

Article

The Undiscovered Countries: Shakespeare and the Afterlife [†]

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Abstract: The multiple uses of religion in Shakespeare's plays seem to counter each other at every turn. In one respect, though, I have found a surprising consistency. Moments when Shakespeare's drama imagines the afterlife are moments that lend significant insights into the play's action or characterization, even though the image of one undiscovered country may differ drastically from another. Across the canon, the afterlife may appear as a place of religious judgment, as in *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Merchant of Venice*; as a classical Elysium or Hades where the spirit or shadow removes elsewhere (*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Titus Andronicus*); as Abraham's Bosom—a place of rest between death and the Last Judgment (*Henry V*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*); or an unidentifiable life to come (*Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*).

Keywords: afterlife; *Antony and Cleopatra*; *Hamlet*; *Henry V*; *King Lear*; *Macbeth*; *Measure for Measure*, *Merchant of Venice*; *Othello*; *Richard III*; *Titus Andronicus*

In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Stephen Greenblatt explores post-Reformation England's relationship with the afterlife once the Church of England declared Purgatory and its associated practices as “a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God” (Greenblatt 2001, p. 235).¹ A “mingling of folk beliefs, classical mythology, and Catholic doctrine”—a “whole, weird, tangled cultural inheritance”—filled the void (Greenblatt 2001, p. 199). Greenblatt explores the persistence of Purgatory in the popular imagination, but stops short of suggesting that in his plays Shakespeare theologically engages the question of Purgatory, even in *Hamlet* (Greenblatt's focus). Greenblatt proposes that the problem of the play's “network of allusions” to Purgatory might not be noticeable to *Hamlet*'s audience except that “Hamlet notices it and broods about it,” and “a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost” (Greenblatt 2001, pp. 237, 240). In this, the play enacts England's “tangled cultural inheritance” in complex and compelling ways which, in Protestant England's “attack on the ‘middle state of souls,’ sustains “a cult of the dead,” and transforms “the space of Purgatory” into “the space of the stage” (Greenblatt 2001, pp. 256–57).

Purgatory in both *Hamlet* and the popular imagination, then, is akin to any overt expression of religion on the stage: both transgress Tudor-Stuart religio-political hegemony. The theater, Greenblatt reminds us, “was censored,” and “it would have been highly risky to represent in a favorable light

¹ Quoted from Edgar C.S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London, 1897) quoted in (Greenblatt 2001, p. 235). The Elizabethan articles were passed by Convocation in 1562 but not published until 1571. Its article on purgatory was taken directly from the Edwardian Articles, published in 1543, although there were other differences among the forty-one Edwardian articles and the thirty-nine Elizabethan articles.

any specifically Roman Catholic doctrines or practices" (Greenblatt 2001, p. 236). Shakespeare's achievement in *Hamlet* derives from "his remarkable gift for knowing exactly how far he could go without getting into serious trouble" (Greenblatt 2001, p. 237). Shakespeare's art becomes both ameliorative and transgressive, and, with regard to religion, ambiguous.

Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti find the interest in religion in Shakespeare studies less problematic. In 2004, Jackson and Marotti noted a shift in early modern English literary studies, which they referred to as a "turn to religion" (Jackson and Marotti 2004, pp. 167–90). As any Shakespearean would readily admit, religion is not new to Shakespeare studies. Generations of scholars have scoured the plays in efforts to reconstruct religion as part of the bard's intellectual milieu, to discover both spiritual meanings and authorial theological leanings, and even to repudiate altogether any and all claims for religion in Shakespeare's plays. What has changed? In their introduction to *Shakespeare and Religion: Early Modern and Postmodern Perspectives*, Jackson and Marotti observe that in a modern secular society, especially among "intellectual elites," a sufficient discomfort with religion has meant that the subject either has met with outright antagonism or has been relegated to an old historicist position of Shakespearean drama "mirroring" its cultural contexts (Jackson and Marotti 2011, p. 1). Jackson and Marotti observe that of late "Shakespeare scholars have been more sympathetically responsive to the presence of the religious in that author's work," and they have "used it to think through perennial philosophical and religious issues of which we have become more aware" (Jackson and Marotti 2011, p. 20). Such engagement with the religious in Shakespeare often points to ways in which the playwright both incorporates and resists his own religious culture: he "dismantles religious practice only to end in a position, paradoxically, that still can be termed 'religious'" (Jackson and Marotti 2011, p. 3). Matthew J. Smith's "At War 'Twixt Will and Will Not': On Shakespeare's Idea of Religious Experience in *Measure for Measure*" in this special issue offers an excellent illustration of such an approach. According to Smith, *Measure for Measure* presents multiple religious perspectives that "through their dramatic contact" with each other not only "reveal one another's limitations," but create a dialectic "Between the world and the self that many have located at the heart of religious experience" (Smith 2018, pp. 9–11).

Despite the fact, then, that studies of religion or the religious in Shakespeare have attained a new legitimacy, notions of ambiguity persist. The playwright's multiple uses of religion seem to counter each other at every turn—within a play as Greenblatt has demonstrated in his study of *Hamlet*, or across plays, as Julia Reinhard Lupton's richly allusive essay, "The Wizards of Uz: Shakespeare and the Book of Job," suggests (Lupton 2011, pp. 163–87 in Jackson and Marotti 2011). In one respect, though, I have found a surprising consistency. Moments when Shakespeare's drama imagines the afterlife are moments that lend significant insights into the play's action or characterization, even though the image of one undiscovered country may differ drastically from another. To illustrate this, I will take the liberty of returning to my work on *Othello* and Islam. (But first, it needs to be said that in this study I am considering only references to the afterlife that do not appear as ghosts, dreams, or other aspects of the supernatural considered with such nuance in *Hamlet in Purgatory*.)

By considering how Renaissance books on Africa and the Islamic world represented categories of religion, ethnicity, and national origins, I have suggested how Shakespeare's audience might have responded to the Moor of Venice as a tragic figure driven more by law than lust, and more by justice than passion.² In early modern accounts of Islamic and Middle-Eastern culture, accusations of adultery were grave. According to *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, a man who failed to prove by four witnesses that his accusation of his wife's adultery was true would receive eighty lashes. A "jealous husband" had to swear "four times" to the truth of his accusation, which if the case were otherwise, had to "curse himself" (Purchas 1613, p. 210). Shakespeare's contemporary audiences, though, would not even have needed to read books about Islam, because they learned at church of the Islamic world's contempt for adultery. The Church of England required that at any religious service where no licensed preacher

² My initial work on this appears in (Clegg 2006, 2009, 2017).

was available to preach a sermon, a homily should be read from the Book of Homilies. The homilies were to be read in sequence, and when the sequence was completed, they would start again at the beginning.³ The first Book of Homilies lays out English Protestant teaching on salvation by faith and election, but also expresses the certainty that good works arise from sanctification. One homily stands out as an exception to this theological exposition: the homily against whoredome and adultery, which begins by apologizing for this departure, and then pronounces, “the greatnes of thys synne, and howe odious; hateful, and abhominable it is, and hathe alwaye bene reputed before God and all good men” (Cranmer 1547, sig. K3). The homily relates to *Othello* in two ways—first it praises the foreign laws (“godlie statutes”) that punish adultery with death; and second, it specifically mentions Islamic law, which would have been part of Othello the Moor’s experience: “Among the Turkes even at this day, they that be taken in adulterie, both men & woman are stoned straight way to death without mercie” (Cranmer 1547, sig. L4).

Othello’s tragedy looks quite different in light of such views, and the play’s denouement comes at the moment Othello envisions the afterlife. In the fifth act, just after Desdemona’s death, Emilia accuses Othello of being “rash as fire” for saying that Desdemona was false. “O,” proclaims Emilia, “she was heavenly true!” (5.2.134–35). Othello replies,

Cassio did top her; ask thy husband else.
O, I were damn’d beneath all depth in hell
But that I did proceed upon just grounds
To this extremity. (5.2.136–39)⁴

Given Othello’s Islamic origins and the “Homily Against Adultery’s” praise for the zealous punishment of adulterers, for Othello to believe that Desdemona’s death was on “just grounds” (rather than an act of self-deception or self-justification as many critics see it) lays the ground for his tragedy. Othello’s words clearly reveal that if he had not acted “upon just grounds,” he deserved damnation. This, of course, is precisely the afterlife he sees for himself when he grasps the enormity both of Iago’s lies and of his error. Looking upon Desdemona’s body, he says,

O ill-starr’d wench,
Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl?
Even like thy chastity. O cursed, cursed slave!
Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! (5.2.272–80)

What began in Othello’s mind as an act of justice—capital punishment for a “proven” crime—is now murder, the murder of a chaste wife—a crime for which Othello understands he deserves damnation and for which he believes he must kill himself: “No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss” (5.2.358–59).

This vivid conception of the afterlife defines both Othello’s character and his tragedy. From the Islamic perspective, Othello may be regarded as doing the right thing for the right reasons, but from the play’s perspective, Othello is damnably wrong—not because he descends to some base instincts but because he acts on false evidence, albeit evidence fed to him by a demi-devil who “ensnared” his soul and body (5.2.307–8). In destroying what he loved best, he loses his soul.

³ Actually there were two books, one written during the reign of Edward VI, the other Elizabethan, and both were used in sequence during Elizabeth’s reign.

⁴ Shakespeare (1997). All citations are from this edition.

In a very different tragedy, a very different vision of the afterlife likewise amplifies the play's tragic effect, but in their vision of the afterlife, Antony and Cleopatra transcend death. In Act 4, scene 14, learning of Cleopatra's (supposed) death, Antony commits to die as a noble Roman by his own hand—an act he will later describe as “valour” that has “triumph'd on itself” (4.15.15). For him the afterlife will be a place to reconcile with Cleopatra: “I will o'ertake thee, Cleopatra, and / Weep for my pardon” (4.14.44–45). As he calls out to his servant Eros to help him enact his suicide, he says,

I come, my queen ... Stay for me:
Where souls do couch on flowers, we'll hand in hand,
And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze:
Dido and her Aeneas shall want troops, And all the haunt be ours. (4.14.50–54)

This, of course, is a Roman afterlife, Elysium, where the shades of the valiant live on in honor. In the underworld of Virgil's *Aeneid*, however, Dido and Aeneas were not reconciled. Dido spends eternity with her husband, whose death preceded the epic's action, rather than her lover. Joining Dido to Aeneas, as Antony does, allows him to envision an epic afterlife in Cleopatra's favor. That they have spirits that transcend earthly life is made clear both in Cleopatra's acceptance of Antony's death in Act V and in her own suicide. After Antony has died, Cleopatra remarks on his earthly body's insignificance; it is merely a “case” for “that huge spirit.” That this spirit lives on appears in Cleopatra's language before her death as she dons her royal robes:

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me: now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip:
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
Antony call; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act; I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath: husband, I come:
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. (5.2.280–90)

As fire and air, Cleopatra is a spirit escaping the base coils of mortality where “there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon” (4.14.67–68). For her, as for Antony, the afterlife is a place where their great spirits will live together forever. There is tragic loss in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but the loss derives less from their deaths than from their stature that emerges in part from their epic visions of the afterlife.

Henry V uses its image of the afterlife to reflect on one of the play's central problems—Henry's character and the legitimacy of England's war in France. On the night before the battle of Agincourt, King Henry appears among his troops in disguise. Three of his soldiers come in reflecting on what happens to men who die in battle. They speculate that the king faces battles with fears like their own and that, like them, he would rather be anywhere else. Henry intervenes and says that he “could not die anywhere so contented as in the King's company, his cause being just and his quarrel being honorable” (4.1.126–28). The soldiers question the degree to which they are accountable if the cause is not just and honorable. Bates says, “If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us.” Williams replies, “But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopp'd off in a battle shall join together at the latter day and cry all, ‘We died at such a place’” (4.1.134–38). The afterlife envisioned here is not simply heaven or hell but the day of final judgment—the end of days—when, according to Christian dogma, the resurrection of the body will occur. The proposition that Williams makes is that “few die well that die in battle” and because they cannot disobey the king, the king that led them to battle should be accountable for the “black matter” (4.1.144–45). The disguised Henry replies that “the King is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers” since “they purpose not their death

when they purpose their services" (4.1.155–58). If men die in war unprepared for death, "they have not wings to fly from God" (4.1.168–69). Each man is accountable for his own soul. The soldier's remedy described by Henry is perhaps the most direct and conventional statement of Christian religion in all of Shakespeare's plays:

Therefore should every soldier in the wars do as every sick man in his bed, wash every mote out of his conscience; and dying so, death is to him advantage, or not dying the time was blessedly lost wherein such preparation was gain'd; and in him that escapes it were not sin to think that making God so free an offer, He let him outlive that day to see His greatness and to teach others how they should prepare. (4.1.178–85)

This statement speaks directly to Christian doctrine as presented in the first Book of Homilies. "An exhortation against the feare of death" considers that "It is not to bee marveiled, that worldlie menne dooe feare to die" (Li). The homily considers the fear of the pain arising from sickness or death and gives comfort to the faithful Christian who is truly penitent for his offenses, that "bodailie death" is "a slepe, wherein mannes senses be as it were taken from him for a season, and yet when he awaketh he is more fresh, then hee was when hee went to bedde" (Lv). According to this homily, souls are "separated from oure bodies, for a Season, yet at the generalle resurrection, we shall be more freshe, beautiful & perfecte then we be now" (Cranmer 1547, sig. Lv). The place of separation between death and the end of days, according to the homily, is "Abraham's bosome: a place of rest, pleasure and consolation" (Cranmer 1547, sig. Liii^v). Henry V's image of the gathering of soldiers' scattered bones at the bodily Resurrection of the dead, grotesque as it is, elicits Henry's reassurance that the man prepared for death need not fear. The idea of Abraham's bosom also appears in Act II. Bardolph expresses his wish to be with Falstaff "wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell," to which Mistress Quickly, the hostess, replies, "Nay sure, he's not in hell; he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. 'A made a finer end, and went away an it had been any christom child" (2.3.7–12). It seems, thus, that readiness in the face of death is all. The parallels between Henry's theology on the eve before the battle and the hostess's account of Falstaff's death offers some resolution to two of the play's problems: war's moral precariousness and Henry's abandonment of Falstaff. While Falstaff's good death does not fully vindicate Henry turning away from his old friend, it offers some comic consolation that is comparable to the reassurance that Henry offered his soldiers: that his cause is just and for those prepared for death, death will bring peace.

Not all visions of the afterlife in Shakespeare's plays are as fully realized as they are in *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Henry V*. Indeed, some are mere glimpses, but glimpses that help us to understand central issues in the plays. In *Richard III*, for example, Queen Elizabeth envisions her dead sons in a middle state that is very like Abraham's bosom in *Henry V*—a place between death and judgment:

Ah, my young princes! ah, my tender babes!
My unblown flowers, new-appearing sweets!
If yet your gentle souls fly in the air
And be not fix'd in doom perpetual,
Hover about me with your airy wings
And hear your mother's lamentation! (4.4.9–14)

Unlike the comfort of Abraham's bosom implied in *Henry V*, Elizabeth's "yet" suggests only a brief moment between life and everlasting judgment. This allusion to divine judgment occurs just moments before Queen Margaret asks how she can "thank" an "upright, just, and true-disposing God" for "A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death" (4.4.55, 48). Elizabeth's "doom," together with Margaret's questioning, suggests a deep skepticism about moral order in the play, making the Tudor providentialism of Richmond's defeat of Richard all the more welcome.

Glimpses of divine judgment in some plays are not deferred to the end of days. Such is the case in *The Merchant of Venice*. In the trial scene, the Duke asks Shylock, "How shall you hope

for mercy, rend'ring none?" (4.1.88). Shylock's reply—"What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" (4.1.89)—merely alludes to mercy and the afterlife, while Portia's speech on the nature of mercy explicitly speaks of judgment and heavenly reward. Here Shylock asks, "on what compulsion" must he be merciful; and Portia, after an encomium to mercy, answers, "That in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation" (4.1.199–200). This Christian promise of heaven (salvation) is unavailable to the Jew, whose sense of judgment and consequences is impossibly opposite. Even when he is offered three times the money he is owed, he declaims why he must insist on the bond: "An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven!" (4.1.228). He swore his oath in God's name. To deny his oath is to perjure himself, and implicitly, to deny God. The importance of an oath and its relationship to the afterlife is complex. The Hebrew scripture (as opposed to the King James Bible) does not actually envision hell. It refers to *sheol*, a place holding the bodily remains where the soul awaits the just man's final reconciliation with God. The Hebrew scripture's language of punishment and reward is that of separation and reconciliation. To be reconciled with God requires righteousness, and God commands the righteous person to honor his oath:

And Moses spake unto the heads of the tribes concerning the children of Israel, saying, This is the thing which the Lord hath commanded.

If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth. (Numbers 30:1–2, KJV)

From Shylock's Jewish perspective, if Shylock breaks his oath, he loses his hope of Heaven. In this courtroom scene, which began with Portia's question "Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?" (4.1.174), Shylock's religious dilemma renders strangely cruel the mercy Antonio finally extends to him on the condition he become a Christian.

The Merchant of Venice's use of the afterlife highlights the play's moral ambiguity by creating some sympathy for Shylock as a man of conscience. Linking conscience to judgment and the afterlife in two other plays, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, shows their protagonists' flaws. On the day of the battle with Richmond in *Richard III*, Richard awakens disconcerted after his night of troubling dreams. In shaking off his dreams' effect, he dismisses conscience even as he recognizes that hell may be his afterlife:

Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls;
Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe:
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law!
March on, join bravely, let us to it pell-mell;
If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell. (5.3.308–13)

Richard envisions himself outside of the moral universe, but to the audience the end rhyme of "mell" and "hell" emphasizes the total unlikelihood of the "if" proposition of heaven. For *Macbeth*, the moral universe is far more viable.

Macbeth's conscience may be seen as one of his redeeming traits, but in his Act I soliloquy where he wrestles with judgment and the afterlife, he reveals his lack of moral compass. He is less concerned about enacting murder than about being discovered. The soliloquy opens with *Macbeth* imagining Duncan's successful murder as a means to his own ends. These ends are so all-consuming that he envisions himself escaping judgment in the afterlife:

If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and [shoal] of time,
We'd jump the life to come. (1.7.2–7)

While Macbeth thinks he can escape consequences in the life to come, the reality of earthly judgment is more pressing: “But in these cases / We still have judgment here” (1.7.7–8). What Macbeth fears most is that the heavenly host, spurred by Duncan’s virtue and the “deep damnation of his taking-off,” “Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye” (1.7.20, 24). The glimpse of the afterlife that appears here is not Macbeth’s but Duncan’s. Strangely, Macbeth sees himself outside this divine economy. It is the “judgment here” that he must face. That this judgment cannot be escaped motivates Macbeth’s tragic action: Macbeth’s ruthless and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to conceal his crimes.

In *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, then, the protagonists give little more than lip service to Christian ideas of judgment and the afterlife, which points to the nature of their characters. In many respects this is fine: the world of both plays is steeped in evil. What happens to the afterlife, though, in plays immersed in religion? Among these, images of the afterlife evoke a kind of religious skepticism. In “Decorum and the Politics of Ceremony in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*,” Gary Kuchar reminds us that Tamora’s cry of “irreligious piety” in response to Titus’s ritual sacrifice of her son calls attention to Rome’s decline into barbarity that is displayed throughout the play (Kuchar 2011, p. 50). (Human sacrifice was not part of Roman religion.) The afterlife in *Titus Andronicus* is the classical underworld, to which in both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* souls without proper burial rites are not admitted. Titus asks himself, “Why suffer’st they sons, unburied yet, / To hover on the dreadful shore of Styx?” (1.1.87–88). Burial, not human sacrifice, was the required rite. The unravelling of Titus’s (Roman) world in the play derives directly from his “irreligious piety.”

Another play in which the charge of irreligious piety might be raised is *Measure for Measure*, where to save her brother, who is condemned to death for fornication, the nun Isabella meets with a moral dilemma. The only way to save her brother’s life Angelo tells Isabella is for her to sleep with him. In presenting his proposition, Angelo asks, “Might there not be a charity in sin / To save this brother’s life” (2.4.63–64). Isabella’s refusal is resolute: “Better it were a brother died at once, / Than that a sister, by redeeming him, / Should die for ever” (2.5.106–8). The afterlife here is but a mere glimpse of heaven and hell. In the next scene where Isabella reports Antonio’s proposition to her brother, Claudio, his vision of the afterlife is horrific. He tells Isabella that death is “a fearful thing,” to which she answers, “And shamed life a hateful.” He replies,

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods.... (3.1.115–21)

At the end of this account, Claudio pleads to his “sweet sister” to let him live and assures her that such mercy would not be reckoned sin. Isabella is so incensed by this that she will “pray a thousand prayers” for his death (3.1.145). What is strikingly absent is Isabella’s ability to envision hell or heaven in anything but the most general terms. Furthermore, her piety is less invested in the life of the world to come than in the prospect of a “hateful” and “shamed life” in this one. *Measure for Measure*’s problematic ethos is usually attributed to the Duke’s manipulation of all the characters, but Isabella may have some culpability. Not only does she assent to the bed trick, but perhaps the Duke’s claim of her hand in marriage is more of a meet end for her concern about her worldly fame than some readings of the play allow.

The last two images of the afterlife—in *King Lear* as a mere passing of the spirit out of this world and in *Hamlet* as place of purification between this life and heaven—receive Greenblatt’s astute consideration in *Hamlet in Purgatory*. The passing of the spirit appears at the end of *King Lear* when, after realizing that Cordelia is dead, Lear loses consciousness. When Edgar tries to revive him, Kent says,

Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass. He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer. (5.3.287–89)

According to Greenblatt, the words “Vex not his Ghost” both “pick up the strange sense that Lear’s existence is purgatorial and underscore the bleak humanism that locates his terrible suffering in this tough world” (Greenblatt 2001, p. 187). I would add that this ending highlights Lear’s profound and tragic suffering. As indicated at this study’s beginning, Greenblatt says that Purgatory is one of the many alternative views of the afterlife in *Hamlet*, a play whose “pervasive pattern” is “a deliberate forcing together of radically incompatible ideas”:

What is at stake is more than a multiplicity of answers. The opposing positions challenge each other, clashing and sending shock waves throughout the play (Greenblatt 2001, p. 240).

In a play so theologically engaged, its final glimpse of the afterlife I find to be remarkably irresolute. It epitomizes the play’s pattern of forcing together incompatibilities. At Hamlet’s death, Horatio’s words evoking Heaven—“And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (5.2.302)—echo the final prayers of a requiem Mass. This, however, follows Hamlet’s last words, which seem to deny an afterlife: “The rest is silence” (5.2.301).

As I observed at the beginning of this study, Greenblatt suggests that *Hamlet* reflects the complex and often contradictory belief system in post-Reformation England—the “whole, weird, tangled cultural inheritance.” The multiplicity of conceptions of the afterlife I have found in Shakespeare’s plays would seem to substantiate his understanding—except that, as I have argued, in representing afterlives Shakespeare’s religions serve their plays’ particular ends. I am untroubled by the variety in the forms the afterlife takes. Yes, some uses point to a Catholic world, some to one that is Protestant, one to Judaism, some to a classical pagan world, and some to religious skepticism. What seems to me more significant than the multiplicity of representations is how consistent Shakespeare’s plays are in using the undiscovered country as an aesthetic and interpretative marker.

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