

Article

Paganism and Reform in Shakespeare's Plays

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Received: 21 May 2018; Accepted: 18 June 2018; Published: 11 July 2018



Abstract: Shakespeare's plays mix references to pagan and Christian symbols and ideas in ways which are only superficially contradictory. While the sometimes uneasy juxtaposition of classical and Christian religious thought is characteristic of Renaissance literature, there is, in Shakespeare's use of paganism, a method to the madness. Shakespeare's comedies and romances associate the worship of Diana with the Catholic ideal of religious celibacy, and ultimately repudiate the Diana figure or transform her into a "Christian" spokeswoman who encourages and facilitates marriage and child-bearing. In a late romance, *The Winter's Tale*, the turn from Diana to self-sacrificial marriage is also made symbolic of a key character's turn from Catholic-like works of ritual penitence to inward transformation by faith. Thus, Shakespeare's plays represent pagan ritual in a way which supports the Calvinist religious tendencies of early-modern England.

Keywords: Diana; Calvinism; paganism; romances; *The Winter's Tale*; Catholic; marriage

In 1606, the English Parliament passed an Act "to Restraine Abuses of Players," instituting a 10-pound fine for any "prophan[e]" utterance of "the holy name of God or of Christ Iesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie." Although Hugh Gazzard has argued persuasively that this law was only laxly enforced, still, as notable a theater historian as Andrew Gurr cites the 10-pound penalty as "one reason why the pagan gods begin to be called on with more frequency in the drama" after 1606 (Gazzard 2010, p. 493; Gurr 1994, p. 76). For Shakespeare's part, seven of the nine plays he wrote or co-wrote after the Act's passage¹ are set in pre-Christian worlds where vexed characters do not, like Hamlet, exclaim, "O God, God!" (1.2.132), but instead call on the "blessed breeding sun" (*Timon of Athens* 4.3.1) or the "Thunder-master" (*Pericles* 5.4.30) in moments of emotional stress.² For the players, praying to Nature or Jupiter was a cost-controlling measure.

Yet Shakespeare's marked post-1606 turn to what were at least superficially pagan worlds should not obscure the fact that he expressed Christian ideas through pagan situations throughout his entire career. Maurice Hunt has written eloquently of Shakespeare's consistent "syncretistic" mode, whereby "Judeo-Christian ideas and allusions" are made to "compete with the details of pagan religion" (Hunt 2011, p. 29). Hunt's discussion ranges over more than two decades' worth of Shakespeare's work, beginning with the 1593 *The Comedy of Errors*, which may have been his first play. In that comedy, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and many other pre-1606 plays, Shakespeare accommodates references to pagan practices and beliefs to a dominant Christian perspective which is always powerfully present, if at times, only subtly alluded to.

In what follows, I will explore how Shakespeare's career-long pattern of allusions to pre-Christian deities and devotional practices put forth, for his English audience, a nationally self-congratulatory religious argument. In many of his plays, the displacement of paganism by Christianity—whether

¹ *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, co-written with John Fletcher.

² All quotations of Shakespeare come from (Shakespeare 1974).

imminent or accomplished—is likened to the banishment of Catholic thought and practices by Protestantism. To say this another way, the paganism whose deficiency the plays expose, evokes some aspects of England’s Old Religion, and the Christian ideas the plays champion are of a Reformed variety. Specifically, the comedies and romances lay stress on godly marriage, the celebration of which reached “rhapsodic rhetorical heights” in early modern England, to use Catherine Belsey’s phrase (Belsey 1996, pp. 5–6). Shakespeare’s plays associate devotion to the goddess Diana with monastic celibacy, a Catholic ideal, and repudiate or reinterpret this devotion in order to honor fruitful matrimony. In two romances, Shakespeare also connects pre-Christian religious practices to what early-modern Protestants regarded as superstitious Catholic modes of worship, by which salvation is assisted by works. In *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale*, it is not human rituals but God’s grace, working through Providential time, that effects resolutions and miracles. Human participation in God’s comedy requires characters to turn from “pagan” works to Christian faith.

1. From Diana to Abbess to Wife

In his *Institutes*, John Calvin justifies the choice of marriage over single life in terms of spiritual warfare. Our fight against wayward sexual desires should lead us to “set that remedy against them, which the Lord hath given us for our defense. Therefore, they do rashly which renounce matrimony: as though they had made a league with God concerning their perpetual strength” (Calvin 1599, *Institution* STC 4423, K3r). A markedly Calvinist feature of Shakespeare’s comedies is their powerful and obvious argument for marriage over virginal chastity, in rejection of the Catholic monastic ideal of the renunciation of the flesh. Young women’s veneration of Diana, goddess of virgins, is in Shakespeare not a permanent but a liminal condition, preparatory for their entrance into matrimony and motherhood. This is true whether Diana worship is a real religious activity, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Pericles*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, or a mere metaphor for the virginal state, as in *Much Ado about Nothing* and *All’s Well that Ends Well*, as well as in casual comparisons made throughout the plays between eligible maids and Diana. (“O, be thou Dian . . . and Dian sportful!” is the burden of Petruchio’s wooing dance [*The Taming of the Shrew* 2.1.200–1].) Finally, in the romances, the figure of Diana herself is transformed from patroness of virgins to Christian matron, even dispensing advice on how to be a good wife, in Biblical terms.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Theseus presents a grim picture of celibacy as suffered by the female. If Hermia refuses an arranged marriage, she must “endure the livery of a nun” in “shady cloister mew’d,” living “a barren sister all [her] life,” / Chaunting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon” (1.1.70–73). Two words in Theseus’ warning, “barren” and “fruitless,” evoke the sterility of the monastic life, implying, by their contrary, child-bearing as a chief blessing of marriage. As the Puritan Robert Crofts would write in the 1640s, marriage, the “blessed union,” may become “an occasion of sweet and lovely children, who in after times may be a great felicity and joy” (Crofts 1638). In contrast to the bliss of fruitful marriage, the condition of Diana and her followers is dark and chill. This stark view of Diana is echoed in young Emilia’s appeal to the goddess in the late play *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which begins, “O sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen, / Abandoner of revels, mute, contemplative, / Sweet, solitary, white as chaste, and pure / As wind-fann’d snow, who to thy female knights / Allow’st no more blood than will make a blush . . . ” (5.1.137–45). Diana is here a diminished goddess, whose mythic qualities as energetic huntress and, alongside her devotees, woodland merry-maker have died into marble stillness. Rather than Hesiod’s “lover of woods and the wild chase over the mountains” (Hamilton 1969), she is a static image: an enshrined saint’s statue, like those forbidden in England since the mid-sixteenth century by the Church’s Articles of Religion (“The Romish doctrine concerning . . . Worshipping and Adoration . . . of images . . . and

also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented").³ Indeed, the prayer to the "cold" goddess suggests the unhealthy attitude of the supplicant, who prefers the bloodless isolation virginal Diana is here made to symbolize, to the intimacy of marriage. Emilia's language signals, if we hadn't guessed it already, that she, a living woman, is destined not to remain, unnaturally, a bloodless "female knight."

In this she is like *Much Ado about Nothing's* Hero, another "virgin knight" only temporarily consecrated to Diana, "goddess of the night" (5.3.13, 12). Hero's plot's comic trajectory will also maneuver her into marriage since, as her friend Benedick says, "The world must be peopled" (*Much Ado about Nothing* 2.3.242). Her situation is reflected in a later Shakespeare character, one actually called Diana, the Florentine maid of *All's Well that Ends Well*. This Diana bears the virgin goddess's name only symbolically to hint that she has not slept with the lustful Bertram—that dubious honor went to Helena, his lawful wife, who scored by means of a bed-trick—and that at play's end she, Diana, is still a decent maid eligible for a husband. "If thou beest yet a fresh uncropped flower," the French king tells her, "Choose thou thy husband, and I'll pay thy dower" (5.3.327–28). Diana's likely future is at this moment made visible in the pregnant Helena, with whom she shares a stage. Like that of the earlier Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *All's Well's* Helena's marriage will breed "blessed . . . issue" (*Dream* 5.1.404–05), and has already begun to do so. The marriage will be, in Crofts' words, "an occasion of sweet and lovely children" (if all goes well) (Crofts, A7v-A8r). For all that Helena was played by a bewigged boy with a pillow strapped to his stomach, her manifestly pregnant condition was a reminder to Shakespeare's Jacobean audience that the good Christian couple was to "bring forth fruit, and multiply" (Gen. 1:28).⁴

Yet fruitfulness, however Biblically approved, was not the only marital blessing recognized and celebrated in these comic endings. The English Church's "Homily of the State of Matrimony," published in 1623 among other official marriage sermons, places children as only the second benefit of marriage, a state "instituted by God, to the intent that man and woman should live lawfully in a perpetual friendship, to bring forth fruit."⁵ "Art thou gone so, love, lord, ay, husband, friend!," Juliet complains at Romeo's departure, after their wedding night (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.5.43, my emphasis). The friendship ideal was paramount, and the greater part of the famous marriage homily is devoted to the means of achieving it rather than to matters of child-bearing and child-raising. Likewise, Robert Snawsel's widely read 1610 "A Looking Glass for Married Folks" produces an argument, made in dialogue form, regarding the ways wives might be friends with their husbands while remaining in obedience to them as the Apostle Paul instructs. "Paul . . . teacheth, that wives should be in subjection to their husbands," says one wife. "But the same Paul, I trow, teacheth, that husbands should love their wives," replies a second. "Well, let him first do his duty, and then I will do mine," says a third (Snawsel 1610, p. 184).

These popular writings' intense concern with the creation of marital harmony reflects the idea expressed in Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* (1622), that marriage is a kind of Eden, "the place blest, / And is [man's] right home back, if he achieve it" (1.1.8–9). Catherine Belsey has written of the headboards carved with images of Adam and Eve in the garden which were popular among seventeenth-century English couples who could afford them (Belsey 1996, pp. 7–9). These carvings tended to include the snake, emblem of the "Sour-ey'd disdain, and discord" that might, without prayer and humility, come to "bestrew / The union of [a couple's] bed," to quote *The Tempest's* Prospero (4.1.19–20). Yet the Eden headboard images, like the lines from Middleton, Snawsel, and the Homily, suggest the degree to which marriage, despite its challenges, was celebrated by the early modern

³ Article 22, p. 274. Articles of Religion of the English Church. In *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*. 3rd ed. Ed. John Leith. Atlanta: John Knox, 1982.

⁴ All Biblical quotations come from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1599 Edition*.

⁵ *A Homily of the State of Matrimony*. In *The Second Tome of Homilies*. London, 1623. In William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Frances E. Dolan (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 172.

English as “man’s” (and woman’s) “right home back, if he [or she] achieve it”—a relationship promising a likelier path to godliness than Catholic sexual self-denial.

In Shakespeare, resistance to marriage is not godly self-control, but social pathology. We see this clearly in *Measure for Measure*, a play set in a Catholic Vienna, wherein the young novice Isabella knows nothing about Christ’s plan for salvation (at least, she says nothing about it when she bids her condemned brother to prepare for death [3.1]). Isabella seeks the religious life not for devotional purposes but in quest of “strict restraint” on her passions (1.4.4). The famous Biblical justification of a life of sexual abstinence, found in First Corinthians, makes clear that restraint is a spiritual gift, not an effect to be achieved through personal efforts, nor something to be imposed by the Church. “For I would that all men were even as I myself am, but every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that,” Paul writes to the Corinthians. “Therefore I say unto the unmarried, and even unto the widows, it is good for them to abide even as I do. But if they cannot abstain, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn” (I Cor. 7:7–9). Isabella has no spiritual gift of restraint, and seeks its imposition by institutional authority and a physical cloistering which her play’s arch-plotter, Duke Vincentio, eventually tries to deny her. Of course, audiences are understandably skeptical about the marriages arranged and proposed by Vincentio. These unions, including, possibly, his own with Isabella, are mismatches, patched together against the wills of one half of each couple. Daniel Gates may be right that in Vincentio, Shakespeare mocks Calvin’s argument that since the gift of restraint is so rare, “marriage should be the solution for almost everyone” (Gates 2013, p. 529). Yet resistance to marriage is not virtuous in the cold, uncharitable Isabella, any more than it is in the sanctimonious bachelor Angelo, a man “whose blood / Is very snow broth” (1.4.57–58), but who nurses hot passions on which he illicitly acts. Huston Diehl quotes Calvin to describe Isabella and Angelo, aptly noting the “isolation of their counterfeit righteousness” (Diehl 1998, p. 409).⁶ The conditions of both these characters present single life as a grim, self-serving, loveless alternative even to an imperfect marriage. Even in this unhappy comedy, Shakespeare leads us to the Calvinist association of celibacy with spiritual error, and matrimony with the opportunity for spiritual growth.

In a brighter comedy, *Much Ado about Nothing*, male marriage-resister Benedick, though he lacks Angelo’s treachery, is, like him, not impelled by virtue or godliness. Instead, he nurses a self-protective fear of cuckoldry that signals his immaturity, and is in fact, as R. Chris Hassel observes, a mark of his self-love (Hassel 1980, p. 91). His final declaration, on the eve of his marriage, that “There is no staff more reverent than one tipped with horn” (5.4.123–24), registers his brave advance into a realm of emotional risk and self-sacrifice. (“[S]o is the forehead of a married man more honorable than the bare brow of a bachelor,” as Touchstone says in *As You Like It* [3.3.60–1]). In Shakespeare, the dangers of intimacy are to be risked. Vulnerability to a spouse is a step on the path to our necessary vulnerability to God. It’s no wonder that C. S. Lewis thought of Benedick when, in his famous sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” he associated the sinner’s isolation with a failure to join with and be recognized by God. In such a condition, “Nobody marks us” (Lewis 1980, p. 40). (“Nobody marks you,” Beatrice says of bachelor Benedick [1.1.117]—though, clearly, *she* does.) Lewis finds love’s willingness to risk being wounded by a friend or lover a spiritual necessity, taking issue with St. Augustine’s neo-Stoic argument that one should not give one’s heart to a fallible human. “To love at all is to be vulnerable,” Lewis elsewhere writes (Lewis 2012, p. 121). Benedick comes to agree, and, by play’s end, not only risks the cuckold’s horn, but encourages others to join the dance (“Prince, thou art sad, get thee a wife, get thee a wife” [5.4.122]).⁷ This is the general early-modern view. Spiritual trials are to be met in conjugal relationships, triumphed over through humility and prayer—“Serve God, love me,” Benedick tells Beatrice (5.2.93)—and crowned with friendship, in a

⁶ Calvin’s passage, quoted more fully by (Diehl 1998, p. 404) reads, “But so soon as [man] is compelled to try his life by the balance of the law, then leaving the presumption of that counterfeit righteousness, he seeth himself to be an infinite space distant from holiness.”

⁷ (Tiffany 1995) discusses at length Shakespeare’s male comic characters’ morally healthful choices to risk cuckoldry.

community of married couples.⁸ Paradoxically, such success is most clearly envisioned in plays which contain “pagan” scenes that directly or indirectly invoke the figure of Diana. These scenes—which include the procession to the shrine of Hero, “virgin knight,” that succeeds Benedick’s instruction to Beatrice in *Much Ado*—associate Diana with Catholic saints and Catholic celibacy, and ultimately rechannel her worship into marital devotion.

Shakespeare’s plays’ most spectacular rejections of celibate Diana involve Diana’s own transformation into a virtuous wife, like the Biblical helpmeet whose price is above rubies (Prov. 31:10). In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare has changed the pagan city described in Paul’s Ephesians to a Christian town, and the famous shrine of Diana at Ephesus (Baugh 1999, pp. 50–51) to a convent ruled by an abbess who, by play’s end, throws off her veil to embrace a long-lost husband. Paul’s challenge to the idolatrous cult of Diana is described in the Acts of the Apostles as a confrontation between Paul and the local silversmiths who made “great gains” by fashioning and selling “silver temples to Diana” (Acts 19:24). Thus, Shakespeare has comically translated Paul’s religious attack on those supporting the commercially profitable rites of Diana, to a Protestant attack on the celibate religious life, using Paul’s comments on marriage in Ephesians as his Biblical justification.

Ephesus is, of course, no accidental choice of setting for a play which deals substantially with the trials of marriage, and with the husband’s and wife’s mutual obligations. Elizabethans were familiar with Paul’s instructions to the married couples of that town in Ephesians five:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord.
 For the husband is the wive’s head, even as Christ is the head of the
 Church, and the same is the Saviour of his body.
 Therefore as the church is in subjection to Christ, even so let the
 wives be to their husbands in every thing.
 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church . . .
 So ought men to love their wives, as their own bodies; he that
 loveth his wife, loveth himself . . .
 For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall
 cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh.

Ephesians 5:22–31

Antipholus of Ephesus’s estranged wife Adriana’s aggrieved complaint against her husband⁹ refers to the obligations and the relation described in Paul’s letter.

How comes it now, my husband, O, how comes it,
 That thou are then estranged from thyself?
 Thyself I call it, being strange to me,
 That, undividable incorporate,
 Am better than thy dear self’s better part.
 Ah, do not tear thyself away from me;
 For know, my love, as easy mayst thou fall
 A drop of water in the breaking gulf,

⁸ (Cox 2007) invokes the Protestant ideal of marriage as a forum for Christian virtue in his eloquent account of Hermione’s embrace of her husband at the close of *The Winter’s Tale*. He writes, Hermione’s “decision to move toward Leontes and embrace him enacts her forgiveness, with its root in charity” (p. 215).

⁹ More accurately, her husband’s twin brother, who she thinks is her husband in this scene.

And take unmingled thence that drop again,
 Without addition or diminishing,
 As take from me thyself and not me too.

2.2.119–129

Yet in the play's fifth act, the town abbess turns Paul's words against Adriana, admonishing her for her failure to submit to her husband in allowing her unruly, jealous outbursts to disturb his peace. The Abbess chides, "The venom clamors of a jealous woman / Poisons more deadly than a mad dog's tooth. / It seems his sleeps were hindered by thy railing" (5.1.69–71). Adriana herself, it seems, has driven her husband away. Adriana—who humbly agrees with the Abbess' criticism ("She did betray me to my own reproof" [5.1.90])—has failed to live up to the ideal of the Christian helpmeet described in the *Homily of the State of Matrimony*, which counsels women to "seek [their husbands'] contentation," and warns that men "are compelled . . . to abhor and flee from their own houses" when wives are "forward."¹⁰ Here the Abbess plays an authoritative Pauline role in chastening and counseling these modern-day Ephesians in marital wisdom and virtue, refusing to release Antipholus (who is hiding in the abbey, and is the wrong twin anyway) to his wife until her lessons have sunk in.

Yet, the Abbess herself is made subject, or is self-subjected, to the Calvinist preference for marriage over Paul's celibacy. Later in the scene, revealing herself as the long-lost wife of the long-lost Egeon, she re-embraces her identity as mother (of the two Antipholi) and wife. She speaks "to gain a husband," identifying herself as the lost "wife, once call'd Aemilia," who "bore [Egeon] . . . two fair sons" (5.1.343–4). Her joyful disclosure, by which she abandons the religious life, makes possible the comic revelations of mistaken identity that restore harmony to Adriana's and Antipholus E.'s marriage, and facilitates another marriage, that of his twin and Adriana's sister. Paul's ancient displacement of Diana's Ephesian shrine by the (re)united Christian family is completed in Aemilia's rejection of religious vows for a renewed conjugal relation.

Shakespeare's romances furnish us with two more versions of Diana transformed to a wife or, at least, a spokeswoman for marriage.¹¹ In *Pericles*, set in a pre-Christian Mediterranean world, the goddess Diana appears to the storm-tossed Pericles in a dream (which is visible to the audience) and directs him to visit her shrine at Ephesus. That location will be the setting of his revelation, to the "maiden priests," of how he "at sea did lose [his] wife." (5.2.239–44). In fact, the shrine visit results in the restoration to Pericles of Thaisa, his lost wife, who has been serving as Diana's priestess since she washed up on shore two decades before. "Noble sir, if you have told Diana's altar true, this is your wife," says Cerimon, her protector (5.3.16–18). Like the Abbess in *The Comedy of Errors*, Diana, traditional protector of virginity, is thus made an agent and Pauline priestess of marriage. As in the earlier comedy, a wife's celibate devotions give way to reverent marriage, this time at a divine behest. As for the pagan sacrifice Diana requested, it never happens—or, rather, becomes, retrospectively, simply a metaphorical reference to Pericles' confessional testimony in Diana's temple. "Hail, Dian!" he begins, and launches into his tale, only to be interrupted by priestess Thaisa's naming of him as her husband (after she faints and revives, as is her custom [5.3.21ff]). The temple of the sainted virgin goddess becomes, in quick succession, the place of marital reunion and then the site of marriage banns. To "Pure Dian" and his wife, Pericles announces, "This prince, the fair-betrothed of your daughter, / shall marry her." He concludes by barbering himself (in the temple!) "[t]o grace thy marriage-day" (5.3.70–6). The scene uses a pagan religious setting to turn from the celibate ideal to a celebration of Christian marriage and the expanded family, achieved by the workings of "grace."

¹⁰ *A Homily of the State of Matrimony*, p. 175.

¹¹ (Bicks 2000, pp. 211–12) has argued that even the original Diana was worshipped, paradoxically, both as a protector of virgins and a mother goddess, both at Ephesus and elsewhere in the ancient world. She was likewise known to some as "goddess of hunting and childbirth" (Wilson 2018, p. 538).

The Winter's Tale's pagan shrine is that of Apollo, not Diana. Yet its scenes of Apollo's shrine and his oracle's declaration belong to the old, bad time of the first three acts. Although act five sees the fulfillment of Apollo's prophecy that King Leontes will die heirless if "that which is lost"—his daughter Perdita—"be not found" (3.2.135–6), still, this final act ushers in a new religious dispensation, and delivers us into the hands of a fresh authoritative voice: one that speaks and acts in the service of marriage. That is the voice of Paulina, named, not accidentally, for the apostle Paul. Paulina is indeed Pauline in her bracing admonitions to Leontes to remain virtuous, repentant, and chaste after the death of Hermione.¹² Additionally, in the play's last scene we see reiterated through her the Apostle Paul's resistance to the cult of Diana. In an episode reminiscent of the shrine scene in *Pericles* (written shortly before *The Winter's Tale*), Paulina officiates at a quasi-religious ceremony in which what is either Hermione's statue or Hermione herself is brought down from her pedestal, to be rejoined with Leontes, her wonder-struck husband, after sixteen years of separation. The cold, still statue associated, like the Diana of *Two Noble Kinsmen*, with abstinence and contemplation becomes a living woman, enfolding her husband in an embrace. "She's warm," Leontes says, amazed (5.3.109). The shrine is empty, the family circle full. Like Aemilia, and like the Diana of *Pericles*, Paulina has replaced austere celibacy with marriage, proving the agent not only of Leontes' and Hermione's restored union, but of Florizel's now-permitted marriage to Perdita, and of her own remarriage to the servant Camillo. In their joy, Polixenes and Leontes approve all these matches.

2. From Works to Faith

In *The Winter's Tale*, harmonious marriage is the product of providential time rather than human effort. Hermione frequently speaks of God's grace (e.g., "Grace to boot!" [1.2.80]; "You gods . . . pour your graces / Upon my daughter's head!" [5.3.121–2]). She is also the spokesman for gracious, God-fearing patience. "I must be patient, till the heavens look / With an aspect more favorable," she says, when arrested on false charges by her jealous husband (2.1.106–7). Calvin writes that God gives grace to our fallen souls through "the secret energy of the Spirit" (Calvin 1960, vol. 1, p. 537), and he affirms that the Creator, working through time, fulfills a mysterious plan and "sustains, nourishes, and cares for, everything he has made" (Calvin 1960, vol. 1, pp. 197–98). Calvin's description of God's grace in his *Institutes* reads like the plots of Shakespeare's "shipwreck" comedies and romances. "Suppose a man falls among thieves, or wild beasts; [or] is shipwrecked at sea by a sudden gale," he writes. "Suppose another man . . . [.] having been tossed by the waves, reaches harbor; [and] miraculously escapes death by a finger's breadth . . . anyone who has been taught . . . that all the hairs of his head are numbered [Matt. 10:30] . . . will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan" (Calvin 1960, vol. 1, pp. 198–99). This description also applies well to *The Winter's Tale*, where the vast, slow work of God's grace is the powerful backdrop to Leontes' puny and finally vain efforts to effect quick cures for the injuries he's done himself and others.

It may sharpen our perception of Leontes' religious error if we note that in several earlier plays, Shakespeare likens the haste and impatience seen in characters' desires for instant cures and miracles to the Old Religious penchant for amulets, holy water, and efficacious prayer-formulae. Shakespeare had already (anachronistically) mocked such trinkets and rituals in two "pagan" plays of the 1590s, *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*. In the first, Aaron the Moor speaks scornfully to Titus's son Lucius of the Romans' "popish tricks and ceremonies," and notes that "An idiot holds his bauble for a god" (*Titus Andronicus* 5.1.76–9). In Aaron's insult, the Ancient Roman worship of the Olympian gods is explicitly associated with contemporary "Romish" practices.¹³ In *Julius Caesar*, that connection is made similarly plain. There the conspirator Decius strategically misinterprets Caesar's nightmare

¹² See (Tiffany 2000), where this observation first appears. See also the argument of (Lewalski 1978, pp. 131–44) regarding the Protestant vision of *The Winter's Tale*.

¹³ Robert Miola thinks the fact that Aaron, a wicked fellow, is the one uttering this sneering insult invalidates the insult. He sees Aaron representing a "Tudor magistrate" who misunderstands the Christian religion (Miola 2001, p. 34). However, I see

of his own assassination in terms which suggest popular reverence for relics and vials of sacred blood, staple items of show and profit in the Catholic shrines of the continent and pre-Reformation England—as well, of course, as in late-sixteenth-century Rome.¹⁴ “Your statue spouting blood in many pipes, / In which so many smiling Romans bath’d, / Signified that from you great Rome shall suck, / Reviving blood, and that great men shall press / For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance” (2.2.85–90). Caesar-worship is here recognizably associated with the “popish” idolatrous practices of the Old Faith. Of course, Caesar’s death is caught up in a Providential scheme that none of its characters understands, one that makes saints’ relics look superstitious and trivial, and turns readers and audiences instead toward the complete transformation of nature effected by Christ’s awe-inspiring birth, death, and resurrection. *Julius Caesar* and, especially, its sequel, *Antony and Cleopatra*, are permeated with references to the coming “time of universal peace” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.6.4), the *pax romana* ushered in by the final victory of Caesar’s heir, Octavius, in the wars pursuant to Caesar’s death. This *pax romana* is the precursor to Christ’s coming. Octavius will become Augustus, under whose reign the Christ will be born, an event that will lead, in the fullness of Providential time, to the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev. 21:1) which Antony falsely identifies with his erotic (and bigamous) love for Cleopatra (1.1.17).¹⁵

Thus, Shakespeare’s earlier pagan plays prepare us for *The Winter’s Tale*’s dismissal of instant, humanly wrought solutions to the evil caused by flawed human natures. Tinctures, tricks, and relics, thought by some to impart healing, are the products of magical thinking and haste. They are superficial. Leontes longs for such easy solutions at the end of act three of his play, when, confronted with the death of his son and the Delphic oracle’s pronouncement of his wife’s innocence and his own tyranny, he vows to put things to rights immediately by his own actions. As Stephen Orgel writes, for Leontes, “heaven is to be squared with an apology, and all past errors are assumed to be easily rectifiable” (Orgel 2005, p. 263). “Beseech you tenderly apply to her / Some remedies for life,” Leontes directs his servants, believing his dying wife has merely fainted. He adds, “I’ll reconcile me to Polixenes, / New woo my queen,” and “recall the good Camillo,” his maligned servant, as though these actions could speedily mend the breaches he’s made in both the marriage friendship and the other friendships (3.2.152–6). He cannot, of course, perform these miracles – Hermione either dies or removes herself, and Polixenes and Camillo remain out of reach for sixteen years across an ocean. Yet equally unhelpful is Leontes’ subsequent commitment to perpetual acts of devotion at a shrine he’ll erect for Hermione and his son, Mamillius (also dead, of grief at his father’s actions). “Once a day I’ll visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there / Shall be my recreation” (3.2.238–41). Though he performs his pledge, these acts of ritual penitence do not mitigate his grief and guilt. Indeed, his actions display what Sarah Beckwith calls the “abandoned sacrament of penance” (Beckwith 2011, p. 1). Like the prayers for Richard II’s soul instituted by Henry V, son of Richard’s slayer, and sung by “sad and solemn priests” in “chauntries,” Leontes’ prayers are “nothing worth” (*Henry V* 4.1.301). Sixteen years of them do not serve to restore his kingdom, which lacks an heir, and leave him smarting as sharply as ever at Paulina’s reminder of the wife he “killed.” “Kill’d? / She I kill’d? I did so; but thou strik’st me / Sorely, to say I did. It is as bitter / Upon thy tongue as in my thought” (5.1.15–19).

This interchange between Paulina and Leontes shows the insufficiency of pious works to restore him to God (whom Leontes has called Apollo), or his kingdom to political health. Early-modern Protestants associated works with the outward sacrifices of the Old Covenant which “could not make holy, concerning the conscience, him that did the service,” according to Hebrews, a letter then attributed to Paul. Time dispenses with this Old Covenant, which, “disannulled and waxed old, is ready to

little resemblance between Aaron and a Tudor magistrate. Wicked he may be, yet Aaron functions as the play’s satirist, skewering the hypocrisies of various Roman and Gothic characters.

¹⁴ For a discussion of late-medieval English church reliquaries, see chapter 1 of (Tiffany 2006).

¹⁵ Two excellent discussions of references to Christian Providence in these Roman plays are found in (Hunt 2011), mentioned above, and in (Danby 1994).

vanish away." In its place comes a new promise, wrought from Christ's sacrifice and the Holy Spirit, which acts upon the penitent to achieve an inward purification (Heb. 9:9, 8:10–13). The view that only infusing spirit, not performed works, could rehabilitate sinners was strongly emphasized by Calvin, who writes, "All those things in [man] which are said to have pleased God he received from God's grace—so far is he from preparing himself to receive grace . . . through his own effort" (Calvin 1960, vol. 1, p. 806). What Adrian Streete calls the "profoundly anti-volitional" character of Protestant Christianity, and finds broadly expressed in early modern drama (Streete 2009, p. 15), was influenced by these words of Calvin, which expand upon Paul's statement in Ephesians: "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of your selves; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Thus, Paulina's affirmation of Leontes' inability to atone for his own sins echoes both Calvin and Paul.

It is indeed significant that despite Paulina's grief and anger at Leontes, his wife's tormentor, it is not she who imposes on him ritual penitent acts for destroying his family. Leontes devises these for himself. Leontes also uses a Catholic vocabulary to describe the dead Hermione, referring, when he speaks of her, to saints and incense. Were he to marry again, he says, "her sainted spirit" would appear and—in an odd replacement for "incite me"—"incense me" (5.1.57, 61). Leontes seeks peace from his pain, and imagines Hermione, his victim, as a saint with the power to give or withhold his cure depending on whether his actions are virtuous or treacherous. However, Paulina does not want Leontes healed by anything less than an intervening, Providential miracle. Rather than urging him to find reconciliation through rote acts of veneration at Hermione's chapel shrine, she strives to keep him ever mindful of his unassuaged guilt. In this, she expresses the same distrust of penitent works seen in Calvin, who writes that "men having made confession to a priest, think that they may wipe their mouth and say, I did it not. And not only they are made all the year long the bolder to sin: but all the rest of the year bearing themselves bold upon confession, they never sigh unto God, they never return to themselves" (Qtd. in [Diehl 1998, p. 408]). Companioned by Paulina, Leontes cannot "wipe [his] mouth and say, I did it not." She keeps his wife's death bitter in his thought and on both of their tongues (5.1.17–19). He runs no danger of not "return[ing] to [himself]": of failing to revisit his own sin. Her reminders of "she you kill'd" (5.1.15) guard him against any presumption of what Calvin called "counterfeit righteousness," keeping him aware that, as Calvin writes of sinners, he is an "infinite space distant from holiness" (Qtd. in [Diehl 1998, p. 408]). Paulina is Pauline in her vigorous exhortations to virtuous behavior (preached almost exclusively to the longsuffering Leontes); and she is both Pauline and Calvinist in her implicit repudiation of penitent works—and, finally, in her explicit call for faith.

To prepare for the miracle made possible by faith, after the reunion of Leontes and Perdita and his reconciliation with Polixenes and Camillo, Paulina removes them all to a new "chapel," where stands the statue which will shortly become a wife. There she requires all participants in the imminent ceremony to "awake [their] faith" (5.3.94). Certainly, Leontes' penitence, deepened over time, enables him to receive the graceful gift here made available by Paulina, namely the resurrection of his marriage partner. But the miracle is accomplished through his humble acceptance of the resurrection—his faith that it will happen—as it could not have been through his pious acts. This surrender to faith is as important for Leontes as it is difficult. His sin in the play's first three acts has stemmed directly from his lack of faith, first in his wife's loyalty ("She's an adult'ress" [2.1.88]); second, in the virtue of his lifelong friend ("I have said with whom" [2.1.88]); third, in the honesty and judgment of his counselors ("You're liars all" [2.3.146]); and fourth in the Delphic oracle, which—characteristically for a Renaissance romance set in the classical world—is a mask of Providence.¹⁶ Leontes has claimed, "There is no truth at all in the oracle" (3.2.140). Now, his profession of faith in the miracle Paulina offers, completes the healing begun by his statement, after his son's death, "I have too much believ'd mine own suspicion" (3.2.151). Yet nowhere does Leontes, or anyone else in the play's last scene, suggest that

¹⁶ In Clifford Davidson's words, Apollo's oracle is here "a pagan source of truth which may be interpreted as a source of divine revelation" (Davidson 2006, p. 121). The oracle may be interpreted this way because the play proves its prophecies accurate in every detail.

Paulina is the author of the miracle. She is “assisted,” though not by “wicked powers” (5.3.90–91). She presides, but her language attributes the life-restoring power to a being outside herself. She tells Hermione, “Bequeath to death your numbness; for from him / Dear life redeems you” [5.3.103–04]. Paulina’s “dear life,” like Hermione’s “grace,” suggests the salvific power of God’s unearned love and forgiveness.

The suggestion is, again, eminently Calvinist, and characteristic of official early modern English religious thought and discourse. We might consider, for example, *Certain Sermons*, a book of state-prescribed homilies read in churches throughout England after its 1547 publication, which lays a Calvinist stress on man’s inability to act freely without the impetus of grace. “We cannot think a good thought of our selves, much less can we say well, or do well of our selves . . . There is none good but God, and . . . we can do nothing that is good without him” (Bond 1987, pp. 72–74). So in *The Winter’s Tale*. Leontes’ awakening of his faith leads to a secular redemption for himself and his kingdom, emblematic of the larger redemption available to sinners through grace. In the final scene of this play, Shakespeare affirms both the spiritual value of human marriage and the superiority of simple belief to ritual acts.

I have elsewhere written extensively of how Shakespeare’s use of “Catholic” miracles like moving “saint” statues shows the confidence with which an early-modern English Protestant playwright could claim Catholic practices and iconography for imaginative play, relegating them to the fairytale world of the playhouse.¹⁷ Yet, Shakespeare could also “play” with Catholicism in ways which made serious suggestions about the practical yet mysterious operations of marital and divine love. The scene of Hermione changing—of her being changed—from a stone statue to a woman embracing her husband joins a pattern of similar Shakespearean championings of marriage against the celibacy prized and practiced in Catholic tradition. Other cold, celibate, and finally healthfully rejected or enlivened statues include not only the sterile Diana of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, but the enshrined “dear saint” whom Juliet refuses to be when she returns Romeo’s kiss (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.1.95–110). Tragically, they also include Othello’s false image of Desdemona, the wife he kills for not being as pure as “Dian’s visage” (*Othello* 3.3.387) and as motionless as “monumental alabaster” (5.2.5). In *Leontes*, it might be said, Othello gets a second chance at loving a wife, and that second chance is thematically associated with salvation. In *The Winter’s Tale*, by means of its paradoxically pagan setting, Shakespeare deepens his celebration of Christian marriage by linking its trials and joys to the larger issue of the sinner’s reconciliation to God through faith.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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¹⁷ See (Tiffany 2006), chapter 4.

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