

# Shakespeare and Religious Skepticism

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## Abstract:

If as Benjamin Bertram says, in England “for centuries people had relied on charms, prayers, and blessings to protect themselves from anything ranging from the devil to inclement weather” (*The Time is out of Joint*, p. 15), the unbearable and bitter economic, cosmic and religious realities of life in the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries had come to a point where people no longer relied on such prayers and blessings. In what follows, I will shed a light on the reality of life in England during Shakespeare’s time that brought about the revival of classical skepticism. Then I will argue that Shakespeare’s plays, at least the ones examined in this paper, not only simply represent the reality of the world that surrounded Shakespeare, but they also present a skeptical view and a questioning of the long-held religious dogmas. Such skepticism is believed to have passed to Shakespeare through the essays of the French skeptic Michel de Montaigne. I will be primarily concerned with the way Shakespeare deals with three notions that have a firm position within the Christian understanding of the world: the stoic endurance of “crosses afflictions,” the idea that the universe is rationally governed by a divine power, and Montaigne’s views on the “inconstancy” of human character and his actions. In the course of the discussion, I will refer to scenes and passages from selected plays of Shakespeare and examine them in view of skepticism.

## 1. Introduction

The economic situation of England, the rise of Capitalism, resulted in a remarkable increase in the numbers of beggars and vagabonds. They were placed in dire work conditions by force, and suffered their lives under the severe laws. The rise of

Capitalism, on the other hand, made people greedy. People were trying to climb up the economic ladder; they were no longer satisfied with their “god-given” positions. In this sense, poverty and greed were haunting the economic climate of England in Shakespeare’s time (Benjamin Bertram, 2004).

Natural calamities, Millicent Bell believes, were another serious issue of the time. The many cosmic disasters that troubled people’s lives influenced people’s beliefs in many ways. The 1580 earthquake of London, Cassiopeia 1572, the comet of 1557, planetary conjunctions of 1583, eclipses of the sun and the moon, and the plague of 1603 of London which killed 36,000 people, Bell states, aroused feelings of terror and uncertainty among people (*Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism*, p.7). I would like to further suggest that such natural disasters could possibly have led people to doubt the idea that Nature is a fine piece of work, rationally governed and divinely tuned. It might not be irrelevant to consider Kenneth Burke’s observation of Horatio’s warning when Hamlet wants to follow the ghost:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,  
And there assume some other horrible form,  
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason  
And draw you into madness? Think about it;  
The very place puts toys of desperation ,  
Without more motive, into every brain  
That looks so many fathoms to the sea  
And hears it roar beneath (Quoted from *Container and Thing Contained*, p.

62).

Burke observes that part of Horatio’s warning is of the place itself. The very place might provide one with motive to commit suicide (*ibid*). Not only the ghost, but the natural surroundings, “the very place,” are presented as terrifying. This view of nature does not accord with the idea that “ Nature displays majesty and power, unity and order, regularity and permanence , and all these testify to the wisdom, the glory, the everlasting divinity of the Creator” ( W. David Stacey: *The Christian View of Nature*, p. 864).

Speaking of the religious and intellectual turmoil of the Elizabethan Era, Bertram observes that the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism caused many problems for people. Despite the fact that Protestantism was the religion of the state, there were minorities who still followed the old religion. The Catholic Church was accused of witchcraft, exorcism and superstitions. . Such doubts and critiques of the fundamental issue of religious truth lead people in uncertainty as to what rituals to perform, which is the right path for salvation, or is there salvation at all? The people were torn between different ways of performing daily religious rituals. The society was undergoing a drastic religious change (*The Time is Out of Joint*, p. 15). When Hamlet announces that “The Time is out of Joint,” Bertram argues, all the uncertainties and unrests of the time could be sensed behind his statement.

If we call the economic, cosmic and the religious turmoil as objective realities possible to have brought skepticism to Shakespeare's plays, there is subjective reality as well; the fact that Shakespeare's writing was influenced by Montaigne's skeptical views. Amita Gilman Sherman states that the translation of Extus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562, along with Montaigne's *Essays* influenced Shakespeare's views (*Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne*, p.3). Bell states that "there is evidence" that Shakespeare read Montaigne. It is possible, she claims, that Shakespeare accessed Montaigne's *Essays* in French in 1580, but it is certain, Bell confirms, that he read John Florio's translation of the essays published in 1603 (*Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, p. 17).

## 2. Hamlet

In the opening scene of the play, the guards Bernardo and Marcellus say that they have seen a ghost twice. Horatio seems to disbelieve the whole idea of the ghost. While they are talking about that, the ghost appears again. The ghost's appearance brings a chaos of lack of knowledge to the characters. It is a strange creature; they cannot make sense of it. Horatio, a scholar, tries to speak to the ghost, but even he lacks means to communicate with it. Horatio's reaction is as he says "fear and wonder." The characters do not know what to name the ghost, they refer to it as an "image" ( I.i. 81) , a "figure" (I.i. 109), and most significantly " A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye"(I.i.112). The ghost indeed may trouble our minds, too. Ken Graham notes that we know that at the time the play was presented ghosts and purgatory were part of the old religion; we also know that Catholic ghosts were said to ask for prayers. This ghost, however, asks for revenge as we see later in its encounter with Hamlet. We might wonder then what the ghost is.

The ghost asks Hamlet to remember it, and to remember the ghost is to revenge. For Hamlet to remember the ghost, he should put aside whatever exists in his mind and replace it with one thing-revenge. Bell rightly remarks that Hamlet's encounter with the ghost is like a new religion revealed for him. The ghost has commandments, and Hamlet should wipe away in his mind,

...all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
 The youth and observation occupied there;  
 An thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmixed with baser matter (I.v. 97-101).

Hamlet's new identity thus is the avenger, albeit not a religious avenger. Bell states that " Indeed, nothing is more *unchristian*, as has often been noted, than Hamlet's reason for sparing Claudius when he might do it pat-that killing him in a moment of repentant prayer will save his unworthy soul" ( *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, p. 42). The revenge, on the other hand, might create a sense of meaning to Hamlet's

life; now there is mission in his life which is to remember the ghost. In the frustrating world he lives in, perhaps revenge is the only thing that ties Hamlet to the world. There are at least two references to “the mind’s eye,” (I.i.112) and (I.ii.184), at the beginning of the play. There are things that “seem” Hamlet says, in fact the word “seem” appears more than twenty times in the play,

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”  
‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
No customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,  
For they are actions a man might play (I.ii.76-85).

But Hamlet’s woe, he says, “passes show.” The play seems to be so much about these two perspectives on reality, what *is* and what *seems*, which might be at sharp contrast at times. In an early instance of the play, Hamlet says that one may “smile and smile...” which seems good, “...and be a villain” (I.v.106).

But we might indeed wonder why *it is* so particular with Hamlet. Throughout his first soliloquy, Hamlet shows how discontented he is about his mother’s hasty marriage with Claudius, but this might indeed be understandable for the good of the crown. But Hamlet’s grief seems to be beyond the particular situation he lives in, something other than his father’s death and his mother’s hasty marriage provided that he has not seen the ghost yet, and knows nothing of his father’s murder:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on’t, ah fie! ‘Tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed (I.ii.133-6).

Speaking in feigning madness to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, Hamlet expresses his disgust of the earth, the heavens and the humans. The world, that canopy, the excellent frame seems to Hamlet but s sterile land; the sky, the stars and the sun appears nothing but a “foul and pestilent congregation, and humans to Hamlet are but the “quintessence of dust” (II.ii.290-298). What we see here is the world through Hamlet’s “mind’s eyes,” life is meaningless; humans are nothing but quintessence of dust. Hamlet’s skepticism of life and humans seems to echo Montaigne’s:

We have no communication with being; for every humane nature is ever in the middle between being borne and dying; giving nothing of itself but an obscure appearance and shadow, and an uncertain and weake opinion. And if perhaps you fix your thought to take its being; it would be even , as if one should go about to grasp the water: for, how much the more he shal close to presse that, which by its owne nature is ever gliding, so much the more he shal lose what he would hold and fasten (Essays, II.323. Quoted from Jonathan Dollimore.

*Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, p. 40).

Hamlet's third soliloquy seems to have a universal theme: for, its entire grammatical structure is that of a series of infinite phrases, and he speaks of "we" (lines 67 and 80); "us" (lines 68, 80 and 83). Thus, Hamlet's inquiry is far beyond his particular situation; in fact he deals with a human dilemma. "The soliloquy suggests that even something so fundamental to Christianity as the afterlife could be called into question" (Bertram: *The Time is Out of Joint*, p. 14). "To die to sleep" is probably one of the issues seriously dealt with in Hamlet's speech. This idea of death as sleep appears in *Measure for Measure*, too. When the Friar tells Claudio "Thy best of rest is sleep, And that though oft provok'st, yet grossly fear'st Thy death, which is no more" ( III.i.17-19). The "rub," is there that we do not know in our death sleep what sort of dreams will come to us. The dilemma is clear; "to live" means to endure and to suffer, and "to die" is to go to an uncertain place.

If we summarize the main points of our argument about *Hamlet*, the play presents a world, where things do not seem to be rationally designed. The world as Hamlet says is an "unweeded garden." Hamlet questions the essence of life, or rather of being. Hamlet's "to be or not to be" is striking in the sense that his perspective of the life after death excludes the Christian notion of Salvation. Hamlet is understandable when he says to Ophelia "Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" ( III.i.119-20). Thus, I believe, *Hamlet* brings the whole Christian understanding of life and afterlife into question.

### 3. *Othello*

Much has been said of Othello's character. He is a noble man, a man of a great heart ( William B, Toole III, 1976); he is " one who is fiercely faithful to both divine and domestic covenants" ( Julia Reinhard Lepton. *The Wizard of Uz: Shakespeare and the Book of Job*,p. 171), and in Albert Gerard's view "...Othello is what Iago says he is, a barbarian." (Cited in Edward Berry. *Othello's Alienation*, p. 316). It is not easy; it seems, to come up with a judgment about Othello's character. Othello could be marked differently in different circumstances he is in. At times Othello is piteous; noble and admiring; cruel and devilish, etc...

While he begins a life seemingly perfect marriage with Desdemona, the bliss of their marital life is soon tainted with unpleasant things as it becomes clear that Iago, ostensibly because Othello has slept with his wife, gets between the couple and destroys their lives. Iago, with his rhetoric and devilish powers sets Othello's jealousy into a dreadful motion. As the events unfold, it becomes obvious that Iago is the evil, and that Desdemona is the good. The play shows in part the good/evil dichotomy. As for Othello; however, it is not as easy to place him within either the good or the evil. This good/evil dichotomy, indeed, might not work on Othello's character.

Reading *Othello* through Montaigne's "On the Inconstancy of Our Actions" might help better understand him. Speaking of human actions, Montaigne says "...they

commonly so contradict one another that it seems impossible they should proceed from one and the same person” (*On the Inconstancy of Our Actions*. Quotidiana. Ed. Patrick Madden, 2006). Othello is a noble character at the play’s opening scenes. He is a self-made man. From his past experiences “of moving accidents by flood and field; ...of being taken by the insolent foe and of being sold to slavery...” ( I.iii.135-138), he has made himself an honorable nobleman in Venice. It is surprising to see such a noble man falling to such a base position as the murderer, the cruel. Montaigne states that it is almost impossible to form a judgment about a person since human actions are “inconstant;” they change with the change of situations and with the lapse of time. “It is nothing...” he argues, “ but “shifting and inconsistency.” Montaigne further argues that “We do not go, we are driven; like things that float, now leisurely, then with violence, according to the gentleness and rapidity of the current” (*On the Inconstancy of Our Actions*. Quotidiana. Ed. Patrick Madden, 2006). In this view of human actions, Othello’s might be understandable. Iago, no doubt, is the evil of the play; he is in control of the circumstances and situations of the play. Bell argues that Iago is like a dramatist; he gives roles to the characters and sets the scenes and actions of the play (Bell, 2002). Othello; in this sense, does not act on himself, he plays the role that Iago has given him. Iago represents that skeptical view of the instability and inconsistency of human character and takes that skepticism to its most extreme extent. He is skeptical of everything that forms the essence of human nature: “virtue is a fig” (I.III.319) and love is nothing but “ a lust of the blood and a permission of the will” (I.iii.334). Iago’s dangerous skepticism changes Othello’s views as well. Othello, Iago tells us, is a man of free nature and “thinks men honest that but seem to be so”( II.i.392). Iago alters that nature of Othello and his views on honesty; he thinks no one honest but Iago.

Othello’s identity is another issue in the play. The circumcised Moor, Othello, Ken Graham believes seems to have been a Muslim and converted to Christianity. His name as well suggests a Muslim identity, but he has married a Christian lady and converted to Christianity. As time passes, though, we see how vulnerable Othello’s religious identity is. Othello’s Christian identity seems as “inconstant” as his character and his actions. When confronted with the imagined reality that Desdemona is adulterous, Othello fails to maintain a Christian stoic identity; he soon loses temper and decides to revenge. Othello takes on the role of the avenger, whereby leaving his whole previous identity behind: “Othello’s occupation’s gone!” (III.iii.357). His new occupation is to restore his honor, to revenge. I suggest that Othello failure to be patient, an appreciated Christian value, is another instance in Shakespeare where Christian identity is disappointed when the characters are confronted with the reality of their lives.

#### 4. *Richard II*

As the play opens, there is an Abrahamic call: a call for Old Gaunt to sacrifice his son, Bolingbroke. Old Gaunt seems resolute in his commitment to the “absolute

other”( Ken Jackson. *Abraham and the Abrahamic*, p. 231). That commitment, Jackson observes, is reiterated in many other instances in the play by other characters, Bolingbroke, Richard II, the Duke of York. When the actual moment of Bolingbroke's banishment comes, Jackson notes, Old Gaunt breaks down. That moment in fact is a retreatment from divine commitment. Old Gaunt does banish his son, but he fails to endure the consequence of his absolute commitment to the “absolute other,” and ultimately dies of grief. We should remember that moments before Bolingbroke is banished Old Gaunt encouraged him to be patient, and think of his banishment a “travail,” but he himself fails to maintain such patience. The Christian expectation of patience and endurance is disappointed. In scene two of act one, Duchess of York tells Gaunt:

“That which in mean men we entitle patience  
Is pale cold cowardice in noble breasts.”

“The duchess, like almost all the characters in *Richard II*, particularly women, has little use for the Christian side of the equation.” (Debra Shuger. “*In A Christian Climate*”: *Religion and Honor in Richard II*, p. 45). Almost all the characters fail to stick to the Christian value of patience. Old Gaunt dies following his son's banishment; Bolingbroke cannot endure his banishment and comes back to England with a big army, and Richard II goes to the edges of madness when deposed of the crown. The play as a whole exposes a world where Christian patience is not embraced. Shuger quotes from Tyndale that “ a Christian ought to suffer all things patiently...[committing] vengeance to God;” Latimer that “in all adversities the armour of the children of light...[is] patience and prayer,” and Perkins that “ being the servant of Christ we are...to bear crosses patiently...[for our]likeness to Christ is in bearing afflictions” ( *ibid*, p.44). If as York says “ Comfort is in heaven, and we are on the earth, Where nothing lives but crosses, cares and grief”( *II.ii.78-9*), most of the characters in *Richard II* do not bear such crosses and cares patiently, as Christianity requires.

#### **4. The Comedy of Errors**

As the first error raises in the play , Antipholus of Syracuse calls on religion for a solution,” Now as I am a Christian, answer me” (*I.ii.77*). Richard Strier explains that later in the play there is a clear call for “some blessed powers” to deliver the characters. The characters are confused; the entire scene of play is one of chaos and disbelief. Out of their ignorance, the characters seek religion to save them. The religious help arrives through Dr. Pinch, the official conjurer of the town. Nevertheless, Strier believes, Dr. Pinch cannot deliver the characters. He thinks that Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus are possessed with evil powers. Strier argues that “*The Comedy of Errors* in presenting a Catholic exorcist that is totally skeptical about witchcraft” (*Shakespeare and the Skeptics*, p. 175). Even Lady Abess fails to fix the errors. Like Dr. Pinch, she promises to cure Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse with “syrups, drugs and holy prayers” ( *V.i. 104*). Lady Abess, Strier argues, with her

irrational reaction and authoritarian position is unable to clear any error. This is obviously seen in Adriana's protest of Lady Abess's militant separation of "the husband and the wife" (*Shakespeare and the Skeptics*, p.176). In fact what the characters understand to be supernatural is but an error, one that religion could not solve. Strier argues that ' what is needed in *Error* is neither faith nor ritual but ordinary common sense, the thought "Perhaps I am being mistaken for the twin brother I am seeking" (ibid). The play; thus, could be said to lack an actual presence of miracles and the supernatural. *Winter's Tale* might be a more vivid example of that sort of skepticism about miracles and divine presence.

##### 5. *The Winter's Tale*

No doubt there is an actual physical sign of the presence of god in *The Winter's Tale*, the oracle. The oracle comes at a good time; it clears the air, telling that Leontes's jealousy is ungrounded and that Hermione is faithful. This seems to be a good divine solution. That divine solution, though, is accompanied by two deaths; Leontes's wife and his son are reported dead after the oracle has been read. Leontes feels guilty; he thinks he is the cause of the deaths. He therefore decides to undergo a process of repentance. He promises to go to the chapel where the dead are buried everyday and say prayers on their graves, "Once a day I'll visit The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there Shall be my recreation" ( III.ii.236-9). In the play's closing scene, we see what seems to be the miraculous resurrection. However, there are two important things to note about the resurrection, which I suggest question the whole idea of miracles in the play. First, unlike Christian resurrections, this one is presented in a secular fashion. It is not from tomb but a piece of art, a sculpture. Second, the resurrection is suspicious. Hermione has grown old, which suggests that she has had a natural growth, and she has been alive all that period. This view is further strengthened when Leontes says

...Thou hast found mine;  
But how, is to be questioned, for I saw her,  
As I thought, dead, and have in vain said many  
A prayer upon her grave( V.iii.139-141).

*The Winter's Tale* is set in a pagan world. References to "chapel;" however, does not allow us to isolate the play from a Christian context. The play, I believe, like other plays examined, echoes a voice of skepticism about miracles and the idea of supernatural causation.

The plays so far examined have presented us with a world where the link between humans and the divine is not so clearly understood as it was in the traditional Christian dogma. The idea that the universe is rationally designed by a divine power is questioned in many instances in Shakespeare's plays. The world is an "unweeded garden" for Hamlet. Christian identity, on the other hand, does not seem to be invoked so much, revenge is often favoured over it. The characters are frustrated and are drawn to edges of madness; the only way to tie them with life again seems to be from revenge. Such Christian identity as shown in *Hamlet* and *Othello* is not a stable and constant one; it could change with the change of circumstances. In *Hamlet*, the

Christian identity is questioned. The whole idea of life and death and of being is put into question. In a sense, the Christian notion of afterlife is no longer certain and safe. Also in Shakespeare's plays, we saw skepticism of human character and human actions. Human actions according to Montaigne are inconstant; human character as well is inconstant. The idea of Christian patience is another issue in Shakespeare's plays. Patience a significant part of Christian belief; Christians should bear crosses and cares with patience, but in *Richard II*, the characters do not invoke to that Christian standard of behaviors, and they favour honor over patience.

### **Conclusions**

All in all, life in England in Shakespeare's time was experiencing economic, cosmic and religious changes. Those changes of life, religion and nature led people to doubt many aspects about the lives they lived. Firstly, Shakespeare's plays represent the intellectual chaos of his time. His plays often take part in the debates of the time over religious issues. Secondly, religious skepticism is part of many Shakespeare's plays, and skepticism forms part of his literary practice. In the selected examined plays, Shakespeare shows a world that is haunted by disasters, instability in human relations and insecurity of human's sense of being in the universe. His characters, in turn, raise serious questions about life on earth and the broader and the deeper sense of being.

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#### پوخته‌ی توئیژینه‌وه

ئهم توئیژینه‌وه‌یه له بیروکه‌ی گومانگه‌راییی له هه‌ندیک له شانۆنامه‌کانی ولیهم شکسپیر دا ده‌کوئیته‌وه. ئه‌گه‌ر وه‌ک بنیامین بیترام ده‌لێت "بۆ ماوه‌ی چه‌ندین سه‌ده‌ خه‌لکی به‌ریتانیا بۆ هه‌موو کیشه‌کانیان، له شه‌یتانه‌وه‌ تا



الاقتصادية المريرة الكونية والدينية للحياة في أواخر القرن السادس عشر وحتى أوائل القرن السابع عشر قد وصلت إلى نقطة لم يعد فيها الناس يعتمدون على هذه الصلوات. وفي ما يلي، سألقي الضوء على واقع الحياة في إنجلترا خلال زمن شكسبير الذي أدى إلى إحياء الشكوك الكلاسيكية. ثم سأناقش مسرحيات شكسبير، على الأقل تلك التي بحثت في هذه الدراسة، التي لا تمثل فقط حقيقة العالم التي تحيط بشكسبير، بل تقدم أيضاً وجهة نظر متشككة واستجواب للعقيدة الدينية. واعتقد أن مثل هذا الشك قد راود شكسبير من خلال مقالات المشكك الفرنسية ميشيل دو مونتين. سأعنى في هذه الدراسة بالطريقة التي يتعامل بها شكسبير مع ثلاثة مفاهيم لها موقف ثابت في الفهم المسيحي للعالم ، وهي : أولاً : القدرة على تحمل " الاضطرابات و المشاكل"، ثانياً : فكرة أن الكون يحكمه العقلانية بقوة إلهية، ثالثاً : وجهات النظر مونتين حول "الاستياء" من الطابع الإنساني وأفعاله. وأثناء المناقشة، سأشير إلى مشاهد ومقاطع من مسرحيات مختارة لشكسبير وتحليلها في ضوء التشكك.

At some schools with religious affiliations, like Georgetown University in the District of Columbia, the student experience is largely unaffected. While prospective international students may have varying criteria for their choice of universities, some U.S. colleges have a religious affiliation that doesn't affect campus life all that much, while at others the affiliation is evident in students' day-to-day lives. For international students considering applying to U.S. universities with religious affiliations, here are two things to consider. The student experience. At some schools with religious affiliations, like Boston University and Georgetown University in the District of Columbia, the student experience is largely unaffected. Graduate Student, Predoctoral Instructor, Assistant Director, UW in the High Schools. Matthew Poland. Graduate Student, Predoctoral Instructor. Sarah St. Albin. Graduate Student, Teaching Assistant. William Streitberger. Professor. Elizabeth ("Eliza") Wu, "American Mythology: The Intersection of Shakespeare and the Asian American Body Onstage," 2015. Publications, Essays and Articles. Jeffrey Todd Knight. Drama. Ecocriticism. Education. English. Environment. Khalsa College is a constituent college of Guru Nanak Dev University. It is one of the most iconic and legendary educational institutions in Amritsar. Eligibility Criteria. The future scopes for MA Religious Study degree holders are given below : Higher and advanced education: Students can opt for higher advanced education and research opportunities after completing their MA Religious Study degree course. The higher education options they can pursue are : B.Ed.