' it enabled the playwright to use diverse religious beliefs, and have his characters act on them, as long as it was possible for him to remain at a distance. Shakespeare's adaptation of the Samothracian 'religion' would go some way in explaining what he *did* choose.

Responding to this time of religious conflict in England means that 'topicality' in Shakespeare cannot be taken to be 'rare, enigmatic, and incidental:'[10] topicality is not a question of 'nudges and winks.'[11] Shakespeare reacted to the arguments that were put out by both Christian camps and to their internal inconsistencies; and is clear that he was not completely 'unpeggable,' to use William Bouwsma's novel term.[12]

Bouwsma argues that 'the idea of conscience [that] manifests itself amongst a variety of religious concepts to which his characters refer [is] orthodox in the assumptions [that the characters reveal] about the moral nature of man.' He believes that 'the general eclecticism of the age is apparent, for example, in the later sixteenth century Church of England, [that included]...theological residues from the medieval past.' This view might omit, not only the increasing disagreements over the elements of these beliefs that determined 'conscience' and the forms of service and their meaning, but also the relationship between the Church and the Monarchy.

It has been said that Shakespeare dispensed with the old religion, but retained the language of the past, though that the Reformed church had associations with the practices of the Roman Church, was 'entirely explicable as a linguistic phenomenon and [did] not impose any doctrinal consequences.' In his choice of language, it has been argued, Shakespeare

'gave no sign of being an intellectual'[7] amidst the competing theologies of the sixteenth.[13] Doctrines that came to be associated with the Reformation occurred within the old religion before they achieved prominence in Protestantism. If, for example, '…the absolute gratuitousness of justification was and always remained the basic concern of Luther's religion,' 'gratuitousness' was also a notion precious to the Catholic tradition of Augustine.[14] Sean F. Hughes, similarly, has said: 'What we must not do is to assume predestination was a peculiarly reformed doctrine.'[15]

Anthony Levi believed that the main thrust of the Protestant argument was over jurisdiction. In political theology, important beliefs crossed the boundary between the camps struggling to control them, and cannot easily be traced back to one or the other.[16] There are writers who refer to Shakespeare's beliefs as if they needed no precise outline and had no historical context. The 'pattern' of the comedies and tragedies, says Michael Hays, 'begins with an imperfect order, passes through confusion and tumult, and emerges with a Reformed, though still imperfect, society.' Hays had his attention fixed on 'chivalric romance' and on 'courtships,' 'defined by features derived from courtly love,' so that he is compelled to see Shakespeare's work fit its pattern. There is little evidence of this. Whatever 'courtly' gestures there might be, appear to follow early modern conventions, even rejecting these when they are occluded by importunate passions or passions parodied. It is straining interpretation if, at the end of the play, the improvised encounter between Edgar and Edmund in *King Lear* is said to show conduct that would be 'defective' if judged by a 'knight's' standards,' and is still thought somehow to be Christian, with the play ending in a 'harmonious' resolution.[17] The bleak animosity of their encounter, despite its formality, and Lear's abyss of his despair, when he utters 'Never' five times over are in charged atmospherics of their own, and are outside the compass of 'early modern' Reformation, earlier Christian, or even humanist conduct.

'If Protestantism was a religion…[that]…, renounced all non-scriptural practices and objects, and engaged in iconoclasm, [and] Catholicism was [the residue] of a religion of images, embellished ritual paraphernalia, man-made traditions, fables,'[18] then severance with the past had to be absolute. A new map of religious emotion might seem necessary; nothing taken for granted.

A writer such as Stanley Cavell, with 'scepticism' as one of his critical tools, if he does not ignore the religious context, certainly blurs the doctrinal boundaries, so that, in his book *Disowning Knowledge*,[19] he says of *King Lear*: 'Is this a Christian play?...King Lear is not illustrated theology.' Yet the play might both accept and reject Christianity. Russ McDonald has said:

'I acknowledge the capacity of new modes of criticism to identify and promote ideological issues and other points of departure that more traditional forms of criticism have neglected or deliberately suppressed.'[20]

Shakespeare needed to know the versions of Christianity; he needed to register their arguments. If it appeared that 'he did not write Christian plays, or unchristian ones either, [21] it was because he was able to maintain an aesthetic distance. It was Shakespeare's mastery of the art of making several voices persuasive that led to his renewability.'[22] This was helped, even given authority, by the additional pagan perspective that he was able to adopt.

It has been said that, under the influence of a 'Machiavellian' moment, Shakespeare wrote plays that are 'characterised by morally complex political conflicts, where right and wrong are hard, if not impossible, to identify; where the hand of Providence is seemingly absent.'[23] Hugh Grady does not say whether his account of 'Providence' is according to a Protestant (Calvinist or Lutheran) or Catholic understanding of the term. He suggests that Shakespeare's implied moral framework changed after 1595 when it became 'less certain.' It can be contended that there were deeper structures that caused the plays' characters to be 'entrapped...in ways they only partly control,' but this was more than he would make allowances for. The theological dynamic that determines the actions of the characters had far-reaching consequences; not least of which was that it contributed to the confusing of their motives: but it is an intelligible confusion. This might make it seem similar in style to Machiavellian scheming, but it lacked its cynicism, except in the case of a complete villain. When the paradigm of order is subverted as a consequence, it is doubtful that there was any room for a 'final ambiguity': both tragic and comic characters know (as do the audience) that there are justice and goodness in their world, however, broken it might be:

> Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell
> Though all things foul would wear the brow of grace:
> Yet grace must look so still.[24]

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), p. 175.
2. Hugh Trevor Roper, *The Golden Age of Europe*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p. 17.
3. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, (London: Faber, 1963), p. 209.
4. Informal comment.

5. Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti, *Shakespeare and Religion*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).
6. Palmer, 'A Study of 'The Tempest,' in Still, *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, p. 206.
7. J. S. Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 4.
8. Arthur Kirsh, *The Passions of Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, (Charlotteville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), p. 130.
9. Loewenstein, *Religion in Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, p. 48.
10. Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, p. 218.
11. Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*, (N. York: Random House, 2008), p. 332.
12. Willian J. Bouwsma, 'Hooker in the Context of European Cultural History,' in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. Claire McEachern and Deborah Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 143-145.
13. G. K. Hunter, in *Shakespeare's Universe*, ed. John Mucciolo, (Scholar's Press), pp. 27-28.
14. Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 340. Cummings quotes from Hubert Jedin's, *A History of the Council of Trent*, (2 Vols. 1957), and p.170:'…The absolute...gratuitousness of justification was and always remained the basic concern of Luther's religion.' But 'gratuitousness was also a notion precious to the Catholic tradition of Augustine.' He says: 'What we must not do is to assume predestination was a peculiarly reformed doctrine.'
15. See, Sean F. Hughes, 'English theologies of Predestination,' in *Belief and Practice in Reformation England*, eds. Susan Wabuda and Caroline Litzenberger, (Farnham: Ashgate, 1998), p 232.
16. Anthony Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, (New Haven: Yale, 2002), p. 15. Also see, p. 73.
17. Michael L. Hays, *Shakespearean Tragedy and Chivalric Romance*, (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 96.
18. Antoinina Zlatar, *Reformation Fictions*, OUP, '13), p. 126.
19. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, Updated Edition), p. 73.
20. Russ McDonald, 'Reading The Tempest,' in *The Cambridge Shakespeare Library*, ed. Catherine Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 29.
21. Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 175
22. Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, p. 329.
23. Hugh Grady, 'The end of Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment,' in S*hakespeare and Renaissance Literary Theory*, ed. Michelle Marrapodi, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 125.
24. *Macbeth*, Act IV, Sc 3, line 23.

INTRODUCTION

THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

A good brother/bad brother (Abel and Cain) narrative impels the action in the majority of Shakespeare's plays. It gained prominence at the time of the Reformation in the religious controversies of the late sixteenth century, which in the Protestant religion at large threw up accusations of *antinomianism*: a diminished force for good, and evil, was equal and of the same origin.

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair... [1]

This deliberate confusion, an example of the paradoxical religious psychology of Protestantism, lent its expression to attitudes of envy and mistrust, and (Catholics claimed) gave rise to a despair that resulted from an over-emphasis on human sinfulness. It was reflected in the internecine conflicts within the ruling class of the time, and in the deep divisions that occurred in post-Reformation society, where there were still shared values. It was once put forward, by Roland Mushat Frye, that for Shakespeare 'though the plays do not furnish us with evidence of [his] religious orientation, they do attest to his theological literacy and to his uncanny ability to adapt his impressive religious knowledge to dramatic purposes.'[2] Shakespeare's 'religious orientation' was not a 'mystery,' nor was it neutral. If the Reformers believed that the 'righteous man sins in all his good works,' it is arguable, as Frye claims, that they also made the mistake of believing 'that good and evil, virtue and vice became confused as to *essence*.' Catholic critics of Reform theology, whose views Shakespeare appears to have known, maintained that they did. They thought that this was the fault of 'antinomianism,' which is a way of accounting for the beliefs of a 'new Manichee,'[3] as they described the reformers. Luther's 'paradoxes' made God the source of good and the 'author of sin.' According to a modern theologian, Tom Torrance, (quoting Luther):

> The world and its God cannot and will not bear the Word of God, and the true God cannot and will not keep silent. While, therefore, these two gods are at war with each other, what else can there be in the world but tumult…[4]

Richard Niebuhr has said: the ‘temptation of the dualist,’ such as Luther ... [which he rejects] is to posit two gods, or a division in the Godhead… He cannot forget the dark side of human social life, such things as vices, crimes, wars, and punishments are weapons in the hands of a wrathful God of mercy. These two ‘sides’ can be indistinguishable: ‘the crime of the murderer...and his chastisement by the magistrate.’[5] Understanding Luther in this way made his thought a radical departure from traditional Christianity. This was used by Shakespeare. He did not leave it there but found solutions to the problems the new religion created, using both the perspective offered by the more traditional religions and a form of paganism.

Since Frye, opinions have proliferated regarding Shakespeare’s religion or the lack of it. By using different voices, that looked sidelong at religion, Shakespeare was able to separate language from a defined ideological centre; although that is not to say that the ideologies are not there. The plays might implicitly dramatise the arguments that were disseminated by the main Christian camps, and use the views they supported, as well as the disputed beliefs that came from their disagreements. This included a number of hidden, or not-so-hidden, references to Catholicism. Claims about Shakespeare’s references to Catholicism have been over-stated: his use of pagan alternatives distanced him from Christianity.

Although Cavell has a following, in contrast, Huston Diehl wrote that, in tragedy, Shakespeare found a form ‘in which he could reflect upon the disruption, uncertainty, and violence and loss caused by the Reformation, yet imaginatively engaged with the beliefs, rituals, habits and moods of the new religion.’[6] Diehl addressed these tragic concerns from the perspective of someone who would be cognisant of the religious controversies of his day and engaged in examining their metaphysical and ethical dimensions. Diehl did not show how Shakespeare did this, or in what form he received these ‘beliefs,’ or exactly what they were. He might have been influenced by the way each version of Christianity interpreted the other’s theology.

It has been claimed that Shakespeare was a ‘closet Catholic’ who wrote in code. He did not need to: his many-faceted eclecticism was based on considered choice. He used traditional teaching which refuted the fundamental Lutheran tenet that evil is deeply rooted and will deceive and masquerade as goodness, yet he also used Lutheran sleights of hand if it suited him. Pagan mythology offered a new perspective on every kind of Christianity practised at the time.

In contemporary historical studies of the diverse theology, there has been a rejection of the 'dichotomising propensity'[7] which isolates the doctrines that formed the arguments between Protestant and Catholic apologists up to the turn of the seventeenth century, rather than showing what they had in common. However Anthony Milton has argued that 'conflict with Rome was seen as the essence of Protestantism.' He says that John Donne told his congregation that, 'as often as you meet here, you renew your band to God, you will never be reconciled to the superstitions of Rome.'[8]

Every Protestant act could be thus interpreted as, effectively, a rejection of Popery, and vice versa in the case of Catholicism. A number of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies might be found to contain problems, though not evident as such, that had been gleaned from Protestant theologians, and Catholic criticism of them; both Reformation and Catholic theology responding, not to an academic debate, but to the arguments of a culture under attack. Yet even when the paradoxes in character, or idea, or image, in Shakespeare's plays, have been noticed by critics, they have not been registered, in their immediacy, to describe a critical investigation, and their origins have not been sought.

The shadowy conclusions to which a reader is impelled, and which in the final act [of Macbeth] begin to take on an obscure luminescence, are those that centre upon what at first appears to be a deep *equivocation* in the moral universe itself. This view of the moral universe is one perspective that Shakespeare uses. It is taken from Catholic theologians' descriptions of Protestantism, in their challenges to the Protestant theology of his day. The playwright sometimes magnifies the distortions of the polemicists in the course of creating his plots and the exceptional nature of his characters.

The Reformation in England was iconoclastic, replacing the image with belief: belief in the word. There is a shift in emphasis, from the practising of primitive ritual to affirming ethical goodness.[9] To explain the Reformation as mere continuity with older trends is to cut out the very thing that made it different; for all late medieval renewal movements in religious politics or piety had stopped short of fundamentally questioning the received beliefs underlying the economy of salvation. In altering the basic role of the Church,[10] the Reformers appealed to secular authorities and the pious layperson. City—'godly'—magistrates were called upon to extend their competence.

Today, theologians assert that Reformation teaching effected an overall cultural shift, responsible for the emergence of the modern world, but at that time, such hindsight was lacking. The strength of the traditional religion had been derived from its belief in the affirmation of life that was expressed in ceremonies for the renewal of the body and spirit, which gave faith the

power to overcome evil. Now the energy that had sustained this turned in on itself, 'marred itself with strength'; the 'good' being seen to be constricted by the forces of evil, or even serving them.

In the sixteenth century in England, divine authority that was formerly vested in the leaders of the Church was attributed to the rulers of the state. An enhanced concept of 'divine right' for the monarchy was developed and contested. 'Divine' authority came to be seen as contained within the office of the 'Supreme Governor' of ecclesiastical affairs in the English church, who was the monarch.

The Catholics of the late 16th and early 17th centuries evinced 'a certain basic scepticism or irreverence about the state.'[11] They refused to believe that 'temporal kingdoms were matters of godhead and immortality.' The Bishop of Challenor condemned Henry VIII 'for presuming to take on ecclesiastical supremacy' making himself as it were a 'god.'[12] Kevin Sharpe refers to Thomas Bilson's sermon on the coronation of James on 25 July 1603: 'Preaching on Romans Bilson [argued] that princes were not only 'gods by office' but also 'in the sanctity of their person.' They were to be honoured and served as '[Gods] lieutenants and vice-regents here on earth.'.[13] The plays took a hint from the contradictions that emerged from this. They held the composite icon of the monarch up to the scrutiny of both Lutheran and Catholic views on kingship. If, in orthodox theology, both Catholic and moderate Protestant, humans were described as vulnerable with weaknesses, at what point did they become or cease to be gods? Could they be divested of their divinity?

If the king as a 'god' has a composite nature where his divinity is expressed in his humanity, or if the Prince and the people, the monarch and the church, are one connected whole, what if the head of the 'body' were to become 'sick' or corrupt? How would it be purged? How would moral sickness co-exist with 'divinity?' Even without this 'sickness,' a result of the god-like attributes, an anxiety might be occasioned by a ruler's obsessive concern with the consequences of a power that might ricochet.

While the plays support this critique of the theology of kingship, which was partly derived from Catholic writers, there is further evidence of this sympathy for Catholicism. In *Coriolanus*, credence is given to a religion, hated by its enemy, from which its followers had lapsed, whose 'prayers of priests' and ritual 'times of sacrifice' had formerly offered to secure 'embargements of all fury.'[15] This is accepted to be an oblique reference to Catholicism, yet when Shakespeare was an adult, Catholicism was a displaced religion. It had ceased to be the religion to ward off evil or to offer salvation in a peaceful world. Instead, its spirituality more often than not demanded martyrdom. Some Catholics welcomed the persecution they

suffered and sought the martyrdom it incurred. It paved the way for a return to the heroic age of Christianity. The faith of other Catholics survived through caution, compromise and anonymity.

Responding to this contentious time, 'from about 1595 onwards Shakespeare seems to have become interested in the building of symbolic paradigms in which contrary values were structurally opposed to one another.'[16] These centres of meaning were provided not just by Protestantism and Catholicism, but by the modified paganism of the Samothracian religion. Not only were there new theological developments contributing to the political upheaval of the period, but they were also changing the way people understood themselves, whether they came under diverse Protestant influences or still subscribed to Catholicism. The laity needed to approach the divine through the vehicle of words, not images. This was a seismic shift in spiritual awareness. The Catholic Erasmus, among others, encouraged scripture reading.[17]

On the other hand, there was an audience for the theatre that reacted to the discipline of Christianity, and was attracted to the freedom that a pagan culture gave them: *The Tempest* is a case in point. Stephen Orgel subscribes to the view that, in *The Tempest*, Prospero is an unsympathetic 'God' for whom one must make allowances because he belongs to a 'Renaissance Christianity [that] was not a comforting faith.'[18] Orgel ignores or, more likely, is unaware that Prospero's role is as a *magus*, whose benign powers came from sources that were mainly pagan while being blended with Christianity. These should be distinguished from references to 'divine' elements that might reflect only the controversies of contemporary Christians. Shakespeare goes further afield than Protestant Christianity to find—and to succeed in finding—'new ways of making manifest the presence and possibility of 'grace' from rites of regeneration; even if there is some truth in Sarah Beckwith's suggestion that, in a play like *Measure for Measure*, change in human nature is imagined less as a complete transformation than as an external imposition.[19] Beckwith accepts that in the Romances, through the power of 'forgiving,' there can be 'redemption from the predicament of irreversibility.' Not knowing the source of Shakespeare's paganism, Robert Miola[20] sees Shakespeare as Romanising the ancient Greek world with two kinds of 'Roman,' in order to oppose Protestant scorn for contemporary Catholic fraudulence; but he is unaware that the 'ancient Greek world' was mediated by an early modern Italian mythographer's research. Shakespeare chose to depict human behaviour from perspectives that Catholic or Protestant doctrine—and their propaganda—offered. However to show up the limits they placed on life he used another angle, from a pagan source that put the imagination at the centre of religion and

life. The pinnacle of moral or spiritual authority is empowered beyond those found in the natural world. This is revealed in a magus (Prospero, in *The Tempest*) who ruled as a notional Duke. His instrument is a magical imagination that enables him to exploit the powers of divinity, the source of his authority, grounded in kingship, and enhance them to contain those of a 'god,' in ways that are primal, personal as well as political. He nullifies the evil of his enemies.

An Italian mythographer, Gyraldus, represented a pagan religion as originating on the island of 'Samothrace'[21] that competed for attention with Christianity. This was taken up by Shakespeare, enabling him to salvage elements from Christianity that would be of permanent value in a 'brave new world' of the rituals of renewal that he invented. In making the power of good effective against evil (as a Renaissance commentary might have represented it). At least on the stage they also purported to give men and women roles in ceremonies equal in religious importance, such as was lacking in the different versions of Christianity, giving primacy to their love for one another.

The Tempest was written in the face of the shift of Protestantism to a literal attention to the text in dispensing the Word of God. This prevented them from celebrating in symbolic ways the spiritual order over which it presided. For the Renaissance, the imagination was seen not only to be the means of restoring this order; it was also seen as unfolding the drama of all human life with symbolic expressions.

The theatre is an analogue of life so that growing into a 'part' means those characters on or off the stage become personae that may suit them or compromise them, or unexpectedly advance them into a different dimension of experience, whether or not they reverted to the living real. Viola reveals this when she reacts to her double misfortune in *Twelfth Night*: [24]

> by the fangs of malice I swear - I am not what
> I play..

On the stage, this 'act' is an experience shared between playwright and actor who, when he discovers the import of his role, finds (like Edgar) that he cannot merely 'daub' it, so interacts as a suffering human with the role he has adopted. He may realise, like Hamlet, when he asks with astonishment: 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?'[22] that acting is not merely an assumed part,[23] the fashioning of an artificial identity with the actor 'forc[ing] his soul to his whole conceit', neither is it a set 'text' with actors merely reading lines, the actor *becomes* the persona. Initially, Viola is made to feel the falsity of her role as the Duke's messenger by the Fool, lacking as it does any spontaneity, so she parodies it to achieve some degree

of authenticity. If she experiences uncertainty about her male/female identity, she still falls in love with the Duke.

Julia Briggs[25] suggests that, to an Elizabethan audience, plays were seen to interact with the real world even to the point of confusion, so that they ceased to be an illusion, as if the two realities co-existed or merged. Plays could encourage self-examination or (as Hamlet hopes) force 'guilty creatures' to 'proclaim[ed] their malefactions,'[26] if only to themselves. Plays invited people to improvise 'theatre' in life. There was no single purpose to theatricality either on or off the stage. A role might become a rite of maturity, or it might betray a character's folly. It could create a multi-dimensional world from its own platform of reality-within-theatre, as Prospero does, employing theatre in the service of that theatre-within-reality, that enhanced the lives of those in the world/theatre, while it refers to a world beyond its dimensions: 'These our actors...'[27]

Protestant writers, principally the clergyman John Rainoldes, objected to 'conflated sacrifice, theatre, and Catholic worship.'[28] He objected to a Eucharistic rite of sacrifice because it resembled a stage play, and to plays because they resembled papist ceremonies. Yet a function of theatre was only to *represent* conflict or reconciliation where the extremes of evil, and even of good, in their direct manifestations, could only cause or avoid harm or discomfort. With the resources, the protection of a mask, a role, theatre might address inventively the flaws that assailed trust with betrayal, or love with hate, when the positive virtues of the soul in life might otherwise fail. Theatre still allowed the soul to stand aside untrammelled by immersion in any role at the end of the action.

The pagan 'religion' that promoted this purpose for Shakespeare in his last plays, the 'Samothracian' religion,[29] (see Chapter 18) was theatrical. Through formal or informal drama or impromptu rites, it initiated candidates into the 'religion,' instructing and entertaining them at the same time. Those who did this were minor gods who gained the assistance of the great gods, female and male, and even communicated with them within a system that recognised the oppositional or cyclical rhythms that governed the life of the world. The source of this paganism, the mythographer Gyraldus, adapted it to a Christian cosmogony: 'In the beginning was the Poem.' God shared with mankind His gift of creation for use and celebration. With powers of the imagination, the human spirit had participated in the acts of creation from the beginning. It enabled humans to take themselves out of the woods and caves they inhabited, ever conscious of their origins, then to evolve the religious beliefs that grew into the knowledge and culture of civil societies, in harmony with the rhythms of nature: L. G. Gyraldus believed that:

Alio vix modo sine Poetica, sacra recte et divina mysteria, exprimi possunt ... Sed quis non ipsam Poeticam potius dicat cum ipso mundi principio incaepisse, vel id velitis philosophorum placitis intelligere, vel eo quem asserit Christiana religio modo…[30]

Without the poetic gift the sacred and divine mysteries can hardly be uttered. But who would not prefer to hold that the Poetic power itself was active in the Creation of the universe itself, whether you wish to interpret this by the doctrines of the pagan philosophers or according to the dictates of the Christian religion.

William Bouwsma, in his essay on 'The Renaissance Discovery of Human Creativity,'[31] considers whether 'a recognition of the radical creativity of God thus pointed to an almost equally radical creativity of man.' Bouwsma refers to the creation of man in the image of God; he expresses the reservation that to see human divinity as 'like God' was the reason for the Fall. He quotes Scaliger, who had said that poetry '...fashions images more beautiful than the reality of those things which are it ... seems ... like another God to produce the things themselves.'[32]

Although the collection of Samothracian myths and its 'religion' have attracted the attention of individual writers spanning several centuries in England, France, Germany and Italy, including two from the twentieth century, and one painter and one musician at least, and could be considered a European 'tradition,' this continuity has never been considered as such: it has not been investigated. An often-quoted essay by the poet, William Butler Yeats entitled *Hodos Cameliontos (Chameliontos)* opens:

I planned a mystical order which should buy or hire the castle where its members should retire for a while for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like those of Eleusis or Samothrace.[33]

Samothracian mythology gives centrality to the imagination; it provided the substance of Yeats's 'Byzantium' poem, creating the artifice of a common space in which, at a cost, human souls and divine beings might meet ritualistically:

where blood begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave
Dying into a dance.[34]

'Samothrace,' the island near Constantinople, was thought by Yeats to be the spiritual source of Celtic culture: the place where it should re-discover its true religion. This was not Yeats's invention, but one held by nineteenth-century Celtic antiquarians, whose eager speculations supplemented

their scholarship. The religious artificers of Byzantium, in mosaics emerging triumphantly from the uncreated world, were thought to display the Delphine icons and rituals of Samothrace in their art. D. H. Lawrence outlines his notion of Samothracian cosmology in his book *Apocalypse*: [35]

> When the Samothracian cult spread to Hellas…then the twins became the 'Kabeiroi, Kabiri' and had an enormous suggestive influence over the minds of men…a swing back to the old idea of the dark mysterious twins, connected with the movement of the cloudy skies and air and the perpetual mysterious balance between these two…It is they who hold things asunder... They limit every action and counterbalance it with an opposite action.

The French composer Rameau wrote an opera, *Castor and Pollux* (1737 and 1754). In the Renaissance understanding of Greek mythology these two figures were thought to have become Samothracian gods. The opera celebrates the love of the part-twin brothers for one another and the love they have as rivals for the same woman. Pollux offers to surrender his immortality for Castor who is slain by her former suitor:

> Castor: Tu veux mourir pour moi je renaitrai pour elle.

At the end of the opera (1737) the twins are celebrated as the protectors of mariners and urged:

> Guidez les mortels sur les flots.[36]

The notes of the new edition (1604) of the opera mention that they have the power to 'subdue tempests.' These figures answered the Cain and Abel myth of implacable hostility that featured in Protestant theology, all of which Shakespeare dramatises in *The Tempest*, in which father and daughter are able '*tempestatem evadere*.'

'Samothrace' even came to the attention of George Eliot who, in her novel *Middlemarch*, represents the attention that her character Casaubon gave to the 'Cabeiri,' the Samothracian gods, as being a futile occupation. In real life there was an Isaac Casaubon, who was a scholar of some repute, editing Strabo's Geographia.[37] Strabo referred to the practice of the Samothracian religion on an island near (Great) Britain.'[37] In Eliot's novel, Dorothea contemplates with dismay the prospect of 'sifting mixed heaps of material…doubtful illustrations of principles more doubtful; fragments of a tradition which itself was a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins… food for a theory withered in birth…'[38]

Her character, Ladislaw, reveals that Eliot was aware of the volumes that had been written on the religion in Germany, but she misjudged its

importance for European culture. Perhaps reacting to the volume of dubious scholarship on the subject (in England), she gives the impression that it had never justified the interest it had aroused. She could never have anticipated the store future writers would set by it.

In a marginal (pencil) note on his copy of one of Jacob Boehme's works (kept in the British Library), Samuel Coleridge states that Boehme was a 'Samothracian.'[39] Coleridge was as fascinated by Boehme as he was eager to discourage others from reading him. He might have known that Goethe uses the myths in *Faust*,[40] and he was familiar with Schelling's writing on the subject. In the British Library is a copy of his *Uber die Gottheiten von Samothrace*, ([MS. notes by S. T]. Coleridge. Stuttgart & Tübingen, 1815). Robert Brown, in his translation of Schelling's *The Deities of Samothrace*, suggests that Schelling regarded the mystery cult surrounding the Samothracian deities as the 'oldest perhaps the noblest, of ancient Greece.'[41] It was Schelling who proposed the view that Samothrace contained the 'key to an original system of belief underlying the various mythologies and revelations of human history.'

Ernest Renan, in his *Studies of Religious History*, refers to the 'Telchines...Curetes...Dactyls...Cabeiri of Samothrace' as being found among 'the races ecstatic and magic[al],' who were in 'direct communication with the forces of nature.'[42] Charles Vallancey, in *A vindication of the Ancient History of Ireland*,[43] claims that the earliest pagan Irish religion was the origin of the Samothracian, and identifies a number of the principle gods of that religion with their Irish equivalent**.**

The interests of Phyllis and Karl Lehmann, who were archaeologists,[44] turned to Renaissance painting, in particular Mantegna's *Parnassus*. They show the connection between Samothracian culture and the court of Ferrara, under Duke Ercole, whose wife Isabella D'Este commissioned the painting. This religion had become the study of the recipient of the patronage of the Duke Ercole d'Este, who made the Duke to be a 'Samothracian' by virtue of his mythological namesake: Hercules being counted as one of the gods. This mythographer said:

> Hermionensis Ceres cognominata ab Hermione civitate… cuius initium fuit hic in civitate Hermionis Cereris chthoniae templum conditum fuit et sacra chthonia quae summa agebantur…aestivo tempore…[45]

Shakespeare must have been familiar with Samothracian mythology from this source. In the town of Hermione (in ancient Greece), there were ceremonies to propitiate *Ceres Hermionensis* as an earth power. The people had the practice of making an effigy of Ceres and conducting processions to celebrate the finding of Ceres's daughter, the *filia deperdita*, by her