

Thomas, Alfred

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ALFRED THOMAS

## SHAKESPEARE'S BOHEMIA: TERROR AND TOLERATION IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

### Abstract

This article argues that William Shakespeare was not ignorant of the geographic location and political importance of the kingdom of Bohemia, as critics of *The Winter's Tale* have traditionally assumed since Ben Jonson's infamous jibe of 1618. Shakespeare inherited the motif of Bohemia from his source but significantly inverted it (and gave it a sea coast) in order to make Bohemia the refuge for Perdita, the outcast baby daughter of King Leontes and his wife Hermione. The paper proposes that this inversion is not coincidental but is crucial to the play's oblique message and allegorical plea for religious toleration in Jacobean England, where Catholics had been persecuted since the reign of Elizabeth I. Drawing on previously overlooked primary sources by Shakespeare's Protestant and Catholic contemporaries who lived in or visited Bohemia (including Edmund Campion, John Taylor and Fynes Morison), the text demonstrates that RudolFINE Bohemia's – and Prague's – reputation for religious toleration in the years prior to the catastrophic Battle of the White Mountain (1620) would have been well-known to the playwright and his English compatriots.

### Keywords

*Shakespeare; Macbeth; The Winter's Tale; Bohemia; Rudolf II; Gunpowder Plot; religious tolerance*

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### 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2017 an Islamic extremist drove a car at high speed into a group of cyclists, wounding several of them, before crashing it into a barrier near the House of Lords in London. The press – and the police – described the incident as a “terror attack” along the lines of the March 2017 atrocity, when several

pedestrians were mowed down on Westminster Bridge and a policeman stabbed to death outside the House of Commons. For those of us who work in the pre-modern period, these attempts to cause destruction and devastation at the heart of the British establishment inevitably recall the Gunpowder Treason of November 1605 – a plot hatched by a group of disaffected Catholic gentlemen to blow up the House of Lords and kill all those assembled for the King’s speech. If the mission had been successful, King James I, his wife, his two sons and the entire political elite gathered for the state opening of parliament would have perished. Modern explosive experts estimate that the 36 barrels of gunpowder under the House of Lords would have a force equivalent to that of TNT. The blast would have caused structural damage within a radius of 500 yards; all buildings within forty yards would have been obliterated, including the parliament house itself, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Hall. Hundreds of people would have been killed or maimed. This would have been terrorism on a vast scale, foreshadowing the twentieth and twenty-first century world of 9/11 (see Sharpe 2005: 7).

Yet, as Ronald Schechter has argued, in the pre-modern period the word “terror” did not carry the same negative associations of politically motivated mayhem that it does today. Before the French Revolution – and specifically the Terror of 1794 – “terror” was a positively connoted term applied by absolute monarchs in order to justify their divinely ordained rule. According to Robert Schechter, the word that previously connoted justice and magnificence became associated – we might even say, contaminated – with the modern notion of terror as something wholly destructive:

Within days of Robespierre’s execution on July 28, 1794, terror came to mean something very much like what it means today. Instead of conveying a sense of legitimate sovereignty, it epitomized illegitimate force. Rather than signifying justice, it indicated gratuitous violence. Far from evoking majesty, it smacked of degradation. Its connection to the sacred was lost: few things could match terror for profanity. From a rational force of law and government it came to stand for profound irrationality, even madness. (Schechter 2018: x)

In Shakespeare’s England, for example, the words “terror” and “deterrence” were used synonymously to justify the Tudor state’s ruthless suppression of the Northern Uprising of 1569 when thousands of Catholics rose up against the enforced imposition of the Protestant prayer book and legislation that made Elizabeth I Head of the Church of England. In a complete departure from previous government policy, not only the ringleaders but 600 rank-and-file rebels out of a total of 6,000 insurgents were hanged in summarily arranged tribunals.<sup>1</sup> This literal decimation of the rebellion was intended, in the words of Lord Burleigh, the Queen’s first minister, to instill terror into the population at large. In a sermon preached before the royal court, Thomas Drant was insistent that the rebellion against Queen Elizabeth required drastic and harsh measures: “Let them in God’s name feel the punishment of a club, and hatchet or an halter, and in doing so, I dare say God shall be highly pleased” (Kesselring 2010: 118). Here was state

terror exercised in the name of an absolute ruler, God's representative on earth.

Conversely, religious toleration, as we understand it in the post-Enlightenment world, was not considered a virtue but a vice in early modern Europe, a sign of weakness rather than of strength. Or at least that was the way it was seen by most political elites from the Tudor-Stuart dynasties of Britain to the Spanish Habsburgs and the French Valois monarchy. In 1572 three thousand Huguenots (French Protestants) were slaughtered in the streets of Paris on the direct orders of the French King Charles IX. But there was an important exception to such bigotry, which is often overlooked: from 1555 (the Peace of Augsburg) the Austrian Habsburgs established a workable *modus vivendi* which gave a degree of religious freedom to the Protestant as well as Catholic subjects of the Holy Roman Emperor. This ecumenical situation lasted for seventy years until the outbreak of the Thirty Years War in 1620 when Europe lurched into the most devastating and destructive conflict before World War I. Though Britain was not drawn into that conflagration, it was a far from tolerant land and soon succumbed to its own civil war twenty years later. The seeds of the civil war were sown far earlier in the religious conflicts of Shakespeare's England. The Gunpowder Plot is clear evidence that the polarized situation in England at the beginning of the seventeenth century had reached a dangerously feverish pitch. This polarized situation did not start with James's succession but was itself the culmination of decades of religious persecution under his predecessors – the Protestant Elizabeth I and, before her, the Catholic Mary I, both of whom sent hundreds of religious dissidents to their deaths. Far from the "Good Queen Bess" of later myth, Elizabeth was a figure of hatred in many circles. In June 1585 a Sussex gentleman called Robert Threeles was alleged to have said that "the queene is a hoore, yea and an arrant hoore". In February 1586 Jeremy Vanhill of Sandwich, a laborer, was condemned for saying in April 1585, "shyte upon your queene; I would to God shee were dead that I might shytt on her face" (qtd. in Questier 2006: 39).

Such rhetorical polarization was the direct consequence of religious persecution: about 63 Catholic lay men and women were martyred during Elizabeth's reign; and 133 missionary priests, more than one in five of the total, were executed. In addition, about 377 priests were imprisoned (Pritchard 1979: 7–8). A special detention camp – a legal black hole that foreshadowed Guantanamo Bay – was set up in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, to incarcerate without trial those perceived as threats to national security. Elizabeth's older sister Mary Tudor had sent about 237 men and fifty-two women to the flames between February 1555 and the Queen's death in November 1558 (Sharpe 2005: 9). Mary and Elizabeth were not diametrically opposite in their treatment of religious dissent but were similar; indeed, we might speak of a continuum of religious persecution throughout the late Tudor era, beginning with the reign of Henry VIII. Coming of age in the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare could not have been blithely indifferent to the human consequences of fifty years of religious persecution. But this did not mean that he was a religious sectarian, and it is not the aim of this essay to argue that he was Catholic (although he may have been). Rather, I am interested to show how

Shakespeare was reluctant to take sides in the religious violence of his time – not because he failed to recognize the gravity of the situation but because he sought a solution to it in terms of religious toleration. I will argue that Shakespeare envisioned a world where people of different faiths could exist in peace and tolerance without fear of persecution. And I shall further suggest that he locates this space of toleration in the Bohemian setting of his late play *The Winter's Tale* – that is to say, in the heart of the Holy Roman Empire where peace had prevailed for more than fifty years.

## 2. Shakespeare's England: *Macbeth*

The fact that pre-modern terror was conceived more as a monopoly of state power than as a group of individuals seeking to overthrow the monarch is exemplified by the terrible fate of the Gunpowder Plotters themselves. Guido Fawkes, who was designated to light the fatal fuse in the basement below the House of Lords, was arrested and subjected to severe torture in order to extract the identities of his co-conspirators. The remaining plotters were tracked down in the English midlands and arrested or killed as they attempted to resist. They were put on trial and sentenced to be executed. On Thursday, January 30, 1606, the first batch of the eight surviving plotters – Sir Everard Digby, Robert Wintour, John Grant, and Thomas Bates – were dragged on wattle hurdles from the Tower of London to St Paul's churchyard, where they were drawn and quartered after a brief hanging to ensure that they were still alive and conscious as they were cut open and their hearts plucked out.

William Shakespeare was lodging a short distance away from St Paul's churchyard and might easily have strolled there to witness the grisly events before writing Act 1, Scene 4 of *Macbeth* which describes the execution of the traitor Cawdor (see Paul 1950: 234). Or like Malcolm, he may have heard the reports at second hand:

DUNCAN

Is execution done on Cawdor? Are not those in commission yet returned?

MALCOLM

My liege,

They are not yet come back. But I have spoke

With one that saw him die, who did report

That very frankly he confessed his treasons,

Implored your highness's pardon, and set forth

A deep repentance. Nothing in his life

Became him like the leaving it.

He died

As one that had been studied in his death

To throw away the dearest thing he owed,

As 'twere a careless trifle.

DUNCAN

There's no art  
To find the mind's construction in the face;  
He was a gentleman on whom I built  
An absolute trust. (1. 4. 1–15)<sup>2</sup>

Duncan's disillusioned words perhaps reflected the sentiments of King James himself, since the first plotter to die, Sir Everard Digby – a tall handsome man of twenty-eight – had been knighted by the King two years earlier when the new sovereign had stayed at Belvoir Castle during his progress from Edinburgh to London (Paul 1950: 233–34). According to the Jesuit Oswald Tesimond's account of the Plot, Digby displayed considerable courage on the scaffold. His words recall Malcolm's account of Cawdor's apparent insouciance in the face of death: "At the same time he showed warmth of feeling and even light-heartedness. So much so that when they recalled it afterwards, they could not remember seeing in him any sign of fear in the presence of death. He took his leave of them in much the same way as if he were departing from the court or city to go home" (Tesimond 1973: 226).

This is just one of several allusions to the Gunpowder Plot and its vengeful aftermath in *Macbeth*. A more graphic and vivid moment occurs in Act 1, Scene 1, when the "bloody Captain" describes how Macbeth executes Macdonald in words that clearly recalled the evisceration of the Gunpowder Plotters:

Like Valour's minion carved out his passage  
Till he faced the slave –  
Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him,  
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th'chops,  
And fixed his head upon our battlements. (1. 2. 18–23)

At the end of the play, Macbeth, now the usurping tyrant rather than the avenging hero, is described in words reminiscent of the King's Book where King James describes the plotters as "the rarest sort of monsters" whom the populace gazed at in wonder and whose heads were placed on Tower Bridge as a sign of deterrence (Shapiro 2015: 124):

MACDUFF

Then yield thee, coward,  
And live to be the show and the gaze o' th' time.  
We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,  
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit  
"Here may you see the tyrant." (5. 7. 53–57)

Here the roles of tyrant and plotter are suddenly reversed: the tyrant on stage suffers the same fate as the plotters in real life. By the end of the Scottish play,

Shakespeare has effectively inverted these categories; or, more precisely, he has revealed their dialectical fluidity. The play seems to show that the categories of plotter and tyrant are not oppositional but related and interchangeable. When in Act 4, Scene 1, Macbeth cries out at the prophetic sight of Banquo's future issue stretching into eternity – “What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?” (4. 1. 139) – he might well be articulating the despair of Robert Catesby, the leader of the Gunpowder Plot, who knew that he would have to eliminate the entire Stuart dynasty if he was to restore the Catholic faith in England. Unlike the childless Elizabeth Tudor, James Stuart had two healthy sons to succeed him (Henry, Prince of Wales, and Charles, duke of York). Assassinating James alone therefore was not enough: the plot would have to remove James, his wife and his two sons, all of whom were present in the parliament house at the time the gunpowder was to be ignited (Travers 2005: 24). By the same token, Macbeth knows that the only way to secure *his own dynasty* is to wipe out Banquo's entire issue (including his son Fleance, who, of course, escapes). Like the Gunpowder plotters, Macbeth becomes an increasingly desperate player in the high-stakes game of regime change.

Strikingly, the plotters were mistrustful of women and did not draw them into their confidence. In a letter, dated January 26, 1605, Thomas Wintour instructed his brother-in-law John Grant to come to the plotters' next meeting at Chastleton but without his wife (Wintour's sister) Dorothy, explaining that they were “monastical, without women”.<sup>3</sup> In a second letter dated August 31, 1605, Wintour requests Grant to clear his house of co-conspirator Henry Morgan “and his she-mate” for the next round of the plot. The plotters defined masculinity in terms of the negation of the feminine: if men were loyal and steadfast, women were deemed to be fickle and unreliable. Ironically, it was almost certainly a man (probably Francis Tresham) who divulged the details of the plot in the form of an anonymous letter sent to Lord Monteaule, who then passed on the cryptic letter to the Privy Council. Even more ironic is the fact that Macbeth's construction of manhood, similarly stripped of all feminine attributes of pity and nurturance, is forged by his ambitious, manipulative wife, Lady Macbeth, to whom Macbeth imputes a pristine masculinity he cannot find in himself: “Bring forth men children only; for thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males” (1. 7. 73–75).

### 3. Shakespeare's Bohemia: *The Winter's Tale*

If Shakespeare uses the political turmoil of eleventh-century Scotland as an Aesopian camouflage to discuss the discontents of early seventeenth-century England, his later romance *The Winter's Tale* uses the paranoid setting of Leontes' Sicilian court to highlight the oppressive nature of Jacobean London. By the time Shakespeare came to write his great tragedies *King Lear* (1605) and *Macbeth* (1606), England had long been a Protestant country-- not through unanimity and persuasion but through coercion and persecution. Even as late as 1640 one fifth of

the English nobility was Catholic, and Catholicism was still the religion of many English men and women, especially, but not exclusively, in the religiously conservative northern and midland counties of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Warwickshire. It was hoped, and even expected, that upon his accession in March 1603 the new King James I (King James VI of Scotland) would grant a measure of religious toleration to his Catholic subjects. He had certainly offered promises to that effect to leading English Catholics before he came to the throne. The head of the Jesuit mission in England, Father Henry Garnet (to whom we will return later) was enthusiastic about Catholic prospects, writing on April 16, 1603: "Great hope [there] is of toleration: and so general a consent of Catholics in the [king's] proclaiming [that] it seemeth God will work much" (Travers 2005: 25). But in February 1604, less than a year after his accession, James reversed his previous position and "presented a hostile face towards papists" (Questier 2006: 271). The old Elizabethan penal code against recusants was reintroduced. James's sudden volte-face came as a bitter disappointment and shock to Catholics who had long since languished under conditions of persecution; and the pent-up frustration of a few Catholic gentlemen culminated a year later in the notorious Gunpowder Plot of November 1605.

There is evidence that Shakespeare shared the optimism of some of his Catholic country-men when James came to the throne. In what has been widely understood to be a veiled reference to the death of Elizabeth, Sonnet 107 gives voice to the hope that peace (with Spain) and religious toleration would now prevail:

The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,  
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;  
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,  
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.

The desire for peaceful religious coexistence was not Shakespeare's vision alone; it can be documented in the beliefs of several of his English and European contemporaries. A ground-breaking work of reconciliation was *A Relation of the State of Religion* (1599) by Sir Edward Sandys, a colleague of Shakespeare's patron the earl of Southampton and a supporter of the earl of Essex. A survey of the major religions of post-Reformation Europe, Sandys's work concluded that Christian unity was not a realistic option, but that peaceful co-existence was (see Chapter 2 in Rabb 1998). Another influential figure was Henry Constable, an English favorite of three monarchs – Elizabeth I, James I and Henri IV of France – who had converted to Catholicism in 1591. Constable was the author of an influential tract in French entitled *Examen pacifique des Huguenots* (1589), in which he urged his countrymen to support the recently crowned Henri IV of France who had converted to Catholicism in order to be eligible for the French throne. Shakespeare may easily have read this treatise, since he was a lodger with a family of Huguenots (French Protestants) on Silver Street (see Nicholl 2008). In a recent study, Elaine Scarry has even hypothesized that Shakespeare not only



knew Constable, but that he was the mysterious “Fair Youth” of the Sonnets (see Scarry 2016). At all events, I am inclined to think that what Shakespeare shared with Constable – if not his bed – was at least his commitment to irenicism – an early modern precursor of ecumenicism.<sup>4</sup>

Irenicism is derived from the Greek word for peace (*irene*), and peace was its central tenet. It was known and practiced in France at the end of the sixteenth century where Constable was exiled from England in his final years and where Henri IV had granted religious toleration with the Edict of Nantes (1598). But religious toleration had an even longer tradition in the Holy Roman Empire where it had adherents at the court of the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian II in Vienna as early as 1575. As Howard Louthan has demonstrated in an important study of Counter-Reformation peace movements in Central Europe, Maximilian’s court attracted several men of an irenic disposition; in fact, the court became a center of the movement (see Louthan 1997). This tolerant animus was inherited by Maximilian’s son and successor, Rudolf II, who also attracted men and women of great talent to his glittering court in Prague around 1600 – people like the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe and the German mathematician Johannes Kepler, the English alchemist Dr John Dee and the neo-Latin poet Elizabeth Jane Weston, a Catholic exile from Jacobean England who died in Prague in 1612.<sup>5</sup>

Given the prominence of Rudolf’s court, it is certain that Shakespeare had heard of it and perhaps knew of its reputation for toleration. We know that English actors came back from cities like Prague, Cracow and Königsberg with tales of their experiences there in the 1590s (see Limon 1985). Shakespeare – who always had his ear to the ground in quest of covert information from abroad – might easily have learned about Bohemia and Prague from these wandering players in strands afar remote. Contrary to Ben Jonson’s jibe that Shakespeare had no idea where Bohemia was or that it was a landlocked country, it is possible to understand the coast of Bohemia in *The Winter’s Tale* (1610/11) as a veiled allusion to the tolerant alternative to oppressive Jacobean England. It is often supposed that Shakespeare could not have entertained a modern notion of toleration given the world in which he lived. But this is not true. Even before Shakespeare was born, there were calls for religious toleration in England. During the parliamentary debate of 1563 as to whether penal debates against Catholics should be increased for denying the Queen’s supremacy, the lawyer Robert Atkinson in the Commons was calling for religious toleration: “Let us therefore, for the honour of God, leave all malice, and notwithstanding religion, let us love one another; for it is no point of religion one to hate another” (Questier 2006: 137). Michael Questier has dismissed this as “ecumenical reverie” but as he himself points out (in footnote 106) the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand I had already tried to prevail upon Elizabeth to grant a form of toleration along these lines. The Habsburg Empire had enjoyed some form of religious *convivencia* since the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, and there was no reason why a similar form of toleration should not exist in England. In the reign of the Rudolf II, Prague – and by extension the land-locked kingdom of Bohemia – was the heart of European power and culture. So it is not

unreasonable to suppose that Shakespeare knew what and where Bohemia was, and what it stood for in terms of religious toleration.

If Shakespeare knew that Bohemia was a landlocked country in central Europe, why did he give it a coastline in *The Winter's Tale*? Here we need to take into account the immediate source of Shakespeare's play – a novella entitled *Pandosto or the Triumph of Time* (1588) by Robert Greene. Curiously Shakespeare inverted the settings of Greene's narrative to make Bohemia rather than Sicilia the refuge of the disinherited princess Perdita ("lost") (see Thomas 2007: 167–168). Shakespearean inversion is often a sign of political subterfuge; so by making the coast of Bohemia the refuge where the baby Perdita is cast up – only to return to her native land sixteen years later – Shakespeare may be alluding to the fate of English recusants who found refuge from religious persecution in Prague and Bohemia, including Elizabeth Jane Weston and, more famously, the Catholic martyr and Jesuit priest Edmund Campion, who taught rhetoric in Brno and Prague for seven years before returning on the fateful mission to Elizabethan England where he was captured and executed as a traitor in 1581.

Shakespeare must have known about Campion, and not only because the latter was a high-profile figure during his fateful mission in England. One of Shakespeare's schoolmasters at Stratford Grammar School was a Catholic named John Cottom, whose Jesuit brother Thomas Cottom was arraigned with Campion on November 14, 1581, and executed as a traitor on May 13, 1582 (see Honigmann 1985: 5 and Milward 2003: 58–70). It is reasonable to assume that Campion was well-known in Shakespeare's family and among his neighbors, especially since the priest spent some time during his mission in Warwickshire. There seems to be an encoded reference to Campion in *Twelfth Night* (1601) when the Clown assumes the disguise of one Master Parson: "For as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, 'that that is is'" (4. 2. 12–14). The editors of the *Riverside Shakespeare* fail to gloss this enigmatic comment, and modern audiences inevitably dismiss it as clownish nonsense. But Richard Wilson has revealed the political significance of this apparent gibberish, pointing out that Campion's torturer was the Rackmaster Thomas Norton, the author of *Gorboduc*; and the line "never saw pen and ink" clearly alludes to a dissident poem probably by the Jesuit priest Henry Walpole that Campion never saw "paper, ink and pen" (i.e., was unable to write) because he was so badly racked prior to his trial (Wilson 2004: 192). Shakespearean fools are frequently the mouthpiece of satirical commentary and topics strictly off-limits in the public arena. As in Communist Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, Elizabethan theatre had to resort to stealth to express dissent.<sup>6</sup> Adlibbing, inflections of the voice, and encoded messages played a crucial part in overcoming the increasingly centralized machinery of Elizabethan censorship (see Clare 1999). Punning and double-entendres were especially favored devices employed by Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights to circumvent government control.

The seemingly innocuous name Parson in *Twelfth Night* may even be a punning allusion to the Jesuit priest, Robert Parsons, the most anti-Elizabethan Catholic

exile of the day and anonymous author of *A Conference about the Succession to the Next Crown of England*, 2,000 copies of which were smuggled into England from the continent in 1595. Shakespeare probably read this samizdat work when he was writing *Richard II*, a play about a deposed ruler without issue that clearly resonated with the childless Elizabeth I (see Guy 2016: 246). Similarly, throughout *Macbeth*, encoded references to the names of the Gunpowder plotters are scattered like so many mutilated body parts: “Light thickens, and the crow / Makes wing to th’ rooky wood” (3. 2. 51–52) encrypts the name of the executed conspirator Ambrose Rookwood. In the burlesque porter’s speech the names of the executed Jesuit priest Edward Oldcorne and the Catholic layman Robert Keyes are echoed in the phrase “old turning the key” (2. 3. 2). The Farmer who is admitted into hell by the porter is almost certainly an allusion to one of Henry Garnet’s many aliases used to avoid detection through years of hiding in Catholic houses. In fact, the speech is centrally concerned with Garnet’s notorious treatise on equivocation written as a means to avoid government entrapment during interrogation by playing on the ambiguous meaning of words. It was the talk of the capital in the wake of his arrest in connection with the plot, and the London audience – whatever its religious persuasion – would have picked up on its controversial content:

Here’s a knocking indeed. If a man were porter of hell gate, he should have old turning the key. (*Knock*). Knock, knock, knock. Who’s there, i’th’ name of Beelzebub? Here’s a farmer that hanged himself on th’ expectation of plenty. Come in time – have napkins enow about you: here you’ll sweat for’t (*knock*). Knock, knock, who’s there in th’ other devil’s name? Faith, here’s an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O come in, equivocator. (2.3.1–11).

The theme of equivocation in *Macbeth* has been much discussed: it is after all the mechanism used by the Three Sisters to ensnare Macbeth into committing murder, and has thus been linked with the Jesuitical casuistry (see Wills 1996). And yet, the play seems to demonstrate that equivocation is not limited to one group but becomes the inevitable default mode of everyone in a society where speaking the truth could be not only hazardous but fatal. The hell that is Jacobean England, implies the porter, cuts across all categories: “I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to th’ everlasting bonfire” (2. 3. 16–18). Even Shakespeare is equivocating in failing to make clear where he stands on the issue of Garnet’s treatise. Ventriloquizing the anarchic porter, he seems to suggest that equivocation is both a damnable impediment to salvation (“could not equivocate to heaven”) and pleasing in God’s eyes (“committed treason enough for God’s sake”). Shakespeare’s plays in general are famously equivocal in refusing to take sides in an argument. As James Travers has shrewdly pointed out, “in their ability to say two things at once the priest (Garnet) and the playwright (Shakespeare) had much in common” (2005: 25). The fate of the missionary

priest Edmund Campion was exemplary of the grave risks involved in speaking truth to power in Shakespeare's England.

While still living in Prague, several years before his fateful and fatal mission to England, Campion sent a letter, dated August 6, 1577, to a fellow Jesuit named Robert Arden (a distant relative of Shakespeare's mother Mary Arden) in which he encouraged Arden and his coreligionists to seek refuge in Bohemia to which he assigns a symbolic seacoast: "For this at least we are indebted to those by whose heresy and persecution we have bene driven forth and cast gently on a pleasant and blessed shore..." (qtd. in Thomas 2007: 174) There is no way of knowing if Shakespeare read this letter; but even if he did not, perhaps he heard about it second-hand just as he may have heard about the execution of Sir Everard Digby in 1606 without actually witnessing it in person. Letters in pre-modern Europe were not private documents in the modern sense, and Campion's letter to Arden was probably intended to be read aloud to the Jesuit's coreligionists in Warwickshire. It is perhaps via this epistolary route that Bohemia became a byword in Shakespeare's home country as a religious haven and a synonym for religious toleration.

Bohemia's reputation for religious toleration is confirmed by several eyewitness accounts of Shakespeare's English contemporaries. One such visitor to Bohemia was John Harrison, a former groom to Elizabeth Stuart, James I's daughter, who married Frederick of the Palatine and became the Queen of Bohemia. In 1619 – just a few months before the defeat of the Protestant cause and the flight of Frederick and Elizabeth from Prague – hence their name the Winter King and Queen – Harrison published a pamphlet with the elaborate title *A Short Relation of the Departure of the high and mightie Prince Frederick King Elect of Bohemia with his royall and virtuous Ladie Elizabeth; and the thryse hopeful young Prince Henrie, from Heydelberg towards Prague, to receive the Crown of Bohemia*. A year later Harrison published another pamphlet entitled *The Bohemian lawes or Rights against the Informer*, a translation of a Latin tract *Bohemica Jura defensa*, which affirmed the Bohemian Estates' historic right to elect their rulers. The pamphlet was a retort to an anonymous Catholic tract attacking the Bohemians' deposition of the Habsburg Frederick of Styria in favor of the Protestant Frederick of the Palatine crowned Frederick I of Bohemia on October 25, 1619.

Harrison's pamphlet mixes history with myth in invoking the legendary figures of Bohemian history, Čech (Czechius), Krok (Crocus) and Libuše (Libussa) as the first legitimate rulers of Bohemia. English knowledge of these legendary figures is attested even earlier in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Queens*, which was performed before Queen Anne of Denmark and her ladies at Whitehall on February 2, 1609 (Jonson 1995: 50). In this pageant Jonson introduces the valiant Amazon Valasca, better known as Vlasta, the formidable follower of Princess Libuše who leads a female rebellion against Prince Přemysl the Plowman. This ecumenical climate of tolerant and peaceful coexistence within the Habsburg domains would last until the Battle of the White Mountain on November 8, 1620, when the Protestant Estates of Bohemia were defeated by their Catholic-Habsburg

adversaries. The English traveler John Taylor wrote two pamphlets which confirm this ecumenical situation before the events of November 1620. The first was entitled *An English-man's Love to Bohemia with a friendly farewell to all the noble souldiers that goe from Great Britain to that honorable expedition* (1620). Taylor's second pamphlet describes his arrival in Prague just a few weeks before the fateful Battle of the White Mountain. Taylor is impressed – if a little baffled – by the large number of churches and the harmonious coexistence of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews he sees in Prague:

[T]here is said to be in it of Churches and Chappels, 150. [F]or there are great numbers of Catholiques, who have many Chappels dedicated to sundry Saints, and I was there at foure several sorts of divine exercises, viz. at good sermons with the Protestants, at Masse with the papists, at a Lutherans preaching, and at the Jewes Synagog; three of which I saw and heard for curiosity, and the other for edification. (Taylor 1620: C4')

In his *Itinerary* (1617) Fynes Moryson was also struck by the diversity of openly tolerated faiths – including the freedom granted to Jews – when he visited Bohemia:

Generally in all the kingdome there was great confusion of Religions, so as in the same Citty some were Calvinists, some Lutherans, some Hussites, some Anabaptists, some Picards, some Papists, not only the Cheefe Citty Prage, and other Cyttyes of Bohemia... And as the Jewes have a peculiar Citty at Prag, so they had freedom throughout the kingdome. (Hughes 1967: 275)

What these contemporary allusions to Bohemia and its history indicate – regardless of whether they were intended to demonstrate Harrison's Protestant or Jonson's Catholic agenda – is that Bohemia had a reputation for toleration around the year 1600. This had not always been the case. Throughout most of the fifteenth century, Bohemia – and Prague in particular – had a negative reputation as a schismatic and heretical kingdom that had broken away from the Catholic mainstream. Bohemia's status as a pariah nation was confirmed by the Council of Constance where the Czech reformer Jan Hus was tried as a heretic and burned at the stake in 1415. Sir John Fortescue, tutor to the son of Henry VI of England, regarded Bohemia as synonymous with class chaos and religious anarchy. Chiming on the same theme, Henry VI himself wrote a letter to Pope Eugenius IV (dated May 18, 1440) in which he denounced the English heretic and defector to Bohemia, Peter Payne, as “that cruel and monstrous beast, and dangerous enemy who has, forsooth, intoxicated many nations and peoples innumerable with his pestilential and poisonous doctrines, and has impiously burned, overthrown, and destroyed, and profaned hundreds of monasteries, churches, altars, and religious places in all directions” (qtd. in Thomas 2007: 154). Nine years later in *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy* (1449) the conciliatory Bishop Reginald Peacock acknowledged Bohemia's sinful past but insisted that its people now wished

to return to the true Catholic fold (Pecock 1860: I, 86). Right up to the eve of the English Reformation most Englishmen regarded Bohemia in dystopian terms. Alexander Barclay, the English translator of Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools) (1509) wrote of the diabolical "school of Prague" and "they of Boeme" as treacherous and deceitful (see Polišíenský 1949: 37–38).

By Shakespeare's day, this negative connotation had turned into something wholly positive – even utopian – rather in the way that the term "terror" underwent a sudden 180 degree turn from a positive exercise of monarchical power to a negative function of destructive individuals during the French Revolution. It is interesting to speculate why and how such terms as "toleration" and "terror" can turn so drastically from one meaning to its opposite within such a short time. In the case of the word "terror" – the French Revolution seems to have been the occasion upon which the term pivoted from positive to negative. The same might be stated of "Bohemia" – but in reverse. Instead of connoting heresy and sectarian madness, Shakespeare's Bohemia now suggested the opposite – a kind of tolerant paganism reminiscent of late medieval Catholicism. Indeed, Julia Reinhard Lupton has argued that Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale* encodes cultural and religious references to England's pre-Reformation past in the form of "a rustic English paganism, the remains of Catholic syncretism" (Lupton 1960: 197). As in the case of the French Revolution, this sudden shift of meaning was rooted in specific political and historical circumstances. England had become a Protestant nation by Shakespeare's time which clearly inured Hussite Bohemia to the English reformers. But Bohemia's positive reputation was not sectarian based and not limited to Protestants, as we have seen. The Austrian Habsburg Emperors Maximilian and Rudolf II knew that if they were to avoid religious and political chaos in their territories, they needed to grant some degree of religious tolerance to all their subjects within their domains. In 1609 – while Shakespeare was still writing *The Winter's Tale* – Rudolf issued his famous *Letter of Majesty* granting freedom of religion to his Protestant subjects.

The reign of Rudolf II also marked the golden age of Jewish culture and religion in Prague. In 1592 the Jewish businessman Mordecai Maisel built a splendid synagogue which still stands today in the city's Jewish quarter. What a stark contrast Rudolfine Bohemia must have made with Shakespeare's England, where few Jews lived after the expulsion of 1290 (they only started to trickle back to England during the Commonwealth) and where the Catholic mass was forbidden. Apart from in foreign embassies, where a handful of well-connected people could attend, the Mass was prohibited in England, so in general it had to take place in the secret setting of concealed family chapels. The final scene in *The Winter's Tale* – where Paulina unveils the "statue" of Hermione before King Leontes and Perdita – has been read as a covert reference to the secret chapels of English recusants where statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints were concealed from the prying eyes of the Protestant authorities (see Chapter 11 in Wilson 2004). Perdita kneels at Hermione's feet much in the way that the Catholic faithful venerated the Virgin Mary:



And give me leave,  
 And do not say 'tis superstition, that  
 I kneel, and then implore her blessing. Lady,  
 Dear queen, that ended when I but began,  
 Give me that hand of yours to kiss. (5. 3. 43–46).

The line “that ended when I but began” ostensibly refers to Perdita’s enforced separation from her mother sixteen years earlier. But for many Catholics in Shakespeare’s audience, the line might also have served as a poignant reminder of how they too had been sundered from Catholic England through the Protestant Reformation and, specifically, from England’s ancient attachment to the Virgin Mary. Medieval England had been known as “Mary’s dowry” and the veneration of the Virgin represented a powerful *cultus* both for medieval and early modern English Catholics (see Vanita 2000). The famous Wilton Diptych, an altarpiece commissioned for King Richard II around 1395, shows the King as a boy kneeling before the Virgin and Child. An attendant angel holds a staff of St George surmounted by an orb illustrating a map of England. A later lost altarpiece in Rome shows Richard handing the orb to Mary with the inscription: *Dos tua Virgo pia haec est* (“This is thy dowry, holy Virgin”). As Alison Shell has pointed out, the conception of England as Mary’s dowry had a special resonance at Valladolid in Spain, where the English Catholic College displayed a picture of Mary spreading out her mantle with her hands over kneeling Jesuits who present her with a scroll upon which is written: *Sub umbra alarum tuarum manebimus, donec transeat iniquitas* (“We will remain under the shade of your wings until the wickedness passes”). The superscription reads: *Anglia dos Mariae* (England, Mary’s dowry) (Shell 1999: 206). The English College at Valladolid still displays a statue of the Virgin and Child known as *La Vulnerata* (The Wounded One). The statue, which lacks its arms, was mutilated by English sailors who sacked Cadiz and was taken to Madrid where it was hidden in the chapel of a Countess. In 1600 it was handed over to the Jesuit English seminarians in Valladolid so they could make atonement for the desecration of their countrymen.

The wording of Perdita’s speech as she kneels before her mother is careful to forestall any animosity from his Protestant audience through Perdita’s careful qualification “and do not say ’tis superstition” (i.e., do not take this as a sign of my Catholicism). This final scene of *The Winter’s Tale* was not necessarily intended as a coded affirmation of Shakespeare’s Catholic sympathies (although it may have been). More importantly, I think, the unveiling of Hermione’s “statue” signified for Shakespeare and his audience a moment of reconciliation as well as reunification and a broader allegory of the hoped-for religious rapprochement between English Catholics and Protestants in the guise of the fractured family of Leontes finally reunited after years of cruel separation. It is significant that the writing and performance of the play coincided with the translation of the remains of James I’s mother, the executed Mary Queen of Scots, from Peterborough Cathedral to the royal mausoleum at Westminster Abbey and the construc-

tion of an elaborate marble tomb intended for Mary and her arch-rival Elizabeth I (1605–12). As Richard Wilson has pointed out, the sixteen years that separated Perdita from her mother is the same amount of years that separated the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587 from the accession of her son James in 1603 (Wilson 2004: 247).

#### 4. Conclusion: Shakespeare “Our Contemporary”

The reburial of Mary Queen of Scots in Westminster Abbey was inevitably a wish fulfilment attempt to paper over the real problem, which was the denial of religious toleration in Jacobean England. If this was the tragedy at the heart of Shakespeare’s England, it was not so in Shakespeare’s Bohemia where a *convivencia* of religious faiths flourished from the Peace of Augsburg (1555) until 1620, when it was swept away by the disastrous Battle of the White Mountain, when the forces of Protestant insurgents who had deposed the Catholic Emperor Ferdinand II as King of Bohemia in favor of the Calvinist Frederick of the Palatine were routed, an event that signaled the beginning of the Thirty Years War – the most destructive European conflict before World War I.<sup>7</sup> After seventy-five years of relative peace toleration in Central Europe suddenly gave way to dystopian terror symbolized by the horrific execution of the twenty-seven ringleaders of the Protestant rebellion on the Old Town Square in Prague on June 20, 1621. Twelve of the severed heads were impaled on iron hooks and displayed on the old imperial Bridge Tower where they remained for ten years for all of Prague to see. It seems as though Ferdinand II had learned a few lessons in terror from his British counterparts (see Stach 2017: 12).

This is about the same amount of time that separates us from the end of World War II. Are we also on the brink of such a historical catastrophe after seventy years of European peace and liberal democracy? There are some disturbing indicators that the West has reached such a critical watershed. Shakespeare’s world was in many ways highly similar to ours – a world in which people are prepared to kill and be killed in the name of an absolutist cause. The Ariana Grande concert in Manchester in 2017 left 22 young people dead and many more maimed and wounded. More recently an extremist murdered eleven Jews worshipping in a synagogue in Pittsburgh. The definition of terror may have changed across time – from the affirmative policy of the absolutist state to the negative actions of a group of extremists – but its human consequences remain the same.

Shakespeare, I have suggested, refused to take sides in the religious struggles of his time. If he was sympathetic to the plight of oppressed Catholics, this did not make him a sectarian of any religious stripe. Like many people who occupy a nuanced middle ground, Shakespeare may even have been caught in the ideological crossfire. Alison Shell has pointed out the veiled criticism of Shakespeare among certain Catholic writers as early as the 1590s. Robert Southwell, the playwright’s distant cousin and Jesuit who was martyred in 1595, reproves Shakespeare –



obliquely at least – for writing Ovidian love poems like *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* rather than dedicating himself to religious verse. And the anonymous author of a hagiography of another martyred Catholic priest (*The Life and Death of Mr. Edward Geninges Priest*, 1614) disparages Shakespeare for writing *King Lear* (Shell 2011: 94). Ironically, as some revisionist scholars have argued, Shakespeare’s Ovidian love poems may well have been intended as encoded expressions of sympathy for the Catholic cause (see Asquith 2018); and it is worth recalling that some version of *King Lear* was performed by Catholic players in Yorkshire in 1609–10 while Shakespeare was still alive, suggesting that many Catholics found the play’s depiction of pride and penitence congenial. Then, as now, refusing to take political sides was no guarantee of a quiet life (see Jensen 2003).

The beleaguered nature of England during the last years of Elizabeth’s reign when the first of several Spanish Armadas seemed poised to invade and force regime change (1588) equally recalls the current atmosphere of Trump’s America – a godly Protestant land that must protect itself from the “invasion” of illegal immigrants. As in Shakespeare’s England, so in Trump’s America statues and monuments have frequently become the flash-point of ideological contestation. And just as the Trump White House decries negative news reporting on such events as “fake news,” so did Protestant broadsides such as *The Ballad against Rebellious and False Rumours* (1570) castigate the seditious statements of the Catholic insurgents in the Northern Rebellion of 1569. Shakespeare was, I think, powerfully sensitive to these polarizing trends and was, as Stephen Greenblatt has rightly observed, antipathetic to absolutes of any kind (see Greenblatt 2010). Above all, I would submit, Shakespeare understood the immense human cost of such absolutes and was anxious to find a way to avoid them.

About the same time that Shakespeare was completing *The Winter’s Tale* he was beginning work on the last play he wrote on his own – *The Tempest*. Traditionally regarded as Shakespeare’s farewell to the stage, the Epilogue spoken by Prospero can be seen less as an expression of valediction than of benediction, a fervent prayer for forgiveness that is the necessary prerequisite of reconciliation (see Beauregard 2008: 145–146):

Let me not,  
 Since I have my dukedom got,  
 And pardon’d the deceiver, dwell  
 In this bare island by your spell,  
 But release me from my bands  
 With the help of your good hands.  
 Gentle breath of yours my sails  
 Must fill, or else my project fails,  
 Which was to please. Now I want  
 Spirit to enforce, art to enchant,  
 And my ending is despair,

Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,  
 Which pierces so, that it assaults  
 Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
 As you from crimes would pardon'd be.  
 Let your indulgence set me free. (Epilogue 5–20)<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The rebellion was led by the earls of Northumberland and Westmorland. The former was executed and the latter escaped to the Netherlands.
- <sup>2</sup> All Shakespeare quotations in this essay are from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).
- <sup>3</sup> These letters are still extant in the National Archives at Kew in Sussex. See the photographs reproduced in Travers 2005: 41–42.
- <sup>4</sup> For the argument that Shakespeare was an irenicist, see Marotti 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> The standard study of Rudolf's court is Evans 1973.
- <sup>6</sup> For parallels between Soviet and Shakespearean dissent, see Thomas 2014.
- <sup>7</sup> For a succinct history of the Holy Roman Empire in the medieval and early modern periods, see Stollberg-Rilinger 2018.
- <sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Filip Krajník, Mary Beth Rose and Rowland Wyler for their detailed and helpful reading of an earlier version of this essay.

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ALFRED THOMAS is Professor of English and Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent book is *Shakespeare, Catholicism, and the Middle Ages* (2018). He is currently working on a book project about Richard II and the International Court Culture.

Address: Alfred Thomas, English Department, University of Illinois at Chicago, 601 S. Morgan St., 2027 UH, MC 162, Chicago, Illinois 60607, USA. [email: [alfredt@uic.edu](mailto:alfredt@uic.edu)]

