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Proceedings of the 28th Northern Plains Conference on British Literature

Bob De Smith
Dordt University, bob.desmith@dordt.edu

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Abstract

It was a pleasure to plan and host the 28th Northern Plains Conference at Dordt in 2021—and to collect many of the conference papers for presentation in the proceedings which follow. In the following pages, you will find the Conference Program, followed by submitted papers in the order in which there were presented. Thanks to everyone who submitted. Your scholarship, wit, and insights are inspiring.

Keywords

conference papers and proceedings, British literature, academic writing, COVID-19 pandemic

Disciplines

English Language and Literature

Comments

Presented at the 2021 Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature, held on the campus of Dordt University, Sioux Center, Iowa, April 16-17, 2021.

Proceedings of the 28th

Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature

Edited by Dr. Robert J. De Smith

With the assistance of Lauren Hoekstra

Conference held April 16-17, 2021

at

Dordt University, Sioux Center, Iowa

Sponsored by the Office of Research of Scholarship,

the Co-Curricular Committee, and the English Department at Dordt University,

Dr. Robert J. De Smith, host

Keynote Presenter

Dr. Mark Rankin, Professor of English at James Madison University

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Introduction

If a conference can have a coming out party after more than two decades of annual events, spring 2021 was that party. The 28th Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature was held April 16-17 at Dordt University in Sioux Center, IA. Planned for the same location in the spring of 2020, the conference was canceled just as the pandemic brought concerns, restrictions, and illness. The previous spring, the conference was battered by a blizzard, and while it was highly successful, it was held virtually, hosted by Stephen Hamrick at the University of MN Moorhead and David Sprunger at Concordia. We hardly knew how much zooming we would be doing in the next two years!

As spring of 2021 progressed, restrictions were slowly easing and vaccines were showing up. A month before the conference, I predicted that perhaps a dozen participants would show up in person and a dozen more would attend virtually. Turns out, just 5 participants (3 of them local) were able to attend in person, with 19 showing up virtually. The hybrid format, with most sessions including both local and virtual presentations, did not seem to be a barrier to great engagement. On campus students and faculty helped to fill the room a bit.

The on-campus contingent enjoyed the camaraderie of in-person interaction, but the real party was online. I was impressed not only with the attention and persistence of the Zoom group (folks came and stayed) but also with their lively chattiness and engagement. Many attendees remarked that this was the first conference they had attended in more than a year—one observing for us all that it was high time she recovered her academic self. The NPCEBL has always been remarkable for its friendliness: as host, I was delighted to sit back and listen as great discussions unfolded.

The papers were consistently excellent and varied, as the selected papers gathered here demonstrate. If there's such a thing as pent-up academic energy, it was in display at the conference. We were led in this regard by my friend Mark Rankin, whose address on the illustrations in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* reminded us of the excitement and discovery that attends to academic inquiry. Mark's commitment to the conference deserves recognition, as he was the first say that he was happy to defer his talk for a year when the conference needed to be canceled in 2020.

So thanks to everyone for participating in the 2021 NPCEBL. Paradoxically (is that a sort of anagram of "Pandemically"?) we learned how much we miss in-person participation in a conference that values both ideas and those who present then. And we also learned that the conference can push out its elbows a bit to accommodate virtual attendees. I look forward to gathering in person in the spring of 2022 at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion in order to resume our face-to-face interaction and perhaps, if the hosts see fit, to welcome some virtual participants who could not otherwise attend.

My particular thanks go out to my many friends at the conference whose support and affirmation make me dedicated to our little affair. Locally, Dordt's Office of Research and Scholarship, its Co-curricular Committee, and its English Department generously supported the conference. Joe Bakker offered his technical support and Mindi Sneller at Dordt Dining made our guests feel at home at every turn. Students Yovela Belicia (planning and coordination) and Lauren Hoekstra (proceedings) helped immensely. Mark Rankin was the kind of guest who is also a host—his participation was a delight. Final thanks goes to my spouse, Rebecca, whose only regret is that she could not host a reception in our home for our guests. Her eye for detail and innate graciousness aided the conference in more ways than anyone knew.

It was a pleasure to plan and host the 28th Northern Plains Conference at Dordt in 2021—and to collect many of the conference papers for presentation in the proceedings which follow. In the following pages, you will find the Conference Program, followed by submitted papers in the order in which there were presented. Thanks to everyone who submitted. Your scholarship, wit, and insights are inspiring. Please send on any inquiries about the proceedings to bob.desmith@dordt.edu.

Bob De Smith
Dordt University

The 28th Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature

Dordt University, Sioux Center, IA

April 16-17

Keynote Address by

Dr. Mark Rankin, Professor of English at James Madison University

Conference Host: Dr. Bob De Smith, Professor of English at Dordt University

Sponsored by the Dordt University English Department and the Office of Research and Scholarship.

Conference Information

For wifi on Campus, choose Dordt Guest from among your options and follow the instructions.

Separate Zoom links will be provided for the following events:

Friday paper sessions

Friday virtual social hour

Keynote address

Saturday paper sessions

A password will be required for each session.

If in person participants plan to share slides or documents, they should join the Zoom session from their device when they present, but they can present from the podium without joining Zoom if they don't need to share their screen. Assistance will be provided.

Masks will be strongly encouraged for on campus visitors when they are not presenting. Social distancing and cleaning protocols will be employed, and visitors to the sessions will be asked to wear masks.

A selection of papers will be published electronically as the Conference Proceedings. Contact Bob De Smith (bob.desmith@dordt.edu) with questions or to submit your paper for consideration. Deadline: June 1 (they are gladly received earlier).

Past proceedings may be found on the NPCEBL website.

Plans for the 2022 conference are in process: talk to Bob De Smith if you want to learn how easy and rewarding it is to host.

The conference host would like to thank Dordt's English Department for its financial and moral support; Mark Rankin, for his longsuffering commitment to the conference after it was canceled last year; campus colleagues (named in the program) who were persuaded to present or chair sessions; friends of the conference who have become my friends; Joe Bakker, for technical support; Yovela Belicia, English Education student and my assistant, and my students, who inspire me every day.

Bob De Smith

Northern Plains Conference on Early British Literature

Conference Schedule

Friday, April 16 All Sessions in CL1321 *In person

8:15-12:00 Registration

8:15-10:30 Continental Breakfast in CL1321

8:30-8:45 Welcome: Scott Culpeper, Humanities Division Dean and Bob De Smith, host

8:45-10:15 Session 1: Sources and Contexts

Chair: Bob De Smith, Dordt University (conference host)

Derric Ludens, Dakota Wesleyan University

Ponts and Pontiffs: Reestablishing the Social and Political Context of Josuah's Sylvester's *Divine Weeks*

Art Marmorstein, Northern State University

The Tragedy of the Common Adulterer: John Dryden's *All for Love* and its Sources

Judith Dorn, St. Cloud State University

Conscience and English National History

*Scott Culpepper, Dordt University

Shakespeare's Historians: Getting to Know the Chroniclers Who Inspired the Bard

10:15-10:30 Morning Break

10:30-12:00 Session 2: Translations, Construction, and a Good Scouring

Chair: Mark Tazelaar, Dordt University

*Walker Reid Cosgrove, Dordt University

The Monsters and the Translators: An *Apologia* for the Study of History

Peter Ramey, Northern State University

The View from Tolkien's Tower: *Beowulf* and Allegories of Reading

Charles Henry, University of North Dakota

The Construction of Leprosy as Identity in Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*

Michelle M. Sauer, University of North Dakota

Whitewashing the African Desert: Blackness in the Patristic World

12:00-1:00 Lunch: Dordt University Commons

1:00-2:30 Session 3: Pilgrimages and Sieges

Chair: Shaun Stiemsma, Dordt University

*Christina Di Gangi, Dawson Community College

Lineage As Tragedy: Jocasta in the *Siege of Thebes* and *Fall of Princes*

Nickolas Haydock, University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez

Lydgate's Seven Mile *Siege of Thebes*: Repetition and Chaucerian Narratology

William F. Hodapp, The College of St. Scholastica

"The holy blisful martyr" Becket, Pilgrimage, and Chaucer's Inscribed Audience in *The Canterbury Tales*

E. L. Risden, St. Norbert College

Paradise Lost and the Physical/Spiritual Implications of Expandable/ Contractible Space

2:30-2:45 Afternoon Break

2:45-4:15 Session 4: Forgiveness, Mas(que)s, and Reformations

Chair: Howard Schaap, Dordt University

Kyle Moore, University of North Dakota

A Lesson in Humility: Penance and Pilgrimage in *Sir Isumbras*

Gayle Gaskill, St. Catherine University

Using Folktale Traditions to Interpret Themes of Honor and Forgiveness in *All's Well*

Susan Wood, Midland University

Masks and Masques: *Troilus and Cressida*

Stephen Hamrick, Minnesota State University Moorhead

"In Martirs Tunes They Sing and Waile": Revisiting Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* as a Reformation Text

4:30-5:15 Virtual Social Hour

5:30-6:30 p.m. Banquet: Terrace Room

7:00-8:00 *Keynote Address:*

Dr. Mark Rankin, James Madison University

"The Illustrations of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and their Publication History"

8:15 p.m. Afterwards at the Fruited Plain [171 N. Main Ave, Sioux Center]

Saturday, April 17 All Sessions in CL1321 *In person

8:30-10:30 Continental Breakfast in CL1321

8:45-10:15 Session 5: Going to the Movies and other Troublesome Topics

Chair: Mark Tazelaar, Dordt University

John Kerr, St. Mary's University

"Think of it like theatre": Metadrama in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*.

*CoryAnne Harrigan, Simpson College

Imagining Hamlet's Father as a Nazi Sympathizer

*Bruce Brandt, South Dakota State University

Redeeming Shakespeare's Wife

*Shaun Stiemsma, Dordt University

"All form is formless, order orderless": Marriage as Comic Resolution in *Troublesome Reign* and *King John*

10:15 to 10:30 Morning Break

10:30-12:00 Session 6: So many "Ands"

Chair: Bob De Smith, Dordt University (conference host)

Rachel Roberts, North Greenville University

"Unpriseable Only for Itt Self": Beauty and Virtue in Mary Wroth's *Urania*

Audrey D. Johnson, North Dakota State University

Mycology and the Sublime in the Eighteenth-Century Gothic

Emily E. Severinson, University of North Dakota

The "Eating Disorder Voice" as an Extension of Christ's Control Over the Female Body in the Life of Dorothea von Montau

Sarah B. Rude, Augustana University

Interrogating "The Blessing of Forgetfulness": War and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*

Scott Culpepper, PhD
Dordt University
Scott.Culpeper@dordt.edu

Shakespeare's Historians: Getting to Know the Chroniclers Who Inspired the Bard

William Shakespeare filled his plays with history. Even those works not formally categorized as "histories" by scholars contain historical settings or allusions. No one produces history from a vacuum. Shakespeare utilized sources like any other student of the past. Historical writing in Shakespeare's day resembled the narrative epics of the ancient world more than the formalized disciplinary studies rooted in archival research inspired by Leopold Van Ranke in the nineteenth century. The chroniclers Shakespeare consulted were compilers and interpreters of narrative traditions and oral histories passed down from previous generations. For more recent history, they sometimes collected oral histories from their contemporaries as well. Many historians would argue that their presentation of eyewitness accounts from their own day may be their most valuable contribution outside their connections to Shakespeare. University College historian René Weiss said, "Shakespeare also used sources extensively. Whole passages of *Henry V* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were demonstrably written with Holinshed and Plutarch open on his desk." These histories draw critical interest primarily because of their role in preserving sixteenth century views of history and their influence on Shakespeare's work. As Shakespeare scholar Alison Taufer observed, "We care about the Holinshed Chronicles because Shakespeare read them" (135).

Who were these historians? What were their strengths and limitations? In what ways can we see their influence reflected in Shakespeare's plays? In this presentation, we will

explore the lives and writings of three chroniclers whose works impacted Shakespeare's dramatic renderings of the turbulent two centuries that preceded his own times. That historical period was consumed with dynastic conflicts from 1399-1485 and the reign of the Tudors from 1485-1603. Shakespeare was poised at the intersection between the Tudor and Stuart periods, a time that was potentially ripe for a reigniting of old dynastic squabbles if the transfer of power from one dynasty to the next was not handled well. In light of this dynamic, Shakespeare's interpretations of that history and those of the chroniclers he consulted took on additional weight. How those times were perceived by the populace might well color how they read the signs of their own times.

The first two chroniclers are lesser-known figures, though their histories were widely read and influential in their day. Edward Hall (1496-1547) lived during the reigns of the first two Tudor kings and served as a Member of Parliament. Hall's most noted historical work was *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke,* which was first published in 1542. The original text covered the historical period from 1399 to 1532. It was updated to the 1547 death of Henry VIII posthumously for Hall by the printer Richard Grafton in 1548. Grafton completed the update using Hall's notes.

Hall's interpretive bias appears in the title of the work with his choice to use the words "union" and "illustre." The great dynastic conflicts of the fifteenth century that culminated in the Wars of the Roses were viewed by Hall as the troubled path to a desirable end. That end was uniting the houses of York and Lancaster through the marriage of Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York. Hall relates this interpretive slant in detail at outset in his full title, which is *The Union of the two noble and illustrious families of Lancaster and York being*

long in continual dissension for the crown of this noble realm, with all the acts done in both the times of the Princes, both of the one lineage and of the other, beginning at the time of king Henry the fourth, the first author of this division, and so successively proceeding to the reign of the high and prudent prince, king Henry the eighth, the indubitable flower and very heir of both the said lineages.

Hall's approach consists of the elements one would expect from a loyal civil servant living under Henry VIII. However, there is little reason to believe that Hall's exaltation of the Tudor state and its virtues was mere pretense. Hall's writings and what little we know of his activities suggest that he was sympathetic to the Protestant cause. Despite Henry's notorious waffling on matters of religion, he was viewed by Protestants as the person who liberated them from Catholic control. Gratitude for the Protestant turn Henry enabled for his own reasons, and hope for an extension of Protestant influence under his son, allowed Protestants like Hall to excuse a multitude of failures in the final decade of Henry's reign.

Hall's breakdown of historical time periods highlights the emphasis on rulers or great personalities that dominated historical writing before the twentieth century. They also bear evidence of a one-dimensional characterization bestowed on those great personalities. For example, Hall highlights "the victorious acts of King Henry V," "the prosperous reign of King Edward iiii," and the "the tragical doings of King Richard III." The only allusion to time and circumstance not shaped by royal influence was Hall's reference to "the troubolous season of King Henry VI," an acknowledgement that Henry was so much a prisoner of fortune and incapable of exercising agency because of his incapacitation throughout much of his reign (9). One interesting aspect of Shakespeare's interpretations of these histories lies in

his decisions to sometimes follow these one-dimensional characterizations and at other times to dispense with them altogether, giving his historical characters more depth for the sake of dramatic force. Two outstanding examples where Shakespeare follows the one-dimensional trope are the characterizations of Henry V and Richard III. Henry represents the great hero of the cycle of historical plays. He leads England to its greatest successes during this troubled age and embodies its highest ideals in the St. Crispin's Day speech that Shakespeare places on his lips (Shakespeare 660). The constant shadow does provide at least some complexity is Henry's awareness that even he will pay the price for the sins of his father. If Henry is the English superhero of the fifteenth century, Richard III assumes the mantle of its most detestable villain. Hall points to the "tragical doings" of Richard as the crowning atrocities in an age of atrocities. Richard's villainy threatens to reignite the fratricidal conflict that his brother had ended and destroy all the English virtues made secure by the victories of Henry V. The narrative progression we see across Shakespeare's ten history plays is present in outline already in Hall's chronicle. Everything stands or falls on leadership. Henry Bolingbroke's ambition draws the succession into doubt and opens a new uncertain age. Henry V achieves unparalleled success only to have it threatened by premature death and a weak incapable successor. The state is mended in a tenuous fashion by Edward IV only to be threatened once again by premature death and the succession of an heir too young to rule effectively in his own right. Richard III provides the final threat as Henry Tudor rises to secure the future of the kingdom at Bosworth Field.

While Shakespeare follows Hall's propensity to engage in one-dimensional characterization with Henry V and Richard III, he provides more nuance and complexity to

figures such as Henry VI and Edward IV. Henry wants to be an effective ruler and takes baby steps in that direction in his more lucid moments. But he is ultimately a slave to fortune and his mental incapacity. Edward rises to greatness on the field of battle, but his fondness for unreliable allies and "sportive tricks" in the bedchamber binds him to the Woodvilles. His bitter younger brother imagines him as a hero who has become soft and overly content in the famous opening soliloquy of *Richard III*.

Raphael Holinshed collaborated in the creation of another work that colored the history Shakespeare read and utilized in his plays. *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* began as a broader work on world history conceived by Reginald Wolfe, a Dutch-born London printer and an original member of the Royal Stationer's Company. Wolf hired Raphael Holinshed and clergyman William Harrison to help him with the work. They limited the scope of the chronicle to the British Isles. Holinshed and Harrison continued work on the *Chronicles* after Wolfe's death in 1573, publishing the first edition in 1577. Holinshed himself died in 1580 and his collaborators produced a second edition published in 1587. This second edition was likely the one read by William Shakespeare. Shakespeare scholars have identified *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* as an important source for Shakespeare's history plays as well as *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Cymbeline* (Kewes). The most interesting of Shakespeare's adaptations from Holinshed remains *Macbeth* due to the way that Shakespeare changes the characters of Duncan and Macbeth to create dramatic tension. He also magnifies the figure of Lady Macbeth, a move some scholars attribute to inspiration from Seneca (Kewes). Whether these changes could be

attributed to Shakespeare's dramatic license alone or to the existence of other unknown sources he consulted remains a live question.

Concerning the fifteenth century, *Holinshed's Chronicles* provided a number of raw materials that Shakespeare adapted and improved. Paulina Kewes of Oxford University noted, "Conventions of history writing in Shakespeare's time not only permitted but positively dictated that chroniclers invent speeches for major historical figures. Thus in the Chronicles we find Henry V's rousing oration to his troops before the battle of Agincourt . . . which Shakespeare adapted in his *Henry V*" (Holinshed). Holinshed's version of the speech was markedly different from the dramatic address crafted by Shakespeare. Holinshed puts in Henry's mouth the words:

> If we should fight in trust of multitude of men, and so get the victorie (our minds being prone to pride) we should thereupon peradventure ascribe the victorie not so much to the gift of God, as to our owne puissance, and thereby provoke his high indignation and displeasure against vs: and if the enimy get the upper hand, then should our realme and countrie suffer more damage and stand in further danger. But be you of good comfort, and shew your selves valiant, God and our iust quarrell shall defend us, and deliver these our proud adversaries with all the multitude of them which you sée (or at the least the most of them) into our hands (Holinshed).

Shakespeare's version infuses the speech with poetic beauty and nationalistic zeal.

> From this day to the ending of the world,
>
> But we in it shall be remembered;
>
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
>
> For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
>
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile
>
> This day shall gentle his condition:
>
> And gentlemen in England, now a-bed

Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,

And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day. (Shakespeare 660)

Contrary to Holinshed and Shakespeare, the actual Henry V probably said something akin to "Charge" if he said anything.

The most consistent characterization over the course of the historical chronicles from the sixteenth century remains the character of Richard III. Holinshed continues the negative appraisal of his schemes and usurpations advanced in Hall. An earlier work produced by a figure better known than either Hall or Holinshed preceded them. Thomas More (1478-1535) achieved a level of success and influence that allows us to know many more details about his life than other chroniclers of the period. More wrote an account of Richard III's reign between 1513 and 1518. The account remained unpublished until 1557, two decades after More's execution (More). It is uncertain whether Hall had any knowledge of More's unpublished text. If so, he does not appear to have had access or used it extensively. By the time Holinshed was compiling his work, More's text was available and did influence his portrait of Richard. Historian Lily Campbell wrote,

> The Richard whom we know in Shakespeare's *Richard III* both as the tragic villain and the historical usurper and tyrant is the Richard whom Sir Thomas More gave to the world in a picture so convincing that none of the succeeding chroniclers could banish it from his work. More's Richard III is, indeed, still the Richard accepted by the multitude, and the apologists from Buc onward who would give the devil his due have spoken to deaf ears. (318).

Time and The Richard III Society have given a stronger voice to Ricardians in the early twenty-first century than they enjoyed when Campbell first wrote *Shakespeare's Histories* in the 1960s, but the weight of opinion still tends towards a negative view of Richard at best.

More drew on sources such as Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* in its prepublication 1513 manuscript and John Rous' *Historia Regum Angliae*. Both works were commissioned by Henry VII and neither has a strong reputation for historical accuracy. Rous portrayed Richard as gestating in his mother's womb for two years, after which he emerged with a full set of teeth and long hair (Campbell 64-67, 316-319). Thomas More himself was only seven when Richard perished at Bosworth Field. His primary innovation is pushing Richard's plotting back to the period before Edward IV's death. Even many of Richard's critics acknowledged his outward loyalty to his brother before Edward's death. Some interpreters argued that changing circumstances and new opportunities transformed a once loyal supporter of Edward's young heirs into the usurper who confined the princes to the Tower. Loyal Ricardians insist on it and go a step further, arguing that Richard did what he did for the preservation of the realm. More's Richard was plotting to displace his brother Clarence before Edward's death and had designs on the throne from an early stage. His elaborate and overly convoluted plot is worthy of any cinematic mastermind from a spy thriller.

More's Richard appears in both Shakespeare and, to a lesser degree, in Holinshed. Shakespeare provides the mustache-twirling opening soliloquy in which Richard deliberately chooses to "play the villain." Shakespeare wisely avoided including Rous' other implied physical deformities for Richard, but he does magnify Richard's mild scoliosis into an imposing hunchback. The actual skeleton, discovered in 2013 under a Leicester car park, revealed that Richard did have a mild idiopathic adolescent spinal deformity due to scoliosis. Such a deformity could be easily corrected by surgery today and would have been slight. It could be covered by heavy clothes and armor to the point where it was hardly noticeable

(Shakespeare 209; Jones). There was no evidence of a withered hand or limp of any kind. The unfortunate legacy of attributing physical deformity to internal corruption finds too willing enablers in the sixteenth century chronicles and in Shakespeare's own interpretations.

It is worth noting that Shakespeare's *Richard III* was one of his earlier works and one that straddles the line between history and tragedy. It contains elements of both genres. For our purposes, its chronological place as an earlier work in Shakespeare's corpus urges some caution in regard to how we read overall interpretive design in Shakespeare's historical cycle covering 1399-1547 (Campbell 1-10). There is a discernible thread across the plays from Henry IV's disturbing of the royal line, prompting divine disfavor that will loom even over the victories of Henry V, to the restoring and uniting of the royal line in Henry VII's reign and Henry VIII's very person. But the plays themselves are composed out of order and contain a world of complex themes that go deeper and beyond the surface threads that connect them.

Shakespeare's historical plays were themselves based on historical chronicles that also dramatized the past and took dramatic license with details as well as characterization. These works were more akin to current popular histories targeted for younger readers or the nationalistic fare intended for some popular adult audiences. One could see Bill O'Reilly writing a tome entitled *Killing Richard III*. To some degree, one could say Shakespeare was taking dramatic license with dramatic license. And, in most cases, he improved on what he found in the chronicles. These chronicles and Shakespeare's plays do teach us some history and also instruct us just as much on how our cultures and perspectives color our perceptions of past and present.

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Walker Reid Cosgrove, PhD
Associate Professor of History,
Dordt University
Walker.Cosgrove@dordt.edu

The Monsters and the Translators: an *apologia* for the Study of History

No longer do we believe in monsters; we've reached a ripe old, disenchanted age. In the 21st century, we romance vampires, we train dragons, and we pacify Greek gods. In our enlightened state, we produce novels and films that offer the perspective of the monsters in an attempt to help us understand them and make them seem less monstrous. Yet, we continue to demonize, and the monstrous survives in the "other" with whom we disagree, fueled, no doubt, by our highly politicized society today. It appears we've learned nothing in our enlightened disenchantment.

I want to consider here one such recent attempt to understand monsters in Maria Dahvan Headley's new translation of the poem *Beowulf*. But before I do, I want to be clear upfront that I am not a scholar of Old English generally or *Beowulf* specifically, and that my own academic specialty ranges south to southern France and the Mediterranean world and forward in time to the turn of the 13th century. Even so, I've taught *Beowulf* in the undergraduate classroom for almost fifteen years in a variety of settings from general education to upper-level courses. It's also important to note that I am a historian, which means that I can't help but teach a text within its particular cultural context. I'm not opposed to other ways of reading and interpreting texts, but I do think author and historical context worthwhile places to start (Edmundson 53).[1]

I say that as a frame of reference for the way I approach Headley's new translation, namely, as a teacher and historian. This translation stems from her 2018 novel *The Mere Wife*, a really fantastic, contemporary retelling of *Beowulf* that beautifully muddies the water between hero and monster, and in so doing humanizes Grendel's mother as an Iraq war veteran and rape survivor who clearly deals with some pretty intense PTSD. The novel cleverly forces the reader to grapple with many contemporary issues that confront us today, including toxic masculinity and the demonization of the other. Headley's re-writing of *Beowulf* in this way follows a long history of re-writing stories and myths going back at least to ancient Greek treatments of Homer.[2] As a historian I am fascinated with historical reinterpretations and rewritings of texts, whether in the pre-modern eras or our own.

That background is important because, not surprisingly, the issues Headley explores in *The Mere Wife* influence her translation and interpretation of *Beowulf* itself. An important reason to read Headley's translation of the poem is her foregrounding of the female in the text. Unlike other translations I've read, Headley's work brings to light the female and reveals that *Beowulf* says as much about the world of women in a hyper-masculine society as it does about its masculine heroes, for example, in Wealhtheow's speech following Beowulf's victory over Grendel (1170-1187)[3] and Hygd's attempt to protect her son and offer Beowulf the throne (2369-2378). Adjacent to this emphasis, she problematizes the monstrous in humanizing Grendel's mother, revealing her to be something of a female ruler and warrior in her own right, and ultimately a regional rival to Hrothgar (1258). Reminiscent of Mark Edmundson's treatment of the *Iliad*, Headley refuses to let *Beowulf* simply be a "period

piece," but rather "replete with vital possibilities" and "a potent guide to the present and the future" (Edmundson 70). In this way, Headley reveals *Beowulf* as timeless.

While there is much I appreciate in reading literature this way, I am, as I said above, a historian teaching history, not literature. This means that I don't stray much from the particular contexts that produced the literature, and in accentuating a text's milieu I offer my students an opportunity to safely consider the other from a distance. I say "safely consider from a distance" because in this case, the other is already dead, and in many of my courses has likely been dead for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. This is important because in our particular moment in the history of our nation, it appears that few can, or even desire to, understand those with whom they disagree, a problem that plagues every side of any spectrum. Essentializing those different from us has become the norm, partly because it is easier to demonize, and partly because it takes much effort and energy to explore the complexity of one who is different, to be willing, as it were, to step into their shoes and walk a mile.

I think that another reason we essentialize is that we mistake understanding those unlike us as necessarily agreeing with them. This need not be the case. Theologian Henri Nouwen suggests that true hospitality requires receiving the other completely on his or her terms alone, because to add conditions to hospitality is to manipulate and do violence. And yet, true hospitality also requires confrontation, "because a space can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define our own position" (Nouwen 69). Thus, in my classes I try to help students move beyond essentializing and develop habits and postures by which they can move toward

understanding those with whom they disagree. When faced with the other, I want my students' first reaction to be something other than judgment. I want them to see one unlike themselves as a fellow human in all his or her complexity. In this, I hope to arouse a life-long posture of charity, humility, and hospitality when engaging those, living or dead, with whom they disagree.

Despite an alleged feud between poetry and philosophy,[4] about which I'm sure there are many strong opinions in a room full of English professors, one reason I like Plato is that he truly understood the power of poetry in any given society. Poetry is the thing that casts a vision for, and is the true educator of, any culture, which is to say that poetry tells us how to be human, at what our hopes and dreams ought to be directed, why pain and suffering exist, and how we might overcome the pain and suffering to find peace, stability, wholeness, and ultimately human flourishing. Though often attributed to him, Plato didn't hate poetry so much as he hated the epic and tragic vision cast for his fellow citizens, and in his philosophical poetry he attempted to counter it with a new vision for human life, complete with a new Socratic hero to replace Achilles, Odysseus, Herakles, and the like.[5]

So, what's all of this got to do with *Beowulf*? If Plato is correct about poetry, then *Beowulf* furnishes a powerful vision for the Germanic peoples.[6] It presents the key to peace, stability, wholeness, and flourishing in the powerful warrior who can unite the people and struggle against the violent, threatening forces outside the community, be they monsters, other marauding clans and tribes, or even nature itself. Yet, and this is where *Beowulf* is unsparingly frank, by the end of the poem it is so clear that its vision ultimately and invariably fails. This is why the poem is dark, melancholic, heavy, and elegiac, and requires

such language. To my mind, the majority of the poem serves as a prologue for line 3137 to the end with Beowulf's funeral pyre and the Geat woman's lament, which reveals that any peace and stability is fleeting and temporary. The greater forces may be held at bay for the moment but are never ultimately defeated or destroyed. Without fail, the violence and destruction return (Tolkien, "On Translating" 127-128). This impression is foreshadowed earlier in the poem with the Saga of Finn (1070-1158) as well as Beowulf's remarks about the attempt to control feud through marriage alliances (2027-2031), and both of these examples disclose the relentless nature of violence and feud in the Germanic world that *Beowulf* enacts in its entirety.

Accordingly, in my reading, *Beowulf* is a text critical of its own context and hyper-masculinized framework for life and reality through a serious treatment and consideration of that very context and framework. Of course, the original audiences wouldn't have recognized the gendered categories that we use when reading the poem. But it would have been perfectly clear to them that while Beowulf the hero provides 50 years of peace and stability, in the final analysis his kingdom still collapses into violence and chaos at his death. The monsters always return, again, foreshadowed earlier in the poem with Hrothgar's own peaceful reign over his people that is eventually spoiled in Grendel's nightly visitations (81-100). In each of these examples, and the poem in its entirety, *Beowulf* reveals the futility of this Germanic vision, and thus we don't need to turn Beowulf the character into a joke to reveal how stupid and destructive toxic masculinity is. I struggle with Headley's translation at this point, because to a certain extent that is what she has done. More on this below.

Part of the challenge with Headley's translation is that she provides no scholarly apparatus offering insight into her philosophy of language and translation. Hence, we have little direction for her methods and linguistic choices, outside of a 27-page introduction. It is clear from this introduction that Headley is familiar with literature surrounding *Beowulf* and a number of other translations (ix-xv). She presents a long discussion about *hwæt* and why she translates it as she does—she renders it "Bro," in case you were wondering (xx-xxi). She also offers what I found to be an extremely insightful and helpful discussion on *aglaec-wif* (xxv-xxviii). But nothing else.

The most guidance we get concerning her method of translation is that she does not interpret the poem as an elegiac or heroic epic, but rather as "a manual for how to live as a man, if you are, in fact, more like the monsters than the men. It's about taming wild, solitary appetites, and about the failure to tame them" (xxi-xxii). Her language throughout, which is intentional on her part, seems to be spoken by deplorables in a redneck bar out in the middle of nowhere, filled with all things Trump. The reason Headley uses such language is that she wants to expose and criticize the toxic masculinity of our own day. Therefore, males in *Beowulf* are no longer great warriors but "dudebros" worthy, not of our understanding, but of our complete and utter disdain. Her translation shows little sensitivity or understanding for the cultural situation that produced the language and the poem. This is disappointing because it is the very sin for which she derides previous translators as committing against the female and monstrous characters (xxiii-xxxi).

I highlight here a few examples of these transgressions. After Scyld dies we're told his men mourn as men should, by getting drunk instead of weeping (48). Headley's narrator

doesn't tell us of the elegiac poems composed upon Heorot suffering Grendel's attacks, but instead that "Every outsider talked shit" (145). Scyld Scefing "spent his youth fists up, browbeating every barstool-brother" (5). Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar with, "Anyone who fucks with the Geats? Bro, they have to fuck with me" (421). As the titular hero dressed for battle against Grendel's mother, she translates "Beowulf gave zero shits," presumably about death, but that isn't clear in her interpretation (1441). And Headley's rendering of the heroic code begins with "Beowulf…was open for business: / 'No worries, wise one, I've got this'." (1383-1384). Admitting to Hrothgar that Grendel could kill him, Beowulf exclaims, "Horrors happen, I'm grown, I know it. / Bro, Fate can fuck you up" (453-454). I've cited "bro" twice already, and she uses the word at least two dozen more times on my count. The pissing match between Unferth and Beowulf early in the poem descends into bro this and buddy that, with Beowulf's mic drop "He's got no fear / of beer-hall brothers, but, this you can quote—he'll fear me. / There's no guns of note on anyone but me and my Geats" referring, presumably, to their muscular arms (599-601). Multiple times in her rendering she announces what "real men" do (for example, see 48, 311, 635, 1534). As Beowulf begins his boast about his battle with Grendel's mother he says "Here's to glory! And now my story. / I don't mean to say this shit was no thing" (1654-1655). I could go on.

Perhaps Tolkien went too far when he said that to translate *Beowulf* well one must use "literary and traditional" language because "the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day the poem was made" (Tolkien, "On Translating" 55). Headley disagrees with Tolkien on this point (xiv-xv), and I'm willing to admit that there is no single definition of "literary and traditional" language. Yet, as a historian, when I

examine the Germanic world of the early medieval era before the coming of Christianity, I do think that the language ought to approximate the grand, majestic, and dignified vision that the poem casts for its audience, and for this reason the language must be melancholic and elegiac, and ultimately tragic to truly capture the *geist* of this early Germanic world and culture.[7]

I understand Headley's desire to bring the poem to life, and she is correct that "Even though it was probably written down in the quiet confines of a scriptorium, *Beowulf* is not a quiet poem. It's a dazzling, furious, funny, vicious, desperate, hungry, beautiful, mutinous, maudlin, supernatural, rapturous shout" (xvi). *Beowulf* is, indeed, a lively poem, though I disagree with her as to when it was "written," as it was likely composed orally in the mead halls of now-anonymous warrior chieftains like Hrothgar long before a monkish scribe put pen to parchment.[8] And, as such, I don't think she's justified in turning the poem into a braggadocious and drunken monologue of "an old-timer at the end of the bar, periodically pounding his glass and demanding another" (xvi).

Guiding her translation and interpretive choices is the notion that "There are noble characters in *Beowulf*, but the poem itself is not noble. There is elevated language in *Beowulf*, but the poem feels populist. It's entertaining, episodic, and full of wonders" (xix). Therefore, she writes, "I'm as interested in contemporary idiom and slang as I am in the archaic. There are other translations if you're looking for the language of courtly romance and knights" (xx). At this point, I'm not even sure we're talking about the same poem anymore. I think that our contemporary language is rich enough to not be forced to choose between "forsooth" and "fuck," and as there is nothing in *Beowulf* that suggests courtly romance or knights,

surely we can be elevated and serious without descending into faux medieval or courtly language.[9] No doubt, the slang and contemporary idioms make the text approachable to a new generation of readers, which non-academic reviewers fall all over themselves celebrating.[10] But, I wonder if it makes the text something other than what it was in either its oral or written form. I wonder if it tells us more about ourselves and our day than about the poem or the Germanic world itself.

Headley gives us a version of *Beowulf* for the 21st century, of that there is no doubt. There are as many "fucks" and "shits" here as a Quentin Tarantino film with the violence to match. She brings *Beowulf* to life and makes it contemporary, which reveals the ongoing power of literature. One can imagine Charles Péguy speaking about *Beowulf*, "Homer is new this morning, and perhaps nothing is as old as today's newspaper" (Singleton 371), or the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri could have included *Beowulf* when he said, "Literature doesn't have a country. Shakespeare is an African writer.…The characters of Turgenev are ghetto dwellers. Dickens' characters are Nigerians.…Literature may come from a specific place, but it always lives in its own unique kingdom." They, and others, could speak of *Beowulf* in this way because they pointed to the universal nature of literature and the human condition, but I'm not sure either would say the same about Headley's translation which is hyper-particular.

And so, in her treatment of the hero Headley commits the very sin about which a close reading of *Beowulf* actually warns the audience, namely, that nothing changes when we answer violence with violence. In this, *Beowulf* enacts the very words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached:

> As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

Dr. King's words offer a concise synopsis of *Beowulf* in its entirety. And this leads me back to my attempt to encourage and model for my students a posture of charity, humility, and hospitality when dealing with the other. The world today is already hyper-polarized, with every side demonizing their perceived enemies. If democracy is going to work, then we need a different way forward. We have to figure out how to interact with one another from a place other than fear and loathing. Instead of essentializing the other, we must say with Saint Francis "let me not seek as much . . . to be understood as to understand."[11] I want my students to listen carefully to the text as it speaks to them, to be respectful of the thoughts, ideas, and visions it offers, even, or especially, if they have serious misgivings about them. I am quite aware that this is not the only way to approach and read texts, nor even the final way. But it's not a bad place to start.

It would seem Headley agrees with these ideas, as she ends her introduction with the following paragraph:

> There are also stories that haven't been reckoned with, stories hidden within the stories we think we know. It takes new readers, writers, and scholars to find them, people whose experiences, identities, and intellects span the full spectrum of humanity, not just a slice of it. That is, in my opinion, the reason to keep analyzing

> texts like *Beowulf*. We might, if we analyzed our own long-standing stories, use them to translate ourselves into a society in which hero making doesn't require monster killing, border closing, and hoard clinging, but instead requires a more challenging task: taking responsibility for one another. (xxxiv)

This is a beautiful statement, a voice of clarity for our dark times. But her translation, sadly, does not fully embody it. Yes, Headley clearly prompts us to take responsibility for typically marginalized characters, in this case the female and, to a certain extent, even the monsters. She fails, however, to understand or convey the nature of heroism in the early Germanic world. Instead, she turns the hero into a washed-up has-been, sitting at the end of the bar, nursing a fifth of cheap bourbon, reliving his high school glory days for anyone who will listen, and mansplain to any female unfortunate enough to materialize in his presence. Of course, she is more than free to translate and interpret the text this way, but in the words of the late Joseph Frank, "one should be aware that in giving this sort of interpretation, we are using the work for our own purposes, in terms of our own contemporary cultural concerns, but not understanding it" (74).

I'm fully aware of the destructiveness of toxic masculinity in our own day, and think we need to address and criticize it whenever we see it, but this translation does not offer us a place from which we can move forward. And while clearly Beowulf is not a hero to emulate in our contemporary world, certainly he, and the pagan Germanic poets who cast this vision, deserve more. They deserve to be understood. *Beowulf* can help us move toward understanding as it pulls back the veil on a world very far removed from our own, a Germanic world in which all authority is personal not official, and where justice is found

along the blade of an ax. The poem enacts a story of violence and death, and in so doing exposes the never-ending cycle of blood feud, which even *weregeld* fails to end.[12] This helps us to make sense of how a culture can celebrate heroes such as Beowulf. If we refuse this opportunity to understand, to love our neighbor as it were, we do so to our own peril and to the peril of our entire society, as Dr. King so eloquently warned. I close with the words of the eminent Slavist Gary Saul Morson, who wrote concerning these matters, "The worst evil arises not from wrong philosophy, or from economic exploitation, or from anything we do. No, as often as not, it arises from what we neglect to do, from the failure to put ourselves in another's place when we might readily do so" (58).

Endnotes

[1]This notion of the importance of a literary text's context is not the province of historians alone. The late Joseph Frank, professor emeritus of comparative literature at Stanford and Princeton, provides a very fine example of this idea in his momentous and award-winning five-volume biography of Dostoevsky. He succinctly summarizes his perspective on historical context in a lecture on the *Underground Man* in this way:

> We can, of course, use the work of the past any way we please. But let us not confuse this use of the work with attempting to understand it in its own historical terms. It is now fashionable to say that, since we can never really know the past on its own terms, we might as well stop trying and consider it in our own. We do this inevitably in any case whether we want to or not. And the question is a very complicated one. My own position is a very simple one. We may not be able to know the past as it really was, but there's no reason we should not make the effort to do so as far as possible. There is no harm in trying, and in doing so, we may be able to avoid egregious historical errors (Frank, 75).

[2]Gregory Nagy, an eminent philologist and professor of classics at Harvard University and the Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies at Harvard, explores the various ways that the Greeks read, interpreted, and re-wrote Homer from the Archaic to the Hellenistic age, for example, see Nagy (1990), Nagy (2002), Nagy (2010), and Nagy (2017). This process of rewriting Homer continues through the Latin world of Late Antiquity with the Neo-Platonists as illustrated in Boethius (2010) and his various retellings of myths, including Orpheus, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Hercules, as well as into the medieval world, illustrated by Dante (2002) and his reconfiguring of Ulysses' story in *Inferno* 26.

[3]All line numbers (Arabic) cited are from Headley's translation of *Beowulf*. Roman numerals refer to her introduction to the translation.

[4]The clearest place in Plato's work for the relationship between poetry and philosophy is the *Republic* where Socrates bans the poets from the polis. Perhaps it goes without saying, but when Plato refers to poetry here, he is talking about the stories any culture tells itself to explore the great questions of meaning and purpose.

[5]For one good example of reading Plato's Socrates in this way, see Nagy (2020). See also Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* I. P.1 for what initially appears to be an attack on poetry, but rather upon deeper reflection seems to have a similar, more nuanced, view of the relationship between poetry and philosophy as Plato, at least as I read him.

[6]By Germanic peoples I mean those tribal peoples from northern Europe who share certain broad cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties. This would include those speaking Germanic languages, but also further north to the Scandinavians speaking Norse. There are similarities between this Germanic context of Late Antiquity and the Greek Dark Ages before the advent of writing in the 8th century BC. Despite the similarities, the cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties in the Greek world at that time were tighter and allowed the formation of a more centralized Greek culture and identity with the development of writing, which we do not see in the Germanic world except in a loose and decentralized way. So, unlike the Greek world which developed a shared repository of stories in Homer and Hesiod (as well as in the no longer extent Epic Cycle), the Germanic peoples had a more diverse poetical output including *Beowulf*, but also the *Nibelungenlied*, the Icelandic Sagas, and the *Elder Edda* for example—there are, however broader thematic similarities between these stories. See, for example, Tolkien (2002), where he says, "With due reserve we may turn to the tradition of pagan imagination as it survived in Icelandic. Of English pre-Christian mythology we know practically nothing. But the fundamentally similar heroic temper of ancient England and Scandinavia cannot have been founded on (or perhaps rather, cannot have generated) mythologies divergent on this essential point…. (w)e may suppose that pagan English and Norse imagination agreed" (117; see also 121).

[7]See Tolkien (2002). I agree with Tolkien that the poem tells us little about the historical events of 6th century Denmark, Sweden, or Geatland (124), and thus I agree with him that many earlier critics put too much emphasis upon a historical reading of the poem as opposed to the literary value of the poem. I do think, however, that the poem tells us plenty about the "social imaginary" of the Germanic world before the

arrival of Christianity, but it seems to me that this notion still fits with Tolkien's ideas because I still try to understand the poem as a poem, as well as keeping the important things in the center (103-105). Finally, I also think I answer Tolkien's call to properly treat *Beowulf* as a historical document to reveal the *mentalité* of this Germanic world (116-117).

[8]In fact, *Beowulf* itself gives clues to its own genesis as oral poetry in the mead hall with the tale of Sigemund slaying the dragon (884-914) and the Saga of Finn (1071-1158), as well as the genesis of *Beowulf* itself (867-876). In this way, *Beowulf*'s origin more closely resembles that of Homer's poetry than Virgil's.

[9]See Tolkien (2002). I agree with Tolkien's interpretation of the centrality of death to the poem, which gives the poem its "lofty tone and high seriousness" (115).

[10]For example, see the following reviews: Sheehan, Franklin, Grady, Guran, and Ball.

[11]As a medievalist, I'm aware that Francis of Assisi probably never uttered these words.

[12]And *Beowulf* is not an outlier from this broader Germanic world, as can be seen in other Old English texts such as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and, to a certain extent, even *Dream of the Rood*, as well as the broader Germanic world represented in the Middle High Germanic *Nibelungenlied* and the Old Norse *Elder Edda*. See also footnotes 6, 7, and 9 above.

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Peter Ramey
Northern State University
Peter.Ramey@northern.edu

The View from Tolkien's Tower: Beowulf and Allegories of Reading

Part 1. Tolkien's Tower

Near the start of his landmark 1936 lecture, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," J.R.R. Tolkien presents an allegory of a tower. In the allegory Tolkien takes issue with the dominant critical approaches of his day. *Beowulf,* Tolkien argues, should not be seen as "quarry of fact and fancy" for scholars' pet theories, but as a work of the highest literary artistry. He compares it to a tower. Here is the allegory as Tolkien tells it:

> A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, and in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? he had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

So concludes the allegory. The man who builds the tower is the Beowulf-poet; the old stones are the traditional heroic tales inherits, which he repurposes in order to create the poem *Beowulf*. The man's friends are scholars, who pull the poem apart looking for scraps of earlier poems or fragments of lost early Germanic culture. The problem, for Tolkien, is that none of

them bothers to "climb the steps" of the tower—that is, to appreciate what Beowulf does as a work of art, seeing it only as a "quarry of fact and fancy." If they had, they would have realized, to paraphrase Tolkien, that *from the top of the tower one can look out upon the sea*.

But what does Tolkien mean by this enigmatic, and rather lyrical, statement? From that single suggestive line, I want to consider ways of reading *Beowulf,* expanding on what it might mean to "bother to climb the steps" of the tower and look out from it.

Whatever his exact meaning, Tolkien's essay certainly struck a chord. It remains the most well-known piece of Beowulf criticism in existence, and its views on *Beowulf* as a great work of art have proven enduring. This is not the case with his critical contemporaries and predecessors. I recently read through the Shippey-Harder volume of collected 19th century *Beowulf* scholarship, and it was a sobering experience. All of the critical schools that Tolkien took issue with have disappeared with hardly a trace. They've all gone the way of the Dodo bird. *Liedertheorie* anyone? Any proponents of Solar Myth theory here today? No? How about the various nationalist schools of Beowulf criticism? These approaches are gone, despite the mountains of scholarship that once advocated for each of them. The hard lesson of this fact is that the critical approaches of our own day will probably fare no better. That's why it is worth pondering what Tolkien has to say—about *Beowulf* and about imaginative literature in general.

Tolkien's famous essay is often interpreted as a kind of proto-New Criticism, the start of a shift away from the focus on historical context, to the poem itself as a work of art. There's some truth in this view, but it's a mistake to see the essay as a defense of formalist readings or aesthetic appreciation *per se*. Tolkien is not a formalist; he's a fantasist. Tolkien's

essay is an apologia for the imagination. The *work* of a work of art for Tolkien is to open up a realm of the imagination. He calls this realm, in his essay "On Faery Stories," the "secondary world," as opposed to the primary world of our everyday lives. Unlike the primary world, the secondary world is one with the power of *enchantment*. As he explains in "On Faery Stories," "Enchantment produces a secondary world into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside" (73). While Tolkien is speaking specifically here of faery stories, I think he would apply the same to *Beowulf*, and indeed any work of imaginative literature. These have the power to raise us above our immediate circumstances and allow us to glimpse more distant vistas—to climb the tower and look out upon the sea. "The sea," then, is as an image of otherness, the otherness that imaginative literature like *Beowulf* opens up.

But how is the experience Tolkien describes any different from mere escapism? What is the value of such literary "enchantment"? In "On Faery Stories" Tolkien addresses these questions by identifying several functions of imaginative literature. These functions are Escape, Renewal, Recovery, and Consolation. These functions explain why it is worth our while to scale the allegorical tower, and they describe what happens when we peer out from it. They are in this way an elaboration on the tower allegory.

The most primary function is Escape. This is not mere escapism. It is instead closer to the escape depicted in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. "Why," Tolkien asks, "should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?" (79). What we escape is not reality but our blinkered view of it—our environment and its prevailing ideology (83)—these can all imprison our minds and dim our imagination. Tolkien writes, "We need . . . to

clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity." By escaping into imaginary, fictive worlds, we come to see our own world more clearly. We can also see it anew—glimpse it with a renewed vision. This enables the next function of faery stories—Recovery, such that one's unquestioned assumptions might be recovered and changed by an outside perspective. Finally, the secondary world of literature offers Consolation. Tolkien coins a special term for this consolation: *Eucatastrophe*. Faery stories provide this. "A fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (86); it is "glimpse of joy . . . that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through." This description of the "poignant glimpse" sounds very reminiscent of the vision of the sea from the tower. For Tolkien, Eucatastrophe is a glimmer of transcendent possibility, the hint that we are part of a larger story.

Tolkien's tower is, in many ways, a rewriting of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. But in place of Plato's philosophical dialectic, the means of escape in Tolkien's allegory is the imagination. But in both allegories, what we are escaping is the limitations of our present social imaginary—that is, what John Thompson defines as the "the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life" (6). This social imaginary is our cave. Imprisoned within it, we see only a shadow-show that limits what we perceive as real or as possible. It is very, very difficult to imagine anything outside of our social imaginary, anything other, for this construction of reality appears to us, immersed in as we are, as reality itself. That's why we need the tower. It raises us above our social

imaginary. It reveals as provisional the reality we inhabit and points toward other possibilities.

Part 2: Alterity Theory

Tolkien's tower provides a potent image of the *otherness* of literature, and of *Beowulf* specifically. It is what I'll term the "alterity theory" of literature. This theory emphasizes the way literature provides an alternative to our ordinary experience of the world around us. Literature provides a secondary world that exists apart from our everyday reality; this theory stresses the difference and distinctiveness of imaginative writing. In this respect, the alterity theory differs from the prevailing theories of literature, particularly the mimetic theory which sees art in representational terms: art and literature are copies of the world. In this view, it "holds up a mirror to nature," in Hamlet's phrase. But alterity theory is also distinct from the expressive theory of art, which sees literature, especially poetry, as the expression of the inner feelings or individuality of the author; this theory is summed up in Wordsworth's famous formula that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." In his classic study, M. H. Abrams uses the images of the Mirror and the Lamp as images of these two prevailing theories. Against these two theories, Tolkien's writings provide the basis for a third theory—what I'm calling the Alterity Theory. In keeping with the vision-based metaphors of mirror and lamp, for Alterity Theory a fitting image is image of literature as "the window" (since "tower" isn't quite as vision-centric). In this theory, literature is a means of seeing *beyond* one's social imaginary; it allows us to see "beyond the walls of the world," to borrow a phrase from Tolkien.

This distinction can help us understand what Tolkien is advocating in his famous Beowulf lecture and how he differs from the other critical schools he takes to task. The schools of 19th and early 20th century scholarship approach Beowulf in broadly representational terms: they scrutinize the poem for the way it reflected, however dimly, fragments of a lost Germanic culture, or for how it expressed a faded heroic ethos and buried nationalist sentiments. But Tolkien's point is that looking at it only for what it represents, or as a form of national expression, misses out on what it does as a work of art. We must use it, climb up its steps, learn to see from it. The value of Beowulf, then, is not primarily its historical value, but its imaginative value; it does not depict a north-Germanic or Anglo-Saxon culture that ever existed historically (apart from a few stray historical-legendary ingredients), but instead an imaginary one—its function for us and for its earlier Anglo-Saxon audience alike was in its otherness.

Part 3: *Beowulf.*

Now, at long last: *Beowulf*.

Beowulf is an unusual poem, an odd poem really. What is especially striking is the way it stages otherness. It establishes alterity right from the get-go. Its first three lines declare that the heroic tales it will tell take place in the *gear-dagum*, the days of yore, and will concern the legendary warrior-kings of old, kings like Scyld Scefing. This is a distancing frame: we are thrown into the world of long-ago-and-far-away—a realm of heroes, foundling-kings, dragons, and enchanted gold.

And from here the distancing continues and deepens. Again and again, the poem fashions alterity *within* the narrative itself through scenes of encounter: Hrothgar as he examines the mysterious giant sword hilt; the work of the ancient *entas*; the Danes as they gaze in awe at Grendel's severed arm; the uncanny creatures that are met with, *niceras* and *sae-dracas;* the mysterious mere of Grendel and his mother; the dragon and the cursed treasure hoard; and on and on. These scenes establish a gulf between the known and the unknown, the present and the past, the certain and the possible. They are allegories of reading: they coach us to see the past with openness and awe. The scene of Hrothgar gazing upon the giant hilt, which is inscribed with runes and depicts the story of the destruction of the giants, is not unlike the man in Tolkien's parable who gazes out from the tower. Both glimpse a distant scene, one that lies beyond the borders of their familiar world. And this relativizes their world. This, indeed, is the work of awe: it opens us to other possibilities and thereby exposes our own contingency. The entire poem of *Beowulf* is riddled with mystery: Where did the Scyld Scefing come from? And who received his body, heaped with treasure, when it was sent away by ship? No one can say for certain, says the poem, not even the wisest knows the answer.

Although it has been little noted, the poem's alterity is unusual. The other Old English heroic poems that survive do not resemble *Beowulf* very much in this respect. The *Fight at Finnsburg*, the fragment of *Waldere, Widsith,* and the later *Battle of Maldon* all center on stirring heroic action more than awe and alterity. In its othering tendency, *Beowulf* is in fact much closer to the Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book, which also celebrate

strangeness and generate alterity by staging a series of encounters with mysterious riddle creatures—full of words for wonder, *wraetlic, sellic, wundorlic*.

Like the Riddles, I want to suggest that what *Beowulf* is doing as a poem is staging an encounter. It is an encounter between the poet's Christian world—the social imaginary of 8th or 9th century Christian Anglo-Saxon England—with the inherited past, the heroic poetic tradition. The poet draws upon traditional lore, but imbues it with a Christian metaphysics, theologizing the legendary elements. The supernatural creatures thus acquire a metaphysical dimension: the dragon is a creature of flesh and blood, but also an incarnation of avarice, of gold-hoarding. Grendel is an *eoten,* a trollish creature, but he is also Cain's *cynn*, an agent of social disintegration, a demonic being, God's foe; Grendel's mere is a spooky pool; it is also a space of evil that goes all the way down, an image of hell in the tradition of the *Visio Pauli*. It is a both/and approach. Beowulf is a fierce warrior, eager for praise—but also called the mildest of men and the most gracious to his people. Within the fictive frame of the poem, the poet can reimagine the heroic past and preserve it, but as framed within a Christian ethical perspective. Within the secondary world of the poem, the heroic deeds of Beowulf are attributed to God, and also to Fate, and also to his own prowess—often all within the same sentence. This both/and approach creates tension, but it is a remarkably productive tension. When the poet declares that Beowulf destroyed Grendel with his great strength—and in the same breath declares it was God, and then also Wyrd, fate—this doesn't make the poem inconsistent; it makes it interesting. We intuit that there is a mystery here; within the frame of the poem there opens up a profundity in which all of these are true at once. It is the same

world where a warrior can be fierce, violent, and vaunting—and also be a self-sacrificing savior figure. The poem *Beowulf*, in its otherness, contains multitudes.

At the end of the story, Beowulf dies fighting the dragon and his soul is said to take its place among the righteous, the *sothfaestra*. In this, he embodies the heroic tradition of the Germanic past as a whole: the heroic poetic tradition too can find a place among the *sothfaestra*—it need not be repudiated by the Christian culture, but can find a place within it—its goodness can be affirmed, once we see in it an ethical system animated with values not alien to Christianity. This is the vision it grants.

Conclusions

What might Tolkien, and Tolkien's take on *Beowulf*, have to say to us today? I'd like to end my talk by considering this question.

For those of us who teach literature, these are bewildering times. There is a great deal of uncertainty among the general public, and among instructors themselves, about the value of literature and literary study. I've discovered this in conversations with others in my profession, and I've felt the uncertainty myself. It amounts to a crisis of identity, and of confidence. In the face of this crisis, there are various responses and approaches.

First, there's the traditional approach: we study a text, say, Shakespeare's Hamlet, because it is a masterpiece, one that probes the depths of what we used to call "the human condition." It is therefore a work every educated person ought to know. Some might go still further: its value is that it teaches timeless truths.

Then there's the politicized approach: studying text like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is important because we see among his pilgrims the discursive power structures as they are contested and asserted by the various voices in the text, all in the process of the construction of identity. Some go further still: literature offers political agency: it is a hammer with which we smash hegemony.

And then there's the instrumental approach: it doesn't really matter what literary works we teach, so long as they bring about the right results in our students—they teach us empathy, perhaps, or critical thinking skills.

Each of these approaches can have merit, and for many who teach literature, it is probably some combination of all three. But the limits of these approaches is that, on some level, they tend to approach literature in representational or expressive terms, or even to dismiss the distinctiveness of literary works altogether. If Tolkien were writing his "Monsters and Critics" essay today, he would probably expose our present-day critical methods as a "quarry of fact and fancy" that, like the 19th c. critical approaches, fall far short. He would likely scold us for not climbing the steps of the tower, for missing out on the real work of imaginative literature.

Tolkien's allegory suggests that the primary work of literature is not merely that it can transmit timeless truths, or represent voices, marginalized or historical. Literature is also a means of otherness. Through the imaginative landscapes of literary texts, we are able to inhabit worlds other than our own and consider alternatives to our own social imaginary. These alternate value systems can challenge, critique, question, and perhaps renew, those of own social imaginary. I find this to be the case with the texts I most love to teach: Marie de

France's *Lanval,* More's *Utopia*; Orwell's *1984;* Tolkien's neglected masterpiece, *Leaf by Niggle;* and of course, *Beowulf*. These texts are powerful technologies of alterity; through them we are able *to imagine things other than they are*. This is incredibly difficult to do on our own, and that's why we need literature. That's why we need to scale the steps of the tower, and gaze out upon the sea.

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Charles Henry
University of North Dakota
Charles.D.Henry@und.edu

The Construction of Leprosy as Identity in Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*

What does it mean to be a leper? It is to be unforgiveable. The medieval leper, in particular, is not just a person with a disease, but an assignment of a person *as* a disease. The question then is: what effect does the assignment of leprosy have? Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid,* is a continuation of the Chaucerian story. It begins with the dismissal of the unfortunate protagonist, Cresseid, by Diomedes and then follows her plight: first to anger and sadness, then to leprosy and isolation, and finally to resolution and death. Henryson's salient addition to Cresseid is the assignment of leprosy. The difficulty of the assignment is that it doesn't necessarily show the intrinsic crime attached to the disease. Medieval leprosy is both a medical and moral disease. Leprosy, then, is more than a plot device; it is a defining attribute, and implication, of Cresseid's wantonness. In assigning leprosy, Henryson has effectively imprisoned Cresseid as "loose woman." When Cresseid accepts this condemnation, and subsequently dies, she opens an interpretation which questions whether Henryson is damning or forgiving her. This potential "excusal" as the focus of scholarship does not consider the idea of leprosy as integral to her fall, but, in fact, this assignment's importance is inescapable. Leprosy is the symptom of her transgression, a transgression which must lead to her fall. I argue that the assignment of leprosy to Cresseid cannot be divorced from her character, and the potential of forgiveness disappears when she is assigned as leper.

The idea of "excusal" presumes a didactic purpose where one has the autonomy to choose. Through "performative essentialism," the biological, social, and performative constructions of gender results in an inevitability to which both author and character are subject regardless of intent. In essence, Henryson was never able to forgive Cresseid, only to assign her final condemnation because leprosy is wantonness, and wantonness is unforgiveable.

I've chosen the Charteris print of 1593 of *The Testament of Cresseid*, edited by Robert Kindrick, for my analysis. Robert Kendrick, in his introduction, comments on the themes of morality and forgiveness within the poem. Tom Scott, of the University of Glasgow, agrees with Kindrick's ideas of forgiveness and both scholars pull in the question of whether Henryson was being intentionally ironic. On one hand, if Henryson is being sincere, perhaps a sympathetic reading can assert that Henryson has forgiven, or excused, Cresseid. But on the other, he could be punishing her for her sins (being a wonton woman) and her not adhering to gendered expectations. More contemporary scholarship looks at the motivations behind Henryson's treatment of Cresseid, but still ask whether forgiveness is an option. The eligibility for forgiveness creates a gap in the literature because it presumes that the mark of a leper is removable after it has been applied to a character.

Medieval leprosy, metaphorically and medically, is incurable, and in examining the construction of leprosy one can see how incurable translates to unforgiveable. To examine medieval leprosy, I will use "performative essentialism," which takes into account an understanding of the biological, cultural, and performative traits which define the disease; that is to say, leprosy is not simply a biological description of a disease, but a concept derived

from a social and biological understanding within the period.[1] Leprosy was understood throughout the Middle Ages to be a venereal disease. The disease is not sexually transmissible in nature and, hence, the attribute of wantonness is an assignment to, or on top of, the disease. Thus, Henryson assigns both disease and wantonness to Cresseid; and so, disease and character are not constructed separately, but together. It is this construction of leprosy when applied to Cresseid that makes excusal impossible. Although I do not suggest that Henryson actively diagnosed his character through medical analysis, I do assert that, regardless of intent, Henryson has marked Cresseid as other, as woman, and as monster, which strips her of potential agency and makes her irredeemable. Henryson's excusal, then, is irrelevant because it was never on the table to begin with.

Hansen's disease, or leprosy, was "discovered" by the Norwegian doctor Armauer Hansen in 1873. To be more accurate, he discovered the germ that caused leprosy: Mycobacterium Leprae (Rawcliffe 2).[2] An important discovery because it proved that the disease was not hereditary, but also that leprosy is not caused by sin (Barrett). Even today, it is not known exactly how leprosy is spread, but it is believed that it occurs from prolonged contact (CDC). Leprosy may take up to twenty years for symptoms to develop, but ultimately it is a bacterial infection which affects nerves. Fear from a resurgence of leprosy in the 1800s created a need to understand medieval leprosy, with a special interest of how the disease was greatly reduced in the Middle Ages (Rawcliffe 13-21). But, understanding the disease became obscured as medieval definitions were often informed heavily by culture and religion.

The history of leprosy can be traced back as early to biblical representations in Leviticus. There are several difficulties in gaining an understanding of ancient leprosy, beginning with the lumping together of many diseases into the category of leprosy. Leprosy in the ancient world, which followed into the Middle Ages, could include forms of skin infections which were not leprosy (Jacquart & Thomasset 183; Eichman 491; Rawcliffe 74). Despite the definitional ambiguity of the disease, Leprosy was so prevalent by Greek and Roman times that Pliny, in his *Natural History*, details the first time that the disease had risen to an epidemic proportion.[3] Though the description of the disease resonates with modern definitions, the spread of the disease was poorly understood. Accurate descriptions of the disease can readily be found throughout ancient and medieval literature, but "definitions of what constituted *lepra* were not only provocatively imprecise, but also subject to a range of shifting social, cultural, moral and linguistic imperatives" (Rawcliffe 4).

As now, the medieval medical practitioner was greatly concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of diseases, including leprosy. Many doctors provided accurate portrayals of the disease such as Bernhard Gordon, in his *Lilium Medicinae* and Gilbertus Anglicus' *Compendium Medicinae*. Gilbertus' descriptions of leprosy are considered to be one of the first correct descriptions of the disease in the Christian west (Handerson 49). He details at great lengths the physical conditions that result from leprosy. For instance, he diagnoses a form of leprosy, Gutta Rosacea, quite accurately, describing the variety of a red-faced pimpled exteriority of leprosy and a particular redness of the nose. As a curative, Gilbertus suggests an ointment, described in the *Trotula*, created for sunburn, which is especially good at raising the colors in skin. This curative is interested in combatting the color induced leprosy that

Gilbertus describes in his compendium. The cure is listed in precise measurements with a practiced level of expertise, but the cure is based in his understanding of Galenic, or humoral, medical theory. Though he describes the symptoms accurately, their causes were rooted in the science of his day. This understanding of medicine, however, did not exclude ideas of astrology and religion; and thus, show a construction of understanding which goes beyond the biological.

In the Middle Ages, religious and cultural thought superimposed a socially informed definition onto the biological leprosy. That is to say, that the understanding of medieval leprosy was not from strict physical or biological observation. Leprosy itself was attributed to being a sexually transmitted disease nearly from the beginning of its conception (Bullough & Brundage 67). This understanding of leprosy as a "spread" venereal disease mixed with some of the philosophical aspects of medieval life, such as Christianity and sin, resulting in an altered understanding of leprosy. To the medieval lay person, sexual impropriety was a definite cause of getting the disease, as was lechery, wantonness, and more general forms of sin. Hildegard von Bingen, in her *Physica,* describes different forms of leprosy as Gilbertus did, but she also makes delineations of spiritual causality. Her approach to writing was curative in nature and comes up with the rough equation of: if sick with (a), caused by (b), then take (c) and you'll be cured (unless otherwise willed by God). For instance, if leprous from lust or intemperance, one should cook agrimony, hyssop, and asarum and make a bath of it. Then he (almost certainly to be a he) should add as much menstrual blood as he can acquire to the bath. After the bath he should lather down with a mixture of chicken and geese fats mixed with chicken dung, immediately going to bed after, and he shall be cured

(von Bingen 61). Though these curatives may seem strange, they were intuited and built from a system in place that was interpretative both of biological features and ontological impressions. Or in other words, a framework of disease was born of biological understandings supplemented by social or religious input. For instance, leprosy was assumed to be a venereal disease, and venereal diseases come from sinful sex, thus leprosy is born of sin. Then the type of sin need only be extrapolated to help understand deviant varieties of leprosy.

Another of the prevailing ideas of the time, born of Galenic medicine, is the idea that diseases of woman were intrinsically a result of the *heat* of a woman. Woman, being *naturally* cold, could sometimes become too cold, or too hot, and the cure must be the opposing temperature (Green 39, 81). This idea of heat and coldness is readily apparent in Hildegard's work where she illustrates each ingredient according to its hotness and dryness. For instance: Agrimony is hot, Thyme is hot and dry, the walnut tree is hot and holds bitterness, topaz is hot with a bit of air and water in it, hawks are hot and moist, and unicorn is more hot than cold (von Bingen 25, 60, 95, 108, 130, 144, 187, 210). All of these curatives (plant, herb, tree, bird, and animal) are hot and offset the condition of cold leprosy. This is based in humoral understanding, and the assignment of which cure is based in medieval astrology (Rawcliffe 98).

The construction of the medieval leper is complex. The first problem is that the biological aspects of the disease would not be discovered for centuries, and thus proper attribution was difficult. The presumption was that the disease was classified with other venereal diseases, potentially because of similar symptoms. Venereal is then inextricably linked to sex, but also leprosy itself is linked to uncleanness, both physical and spiritual.

Thus, the biological description only required inspection to suggest metaphysical causes of the disease. It is the application of religion that applies sin to the act of sex. Therefore, the Leper is a sinner, based on assignment, because leprosy comes from sex or desire. Hence, when Cresseid takes a second lover, she becomes lustful sinner, which causes leprosy. So leprosy and wantonness are one and the same. This understanding can be understood through "performative essentialism."

The three features of "performative essentialism" are the biological, social, and performative features of society. The biological feature of leprosy is the symptoms and the disease itself. Sinfulness is then assigned on top of the biological disease. Thus both biological disease and innate sinfulness become a singular understanding. The lepers then being forced to perform as *sick sinner* then completes the system. This is how Cresseid is treated within Henryson's *Testament*. She is not simply a person with a disease, she is the disease.

Cresseid's crime more than anything else is offending the system which has told her her place. "O fals Cupide," she accuses the gods, and it is at this point the gods punish her, but also abandon her. Leprosy is always a punishment in some sort or another. The story at face value would consider it a curse, an application of a disease on top of a person, but what leprosy does essentially is to remove personhood from the leper. Cresseid, in all her reproductions, is a character with extraordinarily little agency, and what agency she does possess is taken from her when she tries to use it. When she worries about being with Troilus in Chaucer's tale, her uncle blackmails her to accept him. When she accepts him, her father, Calchas, reclaims her and she is lost again. She then allows herself to fall for Diomedes, who subsequently dismisses her after he had all "his appetyte, / And mair, fulfillit of this fair

ladie." When she's lost all and speaks out, she is then marked as leper. It matters little then which system she has offended, be it Christian, pagan, or otherwise, because her slight was recognizing the unfairness of the system in place. Her reward was to be marked as leper and to have the final abandonment of the gods. Her personhood at this point ceases to exist.

When the narrator says, "I shall excuse as far as I may your womanhood, it would seem that he offers some level of forgiveness, but he is incapable of forgiving Cresseid of her sins, because her sins are being *woman* and *leper*" (Green 135). This womanhood was not inflicted upon Cresseid, but instead is a construction of womanhood by medieval society. And this assignment of womanhood is not dissimilar from the assignment of leprosy. Both have an outward physical description, but an inward sociocultural assignment on top of the biological framework. When the attributed norms are transgressed, she becomes monstrous. Conversely, leprosy is the outward sign that marks the inward filth. Thus failing woman becomes leprous monster. The punishment of leper then comes from a lack of performance within the structure presented.

Medieval leprosy is defined through biology, but equally through social construction. This construction then leads leprosy to become venereal disease, but a disease connected to social expectation. Leprosy then is the result of being inconstant to Troilus and damaging the system she's been assigned. This is her primary crime, and thus she is abandoned by the gods (Dunai 425). The fact that she offended Venus is of small consequence because the crimes are one in the same and are unforgiveable because she has infracted against the law prescribed by medieval culture.

When Troilus buries his ex-lover, he says: "Siching full sadlie, 'I can no moir- / Scho was untrew and wo is me thairfor'" (Henryson 12). The stark final sentiment shows the importance that leprosy conveys. Because "she was untrue," she was unforgiveable. Cresseid was a leper before the gods' affliction marked her, and the mark of leper supersedes anything she had the potential of being before or after. Cresseid to the world will always be the leper. Most scholars believe that Henryson was offering potential forgiveness. The truth is that he only exposed the construct of the medieval woman; Cresseid is simply an example of what happens if a role is performed incorrectly. She cannot be said to have made choices, because the only choice was submission. The lesson doesn't inform behavior, but instead shows what it is to be a *medieval woman*, just as it is to be a *medieval leper*. The answer to "why leprosy?" is not a condition given to Cresseid for potential absolvent, but is instead the final nail in the coffin which marks her as irredeemable.

Any interpretation based on agency, or forgiveness, has missed the point. Readings of excusal without an understanding of the constructions of agency and assignment reduce the effectiveness of potential interpretations. Abstract notions of truth require agency for non-truth, and forgiveness can't be given to those who've already been damned. Thus the scholarship of Henryson's testament has largely missed the point. The narrator, Troilus, Calchas, and even Henryson are all subject to the performative nature within the construction of medieval society. Being marked as leper, as monster, is to be marked unforgivable. Cresseid's testament, then, can only be read as a eulogy, a story of the inescapability of assignment.

Endnotes

[1]In his Introduction to The Testament of Cresseid, Robert Kindrick suggests that the vivid portrayal of Cresseid's leprosy alludes to the idea that Henryson may have been a physician (p. 1).

[2]See also Luke Demaitre. "The Description and Diagnosis of Leprosy by Fourteenth-Century Physicians." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 59, no. 3 (1985), p 327.

[3]Eichman's, p 491, descriptions are taken from: Brothwell, D. "The bio-cultural background to disease. In D. Brothwell & A.T. Sandison (Eds.)," *Diseases of Antiquity* (Springfield, IL: 1967), pp. 56-68.

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Nickolas Haydock
University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez
Nickolas.Haydock@upr.edu

Lydgate's Seven-Mile *Siege of Thebes*: Repetition and Chaucerian Narratology

"Crossroads are uncanny places."

Salley Vickers,
Where Three Roads Meet: The Myth of Oedipus (62)

The form of literary history that I find most tenable analyzes the tradition writers establish and evoke in their texts. In the Chaucerian tradition through the time of Spenser and Shakespeare, these tropes often stress natural continuities and circularities, such as roads, paths and rivers, or seasons and generations. Reactions to Chaucer's antique romances, *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* were especially definitive. British writers from Lydgate through Shakespeare knew little of Chaucer's sources in the vernacular works of Boccaccio. What they did know was that *Troilus* and *The Knight's Tale* provided continuations of stories about Troy and Thebes by the so-called father of English poetry, forging a vital link between ancient and English literary history. If Chaucer could present himself, however tentatively, as following in the footsteps of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, and Statius, then later poets in Britain could join that queue by adapting a tradition in epic poetics that featured sequels and prequels, imitation and parallelism, parody and pastiche.

Virgil had written a sequel to the epics of Homer; Statius offered a prequel to the generation of warriors that populate the *Iliad*. The wanderings and the wars of Odysseus and Aeneas occur during the same decade after the fall of Troy, both heroes seeking a

homecoming, a *nostos*. Virgil imitates Homer at every turn but in the service of creating a very different kind of hero than Achilles or Odysseus. Statius, just as resolutely, shadows the *Aeneid*, but his poem has no real hero, and the Roman empire of his day seems bent on repeating the internecine disaster at Thebes. Indeed, Statius in his role as *doctus poeta* was especially central to medieval poetic self-consciousness about the ancient epic tradition.

With the rise of antique romance in the twelfth century, the ancient stories, often known only through medieval avatars, are retold with a significant change of focus. Erotic relationships emerge and martial heroism recedes into the background, as though, through an anamorphic transformation, the image perceived has been reconfigured by a change in perspective. History and war, the rise and fall of civilizations, linger at the borders of antique romance—never wholly out of sight or mind. In fact, parallelisms in the *romans antique* function intra-textually: tragic love affairs occur in concert with the convulsions of history. The parallels between Eros and Thanatos create semiotic concatenations whereby, for instance, the death of Troilus functions as a sign of the destruction of Troy, his funeral signifies the waning of paganism, and at the end of Chaucer's poem, the audience is enjoined to abject all that Troy, Troilus, and pagan love have embodied. But the notion that the personal and the erotic is a misleading, deluding sign of the public and religious is, of course, present from the very outset. Notably, young Troilus ignores the Palladion in the temple of Minerva, his gaze fixed rather on the tenor of a simile: "That lik a thing inmortal semed she, / As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature, / That down were sent in sent in scornynge of nature" (1.103-105).

Richard Dyer, taking his cue from Althusser's famous essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (1971), proposes a concept he calls "structuring absences" to characterize this narrative strategy. For Dyer, the term refers to forces the "text cannot ignore, but which it deliberately skirts round or otherwise avoids" (83). Perhaps there is no better image of structuring absences than an army laying siege to a city's walls, momentarily excluded but inflecting the lives and loves of those within, holding all in suspense except the inevitability of a tragic outcome, which broods on the margins waiting to be born. The opening of Chaucer's *Troilus* masterfully evokes and excludes the world of war before its opening scene, employing a figure that is a stylistic commonplace of his antique romances: *praeterito*.

> But how this toun com to destruccion
>
> Ne falleth naught to purpos me to telle,
>
> For it were a long digression
>
> Fro my matere, and yow to longe to dwelle.
>
> But the Troian gestes as they felle,
>
> In Omer, or in Dares, or in Dite,
>
> Whoso that kan may rede hem as they write (1. 141-47).[i]

In Chaucer's antique romances, war, public policy, and even history itself are repeatedly suspended. Yet the world that is too much with the lovers remains a *structuring absence*, decentered and marginalized, perhaps, but still a constant threat.

Antique romances negotiate a kind of temporary truce with history, holding inevitabilities momentarily in abeyance. In the *Troilus,* as the obsessive-compulsive rhymes on "Troy" and "Joy" accumulate, the fleeting, artificial nature of erotic love is put in italics, or as Derrida might say, *under erasure*, always already gone. All this makes these narratives complex puzzles of insinuation and omission, while the fleeting world of love on the verge of being lost uncannily imitates the tragic trajectory of the world at war: the loss of love and the loss of life come to seem two sides of the same coin.

In addition, sexual desire, in an age prior to the reign of Christian charity, is inflected by another structuring absence, that of pagan idolatry. Again, though never directly stated, Chaucer broadly implies at every turn that erotic love is a form of paganism. At Palamon's first glimpse of Emelye in the garden, he believes himself witness to epiphany and begins worshipping the "goddess." Even more telling in this regard is the palinode to *Troilus and Criseyde* where the narrator turns quickly from the "swich fyn" stanza lamenting the transitory nature of love, to the "Lo here" stanza condemning the "payens corsed olde rites" (5. 1849).[ii] A great deal of recent work on images of paganism in Middle English literature has taught us much about uses of paganity across a broad generic spectrum, but the antique romances in particular feature erotic love as a pagan trace still present in Christian souls, and it is approached with the same vertiginous combination of fascination and abjection.

The internal narrators of *The Knight's Tale* and Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* are pilgrims on the same road, though they travel in opposing directions: Chaucer's Knight toward Canterbury, and Lydgate back to London. Both narrators relate their tales on the first leg of a journey. This constructs a sort of "there and back again" routine implicit in the pairing of

these tales, which move in opposing directions and bookend the Canterbury collection in Lydgate's hijacking of the poem's itinerary.

I have been using the word "itinerary" in an unusual sense. Nowadays, it is usually employed to designate a map or the description of a prospective journey. In classical Latin, forms of *iter* (journey, road, path) include the central meaning of repetition, *itero*—do a second time, repeat, revise; *iteratio*—a repetition. The trope of the poem as a path through story is integral to Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Lydgate's response to it—and not only because of the parenthetical references in both poems to the pilgrimage framework. In Narratological terms, the mimetic, physical journey of characters along roads or paths is repeatedly halted or stymied, resulting in confusion, indecision and violence. While the diegesis of the two poems likewise proceeds by fits and starts; narrators quite obviously steer and shape the story, noting by the way what they leave out or pass over in shepherding the reader through the tale. Lydgate's wholesale imitation of these strategies suggests that he recognized them as marks of Chaucer's style.

As for the diegetic mode, the narrator of *The Knight's Tale* includes six substantial examples of preterition in the course of his performance. The narrative has no sooner begun than the narrator launches into a catalogue of the episodes he plans to omit—roughly the first four books of his source in Boccaccio, which detail Theseus' "siege of Amazons," the conquest of the "*regne of Femenye*" and the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Chaucer's narrating Knight employs "structuring absences" with a vengeance. The power of women in governing or battle is left wholly aside, though the eroticizing glimpse of powerful women not quite able to resist domestication produces the desired effect. Another obvious example of

erotic withholding comes in the voyeuristic peak afforded readers of Emelye's devotions in Part 3. Here again the apparent synonymy of sexuality and paganism hints at occult delights just out of sight:

> But how she dide hir rite I dar nat telle,
> But it be anything in general –
> And yet it were a game to heren al!…
> And dide hir thynges, as men may biholde
> In Stace of Thebes, and thise bokes olde (1. 2283-86; 2293-94).

Of course the footnote is a shameless equivocation; the unseen scene comes from Boccaccio not Statius. But the invocation of "Stace of Thebes" works its magic nonetheless: ancient books like pagan love are a glorious mystery which "men at large" can feel free to enjoy, if only in passing. The final and by far the longest *praeteritio* in *The Knight's Tale* concerns the pagan funeral of Arcite, which contains snap shots of cremation including the displaced forest gods, Emelye lighting the pyre and the oiled bodies of wrestlers at the funeral games (1.2913-66).

But loud silences, elaborated inventories of what must remain untold, and hesitations in the face of competing alternatives are a recognizable feature of Chaucer's narrative style, especially in the first of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Knight has hardly begun his tale when he launches into an extended *praeteritio* inventorying all the events that would take too long to tell: Theseus' defeat of the Amazons, his marriage to queen Hippolyta, their wedding feast, etc. Many fields of narrative must lie fallow:

> And certes, if it nere too long to heere,
>
> I wolde have told yow fully the manere
>
> How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
>
> By Theseus and by his chivalrye;
>
> And of the grete bataille for the nones
>
> Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;
>
> And how asseged was Ypolita,
>
> The faire, hardy queene of Scythia;
>
> And of the feeste that was at hir weddinge,
>
> And of the tempest at hir hom-cominge.
>
> But al that thing I moot as now forbere.
>
> I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,
>
> And wakie been the oxen in my plough.
>
> The remenant of the tale is long ynough (875-888).

The *praeteritio* accomplishes the neat omission of Theseus' war with the Amazons, making Theban widows' interruption of his journey homeward to Athens the opening scene of the poem. Revealingly so, because, while the preterition refers explicitly to the first four books of

Boccaccio's *Teseida*, it constitutes in addition an intricate allusion to the opening of Statius' *Thebiad*.

It is important to recognize that imitation in the classical tradition that I am outlining here can include more than just verbal parallels and ironized intertextual parallels. Amanda Holton (77) usefully compares Chaucer's figures of "abbreviation and omission" with the much more sparse use of such figures in his main source, Boccaccio's *Teseida*. True enough. In fact, Chaucer's rhetorical strategies in *The Knight's Tale*, particularly his use of elaborate preterition to structure and speed the pace of an episodic narrative, derive directly from his appreciation of Statius' rhetorical style. Holton even makes the doubtful assertion that Chaucer's use of omission is designed to "maintain… a great deal of the shape and content of the source" (82). The two passages from *The Knight's Tale* discussed above suggest that a great deal more is at stake in Chaucerian preterition.

In fact, Chaucer's significant omissions and meta-diegetic divagations perform a Statian dissection of Boccaccio designed in terms of style and in terms of structure to do to the *Teseida* what the *Thebiad* does to the massive myth of Thebes ("*longa retro series*" 1. 7). The renewal of interest among classicists in Statius and his *Thebiad* has been driven in part by a new appreciation of his stylistic innovations. As D. C. Feeney wisely reminds,

> Criticism of the poem's episodic progress evaporates before the evidence that the poet calls our attention again and again to his dilatory manner of narrating—a manner which is not only diverting but purposeful, as it helps create an environment for the poem's capturing of confusion (340).

Chaucer's narrator in *The Knight's Tale* is a Statian savant.

In Lydgate's supplement, preterition plays a major role, as if he realized the centrality of the figure to the narrative style of *The Knight's Tale* and consciously imitated its style. But the figure seldom does any heavy lifting; what is left unsaid does not tantalize or frustrate, but rather offers a respite from Lydgate's customary elaborations. An exception to this comes early in poem as the monastic narrator finds himself disgusted at the prospect of recounting the marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta: "I am wery more therof to write; / The hateful processe also to endite / I passe over, fully of intent (823-5)."[iii] This preterition, however, spurs Lydgate to substitute for the scandalous espousal a metaphysical allegory of celestial and infernal marriages. Not invited to the marriage of Oedipus and his mother were the cast of characters that peopled Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Mercury and Philology*; rather, those assembling for the Theban feast include a hellish congeries of heathen gods, Furies, and personifications such as Death, Rage, Dread, Darkness, "Fraternal Hate," and broken promises—the genesis in fact of all the disasters to come: "Alle thise folk weren at this weddyng newe / To make the toun desolate and bare, / As the story after shal declare" (872-4). The allegory of diabolical nuptials thus serves as a kind of *ab ovo* fable of civic discord that dovetails cleverly with the opening words of the *Thebaid*: "Fraternal Hate" neatly translates Statius' *Fraternas acies . . . profanis odiis* (1-2). The citation insinuates that Lydgate is posing this first part of *Siege of Thebes* as a prequel to Statius as well as Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. But note that Lydgate's elaborate preterition and the entailed catalogs of *in malo* and *in bono* marriage guest allegories are an opportunity not only for learned compilation but also to

shift human events to the plain of cosmic significance. Unlike Statius, whose *deus ex machina* for civil war was the blind Oedipus's curse that summons Tisiphone from hell, Lydgate—interestingly given the political context in 1420-22—sees marriage itself as root of social division and civil war.

I contended earlier that war and destruction function as structural absences in Chaucer's antique romances. Both of Lydgate's replies to Chaucer in the *Siege* and in the *Troy Book* are at some pains to restore politics, war, and the Christian doctrine of charity to the center of this transient vision of pagan love. Indeed, Lydgate employs parallels already extant in the tradition to juxtapose mimetic episodes with Chaucerian subtexts, attempting to "outdo" his predecessor by divesting violence and courtliness of moral ambiguity. A good example of this strategy comes in Part 1 of the *Siege* where Polymete and Tydeus fall to bloody battle over whether or not to share shelter in the portico of Adrastus amid a raging storm. Adrastus wakens to the ruckus of their mortal combat and rushes to separate the antagonists before they kill one another. Quite clearly, the scene has been constructed to foreground comparisons with a similar moment in Part 3 of *The Knight's Tale* where Theseus interrupts the duel between Palamon and Arcite in the forest. Adrastus, like Theseus, objects to fighting "withouten juge," but here the parallel ends. Theseus immediately rules that both must die and only after pleas for mercy from Hippolyta and Emelye does he "sentence" them to judicial combat with Emelye as the prize. Adrastus treats the garrulous knights as the benign fulfillment of a threatening dream, offers to marry them to his daughters and ultimately along with Tydeus supports the claim of Polymete to the throne of Thebes. Note the crucial difference between Lydgate and Chaucer in the scene whereby Theseus does not

resolve the conflict between the two cousins, but rather enjoys the joke at their expense, commenting:

> But this is yet the best game of alle,
>
> That she for whom they han this jolitee
>
> Kan hem therefore as muche thank as me.
>
> She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,
>
> By God, than woot an cukkow or an hare (1806-10).

One of many dark evocations of Statius in Chaucer's romance, the joke sends up the Latin poet's phrases about the *regendi saevus amor* (savage love of rule, 1. 127-8), as well as the quarrel of Etiocles and Polynices over a beggar's crown (*pugna est de paupere regno,* 1.151). For Adrastus, however, the question of love and marriage is not "hoot fare," but rather a way of establishing peace and binding allies to one's policies. Lucky Adrastus has two daughters and not a single sister-in-law. The savages turned suitors now compete in deference declaring themselves Adrastus' men and he offers them half his kingdom and his daughters. Marriage and political alliances, not erotic love, are at the heart of Lydgate's antique romance.

Just as Lydgate refashions the interrupted quarrel into bonds of brotherhood and marriage, he also remakes a paradigmatic scene of courtly love into an emblematic version of charitable love. As in the portico episode, brief echoes work like a leitmotif, inviting comparisons between scenes in Chaucer and Lydgate. Here, Tydeus, suffering from wounds

received in the Theban ambush makes his way to the land of Lycurgus and discovers a garden "joyneaunt… to a [castle] wal" (2274). The scene obviously evokes the scene in *The Knight's Tale* where the Theban youths see from their prison cell a vision of Emelye among the flowers of May. The setting adds fear and menace to the equation, as the daughter of Lycurgus sees blood on the ground and on the supine knight in the lying in her spring garden: "his grene woundes runne / Round about, that the soyl depeynt / Of the grene with the rede meynt" (2304-06). But the young woman shows more courage and curiosity than her Amazonian double in Chaucer. She wakes the unconscious knight with a gentle touch and stands fast as he pulls his sword in fear. Some erotic tension is present here if only by the expectations such pastoral scenes typically evoke, but Lydgate chastely avoids any such insinuation in the text. In fact, Robert Edwards is certainly correct when opines that, "the reference is interesting for what does not occur in Lydgate's poem" (168, note on lines 2274-5). The omission of erotic overtones allows Lydgate—like the longer reiteration of the theme in the Isiphile episode—to emphasize his vision of the courtly woman as a paragon of charitable love.

In fact, I would argue that Lydgate's adaptation of Statius and French romance puts women at the center of the work in ways designed to provoke comparison with the objectified and marginalized Emelye and Hippolyta. The actions that these two Amazons perform in Chaucer are confined almost exclusively, following the paradigm established by the Theban widows, to prayer and pleas for clemency. In Lydgate, women repeatedly put themselves in physical danger to save men's lives and typically suffer for it. The *Siege*'s Isyphilé is a case in point. Her charitable guidance saves a Greek army dying of thirst, but the death of the

infant in her care puts her in mortal danger. Even Jocasta at the end of the poem plays the role of peacemaker and stateswoman, suing for peace and playing for time until she, like Isyiphilé, falls victim to chaos caused by tension and panic. Though victims of Fortune, these women are also representatives of courtly heroines whose love is expressed through caring for the injured, providing relief and pursuing peace, roles undreamt of by the blushing and silent Emelye.

However, Lydgate's longest and most interesting imitation of Chaucerian preterition comes near the end of his poem in passages which clearly respond in very direct ways to the closural strategies of both *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Lydgate deliberately follows the example of Chaucer's long *praeteritio* (1. 2913-2966; mentioned above) in what is the longest of his imitations of his master in the poem. But the context is markedly different. This preterition obliquely describes the cremation of a large portion of Greece, not that of single tragic figure, and of course it too is brought about by women seeking clemency.

> But what shuld I any lenger dwelle
>
> The olde rytys by and by to telle;
>
> Nor th'obsequies in ordre to devise;
>
> Nor to declare the manere and the guyse
>
> How the bodyes wer to asshes brent;
>
> Nor of the gommes in the flaumbe spent
>
> To make the ayre swetter of relees,

As frauncencence, mire and aloes.... (4565-72).

Lydgate evokes the fascination with pagan rites, exotic words, and customs, but his version of a pagan funeral concludes not with consolation, but with condemnation—and not as we might have expected, given his model for such statements in the *Troilus*, with a curse on paganism, but rather on war itself, as represented in the figure of Mars: "Lo, her the fyn of contek and debat. / Lo, her the might of Mars the forward sterre. / Lo, what it is to gynne a were" (4628-30). Just as erotic love can be understood as part of the pagan inheritance, as an idolatrous spirit still living in human hearts, so too can war.

Endnotes

[1]Quotations of Chaucer are taken from Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Riverside Chaucer. Christopher Cannon, ed., 3rd edition.

[2]See, for instance, A. J. Minnis' influential discussion of these matters in Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity: "This is what happens in the epilogue of the Troilus, where pagan love (that is merely human love) and pagan lore (notably the 'corsed olde rites') are placed in a Christian perspective. Here Chaucer, in the manner of the compiling historian, ascribes the limitation of pagan society 'rather to the tyme then to man' and shows how his gentile figments and pagan sayings can serve the Christian religion and faith" (67). While Minnis is certainly correct in introducing these important distinctions, he glosses over the tone of the anaphoric recriminations of the "Swich fyn" and "Lo here" stanzas, the virulence of these anaphoric abjections of everything the poem has presented with such sympathy. Holding such abjections in abeyance until the very end is a crucial characteristic of Chaucer's style.

[3]Quotes from Siege of Thebes are taken from Edwards' edition for TEAMS Middle English Texts.

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William F. Hodapp
The College of St. Scholastica
whodapp@css.edu

"The hooly blisful martir": Becket, Pilgrimage, and Chaucer's Inscribed Audience in *The Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* opens as follows:

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
>
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
>
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour
>
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
>
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
>
> Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
>
> The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
>
> Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
>
> And smale foweles maken melodye,
>
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye
>
> (So Priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
>
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
>
> And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,

To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;

And specially from every shires ende

Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,

The hooly blisful martir for to seke,

That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke (General Prologue 1-18).

This eighteen-line passage constitutes perhaps the most memorized, if not recorded, set of lines from Chaucer's poetry. Most North American readers of *The Canterbury Tales* first encounter the text—whether edited Middle English as here or Modern English translation—in a British or medieval literature survey classroom. Few first-time readers know much of the social-cultural context on which Chaucer's tale-telling adventure turns. Though providing some contextual information, notes and comments are mostly limited in scope. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, for instance, simply states that the "hooly blisful martyr" of line 17 refers to "St. Thomas à Becket, murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170" (262 n.7).[1] Yet, Chaucer the narrator-poet does not mention Becket by name: a silence that points to his inscribed audience—the narratee written into the discourse who understands fully the text (Prince). Chaucer, after all, does not name Becket because he assumes his inscribed audience already knows who the "hooly blisful martir" is and why people travel "from every shires ende / Of Engelond to Canterbury" to visit the Saint's shrine. Focusing on Becket and on pilgrimage, I examine here these two assumptions in an effort to unpack what they suggest to us in early twenty-first century America about Chaucer, his audience, and their world in late fourteenth-century England. In essence, this essay offers an expanded gloss on

two Middle English terms from these opening lines: "pilgrimages" (12) and "hooly blisful martir" (17).

Let me begin with "pilgrimage," a term Chaucer uses in singular or plural form eleven times in the *Canterbury Tales*.[2] Signifying "the act of journeying to a holy place; traveling, a journey; sojourning," this Middle English word derives from French "pelerinage," which in turn had derived from Latin "peregrinatio" (*MED*; *OED*; Lewis 597-98). Though in the Latin of writers such as Cicero (106-43 BCE) "peregrinatio" referred to an actual journey one might take away from one's "patria," or homeland, by late antiquity it had accrued a figurative use referring to one's earthly life: life itself was "peregrinatio." Augustine (354-430) suggests this view in *Confessions* when, addressing God, he writes: "*inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*" [our heart is restless until it rests in you] (1.1). Much later Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), in his explication of hope, examines the displaced human condition implicitly as journey (*ST* II-II 17-22), which may be summed up in the phrase *homo viator* [human wayfarer] (Kuntz 79-89), and his contemporary Bonaventure (1221-74) similarly engaged this figurative idea of journey in his mystical text *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. The end of pilgrimage through this changing world was a person's eternal destination, which depended in part on his or her fidelity to cultural and religious doctrine and practice while living. These ideas of "peregrinatio" and "homo viator," for instance, fit Dante's primary use of the Italian "cammino" in the first line of his *Commedia*, but we also recall that the entire poem recounts a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven in his thirty-fifth year: that is, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" [midway in the journey of our life] (*Inferno*, Canto 1.1)—an allusion to the biblical seventy years of life allotted to the human person (Ps. 90:10).

As Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure suggest and Dante underscores, medieval people often viewed the human condition as a type of displacement and life metaphorically as a pilgrimage, a restless journey filled with trials, sufferings, and temptations as well as joy and hope.

This metaphor of life as pilgrimage also found literal expression in actual pilgrimages taken by people from all three monotheistic faiths to holy places. For many Jews, journeying to Jerusalem was a life-long dream. For Muslims, Mecca, as well as Jerusalem and other places, were pilgrimage goals. And for Christians, a number of places throughout the Mediterranean basin and Europe became pilgrimage sites: major destinations like Rome, Jerusalem, and Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, and minor ones like Croagh Patrick in Ireland and Chartres in France, drew pilgrims from far and wide. Pilgrimage—a journey to a holy place and a metaphor for life—was an important feature of all three main religious traditions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

While the network of major Christian pilgrimage sites in the Mediterranean basin and southern Europe were associated with Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and early Christian martyrs, a network of archaic and medieval pilgrimage sites also marked fourteenth-century England (Turner and Turner 17-19). Local English saints tended to have their place in the culture and on the landscape. In "The Miller's Tale," for instance, John the Carpenter invokes "Seinte Frydeswyde" (3449) when concerned about Nicholas' feigned illness. The seventh-eighth century St. Frideswide (c.650-727), a Mercian noblewoman who founded a double monastery in Oxford, was also associated with a holy well at St. Margaret of Antioch Church in Binsey outside Oxford. Likely an archaic site, a pre-Christian sacred spring that had been

Christianized (Turner and Turner 17-8), including an origin story of its miraculous appearance to aid Frideswide, St. Margaret's Well was a long-time local pilgrimage site, drawing even King Henry VIII once.[3] Similarly, though not part of the *Sanctorale*, or official saints calendar, St. Walstan (c.970-1016)—a tenth-eleventh century noble who had surrendered the trappings of class to become a humble reaper—inspired annual local pilgrimages to his holy-well shrine in Bawburgh, Norfolk, five miles from Norwich: a sort of regional labor-day celebration held May 30 (Duffy 200-5; James 238-67). And, from the late seventh-century, pilgrims venerated St. Cuthbert (634-87), patron saint of Northumbria, first at Lindisfarne and then, after Danes took the monastery in 875, eventually in Durham, where he along with the Venerable Bede drew pilgrims throughout the Middle Ages. Unlike Thomas Becket, Cuthbert and his shrine remain intact in Durham today. As this brief litany suggests, Chaucer and his contemporaries lived within what we might call a sacralized landscape.

Chaucer implies this sacralized landscape when his narrator states, "And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes, / To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes" (13-14) before focusing "And specially from every shires ende / Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende" (15-16). Though Becket remains nameless when Chaucer refers in the next line to the "hooly blisful martir," the second term I wish to explicate here, the poet cues him up for his inscribed audience with the word "Caunterbury" as any tetra-syllabic substitute associated with a martyr, like "Edmunds Bury," illustrates: were it "Edmunds Bury" the "hooly blissful martir" would have to be the ninth-century Anglian King St. Edmund whose popular pilgrimage shrine was in Suffolk, not Kent. Stating the obvious, the word "Caunterbury"

does a lot of work for Chaucer at this moment: he knows his inscribed audience understands the "hooly blisful martir" is Thomas Becket.

Becket's association with Canterbury began when he worked for Archbishop Theobald of Bec, who eventually named him archdeacon in 1154.[4] On Theobald's recommendation, Henry II named Thomas the Chancellor of England in 1155, beginning a 15-year relationship with the King, and at Theobald's death in 1161, Henry pushed Thomas to be archbishop. Initially reluctant, he finally agreed and was ordained priest on June 3, 1162, consecrated archbishop on June 4, and resigned his Chancellorship soon after. Almost immediately at odds, Thomas and the King commenced a power struggle that led from argument and opposition to exile, excommunications, and ultimately Thomas' assassination. In an unguarded moment, following news of Becket excommunicating the bishops of York, London, and Salisbury for crowning Henry the Young King in June 1170, Henry II reportedly mumbled something that four knights took as a royal command. Sir Reginald FitzUrse, Sir William de Tracy, Sir Richard le Bret, and Sir Hugh de Morville left the King in his cups in Normandy and traveled post haste to Canterbury, arriving in late afternoon Tuesday, December 29, 1170. Joined by Hugh of Horsea, alias Mauclerc, and confronting Becket in his palace, they demanded the Archbishop to lift the sentences of excommunication. Becket refused, the five stormed out to retrieve weapons, and Becket's clerks convinced him to join the monks for vespers. Armed, the knights and clerk returned and pursued Becket into the cathedral, where they accosted him again in the north transept near the St. Benedict altar. Eyewitness accounts detail a volatile confrontation and violent and swift attack as, according to Edward Grim, each knight struck a blow and Hugh

Mauclerc "*posito pede super collum sancti sacerdotis et martyris pretiosi, (horrendum dictu,) cerebrum cum sanguine per pavimentum spargens, cœteris exclamavit, 'Abeamus hinc, milites, iste ulterius non resurget*"" ["placed his foot on the holy priest and precious martyr's neck and, horrible to say, scattering brains and blood over the pavement, declared to the others, 'Let us leave from here, knights, this fellow will not get up again'"] (82.438). Monks broke off chanting and townspeople present in the nave came to the scene: news of the murder spread and, as the killers ransacked the palace while escaping, clerks and monks secured the body for burial, and townsfolk sopped up blood and gore from the Cathedral pavement. Early the morning of December 30, the monastic community buried Thomas in the Cathedral crypt. He had just marked his fifty-second birthday on December 21, the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle.

Almost immediately people recorded stories of miracles resulting from Becket's post-mortem intercession, and biographers cast his final days and moments within the framework of Christ's life, an *imitatio Christi*. Pope Alexander canonized him on Ash Wednesday, February 21, 1173, Henry II made a penitential pilgrimage to his tomb on July 12, 1174, his cult grew, and his story—particularly his death—became the subject of sculpture, stain glass, literature, and manuscript illumination (Backhouse and de Hamel 11-12; Borenius *passim*; Koopmans; Koopmans and Seliger; Rigg 77-83). A crusading military order, the Knights of St. Thomas of Acre, was founded in his honor around 1190 (Backhouse and de Hamel 6-8). His death day became part of the *Sanctorale* and, after moving his body from the crypt to the Trinity Chapel Shrine on July 7, 1220, to better accommodate pilgrims, the feast of his translation was also added. In an effort to memorialize his life and death, liturgists and

preachers composed offices, hymns, hagiographies, and sermons keyed to these feast days (Slocum *passim*; Roberts 14-45; Hughes 62-69). Thomas' cult became pan-European, and he was particularly noted for curing ailments of any kind, a point Chaucer touches on in line 18.

Turning again to the opening 18 lines of *The Canterbury Tales*, we find Chaucer emphasizing Becket and pilgrimage through creating and fulfilling syntactic and generic expectations, thereby involving his audience in allusive verbal play. Grammatically, this passage is what we would call today a compound-complex sentence, combining as it does two dependent clauses—each opening with the time-marking adverb "Whan"—with two independent clauses starting at a second time-marking adverb "thanne." Chaucer inscribes audience expectations in the dependent clauses on two levels: syntactically, he creates desire for resolution, that is, something needs to happen "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote…" and "Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth…"; and thematically, he leads his initial reader-auditors—whether reading a manuscript to themselves or listening to another, perhaps Chaucer himself, read aloud in a social setting similar to that depicted in the famous Troilus frontispiece—to think about romantic love by opening with a *reverdie* in praise of April (Holmes and Harrison 1045; Coleman 103-28). Arriving at "Thanne," then, he starts to fulfill and revise those inscribed expectations: for syntax, just about anything will do as long as it is at least one independent clause; for theme, he turns expectations from romantic love punctuated by blooming flowers, warm breezes, and ardent birdsong to folk longing "to goon on pilgrimages." Though admittedly not quite a whiplash, his move emphasizes pilgrimage and suggests love of a different kind: like birds pricked in their "corages" folk desire to move and "maken melodye" themselves—a hint perhaps of stories yet untold.

Though Becket had been dead over 200 years when Chaucer penned those 18 lines, the poet and his contemporaries knew the archbishop as one of their own: a clerkly Englishman turned martyr and saint who came to their aid in times of need. Chaucer reflects this familiarity further in *The Canterbury Tales* when characters like Alisoun and John of the Miller's Tale swear by "Seint Thomas" (I: 3291, 3425, 3461) or the narrator notes "the Wateryng of Seint Thomas" (I: 826), a place name on the way. And it is this way, this particular road between London-Southwark and Canterbury—the southeastern stretch of Watling Street—on which Chaucer and company travel that also would resonate for his audience, for Becket traveled this same way in mid-December, 1170, in a thwarted attempt to meet with Young King Henry then in court at Winchester (Grim 73.427-8; Loxton 60-2, 144-60). Traveling this route was for medieval pilgrims a sort of *imitatio Thomæ*. With Nature inspiring and Becket calling, Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator was, as he states, "Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage / To Caunterbury with ful devout corage" (21-2). Poised at this moment, we can almost sense Chaucer's living audience stir, maybe smile, in anticipation even as his inscribed audience—again, the narratee written into the discourse who understands fully the text—follows the move and looks forward to the narrated journey to St. Thomas's shrine in Canterbury.

Leaving Chaucer and company on the cusp of their pilgrimage, I conclude here by moving from the 1380s to the present to highlight further points of possible interest for present-day readers of *The Canterbury Tales*. In 1538, reformers dismantled and destroyed Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral—the center piece of pilgrimage to Canterbury and site to which Chaucer and company are bound—and Henry VIII ordered the suppression of

the cult of St. Thomas, declaring henceforth he be referred to only as Bishop Becket and that evidence of devotion to him be erased (Backhouse and Hamel 10-1; Loxton 178-9). In the same year, the practice of religious pilgrimage in England, too, came under attack by the Crown in Thomas Cromwell's "Second Royal Injunctions," in which items 7 and 10 directly worked to undermine pilgrimage as a devotional practice. Though suppressed during the Reformation, and consequently falling by the wayside so to speak in following centuries, pilgrimage in England began to attract renewed, if minor, historical and religious interest in the twentieth century: it is possible today to trace on foot, at least in part, the route between London-Southwark and Canterbury. Now, as in the medieval and early modern periods, Canterbury Cathedral supports and even promotes twenty-first-century trekkers and pilgrims who wish to walk one of four traditional routes to Canterbury, including the London-Southwark route ("Pilgrim's Way"; Loxton 116-43). And, though Henry VIII would likely disapprove, Thomas Becket's fortunes similarly shifted beginning in the twentieth century with retellings like T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1936), Jean Anouilh's *Becket au l'honneur de Dieu* (1960), and Peter Glenville's Oscar-winning film *Becket* (1964), based on Anouilh's play. In July 2020, marking the 800th anniversary of Becket's translation, and anticipating the 850th anniversary of his murder on 29 December, archaeologists and historians at the Centre for Christianity and Culture, University of York, in conjunction with Canterbury Cathedral, announced completion and launch of digitally animated reconstructions of the Becket Shrine: animated videos of the Shrine, the Corona Chapel, the original tomb crypt chapel, and the Martyrdom Chapel are set ca.1408 ("Visiting the Cathedral"; Hampson 65-71; Jenkins 100-23). Similarly, to mark the anniversaries, the

British Museum is hosting an exhibit, *Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint*, from May 20 to August 21, 2021. As these instances suggest, present-day interest in Becket and in pilgrimage more broadly can further help illuminate these aspects of medieval culture permeating Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and articulating his inscribed audience.

Endnotes

[1]Not surprisingly, *The Riverside Chaucer* offers a fuller explanation, stating: "Thomas Becket was martyred in 1170, canonized in 1173. His shrine at Canterbury was rivaled only by Walsingham as an object of pilgrimage until the Reformation…. St. Thomas was especially associated with healing and the water from a miraculous well near his shrine was highly prized for its curative powers" (799-800).

[2]Gen. Prol. 12, 21, 78, 724, KnT 2214, MLT 996, WBProl. 557, ShpT 234, NPT 2986, ParsT 50, 104.

[3]"St Margaret of Antioch, Binsey," In recent years, pilgrimage to the well has resumed annually and as part of the Thames Pilgrim Way: see "Pilgrimage to the Holy Well and Church of St. Margaret of Antioch" and "The Thames Pilgrim Way."

[4]I base these details of Becket's life on Knowles, Barlow, and Loxton (9-76) and on readings of Edward Grim, John of Salisbury, and William Fitzstephen's *vitae* (Robertson).

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E. L. Risden
St. Norbert College
Edward.Risden@snc.edu

Paradise Lost and the Physical/Spiritual Implications of Expandable/Contractible Space

Foucault considers heterotopias, "other places," as "in contrast to utopias, actual places different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about," as "counter-sites" to "effectively enacted utopias"; "I discover," he explains, "my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there" (24). How we experience or interpret space depends on what "real" space we take up to inhabit and how we imagine "Other," fictional spaces, or even characters with respect to it. How do I claim or use "my" space, and what claims do I place on, demand of, or allow "other" spaces? For Milton, the Christian Cosmos meant real, physical space, though he expanded description of it beyond what Biblical sources offered. And for him, physical space meant also spiritual space: a physical intrusion is also a spiritual intrusion, spiritual encroachment a physical one, a spiritual Fall a physical fall, and a physical circumstance a spiritual presence as well as potential.

In *Paradise Lost,* spatial contrariness marks Satan's character: he projects himself into God's place, one he can't have. He sets himself counter to everything that God is: "Evil, henceforth be thou my good": "The mind is its own place, and can itself make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." Through opposites he *becomes* opposition and makes his place a heterotopia. He desires God's place because he is and must be absent from it; he projects himself into a place he cannot go; then, having lost Heaven, having departed from it of his own power, he prohibits himself from re-entering, reasoning Heaven, the presence of God,

into Hell and Hell, the absence of God, into his nominal Heaven—even as he knows that he wrongs himself and his followers. Epic has always sat near to tragedy, as Aristotle noted in the *Poetics,* but as C. S. Lewis suggested, "Milton has chosen to treat the Satanic predicament in the epic form and has therefore subordinated the absurdity of Satan to the misery which he suffers and inflicts" (95); the character in his pompousness draws near to comedy through a "horrible co-existence of a subtle and incessant intellectual activity with an incapacity to understand anything" (99)—I would have said *unwillingness* rather than *incapacity*.[1] "Satan," Lewis says, "*wants* to go on being Satan," that is, the contrary to God, a replacement (or re-placement) for God, but only for those who insist on following his lies as truth—the terrifying nature of contrariety. He demands out of God's creation a place of his own, a space of his own, but he also demands that everyone else follow him into it and do as he says once they get there. And yet he will go on wanting the *other* place, never a place that he has, but the one that he claims to want, one that doesn't exist.

God's place doesn't exist for anyone but God. But God *makes* all space and makes nearly all of it available to any of his creations willing to share it. In *A Christian Theology of Place,* John Inge explains, after discovering a paucity of writing on the subject, "I had to work out what possible grounds there could be for calling any place holy," especially since the importance [of place] in the Bible should be apparent even to the casual reader," and how can anyone deny the degree to which "our human experience is shaped by place" (ix).[2] Further, "the most constructive manner in which to view place from a Christian perspective is sacramentally"; "places" exist in space, which expands to and from them, and Christianity has often understood the sacred and sacramental space and its expansiveness in the practice

of pilgrimage (x). Sacramental attention to place and space may "afford nourishment to the community" and "constitute a powerful prophetic action": any place that we view sacramentally can lead to a sense of sacredness of all of God's creation, any idea that could lead us to much better stewardship of our world (xi). Milton's Satan never needed *God's place* to begin with; he doesn't understand that, to the degree that it's possible for any creature, he's already in it. His attempt to make any more of it is pointless, but God gives him the freedom to make *some* of infinite space not *other*, but his own. He takes it not as a gift, nor does he offer it to anyone else as a gift; he wishes only to control as much of it as he can and place others under his dominion, to create a "counter-site" that does exactly the opposite of *God's place*. Satan designates himself the ultimate contrary, the ultimate outsider in the ultimate "other place," in greatest possible contrast to God's place and the purpose of God's space.

In literature, the effects of expandable/contractible space may be powerful or subtle; my point is to call attention to how a writer does either and to what end. *Paradise Lost* does not treat space or place subtly: poetically it comes from and inhabits Epic Space as much as any poem ever could. Raphael observes to Adam that the current happiness he and Eve enjoy they owe to God, but whether they continue so depends on them. The epic moral responsibility holds true with respect to how they understand and use space.

Consider please where *Paradise Lost* begins and then its flashbacks and flash-forwards. The narrator first contracts space around his own request for inspiration—which, perhaps, God has granted, since we have the poem—and the narration proper takes us immediately to the depths of Hell. While Hell is an enclosure with a locked door—Satan must get through

Sin and Death to get out to the larger universe—the fallen angels have room to move about and do as they please: some engage in Olympic-style games and some in war games, others play music or recite poetry, some philosophize or go exploring, and some even surf: "with vast Typhoean rage more fell / Rend up both rocks and hills, / And ride the air / in whirlwind" (2.539-41). But for their counsel, to decide what as a group they should do next, they contract into a tiny space, "in narrow room" (1.779), in Pandemonium, their "high capitol" (1.756), where the swarm "[T]hick . . . as bees [i]n springtime (1.767-69); the narrator remarks, "Thus incorporeal spirits to smallest forms / Reduced their shapes immense, and were at large" (1.789-90)—something God would never have made them do. But their leaders submit to that indignity:

> Far within
> And in their own dimensions like themselves
> The great seraphic lords and cherubim
> In close recess and secret conclave sat
> A thousand demigods on golden seats,
> Frequent and full. (1.792-97)

In this case the *incorporeal* doesn't mean having no body or substance, but rather "without a fixed shape"—that is, they can still shift their shape at will, yet they choose to reduce their shape. One of the curious points of *Paradise Lost* is how the rebel angels who need not reduce themselves before God, who loves them, will do so for Satan, who uses them for his own purpose and brings about their fall and suffering.

Satan takes upon himself the escape from Hell partly because it is an escape and partly because he doesn't want anyone else to have opportunity to take credit for any success that may come from it. Largely, though, he aims to *bring about* the reduction and confinement of as many other beings as possible. Every choice he makes draws him further from God, though God allowed him the immensity of the universe with no confines beyond the God-space that no other being could share. God even permits Satan on his epic journey to Earth to see an image of the fact that even after his Fall, Satan still has the potential for redemption: the "stairway to Heaven" that angels climb or descend, a visualization of the Great Chain of Being that links all Creation in both unfallen and fallen worlds. But Satan will re-expand his own space only so far: he won't accept readmittance to Heaven, though he knows God would offer it, because he knows equally well that he would only rebel, lose, and fall from Heaven again—more ignominiously than before. "Who knew / the force of those dire arms?" he asks (1.93-94); he will claim God a tyrant having admitted that God neither demanded anything of him nor showed his strength in any way. Even the Fall of the rebel angels comes not from the Father's tossing them into the abyss as punishment for their misdeeds, but from Satan's army throwing themselves off the brink of Heaven as the Son approaches them in the Chariot of Paternal Deity. The threat his strength poses to them in light of their unwillingness to submit to the Father shows the rebels' mindset, not the Father's vengeance. They would rather contract their own universe to a world of pain than admit that, in their pride and violence, they have made a terrible error.

The garden of Eden presents an interesting case: as an enclosure it might technically limit the young humans' movement except that they know no other place and have not lived

long enough to desire or seek out another. It provides all that two persons might need, but it would not have housed the future of humanity; after the Fall they must leave it too early, yet they find "the world all before them." They have expanded their world at the cost of great and unnecessary suffering, doubt, and distance from their creator. As soon as Satan enters the garden, he contracts their attention, focusing it on his presence and on the tree, which without temptation they need not have given a second thought, since they can live well without it—all it offers them anyway is the ability to know good by means of evil rather than good by means of good. They gain no knowledge from it, only the capacity to see good by contrast rather than to be able to recognize it in itself. Satan contracts himself there, too: to the form of a lesser angel, then a lion, then a tiger, then squat like a toad whispering dreams in Eve's ear. Later he will enter the body of the serpent—an improvement on the toad, perhaps, yet constricted in form as in mind and spirit.

Eden makes an interesting comparison with Hell in that it establishes an enclosure that the inhabitants did not choose, though it is beautiful rather than horrifying. Raphael suggests Adam and Eve can, by love, living well, and obedience to God, earn their way to Heaven, though they already experience the presence of God without needing physical expansion. After the Fall they contract themselves, lying on the ground and hiding from God, but they choose to expand their world not by defying God, but by entering the bigger world to grapple with life and their self-wrought limitations.

A significant aesthetic contrast comes in Book III, in the story of the begetting of the Son and the Son's offering himself as ransom for human sin, and in Raphael's account in Book VII of God's creation of the Earth and its surrounds. Along with God's voice, which

emanates from a radiant, enthroned image, comes an "ambrosial fragrance" that "filled / All heaven" (3.135-36). The synesthetic effects and the begetting of the Son create interesting problems for the poet, who must maintain the theology of a Trinity and yet give God consequent space, place, presence, and substance. The Son expands the notion or experience of God without expanding God's nature, which was already infinite; loving, faithful creatures must be able to experience God's presence as pleasant rather than terrifying.

The account of Creation in Book VII expands greatly on that of Genesis—the poet even includes a new invocation to get help with it. Adam asks Raphael for the story, and the "affable angel" answers that "knowledge is as food"—one must consume temperately—and yet takes up the tale from where the Father bids the Son to create the universe: over more than four hundred lines he gives the six-day account of the filling of void. It does not so much create new space as fill the potential that already existed; it expands what space can do and what can happen in it, and it fulfills the purpose to "repair" the loss that Satan begot. The centerpiece of the new Creation becomes Eden and the first people, who have the opportunity to succeed where Satan has failed. Through love, Adam and Eve may expand what Satan aims to contract through hate.

Before Adam and Eve leave Eden, the sterner Michael takes up instruction where Raphael left off, expanding Adam's view of human events to come—it may seem too much to ask of Adam to take it in, given he has so far lived so few days and has already made the worst of human mistakes. Michael alternates stories of human achievement and dismal failure, and he leaves Adam with a sense of human potential and Divine grandeur, but humbled and distant from the God whose presence he had so recently known as friendly,

immediate, and responsive. Yet humans, not God, made the rift, and God provides the means to heal it if humans make themselves willing to receive it: "justified," they may at last expand their world from human indignities to the great Cosmos and God's presence in one.

Though this essay begins what must become a longer process, it deals with *Paradise Lost*—and only a few examples from that—rather than *Paradise Regained*, a word of comparison may prove useful. *Paradise Lost* shows Divine heroism in Divine space; *Paradise Regained* shows a Divine being's human heroism in human space. *Paradise Regained* shows Jesus, having repaired alone to the wilderness for private meditation, meditating on his own circumstance in the world. Satan foils his attempt at privacy, providing visual images of all he will offer of earthly life if Jesus will follow him. The final temptation of the brief epic has Satan set Jesus atop the pinnacle of a temple, tempting and daring him to cast himself down to show that God will save him, "lest at any time / Thou chance to dash thy foot against a stone" (4.558-59). Of course, Jesus does not fall, but Satan does—a visual representation of the original Fall from Heaven—and angels set Jesus down "[f]rom his uneasy station" in "a flowery valley . . . On a green bank (4.584-87), a much better place than the wilderness and a sign that his "quest" there has succeeded. Satan offers Jesus expansive space that isn't his to give: as Son of God, the space belongs to him and the creatures to whom God has given it already. *Paradise Regained* deals less with *space* and more with *place*: the places where Jesus undergoes the test of faithfulness and loyalty to God are Biblical; they "regain" Paradise because he passes the test Adam and Eve could not, Satan's temptation. The changes in place come from Jesus' movement into the wilderness, his placement on and release from the pinnacle, and his quiet return home again. Spatially, he has the capacity to move where he

needs and wants to, no restrictions bar his way—that may be one of the reasons for lower degree of popularity of the sequel, though it forms a necessary extension and completion of *Paradise Lost*. To achieve its effect, it must have a quiet entirely different from the fireworks of the War in Heaven in *Paradise Lost* and even from the horrifying transformations that lead, bring about, and follow the human fall. Except for the pinnacle and—for Western readers—the exotically Middle Eastern locale, despite the display of Satan's gaudy cinematic images, we could call the spatiality of *Paradise Regained* relatively normal.

Paradise Lost, on the other hand, may have the most spectacular use of expandable/contractible space in all of Western literature. The world of the text contracts around a "narrow room" with "[t]hrong numberless" (1.779-80) and a forbidden fruit and expands to all of God's Creation.

Endnotes

[1]*A Preface to Paradise Lost*. Oxford University Press, 1961.

[2]Routledge, 2003.

Kyle Moore
University of North Dakota
kyle.robert.moore@und.edu

A Lesson in Humility: Penance and Pilgrimage in *Sir Isumbras*

In 1291 and 1302, Christians lost Acre and Ruad, respectively, the last two Christian strongholds in the Holy Lands—sacred lands located in present-day Jordan, Israel, and Lebanon. Both losses came at the hands of Muslim forces. The loss of Christian strongholds in the Holy Land to Muslims were major defeats for the continuation of Christianity. *Sir Isumbras*, an early fourteenth-century Middle English romance, comes off the heels of these important losses. *Sir Isumbras* blends elements of romances and hagiographies to create a complex narrative that comments on the recent losses of Christian influences. The romance draws narrative inspiration from the legend of Saint Eustace, a Roman general turned Christian martyr. The similarities between the legend and the romance create an intricate self-reflection of Christian duties for himself. The narrative follows Isumbras on a Christian pilgrimage to repent his sins for failing his Christian duties. This pilgrimage also reveals the humility he must find to understand that his purpose is to serve God before himself.

I argue that *Sir Isumbras* is a critique of fourteenth-century Christians for their failures to complete their Christian duties which has caused the loss of their Christian strongholds and the threat of pagan influences as punishment. Isumbras' story will serve as an inspiration for its audiences how failure is not a permanent state. His example will show audiences how, by understanding his story, they can better themselves, their commitment to their faith, and the promotion of their faith.

During the late Middle Ages, the romance genre was popular with medieval audiences as it combined chivalric ideals and exhilarating adventures. There is no doubt that this romance was well-received at the time as it is found in nine different fragments or manuscripts. Rhiannon Purdie explains, "The swift narrative, simply presented ideas, formulaic diction, and brevity of this romance… make it a strong candidate for oral performance" (267). Because of the candidacy for oral performance, *Sir Isumbras* became a widely popular romance of the time. The number of manuscripts it is found in further propels the argument of its popularity. Its intricate narrative that mixes chivalric heroes, hagiographical qualities, and pilgrimage romances would have caused the romance to strike great liking to its audiences. Leila K. Norako calls these romances "recovery romances" that "desire[s] to reclaim Holy Land and recover from historical trauma" (167). These romances sought to take the fears of its audience and put them to rest by delivering heroic tales of Christians facing pagan threats in the face of adversity and still coming out victorious. *Sir Isumbras* specifically draws inspiration from Eustace and the story of Job, and these stories would have been familiar to medieval audiences. I find that all three narratives follow three sections: downfall, redemption, and legacy. The Isumbras Poet uses these familiar patterns and motifs to construct a narrative that combines historical religious narratives into a romance. Norako's use of the word *recovery* suggests that the text reveals something has been lost. In the case of *Sir Isumbras*, the loss of all Christian strongholds in the Holy Lands. Therefore, the text unveils the need to overcome these losses. With the mixture of genre elements, the romance evokes fictional inspiration to its audience while relying on strong religious traditions to support this inspiration. Additionally, the romance does not promote

the complete disregard for one's identity, but rather a temporary removal of status to receive enlightenment and perspective.

For centuries, scholars have noted the numerous religious influences in *Sir Isumbras*. These influences allows Isumbras to embody the findings of Job and Eustace within his own journey. The narratives of Job and Eustace follow their downfall from society, loss of materialistic goods and family, attempting to find humility by committing to their faith, and ultimately, gaining enlightenment and more goods than they had before. Isumbras, a knight and lord, is not completing his devotion to the worship and promotion of Christianity. Wendy A. Matlock argues the romance promotes the idea that strong Christian societies were patriarchal (350). The romance advocates the need for strong familial bonds with devout Christian beliefs and dedication to create a "Christian society." Isumbras is confronted by divine powers in the form of a fowl who offers him the choice of wealth and prosperity in his youth or as an elder. He selects wealth and prosperity as an elder. Isumbras' horse falls dead beneath him and quickly loses all his materialistic goods and servants. Only left with his family, they embark on a familial pilgrimage where they wander begging for food without shelter and only dressed in tattered clothing.

In medieval literature, pilgrimage narratives became a popular tradition with Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as the most famous example. Pilgrimages in these texts function to show the benefits and experiences of journey and discovery—though these are often sensationalized. For many, pilgrimages were an opportunity for individuals to embark on journeys in search of a higher meaning in life and feel a deeper connection with their faith. In *Sir Isumbras* and other pilgrimage narratives, there are usually two types of

pilgrimage: communal and individual. Communal pilgrimages often inspired comradery as these individuals traveled vast distances to seek the same goals as a community. Individual pilgrimages differ slightly in original purpose as these individuals usually journey for the purpose of penance or redemption.

Before the Crusades, many pilgrims embarked to Rome as the Holy Lands were unsafe and difficult to get to. However, after the establishment of Christian strongholds, because of the Crusades, many pilgrims were allowed to make their way to the Holy Land, including Jerusalem. The idea or act of penance has a long and complicated history in its definition and usage. Andrea Hopkins points out, "Most penances seem to consist of prayer, fasting, almsgiving in various combinations for various lengths of time" (49). Penance becomes a recurring theme in many fourteenth-century romances as various noble and chivalrous protagonists repent for their sins before regaining social status. The idea of penance in these romances is to inspire audiences that just because one sins does not mean they are damned for life. The protagonists remain faithful to their Christian duties despite constant hardship which emulates religious figures like Job and Eustace and eventually becomes models for others.

Early on in Isumbras and his family's pilgrimage, his children are kidnapped by wild animals when they come to a body of water, and his wife is bought by a Sultan. He continues to wander. During Isumbras' time alone, he begins to work as a blacksmith as he tries to rebuild himself into a productive member of society. By going from a lord to a blacksmith, this signifies that only humility can overcome excessive pride. Fifth-century allegorical poem *Psychomachia* by Prudentius addresses the same ideas in *Saint Eustace* and *Sir*

Isumbras. *Psychomachia* personifies a feminine version of vices and virtues in a battle against one another. For the context of this paper, Pride is pitted against Lowliness—or otherwise known as humility. Prudentius' text gives context to the collective Christian ideals coming together to defeat vices—or pagan influences, metaphorically. Lowliness defeats Pride despite being at a great disadvantage to Pride. But through Lowliness' humility, she can outsmart Pride and ultimately defeat her. This is the same message that is seen in *Sir Isumbras,* as he uses his newfound humility to overcome his shameful past. The romance seems to suggest that if even a lord can admit failure and find humility, so can the audience.

The choice to go on a pilgrimage illustrates the importance of self-discovery and religious rebirth one can find as they make their way to the Holy Land. Despite Isumbras' previous losses, he still asks God for guidance and finds himself brought to work which ensures food and shelter. This reiterates that faith will always support you if you ask for guidance and forgiveness. Inspirationally, Job suffered several hardships while he was stripped of his belongings. But no matter how difficult the circumstances were for Job, he never lost his faith or trust in God.

Water is a popular theme in medieval literature. At this point in the romance while working as a blacksmith, water physically separates Isumbras with his family. He is rendered helpless in rescuing any members of his family. Andrew Murray Richmond argues that this limitation of earthly powers for humans can only be resolved from divine powers and interventions (3). Richmond states, "water ceases to obstruct him, becoming powerless before the advance of the enlightened individual" (20). He works closely to the body of water where his wife was taken from him. Water serves as a constant reminder of the physical limitations

of humans. This shows the need for reliance on divine interventions to help humans when they cannot help themselves. If they trust their faith, it will always provide for them.

One day, the Sultan and Muslims arrive on Christian land and begin to attack. Even though Isumbras is only a blacksmith still at this point in the narrative, he forges weapons for himself and heads into battle against the Sultan and his forces. This mirrors crusaders who also temporarily assumed a warrior identity to defeat pagan threats even though that was not their actually identity. Susan Crane argues that Isumbras fights for both God and personal vengeance. Isumbras kills the Sultan who stole his wife while also helping to defeat pagan threats in Christian lands. By killing the Sultan, Isumbras recognizes his place as the strong patriarchal figure needed for a Christian society while also recognizing his larger purpose to diminish any threats to Christianity on earth. After killing the Sultan, the Christian King wants to honor Isumbras for his heroic feats, but instead he conceals his true identity as a former lord and knight from the King and his court. By refusing to take credit for his heroic efforts, he shows that his services are always to God, and he must continue his humility by not seeking recognition. Isumbras receives medical attention and continues his pilgrimage eventually arriving in Jerusalem. The arrival in Jerusalem signifies an important place in the narrative both for Isumbras and its audience. Jerusalem is seen as one of the most sacred locations within the Holy Land due to the belief that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ occurred outside the city. Jerusalem was also one of the first major strongholds captured by the crusaders on the First Crusade. And Jerusalem is often the end point for many sacred pilgrimages both individual and communal.

In Jerusalem, Isumbras receives forgiveness from an angel. He receives divine recognition for his penance and is gifted with several holy symbols. With bread and wine representing the Eucharist, this intervention signals that God has provided for Isumbras. However, all these blessings do not give Isumbras closure as his family is still missing and his wealth has not been restored. Even though Isumbras receives God's blessing of forgiveness, he continues to wander, still searching for a sign that will give him the purpose he desires. Eventually, a queen takes him off the street to learn of his travels and give him living accommodations in her castle. An occurrence in other romances, Iusmbras does not recognize that the queen is his lost wife. Shortly after, he finds some gold wrapped in red cloth and immediately recognizes it as his—this is the same gold was stolen from him after his wife's kidnapping. The queen's knights bring him to her as they are suspicious about his newfound possession of gold. When the queen sees the gold, she and Isumbras realize who the other is, and is crowned king by his wife. Like Job, Isumbras receives more wealth from before his downfall. Throughout his journey, he remained humble and faithful for which he is now rewarded for. He and his wife declare that everyone in their land must convert to Christianity, immediately. The mandate that everyone must convert shows the immediate dangers pagans possess and how Isumbras feels 4that it is his Christian duty to prevent this. He must continue his work even though he has been forgiven and rewarded. The enlightenment he has received is to inspire a lifetime commitment to his faith as it is renewed.

However, the Muslims that Isumbras demands to convert, raised an army up against him and his Christian state in retaliation with the support of neighboring kings. Therefore, it

is Isumbras' duty—as he embodies the virtues and ideals of Christianity—to stop any pagan threats. Even Isumbras' wife prepares to battle as well. This shows how only collective societies of devoted Christians can promote Christianity. Suddenly, three knights come from the distance—ultimately being their three lost sons—on the animals that kidnapped them in the beginning of the narrative. Together as a family unit, Isumbras and his family quickly defeat the kings and the Muslims. Despite not raising his sons, they also seem to recognize their Christian duties just as their father does. This implies that they too never gave up on their beliefs despite their separation from their parents for decades.

The family reunites, and each child is given a kingdom to rule which makes Isumbras an emperor. He seeks to expand his influence into other territories—primarily pagan ones—to spread Christianity physically across the land. With the establishment of new Christian kingdoms, the occupation of these lands allows Isumbras and his sons to control the religious beliefs of the people within these lands. There is no mention of the events after he is made an emperor as the romance ends here. Therefore, the audience is given the impression that the children went onto marry and have children which creates a stable line of succession for more Christian generations. The romance does not address the potential dangers of mass conversion—especially to populations that were forced to convert. Instead, the Isumbras Poet decides to end the narrative here at the victory of Isumbras after his exhausting journey. The finals lines of the romance say that Jesus Christ gives us his blessing and will protect us from hardship.

Sir Isumbras shows its audience the necessity to commit to one's Christian faith. And explain to its audience, that despite failing your faith, that they can repent and seek

forgiveness of their sins. Isumbras embodies Job and Eustace to illustrate a strong human on earth who represents and serves God before himself. The humility he gained through loss and on his pilgrimage allowed him to become a better Christian. Isumbras also mirrors the tradition of the crusaders to defend their religion despite their status in society as he was able to, both as a knight, a blacksmith, and a king. Therefore, the poem seeks to inspire its readers to find enlightenment in their beliefs and uphold their Christian duties in the face of recent defeats. Isumbras becomes better despite great adversity, and as a family. He was able to succeed in defending the Christian state. Just as fourteenth-century Christians can collectively find rebirth and forgiveness to spread Christianity across the land.

I believe that this romance serves as an inspiration for future generations of Christians. By understanding the journey that divine and human figures have experienced, it is possible for them to do the same. By embarking on pilgrimages as a community or individual, all end in the same result: spiritual enlightenment. Admitting one's failures and going on a spiritual journey is only part of the commitment. After you have received enlightenment, you must continue your role in serving your faith. By committing oneself for life to a greater power, one can collectively make one's Christian society better. As we see with Isumbras, he becomes a better Christian throughout his journey which is the first step. Once he is reconnected with his wife and children, together they spread Christianity collectively. Therefore, *Sir Isumbras* as a romance can inspire Christians during a time of defeat, loss, and questioning to strive for rebirth, redemption, and commitment.

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Gayle Gaskill
St. Catherine University,
Professor Emerita of English
ggaskill@stkate.edu

Using Folktale Traditions to Interpret Themes of Honor and Forgiveness in *All's Well*

All's Well that Ends Well is one of Shakespeare's later comedies, a love story about a wise lady doctor who saves the day and gets both the man she wants and the reward of a grateful King. It is also a composite portrait of courageous women: the doctor, her titled mother-in-law, and the poor but brave and honest women who trustingly assist her through desperate times.

The performance I attended most recently was that of Winona's Great River Shakespeare Festival in 2018, back when we could actually go to plays in theaters. Directors stage *All's Well* less frequently nowadays than in the last century, and so it is less familiar than—for example—those guaranteed crowd-pleasers, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. By contrast, in 1953, Tyrone Guthrie—nearly a decade before he built his namesake playhouse in Minneapolis—chose *All's Well* as one of the two plays to open the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Canada, and he persuaded Irene Worth, a promising leading lady he had directed at London's Old Vic—to come to bucolic Ontario to play the lead. Today, critics mislead a popular audience when they drag out an old label for *All's Well* and call it a "problem play." Critic Arthur Dorman employed the phrase in his *Talkin' Broadway* website posting for the Great River production, but it dates back to 1898, when F.

S. Boas invented it to account not for a play that causes problems of understanding but for a play that treats current social problems.

Examples of genuine problem plays are those by Boas's influential older contemporary, Henrik Ibsen, author of the 1883 drama *An Enemy of the People*, which pits deadly environmental threats against sizeable corporate profits, and the 1879 work *A Doll's House*, which dramatizes the patriarchal infantilization of adult women. Boas and his followers isolate *All's Well* from the dramatic genre of comedy, where Shakespeare's contemporaries first listed it, but the phrase grows ever more misleading—even intimidating. The social problem Shakespeare explores in *All's Well* is honor: what is honor: in men and in women? In love and in war? Is it primarily an attribute of noble birth, or does one acquire and maintain it by skill or industry? Is it a private or public virtue, and can a person simulate it through mere self-advertising? Can one who notoriously violates the honor code ever rejoin honorable society? Shakespeare investigates the theme of honor in plays of every genre, from *Henry IV*, a history play, to *Julius Caesar*, a tragedy, to *Much Ado About Nothing*, a joyous comedy. In other words, he dramatizes the compelling social problems of personal honor and dishonor from every perspective and with no simple resolution.

Here is the main plot of *All's Well*: consider how Shakespeare treats the problems surrounding honor. Helena, a gifted physician but a commoner, has from her girlhood loved Bertram, an aristocratic only child, who has recently inherited the title of his deceased father, Count Roussillon. Bertram's mother, the widowed Countess and Helena's legal guardian, loves Helena like the daughter she never had. Young Bertram, however, eagerly leaves Helena and his mother in Roussillon to attend the court of his own legal guardian, the

King of France. When Helena discovers that the King suffers a presumably incurable illness, she follows Bertram to the court and promptly cures the King, who gratefully urges her to choose a husband from among his wards. You can guess Helena's choice. Can you also imagine the young Count's outrage that his royal guardian has matched him with a commoner? In a failing effort to console Bertram as well as to express his personal gratitude, the King offers Helena a title, but he refuses to rescind his decision—or hers. Offstage, Bertram marries Helena, but he immediately sends her back to his mother with a riddle: he will accept the marriage only when Helena gets his family ring from his hand and becomes pregnant with his child. Meanwhile, he runs away and joins the army. Never mind that France is not engaged in a war: he will flee France for Italy and fight on behalf of the Duke of Florence. Bertram actually proves a brave soldier, and soon he attempts to match his military success with amorous exploits. That is, he sets about to seduce an unlucky Florentine by pledging that in exchange for a night of love he will marry her—just a soon as his present wife is dead. As you have already guessed, Helena, like the folktale's Cinderella, fulfills the seemingly impossible conditions of the covenant; however, she faces a collateral problem: how can she accept such a scurvy prize as her callow, heartless Count Bertram?

In *All's Well*, as in many of his plays, Shakespeare doubles his dramatic theme with a comic sub-plot. Bertram, like the affable Prince Hal in the *Henry IV* plays, has a craven companion in his military adventures. This man's name is Paroles, which as you know, in French means *utterance* or *words*. Paroles is all talk. A literary descendant of Miles Gloriosus, the swaggering, vainglorious soldier in an ancient Roman comedy by Plautus, Paroles thrives on boastfulness and flashy uniforms. His fellow officers and even the militarily naïve Helena

see through his self-praise, but Bertram trusts the man's lies until fellow officers comically expose Paroles for an empty, cowardly braggart. Even when enlightened about his false friend, however, Bertram remains stubbornly slow to discover the parallel between Paroles's moral treasons and his own. Can those who penetrate Paroles's dangerously dishonorable nature—or Bertram's—continue to tolerate him?

Were *All's Well* one of Ibsen's problem plays, of course, Bertram, like Paroles, would justly receive his comeuppance, and those poor fools who trusted either of them would be ruined and shamed for their misplaced faith. It is not of that genre, however, but is a life-affirming comedy that leans heavily upon the familiar and assuring conventions of the folktale. As Katharine Eisaman Maus points out, the main plot of the play derives from a collection of folk tales, *The Decameron*, by Boccaccio (1353). Folktales are short narratives that originate in oral tradition, handed down through generations of cumulative authorship. They include legends, myths, trickster tales, and fairy tales, and they continue to evolve after editors collect and publish them in one version or another. You probably learned folktales from the Brothers Grimm if not Walt Disney. Major plot elements and stylistic motifs in *All's Well* depend on folktale patterns that audiences understand before they encounter the play. These recognizable literary devices point not so much to vexing social issues as to a Shakespearean comedy's conventional conclusion: the protagonist's triumph and the promise of continuing life through honorable marriage with its expectation of children.

In this play, one crucial folkloric plot device is the bed trick, where in the dark a man makes love to one woman while believing her to be another. In Genesis, on Jacob's wedding

night, his wily father-in-law substitutes his older daughter, Leah, for her little sister, Jacob's beloved Rachel, thus forcing Jacob to work seven years beyond his original contract in order to pay the bride price. Helena, by cunningly borrowing the bed trick, fulfils half of her rebellious husband's ironic dictates as she substitutes herself for the aptly named Diana, the poor virgin Bertram has tried to seduce. Now, from a realistic perspective, whatever pleasures may lie in consensual marital play-acting, the prospect of Helena's contriving to consummate her marriage in the disguise of her husband's beleaguered doxy is disgusting. What audience can sympathize with a woman so lacking in self-respect? Who could wish for her to build a marriage with a husband whose arrogance and ignorance deem women interchangeable? With Shakespeare wisely keeping the bed offstage, the familiarity of this folktale scheme makes it acceptable to an audience who, instead of raising realistic objections, enjoys discovering how Helena the trickster outwits Bertram the cad and thereby fulfills the terms of his riddle. In some productions, in her final entrance, the actor playing Helena wears a pregnancy pad, though I like to think that once his intended perfidy is publicly exposed and Bertram realizes he has made love to his own wife, he is so grateful for her public forgiveness that he will not demand an E. P. T.

Familiar folklore supplies another persuasive plot device in the ring trick, the surprising recognition of a character's identity by a ring. Bertram's riddling, dismissive letter tells Helena he will be her husband when she gets his ring and conceives his child. In the darkness of their bed, she substitutes a ring the King has given her for Bertram's ancestral ring, so when Bertram returns to the French court, the King recognizes his gift to Helena and suspiciously questions Bertram's means of acquiring it. At that moment, Diana

arrives with her cryptic explanation: Bertram, she insists, "knows himself my bed he hath defiled, / and at that time he got his wife with child" (5.3.294-95). Shakespeare, of course, is returning to the well-worn device he employed in *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Portia, disguised as a triumphant male attorney, acquires her bridegroom's wedding ring as a fee for services and subsequently teases him that his attorney awarded it to her as a love token. Rings remain powerful symbols: think of wedding rings and class rings for two examples, but only in folklore does a particular ring that instantly provides incontrovertible proof of identity come forward at a climactic moment.

A third folkloric plot device in *All's Well* is tricking the trickster. Chaucer's rooster Chanticleer, for example, tricks the fox who has seized him by the throat into boasting of his deed, and as soon as the hungry beast opens his mouth, Chanticleer flies to safety in a tree. Here the wicked trickster is Paroles, the cowardly braggart whom Bertram has mistaken for a role model. To disabuse the young Count, his fellow officers disguise themselves as foreign mercenaries and capture Paroles just as he soliloquizes a scheme to portray himself the hero of an unwitnessed combat. Blindfolded and confused, but desperate for release, Paroles instantly turns to treason as he offers his captors not only detailed knowledge of the Florentine combat forces but also exaggerated testimonials to the personal cowardice and villainy of the unrecognized comrades who question him. Until the trick unmasks Paroles's true character, however, the swaggerer has been not only Bertram's social guide but also his go-between with Diana, so as Bertram witnesses Paroles's unwitting self-display he hears the man he admired label him "a fool and full of gold / . . . a dangerous and lascivious boy" (4.3.203; 212), and his fellow officers hear the same shaming testimony. These tricksters have

exposed two deceivers to themselves; however, this is only Act 4, and so far, neither of the moral traitors repents. "It will come to pass," Paroles eventually admits, "That every braggart shall be found an ass" (4.3.318-19). His little rhyme contrasts him with the angry Bertram and assures the audience that for all the treasonous talk, the play is assuredly a comedy. "Though you are a fool and a knave," wise old Lord Lafeu tells Paroles, "you shall eat" (5.2.46-47), and the unrepentant charlatan praises God for his good fortune.

All's Well turns to folklore not only for its plot structure but its stylistic motifs as well. One of the first is the miraculous cure for a medical mystery. Helena's powerful cure for the King characteristically surpasses all efforts of the court's experienced physicians, discouraged that their study of Galen and Paracelsus works to no available. Before she can apply her skills, however, Helena must assert her powers of persuasion simply to win the King's permission to treat his illness, for more than death he stubbornly fears to play the gullible fool before his court. Humbly, she advances the authority of her late father, a famous healer, and credits him with her medial knowledge, but the King remains stoic. Next, she turns to a familiar folkloric trope: trust in a divine miracle:

> Dear Sir, to my endeavors give consent;
>
> Of heaven, not me, make an experiment. (2.1.151-52)

Reminding the King that her own professional and moral reputation, and perhaps her life, are at stake should she fail, Helena dramatically woos him to trust her gift. When—as the folklore of medical miracles anticipates—the court proclaims her achievement "a showing of a heavenly effect in an earthly actor" (2.3.22-23), she blossoms under the gratifying review.

This hint of divine intervention has further benign implications for the King's Divine Right and for Helena's virtue as one who can call upon her own faith in the Divine and restore the King's in it as well.

Further stylistic motifs borrowed from folktales include riddles and rhymes, vatic word games that assert mysterious powers. Bertram intends his riddling curse simply as a scornful escape:

> When thou canst get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband, but in such a "then" I write a "never." (3.2.53-56)

Helena, however, takes his hyperbole literally as a contractual assignment, and she sets about completing it with the considerable wit, knowledge, and courage she has used to persuade the King. Very possibly, she invokes divine aid as well, for her journey eastward from France to Florence appears to begin with a westward detour to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. In any case, she and Bertram each return from Florence to the French court, now removed to Roussillon, and Helena repeats the riddle as an announcement of her triumph: "When from my finger you can get this ring," she abridges what sounds like her mantra, "And are by me with child' etc." (5.3.306-07). Diana's final dialogue confirms Helena's quest in her own version of the ring riddle: "It was not given me, nor I did not buy it. / . . . It was not lent me neither, / I found it not . . . . I never gave it him" (5.3.266-68, 270). As is the case with nearly every folk tale, the audience knows what the puzzled characters do not, so they wait confidently for Helena to return from the dead, as it were, and resolve the conundrum.

Magic rhymes too belong to folktales, where they mark spells with special powers. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, magic spells turn indifference into love and a man into an ass. In *All's Well*, Helena and the King mutually overcome royal reluctance to trust the female doctor's methods as they converse in rhyme and—given the success that a folktale prophesies—to allow her to choose a husband. Later, Diana uses rhyme to justify her determination to serve Helena's plot against the pestiferous Bertram:

> Since Frenchmen are so braid,
>
> Marry that will, I live and die a maid.
>
> Only in this disguise I think't no sin
>
> To cozen him that would unjustly win. (4.2.73-76)

Rhyme has power to make a statement both convincing and memorable. *All's Well* uses it in letters. Thinking always of Bertram, Helena leaves her disappointed mother-in-law with a letter written in ambiguous quatrains when she departs to Compostela with the claim that evidently her own presence in France has driven Bertram to dangerous foreign wars

> Where death and danger dogs the heels of worth.
>
> He is too good and fair for death and me,
>
> Whom I myself embrace to set him free. (3.4.15-17)

Of course, Helena schemes to embrace Bertram, not death, so her message becomes a memorable folkloric prophecy. Even Paroles writes a letter in couplets as he warns Diana against Bertram with this cynical lampoon:

> When he swears oaths, bid him drop gold and take it;
>
> After he scores, he never pays the score.
>
> Half-won is match well made; match and well make it.
>
> He ne'er pays after-debts; take it before. (4.3.215-18)

Not Diana but Paroles's trickster captors read the letter—aloud and in Bertram's hearing. The magically memorable slogans that call out Paroles's hypocrisy both expose Bertram's efforts to dishonor a woman and label him a fool.

The most dramatic folkloric motif, and thus the one most appropriate for a comedy, is the play's last-minute plot reversal. The dwarfs deem Snow White dead, you recall, before a passing Prince kneels beside her crystal coffin, and Beauty's heart-broken Beast pines himself to fatal feebleness just before her timely return restores him to Princely health. When *All's Well* lumbers into its final scene, the entire French court believes Helena has died, but while they mourn her passing, they hasten to offer Bertram a second wife, an offstage aristocrat this time and not a common doctor, much less the poor Diana. Happily, the ring trick stops them short, for in offering his latest bride a token of commitment—an engagement ring—Bertram ignorantly produces the King's ring that Helena put on his hand in the dark and thereby creates sufficient suspicion to annul the proposed match. Moreover, in accounting for this second ring, he so covers himself in lies as—for the audience—to underscore his growing resemblance to the dishonored Paroles and—for the King—to bring him under suspicion of wife-murder. With Diana's timely appearance and its hope for clarity, Bertram only betrays himself further, for he looks on the woman to whom he had once at

least conditionally promised marriage and scornfully calls her "a common gamester to the camp" (5.3.187). To disprove the charge, Diana produces first the Roussillon family ring that he gave her, next Paroles as a witness, and finally Helena's ring, now circling the finger of its first giver, the King. Through charges and countercharges, the action rises to a climax as the bewildered Bertram mires himself in lies and denials and the exasperated King prepares to jail and execute Diana for her cryptic testimony. At this moment, Helena makes her entrance and confronts Bertram with his cruel riddle of the ring and the child: "This is done, / Will you be mine now you are doubly won?" (5.3.307-08). Emphasized by her rhyme, the timing of Helena's arrival asserts his wife's total command, and Bertram promptly scrambles to recover his forfeited honor by promising to "love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (5.3.310). Is he, however, sincere? Should an audience believe that Bertram, who is now cornered and confronted with his own crude, cowardly, and pathetic deceit, can recover his honor after all? Is not a cynical reading of his last-minute conversion more appropriate? The folktale motif points the audience toward accepting Bertram's pledge even as it has pointed away from accepting his false promises to Diana. Can the director and actors guide current audiences to trust him? Should they even attempt to do so? Is Bertram still no more than an arrogant and despicable aristocrat asserting the power of mere male privilege? Can any stage business convey genuine repentance and forgiveness? Old Lafeu, who has scolded and forgiven Paroles, now weeps while comically saying, "My eyes smell onions" (5.3.314). Helena, however, promptly turns from her recovered husband to her mother-in-law, the Countess: "O my dear mother, do I see you living?" (5.3.313). A stronger bond of affection than marriage joins these women to each other. Meanwhile, the King, determined to have the last word but

stuck in his notion that marriage is a reward, offers the courageous Diana a dowry and her choice of a husband from among his remaining noble wards. Which will she choose? Have the dangers of Helena's haste taught Diana to defer her conjugal choice—perhaps forever? By now, the King has pushed the plot outside the boundaries of the folktale and into social commentary, so Diana's answer lies outside the folktale and outside the play.

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Susan H. Wood
Midland University
Wood@midlandu.edu

Masks, Masques, and *Troilus and Cressida*

I have long been interested in the play *Troilus and Cressida*. A year ago, I was planning to write a re-appreciation of the J. Hillis-Miller article, "Ariachne's Broken Woof." In particular, the idea of the "woof" went along with a pervasive imagery of nets and capture in the play "Agamemnon" by Aeschylus. However, as the months passed, I had new ideas of what I wanted to discuss and embarked upon some new research.

The genre question seems to have been the preoccupation of *Troilus and Cressida* critics for quite some time. I promised myself that my paper would avoid this sticky morass, but I unfortunately have waded into it. To settle my own thoughts on the genre, I have decided to agree with Kristina Faber's article where she says that the play is a tragedy without a tragic hero or catharsis (135). This seems to fit the play as I see it, and I was hoping I could settle that question and zero in on my original topic of radical uncertainty within the play. However, talking to one of my students, we had to consider why the catharsis was blocked. Why break a genre and risk creating a bad play when people have their expectations violated? It vaguely occurred to me that this did seem related to the theme I had wanted to pursue. Lack of catharsis for the viewer means that the tragedy has no satisfactory closure, and that the universe is still somehow out-of-whack. Indeed, this is helped by the idea that everyone knew the characters and their fate already (Farber). I realize that the mythology might not have been extremely familiar to every viewer, but it

certainly sounds like Henryson's "Testament of Cresieye" was well-known to Shakespeare's audience (Haydock 246). In this respect, the audience of the early 1600s would have been in the same boat as the Greeks watching various versions of their myths on the stage. My student, Robert Farber, offered up the theory that Shakespeare wants all the hero characters to be flawed, and less than heroic, and he mentioned Thersites to be his favorite character in the play. I found this a valuable insight, and briefly considered writing primarily on Thersites, reflective of a view of the play as tragedy. I was also interested when some production notes claimed that Pandarus would definitely be the hero of the play— I can clearly see that in some of the more comedic productions, that is what occurs. For example, the production that is profiled in the film "Road to the Globe: Troilus and Cressida."

Everyone seems to agree that the play has two plots; many seem to think the plots are not related, but I think the love and war plot are connected (Tillyard 55). Thersites promotes an anti-war theme, and Pandarus promotes a pro-love theme. Failure to listen to these characters (and the women, and Calchas, and even Hector and Achilles) results in the debacle, which is not only the Fall of Troy, but, if one knows the further Greek tales, the failure of the Greek victors (Oates). The two plots are actually comedy and tragedy cancelling one another out: it is no wonder this is seen as a "problem play."

The theme of the play is the failure of humankind; the answers that are rejected are love, comedy, invective, humanity towards women, slaves and the downtrodden, rational thought, and tragedy itself! I reject Oates' notion that the play is primarily about "infidelity"; I think that is too narrow.

Ironically, everything we think we learned from ancient Greece is what was not employed in the victory at Troy (or by the Trojans sealing their defeat), and thus seriously compromised the future of all humankind. This is why the closing words of the play are a curse, from Pandarus, the apostle of love, wishing disease to befall everyone. A humanity that is bent on having no real love and no real tragedy has mechanized itself into suicide. That is what this play is all about.

In working my way through the play numerous times, it seemed to me that, of course, there is a historical inevitability to everything in the plot that is connected to the previous sources (Foakes cited in Oates). I kept being struck by the character of Ajax. I had barely paid attention to him before. Unlike Pandarus and Thersites, Ajax does not seem to be a "wise fool"; Ajax is viewed as stupid and elephant-like. Thersites has total contempt for him, Ulysses and Nestor are bent on manipulating him, and Ajax has nothing to do with the "love" plot. Let us look at a little sketch I drew:

Love Plot (Pandarus)	**War Plot (Thersites)**	**Ajax**
Comedy/romance	Tragedy	Masque?
Love is the answer	Love is NOT the answer	Truth
Marriage	Death	War is my job
Restores order	Only appears to restore it	Deletes dissonance
Everyman type episode	The parade of heroes	Single combat
True and false love	Lies and manipulation	I am the dissonance

The masque became more prominent during the Shakespearean time period, early in the age of James I. While there is little in the play that suggests the masque compared to *The Tempest*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, many productions have attempted to make the kissing scene or the fight scenes into stylized dances or sporting matches (Brown 71; 175; 177). My *Oxford Companion to English Literature* says that masques are plays for amateur actors (such as the Queen Anne or her son Henry) using a lot of music and dance rather than acting. A more recent source, Harmon and Holman's *A Handbook to Literature*, 10th ed, says that a masque has rapidly changing scenes and tableaux, which "appeal to the eye and ear" (313). What I think is interesting about the masque from a sociological point of view is that it makes the audience part of the play; in other words, it makes everyone an actor. Ajax seems to serve the purpose of being a man who doesn't use "masks," and he does not understand the dissembling/acting that other characters engage in. I am reminded of when I taught the early American play *The Contrast* by Royall Tyler. The main character is a bumpkin who does not understand what a theatre is. He is scandalized to be looking into people's private rooms when seated in the theatre, looking at the stage. This is analogous to Ajax not recognizing the "acting" or dissembling that is happening all around him. There are two spots in the play I see as masque-like, but direction can create others. The two standard spots are the parade of warriors in Act I, Scene ii, where Cressida can take a look at all the major Trojans, and the audience has exposition of them too. The other spot is in Act III, Scene ii, when Cressida, Troilus, and Pandarus all refer to themselves as though they are characters in a morality play (Tillyard relying on idea of L. C Knights 52). However, directors can make more "tableaux" if they want. I would like to see more productions like

Brown did in composing her thesis; it was very interesting to me to read about them, but I have only seen two versions of the play, and analysis of productions could be a future paper. Consequently, this paper will focus on the text.

At one point in the play, Thersites claims that Ajax has just called him "Agamemnon" (Act III, iii, 260); this rather prefigures the scene when Troilus claims that seeing Cressida, it is not her, but "Diomed's Cressida" (Act V, iii, 140). Troilus is ready to "interpret" the actions of this dumb show-like scene without any further investigation of Cressida's possible thoughts. Ajax, meanwhile, not only has no way of decoding the tableaux of masques that surround him but may actually not see what is right in front of him (as in not seeing Thersites). When trying to make Achilles jealous, Ulysses goes so far as to say that he has a writing complimenting "Th'unknown Ajax" (III, iii, 125) (and Thersites refers to his "pageant" (III, iii, line 270), by which it would seem he means that putting on arms is a kind of "dress-up" game for Ajax.) Calling Ajax "unknown Ajax" sounds like a joke since it seems obvious that Ajax is a simple fellow, incapable of having an alter ego, and Ulysses has just made many asides to Nestor and Agamemnon (II, iii, 180-263) indicating that Ajax is monumentally stupid and easy to manipulate. All of this seems to be what other people are saying about Ajax rather than suggestive of his real character. The remarks seem to suggest that Ajax puts on the garb for the battle, but that he *is* aware of his appearance as an "actor" as someone in a masque would dress up and be on display, perhaps enacting an abstract idea, such as "power" or "invincibility." In spite of that, Ajax's actual appearance suggests that he is not acting or putting on a show—he is *becoming* the great warrior. Ajax's

actions point out his understanding of all actions as real, rather than symbolic. This makes him a target for manipulation.

In the world of Shakespeare, the themes of acting or play-acting come up all the time—frequently in comedy, but also in tragedy where Iago or Macbeth conceal their nefarious actions from others. For Iago, dissembling is second nature; for Macbeth, it cripples his mind. In a comedy, the person who is disguised or masquerading is often accorded a certain power (such as Viola, Rosalind, and Portia). In this play, "acting" takes several forms. Troilus believes that actions should align with "truth," which is why he becomes unhinged when Cressida appears to shift her allegiance to Diomedes a few hours after declaring eternal love for him. This "falsity" leads Troilus to a suicidal state of war. He definitely stops believing that "love is the answer," but Shakespeare maybe always thought to block that in this anti-war play. Those who seek comedy and marriage most definitely do not find it. Ironically, the most genuine and "comedic" (marriage-like?) moment in the play occurs when Ajax and Hector agree to stop fighting in the midst of single combat, declare their kinship, and go visit Achilles' tent in the Greek camp (Act IV).

Troilus deceives himself, but so does Hector. Troilus believes he has true love for Cressida, but that seems wrong since he so quickly doubts her. Hector lies to himself about the war. He realizes Helen is not worth fighting over, but he gives up trying to convince anyone. He is a warrior; people want him to war, thus he does so. Pandarus and Thersites serve as truth-tellers. Pandarus pushes the lovers to focus on love. When this fails, it prefigures the failure of Troy itself. Thersites rages about the war and its motives, but no one wants to recognize that the war is about greed or lust, rather than some high-minded ideals.

The women are in a situation of eternal masking and posturing—at least captive women like Cressida and Helen. However, whether women lie or are true seems to be irrelevant, when we consider how Cassandra, Hecuba, Polyxenes, and Andromache are not listened to. It never even occurs to Troilus to consider that Cressida might be lying to Diomedes. However, the Greek and Trojan warriors posture for one another frequently. Their supposed alliances are tainted by a need to control one another, as in all the scheming conducted by Ulysses to get Achilles back in the war.

Ulysses and Nestor have planned to put Ajax up against Hector in a single combat. Their thinking is that while Achilles might be a more worthy opponent, Achilles has been unwilling to fight. His insubordinate attitude imperils the entire Greek effort and has caused Ulysses to recite the entire "degree speech" earlier in the play (Act 1 iii, 75-137). Ajax is seen as expendable—he can fight Hector, and if killed, perhaps they will still have Achilles; at the same time, Achilles may feel his vanity threatened by being replaced by a foolish man and end up fighting after all. Of course, he ends up fighting because of his own rage about the death of Patroclus, similar to how Troilus is anxious to fight (and even die) because of his new view of women as false.

Ajax is depicted as not bright, but he does not lie. He beats Thersites for his insubordinate and evil mouth, prefiguring the rage which will cause him ("Ajax") to kill himself when Ulysses outdoes him for the armor of Achilles. Ajax kills himself with the sword that Hector has given him ("Ajax"). All of this feeds into the characterization of Ajax in the play. He likes and respects Hector as a warrior, and even though he finds Achilles'

disinclination to fight troubling and disrespectful, in the myth he rescues the body of Achilles from the Trojans. Ajax is a man of extreme passions but simple thoughts.

Thersites has an uncontrolled tongue, for which he is beaten and punished by Ajax, who is crazed with anger at the things he says—statements that unhinge the glory of war and the honor of warriors from his reality. Ajax, like a common soldier, does not need to know what the war is about; he does not like to have his commanders questioned. He does not care for dissonance. At the same time, we see a glimmer of sadness and inquiry in Ajax when he questions Agamemnon about why his is not as great as Achilles (II, iii, 141-156).

In Act 1, scene iii, Thersites says of Ajax: "That fool / knows not himself." (Which is precisely the opposite of Socrates' statement, "Know thyself," but it also might not be true.) I think Ajax does know himself. He accepts that he is not as good as Achilles, if that is what Agamemnon says. It does not occur to him his comrades may be lying.

In Act 2 scene iii, Ajax says Achilles is sick "of a proud heart." This is usually seen as an irony; that Ajax is the "proud" one. However, I am not sure that notion is right either. Ajax at least is able to separate his actual relationship to Hector from their respective roles within the military apparatus. It is this compartmentalization that is what our modern military depends upon, but it also is Ajax willingly turning off his humanity for the purpose of conducting war. He is not a very bright fellow, but he sees this is as necessary and part of the "programme," so to speak.

In Act 2, scene iii, Ajax asks Agamemnon whether Achilles is a better man than he. Agamemnon says, "No more than he thinks he is." It is hard to tell whether Agamemnon is

toying with Ajax or being sincere. However, the answer Agamemnon wants to give is really that it depends upon what he needs at the moment—they are all cogs in the machine. Ajax wants a simple and direct answer, which is akin to what "Everyman" would want. When Ajax asks why everyone feeds Achilles' pride, Agamemnon says that Ajax is just as good, and "all together more tractable" (II, iii, 149). I think usually people take this as irony, but in fact, maybe he is telling Ajax a truth to build him up—that an army needs men like Ajax more than men like Achilles. Ajax says he himself doesn't know what pride is—typically people see this as simple irony, but maybe it is true. The pride that is fatal to an ancient Greek is *hubris*. I do not think Ajax is guilty of that. Agamemnon says "He that is proud eats up himself. Pride is his own glass, his own trumpet, his own chronicle, and whatever praises itself but in the deed, devours the deed in the praise" (II, iii, 152-154). This seems like a profound comment from someone who is usually a poseur. Also, it mirrors the statements of Thersites about "incontinence" (V, i, 99). It seems that Achilles is the fellow guilty of this, but it may well be most of the warriors have this issue (do we recall what happens to Agamemnon himself in the play by Aeschylus?).

A little later, in Act 3, scene iii, Achilles is being manipulated by the other Greeks, implying he has lost his status among them: his reputation is a mask that is crucial to him. It doesn't occur to him they are manipulating him (and if one reads *The Iliad*, one knows the gods are the real manipulators). This is the same situation as Ajax, so it is odd that critics see Ajax as stupid and Achilles as better.

Later in Act 3, scene iii, line 242, Thersites says Ajax is acting stupid—that he mistakes Thersites for Agamemnon. Thersites refuses to speak to him. This is a curious

remark, and I am not sure what to make of it. It seems like an emphasis here is the idea that Ajax cannot see the truth right in front of his face, but it also suggests that the gaze is completely corruptible whether others are wearing masks or not. In fact, the scene prefigures Troilus' rejection of Cressida based entirely on what he sees. Ajax is in such a good frame of mind that he sees a friend, Agamemnon, instead of the annoying Thersites. In fact, it also suggests the idea of Ajax's eventual madness. It also makes us question Thersites' reliability.

In Act IV, the fight between Hector and Ajax is very civilized and comprises another opportunity to create a masque-like moment. It occurs just after Cressida has been brought to the Greek camp and been insulted by the Greek warriors. I would have said Ajax is not in that scene, but it may depend on the director. Ajax, as one who is "making an entrance" in his armor to fight Hector, may be still dressing (as we know from Act V, he is missing the war due to spending time "getting ready"). In the fight, it turns out that Ajax is related to Hector, which he reveals (as a sneaky way of weakening Ajax?). Hector says that the family connection forbids killing one another (IV, v, 122). They mutually admire one another and embrace. Ajax assents to this readily, accepting this apparent universal principle. Hector, when fighting Achilles in Act V, he also lets him go, which it sounds like has been a pattern in his fighting. However, he also suddenly decides to chase the random Greek for his armor, killing him in a violation of war protocol (Oates). In Oates' interpretation, Hector does not consistently follow his self-avowed ideals, which is evident in this example. Hector's actions depict his despair and suicidal nihilism. Like Ajax, he embodies the dilemma of a soldier.

Ajax, in IV, v, is willing to not be ruthless. He even says he had planned to slaughter Hector, but he backs off willingly from that opportunity. It is friendly until Achilles steps in.

Ajax is the peacemaker here. One wonders why Ajax wants to kill his relative, or be involved in this war at all, but he takes all Greek warrior culture at face value. I don't see that it makes him stupid; it just makes him typical. Thersites' anger is directed at this—the unthinking multitude of warriors that keep the machine going. Neither Hector nor Ajax is thinking of putting aside the way one accrues personal glory in the Greek/Trojan culture. Achilles is only setting aside the fight for his own reasons, not because war is wrong. In Act 5, scene ix, when the death of Hector is mentioned, Ajax says, "Great Hector was as good a man as he," referring to Achilles (4). While preferring not to embrace dissonance, Ajax does seem to recognize that it exists. Judging Hector as a man and not as a warrior, he thinks Hector is a better person than Achilles, a view that the audience of Shakespeare's play, seeing the unfair advantage taken by Achilles, would agree with. Therefore, the question is, why is Ajax, the speaker of that profound thought, still considered to be a dolt?

At one point, Act II, scene iii, Ulysses says Ajax is his own argument (95)—this, during several readings of the play, seemed to me wit I did not understand, but finally, I believe the purpose of Ajax in the play is to show that the most perfect warrior makes his own case against war. The anti-war play allows no tragic hero, and no catharsis, but if one character embodied all the commitment and all the tragedy of this conflict, a character who actually has a choice, that character is Ajax. Like so many, he buys the old lie, and kills himself when it is over, the PTSD and dissonance of it all affecting his reason and perceptions completely at last.

Ajax remains oblivious to his being figure of fun to the other men, and many critics seem to think this signals that Shakespeare does not think well of him (Wilson). I disagree.

He is the only character in the play who is seeking truth. He is the only character who is not wearing masks. He is the only character who plays roles without examining what they are. He is not an "actor" who seeks his own agency, he acts the roles he has been assigned, not letting them overlap. He is the perfect professional. He cannot offend the Gods, nor the director.

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Bruce Brandt
South Dakota State University
Bruce.Brandt@sdstate.edu

Redeeming Shakespeare's Wife

What do we tell our students about Anne Shakespeare? If anything at all, it is not likely to be positive. Shakespeare's scholarly biographers, from the pioneering Edmund Malone through moderns such as Stephen Greenblatt, have not thought kindly of Anne Hathaway. Shakespeare's bequest of the second-best bed to Anne was interpreted by Malone as showing "how little he esteemed her," which Sam Schoenbaum describes as the most influential statement that Malone ever made (120). Then, after Shakespeare's marriage bond was discovered and published in 1836, she become commonly seen as an older woman who seduced a younger man and through pregnancy trapped him into a marriage that he did not want and for which he despised her. Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare's aversion to Anne may have become so great that the four lines of doggerel carved on his gravestone asking that his bones not be disturbed reflect his fear "that one day his grave would be opened to let in the body of Anne Shakespeare" (148).

However, recent years have seen some interesting questioning of these chauvinistic and misogynist understandings. This paper will look at three strikingly favorable depictions of Anne Shakespeare. The first is Germaine Greer's *Shakespeare's Wife* (2008), a stunning scholarly analysis of life in Shakespeare and Anne's Stratford. The second is Kenneth Branagh's historical drama *All is True* (2018), a film based on Shakespeare's retirement to Stratford. The third is Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020), a historical novel based on Anne's

marriage and life in Stratford. All three could provide the basis for involving undergraduates in engaging projects of historical interpretation.

Greer's study begins with an overview of the poor treatment accorded wives in western literary culture, where they are either invisible or vilified, and then places the treatment of Anne within this heritage. Citing Bacon's argument that "wives and children . . . are impediments to great enterprises," Greer asserts that "Some such idea lies behind the almost unconscious certainty shared by all (male) observers that, if a man of genius is to realize his potential, he must put his wife away. Shakespeare could not have been great if he had not jettisoned his wife, but if he is to be great, she must be shown to have got her just deserts" (2-3). The bequest of the second-best bed and the long separations while Shakespeare lived and worked in London have been considered evidence that Shakespeare did not like Anne, and her unmarried pregnancy was highly distressing to Victorian biographers. It appeared to them that Anne had come close to nipping the career of our greatest writer in the bud. Still, if facts are facts, the way they are perceived may differ. As Greer puts it, "All biographies of Shakespeare are houses built of straw, but there is good straw and rotten straw, and some houses are built better than others. The evidence that is always construed to Ann Hathaway's disadvantage is capable of other, more fruitful interpretations, especially within the context of recent historiography" (9).

In addition to reinterpreting the biographical data that we have for Anne and William, Greer assembles a wealth of information about what life in Stratford would have been like for Anne. It is now well-known that Anne was of normal marrying age for an Elizabethan woman. Shakespeare, still a minor, was the outlier. However, because she was

older, it is often assumed that she was the pursuer. There is no evidence for this, and Greer discusses several cases from Renaissance life and literature in which a younger man courts an older woman. There is no way to know when the two first met, but Greer points out that their "parents had known each other since the 1550s" (42). While admirers of the Bard might lament Shakespeare's throwing himself away on a country girl, marrying Anne was not marrying downward. Greer points out that "Landholders were of higher status than glove-makers, especially glove-makers who were broke and had lost their own land" (46). The real question, she asks, is "How hard is it to believe that eighteen-year-old Shakespeare was so enamored of a twenty-six-year-old that he wooed her and ultimately won her" (46). And how did he woo her? Being Shakespeare, Greer imagines that he might have written sonnets to her. She may even have been able to read them. Those scholars ready to believe that Shakespeare's loathed bride was unworthy of him have generally depicted Anne as unable to read or write. As Greer puts it, "They want her, need her to have had no inkling of the magnitude of her husband's achievement" (51). It is true that she signed documents with her mark. However, reading and writing are separate skills and were not taught simultaneously. Greer reminds us that Protestant families such as Anne's believed that girls should be taught to read English well enough to read the Bible. She also imagines that Shakespeare might have helped hone her reading skills, reading to and with her during their courtship and the early years of their marriage. Later, when his Sonnets had been published, Greer thinks that Anne either could read them or that she would have had them read to her. There were too many Stratfordians who went back and forth to London for her not to know of them.

Perhaps, Greer suggests, she might even have remembered versions of some of them from when Shakespeare courted her.

Bardolaters have long seen Shakespeare as becoming wealthy and buying a fine house in Stratford. It may be, however, that the belief that Shakespeare's genius merited such financial success has colored the reading of the documentary evidence. Comparing Shakespeare to other prolific and successful playwrights such as Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson, Greer argues that playwrights simply did not become rich: "Henslowe's memoranda should suffice to illustrate how hard it was for players or poets to earn significant money in the theatre. Most of the playwrights were shareholders, because as proprietor Henslowe found it expedient to involve them in the business as a way of putting pressure on them to produce playscripts on demand. Many of them were in debt to him" (208). Even if Shakespeare's relationship to the Chamberlain's Men was better than this, he had only been a sharer with them for three years before the purchase of New Place (208). Moreover, while New Place may have been large, there is no evidence that it was fine, as scholars such as Schoenbaum have assumed. Greer finds that the evidence is "that the property had never been properly maintained" and was in disrepair (207). As for who wanted to buy New Place, Greer points out that we do not actually know where Anne lived after her marriage, and that she may have already been a tenant at New Place. She may have also been conducting various business activities, such as making malt, which would have been legally conducted in William's name since Anne was femme couverte. Greer shows that "it seems very much more likely that it was Ann who wanted New Place, Ann who restored it and Ann who ran it than it was Shakespeare. Perhaps it was her money that paid for it" (221).

Greer has no new evidence concerning Shakespeare's will, but speculates that the marriage agreement for the wedding of Susanna Shakespeare and John Hall may have already made them the primary heirs and that Anne had already received and removed what she was to have. A last moment mention of the second-best bed may have been necessary to prevent it from going to the Halls. Perhaps it had not already been removed because it was the bed that Shakespeare lay dying in. Property already in Anne's possession could have included Shakespeare's books and papers, and Greer indulges the thought that Anne, financially independent, arranged for the printing of the First Folio. The idea, Greer says, may be far-fetched, but no more so than much of what we have come to accept as the story of Anne and Will's marriage and life.

Branagh's *All is True* is an entertainment, and not a scholarly reassessment of Anne and Will's life. Starring Branagh as Shakespeare, Judi Dench as Anne, and Ian McKellen as the Earl of Southampton, it purports to show the last years of Shakespeare's life. It refers to many of the known details of Shakespeare's biography, but tailors them to fit the script and manufactures much of the plot out of whole cloth. Thus, Branagh opens the film with Shakespeare standing before the burning Globe in 1613 and tells us that with the theater destroyed, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and never wrote another play. However, as Bevington says in his introduction to *Henry VIII*, which was referred to as *All is True* in 1613, most scholars think that Shakespeare had already retired to Stratford, but that he returned to London at least twice to collaborate with John Fletcher on *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (919). The simplification gives Branagh a clean break from Shakespeare's career in London. Keeping the focus on Stratford is necessary for Branagh's

premise that Shakespeare, whose absentee life has estranged him from his wife and daughters, wishes to repair that damage and to mourn his son. Anne's anger is made evident early on when she tells Shakespeare that he is a guest in their house and will therefore sleep in the best bed, while she sleeps in her bed, the second-best bed. Happily, she later invites him to share the second-best bed.

One of Branagh's stunning fabrications is having the Earl of Southampton ride through Stratford and stop to visit Shakespeare because he is an admirer of Shakespeare's poetry. The brief scene allows McKellen as Southampton to give a beautiful recitation from memory of Sonnet 29: "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." Moreover, the suggestion that Shakespeare reveals his personal feelings in his sonnets introduces another source of estrangement between Will and Anne. She is illiterate but has had the sonnets read to her, and her main takeaway is that Shakespeare has been unfaithful to her.

Throughout the film Shakespeare mourns the loss of Hamnet's poetic talent whenever his death is mentioned. The truth, it develops, is that Judith composed the poems, and being unable to write, dictated them to Hamnet. Having been praised so extravagantly by his father for these poems, Hamnet becomes despondent when Judith plans to reveal that she is the author, and he drowns himself. The suicide is hidden by the lie that Hamnet died of plague. Shakespeare was not informed of the truth, but he deduces it. He now has new and different grieving to do, but the film ends with reconciliation between Will and Anne.

Despite Maggie O'Farrell's title *Hamnet*, her novel's main character is his mother, Agnes. For the Elizabethans, the names Agnes and Anne were interchangeable. Anne Hathaway was Anne on her marriage bond but Agnes in her father's will. Referring to her

throughout as Agnes succeeds in helping the reader to separate her story from Shakespeare's. Shakespeare himself is always "he" or "her husband" for the same reason. This is her story. The novel runs from Hamnet's death from bubonic plague up to the time when *Hamlet* is being performed in London. Earlier events, such as the young man's courtship of Agnes, her marriage, and the births of her children, are covered in flashbacks. O'Farrell's "Author's Note" indicates that she has tried to be true, as much as possible, "to the scant historical facts known about the real Hamnet and his family" (307). The paucity of facts, however, leaves much room for invention, and O'Farrell's novel strongly reflects Greer's reading of the history. She sees the marriage as one of deep, abiding love. Moving far from the historical record, she imagines Agnes as being what would have been known as a "wisewoman," a woman knowledgeable of herbs and able to use them to treat illnesses. She is also something of a psychic, able to divine insight into another person by holding his or her hand. The first time she takes her future husband's hand, she feels depths and complexities beyond her ability to grasp. She also senses that there is a tie that must be loosened or broken if he is to fulfill his potential (69). That tie, we learn, is to his abusive father, which will be broken by her husband's escape to London. Over and over, Agnes finds reasons to postpone her own removal to London. Concern for the children and their health outweighs her longing to be with her husband. The novel ends with Agnes finally making the trip to London. The death of Hamnet severely depresses her, and she becomes extremely angry when she learns that her husband's current play is *Hamlet* (a variant of Hamnet). Believing that her husband is simply utilizing her son's death, she travels to London to confront him. She arrives at the theatre just as a performance of the play is beginning. Uncomprehending at first, she realizes

that through the play her husband is in fact mourning his son in the only way he can. "He has, Agnes sees, done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child's suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child's stead so that the boy might live" (304). With this understanding, the two are reconciled.

In conclusion, all three works would work well in the classroom. Whether she is right or wrong, Greer certainly teaches an awareness of the difference between bare facts and how one assembles them into an understanding of history. Preconceptions about motives and gender may well lead scholars and critics to wrong conclusions. Watching *All is True* could be an exercise in thinking critically, at peering beneath the surface of what one is being told. O'Farrell's moving fiction is just that, a fiction, and indeed rather unlikely to be true in its presuppositions. It is a moving story, though, that reminds us that Agnes, or Anne, Hathaway was once a vital, living woman, and not simply a statistic in Shakespeare's biography.

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Dr. Shaun Stiemsma
Dordt University
Shaun.Stiemsma@dordt.edu

"All form is formless, order orderless": Marriage as Comic Resolution in *Troublesome Reign* and *King John*

The traditional close of a comedy is a wedding, as it represents unity, order, and the coming together of the community into a comic circle. In Christian contexts, these ideas are only intensified, as the two becoming one flesh creates an ideal picture of the possibility of comic unity sanctioned by God. In early modern history plays, this comic resolution is often used to resolve not only inter-personal conflicts, but those between states and rulers as well. Both of Shakespeare's historical tetralogies end with marriages that are intended to convey not merely the political expedience of a truce but the ideal creation of a lasting peace based on mutual love as well.

Although *Richard III* deals briefly with this idea and the last act of *Henry V* draws out the comic elements of marriage, perhaps Shakespeare's most trenchant engagement with the idea of marriage as both comic resolution and historical solution is in his under-appreciated *King John*. Likely adapted from the anonymous 1591 *Troublesome Reign of King John*, the play is one of Shakespeare's least popular works, and its "flaws" are commonly attributed to the weakness of the source play. This assessment of the earlier play may be fair, but it is one of the few non-Shakespearean history plays that use the same techniques of selecting, rearranging, and compressing material from various sources and investing it with dramatic structure. These techniques are employed in both plays to make the marriage of

John's niece Blanche to the French Dauphin Lewis both a resolution to the conflict between England and France and a precursor to John's troubles with the Roman church, though these events are distant and unrelated in the chronicles. Although the anonymous *Troublesome Reign* clearly uses the markers of a comic resolution in this marriage to set up a tragic reversal when the Roman Catholic church interferes, Shakespeare re-works the same generic markers to expose the marriage as a false comedy, merely further evidence of the corrupt commodity that dominates all relations in the play and exacts a human cost.

With this cynical historical view present in the play, some late 20th and 21st century critics have looked at the chaotic structure of the play as evidence of Shakespeare's deconstruction of historical causality in the play, led by Virginia Mason Vaughn's 1989 article touting the play's essential modernness and subversive nature. However, since Shakespeare essentially follows the scene structure and action of his source play very closely, if the structure is a "proto-modernist" deconstruction of historical causality as Páraic Finnerty calls it (38), the innovator must be the anonymous author of *Troublesome Reign* rather than Shakespeare. Indeed, it is at the level of dialogue and the particulars of scene construction that Shakespeare's emphases are to be found, and his changes in speakers of certain lines, his extensions of some conversations and elimination of others, and his diction choices give new meaning to the structures he inherits. Causality in the structure is not negated, but re-shaped to make a distinctly cynical view of politics and history clear. Nowhere is this purposeful revision more distinct from its source than in his handling of the most clearly marked generic structure in *Troublesome Reign*, the marriage of Blanche and

Lewis in its 4th and 5th scenes, which are Shakespeare's second act and the first scene of act three.

Early in both plays, the kings of France and England battle outside the French city of Angiers—John is defending his French territories and his claim to the English throne against his own nephew, Arthur, whose claim is supported by the French King Philip. After a brief skirmish, both kings claim victory and turn to the citizens of Angiers to acknowledge and grant entrance to the true king. Already Shakespeare's revisions are evident: in *Troublesome Reign*, John literally makes the first claim, while Shakespeare makes the first claim Philip's on behalf of Arthur. Under the threat of further attack, the citizens suggest that the rulers should "knit together their kingly strengths" (iv.67) in peace and unity rather than continue to fight: John's niece Blanche and Philip's son Lewis should be wed.

In both plays, the suggested marriage uses the language of comedic unity and courtly love, but Shakespeare heightens the language of chivalric romance in his descriptions of both Blanche and Lewis. However, Shakespeare uses Falconbridge to mock these lines and reveal their emptiness. In *King John*, Lewis is presented as a conquering knight, and Blanche is an idealized object of love, pursued as a valued piece of property, considering especially her "dowry" which will "weigh equal with a queen" to "gild her bridal bed, and make her rich" (II.1.486-491), hinting at the significance of "commodity" (II.1.597) in these allegedly amorous exchanges. Ironically, even the language of romance suggests the exchange of political power at the core of the comic union: James Calderwood refers to the marriage as an expedience created in an "epidemic of deceit" (344). Such deceit is utterly absent in the source play, which allows the audience to perceive the union as genuine.

As in a typical comedy, both plays present blocking figures that must be overcome to complete the unity intended in the marriage. In *Troublesome Reign*, there are two primary blocking figures present on the scene, and both are immediately discussed and resolved in the interest of maintaining the order the marriage would create. One blocking figure, the less significant, is the bastard Falconbridge, whom Queen Elinor had promised Blanche for a wife, thus granting him wealth and title in the royal family. Further, Falconbridge wishes to kill another combatant, Limoges the Duke of Austria, who killed his father, Richard I. Both of his objections are quickly cast aside, as Elinor, the queen mother, promises she will find him another wife (iv. 127) and John makes him Duke of Normandy so he can challenge Austria to a duel as an equal. Conversely, Shakespeare entirely ignores Falconbridge's motivation as a potential match with Blanche, and instead makes him merely bloodthirsty and cynical regarding the entire situation, particularly in his famous soliloquy on "commodity" that concludes the scene. Shakespeare's choice to keep the anger Falconbridge shows in *Troublesome Reign* but remove its primary cause, as Beatrice Groves points out, leaves the audience to see his cynical view as unbiased (280), and his soliloquy at the close of Act II makes "commodity" the audience's last word on the marriage arrangements. In Shakespeare's version, the outward form is shown to be essentially void, while in *Troublesome Reign* the formal arrangement is merely the external manifestation of the internal peace and unity.

The more significant blocking figure to the proposed union in both plays is Constance, Arthur's mother: the marriage and the peace it establishes would end King Philip's efforts on behalf of Arthur. In *Troublesome Reign*, the validity of John's claim over Arthur's is not

directly questioned, while Shakespeare casts doubt on John's claim throughout his first three acts: John's own mother Queen Elinor questions the strength of his claim over Arthur's in the play's opening scene, and Shakespeare's John is consistently inferior to the French king in authority. The *Troublesome Reign* playwright makes Arthur's claim a matter of concern from the first mention of the marriage by the citizens of Angiers, and Lewis and Philip both make a point of resolving Arthur's interest before finalizing the marriage plans. John then becomes a beneficent ruler, suddenly avuncular in addressing the nephew he has been contending with, chiding him that though he "troublest England's peace" (iv. 182) with his actions, he grants him the title Earl of Richmond, the realm of Touraine, and the city of Angiers, the site over which they have just warred. The anonymous playwright thus provides evidence that the blocking figures in the play should be satisfied, and though Constance is not content—Arthur stoically encourages her to be of good cheer, but her last word in scene 4 is "malcontent"—she has resolved herself to accept her fate silently, and is not heard from again in the following scene except for a single line of passive complaint. Thus, in *Troublesome Reign*, every effort is made in good faith by the two kings to make the comic unity the marriage seals genuine and inclusive, an alignment of form and meaning.

Shakespeare's handling of Constance as a blocking figure is entirely different. She and her son are absent throughout the scene in which the marriage arrangements are made, and no one seems to remember their existence as a complication except as an afterthought. Once the dowry has been settled—a dowry that Shakespeare emphasizes costs John much and only improves his claim to the throne by removing a threat—Philip suddenly seems to remember the reason that he and John were fighting. "Is not the Lady Constance in this

troop? / I know she is not, for this match made up / Her presence would have interrupted much" (II.1.540-42). In the absence of Constance and Arthur, Philip and John are left to scheme ways to "content" them, arrangements that further cost John power and prestige, and both kings surely know that these will not content Constance.

Shakespeare, because he has had Constance and Arthur absent from II.1, must add a scene in which they are told of the impending marriage and the impact on their own position, one of his few deviations from the scene structure of the source play, suggesting that Shakespeare was quite deliberate in the changes he made to the scene. While Arthur is nearly as stoic as in *Troublesome Reign*, Shakespeare does not allow Constance to come to a place of passive acceptance of their position; instead, she goes into an extended curse of all involved, and she carries her role as a blocking figure into the scene that is supposed to bring about the comic resolution to the strife of the play thus far.

These parallel scenes, scene v in *Troublesome Reign* and III.1 in *King John*, are climactic scenes in each play's dramatic structure, and the presentation of the turning point illustrates the difference between the two plays. In *Troublesome Reign*, John himself opens the scene with a line that encapsulates the comic function of the wedding: "This is the day, the long-desired day, / Wherein the realms of England and France / Stand highly blessed in lasting peace!" (v.1-3). After this speech, Constance and Falconbridge, the blocking figures from the previous scene, utter parallel asides expressing their discontent, but only Falconbridge expresses his objection publicly—his desire for vengeance upon Austria. Although this violence threatens to disrupt the unity of the comic circle, there is no break between the kings themselves, as both agree that he ought to be able to defend his father's

honor in dueling Austria. Thus, this threatened violence is not a true disruption of the order established by the marriage.

In Shakespeare, it is the French King Philip who has the first line in III.1:

[T]his blessed day

Ever in France shall be kept festival:

To solemnize this day the glorious sun

Stays in his course and plays the alchemist,

Turning with splendour of his precious eye

The meagre cloddy earth to glittering gold:

The yearly course that brings this day about

Shall never see it but a holy day! (III.1.1-8)

Though it echoes the same notion of comic resolution in the marriage—a festival and holy day—his image of an alchemical sun belies the distance between the form and the reality, as the "meagre cloddy earth" is made to *appear* "glittering gold," a reminder of the commodity at the heart of the holy day. No sooner does he utter these lines than Constance rises to throw them back in his face, leading to an immediate battle of words that undoes the claim of the long-lasting peace as soon as it is declared. The language of commodity, with which Falconbridge cynically labeled all the arrangements of the previous act, continues to dominate the scene, as Philip claims to have "pawn'd" (III.1.24) his majesty for Constance and Arthur, and she claims he has sold her a "counterfeit / Resembling majesty" (III.1.25-

26). Constance continues to decry the faithlessness of both kings and to curse them and the marriage now completed, and then Shakespeare adds to this chaos—the very opposite of the order created in a comic resolution—the previously ignored blocking figure of Falconbridge. Instead of challenging Austria within the proper order with a duel, he goads him by mocking him, trying to create a brawl that will allow him to take revenge.

It is into this chaos that Pandulph the papal legate enters in Shakespeare's play; however, in *Troublesome Reign*, the scene was one that had established the peaceful order the marriage intended. Thus, the anonymous playwright makes clear that the comic resolution and amity between France and England was disrupted only by the interference of the Roman church. A portrayal of John as a proto-Protestant was already popular in England when the play was written, and the *Troublesome Reign* scene re-enforces this idea by making clear that the tragedy and chaos is entirely caused by the Pope's interference in political affairs. The scene is much shorter in *Troublesome Reign*: Cardinal Pandulph arrives, announces his claims against John—he has refused to accept the Pope's appointee for Archbishop of Canterbury—and Lewis and Philip both immediately prepare themselves not only to disregard their newly created unity but also to declare war upon John, making clear that the Church's ability to control monarchs brings discord from order. The *Troublesome Reign* playwright provides John with several strong speeches decrying the horrors of ecclesiastical interference in the affairs of divinely appointed monarchs, and he defies the Pope, Philip, and any who oppose him, calling "Confusion [to] light upon their damned souls" (v.138), bringing the disorder that undoes all that the marriage was intended to do. The playwright ends the scene with Philip, who reminds the audience again of the comic order that has now been destroyed, as he

declares, "[War] Drums shall be music this wedding-day!" (v.153). The irony of this inversion is, in *Troublesome Reign*, entirely the fault of the church's interference.

Shakespeare's handling of the arrival of Pandulph is sometimes seen as more anti-Catholic than that of the *Troublesome Reign* playwright, as Lily Campbell suggests the extended dialogue can be seen as reflecting the debate over sovereignty between Elizabeth I and Catholic church in England (137-147). However, most critics find that Shakespeare generally minimized anti-Catholic elements in the source play,[1] and this scene need not be anti-Catholic for being extended from the source play. Although Shakespeare certainly provides John with speeches that parallel those in *Troublesome Reign* and his Pandulph engages in "casuistical" argumentation meant to remind audiences of Jesuit stereotypes, such an anti-Catholic reading is an over-simplification of the structure Shakespeare has created. First, Pandulph arrives to a scene already fractured in multiple ways, and so his presence merely guarantees the falling apart of what was already broken. Further, Constance's insistent presence throughout all Pandulph's dialogue serves both to deflate John's claims about his divine authority, since her son's claim is stronger than his, and to undermine Philip's claims about his divided honor, since he has already divided his honor by ignoring his vow to Constance and Arthur in pursuing his own advantage in the marriage.

Thus, though an anti-Catholic reading would suggest that it is Pandulph's equivocation that causes the pact between the kings to fall apart,[2] Shakespeare's presentation of the scene does not allow the audience to see it that way. Though Philip speaks of his divided honor and seems to ask Pandulph's advice, what he is actually doing is flattering the papal legate and asking for a way that he can keep good relations with both

England and the church, maximizing his "commodity" thereby. Having established a profitable order for himself in the marriage just completed, Philip asks, "Out of your grace, devise, ordain, impose / Some gentle *order*" (III.1.176-77). Pandulph does not offer him a way out; instead he declares "All form is formless, order orderless" (III.1.179) without the church' church's investing meaning in the form and order. The marriage—the church's sacrament for unifying human relationships—is thus a form and order made void as far as any unity with England, because John and England are the enemies of the church. Finally, the Cardinal resorts to pronouncing a curse on Philip, and only then Philip relents and turns on John and the specious peace they've established. Both monarchs end the scene still on stage, threatening each other. Thus, Shakespeare's close not only undoes the promise of the comic resolution this scene opens with, it reveals that the pursuit of commodity has taken the monarchs back to where they started—threatening one another just outside of Angiers.

Thus, in Shakespeare's adaptation the play, it is not the church's conflict with John that has disrupted peace and unity: it is the emptiness of any true form behind the formal arrangement of the marriage. Shakespeare's manipulation of the convention of marriage as comic resolution to political problems in *King John* takes what is a relatively simple tragic inversion of the comic mode in *Troublesome Reign* and makes it a layered and ironic attack on the entire notion of personal marriage union as a solution to political division. But the marriage is not merely empty: it is destructive. Shakespeare's final deviation from the *Troublesome Reign* playwright in the scene is in giving the new bride Blanche a stronger voice of her own:[3] Shakespeare makes her physical form the emblem of the formlessness established, as she, representing the unity between France and England, is now "whirl[ed]

asunder" and "dismember[ed]" (III.1.256) by the very formal arrangement that was to bring her love and grant everyone lasting peace.

Endnotes

[1]See John Klause for a parallel between Robert Southwell and the language of the play.

[2]See Finnerty for an argument about Pandulph's destruction of the "amity" between John and Philip.

[3]See Phyllis Rackin for more on Blanche as a "a site for the inscription of a patriarchal historical narrative" (180).

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Rachel M. De Smith Roberts
North Greenville University
Rachel.Roberts@ngu.edu

"Unpriseable Only for Itt Self": Beauty and Virtue in Mary Wroth's *Urania*

Introduction

In her manuscript sequel to *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621), Mary Wroth makes this observation about beauty: "Beauty is butt an outward part and unpriseable onely for itt self, Vading like lilies, sweet like Roses, yett wither if nott with the curiositie of faithe and worthe (the true preservitors) itt bee nott lined and furnished from with in" (Wroth 2.71.28-31). Although the comparison of inner and outer beauty is a Renaissance commonplace, Wroth rarely discusses physical beauty in her work.[1] Thus, her few descriptions of beautiful characters are intriguing exceptions that invite speculation and analysis.

This paper will explore two such exceptional characters, the prince Clavarindo and the king Rodomandro. Both men are relatively minor characters in the grand scope of Wroth's multi-generational romance. However, Wroth draws attention to their physical beauty at key moments in each character's story. For Clavarindo, this key moment comes when he disguises himself as a lady to complete a quest. For Rodomandro, a character of color, the key moment is simply when he first appears as a marriage candidate for Wroth's protagonist, the queen Pamphilia.

This attention to beauty along the margins of the *Urania* story invites readers to consider the role of beauty in the margins of early modern society. Clavarindo's gender-

bending disguise and Rodomandro's dark skin and eyes, key features in Wroth's discussion of these characters, reveal that beauty in *Urania* is intertwined with English Renaissance cultural ideas about gender and race. Wroth's approach to beauty, gender, and race is at times surprisingly complex.

In addition, as the passage quoted above suggests, both character descriptions evolve into a consideration of "true" or "perfect" beauty—which is "with in" rather than an "outward part" (Wroth 2.71.31, 29). This notion suggests that virtue is the key to true beauty; in the world of *Urania*, the highest virtue is always constancy in love. For Wroth, then, discussing beauty also requires commenting on race, gender, and virtue—within the fictional world of *Urania* and the "real" world of Renaissance England.

Section 1: Clavarindo—Gender, Beauty, and "Faithe"

The first passage that invites consideration of Wroth's approach to beauty is the one with which I began this paper. In this episode, early in Wroth's manuscript sequel (*Urania* 2 from now on), a prince named Clavarindo dons women's clothing. He uses this disguise to enter a giant's castle where his friend and others are being held prisoner.[2] Having hidden a sword under his skirts, Clavarindo intends to do battle against the giant and free the prisoners. Before this battle begins, Wroth's narrator pauses for a lengthy remark on Clavarindo's beauty; here it is in full:[3]

> And ever itt is seene that where a man is faire, hee excels all woemen of that like fairness, for as men are every way most excellent if right, soe in the Very feminine parts (wherein thir greatest imperfections ly), yett they will excell. Beauty is butt an

> outward part and unpriseable onely for itt self, Vading like lilies, sweet like Roses, yett wither if nott with the curiositie of faithe and worthe (the true preservitors) itt bee nott lined and furnished from with in. Butt Clavarindo hath that too, and thus the beautifullest Creature living. (Wroth 2.71.25-32)

In the first part of this passage, Wroth distinguishes male and female beauty. By putting himself in a feminine disguise, her narrator claims, Clavarindo has brought male perfection to female beauty.

It is unusual for Wroth to uphold the Renaissance commonplace that men are naturally superior to women.[4] In fact, *Urania* is often read as a subversive work in which Wroth's female characters are treated as subjects rather than objects.[5] The classic study on this topic is Naomi Miller's book *Changing the Subject*.[6] Other references by Wroth to the supposed superiority of men tend toward the ironic. Consider this narrative remark from *Urania* 1: "being a man, it was necessary for him to exceede a woman in all things, so much as inconstancie was found fit for him to excel her in, hee left her for a new [lover]" (Wroth 1.317.20-22). In this passage, male superiority is a joke at the inconstant man's expense. Wroth here employs a sarcastic tone that Josephine Roberts suggests is influenced by Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (introduction to Wroth, *The First Part* xx). In contrast, the Clavarindo passage may be ironic, but it is not obviously so.

Two additional considerations may clarify why Wroth takes male superiority more seriously in Clavarindo's tale than elsewhere in *Urania*. First, while Wroth rarely discusses physical beauty, her work is largely written from the perspective of women in love with men. A key example is Wroth's sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Pamphilia, the

woman, is the speaker and Amphilanthus, the man, is the object of her affections. This is, of course, a reversal from contemporary sonnet sequences like Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. For Wroth's narrator in *Urania*, as for Pamphilia in the sonnets, male beauty is superior because it is what her female protagonists find attractive. Wroth's emphasis on male beauty may read strangely because the well-known Renaissance love passages are mostly from the male perspective. Gender may be a bit more complex than male and female in this passage: Wroth's narrator switches between masculine and feminine pronouns for the cross-dressing knight (see Wroth 2.71.24, 35). This intriguing detail invites further study.

Second, the latter half of the Clavarindo passage turns (as aforementioned) from physical beauty to inward beauty or virtue. After using somewhat commonplace floral imagery— "Vading like lilies, sweet like Roses" —to demonstrate the precarious nature of physical beauty, Wroth further claims that true beauty is produced by "the curiositie of faithe and worthe" (2.71.30). "Curiositie" here means "Careful or elaborate workmanship," one of the alternative historical definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("curiosity"). Combined with the later phrase "lined and furnished from with in," this passage equates beauty with a carefully wrought object. That object's main components are "faithe" and "worthe," two attributes definitely not chosen at random. "Faithe" is another term for constancy, which Wroth emphasizes as the highest virtue throughout *Urania*. Many of Wroth's male characters are prone to "inconstancie" (Wroth 1.317.21), while her female protagonist, Pamphilia, literally merges with a representation of Constancy at one point (Wroth 1.169.34). "Worthe" here means "merit" or "excellence" ("worth") —virtue rather than (monetary) value. In other words, in this passage, Wroth argues that true beauty is

built of constancy and virtue. It is these rare qualities, she claims, that make a man like Clavarindo "the beautifullest creature living" (Wroth 2.71.32).

The Clavarindo episode thus provides a strong introduction to Wroth's complex approach to physical beauty in *Urania*. The concept of beauty, while tied to gender (in this cross-dressing adventure, a messy proposition), is also aligned with virtue. For Wroth's briefly moralizing narrator here, it is the inner worth of constancy that makes someone "faire."

Section 2: Rodomandro—Race, Beauty, and "Lovliness"

I've used the term "faire" deliberately for beauty here. Another of Wroth's notable exceptions to avoiding physical description is the character Rodomandro (the King of Tartaria who later marries Pamphilia[7]). Insofar as this fictional character is from a "real" place, Rodomandro hails from somewhere in Asia, but Wroth resorts to generic descriptors focusing on his "darkness," particularly of skin and eyes. This passage evokes and lightly disrupts the fair/dark dichotomy common to many Renaissance depictions of beauty. Here is the passage in full:

> A brave and Comly Gentleman, shaped of body soe curiously as noe art cowld counterfett so rare a proportion, of an excellent stature neither to high nor of the meanest stature, his hands soe white as wouwld have beecome a great Lady, his face of curious and exact features, butt for the couler of itt, itt plainely shewed the sunn had either liked itt to much, and soe had too hard kissed itt, ore in fury of his delicacy, had made his beames to strongly to burne him, yett cowld nott take away

> the perfect sweetnes of his lovelines. His diamound eyes (though attired in black) did soe sparcle gainst his rays as made them in ther own hardnes knowe strength against his beames, and power to resist his strongest burning heat; and soe certainly had the conquest, for though black, yett hee had the true perfection of lovlines, and in lovelines the purest beauty. For what is fairness with out feature, even as a picture is with out the life peece itt self? (Wroth 2.42.27-40)

In this passage, Wroth includes the concepts gender, race, and (of course) virtue as she describes Rodomandro. In what follows, I'll briefly explore each of these themes.

In the Clavarindo passage, Wroth describes how Clavarindo's masculine beauty shines in his feminine guise. In the Rodomandro passage, Wroth similarly notes that Rodomandro's hands "wouwld have beecome a great Lady" (2.42.30). This overlap between masculine and feminine beauty may suggest, again, a complex understanding of gender. At the very least, it suggests some congruence in what makes a man beautiful and what makes a woman so.[8]

However, the attribute Rodomandro's hands share with a lady's is their "white" color, which draws attention to race in this passage. Although Rodomandro's hands are white, his eyes are "black" and his skin dark, both attributes that Wroth dwells on. As the remark "though black, yett hee had the true perfection of lovlines" (Wroth 2.42.38-39) shows, this passage upholds the racist Renaissance commonplace that white skin represents true beauty. One powerful cultural example of this association is, as Kim Hall has noted, depictions of Elizabeth I, which typically include "excessively white" skin (466). Renaissance culture associates perfect beauty with light skin and, probably, racial purity. This attitude may also explain why Rodomandro is an exception to Wroth's general policy of not

describing physical appearance. It is his difference, his Otherness, that requires evaluation. We cannot, and should not, deny the troubling racist aspects in Wroth's description of Rodomandro. However, this passage does contain nuances that indicate a complex approach to the fair/dark dichotomy raised in the initial description.

First, Wroth focuses on Rodomandro's eyes in this passage, probably alluding to famous Renaissance sonnets about dark eyes. Wroth describes "His diamound eyes…attired in black" (2.42.34-35). Other Renaissance sonnets on the topic of beautiful dark eyes include Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* 7 ("When nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes") and William Shakespeare's *Sonnet* 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). A relevant quotation from Sidney: "Or would she her miraculous power show, / That, whereas black seems beauty's contrary, / She even in black doth make all beauties flow?" (lines 9-11). Like Wroth, Sidney here leans into the idea that "black" and "beautiful" are opposites and that Stella's dark eyes are the exception. Such sonnets are not always read in the context of race, but they do resist associating fairness or whiteness with beauty. By referencing Rodomandro's dark eyes, Wroth reminds her readers that she is not the only poet to emphasize the beauty of blackness.[9]

Second, Rodomandro's dark skin is described in a manner that overlaps with one of Wroth's own sonnets. Introducing Rodomandro's dark skin, Wroth writes that it "plainely shewed the sunn had either liked itt to much, and soe had too hard kissed itt, ore in fury of his delicacy, had made his beames to strongly to burne him" (2.42.31-33). Wroth uses a similar image in her sonnet *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* 22. The opening lines are as follows: "Like to the Indians scorched with the Sunne. / The Sunne which they doe as their God

adore: / So am I us'd by Loue…" (lines 1-3).[10] In both the sonnet and the Rodomandro passage, the sun presents a paradox of affection and harm. Rodomandro is either loved or harmed excessively by the sun; the sun-worshipers in sonnet 22 are burned by their own deity. In the sonnet, Wroth's speaker depicts her own state as "pale and white with griefes store" (line 7). This contrast unexpectedly makes the dark-skinned "Indians" the enviable ones in the sonnet. A similar reversal of expectations happens in the Rodomandro passage as Wroth once again turns to the concept of true beauty.

Wroth writes that Rodomandro "had the true perfection of lovlines, and in lovelines the purest beauty. For what is fairness with out feature, even as a picture is with out the life peece itt self?" (2.42.38-40). "Lovlines" is, in this passage, the marker of true beauty. Like "faithe and worthe" in the Clavarindo passage, "lovlines" takes on a moral aspect. (The *OED* supports the idea that "lovely" can mean "Morally or spiritually beautiful; attractive in character," ["lovely"].) Thus, as with Clavarindo, it is character or worth that creates true beauty rather than physical attributes. The follow-up question about "fairness with out feature" thus suggests both a physical and a spiritual component. Rodomandro does not have the attribute of "fairness," but his "feature" (probably in a moral sense) is the more important attribute.

In the last phrase of this passage, Wroth compares beauty and art: "as a picture is with out the life peece it self" (2.42.40). She does something similar in the Clavarindo passage when she uses the language of "furnishing." Here, she compares Rodomandro's beauty to the living model for a piece of art. Rodomandro is vital and three-dimensional because of his spirit and inward character, despite whatever shortcomings Wroth assigns to his appearance.

It is not without meaning that Wroth calls him the possessor of "purest" beauty (2.42.38). This term disrupts, at least a little, the fair/dark dichotomy of the rest of the passage with a turn to moral purity. Like Clavarindo, Rodomandro has both outward and inward beauty, and Wroth uses the one to explore the depth of the other.

Conclusion: Who is Beautiful in *Urania*?

In both of these passages, then, Mary Wroth discusses beauty in unusual ways. Beauty is tied to gender and race, certainly, in ways that reveal a complicated relationship with both concepts. However, beauty is also linked to virtue. Wroth is not known for her moralizing—as I've said, in *Urania* love takes the place of religion or other moral goods. In the passages on beauty, however, she makes an exception to describe the way in which virtue constructs true beauty.

Who is truly beautiful in *Urania*? These passages suggest that in the world of Wroth's romance, traditional Renaissance concepts of beauty are disrupted in several ways. While Renaissance love poetry often details a woman's beauty, Wroth's most extensive descriptions are of beautiful men. This change in focus is not unexpected, given Wroth's relatively rare position as a woman writing both romances and sonnets. However, it requires readers to adjust our expectations. Wroth further complicates ideas of gender and beauty in the Clavarindo episode, where a knight disguised as a woman is "the beautifullest creature living" (Wroth2.71.32). Wroth also disrupts the typical fair/dark dichotomy of Renaissance beauty in her description of Rodomandro. Rodomandro's dark beauty is not merely the result of his exceptional handsomeness, shining through his dark eyes like Stella's or the Dark Lady's. Rather, both Rodomandro and Clavarindo are ultimately beautiful because

their inward character is as strong as their outward appearance. Clavarindo is particularly praised for his "faithe" and Rodomandro for his "lovliness," both suggesting these men's moral character.

For Wroth, then, the "beautifullest creature living" (2.72.32), the "parfection of lovliness" (2.42.38), is not reducible to physical features; rather, beauty depends upon a carefully crafted character—particularly the cultivation of loyalty or constancy, Wroth's highest moral good. Clavarindo is constant to his task of rescuing prisoners and Rodomandro is constant to Pamphilia (despite her own pining for another).[11] Through their faithfulness, both men embody true beauty within the world of Wroth's *Urania*. While Wroth is far from the only Renaissance author to claim that inward beauty creates outward beauty, her relatively rare descriptions of physical beauty provide an opportunity for readers to examine how Wroth's *Urania* explores Renaissance ideas about beauty and virtue. Wroth consistently demonstrates that it is virtue that sets apart the exceptional, beautiful men of *Urania*.

Finally, it is worth noting, once again, that Clavarindo and Rodomandro are relatively minor characters. Wroth's major male protagonist Amphilanthus, also the subject of the associated sonnet sequence, receives few such blazons for his physical or moral perfections. By highlighting the complex beauty of these two outliers in *Urania*'s cast of characters, Wroth suggests that virtue, the foundation of beauty, can be cultivated even by unlikely heroes.

Endnotes

[1]One major exception is Wroth's descriptions of clothing throughout the romance. See Snook, "The Greatness in Good Clothes."

[2]Clothing in general, even without the element of disguise, is often important in Urania—for example, see Snook, *Women, Beauty, and Power,* esp. pp. 65-75. Cross-dressing also appears several times in Urania; for a comparison of such material to Wroth's main source, Sidney's *Arcadia*, see Starke.

[3]I have argued elsewhere that this whole episode is based on a portion of Margaret Tyler's romance *The Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* (1578); Tyler frequently includes moralizing narrative interjections, so this passage in *Urania* 2 may also be a tribute to Wroth's source material. See Roberts.

[4]The classic text on Renaissance theories about women remains Ruth Kelso's *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*.

[5]Such characters include the poet-queen Pamphilia, the sage-prophetess Melissea, and the questing Urania.

[6]See also Baer; Cavanagh, "Romancing the Epic"; Carrell; Hackett; Kennedy; and Weidemann.

[7]Miller frames this as a "public marriage" in contrast to Pamphilia's private understanding with Amphilanthus, 61. Miller further writes that this marriage is part of Pamphilia's self-creation in *Urania*: "Faced with a social identity which is overdetermined not merely in familial terms, as will be discussed in the next chapter, but even in spousal terms, Pamphilia begins to forge new parameters for a subjectivity that is not singular, bound by social definitions of female sexuality and domesticity, but rather multiple, encompassing both public roles and private self," 61.

[8]For an intriguing study on gender and beautiful attributes, see Snook, "Beautiful Hair," esp. pp. 34-37.

[9]As Cavanaugh notes in "'Thrown from the Rock,'" Rodomandro is actually more aligned with what we might call Western interests in *Urania*, as he joins forces with the Holy Roman Emperor to "[protect] their kingdoms from pagan invasion and…spread Christianity around the globe" (233). Rodomandro is thus much less "other" than he might be—but Wroth still finds the need to emphasize his physical features.

[10]Both my comparison and Wroth's re-use of this metaphor are simplifying the varieties of identities possible for these people of color—"Indians" could refer to several groups of people in both what Wroth would call the "Old" and "New" worlds, while Rodomandro, insofar as his country of Tartaria has a place in the "real" world, is Asian.

[11]For more on Pamphilia's marriage to Rodomandro, see Miller 61; Sanchez, 468-71; Trull, 484-85.

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