



UNIVERZITET U NOVOM SADU
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET
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FIGURE
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U ŠEKSPIROVIM TRAGEDIJAMA
I PROBLEMSKIM DRAMAMA

DOKTORSKA DISERTACIJA

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Čuva se: ČU	Biblioteka Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu
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Izvod: IZ	<p>Kada je profesor renesansne književnosti na UCLA dr Majkl Alen krajem prošlog i početkom ovog veka počeo da objavljuje svoje prevode dela Marsilija Fičina sa latinskog na engleski jezik, moglo bi se reći da je započeo novo poglavlje u šekspirologiji. Neuporedivo veća dostupnost ovih, svojevremeno izuzetno uticajnih, a u međuvremenu gotovo zaboravljenih tekstova dovela je do obnove interesovanja književno-kritičkih krugova za fenomen poznat kao renesansni neoplatonizam, praćene povećanom svešću o tome koliko je sveobuhvatan i sveprožimajući uticaj koji je ovaj neobični i eklektički sistem misli ostvario na Šekspirova dela, kao i dela mnogih njegovih savremenika.</p> <p>Renesansni neoplatonizam, iako ni ranije nije bio nepoznat šekspirolozima, dugo je</p>

bio zanemarivan pri tumačenjima Šekspirovih dela – posebno onih „ozbiljnijih“ – kao suviše marginalan ili, u najboljem slučaju, suviše optimističan skup ideja o harmoniji kosmičkih sfera. Detaljnije čitanje Fičinovih tekstova, kao i dela drugih neoplatoničara i njihovih drevnih izvora, pruža neprocenjiv uvid u „mračnu“ stranu neoplatonizma, ali i „mračnu“ stranu Šekspirovih „mračnijih“ drama.

Ovaj uvid nije zanimljiv samo sa aspekta tumačenja književnosti. Šekspirovo doba, koje se sada najčešće naziva ranim modernim periodom upravo iz tog razloga, doba je u kome su utemeljeni mnogi kulturni obrasci koji su i dalje u optičaju. Upravo su Šekspirova dela u velikoj meri poslužila kao provodnik za veliki broj tih obrazaca zbog široke i dugotrajne recepcije koju su uživala.

Polazeći od pretpostavke da se bazični metafizički koncepti mogu lako prenositi i ugrađivati u temelje raznih ideologija u najširem smislu te reči i da su stoga njihovo iznošenje na površinu i analiziranje posebno zanimljivi i korisni, ova disertacija za svoj fokus uzima jedan metafizički koncept koji čini osnovu renesansnog (a i svakog drugog) neoplatonizma. Taj metafizički koncept jeste hijerarhijska i gotovo uvek rodno determinisana dihotomija duh/materija, čije se „mračnije“ manifestacije u renesansnom neoplatonizmu često zanemaruju ili pogrešno pripisuju

hrišćanskim uticajima.

Cilj ove disertacije je da se identifikuju oni aspekti Šekspirovih dela – pre svega tragedija i takozvanih „problemskih drama“ – koji su u saglasju sa dualističkom metafizikom renesansnog neoplatonizma, zatim da se značenja tih aspekata analiziraju u okviru te metafizike, te da se time iznađu dalje implikacije ne samo za tumačenja Šekspirovih dela, već i za bliže razumevanje čitave naše civilizacije, koja bi se, pre no posthrišćanskom, moga slobodno nazvati postneoplatoničarskom.

Kao hipoteza se postavlja očekivanje da će dualistički koncepti koji potiču iz renesansnog neoplatonizma biti pronađeni na nekolikim nivoima Šekspirovih odabranih tekstova, od zvučnog, preko metaforičkog, do alegorijskog. Daleko od toga da ponudi nekakvo konačno tumačenje Šekspirovih dela, ova analiza će, nadamo se, prosto povećati broj njihovih mogućih interpretacija.

Metodi koji će biti korišćeni su eklektični. Najčešće će se koristiti klasična komparativna analiza – s jedne strane, metafizičkih sistema dostupnih Šekspiru putem renesansnog neoplatonizma i, s druge strane, Šekspirovih dela (pre svega tragedija i takozvanih „problemskih drama“). Stavovi autorki i autora koji pripadaju feminizmu, novom istorizmu, dekonstrukciji i psihoanalizi biće citirani, a neke tehnike u okviru ovih škola

tumačenja korišćene pri daljoj analizi. U znatnom delu disertacije koristiće se feminističko čitanje metafizike, jer je utvrđivanje rodno zasnovanih hijerarhija i stereotipa jedna od implikacija metafizičkog dualizma duha i materije.

Prva tri poglavlja ove disertacije su uvodna, od čega drugo i treće pružaju kratki osvrt na razvoj dualizma duh/materija i samog koncepta materije kroz istoriju evropske filozofije i religije. Koncept feminino determinisane, haotične i mračne materije, suprotstavljen konceptu maskulino determinisanog, racionalnog i svetlog duha, prati se u drugom poglavlju od svojih začetaka u orfizmu, dionizijskim i eleuzinskim misterijama i pitagorejskom pokretu, preko svog najuticajnijeg proponenta Platona i njegovih sledbenika, sa posebnim osvrtom na neoplatoničare, do mnogobrojnih dualističkih pokreta koji su pod njihovim direktnim ili indirektnim uticajem nicali diljem antičkog i srednjovekovnog sveta. Radikalni ili emanativni, prokosmički ili antikosmički, dualizam duha i materije – prenošen kroz spise i usmena učenja hermetičara, gnostika, manihejaca, bogumila i katara, pa katkad i kroz samo hrišćanstvo, koje mu je zvanično suprotstavljeno – pokazuje se kao neprekinuta nit u istoriji evropske civilizacije.

Treće poglavlje bavi se dualizmom duha

i materije u renesansnom neoplatonizmu. Eklektičan, kompleksan i imanentno paradoksalan fenomen poznat kao renesansni neoplatonizam nastaje kao rezultat snažnog istovremenog upliva više tipova dualizma u judeohrišćansku misao – Platonovi rukopisi stižu u zapadnu Evropu zajedno sa rukopisima neoplatoničara i hermetičara, ali i pravim, živim kabalistima – koji sa oduševljenjem prihvataju, prisvajaju i prerađuju tzv. „hrišćanski“ neoplatoničari na čelu sa Marsiliom Ficinom. U okviru renesansnog neoplatonizma može se izdvojiti nekoliko sasvim različitih i međusobno nekompatibilnih struja: „čist“ neoplatonizam, magija, alhemija, gnosticizam, kabala i hermetizam. Sve one, bile prokosmičke ili antikosmičke, imaju u svojoj osnovi rodno determinisan hijerarhijski dualizam duha i materije i, u najmanju ruku, ambivalentan odnos prema telu i kosmosu, a u odnosu na samu materiju – odnosno, šta se sa njom može ili mora činiti – mogu se uočiti tri široke kategorije koje se mogu ilustrovati kroz primer dualističkih alegorijskih tumačenja mita o Narcisu.

Plotinovo viđenje Narcisa kao prikaz duha prevarenog sopstvenim odrazom u kaljuzi materije poredi se sa gotovo identičnim, ali drugačije percipiranim događajem opisanim u hermetičkom spisu *Pimander*, gde je pad duha u materiju u kojoj se ogleda opisan kao kreativni

čin ljubavi iz koga nastaje kosmos. Tako antikosmički nastrojani Plotin moli čitaoca da se vine ka pravom duhovnom izvoru svog lepog lika, jer je druga opcija pad u kal materije.

Treća opcija, koju nudi prokosmički hermetizam, jeste ljubavni spoj duha i materije u kom superiorni ali benevolentni maskulini duh svojevolumno svojim odrazom formira inferiornu ali prijemčivu femininu materiju.

Ove tri opcije se ogledaju u Šekspirovim delima u centralnom delu disertacije (poglavlja 4-9), koji se sastoji od komparativne analize pristupa materijalnom i telesnom u, s jedne strane, različitim strujama renesansnog neoplatonizma i, s druge strane, Šekspirovim delima, najpre tragedijama i problemskim dramama.

Pojedinačna poglavlja središnjeg dela disertacije bave se mogućim pristupima materiji, ali takođe i mogućim koracima na jednom neoplatoničarskom putu kroz materijalni svet.

Taj put počinje u „Tamnici“, kojom se bavi četvrto poglavlje. Istraživanje antikosmičkih stavova prema materijalnom i telesnom u Šekspirovim tragedijama i problemskim dramama dovodi do zaključka da su oni u skladu sa antikosmičkim učenjima gnostika, manihejaca, bogumila, katara, i pesimista među neoplatoničarima. Junaci Šekspirovih tragedija i problemskih drama

(Hamlet, Romeo, Kleopatra, Lir, Gloster, Tit Andronik) svet i telo eksplicitno doživljavaju kao tamnicu duše, a često se takva osećanja i poređenja javljaju u doslovnim tamnicama (kao što na svojoj koži iskuse Ričard II, Lir, Malvolio, Klaudio i Barnardin). Mora se primetiti da su antikosmički stavovi kod Šekspirovih junaka najčešće posledica nekakvog šoka ili razočarenja.

Mikrokosmosi drama kao što su *Hamlet*, *Magbet*, *Kralj Lir* i *Mera za meru* mogu se čitati kao alegorijski prikazi neoplatoničarskog pakla u kome vlada haos mračne materije, a njihovi vladari-uzurpatori kao zločesti demijurzi. Primećuje se dvojaka subverzivnost – u religijskom i političkom smislu – korišćenja figure kralja kao demijurga, kao i činjenice da pomoć utamničenima u njegovom mračnom domenu uvek dolazi spolja, obično u figuri doketskog Hrista, koji dolazi da probudi uspavane iskre (Vojvoda u *Meri za meru*, duh Hamletovog oca, Kordelija u *Kralju Liru*).

Kada se svet posmatra kao tamnica čiji je glavni tamničar lažljivi uzurpator, sama akcija postaje problematizovana i lako se nailazi na stav da je kontemplacija bezbednija i čistija opcija. Tako se Hamletov čuveni solilokvij može čitati i kao suprotstavljanje opcije „biti“ u fiksnom, nepromenljivom duhu opciji „ne biti“ u fluidnom i iluzornom svetu stalnog nastajanja i nestajanja materije. Mnogi Šekspirovi junaci

izbegavaju da uprljaju ruke i odriču se svega, između ostalog i ljubavi, zarad viših ciljeva (Hamlet; Vojvoda, Izabela i Anđelo u *Meri za meru*).

Ovo se u sledećem poglavlju, „Uznošenje“, pokazuje, opet u neoplatoničarskom diskursu, kao potencijalno pogrešan korak. U neoplatonizmom inspirisanoj renesansnoj teoriji ljubavi, čiji su najuticajniji propagatori Ficino i Bruno, upravo se kroz erotsko dostiže božansko, ali uz bitno upozorenje da erotski poticaj mora dolaziti od nebeske, a ne zemaljske Venere, i da ne sme imati za cilj brak ili, još gore, blud. Narcis koji se ogleda u baruštini materije mora znati da je zaljubljen u sopstveni lepi odraz, a ne u tu baru, i mora se vinuti naviše, ka čisto duhovnom božanstvu kome je suštinski istovetan. Analizom Šekspirovih dela se utvrđuje da se primeri uspešnog erotskog uzdizanja od materijalnog i telesnog mogu naći uglavnom u komedijama, dok je u mračnijim dramama figura nebeske Venere uvek bar donekle problematizovana, kao što je to Dezdemonu u *Otelu*. Takođe se dolazi do zaključka da je eros dualizma po definiciji narcisoidan, jer je uvek težnja istog za istim – duha za duhom, razdvojenim samim od sebe Drugim materije – i da je ovakva idealizovana ljubav, bilo se manifestovala homoerotski ili heteroerotski (a obe manifestacije se mogu naći kod Šekspira)

neumitno neprijateljski nastrojena prema svakoj stvarnoj ženskoj osobi pojedinačno i ženskom telu uopšte.

Poglavlje „Enoza“ bavi se stanjem koje predstavlja krajnji cilj dualističke erotske žudnje, a to je mistično potpuno utapanje svake iskre u svoje božansko izvorište. Svrha narcisoidnog erosa dualizma se ispunjava tako što se maskulini duh sjedinjuje sam sa sobom. Iako je nijedna pravoverna monoteistička religija ne priznaje kao legitimni cilj vernika, enoza je eksplicitno postavljena kao ishodište svake duše u Fičinovom sistemu „hrišćanskog“ neoplatonizma, bilo kao ishod čiste kontemplacije ili vatrene žudnje. Kod Šekspira se figura enoze javlja uglavnom u ovom drugom obliku, i to nikada bez poveće doze ambivalencije prema erotskom. Antonijev dijalog sa Erosom ilustruje nekoliko aspekata erotske enoze: brisanje granica između ljubavnika i voljenog, onostranu prirodu „istinske“ ljubavi, povezanost seksualnosti i smrti, konačno nepostojanje identiteta i ništavilo smrti kao krajnji cilj i ishod svake žudnje. Ovi aspekti se dalje istražuju i ilustruju kroz svoje manifestacije u Šekspirovim tragedijama i problemskim dramama (*Hamlet, Romeo i Julija, Otelo, Troil i Kresida, Mera za meru, Julije Cezar, Timon Atinjanin*). Zaključak je da Šekspir uvek zadržava ambivalenciju prema erotskom i da se svaka erotska smrt može

tumačiti i kao enoza i kao pad.

Sedmo poglavlje, „Silazak“, bavi se onim što se zbiva kada Narcis, zaveden odrazom svog duha u njima, zakorači u vode materije. Fičino i Bruno su u svojim teorijama ljubavi jasni: ukoliko ljubavnik napravi kobnu grešku i posegne za telom osobe za koju mu se učini da ga erotski privlači, umesto da se, inspirisan njenom lepom formom, vine ka čistoti duha odakle ta forma potiče, upašće u pakao materijalnog. Zemaljska Venera može pod maskom nebeske zavesti naivnog i nevinog ljubavnika i odvući ga u dubine materijalnog sveta, naizgled nudeći mu mogućnost uzleta ka nebeskim visinama. Za to je dovoljna jedna noć provedena sa njom. Ovaj zaplet se može naći, u različitim varijacijama, u mnogim Šekspirovim delima: *Sve je dobro što se dobro svrši*, *Troil i Kresida*, *Mera za meru*, *Romeo i Julija* i *Otelo*. U svima je dovoljna jedna noć provedena sa njom da se nebeska Venera volšebno transformiše u zemaljsku – čista Dijana u bludnu Jelenu, devica u kurvu – i utamniči zlosrećnog ljubavnika u telesnost braka ili bluda, ili, još gore, na samo dno pakla ženske seksualnosti, u haotično ništavilo pramaterije.

Osmo poglavlje, „Ništavilo“, bavi se upravo onime što se nalazi na dnu neoplatoničarskog kosmosa – ništavilom koje se istodobno otkriva kao neoplatoničarska *prima materia*. Ona je uvek feminino determinisana –

u neoplatonizmu je Hekata identifikovana sa materijom, a figura Hekate se i u mikrokosmosima Šekspirovih mračnijih komada pokazuje kao prava vladarka paklenog domena zločestog uzurpatora (Ledi Magbet, Tamora, pa čak i Gertruda). Feminina determinisanost pramaterije ogleda se kod Šekspira i u višeznačnom i često ponavljanom glasu, ili slovu, ili cifri – „O“ ili „0“ – koje može biti matematički izraženo ništavilo pramaterije, ali i oznaka za vaginalni otvor. Ovom višeznačju doprinosi i činjenica da se reč „nothing“ („ništa“), uvek zlokobno značajna reč kod Šekspira, mogla u jeziku Šekspirove Engleske koristiti u oba smisla. „O“ je i oznaka za matericu u kojoj se ljudsko biće, po tadašnjim teorijama, zdušno prihvaćenim od strane neoplatoničara, materijalizuje od očevog duha i majčine materije, i time materinstvo dobija izrazito negativan prizvuk. Majka je ta koja doprinosi materiju u procesu reprodukcije, čineći nas time smrtnim i pravdajući čestu povezanost figura materice i grobnice („womb/tomb“), kao i očajnički pokušaj nekih junaka – primerice, Koriolana – da se od materinskog tela radikalno odvoje, što često dovodi do nasilnog i krvavog vraćanja u njega. Neoplatoničarska majka, pokazuje se, često proždire sopstvenu decu.

U mnogim tragedijama se junak suočava sa pramaterijom koja se pojavljuje doslovno

uobličena u „O“: primeri za ovu figuru su paklena jama u šumi višestruko povezana sa Tamorom i vaginalno determinisana u *Titu Androniku*, grobnica Kapuleta u *Romeu i Juliji*, veštičiji kotao u *Magbetu*, kao i vaginalni pakao kroz koji prolaze Lir i Timon u svojoj mašti. Hamlet se spušta u tri gradirana ponora pramaterije u svojoj istrazi o tome odakle dolazi trulež u Danskoj: Ofelijina, zatim Gertrudina odaja, i na kraju otvoreni grob u koji uskače. Suočavanje sa materijalnom osnovom kosmosa, premda u tragedijama uglavnom najviše služi tome da ilustruje paklene dubine do kojih se junak i/ili njegov svet srozao, može dovesti junaka i do neke vrste regeneracije i ponovnog rođenja, kao što je slučaj sa Lirom.

Suočavanje sa neformiranom materijom može dovesti neoplatoničarskog junaka i do prokosmičkih tendencija: može poželeti da u taj mračni kaos unese red i lepotu forme iz viših kosmičkih sfera. Time se bavi poslednje poglavlje centralnog dela disertacije, nazvano „Teurgija“. Narativ iz *Pimandera* o primordijalnom duhovnom Čoveku koji ogledanjem u njenim tamnim vodama svojevoljno daje formu voljenoj materijalnoj Prirodi je, u kombinaciji sa Jamblihovom teorijom teurgije, dao podsticaj Fičinu da osmisli sopstvenu, i pored svog stalno ambivalentnog stava prema bilo kakvoj interakciji maskulinog duha sa femininom

materijom. Teurgija – koja može obuhvatati rituale, praktičnu magiju i alhemiju, ali i druga neimenovana delanja – nalazi se na prokosmičkom ekstremu neoplatonizma, kao aktivan napor svakog pojedinca da uvede red u kosmos i, kao demijurg, i sam formira materiju koja mu je na raspolaganju.

Kod Šekspira se primeri uspešne teurgije uglavnom mogu naći u kasnijim komadima (takozvanim „romansama“), dok tragedije i problemske drame obično prikazuju obrnut proces, u kome se kosmos svodi na kaos pramaterije. Ubijanje ili uklanjanje uspešnih teurga, koji održavaju red na svim nivoima – pojedinac, država, kosmos – dovodi do pada čitavog domena u kaos, kao što se može videti u *Meri za meru*, *Hamletu* i *Magbetu*. Figura uspešnog teurga ili maga oslikava se kao neoplatoničarsko sunce koje oplodava i formira mrtvu materiju, dajući joj život, kao što je slučaj sa solarnim kraljem Dankanom. Uspešan teurg je dobar kralj, otac, oličenje božanstva, što se istražuje kroz metaforu kovanja novca, koje, kao davanje svog lika i forme bezobličnom metalu, kao pravo pripada upravo ovim figurama. Lirova izjava da sme da kuje novac pošto je on kralj se, međutim, može čitati i kao izjava bilo kog teurgijskog nastrojenog pojedinca, jer po metafizici prokosmičkih struja u neoplatonizmu svaka iskra duha ima pravo i obavezu da formira materiju po svom

uzvišenom liku i uvodi poredak u nju.

Prokosmički dualizam se time pokazuje kao potencijalno politički i religijski čak subverzivniji od antikosmičkog.

Teurgija kao koncept je, dalje se primećuje, ugrađena u nekolike diskriminatorne ideologije: mag može figurirati kao kolonizator koji civilizuje inferiornije, telesnije, materijalnije „varvare“ ili kao krotitelj, opet, inferiornijih, telesnijih, materijalnijih žena. U *Buri* se, recimo, jasno vide oba procesa, kao i paradoks po kome je muškarac koji menja i kontroliše prirodu (Prospero) moćni mag, dok je žena koja čini to isto (Sikoraks) zlokobna veštica.

Ženske figure se u slikama vezanim za teurgiju javljaju u dve najčešće varijante. U prvoj su predstavnice feminine materije, koja u prokosmizmu može biti „dobra“ ukoliko je dovoljno poslušna i prijemčiva kontroli i formiranju od strane maskulinog duha, koji time postaje direktno odgovoran za nju, što dovodi do pojačane anksioznosti. Neposlušna materija je kod Šekspira često predstavljena kroz figure neposlušnih žena. Analiziraju se zanimljive slike u kojima se pobuna kćerki (Šajlokove i Lirovih) opisuje kao pobuna materijalnog i telesnog protiv duha koji daje život. Potencijalno neposlušna žena, doživljena kao previše materijalna i telesna jer aktivnim iskazivanjem ljubavi pre braka (Dezdemoni,

Julija, Kordelija) daje signal ocu i/ili mužu da joj je požuda preča od dužnosti, može biti odbačena, i tu se oslikava druga varijanta ženske figure – kao spona kosmosa.

Naime, Šekspirovi junaci, koji usled imanentne paradoksalnosti neoplatonizma nikada ne mogu znati kako se odnositi prema ženskim figurama, često prave i grešku upravo suprotnu, ali isto tako fatalnu, kao što je pad pred požudom zemaljske Venere, a to je odbacivanje ženske ljubavi iz straha da je u pitanju puka požuda. Ispostavlja se da je ta ljubav, kao što je slučaj u *Kralju Liru* i *Otelu*, ali i *Zimskoj bajci*, bila neoplatoničarski zlatni lanac ljubavi, spona kosmosa, koja ga je držala u harmoniji, a da bez nje kaos pramaterije ponovo dolazi. Šekspir ovime dekonstruiše dihotomiju ljubav/dužnost, i to koristeći neoplatoničarsku metafiziku, u kojoj su oba pojma sinonimi za harmoniju kosmosa koju održava uzvišena božanska ljubav. Kodelijin odgovor Liru da ga voli „according to my *bond*“ (dužnost i spona su samo neka od mogućih značenja ove reči) time dobija dodatne moguće interpretacije.

Još jedna dihotomija koju Šekspir dekonstruiše upravo putem neoplatoničarske metafizike jeste, u njegovo doba popularna, umetnost/priroda. Umetnost se – u smislu svega umetnog i artificijelnog i svakog umeća, veštine i delanja koje uređuje i menja datost – često

suprotstavljala „Bogom danoj“ prirodi u pokatkad žestokim debatama, od kojih su neke umele da potkače i pozorište. Ono po čemu se neoplatonizam razlikuje od pravovernih monoteizama jeste, između ostalog, dvojakost shvatanja prirode i neinsistiranje na njenoj normativnosti. Dve prirode u neoplatonizmu, viša i niža, duhovna i materijalna, aktivna i pasivna, korespondiraju sa Venerom i Hekatom, a ova podvojenost prirode se najizrazitije ispoljava u *Kralju Liru*, ali se njene manifestacije mogu naći i u *Hamletu* i *Magbetu*. Viša priroda koja kultiviše nižu kao što vrtlar kultiviše vrt – što je česta figura, kako kod renesansnih neoplatoničara, tako i kod Šekspira – poistovećuje se sa umetnošću.

Pozorišna umetnost kao ogledalo prirode u Hamletovoj izjavi može se u neoplatoničarskom ključu čitati i kao teurgijsko upodobljavanje niže prirode višoj, a ne samo kao puki mimetski prikaz čulne stvarnosti. Dramaturg se tako pokazuje kao teurg koji onom materijom koja mu je na raspolaganju manipuliše e da bi i nju (svoje glumce, scenografiju i pozorište) i publiku transformisao i preuredio po liku više prirode koja je njemu, po platoničarskim teorijama božanske poetske inspiracije, dostupnija. Dok u tragedijama teurgijske umetničke tendencije ostaju neispoljene, a njihovi nesuđeni agenti (kao što su Lavinija u *Titu Androniku* i Kasio i

	<p>Dezdemona u <i>Otelu</i>) obogaljeni i/ili ubijeni, usled čega kosmos ponovo postaje kaos, u romansama se pojavljuju i uspešni umetnici-teurzi. Paulina u <i>Zimskoj bajci</i> i Prospero u <i>Buri</i> su možda najbolji primeri, koji svojim „nadilaženjem“ prirode i ukazivanjem na višu istinu putem pozorišne iluzije pokazuju da je dramaturg verodostojniji stvaralac od demijurga.</p> <p>Posle kratke rekapitulacije paradoksalnih i često međusobno nekompatibilnih tumačenja Šekspirovih dela na osnovu aspekata metafizičkog dualizma preuzetog iz renesansnog neoplatonizma, u zaključku ove disertacije predlaže se detaljnije i dublje izučavanje uticaja neoplatoničarskog koncepta materije, kao i dihotomije duh/materija, na dalju književnost i kulturu. Ovo bi moglo da ima implikacije za studije književnosti, ali i studije kulture, rodne i kvir studije.</p>
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Abstract: AB	<p>We have in the past two decades, owing to the recently appearing translations of Ficino's works into English, witnessed a revival of interest in the phenomenon known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. Although not unknown to Shakespeareologists, Renaissance Neoplatonism has long been neglected in interpretations of Shakespeare's works – especially the “darker” ones – as an overly marginal, eccentric, or optimistic concoction of notions on the harmony of the spheres. A deeper reading of Ficino's texts, as well as those of other Renaissance Neoplatonists and their ancient sources, offers an invaluable insight into the “dark” sides of both Neoplatonism and Shakespeare's “darker” plays.</p> <p>This insight is also intriguing for areas of research other than literary criticism. It was</p>

in Shakespeare's age – now usually referred to as the early modern period precisely for this reason – that many of our own current cultural patterns were shaped, and Shakespeare's works certainly served as one conduit. Using as its starting point the assumption that basic metaphysical concepts can with great ease be transferred over time and space and built into the foundations of differing ideologies in the broadest sense of the word, and that unearthing and analyzing them is therefore an especially rewarding and useful endeavor, this dissertation chooses to focus on a metaphysical concept which lies at the very basis of (Renaissance) Neoplatonism. The metaphysical concept in question is the nearly invariably gendered and hierarchized spirit/matter dichotomy, whose more sinister and "darker" manifestations in Renaissance Neoplatonism have frequently been neglected or misattributed to Christian influences.

The aim of this dissertation is to identify those facets of Shakespeare's darker plays – primarily his tragedies and "problem plays" – that resonate well with the dualistic traditions extant in Renaissance Neoplatonism, analyze their possible meanings within the contexts offered by these religious and philosophical systems, and hopefully discover their further implications for understanding both Shakespeare and certain aspects of so-called

Western cultures. The hypothesis is that the dualistic concepts derived from Renaissance Neoplatonism will resonate well with parts of Shakespeare's work, revealing in their originative context further notions illuminating further meanings attributable to Shakespeare's text and our cultural atmosphere, many of which will be paradoxical and contradictory – much like Renaissance Neoplatonism itself.

The central portion of this thesis consists of a comparative analysis of approaches to the material and the carnal existing in, on the one hand, various branches of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and, on the other, Shakespeare's work, primarily his tragedies and so-called "problem" plays. The individual chapters deal with possible approaches to matter and also possible steps along a Neoplatonic journey through the material world. This journey begins in "The Prison," where the hero experiences those Neoplatonic sentiments that are on the anti-cosmic end of the spectrum. This, many Neoplatonists would hope, can induce him to attempt an "Ascent" towards the purely spiritual spheres. This ascent is often also inspired by female figures stripped of all carnality. The ultimate goal of Neoplatonic ascent is "Henosis," in which the hero becomes one with the One. If the hero is not careful, allowing himself to be lured downward by carnal female figures, or if he is very adventurous indeed, he

	<p>can instead begin a kenotic “Descent” into the depths of matter. This descent will allow him to face the “Nothing” of formless prime matter which is at the basis of the cosmos and his own mortal body. Faced with it, he will, some Neoplatonists would hope, realize that it is this nothing that everything comes from, and will strive to help the spiritual forces in the universe, of which he ultimately is one, form it lovingly. This is known as “Theurgy.”</p> <p>As predicted, the analysis shows that the dualistic concepts originating from Renaissance Neoplatonism can indeed be found on several levels of Shakespeare’s “darker” plays. Far from providing definitive answers to questions raised by Shakespeare’s work, the proffered analysis, as expected, merely increases the number of its possible interpretations.</p> <p>It is concluded that the Neoplatonic concept of matter and its spirit/matter dichotomy exerted a formative influence not only on Shakespeare and his age, but the ages that followed as well, our own included. This insight offers implications for further research not only in literary criticism, but also cultural, gender and queer studies.</p>
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FIGURE MATERIJALNOG I TELESNOG U ŠEKSPIROVIM TRAGEDIJAMA I PROBLEMSKIM DRAMAMA

APSTRAKT

Kada je profesor renesansne književnosti na UCLA dr Majkl Alen krajem prošlog i početkom ovog veka počeo da objavljuje svoje prevode dela Marsilija Fičina sa latinskog na engleski jezik, moglo bi se reći da je započeo novo poglavlje u šekspirologiji. Neuporedivo veća dostupnost ovih, svojevremeno izuzetno uticajnih, a u međuvremenu gotovo zaboravljenih tekstova dovela je do obnove interesovanja književno-kritičkih krugova za fenomen poznat kao renesansni neoplatonizam, praćene povećanom svešću o tome koliko je sveobuhvatan i sveprožimajući uticaj koji je ovaj neobični i eklektički sistem misli ostvario na Šekspirova dela, kao i dela mnogih njegovih savremenika.

Renesansni neoplatonizam, iako ni ranije nije bio nepoznat šekspirolozima, dugo je bio zanemaran pri tumačenjima Šekspirovih dela – posebno onih „ozbiljnijih“ – kao suviše marginalan ili, u najboljem slučaju, suviše optimističan skup ideja o harmoniji kosmičkih sfera. Detaljnije čitanje Fičinovih tekstova, kao i dela drugih neoplatoničara i njihovih drevnih izvora, pruža neprocenjiv uvid u „mračnu“ stranu neoplatonizma, ali i „mračnu“ stranu Šekspirovih „mračnijih“ drama.

Ovaj uvid nije zanimljiv samo sa aspekta tumačenja književnosti. Šekspirovo doba, koje se sada najčešće naziva ranim modernim periodom upravo iz tog razloga, doba je u kome su utemeljeni mnogi kulturni obrasci koji su i dalje u optičaju. Upravo su

Šekspirova dela u velikoj meri poslužila kao provodnik za veliki broj tih obrazaca zbog široke i dugotrajne recepcije koju su uživala.

Polazeći od pretpostavke da se bazični metafizički koncepti mogu lako prenositi i ugrađivati u temelje raznih ideologija u najširem smislu te reči i da su stoga njihovo iznošenje na površinu i analiziranje posebno zanimljivi i korisni, ova disertacija za svoj fokus uzima jedan metafizički koncept koji čini osnovu renesansnog (a i svakog drugog) neoplatonizma. Taj metafizički koncept jeste hijerarhijska i gotovo uvek rodno determinisana dihotomija duh/materija, čije se „mračnije“ manifestacije u renesansnom neoplatonizmu često zanemaruju ili pogrešno pripisuju hrišćanskim uticajima.

Cilj ove disertacije je da se identifikuju oni aspekti Šekspirovih dela – pre svega tragedija i takozvanih „problemskih drama“ – koji su u saglasju sa dualističkom metafizikom renesansnog neoplatonizma, zatim da se značenja tih aspekata analiziraju u okviru te metafizike, te da se time iznađu dalje implikacije ne samo za tumačenja Šekspirovih dela, već i za bliže razumevanje čitave naše civilizacije, koja bi se, pre no posthrišćanskom, moga slobodno nazvati postneoplatoničarskom.

Kao hipoteza se postavlja očekivanje da će dualistički koncepti koji potiču iz renesansnog neoplatonizma biti pronađeni na nekolikim nivoima Šekspirovih odabranih tekstova, od zvučnog, preko metaforičkog, do alegorijskog. Daleko od toga da ponudi nekakvo konačno tumačenje Šekspirovih dela, ova analiza će, nadamo se, prosto povećati broj njihovih mogućih interpretacija.

Metodi koji će biti korišćeni su eklektični. Najčešće će se koristiti klasična komparativna analiza – s jedne strane, metafizičkih sistema dostupnih Šekspiru putem renesansnog neoplatonizma i, s druge strane, Šekspirovih dela (pre svega tragedija i takozvanih „problemskih drama“). Stavovi autorki i autora koji pripadaju feminizmu, novom istorizmu, dekonstrukciji i psihoanalizi biće citirani, a neke tehnike u okviru ovih škola tumačenja korišćene pri daljoj analizi. U znatnom delu disertacije korišće se feminističko čitanje metafizike, jer je utvrđivanje rodno zasnovanih hijerarhija i stereotipa jedna od implikacija metafizičkog dualizma duha i materije.

Prva tri poglavlja ove disertacije su uvodna, od čega drugo i treće pružaju kratki osvrt na razvoj dualizma duh/materija i samog koncepta materije kroz istoriju evropske filozofije i religije. Koncept feminino determinisane, haotične i mračne materije,

suprotstavljen konceptu maskulino determinisanog, racionalnog i svetlog duha, prati se u drugom poglavlju od svojih začetaka u orfizmu, dionizijskim i eleuzinskim misterijama i pitagorejskom pokretu, preko svog najuticajnijeg proponenta Platona i njegovih sledbenika, sa posebnim osvrtom na neoplatoničare, do mnogobrojnih dualističkih pokreta koji su pod njihovim direktnim ili indirektnim uticajem nicali diljem antičkog i srednjovekovnog sveta. Radikalni ili emanativni, prokosmički ili antikosmički, dualizam duha i materije – prenošen kroz spise i usmena učenja hermetičara, gnostika, manihejaca, bogumila i katarata, pa katkad i kroz samo hrišćanstvo, koje mu je zvanično suprotstavljeno – pokazuje se kao neprekinuta nit u istoriji evropske civilizacije.

Treće poglavlje bavi se dualizmom duha i materije u renesansnom neoplatonizmu. Eklektičan, kompleksan i imanentno paradoksalan fenomen poznat kao renesansni neoplatonizam nastaje kao rezultat snažnog istovremenog upliva više tipova dualizma u judeohrišćansku misao – Platonovi rukopisi stižu u zapadnu Evropu zajedno sa rukopisima neoplatoničara i hermetičara, ali i pravim, živim kabalistima – koji sa oduševljenjem prihvataju, prisvajaju i prerađuju tzv. „hrišćanski“ neoplatoničari na čelu sa Marsilijom Ficinom. U okviru renesansnog neoplatonizma može se izdvojiti nekoliko sasvim različitih i međusobno nekompatibilnih struja: „čist“ neoplatonizam, magija, alhemija, gnosticizam, kabala i hermetizam. Sve one, bile prokosmičke ili antikosmičke, imaju u svojoj osnovi rodno determinisan hijerarhijski dualizam duha i materije i, u najmanju ruku, ambivalentan odnos prema telu i kosmosu, a u odnosu na samu materiju – odnosno, šta se sa njom može ili mora činiti – mogu se uočiti tri široke kategorije koje se mogu ilustrovati kroz primer dualističkih alegorijskih tumačenja mita o Narcisu.

Plotinovo viđenje Narcisa kao prikaz duha prevarenog sopstvenim odrazom u kaljuzi materije poredi se sa gotovo identičnim, ali drugačije percipiranim događajem opisanim u hermetičkom spisu *Pimander*, gde je pad duha u materiju u kojoj se ogleda opisan kao kreativni čin ljubavi iz koga nastaje kosmos. Tako antikosmički nastrojeni Plotin moli čitaoca da se vine ka pravom duhovnom izvoru svog lepog lika, jer je druga opcija pad u kal materije. Treća opcija, koju nudi prokosmički hermetizam, jeste ljubavni spoj duha i materije u kom superiorni ali benevolentni maskulini duh svojevolejno svojim odrazom formira inferiornu ali prijemčivu femininu materiju.

Ove tri opcije se ogledaju u Šekspirovim delima u centralnom delu disertacije (poglavlja 4-9), koji se sastoji od komparativne analize pristupa materijalnom i telesnom u, s jedne strane, različitim strujama renesansnog neoplatonizma i, s druge strane, Šekspirovim delima, najpre tragedijama i problemskim dramama.

Pojedinačna poglavlja središnjeg dela disertacije bave se mogućim pristupima materiji, ali takođe i mogućim koracima na jednom neoplatoničarskom putu kroz materijalni svet.

Taj put počinje u „Tamnici“, kojom se bavi četvrto poglavlje. Istraživanje antikosmičkih stavova prema materijalnom i telesnom u Šekspirovim tragedijama i problemskim dramama dovodi do zaključka da su oni u skladu sa antikosmičkim učenjima gnostika, manihejaca, bogumila, katara, i pesimista među neoplatoničarima. Junaci Šekspirovih tragedija i problemskih drama (Hamlet, Romeo, Kleopatra, Lir, Gloster, Tit Andronik) svet i telo eksplicitno doživljavaju kao tamnicu duše, a često se takva osećanja i poređenja javljaju u doslovnim tamnicama (kao što na svojoj koži iskuse Ričard II, Lir, Malvolio, Klaudio i Barnardin). Mora se primetiti da su antikosmički stavovi kod Šekspirovih junaka najčešće posledica nekakvog šoka ili razočarenja.

Mikrokosmosi drama kao što su *Hamlet*, *Magbet*, *Kralj Lir* i *Mera za meru* mogu se čitati kao alegorijski prikazi neoplatoničarskog pakla u kome vlada kaos mračne materije, a njihovi vladari-uzurpatori kao zločesti demijurzi. Primećuje se dvojaka subverzivnost – u religijskom i političkom smislu – korišćenja figure kralja kao demijurga, kao i činjenice da pomoć utamničenima u njegovom mračnom domenu uvek dolazi spolja, obično u figuri doketskog Hrista, koji dolazi da probudi uspavane iskre (Vojvoda u *Meri za meru*, duh Hamletovog oca, Kordelija u *Kralju Liru*).

Kada se svet posmatra kao tamnica čiji je glavni tamničar lažljivi uzurpator, sama akcija postaje problematizovana i lako se nailazi na stav da je kontemplacija bezbednija i čistija opcija. Tako se Hamletov čuveni solilokvij može čitati i kao suprotstavljanje opcije „biti“ u fiksnom, nepromenljivom duhu opciji „ne biti“ u fluidnom i iluzornom svetu stalnog nastajanja i nestajanja materije. Mnogi Šekspirovi junaci izbegavaju da uprljaju ruke i odriču se svega, između ostalog i ljubavi, zarad viših ciljeva (Hamlet; Vojvoda, Izabela i Anđelo u *Meri za meru*).

Ovo se u sledećem poglavlju, „Uznošenje“, pokazuje, opet u neoplatoničarskom diskursu, kao potencijalno pogrešan korak. U neoplatonizmom inspirisanoj renesansnoj teoriji ljubavi, čiji su najuticajniji propagatori Fičino i Bruno, upravo se kroz erotsko dostiže božansko, ali uz bitno upozorenje da erotski poticaj mora dolaziti od nebeske, a ne zemaljske Venere, i da ne sme imati za cilj brak ili, još gore, blud. Narcis koji se ogleda u baruštini materije mora znati da je zaljubljen u sopstveni lepi odraz, a ne u tu baru, i mora se vinuti naviše, ka čisto duhovnom božanstvu kome je suštinski istovetan. Analizom Šekspirovih dela se utvrđuje da se primeri uspešnog erotskog uzdizanja od materijalnog i telesnog mogu naći uglavnom u komedijama, dok je u mračnijim dramama figura nebeske Venere uvek bar donekle problematizovana, kao što je to Dezdemonu u *Otelu*. Takođe se dolazi do zaključka da je eros dualizma po definiciji narcisoidan, jer je uvek težnja istog za istim – duha za duhom, razdvojenim samim od sebe Drugim materije – i da je ovakva idealizovana ljubav, bilo se manifestovala homoerotski ili heteroerotski (a obe manifestacije se mogu naći kod Šekspira) neumitno neprijateljski nastrojena prema svakoj stvarnoj ženskoj osobi pojedinačno i ženskom telu uopšte.

Poglavlje „Enoza“ bavi se stanjem koje predstavlja krajnji cilj dualističke erotske žudnje, a to je mistično potpuno utapanje svake iskre u svoje božansko izvorište. Svrha narcisoidnog erosa dualizma se ispunjava tako što se maskulini duh sjedinjuje sam sa sobom. Iako je nijedna pravoverna monoteistička religija ne priznaje kao legitimni cilj vernika, enoza je eksplicitno postavljena kao ishodište svake duše u Fičinovom sistemu „hrišćanskog“ neoplatonizma, bilo kao ishod čiste kontemplacije ili vatrene žudnje. Kod Šekspira se figura enoze javlja uglavnom u ovom drugom obliku, i to nikada bez povećane doze ambivalencije prema erotskom. Antonijev dijalog sa Erosom ilustruje nekoliko aspekata erotske enoze: brisanje granica između ljubavnika i voljenog, onostranu prirodu „istinske“ ljubavi, povezanost seksualnosti i smrti, konačno nepostojanje identiteta i ništavilo smrti kao krajnji cilj i ishod svake žudnje. Ovi aspekti se dalje istražuju i ilustruju kroz svoje manifestacije u Šekspirovim tragedijama i problemskim dramama (*Hamlet, Romeo i Julija, Otelu, Troilu i Kresidu, Mera za meru, Julije Cezar, Timon Atinjanin*). Zaključak je da Šekspir uvek zadržava ambivalenciju prema erotskom i da se svaka erotska smrt može tumačiti i kao enoza i kao pad.

Sedmo poglavlje, „Silazak“, bavi se onim što se zbiva kada Narcis, zaveden odrazom svog duha u njima, zakorači u vode materije. Fičino i Bruno su u svojim teorijama ljubavi jasni: ukoliko ljubavnik napravi kobnu grešku i posegne za telom osobe za koju mu se učini da ga erotski privlači, umesto da se, inspirisan njenom lepom formom, vine ka čistoti duha odakle ta forma potiče, upašće u pakao materijalnog. Zemaljska Venera može pod maskom nebeske zavesti naivnog i nevinog ljubavnika i odvući ga u dubine materijalnog sveta, naizgled nudeći mu mogućnost uzleta ka nebeskim visinama. Za to je dovoljna jedna noć provedena sa njom. Ovaj zaplet se može naći, u različitim varijacijama, u mnogim Šekspirovim delima: *Sve je dobro što se dobro svrši*, *Troil i Kresida*, *Mera za meru*, *Romeo i Julija* i *Otelo*. U svima je dovoljna jedna noć provedena sa njom da se nebeska Venera volšebno transformiše u zemaljsku – čista Dijana u bludnu Jelenu, devica u kurvu – i utamniči zlosrećnog ljubavnika u telesnost braka ili bluda, ili, još gore, na samo dno pakla ženske seksualnosti, u haotično ništavilo pramaterije.

Osmo poglavlje, „Ništavilo“, bavi se upravo onime što se nalazi na dnu neoplatoničarskog kosmosa – ništavilom koje se istodobno otkriva kao neoplatoničarska *prima materia*. Ona je uvek feminino determinisana – u neoplatonizmu je Hekata identifikovana sa materijom, a figura Hekate se i u mikrokosmosima Šekspirovih mračnijih komada pokazuje kao prava vladarka paklenog domena zločestog uzurpatora (Ledi Magbet, Tamora, pa čak i Gertruda). Feminina determinisanost pramaterije ogleda se kod Šekspira i u višeznačnom i često ponavljanom glasu, ili slovu, ili cifri – „O“ ili „0“ – koje može biti matematički izraženo ništavilo pramaterije, ali i oznaka za vaginalni otvor. Ovom višeznačju doprinosi i činjenica da se reč „nothing“ („ništa“), uvek zlokobno značajna reč kod Šekspira, mogla u jeziku Šekspirove Engleske koristiti u oba smisla. „O“ je i oznaka za matericu u kojoj se ljudsko biće, po tadašnjim teorijama, zdušno prihvaćenim od strane neoplatoničara, materijalizuje od očevog duha i majčine materije, i time materinstvo dobija izrazito negativan prizvuk. Majka je ta koja doprinosi materiju u procesu reprodukcije, čineći nas time smrtnim i pravdajući čestu povezanost figura materice i grobnice („womb/tomb“), kao i očajnički pokušaj nekih junaka – primerice, Koriolana – da se od materinskog tela radikalno odvoje, što često dovodi do

nasilnog i krvavog vraćanja u njega. Neoplatoničarska majka, pokazuje se, često proždire sopstvenu decu.

U mnogim tragedijama se junak suočava sa pramaterijom koja se pojavljuje doslovno uobličena u „O“: primeri za ovu figuru su paklena jama u šumi višestruko povezana sa Tamorom i vaginalno determinisana u *Titu Androniku*, grobnica Kapuleta u *Romeu i Juliji*, veštičiji kotao u *Magbetu*, kao i vaginalni pakao kroz koji prolaze Lir i Timon u svojoj mašti. Hamlet se spušta u tri gradirana ponora pramaterije u svojoj istrazi o tome odakle dolazi trulež u Danskoj: Ofelijina, zatim Gertrudina odaja, i na kraju otvoreni grob u koji uskače. Suočavanje sa materijalnom osnovom kosmosa, premda u tragedijama uglavnom najviše služi tome da ilustruje paklene dubine do kojih se junak i/ili njegov svet srozao, može dovesti junaka i do neke vrste regeneracije i ponovnog rođenja, kao što je slučaj sa Lirom.

Suočavanje sa neformiranom materijom može dovesti neoplatoničarskog junaka i do prokosmičkih tendencija: može poželeti da u taj mračni kaos unese red i lepotu forme iz viših kosmičkih sfera. Time se bavi poslednje poglavlje centralnog dela disertacije, nazvano „Teurgija“. Narativ iz *Pimandera* o primordijalnom duhovnom Čoveku koji ogleđanjem u njenim tamnim vodama svojevoljno daje formu voljenoj materijalnoj Prirodi je, u kombinaciji sa Jamblihovom teorijom teurgije, dao podsticaj Fičinu da osmisli sopstvenu, i pored svog stalno ambivalentnog stava prema bilo kakvoj interakciji maskulinog duha sa femininom materijom. Teurgija – koja može obuhvatati rituale, praktičnu magiju i alhemiju, ali i druga neimenovana delanja – nalazi se na prokosmičkom ekstremu neoplatonizma, kao aktivan napor svakog pojedinca da uvede red u kosmos i, kao demijurg, i sam formira materiju koja mu je na raspolaganju.

Kod Šekspira se primeri uspešne teurgije uglavnom mogu naći u kasnijim komadima (takozvanim „romansama“), dok tragedije i problemske drame obično prikazuju obrnut proces, u kome se kosmos svodi na kaos pramaterije. Ubijanje ili uklanjanje uspešnih teurga, koji održavaju red na svim nivoima – pojedinac, država, kosmos – dovodi do pada čitavog domena u kaos, kao što se može videti u *Meri za meru*, *Hamletu* i *Magbetu*. Figura uspešnog teurga ili maga oslikava se kao neoplatoničarsko sunce koje oplodjava i formira mrtvu materiju, dajući joj život, kao što je slučaj sa solarnim kraljem Dankanom. Uspešan teurg je dobar kralj, otac, oličenje božanstva, što

se istražuje kroz metaforu kovanja novca, koje, kao davanje svog lika i forme bezobličnom metalu, kao pravo pripada upravo ovim figurama. Lirova izjava da sme da kuje novac pošto je on kralj se, međutim, može čitati i kao izjava bilo kog teurgijski nastrojenog pojedinca, jer po metafizici prokosmičkih struja u neoplatonizmu svaka iskra duha ima pravo i obavezu da formira materiju po svom uzvišenom liku i uvodi poredak u nju. Prokosmički dualizam se time pokazuje kao potencijalno politički i religijski čak subverzivniji od antikosmičkog.

Teurgija kao koncept je, dalje se primećuje, ugrađena u nekolike diskriminatorne ideologije: mag može figurirati kao kolonizator koji civilizuje inferiornije, telesnije, materijalnije „varvare“ ili kao krotitelj, opet, inferiornijih, telesnijih, materijalnijih žena. U *Buri* se, recimo, jasno vide oba procesa, kao i paradoks po kome je muškarac koji menja i kontroliše prirodu (Prospero) moćni mag, dok je žena koja čini to isto (Sikoraks) zlokobna veštica.

Ženske figure se u slikama vezanim za teurgiju javljaju u dve najčešće varijante. U prvoj su predstavnice feminine materije, koja u prokosmizmu može biti „dobra“ ukoliko je dovoljno poslušna i prijemčiva kontroli i formiranju od strane maskulinog duha, koji time postaje direktno odgovoran za nju, što dovodi do pojačane anksioznosti. Neposlušna materija je kod Šekspira često predstavljena kroz figure neposlušnih žena. Analiziraju se zanimljive slike u kojima se pobuna kćerki (Šajlokove i Lirovih) opisuje kao pobuna materijalnog i telesnog protiv duha koji daje život. Potencijalno neposlušna žena, doživljena kao previše materijalna i telesna jer aktivnim iskazivanjem ljubavi pre braka (Dezdemonu, Juliju, Kordeliju) daje signal ocu i/ili mužu da joj je požuda preča od dužnosti, može biti odbačena, i tu se oslikava druga varijanta ženske figure – kao spona kosmosa.

Naime, Šekspirovi junaci, koji usled imanentne paradoksalnosti neoplatonizma nikada ne mogu znati kako se odnositi prema ženskim figurama, često prave i grešku upravo suprotnu, ali isto tako fatalnu, kao što je pad pred požudom zemaljske Venere, a to je odbacivanje ženske ljubavi iz straha da je u pitanju puka požuda. Ispostavlja se da je ta ljubav, kao što je slučaj u *Kralju Liru* i *Otelu*, ali i *Zimskoj bajci*, bila neoplatoničarski zlatni lanac ljubavi, spona kosmosa, koja ga je držala u harmoniji, a da bez nje kaos pramaterije ponovo dolazi. Šekspir ovime dekonstruiše dihotomiju ljubav/dužnost, i to

koristeći neoplatoničarsku metafiziku, u kojoj su oba pojma sinonimi za harmoniju kosmosa koju održava uzvišena božanska ljubav. Kodelijin odgovor Liru da ga voli „according to my *bond*“ (dužnost i spona su samo neka od mogućih značenja ove reči) time dobija dodatne moguće interpretacije.

Još jedna dihotomija koju Šekspir dekonstruiše upravo putem neoplatoničarske metafizike jeste, u njegovo doba popularna, umetnost/priroda. Umetnost se – u smislu svega umetnog i artificijelnog i svakog umeća, veštine i delanja koje uređuje i menja datost – često suprotstavljala „Bogom danoj“ prirodi u pokatkad žestokim debatama, od kojih su neke umele da potkače i pozorište. Ono po čemu se neoplatonizam razlikuje od pravovernih monoteizama jeste, između ostalog, dvojakost shvatanja prirode i neinsistiranje na njenoj normativnosti. Dve prirode u neoplatonizmu, viša i niža, duhovna i materijalna, aktivna i pasivna, korespondiraju sa Venerom i Hekatom, a ova podvojenost prirode se najizrazitije ispoljava u *Kralju Liru*, ali se njene manifestacije mogu naći i u *Hamletu* i *Magbetu*. Viša priroda koja kultiviše nižu kao što vrtlar kultiviše vrt – što je česta figura, kako kod renesansnih neoplatoničara, tako i kod Šekspira – poistovećuje se sa umetnošću.

Pozorišna umetnost kao ogledalo prirode u Hamletovoj izjavi može se u neoplatoničarskom ključu čitati i kao teurgijsko upodobljavanje niže prirode višoj, a ne samo kao puki mimetski prikaz čulne stvarnosti. Dramaturg se tako pokazuje kao teurg koji onom materijom koja mu je na raspolaganju manipuliše e da bi i nju (svoje glumce, scenografiju i pozorište) i publiku transformisao i preuredio po liku više prirode koja je njemu, po platoničarskim teorijama božanske poetske inspiracije, dostupnija. Dok u tragedijama teurgijske umetničke tendencije ostaju neispoljene, a njihovi nesuđeni agenti (kao što su Lavinija u *Titu Androniku* i Kasio i Dezdemonu u *Otelu*) obogaljeni i/ili ubijeni, usled čega kosmos ponovo postaje kaos, u romansama se pojavljuju i uspešni umetnici-teurzi. Paulina u *Zimskoj bajci* i Prospero u *Buri* su možda najbolji primeri, koji svojim „nadilaženjem“ prirode i ukazivanjem na višu istinu putem pozorišne iluzije pokazuju da je dramaturg verodostojniji stvaralac od demijurga.

Posle kratke rekapitulacije paradoksalnih i često međusobno nekompatibilnih tumačenja Šekspirovih dela na osnovu aspekata metafizičkog dualizma preuzetog iz renesansnog neoplatonizma, u zaključku ove disertacije predlaže se detaljnije i dublje

izučavanje uticaja neoplatoničarskog koncepta materije, kao i dihotomije duh/materija, na dalju književnost i kulturu. Ovo bi moglo da ima implikacije za studije književnosti, ali i studije kulture, rodne i kvir studije.

Ključne reči: Šekspir, tragedije, problemske drame, dualizam, duh/materija, renesansni neoplatonizam

FIGURES OF THE MATERIAL AND THE CARNAL IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES AND PROBLEM PLAYS

ABSTRACT

We have in the past two decades, owing to the recently appearing translations of Ficino's works into English, witnessed a revival of interest in the phenomenon known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. Although not unknown to Shakespearologists, Renaissance Neoplatonism has long been neglected in interpretations of Shakespeare's works – especially the “darker” ones – as an overly marginal, eccentric, or optimistic concoction of notions on the harmony of the spheres. A deeper reading of Ficino's texts, as well as those of other Renaissance Neoplatonists and their ancient sources, offers an invaluable insight into the “dark” sides of both Neoplatonism and Shakespeare's “darker” plays.

This insight is also intriguing for areas of research other than literary criticism. It was in Shakespeare's age – now usually referred to as the early modern period precisely for this reason – that many of our own current cultural patterns were shaped, and Shakespeare's works certainly served as one conduit. Using as its starting point the assumption that basic metaphysical concepts can with great ease be transferred over time and space and built into the foundations of differing ideologies in the broadest sense of the word, and that unearthing and analyzing them is therefore an especially rewarding and useful endeavor, this dissertation chooses to focus on a metaphysical concept which lies at the very basis of (Renaissance) Neoplatonism. The metaphysical concept in question is the nearly invariably gendered and hierarchized spirit/matter dichotomy,

whose more sinister and “darker” manifestations in Renaissance Neoplatonism have frequently been neglected or misattributed to Christian influences.

The aim of this dissertation is to identify those facets of Shakespeare’s darker plays – primarily his tragedies and “problem plays” – that resonate well with the dualistic traditions extant in Renaissance Neoplatonism, analyze their possible meanings within the contexts offered by these religious and philosophical systems, and hopefully discover their further implications for understanding both Shakespeare and certain aspects of so-called Western cultures. The hypothesis is that the dualistic concepts derived from Renaissance Neoplatonism will resonate well with parts of Shakespeare’s work, revealing in their originaive context further notions illuminating further meanings attributable to Shakespeare’s text and our cultural atmosphere, many of which will be paradoxical and contradictory – much like Renaissance Neoplatonism itself.

The central portion of this thesis consists of a comparative analysis of approaches to the material and the carnal existing in, on the one hand, various branches of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and, on the other, Shakespeare’s work, primarily his tragedies and so-called “problem” plays. The individual chapters deal with possible approaches to matter and also possible steps along a Neoplatonic journey through the material world. This journey begins in “The Prison,” where the hero experiences those Neoplatonic sentiments that are on the anti-cosmic end of the spectrum. This, many Neoplatonists would hope, can induce him to attempt an “Ascent” towards the purely spiritual spheres. This ascent is often also inspired by female figures stripped of all carnality. The ultimate goal of Neoplatonic ascent is “Henosis,” in which the hero becomes one with the One. If the hero is not careful, allowing himself to be lured downward by carnal female figures, or if he is very adventurous indeed, he can instead begin a kenotic “Descent” into the depths of matter. This descent will allow him to face the “Nothing” of formless prime matter which is at the basis of the cosmos and his own mortal body. Faced with it, he will, some Neoplatonists would hope, realize that it is this nothing that everything comes from, and will strive to help the spiritual forces in the universe, of which he ultimately is one, form it lovingly. This is known as “Theurgy.”

As predicted, the analysis shows that the dualistic concepts originating from Renaissance Neoplatonism can indeed be found on several levels of Shakespeare’s

“darker” plays. Far from providing definitive answers to questions raised by Shakespeare’s work, the proffered analysis, as expected, merely increases the number of its possible interpretations.

It is concluded that the Neoplatonic concept of matter and its spirit/matter dichotomy exerted a formative influence not only on Shakespeare and his age, but the ages that followed as well, our own included. This insight offers implications for further research not only in literary criticism, but also cultural, gender and queer studies.

Key words: Shakespeare, tragedies, problem plays, dualism, spirit/matter, Renaissance Neoplatonism

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*Shakespeare is the happy hunting ground
of all minds that have lost their balance.*

(Joyce, *Ulysses*)

1.0. INTRODUCTION

It has become a commonplace to assert that it was in Shakespeare's age – now usually referred to as the early modern period precisely for this reason – that many of our current thought patterns, judgments, and hang-ups were shaped, for better or worse, which makes it a crucial era to mine for answers to the question of why we think and act the way we do now. (Grady 2002: 7)

Shakespeare's work, in particular, has served as a powerful conduit for concepts extant in the early modern period. It is not difficult to understand why. Firstly, there is hardly a thought that was thinkable in Shakespeare's time that remained unexpressed by one of Shakespeare's characters. Secondly, ideas tend to travel better through artistic expression than by any other means of transportation, spreading like airborne viruses where dry philosophies remain quarantined in various ivory towers. Neoplatonism in Renaissance England, as one very significant example, has been shown to have been a poetic rather than a philosophical phenomenon, (Jayne 1952: 238) and it was conceivably owing to this fact that it was so ubiquitous. Thirdly, Shakespeare's works were subsequently read by such disparate but influential figures as Coleridge, Freud, Jung, T. S. Eliot, and Joyce, who then further disseminated, in their own writings, the concepts they had absorbed from them.

Even if no other reasons existed – and they certainly do – the enduring impact of Shakespeare's works alone would suffice to justify undertaking a close analysis of those

concepts in them that would go on to build themselves into many of our own subsequent ideologies, some of which we continue to hold even to this day.

When the term “ideology” is used here, it will not be in its limited, derisive meanings delineated by Raymond Williams as “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group” or “a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge.” It will instead be used in Williams’ third meaning, “the general process of the production of meanings and ideas,” (Williams 1977: 55) to which Dollimore offers his own corresponding definition. Ideology, in his view, is “not a set of false beliefs capable of correction by perceiving properly, but the very terms in which we perceive the world.” (Dollimore 2004: 9) An ideology can thus be defined here as any system of beliefs that facilitates perceiving patterns and categorizing phenomena in our surroundings, accelerates our decisions – whether universal value judgments or practical, personal choices – and to which no one is immune. Ideologies can range from ambitious religious, philosophical, or political systems of thought to those idiosyncratic concoctions of views individuals may hold, but all have at their foundations certain basic metaphysical building blocks – the inherited responses to those fundamental questions unanswerable by empirical evidence – which are often concealed from view and unconscious.

Those metaphysical building blocks present in Shakespeare’s work that will be paid special attention here will be those that have unjustly been neglected for long – and those are unorthodox dualistic concepts belonging to the complex contemporary system of ideas known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. As Ted Hughes poignantly points out, the sudden disappearance of the tradition of Renaissance Neoplatonism from cultural awareness right after Shakespeare’s prime resulted in the tragic fact that “Shakespeare became in some essential aspects incomprehensible. The metaphysical system behind his drama” in time “became invisible.” (Hughes 2007: 171) Jill Line similarly laments the fact that the relationship of Platonic concepts “to Shakespeare and his plays is not so well known.” (Line 2004: xi) Even authors belonging to the schools of cultural materialism and new historicism now accede that it is not only permissible, but even necessary to deal with issues pertaining to spirituality and religion, for, as Fernie notes in his Introduction to *Spiritual Shakespeares*, the tendency of some critics to miss references to spirituality

“has resulted in serious neglect” of “important metaphysical dimensions of Shakespeare’s text.” (Ferne 2005: 8)

The aim of this thesis is to identify those facets of Shakespeare’s work that resonate well with the dualistic traditions extant in Renaissance Neoplatonism, analyze their possible meanings within the contexts offered by these religious and philosophical systems, and hopefully discover their further implications for understanding both Shakespeare and certain aspects of so-called Western cultures. I expect, as a loosely defined hypothesis, that the dualistic concepts derived from Renaissance Neoplatonism will resonate well with parts of Shakespeare’s work, revealing in their originative context further notions illuminating further meanings attributable to Shakespeare’s text and our cultural atmosphere, many of which will be paradoxical and contradictory – much like Renaissance Neoplatonism itself. Far from providing definitive answers to questions raised by Shakespeare’s work, I expect the following analysis to merely increase the number of its possible meanings and further confound any prospective spectator or reader.

Methods employed here will be eclectic, but will mostly be reducible to a classical comparative analysis of, on the one hand, those metaphysical systems available to Shakespeare primarily through Renaissance Neoplatonism and, on the other, those Shakespeare’s works – primarily tragedies and so-called problem plays – that, arguably, contain darker and thus more useful world-weary-and-wary sentiments. Some methods might resemble new historicism or deconstruction, although I do not subscribe to these schools of criticism, and I will also not shy away from sources belonging to psychoanalysis, whether Freudian or Lacanian, although I do not subscribe to it either. Parts of the thesis will employ what can be termed a feminist reading of metaphysics, as gender issues are perhaps the most intriguing implication of dualism, though certainly not the only one.

Several other tools are now officially permitted in literary criticism and will not be avoided here. Dealing with “spiritual” or “metaphysical” issues is, as has been noted, apparently enjoying a vogue even among those least likely to be invested in it, and discovering allegorical scaffoldings for literary works is once again permitted, though generally now, thankfully, practiced with much more caution, and without any

impression that a work of literature is ever reducible to allegory. (Bloom 2004: 511) Use of biographical data to illuminate an author's interest in a topic or even his "intended" meaning is not anathema any longer, (Kozuka/Mulryne 2006: 54) and Shakespeare is now, at "the start of the twenty-first century," finally allowed to have been quite aware of the intellectual currents of his time. (Batson 2006: 27)

These intellectual currents, as I hope to show, have at the core an unorthodox spirit/matter dualism which posits matter as the perennial dark other.

*The stone which the builders refused
is become the head stone of the corner.
(Psalm 118: 22, KJV)*

2.0. WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MATTER?

Basic metaphysical concepts are, arguably, absorbed more easily and permanently than wholesale ideological and religious systems. These fundamental concepts could be seen as metaphysical building blocks which lie at the foundations of the buildings of belief systems and ideologies. The foundations are concealed from view, but nevertheless shape the remainder of the building.

Who are we, humans? Are we our bodies or something else? Are our bodies good, bad, or inconsequential? Is the world fundamentally good or bad? Are we allowed to change it to make it more suitable for us? Are we perhaps even required to? Answers to those and other basic questions constitute the metaphysical building blocks that lie at the foundations of all belief systems and ideologies. For instance, an ideology of technological progress would have a hard time taking roots in a culture with a basic belief in a fundamentally good and holy nature that is not to be interfered with. We are more likely to accept an ideology if its metaphysical building blocks resonate with those we have already absorbed.

In the Psalm cited above – *The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner (Psalm 118: 22, KJV)* – the stone that the builders reject becomes the cornerstone of the house, which is usually interpreted in Christianity as referring to Jesus Christ, cast off at first but ultimately becoming the founder of a new

major religion. I would like to make an attempt at demonstrating that the fate of a particular metaphysical building block has been very similar.

This new cornerstone, officially rejected by the builders of orthodoxies, is something I would like to term the “dark otherness” of matter. It has never found its way into the official doctrines of any mainstream religious system. It has never been given the stamp of orthodoxy by any major monotheism. It has in fact been explicitly rejected as heretical by many an authority within the established orthodoxies. And yet, spirit/matter dualism has been an unremitting undercurrent throughout the history of what could loosely be termed the “Western” civilization, shaping far more than merely its religious and philosophical discourses.

The metaphysical spirit/matter split has profoundly influenced our outlook on such phenomena as art, science, technology and progress, to name but a few. It has helped fashion our ideologies, from the “highest,” purportedly universal ones, right down to the personal idiosyncratic ones we employ when making practical decisions about our lives. Most enduringly, perhaps, it has shaped the way we perceive and discuss our gender dichotomies. The building block of dualism discarded by the builders of orthodoxies has become the cornerstone of our civilization.

2.1. A SHORT HISTORY OF MATTER: THE DARK OTHER OF CIVILIZATION

“Matter” today conjures in our modern minds images of science labs, particle accelerators, and ever-changing models of the atom. A Google search of the word yields mostly results related to physics. This is, however, a relatively recent development. For over two millennia in the history of human thought, matter frequently represented something far more sinister, perilous and treacherous. It occupied the place of civilization’s Dark Other.

When this first came to be can never be known for certain. Our own scientifically enlightened conceptions of matter actually largely coincide with those of Pre-Socratic philosophers. Not that they actually used that word. Ionian “physicists” asked themselves what subsisted at the basis of all nature, and came up with different notions of the *arche*

(not that they used that word either). Thales saw water at the foundation of all existing things, Anaximander termed his elusive basis of nature the *apeiron*, and Anaximenes believed air could become rarefied or solidified and thus transform itself into the other elements. Empedocles thought there were four discrete elements forming the world, and Leucippus postulated that the world consisted of small indivisible particles he referred to as atoms.

They all believed that nature was wholly living and in a state of constant flux, which prompted later historians of philosophy to categorize them under the misnomer “hylozoists,” which implies that they saw all *matter* as animated and suffused with *life*. The early “physicists,” however, did not even *distinguish* matter from life. Nature was for them inherently living and ultimately one. Even when the word for “matter” made its appearance in Greek as *hyle*, its etymological meaning of “wood” simply denoted it as “that which things are made of.” This was mirrored in the Latin counterpart *materia*, but with the added bonus – or twist, if you will – of suggesting a link with the word for “mother” – *mater*. (Pavlović 1997: 17)

It seems that the distaste for matter and its relegation to the status of Other arose from the appearance of concepts opposed and superior to it. While “life,” “soul” and “spirit” existed as notions before the advent of dualistic metaphysical explanations of the world, they were seen as phenomena inherently immanent to “matter,” and not as separate, superior, immortal entities graciously deigning to animate it, if only for a short while. (Collingwood 1945: 6-7) The soul was perceived to be independent and separable from the body to the extent that the flame is independent and separable from, say, a candle. Once spirit began to be touted as the fixed and eternal part of the universe, matter itself changed as a concept to conform itself to being its perpetual Other. This is the point in the history of ideas at which beginning to use the term “dualism” becomes justified.

As an often misunderstood and misused label, and one that will be employed throughout this thesis as one of its keywords, dualism needs to be precisely defined in all its common varieties here. The most widespread error perpetrated by those encountering Neoplatonism of any sort in their study is the insistence that all Platonic thought is “monistic” and therefore fully compatible with monotheistic religions. This seems to be derived from the never explicitly articulated notion of dualism as restricted to those

metaphysical systems which condemn the entire cosmos and the body as wholly evil or those which see the dark other of matter as co-eternal and fully equal with spirit. As soon as a single seriously conducted categorization of dualisms is pitted against it, this notion begins to collapse. One such systematization of dualistic thought is given by A. H. Armstrong in his “Dualism: Platonic, Gnostic, and Christian.” Dualisms, Armstrong explains, have but one constant tenet in common – that of the existence of two distinct principles whose interaction in some way forms the world as we know it. The relationship between them and the state of the resulting cosmos can, however, be very different:

1. The two principles may be thought of as both unoriginated, independent and everlastingly operative in the nature of things. They may be perceived as (a) intrinsically opposed and in perpetual conflict (or conflict as long as this world lasts). This gives a conflict-dualism of what may be called the Iranian pattern. In this case one principle must be qualified as “good” and the other as “evil,” and one is expected to take the good’s side. Or (b) they may be conceived as equally independent, but working together in harmony. This seems to be prevalent in Chinese thought, and is certainly very well expressed by the Yang-Yin symbol. Its most radical and fiercely original expression in the Greek world is in the thought of Heraclitus: here it takes a very dynamic form, and the conflict and tension, which any doctrine of cosmic harmony which is sufficiently attentive to experience must recognize, is powerfully emphasized.

2. Or the second principle may be thought of as derived from and dependent on the first. [...] This derived and dependent “dark other” may be thought of as either (a) in revolt against, or at least opposed to, the first principle or (b) working in accord and co-operation, at least passive, with it. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 34)

This is almost fully in accordance with the systematization offered in Brandt’s seminal work on the sources of evil in dualistic religious systems, (Brandt 1989) which is based on two fundamental divisions of dualisms: on the one hand, into radical and emanative, and, on the other, into anti-cosmic and pro-cosmic. *Radical* dualisms (coinciding with Armstrong’s “1”) are those in which the two principles are both unoriginated and co-eternal, whereas *emanative* dualisms (“2”) are those in which one of the principles – usually the dark, evil, or inferior one – is derived from the other. *Anti-cosmic* dualisms (largely coinciding with Armstrong’s “a”) see the “bad” principle as

irreconcilable with the “good” one and any combination of the two as irredeemably evil and thus rightly doomed to failure. *Pro-cosmic* dualisms (largely coinciding with Armstrong’s “b”), conversely, even when they see the “dark other” as somewhat rebellious and recalcitrant, still consider the (relatively harmonious) cosmos to be a praiseworthy and heroic endeavor.

Dualism is thus extant in a religion, philosophy, or any other system of thought as soon as a second cosmic principle is first introduced into it. This may be conjectured to have first occurred in the history of what can be termed the “Western civilization” around six centuries BCE in Orphism, whose obsession with the afterlife centered on an eternal and preexistent divine soul. (Stoyanov 2003: 28) This pure soul was seen as fallen, imprisoned, and entombed in the material body, and in need of rescuing from it via ascetic and cathartic practices. Similar tendencies were shortly afterwards adopted by the Dionysian and Eleusinian mysteries, as well as the Pythagorean movement. (Savić-Rebac 1957: 24)

Pythagoras also saw the spiritual as fixed and eternal, and the material as a constantly fluctuating encumbrance to it. The spirit/matter dichotomy was explicitly gendered: in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, the light, male, limiting, ordering, numerical, musical principle is plainly qualified as “good,” and the dark, female, indefinite principle as “evil.” This was the “principle of formlessness, disorder and irrationality, and so opposed to the good principle of light and musical order”; however, the cosmos would not exist without it, and the existence of the cosmos was to Pythagoras an inherent good. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 35) Pythagoras’ ideas on metempsychosis and the eternal soul were taken over by Plato, as well as his relatively consistent pro-cosmism.

2.2. PLATO AND HIS WAKE

2.2.1. PLATO

Plato (424/423-348/347 BCE) is by far the most eloquent, coherent, and influential proponent of such theretofore revolutionary ideas as the immortality of the

soul, its opposition to (or at least uneasy relationship with) the body, and the division of reality into the intelligible and the sensible parts – the eternal Ideas and the constant flux of the perceptible world attempting to conform to them.

In the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, Plato expounds his doctrine of the immortal soul, pure and unchangeable, as opposed to the corruptible body. In the *Phaedo*, the presumed existence of non-empiric knowledge is taken as evidence of the preexistence of souls, their heavenly origin, and their prenatal knowledge of Ideas, which they swiftly forget upon their unfortunate embodiment.

In the *Symposium*, Pausanous opposes the masculine Aphrodite *Ourania*, the motherless daughter of Uranus, inspiring love of wisdom and leading away from the body, to Aphrodite *Pandemos*, the feminine daughter of Zeus and Dione, who can only inspire love of the body, leading to reproduction as merely a lower form of love for immortality. Socrates seems to concur with this division, quoting Diotima's dictum that true love strives for immortality. Those who wish to give birth in their bodies desire women and strive for immortality through their bodies, while those pregnant in their souls will only look at beautiful bodies in order to transcend bodies themselves and ascend towards pure, spiritual beauty. (Plato 1970)

The *Republic* contains the famous parable of the cave, whose influence on the cosmologies and cosmogonies of different philosophical and religious systems can hardly be overestimated. In Book 7 of the dialog, Socrates invites his interlocutor to imagine a group of people fettered in a dark cave from childhood, only able to see the shadows of real objects reflected on the wall, and mistaking these reflections for reality, even if they were somehow at some point to be granted freedom. "When one was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light," Socrates explains, "he would be pained by doing all these things and be unable to see the things whose shadows he had seen before, because of the flashing lights."

But the only road towards truth is this painfully dazzling escape from the shadows. The cave, an image of this world, is likened to a prison and to Hades itself. Its illusions must be fled if a soul wishes to be truly free and alive. As Socrates explicitly concedes, "if you think of the upward journey and the seeing of things above as the

upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you won't mistake my intention.”
(Plato 2004: 208-214)

Plato certainly has his moments of world-weary *ennui*, but it would be difficult to ascribe a persistent anti-cosmic sentiment to him. In the *Timaeus*, he explicitly lauds the actions of his cosmos-creating Demiurge, who shaped the preexistent chaos in imitation, albeit imperfect, of the divine Ideas: “the god took over all that is visible – not at rest, but in discordant and unordered motion – and brought it from disorder into order, since he judged that order was in every way the better.” (Plato 1997: 33)

The Demiurge received this chaotic, fluctuating “all that is visible” (which has often been, not without reason, likened to primeval matter – though Plato never uses the word “matter”) from a distinctly female-gendered “Receptacle.” (Plato 1997: 156) Plato refers to the Receptacle as “the nurse” of “all Becoming,” (Plato 1997: 177) and assures us that “we may fittingly compare the Recipient to a mother, the model to a father, and the nature that arises between them to their offspring.” (Plato 1997: 185) This is in keeping with the contemporary view of the part played by the mother in procreation – maintained, significantly for this thesis, until the seventeenth century, when the existence of the ovum was established – according to which the father provided the active, forming principle, and the mother merely the material to be formed. This is yet another reflection of what appears to be a constant facet of spirit/matter dualism – harking back, as we have seen, at least to Pythagoras – and that is the association of spirit with male figures, and matter with female.

As Plato's souls are all purely spiritual and thus male, he needs to use some serious mental gymnastics in order to explain the existence of two distinct sexes in humankind. In the *Timaeus*, therefore, he insists that the first incarnation of humans was composed entirely of males, who then, if they succumbed to low bodily passions, were then reincarnated as females – or, worse yet, beasts. (Plato 1997: 143-144)

Aristotle saw no reason to discard the gendered spirit/matter dichotomy he inherited from his teacher. “The male principle in nature,” he argued in his *Physics*, “is associated with active, formative and perfected characteristics, while the female is passive, material and deprived, desiring the male in order to become complete.” Few thinkers following Plato did. (Wiesner 2005: 25)

2.2.2. PLATO'S WAKE: MIDDLE PLATONISM AND NEOPLATONISM

As the known world slowly moved away from the bright period of classical antiquity and into what many would see as the decadence and degeneration brought about by the stability and prosperity of the Hellenistic period and the early Roman Empire, so thinkers following in Plato's footsteps appeared to be increasingly world-weary and decreasingly fond of matter in so-called Middle Platonism, extant between the second century BCE and the third century CE. The preeminent thinker of the period was Plutarch of Chaeronea, whose tract *On Isis and Osiris* characteristically describes how God, creating the world, managed to transform primeval matter into the world soul, but it still somehow continued to function as the source of all evil in the cosmos. Though it did not produce many original or noteworthy works, Middle Platonism demonstrates well the slow but steady progression of Platonic thought towards the intensifying anti-cosmic sentiments of the far more influential Neoplatonists proper.

Appearing in the same period and difficult to categorize, but maintaining a distinctly Platonic spirit/matter dichotomy along with the less-than-distinctly-Platonic insistence on the highly troublesome nature of matter, are the *Chaldaean Oracles*, the Hermetic writings, and the works of Philo of Alexandria. All these, Kristeller argues, prepared the ground both among pagans and monotheists for a revival of philosophical Platonism in the third century CE in Alexandria by Ammonius Saccas and his disciple Plotinus. (Kristeller 1961: 51) If the stability of the early Roman Empire brought ennui and satiety, then its crisis in the third century CE caused even more pressing anxiety about the perceptible world. This is the setting in which Neoplatonism proper emerged. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 1-2)

Following Plato, Plotinus systematized the universe into the hypostases of One, Intellect, Soul and Matter. The human soul is celestial, pure, and eternal, but has unfortunately fallen into the prison of matter, from which it must fully escape and return to the world of the divine Forms from which it hails. Otherwise, it will remain forever mired in the "mud of Hades," as Plotinus terms this apparently independent and ungenerated matter, (Turner/Majercik 2000: 39) explaining that it is simply "evil itself."

Numenius and Porphyry also locate the source of all evil in unoriginated prime matter, the latter explaining in his *Sententiae* that, matter in fact being absolute nonbeing, and thus an active principle of evil, the soul's salvation can only be attained via its final escape from the cosmos and into the realm of pure spirit, where it is "never again to find itself held and polluted by the contagion of the world." (Turner/Majercik 2000: 76)

In the later history of Neoplatonism, Plotinus' view that matter can only help create an irredeemably chaotic cosmos that is merely to be fled is abandoned, (Turner/Majercik 2000: 29) and the "dark other" accorded a somewhat more positive evaluation. (Turner/Majercik 2000: 36) Rejecting Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended soul, according to which the divine human soul never fully leaves its heavenly abode to wallow in the filth of the world, Iamblichus boldly asserts that, when the human soul enters a body, it descends entirely and does not leave its "head in heaven." (Turner/Majercik 2000: 68)

This allows Iamblichus to suggest a more positive and active role for the soul while it is in this cosmos, including participation in theurgic rituals that was so abhorrent to Plotinus because it involved dealings with tangible objects in the sensible world. As Gregory Shaw explains in *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, theurgy (*theion ergon* – a "work of the gods" or "working the divine") became an "integral part of the Platonic vocabulary" owing mostly to Iamblichus' writings in defense of it. (Shaw 1995: 5) Just as the Demiurge uses matter to create a relatively beautiful and harmonious cosmos out of it, so a theurgist can use matter in his rites and achieve divine status through them. (Shaw 1995: 26)

Iamblichus' cosmos is as good as a dualistic cosmos can be, but all the evil in it is still squarely blamed on matter. In his *De mysteriis* he deplores "the absence of beauty which is characteristic of matter" (Iamblichus 2003: 49) and explains that those souls "that are pure reveal themselves as wholly removed from matter, but those of opposite nature show themselves encompassed by it." (Iamblichus 2003: 99) The ultimate goal of each soul is still to escape the material world, and it is in this context that the (seemingly) revolutionarily pro-cosmic and pro-material practice of theurgy must ultimately be understood.

2.3. DUALISMS MEET MONOTHEISMS

When Alexander the Great colonized his newly founded city of Alexandria with Greeks, it had already been home to an indigenous Egyptian population, but also, significantly, to the largest Jewish community in the contemporary world. This extraordinary mixture brewing there during the Hellenistic period – the ancient Egyptian religion, Hellenized Judaism, Greek philosophy with its emerging Neoplatonism, and early Christianity subjected to all these influences – is what made Alexandria the Jerusalem of those dualisms which were to impact the Western world for millennia to come, and which arguably continue to do so. Two distinct phenomena occurring in early CE Alexandria will be mentioned here, as their role in connecting these disparate traditions is such that the history of ideas would look very different without them.

The first of these are the works of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria. A philosophically Hellenized, but ritually practicing Jew, he is usually taken to be representative of Middle Platonism. His allegorical interpretations of the Torah are, however, also sometimes categorized as a continuation of an ancient “form of Jewish Gnosticism” and a precursor of the Jewish Kabbalah which was in actuality a development of “the Gnostic material which Philo refashioned in the light of Platonism for the Hellenized community of Alexandria.” (Bentwich 1910: 160)

Philo’s Jehovah closely resembles the impassible and ineluctable supreme being of the Platonists, creating the world of ideas, but not directly involved in creating the material world, an act instead delegated to the hierarchically inferior Logos or Spirit of God. Significantly, the act of creation also presupposes the preexistence of a primeval matter, “destitute of arrangement, of quality, of animation, of distinctive character, and full of all disorder and confusion,” which is then formed and “invested with order, quality, animation, resemblance, identity, arrangement, harmony, and everything which belongs to the more excellent idea.” (Philo 1995: 19) Though the created world is as good and as harmonious as can be, its dwellers are still but prisoners of matter, whereas the high and mighty of the world are merely “the keepers of the prison.” (Philo 1995: 230)

The Platonic gendering of the spirit/matter dichotomy makes its way into Philo’s allegorical interpretation of the Mosaic account of the creation of man. According to it,

Adam is pure mind, whereas Eve should be taken to mean external sense, created while the mind is asleep, and susceptible to the temptations of carnal pleasures, as symbolized by the serpent. (Philo 1995: 66) In another interpretation of the same chapters of Genesis, Philo insists that Adam's creation from a lump of clay into which God breathed life should be read as the primordial matter that was to be his body being infused with divine spirit and thus formed and animated.

Without these thoroughly dualistic interpretations of the Torah offered by Philo and distinctly different from traditional monotheistic Judaism, it would be impossible to imagine much that was soon to follow, including Gnosticism, the Kabbalah, the Christian Neoplatonism of both medieval times and the Renaissance, and, before all, the wildly influential Hermetica.

The most important compendia of Hermetic writing include the *Corpus Hermeticum*, *The Emerald Tablets of Hermes Trismegistus*, and the *Asclepius* (Ebeling 2007: 10-11) which were written by various unknown authors belonging to a circle of pagan philosophers flourishing in Alexandria in the second and third centuries CE. The Hermetica – their traditional themes including, according to Ebeling, “the soul's imprisonment in the body, its rule over the body, its release from the body, and its return to its creator” (Ebeling 2007: 24) – are a bewildering mixture of Platonism and Stoicism, alchemy and magic, combined with Persian and Jewish influences. (Yates 1864: 3) These Jewish influences are strong enough to distinguish Hermetic thought from fully “pagan” Middle Platonism, where it is sometimes classified, along with Philo. Many, Yates notes, have been struck by the resemblances between the book of Genesis and the “Genesis” of Hermetics, the opening chapter of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. (Yates 1964: 23-25)

In it, Trismegistus receives a vision from Pimander, the “Nous of God,” of the creation of the world, which involved two intermediaries, “the demiurgic spirit as the model for the world, and the incorporeal proto-human as the model for man.” (Ebeling 2007: 13) The perceptible world having been formed in an erotically charged encounter between feminine Nature and masculine divine Man, the world and man are both composed of “two polar principles: one is matter, the world of darkness and chaos, “damp nature,” and the other is light, the ordering principle, God or the divine spirit.”

(Ebeling 2007: 12) Man rightly belongs in the highest, most spiritual realm, but he can descend into the lowest, if he relinquishes order and control over his passions. (Ebeling 2007: 16)

Trismegistus, thanking Pimander for these invaluable revelations, wishes also to know how he can ascend towards the purely spiritual. Pimander explains that the mortal body dissolves upon death, but that the spiritual man rises through the cosmic spheres, shedding at each step along the way the corresponding portion of his nature that is still stained with the evil of the material. Recognizing, at last, his purely spiritual essence and origin, man can finally fully merge with God. (Ebeling 2007: 15)

2.3.1. DUALISMS REJECTED BY ORTHODOX MONOTHEISMS

Constant in the Hermetica, Ebeling notes, is “a polarity in the world order, an opposition of divine spirit and dark matter.” (Ebeling 2007: 15) Though the world and the body are beautifully formed, the divine spirit in man yearns to be released from the bonds of matter and return into God. A profound ambivalence towards the world thus becomes a persistent feature of Hermetic texts, prompting some scholars to divide them into two discrete categories: one “monistic and optimistic, the other dualistic and pessimistic,” the second category distinctly resembling Gnostic teaching in its strong anti-cosmic sentiments. (Ebeling 2007: 32) The problem with such categorizations is that, firstly, one cannot label a metaphysical system with a spirit/matter dichotomy at its core “monistic” simply for displaying a slightly more pro-cosmic worldview; and secondly, as Ebeling concedes, gnosis itself is frequently divided into “pessimist gnosis” and “optimist gnosis.” For the “optimist gnostic,” Ebeling explains, “matter is impregnated with the divine.” (Ebeling 2007: 22)¹

Being somehow “more dualistic” or “more pessimistic” is, thus, not necessarily a useful *differentia specifica* to be employed for distinguishing Gnosticism from Hermeticism – a task perhaps rendered moot by the fact that the “Gnostic” Nag Hammadi library itself contains five Hermetica. (Ebeling 2007: 10-11)

¹ The 1966 congress of Messina established the convention of distinguishing “gnosis” from “Gnosticism,” but this is a distinction Ebeling and many others do not seem to heed, perhaps for good reason. It will thus not be observed here either.

Gnosticism first appeared on the periphery of the Jewish world – Samaria, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, and, of course, flourished in Alexandria. Its name is an afterthought of historians of religion, and is based on the tenet that *gnosis* – direct knowledge of the divine – was necessary for salvation, and ignorance the worst sin. Its probable influences include Plato, early apocalyptic Judaism, Philo, and other allegorical “purely spiritual” interpretations of the Torah by Hellenized Jews who, especially after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE became increasingly prone to see the world as unjust and cruel. (Vukomanović 2003: 163-169)

“Anti-cosmism,” Michael Allen Williams notes in his paradigm-shifting book *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, is the feature most frequently chosen as the identifying mark of “gnostic dualism.” (Williams 1996: 96) However, he warns, many of the

sources usually classified as “gnostic” tended to renounce the body’s substance while at the same time finding a certain reassurance in the image traced by its form. Its substance, crude matter, subject to mutilation, disease, inevitable decay, shared in the instability of all matter, all bodies. Its substance was doomed. Yet its form was a mirror of the divine. (Williams 1996: 130)

As we can see, the only certain facet of dualistic thought is its consistent relegation of unformed matter to the status of dark other. Within each of its broad categories, widely ranging sentiments towards the cosmos created from this matter can be found. Having been somewhat oblivious to these shades of gray when constructing our histories of ideas, William notices, we have consequently arrived at a rather peculiar situation where

we have the “gnostics” labeled “anticosmic” and Plotinus as “procosmic.” The problem with such formulations is not that they are entirely wrong, but that they are abstractions which at best tell us very little and at worst can be seriously misleading. (Williams 1996: 133)

What could well be the sole definite distinctive feature of Gnosticism is its both religiously and politically subversive act of portraying the figure of the Demiurge who creates and then rules the cosmos as evil – or at least blind and blundering – and then

equating this figure with that of the Creator in the Torah. Marcion was particularly disposed to see the Jehovah of the Old Testament as an evil, judgmental tyrant. (Stoyanov 2003: 84) The Gnostic Demiurge, often going under such pseudonyms as Ialdabaoth, Samael, or Saklas, bears some resemblance to Plato's, as he fashions chaotic matter into a more harmonious universe, but is a much more sinister figure. His domain is invariably a dark prison doomed to collapse as soon as the sparks of divine light trapped in it are able to flee. This is most probably the reason why many ideas of Plato, the Neoplatonists, and Hermetics were "smuggled" into orthodoxies with relative ease, whereas Gnosticism has been consistently rejected by them.

Its metaphysical spirit/matter dualism itself is certainly and demonstrably not the reason. The dualism of Gnosticism is, actually, interestingly enough – unlike that of the Hermetics and some Neoplatonists – emanative, and not radical. Chaos is, in direct opposition to Greek philosophy, derived, and not preexistent in Gnostic myths, a difference made explicit in the tract *On the Origin of the World*. (Turner/Majercik 2000: 3) It concerns itself with the exploits of Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, who falls from the unity and immaculate light of the Pleroma – the fullness of spirit immanent in the first purely spiritual emanations derived from the heavenly One – when she desires to create a universe of her own. Her hubris compels the world of light to separate itself by a curtain which casts a shadow on Sophia's cosmos, thus creating the first darkness, otherwise known as matter. Sophia's reflection in the dark waters of primordial matter causes the serpentine Ialdabaoth to be spawned from it. Unaware of the heavenly world of light and thus convinced that he is the supreme being, he fashions the surrounding watery darkness into a cosmos. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 6)

The Apocryphon of John describes the subsequent creation of man, turning the Genesis narrative on its head. Unable to give life to his Adam which he made out of matter, Ialdabaoth is tricked into allowing the divine spark of spirit to be breathed into him, animating him, but also making him superior to his creator and captor. Sophia, having already repented of her grievous error, attempts to mitigate it by planting in Paradise two trees that could liberate Adam's spirit and by creating Eve who would help him decide to taste of them. Having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, the first humans realize they are divine sparks trapped in filthy material bodies and strive to escape from

their prisons. Enraged, Ialdabaoth throws them out of his Paradise and onto the earth, the bottom of the created world, where he keeps them intoxicated by carnal pleasures. Procreation, Ialdabaoth's infernal invention, makes sure there will always be divine sparks trapped in his realm, even if some enlightened human souls manage to leave it. (Williams 1996: 12)

In order to help them do so, a series of spiritual beings arrives to awaken the slumbering sparks to their true identity and origin, and most notable among these is the appearance of the eon known as Jesus, who even assumed the semblance of a human body to better approach them. This notion of Jesus only appearing to have taken on a human body in which to be born, crucified, and resurrected, is known as docetism and is pervasive in all anti-cosmic dualisms in which the body is merely a burden and a defilement. Only the elect elite termed the "pneumatics" were capable of understanding that Jesus' resurrection was merely a spiritual allegory for what happens to the soul when it is made aware of its heavenly paternity. The dimwitted "psychics" had to be humored with fairy tales of Jesus' incarnation and resurrection, whereas the "somatics," being entirely bodily, were incapable of receiving any message at all. (Pagels 1975: 5-7)

It is the Gnostic view of the body as an insignificant burden which may have made possible the apparent sexual equality that, as a general rule, prevailed among the Gnostics. (Morris 2008: 60) This equality of the sexes prompted Elaine Pagels to label Gnosticism as "protofeminist." This is, however, an overly enthusiastic qualification. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus promises that Mary Magdalene will be purged of her filthy femininity, and thus made worthy of discipleship, and *Zostrianos* clearly genders the darkness of matter as feminine, and the message of the treatise can neatly be summed up in its exhortation to "Flee from the madness and the bondage of femininity and choose for yourself the salvation of masculinity." (Armstrong 2007: 43-44) Divine sparks being essentially identical, and bodies being but deceptive dungeons, for those who have transcended the carnal, there simply are no sexes, as all are spiritual and thus masculine. A woman could arguably attain equal status only in a movement in which her female body was judged to be irrelevant, and in which procreation – though not necessarily also sexual intercourse – was absolutely prohibited.

This aspect is even more pronounced in Manichaeism, quite possibly the first truly radical anti-cosmic dualistic system of the spirit/matter variety. Its prophet, Mani, who taught in the third century CE, believed the cosmos to be a grievous error which is the result of an attack perpetrated by the eternally chaotic kingdom of darkness against the similarly eternal purely spiritual kingdom of light. His intricate mythology contains, among other illustrative gems, graphic images of creation involving the demonic Mother of Life fashioning the world out of the corpses of slaughtered demons – the canopy of heavens out of their skinned hides, the mountains out of their crushed bones, and the fertile earth out of the dung extracted from their bowels. Clearly, this earth is not meant to be a pleasant home for humans carrying the divine spark of pure spirit, but demonic forces still manage to keep them in deep sleep through pleasures of the flesh.

This is why Jesus arrives from the Kingdom of Light to awaken Adam to his spiritual origin and the light he carries within. (Stoyanov 2003: 103) Mani's Jesus is crucified as a symbolic lesson to humanity that only a radical split from the body will bring salvation to the soul.

Manichees, like Gnostics, divided themselves into the elect, sworn to strict asceticism, and followers, allowed to be married and sexually active, provided they abstained from demonic procreation which trapped more divine sparks in this vile world. (Stoyanov 2003: 105) Manichaeism also accorded its female members an enviable level of independence, power, and status.

Equality between the sexes, the prohibition of marriage, (Obolensky 1948: 201) and the division into the elect and followers are also characteristic of Bogomil teaching, which appeared in Byzantium, Bulgaria, and Bosnia in the 10th century under different names. (Obolensky 1948: 123) Bogomils believed in a docetic, not truly incarnated Christ, (Obolensky 137) as the Son of the True God would not take on an evil body in this evil world, ruled and created by the Devil. (Obolensky 1948: 180) Obolensky calls Bogomils “the missing link between Mani and the Cathars.” (Obolensky 1948: 289)

The Cathar church, arguably more influential in the Western world than the Bogomil heresy, appeared first in Italy in the 11th century (where its adherents were named Patarenes), and quickly spread to France, where it flourished. (Runciman 2008: 117) Its theology included, not entirely surprisingly, a docetic Christology and the belief

that the Devil is the creator and ultimate lord of this world – its malevolent Rex Mundi. (Obolensky 1948: 288)

Cathars likewise condemned marriage and placed an emphasis on asceticism, though rumors of promiscuous orgies followed in their wake. (Runciman 2008: 120-121) These rumors they did not care too much to disperse, as they openly confessed to preferring occasional fornication to marriage, which they considered to be institutionalized fornication, exacerbating the danger of procreation. (Runciman 2008: 149)

Not surprisingly, again, we see women in prominent roles. (Runciman 2008: 130) Esclarmande de Foix was one notable example. Considered to be one of the holiest among the Catharist elite, she participated in debates with the Catholics. On one such occasion, a Catholic monk, obviously scandalized, exclaimed “Go madam, spin at your distaff! You know nothing of such matters.”

Karen Armstrong argues that women enjoyed equality in anti-cosmically dualistic movements – which she terms “anti-sex heresies” – because, apparently, “once a woman shed her sexuality she was accepted as a perfectly respectable human being.” (Armstrong 1996: 51) However, as we have seen, most of these heresies were not necessarily anti-sex at all, provided that sex did not lead to progeny. What they certainly were was anti-procreation. It would appear that childbearing is the factor that makes women unequal in dualist-leaning cultures, not sex itself. Cathars, for instance, denied their sacrament, the *consolamentum* (a laying on of hands), to pregnant women. (Ozment 1980: 92)

Women could be equal in anti-cosmic dualisms provided they renounced their female bodies. On the other hand, in most contemporary orthodoxies, women’s bodies were not evil *per se*, and their reproductive functions were frequently duly lauded; however, these same bodies made women “naturally” different, which translated as “inferior and subjected.” One thing is constant and certain: a female body is an encumbrance in any religious system.

De Rougemont cites that Catharism allegedly spread in England in 1145. (De Rougemont 1983: 83) Arthurian romances and the poetry of courtly love provided a probable conduit for the ideas of the Cathars in medieval England. Eleanor of Aquitaine notably took her troubadours with her from the South of France when she married Henry

in 1152. (De Rougemont 1983: 123) Several authors have also intriguingly suggested that several strains within Protestantism, especially those of the more puritanical variety, share certain distinctive features – such as anti-clericalism, anti-ritualism, denial of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, and denial of the Incarnation or at least its importance – with medieval anti-cosmic heresies and could have been directly or indirectly influenced by them. (Stoyanov 2003: 9-16)

2.3.2. DUALISMS WITHIN MONOTHEISMS

Judaism has always placed emphasis on the relation between God and His creation and asserted that human history was significant as it prepared the Kingdom of God on Earth, which will entail a bodily resurrection of His people (Szulakowska 2006: 8); however, after the fall of the Temple in 70 CE, emerging apocalyptic tendencies combined with the influence of dualisms among Hellenized Alexandrian Jews contributed to the development of early Gnosticism and Kabbalah. Christianity adds to Judaism's insistence on the importance of the world and the body with its revolutionary doctrines of the Incarnation (Copenhaver/Schmitt 1992: 129) and the Resurrection of Christ (Velimirović 1972); however, the writings of Plato and some Neoplatonists were widely used by the early fathers of the church, mostly world-weary-and-wary monastics, with predictable results. Although the subject of this thesis does not include Islam, a relatively similar dynamic is observable in this religion as well. A staunchly monotheistic faith, Islam holds clear doctrines of creation as wholly good, of personal identity as inseparable from the body, and of a universal resurrection in the flesh; however, a steady influence of Plato and Neoplatonism resulted in the deeply mystical Sufi tradition which denies the reality of the world and of separate identities for human beings.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have thus all been heavily influenced by Platonic notions at different points throughout their respective histories, and a rudimentary, “original,” or “pure” monotheism appears to be impossible to excavate. However, certain tenets of “orthodoxy” are undeniable. As Shakespeare lived in a predominantly Christian country, the focus in our attempted excavations here will be on those Christian doctrines which had crystallized before his time and were – explicitly, clearly, and unambiguously

– universally accepted as orthodox by Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans alike.
(Cressy/Ferrell 2007)

Orthodoxy in Christianity is usually defined as conformity to those doctrines that the Christian Church held “at the time of, and following, the formal acceptance of the Nicene Creed” in 325 CE. (Morris 2008: 6) The Nicene Creed – still used in both Catholic and Protestant religious services and prayer manuals – expresses firm beliefs in God as the creator and ruler of the entire cosmos, in the second face of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, as fully incarnated, crucified, and resurrected, and in a general resurrection awaiting all human beings. This has always easily disqualified anti-cosmic dualisms, but pro-cosmic emanative dualisms, such as those inspired by Plato, have often found ways to masquerade as monisms.

This is why the distinction between “pagan philosophy” and “Christian teaching” made by John of Damascus is also useful to our discussion on what “orthodoxy” might entail – though this might not have been as easily perceived and accepted by all who identified as adherents of Christianity throughout its history. In the words of John Damascene, unlike the pagans, who divide reality into the intelligible and the sensible, Christians only truly distinguish between the created and the uncreated. God is uncreated, and everything else is created. Consequently, God is “wholly other” (Morris 2008: 50) and the nature of humans radically different from divinity. For orthodoxy, as Morris plainly puts it, “there is no divine spark.” (Morris 2008: 20) Christian mystics – like, for that matter, Jewish and Muslim ones as well – have therefore always cautiously avoided identifying themselves with God. (Pagels 1998: 33) Creation in monotheisms is humbled, separated from its creator by an insurmountable gulf and utterly dependent on him, but fundamentally whole and good. Crucially, “matter” as something dark, formless, and separable from “spirit” is not really a terribly useful concept in true monism. (Basil 2001) Like it has no “divine spark” of spirit, so orthodoxy has no “dark other” of matter. The cosmos and the human body are by definition wholly good (Kolakovski 1992: 40) and the origin of evil lies elsewhere – not in the dark, formless, and irrational nature of matter. Usually explained as the absence of good, evil is primarily located in demonic powers – significantly conceived of as incorporeal.

For Christian doctrine, man was created in God's image both in body and in soul, (Athanasius 2003: 26) if it is even possible to divide humans in this way. (Elkaisy-Friemuth/Dillon 2009: 91) A human being is created whole at the moment of conception, as opposed to Plato's description of an eternal, preexistent soul undergoing temporary embodiment. Though the idea of an *immortal* soul, also taken from Plato, appears to have become almost universally accepted by Christian theologians, a disembodied soul after death does not in Christianity possess the fullness of the identity held by the original earthly individual. (Szulakowska 2006: 13) This is, again, only provided that this separation ever truly occurs at death, even temporarily – a notion such theologians as Maximus the Confessor and Eriugena argue against. (Tunberg 2008: 139) Maximus follows Athanasius in being only able to imagine theosis in the body, commencing after universal resurrection has taken place. (Jevtić 1984: 58)

However, the subject of the body in Christianity, as the eminent Roman Catholic theologian von Balthasar concedes, “has always been, and still is, surrounded by forms of Platonism and spiritualism, which disparage the body and everything material in favor of a pure spirituality.” He asserts this can only be done “in crass opposition to the doctrine of the Incarnation of God in Christ: everything spiritual in God should become incarnate – and remain so even to the resurrection of the body.” He adds that the “concept of transcending the bodily sphere is unknown in the New Testament.” (Balthasar 1989: 80)

The New Testament was, however, read and interpreted by celibate men educated primarily in Greek philosophy. They saw in Paul's epistles the Greek word for “flesh” (*sarx*) – which in Greek could mean “our physical body, the self, our flesh, or humanity as a whole,” (Obach 2009: 13) while the corresponding Jewish concept referred to “man (soul and body together) in all his physical and moral frailty” (Armstrong 1996: 20) – and interpreted it to mean simply “the body as opposed to the soul.” Another, even more unfortunate twist was the subsequent use of the word “flesh” to denote sexuality. (Obach 2009: 10-13) Obach laments this development:

Ironically, even though Paul had expressly permitted men and women to marry on the basis of strong sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:9), the churchmen who came after him concluded that it was sinful for spouses to engage in marital relations for the sake of

satisfying their sexual desires! Thus the words of Paul provided future leaders with a rationale that enabled them to divide Christians into two classes. (Obach 2009: 12)

The Christian Church, built on the foundations of Judaism, which has yet to place any value on the unmarried state, thus became divided into lofty ascetic monastics and lowly married laymen – much resembling the elect and hearers of anti-cosmic heresies.

Some Fathers of the Church were notoriously inimical to the human body and its attendant sexuality to such a degree that the views they expressed are in direct opposition to the Church's official doctrines. Origen saw bodies as punishments doled out to previously purely spiritual beings for their sins, and his views were later officially declared anathema. Gregory of Nyssa, following Origen, declared that man was given his animalistic body with its disgusting sexual urges only after the Fall, and that the pre-lapsarian body was in contrast not subject to passions. His contemporary, but much more influential namesake Gregory of Nazianzus in contrast held that the only way in which human bodies were changed by the Fall was in their now acquired inertia. (Srbulj 2003: 36)

Tertullian, a member of the dualistic Montanists before his stint with Christianity, and founding the even more extreme Tertullianists after it, notoriously claimed that female beauty was dangerously seductive even to the incorporeal angels, and that the lust women were guilty of producing in men was the very gate to Hell. Ambrose, who believed that the body was but a dirty robe discarded upon death, wrote in his *On virginity* that man never acts as an irrational animal more than during coitus. Ambrose was followed in his views by the even more extreme Jerome.

In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Jerome expresses the type of misogyny usually only observable in fully dualistic systems: “As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.” (Armstrong 1996: 129) This is, of course, in crass opposition to Paul's differently misogynistic dictum that a woman will be saved through childbirth. (1 Tim. 2: 15)

Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* is a tract that has entered the annals of notoriety. Jovinian had taught that all baptized persons, whether virgins, married, or widowed, had

equal spiritual merit. In his vitriolic attack on Jovinian's position, Jerome exalts virginity and decries the "dirt of marriage" which the blood of the martyrs can barely wash clean. His shocked friends in Rome tried to withdraw it from circulation, Jerome agreed to write a retraction, and Augustine actually wrote *The Good of Marriage* in response to this extremism. (Obach 2009: 37)

Augustine's is a peculiar case. A fervent Manichee throughout his youth, during which time he cohabited with a woman, he was baptized into the Christian Church at the Easter Vigil in 387, whereupon he decided to become a monk, and not marry her. (Obach 2009: 30) Apparently unable to truly shed the Manichean mistrust of the body, he simply turned their teachings on sexuality on their head instead. Manichaeism allowed its followers the pleasures of sexual intercourse, as long as it did not result in procreation; Augustine, conversely, claimed that procreation was the *only* acceptable excuse for indulging in marital relations. (Obach 2009: 33) His additional complex strictures on how to make certain one is not engaging in them in a sinful manner notoriously made life difficult for those married couples who attempted to follow them.

To be fair to the Christian Church, those Fathers who expressed dualistic views invariably belonged to monastic orders not fully under its control, or came as converts to Christianity from dualistic heresies, or started their own. Some of their teachings were condemned after their death, when the doctrines they clashed with were officially declared, while some caused shocked reactions even during their lifetimes. There are, then, certain limits to the influence that dualistic thought has been able to exert on orthodox Christianity, pervasive and constant though it may have been.

Where Neoplatonism was most influential was in providing later theologians, especially in the East, with their philosophical terms and concepts. Most notable is the case of pseudo-Dionysius, a 6th century Neoplatonic mystic whose writings had been ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite, a disciple of Christ mentioned in the Acts and thus a figure of unquestionable authority. The confusion was only cleared in the 15th century, by which time his dualistic notions had already become ubiquitous in Christian mystical thought. Further influxes of dualistic thought into Christianity came with Michael Psellus, who mixed Neoplatonic concepts with those drawn from the *Chaldean Oracles* and the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the 11th century, and then with Gemistus Pletho and

Nicholas of Cusa, who revived Platonism in the 14th and 15th centuries. (Kristeller 1961: 52-53)

An ancient dualistic tradition in the history of Judeo-Christian thought thus begins to emerge before our eyes. Never truly broken – suppressed by the Church in anti-cosmic heresies, but smuggled through the Neoplatonic currents within that very same Church – this undercurrent of dualism was alive and well when Plato was resurrected to once more exert a direct influence on the history of ideas. The ground was thus well prepared for the consequent explosive revival of dualistic ideas in the phenomenon that would become known as Renaissance Neoplatonism.

*The one imperfect, mortall, foeminine:
Th' other immortall, perfect, masculine*
(Spenser, *The Faerie Queene, Book II, ix, 22*)

3.0. MATTER IN RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM

There have been several major infusions of the (post-)Platonic brand of dualism into the mainstream currents of the history of monotheistic Judeo-Christian thought. The first significant influx of dualistic ideas into orthodoxy occurred, as we have seen, in Alexandria. The second, without a doubt, took place in the Renaissance.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 was, according to many, a starting point for the Renaissance, as it was the Greek refugees from Byzantium who spread the knowledge of Greek in Europe. It was also from Byzantium that the Greek manuscripts of Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Hermetica reached the Western world and helped form the phenomenon that has since become most widely known as Renaissance Neoplatonism, (Copenhaver/Smitt 1992: 15) though Frances Yates usually refers to it as Occult Neoplatonism and Ted Hughes feels it necessary to expand the term into Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism. The disagreements concerning its name illustrate the complex and composite nature of the phenomenon itself. If it was difficult to differentiate among the various strains of post-Platonic dualistic thought when they first appeared, this becomes a well-nigh impossible task in this eclectic and chaotic movement.

Any discussion of Renaissance Neoplatonism must begin with, center on, and end with the fascinating figure of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who was directly responsible both for resurrecting each of the movement's various and sometimes disparate strains and for somehow managing to merge them into a relatively harmonious-seeming whole. He

was also, remarkably, able to widely publicize and disseminate this amazing amalgam that bordered on heresy – exerting a formative influence on his own and two subsequent centuries – as a Roman Catholic priest, and a scrupulous one at that. Ficino tries very hard not to contradict any accepted doctrines of the Church in his writings, which is why he sometimes resorts to conspicuously neglecting those that do not resonate well with dualistic ideas. For instance, he only mentions the Incarnation of Christ in passing, and almost completely omits the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. (Allen 2002: 58) He is thus able to consider himself a *Christian* Platonist and avoid noticing the inherent contradictions of such a designation.

3.1. FICINO'S (NEO)PLATONISM

Ficino's contribution to the revival of Platonic thought in the Renaissance could hardly be overestimated. Perhaps most significantly, he translated the entire Plato into Latin. This monumental translation was published in 1484 and included his prefaces for each dialogue. He also separately published a long commentary on the *Symposium* entitled *De amore*, which would become the seminal text of Renaissance love theory. Not stopping at that, he rendered the entire *Enneads* of Plotinus into Latin, and spent the last few years of his life publishing translations of other Neoplatonic authors, including Iamblichus, Porphyry, Proclus, Synesius and Michael Psellus.

Ficino's cosmology closely echoes that of the Neoplatonists. He divides the cosmos into the hierarchically ordered hypostases of the One, Mind (or Angel), Soul, and Matter (or Body), each mirrored in the lower sphere. The fundamental split existing at the basis of the universe, however, is that between spirit and matter, a dichotomy that is clearly gendered in his system. The spirit is male, ordering, and rational, whereas matter is female, chaotic, and irrational. The spirit/matter dichotomy is also, as it were, numbered, as the purely spiritual and masculine number 1 is likened to the maker of the world, imposing form on number 2, a fall from its perfect unity and thus given the role of indeterminate matter. (Allen 1994: 64)

Ficino is by no means clear on the position of matter in his cosmos, or the cosmos itself, which, as Sergius Koderka notes, is fully in keeping with his sources. In the

Timaeus, Plato's vision of the world is essentially optimistic, whereas the *Phaedo* stresses its perils to the soul. Among the Neoplatonists, Plotinus notoriously deplores the soul's contact with the corporeal world, while, on the other side of the Neoplatonic spectrum, we have Iamblichus, who sees it as a wondrous opportunity. Both approaches towards the material world are present in Ficino's own philosophy. On the one hand, matter is a defiling encumbrance to the soul from which it must ascend towards full liberation; on the other hand, the cosmos is filled with beautiful forms, of which the human body notably is one, and the divine spirit of man has both the right and the responsibility to propagate these forms and imprint them onto lower matter. (Allen 2002: 286-287)

The union of the soul and the body is, however, invariably uneasy, unpleasant, and almost tragic. The soul is constantly on the borderline between the immortal and mortal parts of the cosmos, and powerfully drawn towards both. The divine spirit, from which it has originated, beckons it back with reminders of its beauty as it is reflected in the forms of this world. The soul can, however, also succumb to the lures of matter, instead of striving towards the purity of spirit, and this is what Ficino calls "sin." (Allen 2002: 52)

By the sixteenth century, under the widespread influence of Ficino's writings and his Florentine Academy, modeled on Plato's, Platonism had become an extremely important aspect of popular culture and had an "almost ubiquitous presence" throughout Europe. (Kristeller 1961: 61) This, significantly, included England – especially its poets. Many of Ficino's theories, Jayne declares, "were in the intellectual atmosphere and could have reached England in a number of indirect ways," but there are also those English poets who were demonstrably directly impacted by Ficino's writings. There are, for instance, in Spenser's verses "verbatim quotations and sequences of ideas unquestionably taken directly from Ficino," (Jayne 1952: 217) and other poets who can be shown to have actually read Ficino include Raleigh, Burton, and Chapman. (Jayne 1952: 238) Other poets and thinkers have received Ficino's ideas via other sources, mostly poetic, resulting in a profusion of thought closely reflecting his own, and justifying his reputation as the "fountainhead" of Platonism in the English Renaissance. (Jayne 1952: 222)

3.2. THE RENAISSANCE MAGUS AS NEOPLATONIST, HERMETIC, ALCHEMIST, GNOSTIC...

Neo(Platonic) thought in the narrow sense of the designation is quite difficult to distinguish from other strains of Renaissance Neoplatonism partly because Ficino and his colleagues attempted to do no such thing. Though Renaissance Neoplatonists highly praised Plato, they saw him as merely one prophet in a long, never broken tradition of occult knowledge, later termed *prisca theologia*. According to Ficino's final list (he had several), this pre-Mosaic occult tradition encompassed Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato. This perennial wisdom was thus ultimately derived from Hermes Trismegistus, thought at the time to have been an ancient sage who had preceded and prophesied both Moses and Plato. The true age of Hermetic writings was only revealed in 1614, when Swiss philologist Isaac Casaubon dated them to the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. This explains the seemingly paradoxical decision Ficino made when the *Hermetica* reached him: he stopped his work on the complete works of Plato and translated Hermes first. Ficino's Latin translation appeared under the title *Pimander* and was relatively quickly available in the vernacular as well, causing quite a stir among a relatively wide circle. (Yates 1964: 13)

Hermeticism, with its gendered spirit/matter dichotomy and its ambivalence towards the created world, was quite easy to assimilate into the newly founded Neoplatonism, and its other aspects simply followed suit. The *Hermetica*, namely, also contained alchemical texts. Much like had been indicated in Iamblichus' theory of theurgy, it seemed possible to do the divine work of ordering and reordering matter through practical magic – only with juicier examples and some actual instructions. Alchemy was in Hermetic texts an investigation into matter and its transmutation into something more durable through applying the mysteries of birth, death, and resurrection. The transmutation of lead into gold served as a symbol for the transfiguration of the alchemist himself – his dark and dull *prima materia* turned into bright and solid spirit. Alchemy had not, of course, been unknown to the West before the discovery of the *Hermetica*, but it could now be taken seriously and practiced even by such otherwise sober “actual” scientists as Paracelsus. Almost all branches of practical magic, as long as

it was “white” – directed by and leading towards the spiritual – now seemed justified and sanctioned by divine Hermes who, after all, influenced Moses himself.

Renaissance Magia was another strain of Renaissance Neoplatonism that Ficino personally started. His popular three-volume treatise *De vita* which dealt, among other things, with statues, talismans, astrology, and daemonology, was suspicious to such a degree that Ficino was threatened with a Curial investigation.

Ficino’s pupil and colleague in the Florentine Academy, Pico della Mirandola, continued in the traditions his teacher had started. His thought contains Platonic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and Cabalistic elements, with a touch of Magia. His seminal *Oration on the Dignity of Man (De hominis dignitate)* written in 1486 has often been touted as the manifesto of humanism, partly because it accords man a great deal of operative power and free will. The operative power is based on the dualistic notion that man, being a spark of the divine, has the right to do divine work on the lower matter of this world. The free will is based on the Neoplatonic notion of the chain of being on which man, being divided into the spiritual and material parts, can freely ascend towards the purely incorporeal angels or descend to the fully carnal beasts.

The German magician, occult writer, and alchemist Cornelius Agrippa goes beyond both Ficino and Pico in his magic pursuits. His *De occulta philosophia*, whose three volumes were printed in early 1530s, and widely, albeit somewhat clandestinely disseminated, openly describes and advocates a powerful brand of operative magic based on a metaphysical dualism. It contains several treatments of harmony in the cosmos, in the soul of man, and the beneficial effects of music on the soul if it is composed in accordance with cosmic harmonies. These are followed by long discussions of the use of number and image in celestial magic, complete with the printed pictures of daemons to be employed by young aspiring Magi. (Yates 1964: 135) Agrippa exerted a powerful influence on two such figures: Giordano Bruno and John Dee.

Bruno’s philosophy, which he claimed was a *prisca magia*, (Yates 1964: 235) was a vertiginous concoction of Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Magic, the Cabala, astrology, and astronomy. Having spent time in Prague at the court of Emperor Rudolf II (notoriously obsessed with all things occult), apparently attempting to aid his pursuit of the philosopher’s stone, Bruno came on a mission of enlightenment to England in his

self-proclaimed role as “the waker of sleeping souls, tamer of presumptuous and recalcitrant ignorance, proclaimer of a general philanthropy.” (Yates 1999: 264) As Hughes surmises, surely “Bruno’s impact on England must have been the supreme experience of these years, a sensation closely associated with the leaders of the English Renaissance,” with whom Bruno was evidently in close contact. He dedicated his sonnets to Sir Philip Sidney, whose tutor had been John Dee. Shakespeare’s patron Southampton, in turn, was the best friend of the Earl of Essex, who married Sidney’s widow and inherited Sidney’s social circle along with her. Shakespeare was, Hughes concludes, therefore more than likely familiar with the ideas of both Bruno and Dee. (Hughes 2007: 169)

John Dee, the first and only widely known fully fledged genuine English Renaissance Magus, was also an eminent mathematician and a welcome guest in Elizabeth’s court. He was apparently sent on a mission to Europe and spent several years in Prague, staying with a noble family whose members were interested in alchemy and other occult sciences, and counseling Emperor Rudolf II. (Yates 2003: 102) When he returned, the times had apparently changed, and Dee suddenly fell into disfavor and finally died in penury. His end was better at least than Bruno’s, who was burned at the stake in 1600. The dreary fates of Dee and Bruno – as opposed to Ficino and Pico, who suffered few repercussions in their time – illustrate well the change of climate in which this still fledgling dualistic tradition was abruptly forced to go fully underground, which may be why we knew so little about it until relatively recently.

Another interesting dualistic strain of thought within Renaissance Neoplatonism, closely associated with its tradition of operative magic (but understandably never explicitly mentioned, as the term used for it has only ever been employed by outsiders, not adherents) was Gnosticism. Elements of Gnosticism, demonstrably present in the *Hermetica* and in the great magicians of the Renaissance, in Nuttall’s words, “show the tradition in living form.” (Nuttall 2007: 1) Both Nuttall and Mitchell have persuasively argued that Gnostic thought has endured in England for centuries – and that, for instance, its resurgence in Blake should not come as a surprise to anyone. Gnostic ideas were, in their view, disseminated throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance via such conduits as persistent Faustian themes in literature. (Nuttall 2007; Mitchell 2006)

Another possible conduit for Gnostic ideas was *another* significant strain of Renaissance Neoplatonism that should be mentioned here. Sixteenth century Jewish mysticism, first resurrected in Italy, contains, according to Yates, “gnostic elements which the Renaissance scholar could assimilate to the Hermetic type of Gnosticism,” (Yates 2003: 19-20) and Daphne Freedman concurs that its “proven Gnostic elements” disseminated via Italian Renaissance writers expounding it “provide a possible conduit for gnostic themes” into Renaissance Neoplatonism in England. (Freedman 2006: 75)

3.3. ... AND (CHRISTIAN) CABALIST

As Yates notes, apart from the fall of Constantinople in 1453, there is another date which has not been so much stressed by historians of the Renaissance, but which is at least equally important. This is 1492, the date of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Many of these exiles fled to Italy, inciting there a fascination with the Hebrew language and an enthusiasm for the Jewish mystical tradition. (Yates 2003: 18) The name used for this tradition here will be the “Cabala,” as this is the spelling usually employed for differentiating its Christianized form widely accepted in Western Europe from the strictly Jewish Kabbalah and the Hermetic Qabalah – although the teachings of the movements themselves are difficult to distinguish. All are based on the notion of En Sof as the ineluctable source of the ten Sephirot emanating from it and forming the Tree of Life, the spiritual basis of the visible universe. Most Cabalists of all stripes have frequently concerned themselves with allegorical, spiritualized readings of the Torah which accentuate the significance of letters and numbers – as each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has both numerical value and symbolic meaning assigned to it – and see reflected in them a divine harmony imprinted into the cosmos and the microcosm that is man.

First incorporated into Christianity by Ramond Llull in medieval times, the Cabala was a subject that Ficino also took a great interest in and was tutored in by a rabbi. It is, however, Ficino’s student Pico who is widely considered to be the founder of Christian Cabala. The Cabala evidently appeared to the mystically-minded Christians in the Renaissance as a new insight into the meaning of Christianity and a novel way to attempt to convert Jews. (Yates 2003: 18) Significant expositions of Christian Cabala

published after the expulsion of the Jews include Reuchlin's *De arte Cabalistica* (1517) and Francesco Giorgi's *De harmonia mundi* (1525). Both authors were also demonstrably influenced by Neoplatonism and Hermeticism.

Jewish intellectuals in Italy were themselves actively involved in this syncretic mystical revival of their tradition and easily accepted the Neoplatonic additions to it, as "Jewish philosophy itself was suffused with Neoplatonism." (Frank/Leaman 1997: 455)

An important Jewish Cabalist with a strong Neoplatonic bent was Leone Ebreo, whose *Dialoghi d'amore* between the lovers named Philo and Sophia possibly earned him the name "Philo Ebreo," which he was also known under. His *Dialoghi*, influenced by Ficino and Pico, were themselves highly influential among both philosophers and poets. Combining Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Cabalistic elements, Ebreo expresses the love of the beautiful in gendered symbolism: the beloved spiritual, active, male principle "impregnates" its material, passive, receptive female lover by imparting the form of beauty onto it. (Frank/Leaman 1997: 456-457)

Now considered to be the most significant Cabalistic text, the *Zohar* became authoritative and venerated among Italian Cabalists, Jewish and Christian alike, around the middle of the sixteenth century. Paradoxically, while the Talmud was being burned and other Jewish works subjected to severe censorship, the *Zohar* was, not without controversy, but without any repercussions, printed by two Christian publishing houses. (Frank/Leaman 1997: 460)

Another important development in the sixteenth century was the appearance of a new type of Cabala and its platonization and further dissemination in Italy. (Frank/Leaman 1997: 462) The kind of Cabala which had influenced Pico was Cabala as it had developed in Spain before the expulsion of the Jews. After the expulsion, a new kind of Cabala emerged and quickly spread like wildfire. (Yates 2003: 25) This was Lurianic Cabala, named after its founder, Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534-1572), the most important and influential Cabalistic mystic after the expulsion.

It is in the Cabala of Isaac Luria that Jewish mysticism – quite possibly owing to yet another exile of God's chosen people – takes a distinctly anti-cosmic turn. As Freedman notices, the myths of Lurianic Cabala, Gnosticism and Manichaeism are very similar, which does not necessarily mean, she warns, that the "origin of these views in the

lurianic cabala is necessarily gnostic,” as “they may equally reflect a parallel development of themes from Jewish exegesis or Jewish influence on gnostic texts; but the consciousness, if not gnostic, shows gnostic sensibilities.” (Freedman 2006: 75)

Armstrong agrees, stating that the “Gnostic character of these ideas, which constitute a new mythology in Judaism, cannot be doubted.” (Armstrong 2007: 171)

In what way is the “Gnostic character of these ideas,” or at least, their “gnostic sensibilities” reflected? Significantly, the supreme being of the system, the wholly transcendental En Sof, had little to do with the actual creation of the cosmos, which is only possible because of His absence. Having withdrawn to make space for the cosmos, He tried to fill the vacuum with His divine light, but sparks of this primal light fell into the abyss, where some remained imprisoned in this dark domain now ruled by the evil sephirah Din, much resembling the judgmental Demiurge of the Gnostics and likewise expressly identified with Jehovah. The first Adam was purely spiritual and only acquired a material nature after his soul was shattered owing to his sin. Like Gnostics and Manichees, Luria also preached a transmigration of souls until they are returned into the En Sof. (Armstrong 2007: 170-171)

The Cabala of Isaac Luria spread with astonishing ease and speed throughout Europe and demonstrably had adherents in England. Lurianic ideas were disseminated in Renaissance England through different conduits. As Richard H. Popkin notices in “A Jewish Merchant of Venice,” there was an actual Jewish merchant from Venice in England from 1596 to 1600, a hostage from the Earl of Essex’s raid on Cadiz by the name of one Alonso Nufiez de Herrera (Abraham Cohen de Herrera). He had studied Florentine Neoplatonism and Lurianic Cabala and “became the most important philosophical expositor of the Lurianic Cabbala.” In December 1596, he wrote to Essex that he was not Spanish and should not be kept with the Spanish hostages, but instead be allowed to move to London where he had friends. His request was apparently granted. (Popkin 1989: 330)

Additionally, English scholars studied in Renaissance Italy – where they came into contact with Pico della Mirandola – and the books of Johann Reuchlin appeared in England in the 16th century. Sir Philip Sidney, Robert Fludd, Sir Francis Bacon, and John Milton were demonstrably all familiar with Cabalistic ideas, enabling Shultz to declare

that in “sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, Kabbalah was in the air.” (Shultz 1981: 228)

3.4. THE NEOPLATONIC NARCISSUS

Renaissance Neoplatonism, as we have seen, incorporated Platonic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Gnostic, and Cabalistic elements. All of these different strains of the tradition had a gendered spirit/matter dichotomy at the core and were ambivalent towards the material world, making possible both pro-cosmic and anti-cosmic sentiments. On the one hand, ascending towards the purity of spirit was the ideal, as matter was an encumbrance to the soul; on the other hand, the harmony of the cosmos and the microcosm was undeniable, and the Magus was invited to introduce this harmony into the dark other of matter by way of theurgy, alchemy, and/or Magia. Matter in the dualisms offered within Renaissance Neoplatonism was, then, particularly ambiguous. Simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic, enthusiastically pro-cosmic and world-weary, transcendental and “proactive,” the Neoplatonism which the air that Shakespeare breathed was saturated with could not quite make up its mind on what the proper attitude towards matter was.

Three broad categories of approaches to matter, with different implications for views on kingship, art, love and gender, can nevertheless be identified. All three can be related to a particular Neoplatonic reinterpretation of the myth of Narcissus.



Narcissus (1594-96) by Caravaggio

The ancient myth of Narcissus has arguably experienced its most widely disseminated version in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to Ovid, Narcissus, a beautiful Greek youth, incurs the wrath of Eros by spurning the advances of the nymph Echo. His fundamental sin lies in his refusal to share his love – and his body – with the men and women who desire him. His punishment is symbolically appropriate: he is doomed to fall desperately in love with his own image reflected in water and drown attempting to become united with it. Poor misguided Narcissus obliviously continues to worship his reflection even in Hades. The moral of the story is clear: avoid solipsistic self-obsession and lovingly notice other human beings around you. In other words, don't be narcissistic.

Interestingly enough, Neoplatonists manage to interpret the myth in exactly the opposite way. Only three centuries after Ovid, Plotinus takes this story to refer allegorically to the soul's fall into the illusory but alluring world of lower matter. In Plotinus' interpretation, Narcissus represents the soul of the Neoplatonic Everyman, who is called upon to contemplate the beautiful forms imprinted upon the matter of this world only to be inspired by them to ascend into the purely spiritual realms of Ideas:

When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddlingly a man wanted to catch and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. (Allen 2002: 289-290)

This interpretation remained highly popular throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages and made its way into Renaissance Neoplatonism unscathed. Ficino interprets the myth of Narcissus in his *De amore* in terms very reminiscent of those used by Plotinus:

Narcissus, *who is obviously young*, that is, the soul of rash and inexperienced man. *Does not look at his own face*, that is, does not notice its own substance and character at all. *But admires the reflection of it in the water and tries to embrace that*, that

is, the soul admires in the body, which is unstable and in flux, like water, a beauty which is the shadow of the soul itself. *He abandons his own beauty, but he never reaches the reflection.* That is, the soul, in pursuing the body, neglects itself but finds no gratification in its use of the body. For it does not really desire the body itself; rather, seduced, like Narcissus, by corporeal beauty, which is an image of its own beauty, it desires its own beauty. And since it never notices the fact that, while it is desiring one thing, it is pursuing another, it never satisfies its desire. For this reason, *melted into tears, he is destroyed;* that is, when soul is located outside itself, in this way, and has sunken into the body, it is racked by terrible passions and, stained by the filths of the body, it dies, as it were, since it now seems to be a body rather than a soul. (Allen 2002: 289)

This interpretation is one of those Neoplatonic concepts that have demonstrably reached England, as a version of the Narcissus story from Ovid appeared in English in 1560. Its anonymous author cites Plato and Ficino as authorities for part of his work and proceeds to moralize about the treachery of watery matter in a similarly dualistic fashion. (Jayne 1952: 219)

The positive reception of this Neoplatonic interpretation of the Narcissus story in the Renaissance was conceivably facilitated by the concurrent rediscovery, translation, and propagation of Hermetic texts, in which Ficino played the pivotal role. A similar story to that of Narcissus can be found in *Pimander, Corpus Hermeticum V*. It is also distinctively dualistic in its metaphysics, but its dualism is slightly different in its approach. It regales us with the adventures of the newly emanated, purely spiritual Man:

Man [...] leant across the armature of the spheres, having broken through their envelopes, and showed to the Nature below the beautiful form of God. [...] Nature smiled with love, for she had seen the features of that marvelously beautiful form of Man reflected in the water and his shadow on the earth. And he, having seen this form like to himself in Nature, reflected in the water, he loved her and wished to dwell with her. The moment he wished this he accomplished it and came to inhabit the irrational form. Then Nature having received her loved one, embraced him, and they were united, for they burned with love. (Yates 1964: 23-25)

The parallels with the Neoplatonic interpretation of the story of Narcissus are striking. Both Narcissus and Man lean over the dark, formless waters of feminine matter,

and see their forms reflected in them. Both are commended for loving the reflection of their own spiritual form in the Other, rather than loving the Other herself. But Narcissus' water is merely deceptive and deadly, while the Hermetic Nature, though infinitely inferior to Man and unlovable for her own self, shows herself to be malleable and pliable, eagerly reflecting his image, and thus making Man's plunge into her waters a positive, creative act.

Ficino bases on the Hermetic story of Man's leap into Nature a captivating, if highly unorthodox, exegesis of the opening verses of the book of *Genesis* and offers it in his commentary on this treatise: "Here Mercurius is seen to be treating of the Mosaic mysteries," Ficino asserts, noting the similarity with the image of the Spirit of God brooding over the material waters "in the beginning," and thus creating the world by casting his reflection onto them lovingly. (Yates 1964: 23-25)

The interpretations of this basic allegorical narrative of the spiritual male figure who falls in love with his own image reflected in the dark feminine waters of matter and consequently plunges into them, either drowning or lovingly creating the universe, carry with them nearly all of the possible approaches to matter that were thinkable in Renaissance Neoplatonism, and were sometimes – as was shown was the case with Ficino – also actually *thought* by the same person. This is why the narrative of Narcissus and his three options will be very useful in delineating the structure of this thesis.

The first option available to Narcissus, standing on the brink of the waters and admiring his reflection, is the one advocated by Plotinus and Ficino in their moralizing accounts of the myth: Narcissus should realize that what he is looking at is the mere shadow of a spiritual reality – his soul, identical to that of the One – reflected onto the dark formless nothingness of matter. This beauty he has fallen in love with should inspire him to ascend far away from the shadowy illusions that this world offers and, rising far above matter, ultimately become one with the real deity, essentially identical to his own spirit. It is as anti-cosmic as Neoplatonism can get.

The second option is what, tragically, happens to Narcissus in the myth, as he does not seem to heed Plotinus' and Ficino's advice: Narcissus descends deep into the dark waters of matter, becoming indistinguishable from the material body.

The third option is the one suggested by the Hermetic story of the descent of Man, and also, paradoxically, espoused by Ficino in his interpretation of it, in which he was possibly inspired by Iamblichus' Neoplatonic system: Narcissus' reflection can form the watery matter lovingly and thus (help) create the universe. It is as pro-cosmic as Neoplatonism gets.

All three can be found in Shakespeare's work.

The central portion of this thesis will consist of a comparative analysis of approaches to the material and the carnal existing in, on the one hand, various branches of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and, on the other, Shakespeare's work, primarily his tragedies and so-called "problem" plays. The chapters will deal with possible approaches to matter and also possible steps along a Neoplatonic journey through the material world.

This journey begins in "The Prison," where the hero experiences those Neoplatonic sentiments that are on the anti-cosmic end of the spectrum.

This, many Neoplatonists would hope, can induce him to attempt an "Ascent" towards the purely spiritual spheres. This ascent is often also inspired by female figures stripped of all carnality.

The ultimate goal of Neoplatonic ascent is "Henosis," in which the hero becomes one with the One.

If the hero is not careful, allowing himself to be lured downward by carnal female figures, or if he is very adventurous indeed, he can instead begin a kenotic "Descent" into the depths of matter.

This descent will allow him to face the "Nothing" of formless prime matter which is at the basis of the cosmos and his own mortal body.

Faced with it, he will, some Neoplatonists would hope, realize that it is this nothing that everything comes from, and will strive to help the spiritual forces in the universe, of which he ultimately is one, form it lovingly. This is known as "Theurgy."

*I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world
(Richard II, V. v. 1-2)*

4.0. THE PRISON

Narcissus, gazing at his beautiful reflection in the murky waters of matter, has three options: ascend far away from the shadowy illusions that this world offers, descend deep into the dark waters of matter, or form the watery matter lovingly.

In their moralizing interpretations of the myth, Plotinus and Ficino advocate the first option: Narcissus should realize that his gaze is meeting nothing more than the shadow of true spiritual reality reflected onto the dark formless nothingness of matter. The world that surrounds him is a mere imprisoning illusion that is ideally to be escaped from. Ficino explicitly maintains in his interpretation that the myth of Narcissus is an allegory for the soul which falls prey to the deceiving powers of the corporeal world. The world thus acquires a firmly negative undertone. (Allen 2002: 289)

This is as anti-cosmic as Neoplatonism can get without becoming something else.

4.1.1. THIS LOATHSOME WORLD: ANTI-COSMIC SENTIMENTS

Anti-cosmic attitudes, as we have seen, have a long-standing tradition in the history of religious concepts. Manichees and Gnostics, Bogomils and Cathars, to name but a few, frankly and openly admitted to entertaining a desire to break free from the

filthy and evil material world that imprisoned them and return to the pristine purity of spirit which they believed was their true legacy.

Neoplatonism proper, in contrast, approached the created world with mixed feelings. The ontology of Neoplatonism is usually categorized as a “pro-cosmic dualism” in histories of religious and philosophical thought – which sometimes does little more than make one wonder to what extent a dualistic ontology truly *can* be pro-cosmic, as it is quite difficult to find Neoplatonic thinkers who did not at one point express grave misgivings about the cosmos. Plotinus, who famously argued – against both Gnostics and Christians – that the created world is eternal, also expressed notoriously extreme anti-cosmic sentiments in his *Enneads*. Iamblichus, reputedly the least squeamish of Neoplatonists, who was not averse to theurgical rites involving “filthy” matter, still believed their ultimate goal was to liberate each fallen spark of spirit from the prison of this world. Both were intensively read and extensively quoted by Ficino, who inherited their ambiguity towards the material world. (Allen 2002: 286)

Shakespeare’s tragedies and dark comedies are densely inhabited by characters – usually male, often previously idealistic and naïve, quite frequently young – who at one point express strong anti-cosmic sentiments. These are nearly always, one immediately notices, the result of shock or disappointment. Hamlet’s melancholy and ascetic anti-cosmism following his father’s death (and, more importantly, his mother’s “o’erhasty marriage”) is probably the best example of this.

By persisting in mourning his deceased father in his black garb, Hamlet, perhaps unwittingly, courts the lofty Saturnian influences sought by Neoplatonic philosophers. In Renaissance Neoplatonic astrology, melancholics such as Hamlet traditionally belong under the auspices of Saturn. In Ficino’s own astrological system, Saturn occupies the most elevated position, as he comprehensively explains in his *De vita*, and his influence can be courted “by sorrow,” which Hamlet thoroughly does. (Ficino 1998: 295)

If there is any question as to why anyone would willingly choose mourning, isolation, and melancholy, Ficino explains that Saturn “helps one contemplate the more secret and the higher subjects,” (Ficino 1998: 295) as he “has taken over the things which transcend the physical.” (Ficino 1998: 365) Being under the influence of Saturn helps one ascend away from matter and, “via Saturnian Capricorn, the sign of contemplation, into

the world, not just of the stars, but of light itself, whence originally we descended into the ever darkening, sublunar realms of generation and the elements.” (Hutton/Hedley 2008: 44)

Hamlet’s melancholy, for better or worse, impels him to see the world with new, different eyes:

this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 298-303)

Contrasted here are two possible perceptions of the created world in Renaissance Neoplatonism: on the pro-cosmic end of the spectrum, the cosmos is indeed “most excellent” and “majestical,” as a reflection of heavenly spheres in the waters of matter; on the anti-cosmic end, being created from filthy matter, however beautifully formed, the universe truly is little more than “a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” and is best renounced and escaped. Under the influence of his Saturnian melancholy, the latter appears to be Hamlet’s choice, at least initially.

Other heroes in Shakespeare’s tragedies also renounce and strive to escape the world as a result of disappointment or sorrow. Romeo, upon hearing of Juliet’s alleged death, decides to likewise abandon “this loathsome world” and, giving money to the apothecary in return for the vial of poison, warns him that

I sell thee poison, thou hast sold me none.
Farewell! Buy food, and get thyself in flesh.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, V. i. 81-84)

His implication, of course, is that money – which can be used for sustaining repugnant bodily existence in this world – is the real poison, while the actual toxic substance is a blessed means to his delivery.

Cleopatra has a similar reaction to news of Antony’s death. The world becomes disgusting and dreary to her, and her proposed solution to this conundrum is also suicide:

Shall I abide
In this dull world, which in thy absence is
No better than a sty?
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xv. 60-62)

Horatio likewise believes it is futile to continue living without his beloved Hamlet, but Hamlet pleads with him to refrain from drinking from the poisoned cup:

in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.
(*Hamlet*, V. ii. 348-349)

It is not an appealing prospect. Stoic Horatio may choose to continue to endure being crucified on the wheel of fire that is worldly existence, but less stalwart heroes such as Lear will understandably prefer to escape into death, as Kent says to those attempting to resuscitate the late king:

O, let him pass, he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.
(*King Lear*, V. iii. 314-316)

Before his own attempted suicide, betrayed and blinded, Gloucester proclaims: "This world I do renounce, and [...] Shake patiently my great affliction off." (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 34-35) When Edgar first sees his father in this condition, he exclaims

World, world, O world!
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age.
(*King Lear*, IV. i. 10-12)

Edgar makes an important point here: death in the universes of Shakespeare's plays is often a voluntary means of escape from the strange mutations of the material world. Shakespeare consistently connects anti-cosmic sentiments with shock and disappointment, rarely putting them in the mouths of his wisest and most seasoned heroes. Gloucester's proposition to "patiently" shake his affliction off via suicide can easily be read as ironic, and he is eventually taught by his own disguised son that his life is a "miracle."

Nevertheless, anti-cosmic attitudes form part of an ancient and venerable Neoplatonic tradition, harking back at least to Plato's own numerous depictions of embodiment as imprisonment.

4.1.2. THIS HOLLOW PRISON OF MY FLESH: THE BODY AS A PRISON

Plato frequently made use of the fact that the words for "body" (*soma*) and "tomb" (*sema*) form a minimal pair in Greek, which conveniently allowed him to pun on the "body-as-tomb" (*soma-sema*). In the *Timaeus*, he described his vision of the descent and constraining embodiment of eternal souls, and in the *Phaedrus*, he explained that the body kept the soul imprisoned in it "by sense experience." (Shaw 1995: 26)

Although Plato arguably did not explicitly express many strong anti-cosmic notions, Plotinus and the ensuing Neoplatonists were only too rearing to read them back into his writings – and it was Plotinus that Ficino saw as Plato's best student who interpreted his wise teachings according to the uninterrupted *prisca theologia* of even more ancient wise men such as Hermes and Orpheus. Ficino explains how the body is to be seen both as a prison and a tomb, quoting Orpheus as claiming that "the body is the prison and tomb of the soul, so that, insofar as the soul is in the body, it is deemed to be dead." (Ficino 2005: 102) In a letter to Pellegrino degli Agli, Ficino reasserts that Plato laments the soul's fall into "the prison of the body." (Allen 2002: 127).

Shakespeare rarely passes up an opportunity to refer to the Neoplatonic notion of the body as a tomb and a prison to the soul in his use of metaphorical and allegorical

figures. One of the first instances occurs as early as *The Rape of Lucrece*, in the description of the heroine's suicide:

Even here she sheathed in her harmless breast
A harmful knife, that hence her soul unsheathed;
That blow did bail it from the deep unrest
Of that polluted prison where it breathed.
(*The Rape of Lucrece*, 1723-1726)

Titus Andronicus, written around the same time, contains very similar imagery. Shakespeare has Titus denounce "this hollow prison of my flesh" (*Titus Andronicus*, III. ii. 10) in his moment of misery.

Constance's body is referred to by King Philip in *King John* as both a tomb and a prison to her soul:

Look who comes here! a grave unto her soul,
Holding th' eternal spirit, against her will,
In the vild prison of afflicted breath.
(*King John*, III. iv. 17-19)

It should be noted that these exclamations occur after the "souls" inhabiting these "imprisoning" bodies have received significant shocks. Constance's son has been taken from her, Titus' sons murdered and his daughter raped and mutilated, and Lucrece's body apparently becomes a "polluted prison" only because it has likewise been raped. As has been noted, it is often grief that causes world-weariness and anti-cosmic dualism in the worlds of Shakespeare's plays, causing heroes to see the world through the black lenses of melancholy Saturn.

The imprisoning bodies then begin to seem overly stalwart and resilient, prompting heroes to rage against them. Lear feels compelled to cry out

O sides, you are too tough!

Will you yet hold?
(*King Lear*, II. iv. 197-198)

and Gloucester to avow

If I could bear it longer [...]
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out.
(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 34-41)

His “snuff and loathed part of nature” is, of course, his body. Gloucester imagines it burnt away through his suffering in this world.

Similarly, Hamlet’s flesh becomes “too too solid” when his father dies and his mother promptly remarries, but his image of how it should be destroyed is somewhat different:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!
(*Hamlet*, I. ii. 129-159)²

As a Christian (Neoplatonist), Hamlet knows that the prison of the body is not lawfully escaped via suicide, as the “Everlasting” has indeed “fix’d His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter.” The Roman Cassius in *Julius Caesar* has no such qualms; he knows that

life, being weary of these worldly bars,
Never lacks power to dismiss itself.
(*Julius Caesar*, I. iii. 96-97)

² It is worth noting that “solid” sounded both like “sullied” and “sallied” in Elizabethan pronunciation, (Burgess 1970: 183) which makes Hamlet’s exclamation even more interesting. Hamlet’s flesh is “sullied” because his mother, in whom it originated, has made it dirty, and “sallied” because it is attacked from both without and within.

Though nominally Christian, the overthrown and imprisoned king Richard II entertains similar notions:

Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot
Unlikely wonders: how these vain weak nails
May tear a passage through the flinty ribs
Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls.
(*Richard II*, V. v. 63-66)

The imprisoning body is here illuminatingly elided with the entire world. The king, incarcerated in a literal prison, begins this soliloquy by explicitly and deliberately allegorizing:

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world.
(*Richard II*, V. v. 1-2)

Thus the body as a prison is metaphorically identified with the world as a prison, while the speaker is locked in a genuine cell. Other heroes – Lear, Malvolio, Claudio, Barnardine – appear to be at least invited to attempt “studying” the very same thing when they find themselves trapped in actual prisons, more often than not because they have previously become slaves to the passions, which, according to contemporary Neoplatonic theories, stem from their bodies.

That the body was widely seen in the Renaissance as the microcosm, reflecting on a smaller scale the entire order (or disorder) of the universe, is one of the most often repeated commonplaces in the cultural histories of the period. (Kostić 1978: 36) What is not as frequently mentioned is that this does not only apply in the positive, pro-cosmic frame of reference, but in the negative, anti-cosmic one as well.

The body-as-prison is thus also the world-as-prison, and both are frequently elided with “earth.” Romeo calls his body “dull earth” and Sonnet 146 laments the poetic subject’s “Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth.” Gnostic Mother Earth, interestingly,

also traps divine sparks in her “matrix of chaos,” imprisoning them in earthly bodies.
(Stoyanov 2003: 88)

The maternal body is, of course, the very first prison of the newly trapped soul. When the Roman emperor Saturninus’ wife Tamora is delivered of a black child, her sons declare that the newborn must die. The baby’s father Aaron says to them:

He is your brother, lords, sensibly fed
Of that self blood that first gave life to you,
And from your womb where you imprisoned were
He is enfranchised and come to light.
(*Titus Andronicus*, IV. ii. 122-125)

Pregnant Hermione calls her daughter “My poor prisoner” (*The Winter’s Tale*, II. ii. 26) and the midwife Paulina subsequently explains to the jailer:

This child was prisoner to the womb, and is
By law and process of great Nature thence
Freed and enfrenchis’d.
(*The Winter’s Tale*, II. ii. 57-59)

This liberation from the mother’s womb is only relative, as it inevitably leads to the soul’s further imprisonment in this world. As Lear observes,

we came crying hither.
Thou know’st, the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. [...]
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.
(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 178-183)

Lear is here echoing Ficino, who notes that “not all who are dying lament, but that all who are being born do lament,” for “they enter upon this earthly journey as an exile, unwillingly it would seem from their tears.” (Ficino 2005: 313)

All these figures are masterfully connected in the scene from *Richard III* in which murderers come into Clarence’s cell to kill him, as instructed by the tyrannical usurper. Clarence cries in disbelief that Richard

swore with sobs
That he would *labor my delivery*.
(*Richard III*, I. iv. 244-245)³

One of the murderers laconically replies:

Why, so he doth, when he delivers you
From this earth’s thralldom to the joys of heaven.
(*Richard III*, I. iv. 246-247)

The imagery is brilliantly economical and eerily apt. It is the womb of Mother Earth that truly imprisons one’s soul. To “labor” one’s “delivery” is to effect a kind of a birth freeing one from it. To be delivered from it is to die.

4.1.3. THE AFFLICTED SPIRITS HERE IN THE PRISON: THE WORLD AS A PRISON

Hamlet notoriously asserts that the world is a prison in his conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Hamlet: What have you, my good friends, deserv’d at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?
Guildenstern: Prison, my lord?
Hamlet: Denmark’s a prison.

³ Emphases mine.

Rosencrantz: Then is the world one.

Hamlet: A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' th' worst. [...] To me it is a prison. (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 239-251)

This is, of course, no mere figure of speech. “Prison” is the favorite term used by all the relevant strains of Renaissance Neoplatonism – Gnostics, Hermeticists, Lurianic Cabalists, and Neoplatonists proper alike – to describe the created universe. Gnostics may be said to have held more distinctly anti-cosmic views than the Hermeticists, Cabalists and Neoplatonists – insisting, unlike them, that the very act of creation was a grievous error which must and eventually will be rectified – but all would agree that divine sparks are indeed imprisoned in this oppressive material world and long to escape it. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 121).

Hamlet’s universe truly is unrelentingly oppressive. Claustrophobically restricted to Elsinore and its surroundings, apparently constantly dark and “bitter cold,” eerily quiet, the world of the play is, like the Gnostic Demiurge’s domain, plagued by doubts and uncertainties, and hastily preparing for an attack from abroad. The world in which Hamlet finds himself at the beginning of his tragedy resembles a Gnostic universe presided over by an evil Demiurge much more than a Christian one, created and ruled by a benevolent deity. The persistent imagery of sickness, disease, ulcers and tumors (Spurgeon 1971: 316) should give those inhabiting it a clue that something is rotten in the state of Denmark, but the pleasant illusions created by the “most seeming virtuous” ruler keep his subjects complacently imprisoned. (Igrutinović 2007: 86)

Macbeth’s domain is similarly troubled. Veiled in constant darkness, filled with fears and terrors, and steeped in disorder and injustice, it is ruled by an evil, spiritually blind tyrant. There is little wonder that Gnostic-leaning Harold Bloom has felt the urge to refer to *Macbeth* as a “full-scale venture into a Gnostic cosmos.” (Bloom 1991: 71) He goes on to elaborate:

Macbeth, my personal favorite among Shakespeare’s dramas, always has seemed to me to be set in a Gnostic cosmos, though certainly Shakespeare’s own vision is by no means Gnostic in spirit. Gnosticism [maintains] that one’s ambition to be

everything in oneself is only an imitation of the Demiurge, the maker of this ruined world. (Bloom 1991: 71)

Bloom, naturally, sees Macbeth as the Demiurge of his dark and chaotic world, and notes that *Macbeth* is one of those Shakespearean plays where one feels that “the cosmos, and not just the kingdom, is an apocalyptic stage,” and where one is clearly an allegory for the other. He sees this in *King Lear* as well. (Bloom *Macbeth* 2008: 340).

The kingdom – and the cosmos – ruled over by Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* is also a dark, chaotic, unjust realm. Its erring heroes, Gloucester and Lear, are both incarcerated in literal prisons by the evil tyrannical usurpers. The image of loyal Kent, who serves the one true King, suffering in the stocks, is the perfect figure of this universe.

Most of the action in *Measure for Measure* takes place in a literal prison, and most of the characters find themselves in it for different reasons. This dark abode is presided over by the “demigod” Angelo, who is the reason most of his subjects are trapped in it. The Everyman of this microcosm, Barnardine, is a “Bohemian born; but here nurs’d up and bred.” (*Measure for Measure*, IV. ii. 130-131) His true home is elsewhere – tellingly, in Bohemia, the contemporary center of “secret studies” (Yates 1964: 313)⁴ – but, having been incarcerated in Angelo’s prison for so long, he has forgotten where he harks from. He spends his days in a drunken stupor, not even attempting to flee, although he might, if he wanted to:

A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep, careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come; insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal. [...] He hath evermore had the liberty of the prison; give him leave to escape hence, he would not. Drunk many times a day, if not many days entirely drunk. We have very oft awak'd him, as if to carry him to execution, and show'd him a seeming warrant for it; it hath not mov'd him at all. (*Measure for Measure*, IV. ii. 142-152)

⁴ According to Frances Yates, the Bohemian Emperor Rudolph II held his court in Prague and gathered there astrologers and alchemists from all over Europe “to assist in his melancholy search for the philosopher’s stone.” Giordano Bruno joined them in 1588, before his tour in England. (Yates 1964: 313)

Blind and oblivious to the true reality of the external world, though bound only by his own ignorance and intoxication with the world of matter, he rages and swears at those coming to awaken him and remind him of his mortality. (Igrutinović 2009: 112) In Greenblatt's words,

penned up, drunken, filthy, and rustling in the straw, the convicted criminal Barnardine is the embodiment of everything that is mortal, bodily, and earth-bound. (Greenblatt 2010: 13)

Malvolio's imprisonment in the "hideous darkness" of the "dark house" somewhat resembles Barnardine's incarceration in Angelo's prison. Malvolio, unlike Barnardine, is sufficiently enlightened to complain about the imprisoning darkness, but insufficiently enlightened to be freed of it. Feste explains to him, in strikingly Gnostic terms: "I say there is no darkness but ignorance." (*Twelfth Night*, IV. ii. 28-47) Just like Barnardine, Malvolio finds himself imprisoned in the darkness of this world because of his blind ignorance.

5.1.4. T'ACCOUNT THIS WORLD BUT HELL: THE WORLD AS HELL

Malvolio's entire metaphysical conversation with Feste is illuminating:

Malvolio: never was man thus wrong'd [...] they have laid me here in hideous darkness.

Clown: Say'st thou that house is dark?

Malvolio: As hell. [...]

Clown: Madman, thou errest. I say there is no darkness but ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog.

Malvolio: I say this house is as dark as ignorance, though ignorance were as dark as hell; and I say there was never man thus abus'd. (*Twelfth Night*, IV. ii. 28-47)

Malvolio may be dim and ignorant, but he is aware enough to realize he has found himself in hell. The porter of Macbeth's castle realizes as much when Macduff knocks in the night:

Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of Hell Gate, he should have old turning the key. [...] Who's there, I' th' name of Beelzebub? [...] But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further. (*Macbeth*, II. iii. 1-21)

It has often been pointed out that the porter closely resembles the keepers of Hell's gates in miracle plays depicting Christ knocking on them prior to His harrowing of Hell. (Kostić 1994: 217) Murray explains in his "Why was Duncan's Blood Golden?" that Shakespeare "will identify Macbeth's castle with hell in the porter scene, which is based on the duality of this world and hell." (Wain 1968: 284) The answer to J. Dover Wilson's question "Where does Macbeth open, on earth or in hell?" (Wilson 1933: 32) is thus "both."

Murray cites Paracelsus for the notion of this earth simultaneously playing the part of hell. Other thinkers belonging to the Neoplatonic tradition also express such ideas. Xenocrates believed that it is this sublunar realm that is actually the Hades and Numenius attributed to Pythagoras the doctrine that Hades is the whole area between the earth and the moon. (Elkaisy-Friemuth/Dillon 2009: 23) Philo refers to ordinary mortals as "skulking in the caverns of Hades" and as "partaking in things earthly and nurtured on the things in Hades." Such a view was very much in line with contemporary and later Platonism, though starkly opposed to that of later Christianity. (Elkaisy-Friemuth/Dillon 24) Cathars likewise did not believe in Hell or Purgatory, as they taught that the devil's abode is the world that we live in. (Runciman 2008: 147) In a nutshell, this is as bad as it gets.

In the more anti-cosmic strands of Renaissance Neoplatonism, thus, there is no hell – only this material world. This is the hell *Macbeth* is set in. It would arguably be ridiculous overkill to see Macbeth hauled off to hell like Faustus is at the end of Marlowe's play. It should be noted, however, that in *Dr. Faustus* the unhappy magus asks the summoned demon: "How comes it then that thou art out of hell?" and Mephistopheles replies laconically: "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it." (*Dr. Faustus*, I. iii. 77–78) He later further elaborates this notion:

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
In one self place, for where we are is hell.

(*Dr. Faustus*, II. i. 124-125)

It should again be noted that such strong anti-cosmic views that would identify this world with hell can often, when held by Shakespeare's characters, be merely the result of disappointment. It is, for instance, only because "love forswore" him in his "mother's womb" and left him disproportioned "like to a chaos" that Richard proposes "t'account this world but hell" as long as he lives. (*Richard III*, III. ii. 153-171) Sometimes, however, we are not allowed to simply disregard such complaints.

Just like Macduff knocks on Hell's gate in the night to harrow it and awaken its sleeping inhabitants, so Feste and the Duke arrive in the dark domain under the guise of priests to visit and teach the ignorant souls trapped in the prison of this world. The Duke's

I come to visit the afflicted spirits

Here in the prison

(*Measure for Measure*, II. iii. 4-5)

has both a Gnostic and a Lurianic ring to it. The afflicted spirits are the sparks of spirit fallen into the loathsome prison of the material cosmos and trapped in it by its evil ruler.

These images of divine sparks trapped in the dark prison of this cosmos which is a kind of a hell and ruled over by an unjust and blind tyrant who is a kind of a devil can be found in such belief systems as Gnosticism and Lurianic Cabala. They have never had a place in mainstream orthodoxies.

4.1.5. THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS IS A GENTLEMAN: THE DEVIL AS "THE PRINCE OF THE WORLD"

The Ghost of Old Hamlet appears to his son in order to expose this world as a dark prison ruled by a usurper. The usurper is no mere political figure:

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,

A serpent stung me, so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus'd; but know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.
(*Hamlet*, I. v. 35-40)

Maynard Mack says in "The World of *Hamlet*" that the play has an "almost mythic status [...] as a paradigm of the life of man," (Jump 1968: 87) as truly great plays, in his words, "present us with something that can be called a world, a microcosm." (Jump 1968: 86) In this microcosm, Hamlet – as a kind of an Everyman – is faced with the fact that there is "something godlike about his father" and that "Denmark was a garden then, when his father ruled." But "a serpent was in the garden" and now the serpent wears his crown. (Jump 1968: 101)

This is a shocking image for anyone who has had their expectations formed by mainstream versions of Biblical Christianity in which a story about a seditious serpent in a garden must end very differently, with both the serpent and his rebellious followers punished by God. There is nothing orthodox about the idea of the devil taking over the world from its rightful ruler. There is certainly nothing orthodox about the figure of the serpent wearing the crown.

The serpent who wears the crown can easily be found in Gnostic writings, though. Ialdabaoth, the blind Demiurge of Gnosticism, and the tyrannical ruler of this fallen universe, is actually described as serpentine in the tenth section of the *Apocryphon of John*. (Nuttall 2007: 13)

According to Hamlet's ghostly father, Claudius

won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.
O Hamlet, what [a] falling-off was there
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow

I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!
But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
So [lust], though to a radiant angel link'd,
Will [sate] itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.
(*Hamlet*, I. v. 41-57)

Catherine Belsey notes that the Garden of Eden was, in Shakespeare's time, the locus of the archetypal seduction, where the serpent seduced Eve and Eve seduced Adam. This seduction scene contained definite sexual overtones:

Conventional representations of the Fall make evident the sexual component of the whole episode in the nudity of the central figures, and sometimes in their gestures as well. The serpent, meanwhile, sustains the erotic reference: sometimes the snake is overtly phallic; alternatively, it often has the face of a woman, to show how sexual desire endangers men.
(Hawkes 2005: 56)

Interestingly enough, while none of the mainstream Christian theologians saw the Fall in terms of sexual seduction, except Justin Martyr – and his notion has been discarded by the Church, which doctrinally considers demons to be purely spiritual and thus incapable of coitus – the story of Eve's very explicitly physical "seduction by the Devil or the Demiurge" was one of the most famous Gnostic teachings concerning the Fall. Cain was supposedly the fruit of that union. (Stoyanov 2003: 84)

Just as the devilish and serpentine usurper Claudius sexually seduces Gertrude, so the demonic deputy Angelo attempts to seduce Isabel. He notoriously demands that she yield to him in return for her brother Claudio's life. Isabel explains to her brother what the price would be for the remittal of his death sentence:

There is a devilish mercy in the judge,

If you'll implore it, that will free your life,
But fetter you till death.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 54-56)

The devil who rules this world appears to be offering earthly life in exchange for carnal sin, which in turn keeps his victims even more firmly imprisoned in his dark abode. This is a notion most commonly encountered in anti-cosmic dualistic systems such as Gnosticism and Catharism. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, the Clown presents a similar doctrinal conviction in his conversation with the Countess:

Clown: I think I shall never have the blessing of God till I have issue a' my body. [...]

Countess: Tell me thy reason why thou wilt marry.

Clown: My poor body, madam, requires it. I am driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that the devil drives. (*All's Well That Ends Well*, I. iii. 24-30)

It is ultimately unclear whether it is God or the devil that rules and requires progeny and procreation, which in Shakespeare appear to be consistently and unapologetically ambiguous, often with humorous effects. The situation encountered in *Measure for Measure* is undeniably the far less humorous of the two, although both doctrinally belong to the realm of anti-cosmic dualisms, where it is the evil ruler of this world, opposed to the One True God, who presides over matter, sexuality, and procreation.

This has not always been readily noticed in religious interpretations of *Measure for Measure*, which relatively straightforwardly see it as a Christian play. Knight, for instance, asserts in his "*Measure for Measure and the Gospels*" that the "religious coloring" of the "allegory or symbolism" towards which the play tends is "orthodox." (Stead/Dyson 1971: 91-92) Most allegorical interpretations firmly identify the Duke with the Christian God, and, somewhat less assuredly, associate Isabella with Man's Soul or the Church, and Lucio with Satan. Establishing the God-Duke parallel in his "Comic Form in *Measure for Measure*," Nevill Coghill, as one example, points out that Duke Vincentio

had long since ordained laws the breach of which he has never himself punished [...]; he has withdrawn himself into invisibility from the world of which he is the lord, but remains as it were omnipresent and omniscient, in the guise of a priest, seeking to draw good out of evil; he reappears [...] in righteousness, majesty and judgment in the last scene. (Coghill 1955: 21)

This is not meant to be taken as an assertion that the identification of the Duke with God as seen in Christian orthodoxy has been uniformly seen as unproblematic. The Duke has been seen as unfit for the role of the Almighty for “violating law and religious observance” (Cole 1965: 428) by hearing confessions in the guise of a priest, for his “seemingly motiveless malingering,” (Lawrence 1969: 25) and for hurting people and treating them “as if they were inhuman cogs to be manipulated.” (Gelb 1971: 29) C. K. Stead offers a litany of accusatory questions:

Why does this prophet of mercy tell Juliet that her contracted husband, the father of the child in her womb, is to die “tomorrow,” when in fact he has no intention of allowing the execution to occur? Why does he load more pain on the already suffering Isabella by letting her believe Claudio has been executed? Why does he sententiously urge Juliet to repent of her “mutual entertainment” with Claudio, and then urge Mariana into Angelo’s bed (assuring her “it is no sin”) – when the contract of neither pair has been blessed by the church? Why does he labor to convince the suffering Claudio that there is no escape from death? Why does he manipulate events to bring about the marriage of the virtuous Mariana to a man who has attempted (in effect) both rape and murder? (Stead/Dyson 1971: 16-17)

Stressing the Duke’s arbitrariness, Stead goes on to argue that serious problems arise “if we are to look to the Duke, as to Jesus, for a consistent ethic.” (Stead/Dyson 1971: 17) The basic premise, however, that *Measure for Measure* offers an orthodox cosmos in which the Duke, were he but a little nicer, could easily play the role of the Christian God, has gone virtually unchallenged.

Few critics expounding the allegorical interpretation of the play have, for instance, ventured to explain why the Duke-God leaves his realm to another’s rule – as

God leaving the world to another's rule is certainly not in line with any orthodox Christian teaching – and who it is exactly that he leaves it to.

The role of the evil usurper of the One True God's authority fits well with the figure of the Gnostic demiurge, who rules this lowly dark domain and traps divine sparks in it using both carnal pleasure and legalistic scriptures. The cosmogonies of various Gnosticisms were extremely heterogeneous, but they agreed on two points, according to Stoyanov: their anti-cosmic dualism (which has at times been contested), and their identification of the Gnostic Demiurge of the material world with the Old Testament Creator and legalistic ruler of the world (which has not). (Stoyanov 2003: 84) Marcion in particular insisted that the Old and New Testament had different Gods appearing in them. The New Testament God was good and merciful; the Jehovah of the Old Testament was evil and strictly legalistic. (Vukomanović 2003: 204) Angelo can thus certainly figure as a Marcionite Jehovah, who snatches the lowly abode of the material world away from the good and merciful Duke.

John Donne observed in his sermon on the Gnostics preached on Easter Monday 1622 – proving, among other things, that Jacobean certainly knew and thought about Gnostic doctrines – that Gnostics generally ascribed mercy to the One True God, who is far away, and legalistic justice to the evil Jehovah of the Old Testament:

All their errors were upon this ground, this root. They could not comprehend that the same God should be the God of Justice, and the God of Mercy too [...] Hence they came to call the God of the New Testament, a good God, because there was *Copiosa Redemptio*, plentiful Redemption in the Gospel: and the God of the Old Testament, *Malum Deum*, an ill God, because they thought all penalties of the Law, evil. (John Donne's sermon on the Gnostics, preached on Easter Monday, 1622) (Nuttall 2007: 2)

Angelo undeniably resembles a Gnostic Demiurge, but he also resembles the evil *sephirah* Din in the Cabala of Isaac Luria, which represents justice divorced from mercy, and which rules over this fallen material world as part of the Old Testament Jehovah.

In Lurianic Cabala, the One True God, En Sof, withdrew at one point to vacate room for the cosmos, attempted to fill it with divine light, but the vessels conducting it had broken, so sparks of this light fell into the abyss that was the absence of God.

(Armstrong 2007: 170) Thus the Duke withdraws, attempting to inspire his realm to rise (as indicated by the name “Escalus” – the first word uttered by him in the play), but the world instead comes crashing down.

According to Luria, some of the sparks of divine light managed to return to the divine world, while others remained trapped in the Godless realm dominated by the evil Din (“Judgment”), a lower *sephirah* no longer held in check by the other *sephiroth* (Mercy, Compassion, Patience, Majesty and Stability, all of which were originally in perfect balance) after the breaking of the vessels. Dominated by Din, Armstrong notes, “they together become “The Impatient One,” the deity revealed in the post-lapsarian Torah,” or the God of most of what is usually referred to by Christians as the Old Testament. (Armstrong 2007: 171) This certainly resembles the world of *Measure for Measure*, where the legalistic judge Angelo rules over his dark realm, where he imprisons the real ruler’s subjects.

It can be said, in reply to all this metaphysical allegorizing, that Angelo simply represents humanity. As the “demigod authority,” Angelo certainly can and does stand for mankind and secular authority, as opposed to God’s justice. However, Isabel’s tirade on

man, proud man
Dress’d in a little brief authority
(*Measure for Measure*, II. ii. 117-118)

also closely echoes patristic readings of the Old Testament to find explanations for the existence of evil.

In order to prove that the fall of angels was caused by their pride, Tertullian quotes Ezekiel: “Because thine heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas; yet thou art a man, and not God.” (Ezekiel 28: 2) Augustine draws the same conclusion, only quoting Isaiah:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend to heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God! (Isaiah 14: 12-13)

The quotes in question also clearly mention men, not angels, but are taken to symbolize angels who fell from Heaven. Similarly, Angelo in his proud authority can be taken to signify both man and angel, towards which his name would additionally seem to point, though also denoting his seemingly immaterial human nature. The rumor that “this Angelo was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation” (*Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 104-105) is another possible indication of this. (Igrutinović 2009: 112)

Angelo thus represents, among other figures, a fallen angel ruling the world as God’s deputy. The notion of the devil ruling the world in God’s stead can be found in the doctrine of the Bogomils and the Cathars, who both had the figure of the devil as the creator and ruler of the world. The Bogomils taught this notion through the New Testament parable of “the bad servant” (Luke 16: 1-9) and the parable of the prodigal son. (Luke 15: 11-32) (Stoyanov 2003: 134) The Cathars saw the devil as the evil *Rex Mundi*, the king of this world. Bogomils and Cathars are mutually connected, though it is the latter group that has exerted a more lasting influence on Western ethics and esthetics, primarily through the poetry of courtly love and Arthurian romances. (De Rougemont 1983)

Angelo, cast in the role of the real deity’s deputy, whether he be demigod or demiurge, the Gnostic temporary lord of the temporary prison world, or the Marcionite evil god upholding the cruel letter of the old law, the Cabalistic *sephirah* of Din or the Bogomil “bad servant,” has a demonic, not angelic, part to play. Explicit identifications between Angelo and the devil in the text – “Let’s write “good angel” on the devil’s horn” (*Measure for Measure*, II. ii. 15) and “This outward-sainted deputy [...] is yet a devil” (*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 88-91) – confirm Angelo’s demonic status and thus the clearly unorthodox “coloring” of the play’s imagery. (Igrutinović 2009: 112)

4.1.5.1. **THOUGH HE BE AS GOOD A GENTLEMAN AS THE DEVIL IS: SOME POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ANTI-COSMISMS**

Angelo is in one way actually a rarity among the demonic usurpers of divine authority in Shakespeare, as he is not represented as a king. The majority of Shakespeare's evil rulers of the world are figured as anointed kings, thus subverting the doctrine of the divine right of kings – which harks back to Constantine (Vukomanović 2003: 245-246) and was quite vigorously upheld by James (Burgess 1970: 204) – from both ends: the political as well as theological. If an anointed king can be an evil tyrannical usurper, then kings do not have unquestioned supernatural license and support, but also, conversely, God Himself is not the omnipotent creator and ruler of the world, as he is depicted in all Christian orthodoxies. The already mentioned Claudius is certainly a devilish king, as is Macbeth:

Not in the legions
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd
In evils to top Macbeth.
(*Macbeth*, IV. iii. 55-57)

Bogomils and Cathars believed that, as the world was governed by the devil, all its rulers – kings, queens, the nobility, and all others holding political power – had in fact been given this power by the demonic king of this world, as it was only the devil that could confer such favors to his adherents. The Clown in *All's Well That Ends Well* is perhaps the most explicit in expounding this very doctrine:

But sure he is the prince of the world; let his nobility remain in's court. I am for the house with the narrow gate, which I take to be too little for pomp to enter. Some that humble themselves may, but the many will be too chill and tender, and they'll be for the flow'ry way that leads to the broad gate and the great fire. (*All's Well That Ends Well*, IV. v. 49-55)

Edgar allows himself similar license under the clownish guise of Poor Tom: “The prince of darkness is a gentleman. Mudo he’s call’d, and Mahu.” (*King Lear*, III. iv. 143-144) Very similarly, in *Henry V* Fluellen begins his tirade with: “Though he be as good a gentleman as the devil is, as Lucifer and Beelzebub himself.” (*Henry V*, IV. vii. 137-138) The message is very clear: the devil is the first among the esteemed and powerful gentlemen of this world.

Shakespeare, of course, did not exactly invent the phrase “the prince of the world”: the devil is mentioned in the New Testament as “the ruler of this world” (John 12: 31; 14: 31; 16: 11), “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2: 2), and “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4: 4). He allegedly promises the world to those who will obey him (Matthew 4: 8-9), and his domain is a sinful world under an evil power. (1 John 5: 19) However, it is also clear that Satan does not really have power over anything, including the sublunar world (1 John 4: 4), only the souls of those who accept him, and that if Satan can be said to rule the world in any way, it is merely the corrupted part of humanity manipulated through deception and sin, and not the tangible created world. (Revelation, 12: 9)

Augustine takes great pains to explain the Biblical references to the prince of the world in orthodox terms:

The devil is not called the prince of this world, in the sense of being Lord over heaven and earth; God forbid. The world here stands for the wicked dispersed over all over the world. In this sense the devil is the prince of the world, i.e. of all the wicked men who live in the world. The world also sometimes stands for the good dispersed throughout the world: God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5: 19). These are they from whose hearts the prince of this world shall be cast out. Our Lord foresaw that, after His passion and glorifying, great nations all over the world would be converted, in whom the devil was then, but from whose hearts, on their truly renouncing him, he would be cast out. But was he not cast out of the hearts of re righteous men of old? Why is it, Now shall be cast out? Because that which once took place in a very few persons, was now to take place in whole nations. What then, does the devil not tempt at all the minds of believers? Yea, he never ceases to tempt them. But it is one thing to reign within, another to lay siege from without. (Augustine of Hippo, cited in Thomas Aquinas’ *Catena Aurea*, exegesis on John 12: 27-33)

Since the figure first appeared in the history of mainstream Christianity, Satan has consistently been taken to be the ruler of this world in the sense of ruling those who are legalistic, unjust and hypocritical, and this was notoriously first applied to the Jews of the Sanhedrin. (Pagels 1996: 102-107)

Even Auden feels the need to explain:

When the New Testament speaks of the 'Prince of this world,' it certainly does not mean the Prince of Cosmos nor assert that, so long as they are on earth, human souls have no option but to obey the orders of the Devil. By *this world* is meant, I should guess, Leviathan, the Social Beast. (From the review of Dodd's *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety*) (Kirsch 2005: 126-127)

The proponents of the doctrine of the divine right of kings similarly took great pains to prove that the monarch's right to rule is directly conferred by God, who is Himself the king of the cosmos, starting with Constantine's leading "ideologue" Eusebius of Caesarea, (Vukomanović 2003: 246) and culminating, in Shakespeare's time, with James' treatise on rule, *Basilikon Doron*, which, among other things, claimed that

God giues not Kings the stile of Gods in vaine,
For on his Throne his Scepter doe they swey.
(Kastan 2005: 129)

The King is a kind of a God and the God is the ultimate King, conferring the authority to rule the world to His chosen and anointed earthly kings. But if, as is the case in anti-cosmisms, the world is a prison ruled by a devilish usurper, the true God is unknown and unknowable and very far away, and every human being is in fact a trapped spark of the one true divinity – thus decentering the right to rule – then the whole construct of the divine right of kings comes crashing down, and we potentially have on our hands a very subversive ideology indeed.

The convergence of religious and political figures seems to come naturally to humans. As one very pertinent example, some thought currents in otherwise very

monotheistic Judaism took a distinctly anti-cosmically dualistic turn after the fall of the Temple and the Jews' expulsion from Jerusalem in year 70, which may have been one of the chief contributing factors to the emergence of Gnosticism proper. (Stoyanov 2003: 78; Bentwich 1910: 160) Nuttall explains the persistence of Gnostic ideas apparently throughout the history of humankind in plainly political terms:

It may be that there is a fundamental impulse in many cultures to say simultaneously "We live under a tyrant" and "The true king is good but lives far away." If a secular equivalent is sought, the seemingly subversive, democratic legend of Robin Hood gives us indeed bad King John, oppressing the people, but also, at the same time, good King Richard Coeur de Lion, far away in the Holy Land. [It has been observed that in medieval England the peasantry believed unshakably in the justice of the king but considered his officers corrupt. (Nuttall 2007: 270)

Shakespeare, as we have seen, appears to be at times subversively toying with anti-cosmically dualistic interpretations of Biblical verses. Using royal figures for that purpose, in allegory, does not weaken the political subversion, but instead only reinforces it, adding to it a theological dimension – and *vice versa*.

To appreciate how close to the verge of explicit anti-cosmism Shakespeare can veer, we can contrast his "prince of darkness" scene in *King Lear* with the source that he used for it. Dr Samuel Harsnett narrates a scene of an alleged exorcism in his *Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures*: a devil who describes himself as "Monarch of the World" appears, accompanied by "two men and an vrchin boy"; Harsnett scoffs at this and notes that he is "skuruiily attended" for such a lofty title. (Muir 1956: 153) This is not surprising, as no orthodox author would take either a demon's or pretend demon's claim to be the ruler of the world seriously. Harsnett obviously does not.

Lear is similarly attended, and Gloucester similarly asks "What, hath your Grace no better company?" Edgar replies that "The prince of darkness is a gentleman." (*King Lear*, III. iv. 142-144) This yields no comic response. We are left to attempt to make sense of this on our own. Is Lear a comic fake devil without the comic relief that even Harsnett provided to his readers? Or, more plausibly, is he, the true king of the realm, virtually alone in the wilderness because this world is ruled by the devil? Anti-cosmic

dualists had no qualms about interpreting the “prince of the world” verses liberally and literally, and, apparently, neither did Shakespeare. He at times seems to seriously entertain the idea of the devil as the real ruler of the world, which is both dualistically heretical and politically subversive.

Greenblatt famously argues in his “*Shakespeare and the exorcists*” that Edgar’s unenviable situation bears a resemblance to the contemporary situation of the Jesuits in England, although he cautions that the

resemblance does not necessarily resolve itself into an allegory in which Catholicism is revealed to be the persecuted, legitimate elder brother forced to defend himself by means of theatrical illusions against the cold persecution of his skeptical bastard brother Protestantism. (Parker/Hartman 1985: 178)

Even if it is not a neat allegorical representation of Catholic priests attempting to operate under an oppressive illegitimate usurper, *King Lear* can be and has in fact at least once actually been interpreted to support the case for “recusancy.” Greenblatt notes that a company of traveling players in Yorkshire included *King Lear* in a repertoire that also incorporated a “St. Christopher Play.” The plays were performed in the manor house of a recusant couple, and the players themselves and their organizer were in trouble for recusancy and were investigated by the Star Chamber in 1610. (Parker/Hartman 1985: 178)

It is very interesting to note that the areas where Catholicism was still stubbornly strong were commonly condemned by the reformers as the “dark corners of the land.” (Cressy/Ferrell 2007: 5) This expression certainly makes the “Duke of dark corners,” as he is referred to in *Measure for Measure*, (IV. iii. 157) very interesting as a figure, especially since he furtively revisits his realm in the garb of a Catholic priest. The absent Duke, just like the absconding king Lear, and the persecuted Gloucester and his older, legitimate son Edgar, can all appear to be Catholics, oppressed but righteous adherents of the old religion.

Traditional Roman Catholicism in the first half of the sixteenth century in England, most historians now agree, was quite “lively, popular and robust” (Cressy/Ferrell 2007: 2) and there were “numerous pockets of recusancy” where the

rituals were retained. (Doran 2001: 51) About 1570, Catholics still outnumbered the Protestants and most of them had remained loyal to Elizabeth. After 1574, however, when the Pope began to send Jesuits into the country, the position of domestic Catholics became more complex and religious freedoms were suppressed. (Hussey 1971: 35) As the Catholics considered Elizabeth to be an illegitimate child of Henry VIII and thus an illegitimate queen, (Gottschalk 1974: 66) she is probably the muse who inspired the many treatises written in her lifetime by Catholics on the right to depose heretical, usurping rulers. (Hadfield 2004: 2)

The Catholics in late Elizabethan England thus felt – much like the Gnostics and Lurianic Cabalists – oppressed under an ungodly usurper, while their true spiritual home lay elsewhere. (Prior 2005: 256) Just like being a Jew living in exile demonstrably did, it is conceivable that being a Catholic under an increasingly hostile Anglican rule could also have inspired both politically seditious and religiously subversive notions and sentiments. If he came from an at least nominally Catholic family, as is increasingly and ever more persuasively being argued, (Batson 2006: 17) this is the religious and political atmosphere in which Shakespeare would have grown up.

Others have, perhaps less convincingly, argued that Shakespeare had, at least at one point in his life, Puritan leanings. (Dusinberre 1975) Puritans, interestingly enough, lay on the other extreme point on the doctrinal spectrum on which Elizabeth attempted to find a precarious balance, but at times felt similarly oppressed by the Anglicans. One of the possible reasons why Shakespeare has sometimes been taken for a Puritan is that, after about 1597, he demonstrably used the Geneva Bible for his citations, the same Bible that the Puritans used. (Brake 2008: 149)

The Geneva Bible notoriously came packed with controversial marginal explanatory notes. Many of them were explicitly anti-royalist. The word “tyrant,” for instance, which cannot even be found in the King James Bible, occurs over 400 times in the Geneva translation. King James was understandably not pleased, and Barlow, one of the chroniclers of the making of the King James Version, wrote down that the king had found most of the notes “very partial, untrue, seditious, and savoring too much of dangerous and traitorous conceits.” (Nicolson 2003: 58)

Whether Catholic or Puritan or neither, Shakespeare appears to have had definite sympathy and understanding for oppressed religious minorities who felt they were living under a usurping tyrant, while their true spiritual home remained abroad.

4.1.6. THERE COMES A POWER INTO THIS SCATTERED KINGDOM: HELP FROM BEYOND

One thing that Catholics and Puritans in England at the turn of the century had in common was that both these oppressed religious groups might have supported the intervention of a foreign power. Jean R. Brink argues in “What does Shakespeare leave out of *King Lear*?” that the Anglican establishment was “by no means secure” and that it was potentially endangered both by Puritans and by Catholics and both from without and from within. Brink notes that Catholic Father Robert Parsons argued in his *A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of England*, published in 1594, that the Spanish Infanta had a strong claim to the throne, and dedicated the treatise to Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.

The figure of Essex, who was becoming progressively more popular, seems to have served as the focal point of all the hopes the disenfranchised religious groups might have held. Essex certainly appealed both to Puritans and to Catholics. On the one hand, he inherited his Puritan leadership position from his stepfather Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. On the other hand, he opposed religious persecution of any sort and thus seemed to promise freedom of worship to the increasingly oppressed recusants. The Catholic underground, at least, obviously considered him to be a potential savior and a potential collaborator with the potentially intervening Infanta. (Kahan 2008: 220) His beheading in 1601 must have dealt a devastating blow to all who had hoped that this fallen world under the reign of an evil usurper could be saved by an intervention from beyond aided by a domestic hero.

Salvation of a realm by means of a foreign intervention is a common motif in Shakespeare’s work, occurring with noteworthy frequency in the histories, and making an appearance in each of the great tragedies. After Othello’s fall into irrational jealousy and his realm’s consequent fall into disarray and chaos, Venetians promptly appear to

reinstate peace and order in Cyprus. After all the nobility in Denmark slaughter themselves or each other, Fortinbras marches in with his troop of Norwegian soldiers and receives Hamlet's "dying voice."

The figures of saving foreign intervention in Shakespeare's work are not couched merely in political terms. They are commonly invested with spiritual significance as well. One pertinent example of this is *Macbeth*, in which the eponymous ruling devil has transformed his realm into hell. The tormented Scots have one hope:

Some holy angel
Fly to the court of England, and unfold
His message ere he come, that a swift blessing
May soon return to this our suffering country
Under a hand accurs'd!
(*Macbeth*, III. vi. 45-49)

Macduff consequently goes to Edward the Confessor

to pray the holy king, upon his aid
To wake Northumberland and warlike Siward,
That by the help of these (with Him above
To ratify the work) we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights.
(*Macbeth*, III. vi. 29-34)

Kastan rightly notes that "the English invasion is not merely English but is endowed with a unique spiritual authority, evident in Edward's "most pious" kingship," and remarks that this divine kingship is so spiritually elevated that it paradoxically "keeps itself discretely aloof from the military action necessary to activate its moral charge." (Kastan 2005: 163)

All this is, interestingly enough, completely in keeping with such anti-cosmic doctrines as those preached by Gnostics, Manichees, Cathars, and Bogomils. In all these

anti-cosmisms, the higher spiritual plane stages an intervention from beyond to aid the trapped sparks of spirit in their rebellion against the tyrannical ruler of the sublunar realm. This intervention, however, is never effected by the highest, apathetic, unperturbed spiritual realms, but only by lower emissaries of light.

The devoted and loyal Kent suffering in the dark world of *King Lear* is heartened when he learns from Cordelia's letter that

from France there comes a power
Into this scattered kingdom, who already
Wise in our negligence, have secret feet
In some of our best ports, and are at point
To show their open banner.

(*King Lear*, III. i. 30-34)

Cordelia furtively infiltrates her sisters' domain while her husband, the King of France, the one who sends liberating troops into this dark realm, remains away. She promises in her letter to Kent that the King

shall find time
From this enormous state – seeking to give
Losses their remedies.

(*King Lear*, II. ii. 168-170)

Her choice of phrase invests her spouse with spiritual significance. Lofty but aloof, caring but distant, the divine King will send help, but remain unreachable.

Cordelia's letter serves as what is usually referred to in anti-cosmic dualisms as "the call from beyond." An emissary of light descends into the dark realm to inform the trapped sparks of light that this world has imprisoned them, but that there is also a higher realm that is their true home. Help will come from this higher plane, but they must first wake up to be able to assist this foreign power in removing the evil tyrannical ruler of this world.

4.2. REMEMBER ME: THE CALL FROM BEYOND

Gnostics, Manichees, Cathars, and Hermeticists all had as prominent part of their doctrines the figure of a heavenly guide awakening the soul to its true spiritual origin and its imprisonment in the world of matter. It was almost always conflated with the figure of Christ.

Gnostics saw Jesus as an emanation of light, and frequently identified him with the original, purely spiritual, Adam. This spiritual, non-incarnated Christ came to earth to awaken souls to gnosis – the knowledge of the divine origin of each spark trapped in the material world. Mani similarly taught his followers that Jesus was a spiritual savior descending from the Kingdom of Light to awaken Adam from his slumber and remind him of his true origin and of the spark of divine light within himself. (Stoyanov 2003: 103)

Cathars saw this spiritual guide as the soul's "light self" – the heavenly counterpart leading each trapped divine spark back into the realm of pure light. In a prominent Cathar text, *Liber supra Stella*, a spirit which is the higher self arrives from above and addresses the soul, which immediately recognizes it and thus remembers heaven. (Savić-Rebac 1957: 29-30) The Hermetic texts translated by Ficino likewise contained the notion of a heavenly guide awakening sleeping humanity and making souls aware of their unenviable situation. This is the role Pimander plays in relation to Hermes, who is grateful at having received "this vision from a Self that is not himself." (Mitchell 2006: 22-26)

It is possible to trace this idea of the necessity of awakening the soul to its true divine origin back to at least Plato. Ficino certainly does this. He finds in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Republic* the notion that sleep fully encompasses our earthly lives and is only interrupted by brief visionary moments when the soul recollects its true spiritual origin and inherent immortality. (Allen 2002: 165)

This is reminiscent of the enchanted island of *The Tempest*, where the exiled rightful ruler and his innocent young daughter find their new home. Prospero asks Miranda, attempting to remind her of her noble origin:

Canst thou remember
A time before we came unto this cell?
(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 38-39)

Miranda only has a vague memory of it, “rather like a dream” – much like the Platonic soul.

When Malvolio is trapped in the “dark house,” Feste visits him under the guise of a Catholic priest, but in fact preaches Gnosticism to him when he pronounces, echoing the tone of the sermons spoken by Jesus: “I say there is no darkness but ignorance.” Pagels notes that the “living Jesus” of Gnostic texts speaks of “illusion and enlightenment, not of sin and repentance,” as the Jesus of the Christian New Testament does. Instead of coming to save humanity from sin, the Gnostic Christ “comes as a guide who opens access to spiritual understanding.” (Pagels 1989: xx)

The Duke of *Measure for Measure* is likewise a Gnostic Christ, coming into the prison in the garb of a priest as an emissary of light to enlighten and awaken, not suffer and redeem. His otherworldly origin is emphasized when he replies to Escalus’ question: “Of whence are you?” with

Not of this country, though my chance is now
To use it for my time. I am a brother
Of gracious order, late come from the [See],
In special business from his Holiness.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 216-220)

The Duke preaches a Gnostic Gospel to Claudio:

Reason thus with life:
If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
That none but fools would keep. A breath thou art,
Servile to all the skyey influences,

That dost this habitation where thou keep'st
Hourly afflict [...] Thou art not thyself,
For thou exists on many a thousand grains
That issue out of dust [...] Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner's sleep,
Dreaming on both.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 5-43)

Claudio should welcome death, as life in this sublunar realm is not life at all, and existing in his earthly body he is not himself at all. The Duke's reasoning echoes Ficino's dualistic injunction to any aspiring philosopher:

Since all the study of a philosopher is nothing but detachment from the body, and since he is brought closer to perfection every day by this detachment, he should certainly not fear the detachment from the body which occurs at death but should look forward to it with supreme hope and joy. (Ficino 2005: 131)

Not surprisingly, the Duke's "comfort" has perplexed almost all of the critics approaching *Measure for Measure* as a Christian play. W. W. Robson, as only one example, notices in his "Shakespeare and his Modern Editors" that Isabella reminds Angelo of the Atonement, so it is a given that this Christian doctrine is present and thinkable in the world of the play.

Yet the friar, supposedly preparing Claudio for his reconciliation with God, makes no reference to Christ's atoning sacrifice. Is not this quite as surprising whether or not *Measure for Measure* is 'Catholic', as Coghill thinks, or 'Protestant', as Dr Lever thinks? (Stead 1971: 86)

Indeed, this is not surprising only if *Measure for Measure* is docetic, as I would venture to think. Let us recall the words in which Isabella purportedly mentions the Atonement:

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,

And He that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy.
(*Measure for Measure*, II. ii. 73-75)

“Found out the remedy” is quite sanitized compared to the usual descriptions of the orthodox doctrine of substitutionary atonement, which state that Christ “was slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb” in our stead or “was crucified for our sins.” The souls that were “forfeit” sound more like lost sparks of divine light which need liberating gnosis than sinning Christian souls in need of a redeeming Savior.

The Christian Savior, let us remember, is a fully incarnated deity who suffers and dies in the world and is then resurrected in the flesh. The Christ of dualisms, conversely, is almost always docetic, only *appearing* to be an embodied human being. He is instead a purely spiritual entity who comes to enlighten and teach the lost sparks that they need to break free from the shackles of the material world, as the Duke teaches Claudio. Being immaterial, the docetic Christ never suffers and certainly cannot die. The Duke, universally accepted as a Christ figure by the allegorically prone critics, never suffers in the play nor is he ever even remotely in mortal danger. In fact, just like in the usual docetic explanations for the apparent resurrection of Christ, which state that another dead body was planted in Christ’s stead, so in *Measure for Measure* no one needs to be killed, as all the Christ figure has to do is “satisfy the deputy” with a head – any head. Claudio’s head is substituted by Barnardine’s, which is then substituted by that of Ragozine, the unfortunate pirate, pre-killed for the Duke’s convenience. This is substitutionary atonement of the docetic kind, paralleled in the other subplot by Mariana also being able to “satisfy the deputy” by substituting for Isabella in his bed.

Portia and Paulina also descend, like the Duke does, as figures of inviolable authority, into the lower, confining realm to bring freedom to its prisoners. They are never perceived to be in any real danger, their words are heeded and obeyed, and what they bring is illuminating knowledge, not redeeming sacrificial aid. If they are Christ figures, the Christ they figure is also docetic. Cordelia might well be the only Christ figure that truly suffers and dies in the world she comes to save, “going about” her

father's "business" (*King Lear*, IV. iv. 23-24) and saving nature from "the general curse" which "twain have brought her to." (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 205-207)

Perhaps the most intriguing figure of a "spiritual" guide arriving to awaken the hero to the truth is that of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Many critics have observed that Hamlet's ghostly father, Old Hamlet, carries a compelling spiritual significance. Spurgeon has perceived that the pervasive atmosphere of diseases, ulcers, and overall murkiness in the play is starkly contrasted with images of the father. (Spurgeon 1971: 319) Bradley notes that the Ghost is not a mere dead king, but is invested with a majestic, solemn quality, which transforms him into a "messenger of divine justice" and "a reminder or a symbol of the connection of the limited world of ordinary experience with the vaster life." (Bradley 1956: 166) Few critics have, in fact, failed to notice that the Ghost is representative of some kind of a higher spiritual reality. (Bristol/McLuskie 2001: 72)

The spirit finds in Hamlet an apt student, rearing to hear his otherworldly message:

Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift
As meditation, or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.
(*Hamlet*, I. v. 29-31)

Belsey notices that "meditation" is an unexpected word to be used in conjunction with promises of revenge. It can simply mean "thought" (*OED*, 1, b) and thus reinforce the "breathless speed of the image." It can, however, also evoke the meaning of "a religious experience" (*OED*, 2) in which case, as Belsey explains, it "conveys a visionary intensity in Hamlet's response." (Belsey 2008: 150-151) The melancholy Saturnian student greets the messenger from beyond with a keen visionary intensity, as his own "prophetic soul" has long told him that this most seeming virtuous world and its ruler are evil and depraved. If "meditation" and "the thoughts of love" indeed sound strange in the context of filial revenge, this is because Shakespeare is grafting onto a revenge tragedy a dualistic spiritual quest of ascent, to which the two possible traditional pathways in Renaissance Neoplatonism are precisely meditation and love.

This spiritual emissary arrives with a clear message: the kingdom is ruled by an evil usurper. Thou, noble youth, must remember that this was not always so, and that, though the ruler of this world may lay claim upon you, I am your one true father. “Remember me,” repeated *ad nauseam*, means simply this: remember where your true spiritual paternity lies.

Hamlet duly obliges and honors his ghostly father. Gnostics would see Hamlet as a successful disciple, awakening to gnosis and recognizing, as depicted in the Gnostic *Gospel of Truth*, that he is “in the Father” and is thus able to ascend from the world of darkness and ignorance back to the Father. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 286) Cathars and Hermeticists would also probably see Old Hamlet as Hamlet’s spiritual counterpart and his higher self, which could be indicated by their shared name, introduced by Shakespeare. Cathars would especially also find Hamlet’s reaction laudable, as he renounces the imposed paternity of the lascivious, carnal and imprisoning Rex Mundi, and proves to be a true son to the true divine king.

In the fallen world of *Cymbeline*, we similarly find the true king’s sons exiled, hiding, and living in a Platonic-sounding cave. Though far away from the royal throne and their father, they are lovely and virtuous, unsullied by the rotten realm they belong to. Their keeper is amazed:

How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!
These boys know little they are sons to th’ King.
(*Cymbeline*, III. iii. 79-80)

Like in so many sparks of divine light exiled in this dark cosmos, their father’s divine nature is apparent in them and cannot be concealed by the bodily garb they happen to find themselves in, nor can it be stamped out by their ignorance of their noble origin.

The father’s divine spirit cannot be suppressed in young Orlando, either, who finds, much like Hamlet, that “the spirit of my father, which I think is within me, begins to mutiny against this servitude.” (*As You Like It*, I. i. 22-24).

4.2.1. TO ACT, TO DO, TO PERFORM

Once the hero discovers his true spiritual paternity that impels him to mutiny against the servitude of this material world and its tyrannical ruler, he is faced with an even trickier question: What exactly is to be done about it?

One of the most consistently popular questions that the critics who have tackled *Hamlet* have long attempted to answer is “Why does Hamlet delay his revenge?” or, simply, “Why doesn’t Hamlet *act*?” The questions that need to be asked first are “How *does* one act in a deceptive, oppressive, and erratic world?” and “What does it even *mean* to act in a play where “act” itself is an extremely ambiguous key word?” A clue may be given in the sexton’s statement that “an act hath three branches – it is to act, to do, to perform.” (*Hamlet*, V. i. 11-12)⁵ These are the three meanings of the word “act” as used in *Hamlet*, which correspond with the three basic meanings of another key word – “play.” (Igrutinović 2007: 89)

One way to attempt to deal with this world is “to act” – to put on an act in order to deceive others and disguise one’s true inner reality. It is immediately linked with one of the meanings of the word “play,” mentioned for the first time in Hamlet’s renunciation of all outward appearances of grief as “*actions* that a man might *play*.” (*Hamlet*, I. i. 83)⁶ All the pertinent characters in the play resort to pretence at some point. “To do” is to take concrete and decisive action in this world, for which Hamlet – no clumsy weakling – consistently uses his sword throughout the play, culminating in his fencing match with Laertes (which is conveniently referred to as “playing”). “To perform” is the kind of acting that actors, or “players” do. Theatrical performance, paradoxically, transpires to be the only deceptive illusion (“to act”) that can approximate truth, and the only concrete action (“to do”) in the course of the play that achieves something positive and does not directly result in a catastrophe.

⁵ Philip Edwards suggests in the 1985 Cambridge edition of *Hamlet* that the sexton has in mind the three parts of an act – the Imagination, the Resolution, and the Perfection, as stated in the legal arguments of 1561-2 on the suicide of Sir James Hales, and cites Plowden’s *Commentaries* in support of this. (1761: 259) While I agree that this is what the sexton is *trying* to say, he obviously fails, as he does when attempting to use other learned expressions such as *ergo* and *se defendendo*. The very phrase in which he gets it wrong provides an invaluable insight.

⁶ Emphases mine.

4.2.1.1. “TO ACT”: I KNOW NOT “SEEMS”

Matter is, according to Ficino and other Neoplatonists, the real source of all illusions that this world offers, as it traps higher reality in it and then only reflects it in a deceptive and shadowy way. This contrast between reality and illusion took on a great significance in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, according to Katharine Maus, and was based experientially on a sense of discrepancy between “inward disposition” and “outward appearance” that is fundamentally impossible without perceiving the material body as an illusory disguise. The modern idea of interiority, Maus argues, depends on “the body as the essential other of this new self.” This dualistic othering of the material body is thus essential for the newly formed dichotomy of the “spiritual” inner as opposed to the “corporeal” outer, or the “self” as opposed to the “body.” (Reynolds/West 2005: 163) Or, in Hamlet’s terms, “is” as opposed to “seems.”

Hamlet assuredly asserts “I know not “seems”” (*Hamlet*, I. ii. 76) and goes on to denounce

all forms, moods, [shapes] of grief... These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show.
(*Hamlet*, I. ii. 82-85)

Contrasted to this is Claudius’ conscious deception:

The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
(*Hamlet*, III. i. 50-52)

Claudius figures several commonplaces of the Renaissance referring to illusion-mongering. His lies are the “witchcraft of his wits,” and witches were imagined to practice the art of illusion, as reflected in “fair is foul, and foul is fair” uttered by the

witches in *Macbeth*. Witches were, in turn, commonly equated with those whorish women who dared deceive men by practicing the art of “face-painting.” This is who Claudius compares himself to, managing to sound almost as if he were exaggerating. It may have, after all, been a bit harsh to compare concealing the murder of his brother with a woman using some make-up.

Iago likewise consciously chooses seeming over being:

Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so, for my peculiar end.
(*Othello*, I. i. 59-60)

His “I am not what I am” (*Othello*, I. i. 65) is, interestingly, the direct opposite of Jehovah’s self-defining “I am who I am” given to Moses on Mount Tabor. Seeming is, once more, the opposite of truly being.

The deceptive Iago significantly offers Othello “ocular proof,” while lying Edmund offers Gloucester “auricular assurance.” In her *Feminine endings*, Philippa Berry attempts to outline the attention paid to sense experience in all the tragedies. While she concedes that each tragedy “gives varied attention to most or all of the senses,” she traces the figure of sense experience

from the devouring mouths of the ‘star-crossed’ lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*, through the ambivalent attentiveness (to secreted meanings) of Hamlet’s ear; across the monstrously dilated eyes of Othello (with their suggestive bodily ambiguity) and the uncannily tactile ‘hairiness’ of ‘the Scottish play’; to a consideration of the stinking tragic refuse whose stench ultimately reaches the nose of King Lear. As each sense—taste or eating, hearing, smelling, touching, as well as seeing—is reconfigured with an obscene difference, what is implicitly produced is an experiential knowledge of the secrets of matter. (Berry 2002: 9)

The most disturbing secret of matter is that it creates a shadowy illusion to deceive suspicious but earnestly truth-seeking heroes. Iago’s “ocular proof” and Edmund’s “auricular assurance” are, ultimately, only evidence that our senses cannot be

trusted and that the material world consistently offers illusions to trick us. This is why choosing the right casket in *The Merchant of Venice* is such a difficult task. This is why Hamlet does not immediately act. This is, finally, how conscience makes cowards of us all.

The anti-cosmism of *Hamlet* is, perhaps paradoxically, shaken by the illusory nature of the material world itself. The Ghost could himself well be a demon assuming a pleasing shape, offering Hamlet nothing but trickery and illusion. The figure is certainly not without its metaphysical ambiguities. Stately, half Apollonian, half Jehovan, King Hamlet is a figure whose notions of justice are decidedly pre-Christian, and there is an eerie echo of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” in his demand for revenge. He at times appears to be as cold and legalistic as the notorious Din of Lurianic Cabala or Marcion’s Jehovah. More problematically, his abode is in Purgatory and he tellingly descends into the cellage during his conversation with Hamlet.

There does not seem to be any love in him for any creature, living or dead: he discards his son’s show of affection and pity for him as weakness, and summarizes his feelings for his wife with “the vow” he “made to her in marriage.” The first mention of the word “usurp” is directed at him (*Hamlet*, I. i. 46) and Barnardo ominously remarks that the late king “was and is the question of these wars.” (*Hamlet*, I. i. 111) When we finally hear exclaimed “The king, the king’s to blame!” (*Hamlet*, V. ii. 300) we cannot but wonder: of the two “kings” mentioned, which one *is* to blame?

On the other hand, G. Wilson Knight reminds us in *The Wheel of Fire* that Claudius, “as he appears in the play,” is “a good and gentle king.” (Jump 1968: 40) He does not bear any real animosity towards anyone and for Gertrude he seems to feel genuine affection. His succession to the throne may even be seen in terms of the Marcionite Gnostic system where the stern, angry, revengeful God of the Old Testament is superseded by the loving and merciful Father of Christ in the worship of man. There is certainly something poetic and Dionysian about the witchcraft of his wits and his incessant feasting, drinking, and dancing.

Both kings claim Hamlet for a son. Old Hamlet constantly seems to be probing his filial devotion, while Claudius calls him “son” and officially names him his heir. Hamlet’s paternity is thus a question raised in multiple ways throughout the play (Grady

2002: 199) and there have even been conjectures of Claudius being his biological father. (Bloom 1998: 418-419) In his strong emotions, powers of speech and artistic propensities, at least, Hamlet certainly bears a stronger resemblance to Claudius than to Old Hamlet. Identifying the two has naturally often presented itself as an attractive notion.

Perhaps most notoriously, Ernest Jones has argued in his relentlessly psychoanalytical “Hamlet and Oedipus” that Hamlet procrastinates because he wishes to avoid being identified with Claudius through the act of killing his mother’s husband and taking his place in her bed. (Jump 1968: 61-62) *Hamlet*, however, is not only a family drama. The act of killing does identify Claudius and Hamlet, but in multiple ways other than doing so out of an illegitimate sexual desire for the same woman – some of which are perhaps even more disturbing.

4.2.1.2. “TO PERFORM”: THE PLAY’S THE THING

It is in the character of The Mousetrap’s Lucianus that Claudius and Hamlet are finally and clearly identified via Hamlet’s projected act of revenge.

Far from breaking the theatrical illusion, the play within the play disturbingly shows that there is no illusion about it. We are shown the King and Queen, as they cheerfully await to be amused by the pleasant pastime, brutally faced with the truth of their crime. The Mousetrap reveals the facts for the first time, as should, according to Hamlet, be the true

purpose of playing, whose end both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 17-20)

Just as Shakespeare appears to be using *Hamlet* to explore the metaphysical ambiguities of the cosmos, Hamlet uses The Mousetrap to investigate his own microcosm. The “illusion” of the performance (“to perform”) disperses the illusion of pretence (“to act”), making the writing for and directing of The Mousetrap the only unambiguously positive concrete action (“to do”) that Hamlet takes in the course of the

play. The play within the play successfully catches the conscience of the King, but it manages to catch more than that.

“This is one Lucianus, *nephew to the king*,” (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 221)⁷ Hamlet ironically states immediately after his self-assuredly venomous “Your Majesty, and *we* that have free souls, it touches *us* not.” (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 219-220)⁸ The Mousetrap, in fact, does indeed touch both of them.

The fact that the murderer of the play is made to be the nephew of the victim may well have been Hamlet’s conscious scheme made in order to threaten the King while catching his conscience, (Wilson 1960: 138-153) but on another level it indicates that the play holds up a mirror to Hamlet as well, in which he can, if he dares, behold none other than Claudius.

The revelation, in the character of Lucianus, of Hamlet’s identification with Claudius by means of his projected act of vengeance is clear. To avenge regicide in the name of justice, law, and order, is to commit regicide, the very emblem of rebellion against justice, law, and order. If Claudius is a rebellious, usurping fratricide, regicide, and even deicide, then this is what Hamlet will have to become as well. To kill Claudius is to become Claudius in every possible respect. (Igrutinović 2007: 90-91)

Hamlet is not the only hero who finds that taking action in this material world, however scrupulously and righteously, always carries with it a taint. “To do” simply is inherently problematic.

4.2.2. TO SUFFER THE SLINGS AND ARROWS OR TO TAKE ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF TROUBLES: DUALISM AND ACTION

Not only is it difficult, in the deceptive and oppressive microcosms of Shakespeare’s darker plays, to know what the reality is and what, consequently, must be the noblest course of action, but action itself can at times appear to be less than praiseworthy as an option. “To do” can easily translate as “not to be” in the more anti-cosmic strands of Renaissance Neoplatonism, where *stasis* – freedom from action and

⁷ Emphases mine.

⁸ Emphases mine.

motion – and *apathia* – freedom from passion and emotion – are seen as lofty ideals every philosopher must aspire to.

4.2.2.1. “TO DO”: *VITA ACTIVA* vs. *VITA CONTEMPLATIVA*

“To do” is to get one’s hands dirty by being active in the material world. The heroes and heroes-turned-villains of Shakespeare’s plays, deceived by the demonic illusions surrounding them, often seem to be faced with an insoluble conundrum in which the only apparently possible and even necessary course of action is at the same time starkly opposed to what conscience would dictate. Thus Antony and Coriolanus, once heroes of their homeland, find themselves waging war against their native Rome. Othello feels impelled to kill Desdemona, and Macbeth is made to believe that his fate is to usurp the throne. Macbeth’s rebellion, regicide, and usurpation seemingly necessitate Macduff’s, as Claudius’ necessitate Hamlet’s.

The apparently necessary course of action frequently entails rebelling against the king. This is certainly the case with Hamlet, (Belsey 2008: 141) whose soliloquy in III. i. could, according to Hadfield, easily have come from the arguments of treatises discussing the right of citizens to assassinate their ungodly rulers. (Hadfield 2005: 198) Whether or not it is permissible to rebel against an evil king and by killing him commit regicide and thus symbolic parricide and deicide, was a burning issue in Shakespeare’s time, and the official answer was in fact a resounding “no.”

William Sclater, a Protestant clergyman, for instance, asserted that the authority of a king was in no way affected by the method of his accession to power or his behavior on the throne:

the persons are sometimes intruders, as in the case of vsurpation; sometimes abusers of their authoritie, as when they tyrannize: but the powers themselues haue God as their author. (Kastan 2005: 161-162)

Similarly, King James argued that a king, once enthroned and anointed, must never be opposed, and that even a murdering tyrant had to be patiently suffered, as the king could be judged by God alone. He cited it as

a sure Axiome in Theologie, that evil should not be done, that good may come of it: The wickednesse therefore of the King shall never make them that are ordained to be iudged by him, to become his Iudges. (Kastan 2005: 161-162)

Hamlet's predicament seems increasingly difficult. On the one hand, as the lawful heir to the throne and the one chosen by the Ghost to hear the terrible truth, he was arguably indeed born to set right the time that is out of joint and would

be damned

To let this canker of our nature come

In further evil.

(*Hamlet*, V. ii. 68-70)

The noble rebels in *Macbeth* find themselves in a similar position, but have fewer qualms about taking decisive action against the usurper, as does the microcosm of the tragedy they inhabit. *King Lear* presents a similarly less scrupulous microcosm. Even a servant can be justified in violently resisting Gloucester's blinding, as Strier argues is the case in *King Lear*, citing it as the reason Shakespeare decided to have the mutilation take place onstage. Everyone would thus have understood how "a pezant" could dare "stand up thus," (Strier 1995: 193) even as we understand the other lowly subjects resisting the reign of Goneril and Regan, and as we justify Hamlet's efforts to set right the time that is out of joint or celebrate Macduff's success at setting the time free.

On the other hand, this precarious support that can be read into Shakespeare's work for resisting tyrannical rulers is not unproblematic at all. Knight notes in "The Milk of Concord: Life-themes in "Macbeth"" that "Macbeth's crime is a kind of parricide – hence the suggestions of parricide in II iv and III vi." (Wain 1968: 149) The suggestions of parricide Knight cites are, however, actually – falsely but poignantly – pointed primarily at those that will at one point join the rebels and the triumphant Macduff. He will certainly commit this symbolic parricide as well when he commits regicide by removing the usurping tyrant Macbeth. As Kastan sharply observes,

Macbeth kills both a rebel then a king, exactly as does Macduff [...] Macbeth's acts, of course, are clearly differentiated: one is a heroic defense of the nation and its king, the other a murderous attack upon them; but Macduff's single act at once defends and attacks sovereignty. It is a liberation and a regicide, one more thing that is "fair and foul" in the "hurly-burly" of the play. (Kastan 2005: 160)

This is precisely what Hamlet perceives will be his predicament as well, when his conscience, as well as Claudius', is caught in The Mousetrap, and what he appears to wish to avoid at all cost.

Kastan further notes that William Segar subversively and skeptically wrote in 1590 that "Kings, Princes, and other sovereign commanders did (in the beginning) aspire unto greatness by puissance and force: of which Cain was the first." (Kastan 2005: 130) It is killing one's brother – figuratively, as all men are brothers, or literally, in the case of Claudius – that really puts one on the throne. This puts Hamlet's father, whose lawful heir Hamlet is, in an unfavorable light: he is problematic as a warrior, and a conqueror, and a killer himself. Old Hamlet killed Old Fortinbras on the very day that Hamlet was born, and thus is "the cause of these wars." The first "usurp" in the play is directed at him and we can surmise that every king is ultimately a usurper. If Hamlet avenges him, if he commits fratricide in his name to avenge fratricide committed against him, then he becomes just another in a long line of killers who get the throne by repeating the sin of Cain.

Action itself in this deceptive world, then, however nobly envisaged and motivated, frequently transpires to be disturbing and problematic, and appears to be far less safe an option than contemplation.

Action and contemplation are quite frequently juxtaposed in Shakespeare. Young Fortinbras, of "unimproved mettle hot and full," goes to battle for "a straw" and Laertes often acts without sparing a single thought on th' event, while Hamlet paces around the castle asking his questions and Horatio the Stoic philosopher endures all life's calamities, patiently suffering all. In stark contrast to Timon readily choosing an ascetic, misanthropic life of contemplation, as another instance, we see Alcibiades planning to conquer Athens the moment he is exiled. Our sympathies in these contrasting scenes are

likely to side with the less impetuous heroes of the darker among Shakespeare's plays – at least when we see the usual results of action.

In the final scene of *Hamlet*, after a general carnage, Horatio promises to speak

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and [forc'd] cause,
And in the upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

(*Hamlet*, V. ii. 381-385)

This macabre list neatly enumerates all the actions that have taken place in the world of the play. This is one pertinent example of the usual results of action in the tragedies. It is little wonder that Hamlet thinks too precisely on th' event and conscience makes cowards of us all.

Contemplation, after all, is the almost universally accepted higher course among the Neoplatonists, especially those whose leanings were slightly more anti-cosmic. Plotinus, as only one example, famously claimed that action is but “a shadow of contemplation,” (Inge 1900: 331) and Hamlet, Cruttwell notes, as a mature student at a time “when the division between university and world, scholar and man of the world, still had much of the medieval strictness,” would almost certainly agree. The fact that Hamlet was a university student indicates that he was striving for a life of contemplation, not activity. (Jump 1968: 188) This is also reflected in his asceticism, disgust at the world, and mistrust of sexuality, which are almost reminiscent of a monastic bent.

Hamlet's choice of university is quite telling as well. He was not a student at any old university, but, significantly, at Wittenberg, the same university where Giordano Bruno taught for two years (1586-8) shortly before he started his tour of England. The doctors of Wittenberg had accepted him and allowed him to teach his mixture of astronomy, astrology, mythology, and poetically inclined occult versions of Neoplatonism in their schools. In a dedication to the Wittenberg senate, he gratefully recounts that

you thought me worthy of the kindest welcome, enrolled me in the album of your academy, and gave me a place in a body of men so noble and learned that I could not fail to see in you, neither a private school nor an exclusive conventicle, but, as becomes the Athens of Germany, a true university. (Yates 1964: 306)

Bruno took an affectionate farewell of the University in an *Oratio valedictoria* which ends with the idea that “it is here, in Wittenberg, whither come all the nations of the world in search of truth, that the truth will be found.” (Yates 1964: 312) It is quite conceivable that Bruno praised the University of Wittenberg in similar terms when he spoke at English universities as well, and that this would have reached anyone remotely interested in poetic and Platonic matters.

Hamlet would apparently be glad to go to Wittenberg in search of truth via contemplative Neoplatonic studies, but is instead trapped in the dark and rotten world of Denmark, where he is fed lies and deceit, and, much to his chagrin, still apparently unavoidably called upon to set right the time that is out of joint.

4.2.2.2. THE VARYING TIDE: THE FIXED vs. THE FLUID

Action, in the Platonic and Neoplatonic discourses, entails becoming entangled in the fluid world of motion and matter, while contemplation enables ascent away from the world of matter towards the fixed, purely spiritual spheres. Action, motion, and fluidity form a paradigm that is commonly juxtaposed – always to its detriment – to contemplation, *stasis*, and fixity. Motion and fluidity are attributes of lower matter and thus best shunned.

Accordingly, Brabantio praises Desdemona as

A maiden, never bold;
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blush'd at herself.
(*Othello*, I. iii. 94-96)

The still and quiet spirit is juxtaposed to motion – which is apparently inherently bluishworthy. The still spirit is opposed to the fluid activity of war in Ulysses’ tirade as well:

They tax our policy, and call it cowardice,
Count wisdom as no member of the war,
Forefall prescience, and esteem no act
But that of hand. The still and mental parts
[...] this hath not a finger’s dignity.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, I. iii. 197-204)

The fixed (the still and mental parts) is opposed to the fluid (bodily), but also, in Ulysses’ entire speech, the fixed/fluid dichotomy corresponds with the head/lower members, and wise rulers/riotous rabble dichotomies. The base, lower, common folk are characterized by action and motion, much like Coriolanus’ “mutable, rank-scented meiny.”

(*Coriolanus*, III. i. 66-71)

This characterization is also reflected in Caesar’s reaction to the news that Pompey is strong at sea and popular among the crowds, or, in his own words: “The people love me, and the sea is mine” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II. i. 9):

This common body [...]
Goes to and back, [lackeying] the varying tide,
To rot itself in motion.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. iii. 44-47)

The sea and the people are mentioned in conjunction both times, as fluidity is an attribute both of the volatile sea and the inconstant multitude. Motion is firmly associated with materiality, which is chaotic and rotten.

Laertes’ violent riot is likewise depicted in clearly negative terms of voraciously destructive chaos, fluidity, and motion:

The ocean, overpeering of his list,
Eats not the flats with more impiteous haste
Than young Laertes, in a riotous head,
O'erbears your officers.
(*Hamlet*, IV. v. 99-102)

Warlike, soldierly action in the world is in imagery commonly associated with all that is lower, “base,” “common,” irrational, bodily, and fluid.

Daryl W. Palmer argues in his “Motion and Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*” that *Romeo and Juliet* attempts to settle an ancient debate on the nature of motion, a debate that he traces back to Plato’s *Theaetetus*. “Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed,” Plato laments in the dialog, reflecting on the vicissitudes of the material world. Palmer believes it is Plato that inspired an intense interest in the study of motion which is a predominant theme of Renaissance fencing manuals.

Fencing is studied as motion in the material flux. Mercutio is, according to Palmer, a true “philosopher,” as he is able to “step back and observe” the flux and “has the capacity to reflect on the nature of motion” from a position of static contemplation. (Bloom 2008 *Romeo*: 293-294) A kind of a dichotomy is established here between fencing and philosophy.

Active life in the world of matter thus puts one at risk and sullies one. One can “act,” chameleon-like, biding one’s time, observing from afar. One can “perform,” in artistic creation mirroring nature and ordering matter. Or one can “do,” fencing in this warlike world of motion and flux. Hamlet’s actions in the world, some of which are rash – such as the stabbing of Polonius and the battle against the pirates – and some of which are merely ill-advised – such as the fencing match against Laertes – are all performed with a sword. To take arms against a sea of troubles is to step into the flux of fencing.

4.2.2.3. TO BE OR NOT TO BE: BEING vs. BECOMING

This is a significant part of the meaning in what has often been referred to as Hamlet's "suicide" soliloquy:

To be or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them.
(*Hamlet*, III. i. 55-59)

To suffer the slings and arrows is "to be" – to be at one with the One; to take arms is "not to be," but instead to act, to do, to perform. Being is here opposed to action, motion, and the material flux of Becoming. Michel Jeanneret, illuminatingly for this particular crux, interprets the Renaissance Neoplatonic attitude towards matter in extremely apt and useful French terms as

a philosophy of birthing [*naître*] which is opposed to that of being [*être*]: to be born and to be born again, is to exist in the precariousness of perpetual oscillation, is not to be [*n'être*]. (Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetuum mobile: métamorphoses des corps et des oeuvres de Vinci à Montaigne* (Paris: Editions Macula, 1997, p. 39.) (Berry 2002: 17)

"To be or not to be?" is not a question pertaining to one's bodily existence in this world. It refers, rather, to the Platonic and Neoplatonic distinction between truly Being ("to be") and merely existing in the flux of Becoming ("not to be"). "To die," the next place Hamlet's meandering mind takes him to, is not necessarily associated with either "to be" or "not to be." The death of the body could well lead to "to be" through suffering the slings and arrows in still and contemplative *apathia* and finally reaching the *stasis* of pure spirit in the One; taking arms and even possibly winning, on the other hand, could lead to "not to be" through fencing in the flux of matter and its perennial becoming,

which for Hamlet signifies the vicious cycle of killing in order to live and usurping in order to rule.

Lovejoy has identified “two conflicting major strains” in Plato and in the Platonic tradition – which he referred to as “otherworldliness and this-worldliness” – and rightly observed that Plato “stood on both sides” of this deep “cleavage.” He defines “otherworldliness” in terms of an anti-cosmic mysticism that seeks to ascend away from and finally escape the material universe, and “this-worldliness” as an active pro-cosmic realism that attempts to engage with the world and improve it. (Lovejoy 2001: 24) If Hamlet does not know which to choose – to suffer or to take arms – he is in good company, as every major thinker from Plato onwards seems to have been similarly confused and indecisive.

It is certainly nobler, at least for many Neoplatonists and Stoics, to choose *stasis* over motion and *apathia* over emotion. Horatio has done precisely this and is lauded by the sincerely admiring Hamlet as “one in suff’ring all that suffers nothing.” (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 66) This is what it means to suffer the slings and arrows and not take arms: to reach the ideal *apathia* and *stasis* of the Stoic and Neoplatonic One. (Bloom *Tragedies*: 2010: 43)

Hamlet is thus not simply a disgruntled youth suffering under an oppressive social system and familial strife, or an Oedipal neurotic struggling to come to terms with the desire of his mother – in both meanings of this phrase. He is a Saturnian, melancholy soul wondering whether ‘tis nobler to remain still and contemplative in a world in which to do anything at all is to get one’s hands dirty.

He goes to great lengths to avoid becoming tainted by this world, forswearing all but his Father’s call, as would any ascetic, dedicated pupil of Renaissance secret studies, weary and wary of the world.

4.2.3. UNMIX’D WITH BASER MATTER: RENOUNCING ALL FOR THE CALL

This is not necessarily always the wisest course of action. Ficino explains in his *De vita* that “a person who is stimulated into scrutinizing curiously the depths of secret things” is Saturnian, as are “all those who delve as far as possible into any pursuit,

especially those who neglect other affairs.” (Ficino 1998: 377) We may remember Prospero, who studied “the liberal arts” and left the government to his brother, who usurped the power while he was “transported” and “rapt in secret studies,” all dedicated to “the closeness and the bettering” of his mind, and understand what the risks of abandoning oneself to the Saturnian influences may be.

Hamlet explicitly renounces his entire previous life after his “initiation” by the Ghost and dedicates himself fully to this newly acquired knowledge:

Remember thee!

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!

(*Hamlet*, I. v. 98-104)

The entire speech smacks of an intense experience of religious conversion, complete with the promise to live for his spiritual father’s “commandment.” Hamlet’s fervor recalls the religious fanaticism found in the adherents of certain anti-cosmic heresies who also, after their initiation, had to renounce all they might have learned or known before. (Stoyanov 2003: 144)

Addressing students who were thought to suffer from melancholy through solitariness and concentration on their studies, Ficino, conversely, advises that the Saturnian or melancholic man, while continuing to pursue his deep studies, should also “take care to temper the Saturnian severity with Jovial and Venereal influences.” (Yates 2003: 61) Hamlet does not heed this advice: he avoids all but his ghostly Father, explicitly denouncing the Jovial pursuits of Claudius’ merry court and renouncing the pleasant Venereal influence of Ophelia.

It is, significantly, immediately after the revelation received from the Ghost that Hamlet seemingly arbitrarily seems to find it necessary to detach himself from Ophelia. That this was not necessarily an easy sacrifice to make is apparent from Ophelia's description of her final encounter with "mad" Hamlet in her closet:

At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go.
(*Hamlet*, II. i. 89-93)

Hamlet is, in abandoning Ophelia, fulfilling his monastic-sounding vow to renounce all other pursuits, especially erotic ones, in order to ascetically and religiously follow his father's commandment. Ophelia apparently qualifies as the "baser matter" that Hamlet must let go of.

Hamlet is not alone in shunning romantic love for loftier goals among Shakespeare's characters. *Measure for Measure* is, for instance, densely populated by characters who renounce erotic love for higher spiritual pursuits. Its spiritually inclined Duke boasts:

Believe not that the dribbling dart of love
Can pierce a complete bosom.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. iii. 2-3)

Similarly, Angelo is, according to Lucio,

a man whose blood
Is very snow-broth; one who never feels
The wanton stings and motions of the sense;
But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge

With profits of the mind: study and fast.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 57- 61)

Study and fast is all that the novice Isabel wants as well, even “wishing a more strict restraint” than the already strict nunnery she has joined requires. (*Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 4)

At the beginning of *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, arguably Shakespeare’s most developed treatment of the theme of renouncing erotic love in order to pursue contemplative spiritual ascent, the King announces:

Our court shall be a little academe,
Still and contemplative in living art.
(*Love’s Labor’s Lost*, I. i. 40-41)

An “academe,” or academy, would be a popular Renaissance institution modeled after Plato’s Academy, (Shewmaker 2008) which usually boiled down to “half learned society and half literary club.” The fashion started by Ficino’s Florentine Academy, these academies flourished in the sixteenth century, especially in Italy, and, interestingly enough, mostly offered lectures on the philosophy of love, based on Platonizing poems and commentaries on the *Symposium*. (Kristeller 1961: 60)

The irony of the endeavor undertaken by the court in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* – renouncing love in order to study the Platonic philosophy of love – will become painfully patent in the course of the play.

*Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire
(Venus and Adonis, 149-150)*

5.0. ASCENT

Let us revisit Narcissus, standing on the edge of the dark waters of matter, gazing at his beautiful reflection in them, and remember his three Neoplatonic options: purifying ascent towards the true divine origin of the beautiful form, disfiguring descent into the depths of formless matter, or actively controlling the waters by lending them his form.

Ascent towards the purely spiritual realms, advocated by Plotinus and Ficino in their moralizing Neoplatonic interpretations of the myth can be, as we have seen, inspired by an anti-cosmic sentiment of being imprisoned in a hostile, cruel, and filthy universe. A common response of the more idealistic and naïve – or the more squeamish and world-weary – amongst Shakespeare's heroes is to consciously renounce actions and passions and pursue a life of quiet contemplation.

Figures such as Horatio, Hamlet, the Duke, Isabel, and Angelo appear to be or at least attempt to be free of passions, most conspicuously relinquishing – at least at some point – their erotic passion for higher spiritual pursuits.

This does not always yield the expected results. In what is arguably Shakespeare's most extensive and explicit treatment of the idea of renouncing erotic passion for the sake of higher spiritual enlightenment via ascetic contemplation, *Love's Labor's Lost*, Berowne wittily complains about being compelled

[...] painfully to pore upon a book

To seek the light of truth, while truth the while
Doth falsely blind the eyesight of his look.
Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile;
So ere you find where light in darkness lies,
Your light grows dark by losing of your eyes.
Study me how to please the eye indeed
By fixing it upon a fairer eye,
Who dazzling so, that eye shall be his heed,
And give him light that it was blinded by.
(*Love's Labor's Lost*, I. i. 74-83)

Berowne makes an important Neoplatonic point here: ascent can indeed be inspired by something other than ascetic, world-weary contemplation.

5.1. A HEAVENLY LOVE: LOVE AS ASCENT

The ascetically inclined members of the courtly “academe” in *Love's Labor's Lost*, originally intent on reaching spiritual heights by forswearing all passions, especially erotic ones, eventually discover that love can actually serve as a way up. Longaville significantly explains to his beloved his change of heart:

A woman I forswore, but I will prove,
Thou being a goddess, I forswore not thee.
My vow was earthly, thou a heavenly love
[...] thou, fair sun, which on my earth doth shine.
(*Love's Labor's Lost*, IV. iii. 62-65; 67)

Discovering that their unrequited feelings for their respective heavenly loves inspire them to good deeds and constant self-betterment, Berowne is able to conclude:

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:

They are the ground, the books, the academes,
From whence doth spring the true Promethean fire.
(*Love's Labor's Lost*, IV. iii. 298-230)

This is more in keeping with the other, more pro-cosmic, of the “two conflicting major strains in Plato and in the Platonic tradition” that Lovejoy has noticed. (Lovejoy 2001: 24)

Horatio, the apathetic Stoic philosopher, for one, chooses to renounce desire and can thus be “one in suff’ring all that suffers nothing.” (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 66) This is certainly a valid Neoplatonic option. Another, at least equally valid option, is to acknowledge that desire causes suffering, but that is also the very force that urges us to climb upwards on the scale of perfection. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 205) The latter option is advocated by Renaissance love theorists.

5.1.1. THIS DOCTRINE I DERIVE

5.1.1.1. RENAISSANCE LOVE THEORY

The phrase “Renaissance love theory” loosely refers to the various Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas – mainly pertaining to climbing upwards on the scale of perfection via pure and purifying desire for an idealized chaste lady – expounded in the numerous *trattati d’amore* whose proliferation was pioneered by the publication, in 1484, of Marsilio Ficino’s highly influential *De amore*. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 175) Ficino’s theory is especially significant in any discussion of the English renaissance, as it was basically his theory of love and beauty expressed in *De amore* that passed for “Platonism” in English Renaissance poetry. Though Ficino’s influence may be said to have been mainly indirect – disseminated through verses of poetry rather than copies of his treatise – the overwhelming importance of that influence must not be underestimated. As Jayne points out, “Ficino certainly was the fountainhead of Renaissance love Platonism.” (Jayne 1952: 238)

Ficino's *De amore* is a lengthy commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, and Ficino's love theory represents a reinterpreted revival of Plato's own love theory, as expounded in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. Plato sees Eros as a divine magnetism pulsing through the cosmos and irresistibly drawing the soul towards reuniting itself with the divine source from which it has descended. Sexual desire which results in procreation is seen as merely the very lowest expression of this divine striving towards immortality, as Plato has Diotima explain to Socrates in the *Symposium*. At a higher level, where soldiers, poets, and statesmen are situated, Eros manifests itself as a desire for fame after death, and at the highest level, that of the philosophers, it impels the soul to regain the immaculate purity of its true divine nature and reconnect with its celestial source in eternity.

Plato regards the highest form of erotic desire as essential and originative, and the lower forms as derivative and existing only when the soul finds itself imprisoned in a mortal body. This doctrine is briefly repeated in the *Timaeus* before human reproductive organs are explained. Plato makes their existence as human body parts sound like an afterthought of the demiurge. The male seed, as part of the marrow, is continuous with the brain, which is the seat of the immortal and divine part. Reproduction is thus even in the hierarchy of the body firmly placed at the bottom, as the lowest rung of the ladder leading an individual towards immortality – and, we can surmise, a rung best skipped. (Plato 1997: 292-293)

This hierarchical distinction between the separate levels of erotic desire is also reflected in the second speech of the *Symposium*, in which Pausanias distinguishes between the two Aphrodites – Aphrodite *Urania* and Aphrodite *Pandemos* – continuing an ancient Greek folk tradition separating the two aspects of the goddess of love. By the fourth century B.C., Greek mythology had already split Aphrodite into the discrete forms of Aphrodite *Urania*, personifying the loftier celestial facets of love, and the more down-to-earth Aphrodite *Pandemos*, dealing with the mundane tasks of aiding marriage, childbirth, and celebrating sexual pleasure, by – including, but not limited to – serving as the patroness of prostitutes. (Brundage 1987: 12) Plato has Pausanias widen the gap between the two Aphrodites by suggesting that those who worship the first, masculine, spiritual one, rise towards immortality, whereas those who follow the second, vulgar,

feminine one, remain tethered to this ephemeral and fleeting material world. (Plato 1970: 40-41)



Venus Urania (1878) by Griepenkerl

Ficino gleefully adopts this Platonic notion of the “two Aphrodites,” or Venuses, and adds his own, distinctly Neoplatonic, layers of interpretation to it, which he offers in his *De amore*. The first or “heavenly Venus” has her abode in the Angelic Mind and is an utter stranger to matter, having been born without a mother. The second or “vulgar Venus” resides in the World Soul, where she presides over procreation. In accordance with their respective locations, the heavenly Venus “is entranced by an innate love for understanding the Beauty of God,” whereas the vulgar Venus “is entranced by her love for procreating that same beauty in bodies”; the heavenly Venus “embraces the splendor of divinity in herself,” whereas the vulgar Venus “transfers sparks of that splendor into the Matter of the world.” The heavenly Venus liberates the divine sparks from the prison of the material world, and the vulgar Venus, conversely, traps them in it.

(Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 180)



Venus Pandemos (1852-3) by Gleyre

These sparks of beauty trapped in the material world serve to remind the eternal human soul of its own true divine origin. Ficino explains in a letter to Pellegrino degli Agli that seeing “the reflection of divine beauty with our eyes” enables us to “remember what we knew before, when we existed outside the prison of the body.” He continues to elucidate that when we happen to “see form and grace in anyone” we ought to “rejoice, as at the reflection of divine beauty,” but that we must be careful to remember that it is indeed only a reflection that we see.

The beautiful human forms we are erotically attracted to only exist so that “by a burning desire for this beauty” we should feel “drawn to the heavens.” (Allen 2002: 127) We must not be tempted to attempt any sort of carnal relationship with them; inspired by their beauty, we are instead supposed to climb the Platonic scale of perfection, step by step: from the love of beautiful bodies to the love of beautiful souls, and from there to the final unification with the divine. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 181)

Very little change in this doctrine is noticeable a full century later, in Giordano Bruno’s 1585 love treatise *De gli eroici furori*, which, according to Hanegraaff, represents a specific culmination of the tradition of *trattati d’amore*. Bruno wonders

if a shadowy, cloudy, elusive beauty painted upon the surface of corporeal matter pleases me so much and so incites my affection [...] so captivates me and so sweetly binds me

and draws me to it, that I find my senses offer nothing so agreeable to me, what would be the effect upon me of that which is the substantial, original, and primal beauty? [...]
Therefore, the contemplation of this vestige of light must lead me by the purgation of my soul to an imitation, a conformity, and participation in that most worthy and most lofty light into which I am transformed and with which I am united. For I am sure that nature, having put this [corporeal] beauty before my eyes [...] wishes that from here below I become elevated. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 203)

Both Ficino and Bruno legitimize the feelings of erotic desire for the beautiful human form, but neither would dream of suggesting that the next step in a lover's journey would be to establish a functional relationship with the actual human being whose form it is or – perish the thought – marry her. The beautiful human form is merely a reflection of the divine in the material waters of this world, from which Narcissus must avert his gaze if he wants to find life instead of death. Both Ficino and Bruno attribute the real agency and beauty that operates in erotic desire to another figure – female, ideal, and, most importantly, supernatural.

5.1.1.2. VENUS IS BUT DIANA TO ME: THE ANAGOGIC FEMALE

Philippa Berry attempts in her book *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* to trace back in history the philosophical, theological, and poetic origins of the idealized female figure, and it is of particular interest here to note that, at every step along the way, solid connections with dualistic concepts and belief systems can be found.

Berry starts with medieval courtly love, celebrating the lover's desperate worship of an immeasurably distant and elevated lady. It is no secret that the emergence of the cult of courtly love coincided – in both time and place – with the anti-cosmic dualistic heresy of Catharism. This notoriously prompted Denis de Rougemont to go as far as to assert that the poetry of courtly love is in fact little more than a compendium of coded secret doctrines of the Cathars. (De Rougemont 1983: 74-89)

The next step is Dante's adoration of his conveniently deceased – and thus disembodied – beloved Beatrice leading him upwards towards the highest spheres of

Heaven and Petrarch's slightly more physical devotion to the equally unattainable Laura, combined with utter disgust at the carnality of actual women, especially when this carnality involved childbirth and childcare. Both Dante and Petrarch – and both the Dantean *stilnovisti* and the Petrarchan sonneteers that followed in their wake – were greatly indebted to the Neoplatonic tradition, and their adoration of their chosen idealized ladies served the purpose of inspiring their ascent to the heavenly.

Finally, Berry arrives to Ficino's Florentine Neoplatonism with its concurrent dualistic obsession with virginity and rising above carnality through the aid of an idealized beloved.

She remarks that attempts have often been made to connect this tradition of the idealized female beloved with the cult of the Virgin Mary. Significantly, the flourishing of courtly love coincided with the rise in the devotion to the Virgin, the vision of the Virgin is the culmination of Dante's journey of ascent led by his love of Beatrice, and the unrelenting emphasis upon chastity in both Petrarchism and Florentine Neoplatonism could point to certain parallels between Mary and the beloved in these systems. (Berry 2003: 9)

Berry observes that the cult of Mary, however, “did not define her worship in terms of desire.” (Berry 2003: 10) It should similarly be noted that other crucial differences exist between the mainly orthodox and monistic cult of Mary and the mainly Platonic and dualistic cult of the idealized beloved: Mary is never seen as cruel or unattainable; quite contrary to that, she is usually depicted as maternally gentle and fully approachable. Though virginal, Mary is always distinctly bodily, and even death does not deprive her of her body in most Christian orthodoxies – her version of Christ's Resurrection and bodily Ascension is still celebrated as her Dormition or Assumption in the majority of today's Christendom worldwide. Her maternal body is consistently celebrated and never seen as even remotely threatening. (Warner 1978) Berry decides that the spiritual figure informing the cult of the idealized beloved is not Mary:

These aspects of the idealized female beloved accord more closely with another concept, pre-Christian in origin but assimilated by Christian theology, whose genealogy was closely associated with those Platonic and Neoplatonic world views to which Petrarch as well as the Florentine Neoplatonists were indebted [...] the idea of Sapientia

or Sophia, the Wisdom of God, who was described in Old Testament and Apocryphal texts as a female figure, and who often appeared in medieval texts as Lady Philosophy or Lady Reason. [I]n the Renaissance [...] her links with an unfallen natural world, and her position as an object of desire, were paralleled [...] by Diana. (Berry 2003: 10)

Dian is thus finally discovered as the mythical figure closest to the concept represented by the idealized female beloved in the Renaissance.

It might sound peculiar, to say the least, that in Renaissance Neoplatonism Dian, the goddess of chastity, the Moon, and the hunt, should become so closely involved in erotic dealings traditionally reserved for other deities, but this is precisely what happened. It might sound slightly less peculiar if we remember that Dian, unlike other goddesses whose virginity denotes their autonomy rather than their renunciation of sexual liaisons, truly is stubbornly celibate and utterly unattainable. This is much more in keeping with the dualistic erotic tradition of Renaissance Neoplatonism than worshipping an ultimately available goddess.

In the entire tradition of the idealized female beloved, as we have seen, if a lover is to ascend above the material, his desire must never be gratified. Accordingly, it might be wise to acknowledge that the eternally desirable but eternally unattainable female figure in the truly dualistic manifestations of this tradition is not merely “idealized” – depicted with the finest blond curls or the deepest blue eyes or the sweetest breath – she is ultimately disembodied and disembodying. The often misandric and cruel Dian, who brutally has Actaeon torn to shreds for his sexual interest in her, who forbids her female devotees from marrying men and punishes those who renege with death in childbirth, seems increasingly like an apt choice as a figure of worship.

Ficino explicitly connects Venus and Dian in his *De vita*, when he smugly asserts that, as he is a celibate priest, “Venus herself is but Diana” to him. (Ficino 1998: 383) Dian and heavenly Venus are linked in Bruno’s love theory as well. *De gli eroici furori* celebrates the “cruel and beautiful” goddess Dian, responsible for the eternal “sweet pain” of the lover: “although the soul does not attain the end desired and is consumed by so much zeal, it is enough that it burns in so noble a fire.” This noble suffering is what, in Bruno’s apt elision – based on Ficino’s association of “hero” with “Eros” – makes the *erotic* lover simultaneously *heroic*. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 200)

In his dedication of the *eroici furori* to Sidney, Bruno reproaches him for writing sonnets to mere women, objects unworthy of intellectual contemplation, but simultaneously makes an exception for English women, whom he refers to as “goddesses,” concluding the dedication with an adulatory sonnet to the ladies of England and their “unique Diana,” the virginal and exalted Queen Elizabeth. (Pellegrini 1943: 13) Only Dian herself can be a female figure worthy of worship, even if, when it is politically expedient, she is embodied in a virgin Queen to whom praise is offered.

In this function of chastely if cruelly leading a worshipper upwards towards the divine, heavenly Venus and Dian thus seem to be firmly identified. In *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Helen pleads with the Countess to help her cause,

if yourself [...] Did ever in so true a flame of liking
Wish chastely, and love dearly, that your Dian
Was both herself and Love.
(*All’s Well That Ends Well*, I. iii. 209-213)

This identification between renunciation of the body and Eros, between pure Dian and purified heavenly Venus, constitutes the foundation of Renaissance love theory.

5.1.1.3. WHEN LOVE SPEAKS: DULLING THE SENSES, AWAKENING THE SPIRIT

Shakespeare sometimes seems to be posing the question “*Can Dian be both herself and Love?*” The answer appears to be affirmative in the comedies and romances, where harmony – celestial and/or earthly, spiritual and/or interpersonal – is ultimately achievable.

“And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods / Make heaven drowsy with the harmony,” pronounces Berowne in his ecstatic apology of Eros in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. (IV. iii. 341-42) Frances Yates argues that the character of Berowne, Giordano Bruno’s namesake, must be “an echo of Bruno’s visit to England,” and that Berowne’s great speech on love is “an echo of the *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, in which all the gods

speak in praise of love in one of the constellations.” (Yates 1964: 357) Jill Line comments that “this harmonious lullaby has a specific function in the ascent of Platonic love.” Love awakens the spirit, which now painfully desires to be united with the One, simultaneously putting to sleep the senses, the body, and the material world. Love does this by making its voice – the harmony uniting the entire cosmos – heard. (Line 2004: 48)

Ficino envisions separate harmonies ordering separate planes of existence. The first one exists in the eternal mind of the One, and the second one, mirroring it, is the harmony of the gods and spheres. We heard this second one pre-existentially, before our unfortunate embodiment, but once in our bodies, we are no longer able to hear the voice of the gods. A third kind of harmony, mirroring the second, can fortunately be found in earthly music. In *The Merchant of Venice*, we witness Lorenzo and Jessica, the newly eloped lovers commencing their Platonic ascent of love, striving to hear the harmony of the spheres, but realizing that the “muddy vestures of decay” that now imprison them make this harmony inaccessible to them. This echoes Ficino’s lament that the soul, “as long as it is enclosed in the dark abode of the body,” can sadly “in no way reach that music” (Line 2004: 54) but also his belief that earthly music – which is the mirroring of the mirroring of divine harmony – can help awaken the spirit to the sounds of the more elevated levels of harmony and lead it towards its divine home. Lorenzo accordingly orders the musicians:

Come, ho, and wake Diana with a hymn,
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress’ ear
And draw her home with music.

(*The Merchant of Venice*, V. i. 66-68)

Line observes that Lorenzo here identifies Jessica with Dian and wishes for her to be awakened to the harmony of celestial music so that her soul could be drawn to its divine home. (Line 2004: 54) As she further elucidates, when “the soul is awakened the body is lulled into drowsiness.” The soul then commences its ascent, having been “opened to the world of the angelic mind, and the music of the gods is heard.” (Line 2004: 58)

5.1.2. DIAN WAS BOTH HERSELF AND LOVE: PURE LOVE AS ASCENT IN SHAKESPEARE

It is most commonly in the comedies and romances that ascent through pure love presents itself as a possibility, whereas in the tragedies and so-called “problem” plays, when it does appear as a prospect – which is not frequently the case – it is consistently undermined and problematized.

Not surprisingly, the most complete example of a journey of ascent through love can be found in one of the comedies – the one already mentioned above. In *The Merchant of Venice*, through melancholy, renunciation, and sacrifice, ascent towards the heavenly sphere of Belmont is effected, facilitated by Portia cast in the role of heavenly Venus. The ascent project commences with Antonio’s sorrowful words: “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.” This melancholy opening ushers in the Saturnian motifs which are so abundantly present in this play. We may want to remember that Saturn occupies the loftiest position in Ficino’s astrology, expounded in his *De vita*, and its influence can, among other activities, be courted “by sorrow,” (Ficino 1998: 295) which Antonio does, setting the tone for the entire quest.

The quest for heavenly Portia necessitates the help of another person – Shylock the Jew. It is interesting to note that the Jews were also supposedly Saturnian, much like melancholics. (Hutton/Hedley 2008: 41) Antonio and Shylock, a melancholic and a Jew, both Saturnian, help lead Bassanio towards heavenly Portia.⁹ The lead casket leading to Portia is also distinctly Saturnian, as Ficino advises that in order to obtain “something from Saturn, we use any materials that are somewhat earthy, dusky and leaden.” (Ficino 1998: 253) The lead casket certainly qualifies. Elsewhere, Ficino reiterates that lead is the metal of Saturn, as “the followers of Plato attribute gold to the Sun, silver to the Moon, lead to Saturn, electrum to Jupiter, iron and bronze to Mars, yellow copper to Venus, and

⁹ Antonio and Shylock are connected in other ways as well: “As a homosexual man, Antonio is again linked with Shylock. In the *Divina Commedia* Dante placed usurers and sodomites in the same circle of hell, on the basis that both sins represented an “unnatural” way of doing a “natural” thing. It is natural to create wealth and prosper, but unnatural to make money breed money; it is natural for sexual opposites to combine in procreation, but unnatural for members of the same sex to combine in unproductive intercourse.” (Holderness 2010: 72)

tin to Mercury.” (Ficino 2006: 144) Bassanio decidedly chooses Saturnian influences for his quest.

These Saturnian motifs help establish the Neoplatonic allegorical dimension of the quest for Portia. Saturn is, according to Ficino, the sole planetary influence that can aid one’s ascent towards the higher spiritual realms, as “spirit is [...] always recalled by him from the outer to the innermost faculties and subjects and often from the lowest to the highest. For this reason he helps one contemplate the more secret and the higher subjects.” (Ficino 1998: 295) Ficino further explains Saturn’s influence:

For Saturn has relinquished the ordinary life to Jupiter; but he claims for himself a life sequestered and divine. To the minds of those who are truly sequestered as much as possible, he is in a way friendly, as to his kinfolk. For Saturn himself is (to speak Platonically) in the place of Jupiter to the spirits inhabiting the sublime sphere, just as Jupiter is the helping father to people leading ordinary lives. [...] Saturn has taken over the things which transcend the physical. (Ficino 1998: 365)

Any pursuit undertaken under the auspices of Saturn is, according to Ficino, likely to transcend the physical and lead us back away from matter and, “via Saturnian Capricorn, the sign of contemplation, into the world, not just of the stars, but of light itself, whence originally we descended into the ever darkening, sublunar realms of generation and the elements.” (Hutton/Hedley 2008: 44)

The presence of all these Saturnian motifs clearly indicates that the quest for Portia, the exalted virgin, sought by all, residing in heavenly Belmont, is not a mere marriage deal pursued solely for the substantial dowry, as was the case in Shakespeare’s source for the play.

The writing in the lead casket reads: “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.” Those who have given and hazarded all they have, as Saturn instructs them to, are also rewarded. We may presume that Shylock, the Saturnian Jew, would have been amply rewarded as well, had he accepted Portia’s generous offer.

Bassanio’s labors are rewarded by

This house, these servants, and this same myself

Are yours – my lord's! – I give them with this ring
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love.

(The Merchant of Venice, III. ii. 170-173)

This speech presages that, once again, all will have to be given and hazarded – only in the opposite direction – for a good cause. Bassanio parts with the ring as part of his efforts to save Antonio:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is dear to me as life itself,
But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.

(The Merchant of Venice, IV. i. 282-287)

Significantly, although Portia feigns anger at the supposedly treacherous exchange, she gives the ring to Antonio to give back to Bassanio, which establishes a sort of a triadic marriage among them, reminiscent of the body-soul-spirit triad which is the trademark of all Platonic thought, but which has also been widely accepted into the orthodoxies. The allegorical interpretation of this triadic bond is in fact more reminiscent of orthodox Christian doctrine than of Platonic dualism. The soul sacrifices the body to attain to the spiritual, but then endangers the spiritual to save the body, finally binding all three together. All has been given and hazarded in both directions and Bassanio now has both Antonio and Portia with him in Belmont.

Portia, the spiritual end of the quest and the heavenly savior figure to whom Antonio gratefully acknowledges: “Sweet lady, you have given me life and living,” (*The Merchant of Venice*, V. i. 286) explicitly self-identifies with Dian:

If I live to be as old as Sibylla,

I will die as chaste as Diana,
unless I be obtain'd by the manner of my father's will.
(*The Merchant of Venice*, I. ii. 106-108)

The Neoplatonic moral of the story is clear: Dian must be chastely and sacrificially pursued until all the higher powers are satisfied. Bassanio has fulfilled all the requirements posed by Portia's father to the letter. The lover must never be deluded into believing that bliss can be found by pursuing the bodily beauty of any actual woman – and this world offers ample opportunities for being deluded. When he chooses the right casket, Bassanio discovers in it Portia's portrait – aptly referred to as her “counterfeit” – which then leads him to the *real* Portia. Narcissus gazing at the reflection of a beautiful form has here been led to its true source. Only when these conditions are met will the lover be allowed to ascend to the higher spiritual spheres.

Romances also offer examples of successful ascents aided by spiritually elevated, purely virginal female figures. The pure and heavenly Imogen, who has, although married, significantly not yet consummated her marriage, saves both her husband Posthumus and her father Cymbeline, collecting, along the way, her missing brothers, like so many Platonic sparks of light lost in the cave. Miranda is similarly entrusted with a double task as a heavenly savior figure in *The Tempest*. Her father Prospero, on the one hand, attributes his salvation to her, describing her in angelic terms:

O, a cherubin
Thou wast that did preserve me. Thou didst smile,
Infused with a fortitude from heaven.
(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 152-154)

Her devoted admirer Ferdinand, on the other hand, behaves like the textbook courtly lover or follower of Renaissance love theory. Inspired by his heavenly unattainable mistress, he patiently bears his imprisonment, happily performs menial tasks, and is thus purified and perfected in order to be made worthy of her, as per Prospero's orders. His situation, not accidentally, resembles Bassanio's in *The Merchant of Venice*, and he

similarly gratefully completes all the steps necessitated by his ascent trajectory towards his heavenly Venus, all the while singing her praises:

The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead,
And makes my labors pleasures.
(*The Tempest*, III. i. 6-7)

Pericles' almost supernaturally pure daughter Marina is explicitly linked with Dian via her devotion to the goddess:

One twelve moons more she'll wear Diana's livery;
This by the eye of Cynthia hath she vowed,
And on her virgin honor will not break it.
(*Pericles*, II. v. 10-12)

As the designated heavenly Venus of the play, she remains impervious and untouched in the brothel – the nether point of her immaculate descent into the depths of the material world, akin to that of a docetic Christ figure – illuminating, instead, the way up to all the men she comes into contact with and converting even the most hardened sinners, such as Lysimachus. It is said of her that “she's able to freeze the god Priapus” (*Pericles*, IV. vi. 3) and that “she would make a puritan of the devil.” (*Pericles*, IV. vi. 10)

These instances of pure Dians and heavenly Venuses, leading the heroes upwards along a neatly linear Platonic scale of perfection, yielded by the comedies and the romances, can serve to put in relief their counterparts appearing in the tragedies and the “problem” plays. In the latter, when such female figures do appear, they are seldom unambiguous and unproblematic. Even when they contain female characters which are immaculately virginal and conform to the image of Dian/heavenly Venus in every way, ascent does not readily present itself as an option in those “darker” plays.

Despite having the aid of his pure and exalted daughter Cordelia, whom he tellingly calls “a soul in bliss” and “a spirit,” Lear fails at what Cymbeline and Prospero achieve. He does not unproblematically ascend to a higher spiritual state, having

reconciled himself to his world and purified it of evil. If he does undergo a personal transformation, which is debatable, it is one that has him traveling in the direction opposite to “up,” of which more will be said later.

It is similarly clear that Othello’s beloved Desdemona is heavenly Venus, and Cassio appears to understand it best, describing her as

a maid
That paragon’s description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th’ essential vesture of creation
Does tire the [ingener].
(*Othello*, II. i. 61-65)

It is also Cassio, apparently the most typical devotee of the goddess in the play, who interprets the safe passage of her ship through tempestuous waters as a sign of her exalted spiritual status:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The gutter’d rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteep’d to enclog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.
(*Othello*, II. i. 68-73)

The “divine” Desdemona passes unscathed through the tempestuous waters, much like Marina remains untouched in the carnal depths of the brothel. This safe passage through the chaotic seas serves a double purpose in according Desdemona her elevated role. Philippa Berry rightly notes that the scene of Desdemona’s arrival reminds us of

mythical accounts of Venus' emergence from the sea onto the island and of the Orphic notion of Love's birth from Chaos. For Desdemona's arrival is seemingly a second birth of Venus; the courtly Cassio speaks of 'the divine Desdemona', greeting her on his knees, and references elsewhere in this scene to Desdemona as 'Our great captain's captain' and Othello's 'fair warrior' further remind us of the myth of Venus' union with Mars, the god of war, as a result of which she was sometimes figured with his attributes, as an armed Venus. (Berry 2002: 96)

The link between Desdemona and Venus is clear enough. What does not always seem as clear, especially in Othello's Iago-induced increasingly dualistic mode of thought, is where to situate her in the heavenly/earthly dichotomy insisted upon in Neoplatonism. The arrival scene, at least, should put his mind at ease, as it firmly links Desdemona with the loftier and purer aspect of the goddess. It is heavenly Venus who is exalted above the material waters and who can never be affected by them.

It is the Virgin Mary, however, who is traditionally attributed with the ability to tame the tempestuous waters of the sea, aiding seafarers in their precarious journeys. Portia notably exhibits this capacity when she miraculously retrieves Antonio's ships, purportedly lost at sea. Desdemona similarly shows herself capable of commanding the watery element. It is again Cassio who appears to notice the connection, when he addresses Desdemona with the salute traditionally reserved for the Virgin Mary: "Hail to thee, lady!" (*Othello*, II. i. 85) We may wish to recall that in *Measure for Measure* the exalted virgin Isabel is greeted similarly by Lucio:

Hail, virgin, if you be, as those cheek-roses
Proclaim you are no less.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 16-17)

Cleopatra is perhaps the most ambiguous and problematic heroine in Shakespeare's world. One of her aspects, though, quite clearly fulfils the role of heavenly Venus, exalting her devotees above the common sphere. In one of her imaginary escapades, she fancies herself fishing and conversing with the fish she catches:

as I draw them up,
I'll think them every one an Antony,
And say: "Ah, ha! y' are caught."
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, II. v. 13-15)

If this sounds more than a little eerie, that is certainly no accident, but we must also remember Ficino's image wherein the soul, captivated by the beauty of the beloved, "is drawn upward as by a hook." (Line 2004: 95) One way of interpreting the imaginary fishing scene is to see Cleopatra as heavenly Venus who draws Antony's soul upward "as by a hook." After all, in her dream she exalts Emperor Antony into a divinity and later praises him as one whose

delights
Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above
The element they liv'd in.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 82-90)

We must conclude that it is – at least to a degree – she who has drawn him up above the watery element.

Unlike the comedies and romances, Shakespeare's tragedies and problem plays cannot boast many unproblematically chaste Dians and heavenly Venuses. When such female figures do appear in these darker plays, they nevertheless fail to effect an unambiguous journey of spiritual ascent in their male devotees, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

5.2. THE NARCISSISTIC EROS OF DUALISM

Chaste Dians and heavenly Venuses serve to inspire the heroic lover's ascent to the spiritual realm through dualistic erotic love. The smitten lover is expected to patiently accept the incessant suffering that his desire for the unattainable Dian brings and through

this suffering allow himself to be, in Ficino's phrase, "drawn upward as by a hook" by her.

Disembodied and disembodying, the anagogic female figure of Renaissance Neoplatonism is not merely an idealized version of an object of erotic desire – she is both more and less than that. As a purely spiritual representation of divine love drawing the lover upwards towards his own true divine self, she is conceivably "more" than a depiction of any actual woman, however alluringly idealized. On the other hand, as a reflection of the male lover's own divine essence, she is arguably "less" than any representation of anyone or anything that would be truly Other to him.

Plotinus and Ficino, we might recall here, praised Narcissus for becoming enamored of his own divine face and only reproached him for mistakenly seeking it in what we can presume is the material body of an actual person. Neoplatonic interpretations of the Narcissus myth thus legitimized precisely what is *narcissistic* in Narcissus' situation: falling for the image of himself reflected in the Other, instead of falling for the Other herself – which they simultaneously delegitimized.

The significance of this cannot be overemphasized. This distinction could well be the *differentia specifica* of Neoplatonic Eros as opposed to Christian Agape, as has already been noted by Anders Nygren in his seminal book *Agape and Eros*. According to Nygren, Christian salvation is rooted in Agape – "brotherly" love that created human beings can foster for each other and their Creator – whereas dualistic redemption is driven by the alluring magnetic Eros of the divine image reflected in the material world. (Mitchell 2006: 27)

In more orthodox versions of Christianity – as well as mainstream Judaism and Islam – God always remains Other to His creation, and His creatures similarly always remain Other to each other. The Agape that may unite them is always the love of the Other *as* Other. The Eros of dualism, conversely, is love of the same *because* it is the same, as it is the divine essence identical to our own that we seek in natural beauty, other beautiful beings, and, finally, God. As Nygren asserts in *Agape and Eros*: "Ficino's love is fundamentally self-love, of God for Himself, of us for ourselves in the others, and in God." (Devereux 1969: 162) Ficino's Eros is, quite simply put, narcissistic.

This is a logical consequence of the Neoplatonic conception of emanation and return that Ficino adopted. The human mind emerges into the human soul from the divine mind, which it simultaneously has as its final aim. The soul thus takes part in the circle of divine emanation. (Allen 2002: 49). Parallel circular patterns of emanation and return exist in the procession of divine love and divine beauty as well. Divine love emanates from God and returns to Him, manifesting itself in the soul as a desire for beauty, which it first perceives through the bodily senses, but ultimately becomes enchanted with the divine origin of all beauty itself. Divine beauty likewise proceeds from God, presents itself to embodied souls, and returns to itself as their ignited love. Human love is the reaction of the soul to the inspiration of beauty and therefore has both its origin and its aim in God. (Allen 2002: 62)

Desire and love are thus in fact *created* by the alienation of the soul which is a direct result of its embodiment. (Shaw 1995: 80) The desperate tension caused by the soul's separation from its own divine source is what makes love possible. Being separated from itself through the existence of material bodies containing it, the divine essence can now experience Eros as a desire for itself. (Shaw 1995: 124) The soul's embodiment thus becomes the *sine qua non* of its ascent, just like, as Plato explains in the *Symposium*, the separation of the lover from the beloved is the *sine qua non* of their attraction and ultimate unification. (Shaw 1995: 125) Love in the Neoplatonic erotic discourse can therefore be defined as a desire for the separated sameness, instead of as a desire for the beloved otherness. In Lauster's phrase, "the soul loves its own idea in God and God loves in the soul an idea of itself." (Allen 2002: 66)

In order to illustrate this circle of emanation and return more lucidly, Ficino also uses Platonic metaphors of light, according to which a ray of the divine spirit – the human mind – descends into the soul, and from there ascends again back to God, reflected, making the soul, in a way, "the mirror of God." (Allen 2002: 49).

These figures of the soul as a mirror of God and divinely inspired love as a mirroring of the divine, both firmly in keeping with the Neoplatonic interpretations of the Narcissus myth, are no accidental occurrences in Ficino's Neoplatonic system. Neoplatonic Eros as a narcissistic love of the same is explicitly expounded in his

consistent usage of metaphors of love as a mirroring of the beloved. In a letter to his beloved Cavalcanti, Ficino confesses:

“It is well known with what pleasure all men, even little men, admire their own image in mirrors. But a friend sees deep in a friend not merely his own image, but his very self. For even though I certainly seem beautiful within, in stature I am a little man, thin and short. Yet in the human mirror descended from God, whence I have loved, I have seen myself these twenty-five years as first manifest: the first among men and not a dwarf.” (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 188)

The “human mirror descended from God” is here, as may have been easily surmised, the young Cavalcanti himself. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 188)

The mirrorings that different Neoplatonic heroic lovers may receive from their different objects of desire are not necessarily identical. For instance, Ficino’s beautiful human forms appear to be those of slender young males, whereas Bruno’s are unapologetically those of nubile females, which is in accordance with their respective tastes. The calm, almost timid, and “stubborn-chaste” homoerotic mysticism of Ficino is greatly dissimilar to the wild heteroerotic “furors” of Giordano Bruno. What is constant is their insistence that the anagogic figures that inspire ascent in the lover mirror back to him his own divine essence.

The mechanisms of homoerotic and heteroerotic mystical love theories are not identical, but both, as I hope to show, are resolutely misogynist and decidedly inimical to actual human women – only in somewhat differing ways.

5.2.1. HOMOEROTIC DUALISTIC LOVE

5.2.1.1. THE HUMAN MIRROR DESCENDED FROM GOD

Homoerotic ideology, arguably, forms the original basis of idealistic erotic love. Plato’s *Symposium* seems to take it for granted that it is a male beloved that will serve as a worthy mirror of the divine for a spiritually uplifted and intellectual lover, and heavenly Aphrodite is represented in it as decidedly masculine. “Socratic” or “Platonic” love,

before its meaning was forever transformed in the Renaissance, could for quite some time refer simply to male homosexual relations.

De Rougemont notes that courtly poets often gave to their Lady the masculine title of *mi dons* or *senhor*. Sufi mystical poets, who were, apparently, both notoriously homosexual and simultaneously more interested in addressing the divine than any mere human being, accordingly did the same. De Rougemont consequently argues that homosexuality was in these poetic-cum-mystical traditions a “religious symbol as much as or more than it was the translation of human relations.” (De Rougemont 1983: 98-99) It was the male beloved that could best serve as a mirror of both the divine One and the divine spark of the One within the devoted male lover.

Ficino’s *De amore* famously has an explicit homoerotic orientation, consistently depicting love as a “desire that is excited in the minds of men when they behold the beauty of other men.” (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 184) This beauty is, in reality, the “divine brilliance which shines in the beautiful man as though in a mirror.” (Line 2004: 95) Women are, significantly, thus completely absent from the foundational text of Renaissance love theory. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 184) This, of course, makes perfect sense: women are traditionally associated with the material and the carnal, and it is away from those very impurities and towards the pristine male spirit that dualistic Eros purports to lead.

Psychoanalytic treatments of *Hamlet* have (not surprisingly, as psychoanalysis itself is based both on Plato and on Shakespeare) read Hamlet’s love for his father in idealistic homoerotic terms. Ernst Jones argued in the original 1910 version of the essay later included in his *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis* (in which he then limited himself to reading Hamlet as only in love with his mother) that Hamlet demonstrates towards his father “mirror-love” – an aspect of the psychoanalytic view of homosexuality – which would mean that Old Hamlet is Hamlet’s own ideal of himself. (Armstrong P. 2006: 328)

Old Hamlet apparently personally demands to be Hamlet’s ideal of himself. Linda Charnes argues in “The Hamlet formerly known as Prince” that the Ghost’s commandment “remember me” reveals a

profoundly disturbing fantasy at the heart of patrimonial culture [...] a fantasy of keeping one's essence pure, without the contamination of Otherness, a dream of exercising in perpetuity one's undivided will by eradicating the difference that literally conceives and constitutes succession. To be a first-born son under primogeniture is one thing; to bear the father's name is a doubly derivative legacy that leaves little room for any kind of autonomy. (Grady 2002: 200-201)

She further asserts that, bound by his father to enact his will without actually succeeding him on the throne, Hamlet becomes what is known in psychoanalysis as a "scissoid replicant – a creature meant to go perpetually from the one to the same." Thus "Remember me" means "remember only me," while "the maternal body is effaced from the replicant relation." Old Hamlet, spiritual and sublime, will only live "within the book and volume" of Hamlet's brain if the son, in Charnes' phrase, "agrees to be the father's clone." (Grady 2002: 201) The material part of Hamlet, received in his mother's body, is to be discarded and forgotten, and only his father's spirit is to live on in him "unmix'd with baser matter."

That the father-son relationship can be read in idealistic homoerotic terms is substantiated in the words which Hamlet uses to describe his eager desire to hear his father's secret:

Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift
As meditation, or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.
(*Hamlet*, I. v. 29-31)

Fulfilling the father's command is explicitly associated with "the thought of love," leading Belsey to believe that there is a strong suggestion of "heroic passion" – the same erotic frenzies or heroic furors that Ficino and Bruno attributed to those lovers purely desiring the divine reflected in an ideal(ized) beloved – at work in Hamlet when he approaches his ideal(ized) and spiritual(ized) father. (Belsey 2008: 150-151)

Whether seen through the lens of psychoanalysis or Neoplatonic love theory, Hamlet's passionate love for the spiritually represented father whose name he bears is a

mirror-love of the same for same which impels Hamlet to discard the Other of the mother – and, subsequently and consequently, the Other of Ophelia as well.

5.2.1.2. THOU NEVER SHOULD’ST LOVE WOMAN LIKE TO ME: HOMOEROTIC FIGURES IN SHAKESPEARE

Ficino seems to have been certain that such exalted philosophers as Socrates and Plato could not possibly have associated true love and sexual desire in any way. As he elucidates in *De amore*, “the desire for coitus and love are shown to be not only not the same motions, but opposite.” Ficino further warns:

No name which is suitable for God is common with sinful things. Therefore anyone who is of sound mind ought to be careful lest he heedlessly apply the term love, a divine name, to foolish perturbations.” (*De amore* I, 4, cited in Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 186)

Hanegraaff nevertheless argues that this does not mean that the homoeroticism of *De amore* can be dismissed as an issue that is irrelevant to what Ficino means by “love.” (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 186) As he notes, Ficino has certainly been claimed for the history of homosexuality in most of the recent works belonging to queer theory. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 184)

The very sentiment seems to have been much more ideologically acceptable in the Renaissance precisely because of its Platonic associations and the notion, agreeable to a dualistically imbued culture, that homoerotic stirrings in a male lover, because they are not geared towards procreation and because they are directed towards an equally male and thus equally spiritual beloved, are consequently of a more exalted and spiritual nature than heteroerotic ones.

This was certainly thinkable and thought in Elizabethan England. For instance, as Rackin notes, in Edmund Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar* (1579), in a gloss to the January eclogue, the writer of the marginal note “E.K.” argues, based on classical tradition, that “paederastice is much to be preferred before gynerastice” because, contrary to “the love which enflameth men with lust toward woman kind,” male homoerotic love

could be purely spiritual. To support his claim, he gives the example of Socrates' love for Alcibiades, whose object was, according to him, not his body, but "hys soule, which is Alcybiades owne selfe." (Rackin 2005: 103-104)

Sinfield conjectures that a "same-gender coterie" could well have flourished at or very near the court of Queen Elizabeth, involving or focused on the Earl of Southampton, and around the theaters as well, which the earl who was notoriously reluctant to marry frequented, socializing with the Platonically inclined actors and playwrights. (Sinfield 2006: 28)

Burgess speculates on this subject in his biography of Shakespeare:

If Southampton would not marry, it might have been not only because he wished to enjoy bachelor freedom, but because he had a distaste for women – temporary only, perhaps a pose assumed by others of his circle. To have catamites or kiss and clip the male friends of one's own age would be accounted a kind of chic Platonism. [...] the Southampton set inclined to a mixture of the Bedouin encampment, the well-appointed monastery, and the Hellenic agape, during the period of Will's initiation into the joys of aristocratic life. Will would not be shocked by homosexuality: he may have been inclined to it himself: he was, after all, a member of the theatrical profession. The sexual orientation of Elizabethan actors may have been influenced by the fact of boys taking women's parts and taking them well. Will certainly took well to the laudation of male beauty. If it was the pose of the self-seeker, it was a pose not hard to assume and sustain. (Burgess 1970: 113-114)

"A kind of chic Platonism" seems like an apt description for the general ideological stance towards homoeroticism in Elizabethan England, but Burgess is also right in noting that homoerotic sentiments are in Shakespeare's work expressed with particular ease and earnestness.

Shakespeare changes his sources to accommodate strong homoerotic passions in his misogynist heroes. For instance, in Cinthio's account Iago falls in love with Desdemona, (Muir 1956: 124) while in Shakespeare's version he is a misogynist disgusted by all women. A ritual "wedding" takes place between the two men, united in their disgust for Desdemona in particular and whorish womanhood in general, wherein Othello and Iago vow to revenge together, and Iago promises: "I am your own forever."

(*Othello*, III. iii. 480) This is strangely reminiscent of Hamlet's own vow to revenge made to his father in a homoerotic furor additionally fueled by his disgust at female carnality.

Similarly, there is nothing in Shakespeare's sources for *Coriolanus* that would really suggest the effusive homoerotic speech (Muir 1956: 219) that Shakespeare's Aufidius addresses to Coriolanus:

I lov'd the maid I married; never man
Sigh'd truer breath; but that I see thee here,
Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
Bestride my threshold.

(*Coriolanus*, IV. v. 114-118)

As a Volscian soldier notes, "Our general himself makes a mistress of him." (*Coriolanus*, IV. v. 194-195) The two men are united in their enmity towards the female-gendered Rome.

Sinfield asserts that it is now widely recognized that the Antonio characters in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* are in love with Bassanio and Sebastian respectively, in scenarios reminiscent of the situation represented in Shakespeare's sonnets. (Sinfield 2006: 14)

In *Twelfth Night*, the amorous Duke says to the still cross-dressed Viola:

Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times
Thou never should'st love woman like to me.
[...] Give me thy hand,
And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds.

(*Twelfth Night*, V. i. 2469-2475)

As Jardine notes, the

afterthought of “let me see thee in thy woman’s weeds” reminds the reader (as an audience does not need to be reminded) that this social rite of betrothal is performed by two “men,” and is thus, as ritual, unseemly and troubling. (Jardine 2005: 72)

It should likewise be noted that an Elizabethan audience had the privilege of witnessing this betrothal performed between two *actual* men – no quotation marks needed – on Shakespeare’s stage, as the role of Viola would have been performed by a young male, dressed at that point in a young male’s clothes. The question should also be posed as to just how unseemly and troubling this ritual would have been to a Platonically inclined Elizabethan audience.

The doubly cross-dressed boy actor, especially when shown as the object of erotic love, carried his Platonic symbolic significance, and thus, as Sinfield persuasively argues, “became a familiar motif, not in spite of its erotic potential, but because of it.” (Sinfield 2006: 120)

5.2.1.3. EVEN IN THE LOVELY GARNISH OF A BOY: THE CROSS-DRESSING HEROINE OR THE DOUBLY CROSS-DRESSED BOY ACTOR

One notable example is that of Lorenzo who, when he sees his beloved Jessica cross-dressed, seems positively delighted: “Descend, for you must be my torch-bearer [...] Even in the lovely garnish of a boy.” (*The Merchant of Venice*, II. vi. 40, 45) It is also interesting to note that the rest of the imagery in this scene is befitting for a spiritual anagogic figure who must “descend” in order to lead her devotee by showing him the way with her light as a “torch-bearer.”

The cross-dressing heroines in Shakespeare seem to serve another important function. As Kimbrough notices, of the seven examples of girl-into-boy disguise in Shakespeare (Julia, Portia, Nerissa, Jessica, Rosalind, Viola, and Imogen) the last one is the most typical of Elizabethan stage-practice: Imogen’s disguise in *Cymbeline* is used to help her flee the increasingly hostile court and to protect her from attack while she is on the road. (Kimbrough 1982: 21) Other heroines do not seem to have pressing reasons to wear boys’ clothes, but still do so with impunity in an age when there certainly were those who would have judged them harshly for it.

Not only do they, in Hamlet's phrase, "escape calumny," but these heroines are arguably the least problematically positive female characters Shakespeare has produced. One is hard pressed to find other heroines in Shakespeare's entire opus that are as unambiguously noble, pure, and virtuous as these seven. The only good woman, apparently, is a boy dressed as a boy. It might be worth remembering that many critics have praised Shakespeare for his depiction of intelligent, witty, resourceful, virtuous female figures, but that it is usually these boys dressed as boys that they have in fact referred to. In the darker comedies and the tragedies, there is no cross-dressing, and hence no unproblematic females.

Sinfield somewhat caustically observes that "femininity may appear more acceptable in the guise of a boy." (Sinfield 2006: 103) He notes that women, who could bear children and thus affect "lineage, alliance and property," posed great dangers to the "social order and the male psyche," and were therefore not employed as actresses, as they were in Spain and Italy. Although boys were indubitably also erotically exciting, "that was less threatening than the eroticism of women." (Sinfield 2006: 61)

Whether the cross-dressing heroines – in effect boys dressed as boys – in Shakespeare's theater are meant to depict idealized homoerotic passion or passion for idealized women deprived of the trappings of their femininity, and thus purely spiritual, is not of vital importance. Both options belie a misogynist ideology informing them.

5.2.1.4. FRIENDSHIP vs. LOVE: HOMOSOCIAL FIGURES IN SHAKESPEARE

In order to be misogynist and dismissive of women, characters do not have to feel a homoerotic passion we would nowadays categorize as homosexual. Even in firmly heterosexual settings, the homosocial relationship between men takes precedence over any male's relationship with any woman.

This is notoriously what happens in the ending of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Valentine offers his beloved to his friend. The theme is a common one, appearing also in Elyot's tale of Titus and Gisippus, and in James Shirley's play *The Traitor* (1631). (Sinfield 2006: 96) Wilson reminds that "the friendship that is ready to sacrifice love

itself on the altar of its ideal is a commonplace of the Renaissance.” (Wilson 1933: 59-60)

The question, of course, is whether carnal passion for women and/or a marriage geared towards procreation and the furthering of lineage could rightly be termed “love” among the more enlightened males in Platonic Renaissance circles. They would have been more likely to be viewed as filthy lechery or, at best, inferior liaisons existing solely for the relatively low purpose of creating progeny. Bach notes that only low-ranking characters in Shakespeare are shown to be slaves of sexual desire, while noble and truly masculine men instead opt for higher pursuits and male company. (Bach 2007: 5) Homosocial relationships, even amongst those who are married or otherwise entangled with women, are seen as decidedly superior. (Bach 2007: 8)

Formerly Manichean Augustine believed that God should have created a male companion to Adam for the sake of friendship and intellectual conversation and Cicero argued that a man’s friend was his equal, while his wife was his subordinate, which made one’s friends exponentially more valuable and significant than one’s lowly wife. (Sinfield 2006: 94) Hamlet seems to take this kind of reasoning seriously and consequently, as Sinfield notes,

repudiates Ophelia and excoriates Gertrude, while prizing Horatio for his rejection of feminine interference. Since Hamlet’s soul “was mistress of her choice,” she has preferred Horatio. (Sinfield 2006: 94-95)

If marriage has any real worth in this value system, it is to connect the males involved. In *Julius Caesar*, Antony’s marriage to Octavia is intended to effect a male bond between Antony and Caesar:

To hold you in perpetuall amitie
To make you Brothers, and to knit your hearts
With an vn-slipping knot.
(*Julius Caesar*, II. ii. 835-837)

That Shakespeare took the theme of homosocial friendship vs. heterosexual marriage seriously is indicated by the wording he chooses to employ above, arguably much more emphatic than the possible original in the Countess of Pembroke's translation of Garnier's *Marc Antoine*: "for knitting a straiter bond of amitie betweene them." (Muir 1956: 208) Compared with Garnier's, Shakespeare's verses sound as if the marriage is being contracted between the men themselves.

Some critics, notably Coppélia Kahn and Janet Adelman, have attempted to explain away the strong homosocial/homoerotic strand in Shakespeare in heteronormative, psychoanalytic terms, as an adolescent phase on the way towards the truly mature, adult ideal of a heterosexual marriage. Sinfield persuasively argues that various Renaissance texts show that male bonding of different sorts in the Renaissance cannot "so easily be accommodated." He goes on to assert that

the misogyny of early-modern society, so far from abating in recognition of the crucial role women must play in continuing the family line, was intensified by male resentment at such necessary enthrallment to the female and the married state. (Sinfield 2006: 94-95)

This misogyny is arguably Platonically dualistic in its metaphysics and in ideology.

5.2.1.5. UNEAR'D WOMB: WOMEN ARE FOR PROCREATION

This necessary enthrallment to the female and the married state is the entire worth women are accorded in a large number of Renaissance texts. Ficino notably states – on the rare occasions when it crosses his mind that women might somehow be beautiful to some men – that the only function of this beauty is to impel men to procreate "handsome offspring." Female beauty thus squarely belongs to the domain of "vulgar Venus," while the more exalted spiritual love under the reign of "heavenly Venus" is, despite the goddess' female identity, exclusively the province of men. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 185)

This is the situation we encounter in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. The poetic subject's initial project is to persuade the Boy to produce offspring. Sinfield observes that the "Poet's commendations of procreation involve hardly any reference to the pleasures of

marriage and cross-gender intercourse.” He can only envisage “an instrumental and rather coarse” role that the imagined woman is to play:

For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
(Sonnet 3)

She is further spoken of as “some vial” for the Boy’s “treasure,” and in Sonnet 16 the Poet muses on the “maiden gardens, yet unset,” which would gladly “bear your living flowers.” The metaphors used are hardly flattering. In the last line, significantly, the Poet warns that women are allowed to have sexual intercourse and progeny with the Boy and are welcome to his sperm. The Poet, however, is keeping his “love.” (Sinfield 2006: 167-168)

5.2.2. HETEROEROTIC DUALISTIC LOVE

5.2.2.1. THE DISEMBODIED FEMALE

It is at some point during the Renaissance that Platonic love forever changed its meaning. From Plato’s and Ficino’s homoerotic idealized infatuation, it was transformed into a decidedly heteroerotic passion but significantly retained its exalted and idealized purely spiritual status. Three texts in particular played a critical role in this transformation.

The most influential was, arguably, Cardinal Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani* (1505), thought of as the prototype of the courtly Neoplatonic treatise, which presents Ficino’s theories in resolutely heteroerotic terms with recognizable influences of Dante and Petrarch. Leone Ebreo published his exceedingly popular *Dialoghi d’Amore*, also firmly founded on Ficino but centered on female beauty, around the same time. A third central text, the *Cortegiano* of Baldassare Castiglione, written about a decade later, exalts the pure love of spiritually inclined men for beautiful women, in a fashion that makes it a model case of the new and improved “Platonic love,” all its old and new stereotypes

included. These ideas, widely disseminated and poetically interpreted, eventually resulted in a genuine cult of the divine beauty of woman. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 195-196)

In apparent contrast both to Ficino's firmly homoerotic *De amore* and his many successors' exaltations of women, whose bodily and spiritual beauty was worshipped as a reflection of the divine, Bruno's *De gli eroici furori*, as Hanegraaff notes, is "clearly heterosexual but also shockingly misogynist." (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 197) A small sampling of the text suffices to illustrate this:

It is truly [...] the work of a low, animal, filthy nature to have made oneself the constant admirer, and to have fixed a solicitous attachment upon or around the beauty of a woman's body. Good God! What more vile and ignoble sight [...] than a man, brooding, afflicted, tormented, sorry, melancholy; who waxes now cold, now hot, now boiling, now trembling, now pale, now blushing, now in a pose of perplexity, now in the act of decisiveness [...] What tragicomedy, what act, I say, more deserving of pity and laughter [...] than these subjugated men rendered pensive, contemplative, constant, steadfast, faithful, lovers, devotees, adorers and slaves of a thing without faith, bereft of all constancy, destitute of all intelligence, empty of all merit, void of any acknowledgement or gratitude, where no more sense, intellect or goodness are to be obtained than might be found in a statue or an image painted on a wall? (From the Introduction, cited in Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 198)

He goes on to deride both women in general as disgusting "things" and "monsters" and their male admirers as pathetic fools and idiots. In Bruno's paraphrasing of the Gospel injunction, "what belongs to Caesar should be rendered unto Caesar, and what belongs to God should be rendered unto God." What he means is that one might appreciate the minor qualities that women have – without which they would be "more useless than a poisonous toadstool" – but one should certainly not admire them for *themselves*, let alone *worship* them. The true lover is really tormented by a "heroic" passion for the divine, not by a foolish passion for an actual – disgusting and monstrous – woman. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 198-199)

Bruno is here only explicitly stating the misogyny already implicit in the tradition of the idealized female beloved. As has been noted, the worship of an ideal and spiritual, disembodied and disembodifying, female beloved, was not only not incompatible with

misogyny, but in fact fully consistent with it. Rackin sees this misogyny as an integral part of the Petrarchan tradition. Both Petrarch's Laura and the ladies celebrated in subsequent sonnet sequences modeled upon her were, in her view, idealized, but also "objectified and dehumanized":

Because the Petrarchan lady was fair, her beauty could be compared to the light of heavenly bodies or at the very least to precious earthly objects such as gold and pearls. Because she was unattainable, she could represent a Neoplatonic ideal and the lover's passion could be sublimated into self-transcendence. Some of the ladies may have truly had those attributes; some of the poets (along with their readers) may have sought out ladies who had them; many of the poets undoubtedly constructed their ladies out of whole cloth. None of this really matters: what was important was the attributes, not the ladies. (Rackin 2005: 96)

For Rackin, the misogyny inherent in worshipping the heavenly Petrarchan lady, while simultaneously – as Petrarch himself did in his misogynist satires – rebuking actual human women who naturally fell short, is virtually indistinguishable from the misogyny of Shakespeare's later sonnets, in which the Dark Lady is introduced and also exposed as being the exact opposite of the Petrarchan ideal: "Dark rather than fair, she is also lustful rather than chaste; and instead of inspiring the poet to spiritual elevation, she degrades him in shameful lust." Shakespeare contrasts his portraits of "a beautiful, unattainable young man and a dark, promiscuous woman" and depicts her in firmly corporeal terms, defying the Neoplatonic conventions of favoring sight over the other senses, and instead focusing on her "reeking" breath. (Rackin 2005: 100) As Nordlund sharply notices, Shakespeare "satirized Petrarch and yet shared a good deal of his ambivalence." (Nordlund 2007: 48)

5.2.2.2. THE MIRRORING FEMALE

The ideal female beloved, sharply contrasted with actual human women, thus had to be fully disembodied and stripped of all remnants of her femininity and humanity – as they were defined in the dualistic traditions which produced the figure. As Berry

observes, “when supernatural or spiritual powers began to be attributed to a female object of desire, there was an attempt to erase all traces of active sexuality from this figure.”

This seems to have been primarily motivated by

the desire to make the sign of woman better capable of mirroring a transcendent dimension which, once contacted, could enable the male lover to forge a new and idealized identity. (Berry 2003: 18)

The figure of the female beloved thus has one important function to perform: mirroring a higher spiritual dimension to a male lover, which in effect equals mirroring the male lover’s true spiritual self back to himself. As Berry reads the ending of the *Paradiso*, the direction of Beatrice’s glance, towards the fountain of light which Dante describes as God,

stresses her role as an intermediary rather than active agent, as a mere mirror of this light, which she has guided Dante towards through his love for her, and which now, in the closing stages of his epic narrative, he can see without her mediation. (Berry 2003: 20)

At the end of the quest, when Bruno would say the lover is finally graced with beholding the beauty of the “eternal feminine” who “perfectly reflects the divine light,” (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 204) the male lover in fact finally reaches the reflection of his own divine self. As Berry interprets it, the figure of the ideal female beloved

was usually little more than an instrument in an elaborate game of *masculine* “speculation” and self-determination, for the philosophical enterprise common to both Petrarchism and Renaissance Neoplatonism used woman as a “speculum” or mirror of masculine narcissism.” (Berry 2003: 2)

Shakespeare’s heroes of the firmly heterosexual persuasion can at times seem quite content to use their beloved women as mirrors in which they can behold themselves. As Bloom reads it, Othello’s summation of his love for Desdemona,

She loved me for the dangers I had pass’d,

And I loved her that she did pity them
(*Othello*, I. iii. 167-168)

must “give the audience or readers pause.” The formulation Othello employs reveals the fatality of his narcissistic love for her as little more than a mirroring object:

He did not love her for herself alone but for the way he found himself nobly and heroically reflected in her. When he will not find the image of himself there that he seeks, that exists only because it is reflected in her, “chaos is come again.” (Bloom *Othello* 2008: 7)

Charney similarly notices that, in his imagination of sexual pleasure, Troilus “speaks only of himself and not at all about Cressida, and his speeches have a naïve and narcissistic quality like those of Angelo to Isabella.” (Charney 2000: 70-71)

This narcissistic quality rightly belongs to the narcissistic mystical Eros of dualism. Neoplatonic Narcissus, let us remember, ideally realizes it is his own divine face he sees reflected in the murky waters of matter and accordingly eventually ascends away from the muddy puddle altogether, having used it for speculative reflection.

5.2.3. THE INEVITABLE MISOGYNY OF DUALISTIC LOVE

The subject of Eros in dualistic systems is almost invariably the masculine spirit – the same as its beloved object and the same as the One – and the body, gendered as female, is always its Other. This puts the goddess Venus herself in a classical double bind that women seem to have always faced, at least in Platonically influenced cultures: if she is cast in the role of the ideal beloved, then she is purely spiritual and thus masculine; if she is feminine, then she is material and carnal, and thus the lower, vulgar version of herself.

Matter itself is always inescapably feminine. In some metaphysical frameworks, at the far pro-cosmic end of the spectrum of Neoplatonic dualism, it can be seen as open to male control, and sufficiently passive and receptive. It is only in this case that matter

itself can serve as a beloved other – but only to the daring theurgically inclined Neoplatonic Magus, as will be seen later. This, however, occurs rather infrequently.

Whether the sentiment informing the Eros of dualism is homoerotic or heteroerotic is virtually irrelevant for women, as men of both predilections could find in Neoplatonism an ideological framework to justify their particular attraction. Those male lovers of the Neoplatonic persuasion who did not share Ficino's homoerotic tastes could either exalt male friendship over vulgar coitus with women – which they could perceive as serving only the purposes of procreation – or, conversely, pretend their feelings for women came from heavenly Venus and had nothing to do with sex and reproduction. The woman thus becomes either anagogic, asexual and incorporeal, or little better than an animal.

The dualistic narcissistic Eros of both veins in this tradition leads to one significant consequence: a distaste for actual women. Platonic dualism, in short, is invariably inimical to women.

Let us compare the Eros of dualism to the idea of *agape*, as expounded in mainstream Christianity. God is, in all orthodoxies, always insurmountably Other to His creatures, and those creatures, in turn, are fundamentally always Other to each other and to God. The abyss in monotheisms exists between the Creator and the created. *Agape*, the love attempting to bridge this abyss, forms the basis of all human relationships in Christianity, including the relationship of marriage. As Brundage points out,

Jesus and his early followers anticipated that Christian married couples would live within the context of traditional Jewish culture, but encouraged them to pattern their personal relationship upon the mutual self-giving that lay at the heart of the notion of *agape* among his early followers. Sexual relations in marriage formed part, but only part, of the sharing and loving relationship that seems to have been the marriage ideal of Jesus and the earliest Christians. (Brundage 2987: 58)

Christian *agape* is always love for the Other, which is, in marriage, potentially inclusive of sexual acts. The narcissistic Eros of dualism, conversely, whether homoerotic or heteroerotic, is fundamentally a love of the same for the same, of the male spirit for what is in effect itself reflected, and, significantly – originally at least – resolutely exclusive of

filthy copulation. The abyss in dualisms exists between the intelligible and the sensible – parts of human beings and parts of creation. The abyss is within each human being, and is to be widened until the spiritual part is reunited with the One, which is essentially the same as the human spirit. The Eros of dualism strives to effect this mystical unification.

Its misogyny in a metaphysical system that genders matter as female and opposes it to male spirit seems guaranteed.

... nothing brings me all things.
(Timon of Athens, V. i. 186-188)

6.0. HENOSIS

The ultimate end of dualistic erotic desire is *henosis* – becoming essentially and entirely one with the One. The object of the male lover’s desire is, in accordance with the narcissistic Eros of dualism, always fundamentally the same as the subject, and his spirit strives to achieve unification with its source with which it is already essentially identical, though it is temporarily separated from it by the imprisoning body. All he needs to do when he reaches the end of his desire is to take that final plunge and accomplish erotic dissolution in the divine One. If the Neoplatonic Narcissus must ascend away from what he realizes is the mere reflection of his beautiful figure in the murky waters of matter in order to escape drowning in them, then paradoxically, his ultimate goal is to instead drown himself in the heavens above, wherein the divine form of his face originated.

Henosis has been the final goal in most dualistic mystical systems, and flatly – if sometimes wistfully – rejected by mainstream monotheisms. Orthodox theologians, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, in Pagels’ phrase, all tend to “emphasize the distinction between the infinite God and his finite creatures,” consistent with the Jewish theologian Martin Buber’s pertinent description of God as “wholly other” in any orthodox monotheistic religious system. Even the mystics of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, Pagels reminds, who seek to experientially approach their infinite Creator, often very carefully first “acknowledge the abyss that separates them from their divine Source.” When the Dominican monk Meister Eckhart, for example, failed to do so

and claimed instead that our ultimate goal is attaining the “Cause that has no cause,” God Himself who “lies hidden in the soul’s core,” the archbishop of Cologne simply obtained a papal bull point-blank condemning his writings as heresy. (Pagels 1988: 65)

Martin Buber expressed very well this crucial distinction between mainstream monotheisms and dualistic mysticisms: the orthodox monotheist describes the relationship he has with God in terms of “I *and* Thou,” while no orthodox Jew, any more than any orthodox Christian or Muslim, could say, with the Hindu devotee – or any other essentially dualistic mystic – “I *am* Thou.” (Pagels 1988: 65)

The stark contrast between the dualistic goal of henosis and a possible orthodox version of the highest point of one’s journey towards God can also be illustrated by comparing two individual expressions of such ideas, one from each metaphysical system, whose imagery is superficially seemingly similar, but fundamentally radically opposed. One is the concept of theurgically achieved henosis, conceived by the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, and the other is the Christian notion of *theosis*, propounded by Maximus the Confessor in the East and Duns Scotus Eriugena in the West. Both have significantly been painted in images involving fire.

Iamblichus, allegedly the least easily disgusted of all the Neoplatonists, shocked those of his peers more inclined towards ascetic contemplation by allowing the practice of theurgy, which involved ritual dealings with filthy matter. What the ultimate goal of theurgy is, however, is clearly stated in an exposition in his *De mysteriis* entitled “On theurgic release from the bonds of matter.” In it, he mentions that fire is used in sacrificial rituals involving burnt offerings, and reminds his readers that

the fire of our realm, imitating the activity of the divine fire, destroys all that is material in the sacrifices, purifies the offerings with fire and frees them from the bonds of matter, and renders them suitable, through the purification of their nature, for consorting with the gods, and by the same procedures liberates us from the bonds of generation and makes us like to the gods, and renders us worthy to enjoy their friendship, and turns round our material nature towards the immaterial. (Iamblichus 2003: 247)

The most pro-cosmic thinker among the Neoplatonists apparently only allowed dealings with matter if their final goal was to liberate the theurgist from it. Divine fire, like the

earthly fire used in sacrificial rites, burns away all that is material and purges the spirit, liberating it for unification with the divine. The true fire of spirit which is within us becomes one with the divine fire.

This is radically different from even the most daring concept orthodox Christianity can offer – that of theosis, a solution proposed by Maximus in the East and accepted by Eriugena in the West. The resurrected body of each human being is imagined as participating, along with the soul from which it is fundamentally inseparable, in the gradual process of becoming ever more God-like. For Maximus this emphatically does not mean a loss of identity or an absorption into the divine, and he uses the famous simile of iron in the fire to illustrate this process of unification, a simile which is repeated by Eriugena in the first book of the *Periphyseon*. (Elkaisy-Friemuth 2009: 91)

The iron which finds itself tempered in the fire is each resurrected human being, body and soul, becoming perpetually more Godly, but never reaching the point of becoming one with God. The iron of humanity becomes bright, hot, and pliable in the divine fire, growing ever more fire-like, but it never becomes fire itself, and it is never annihilated. It always remains itself, though it might appear virtually indistinguishable from the embracing flames.

We can here see clearly the stark difference between orthodox Christianity and dualism, even that of the mildest, most pro-cosmic kind. In orthodox theosis, Maximus' iron – both body and soul as the beloved Other to God – in the divine fire becomes ever more similar to the divine, whereas in dualistic henosis Iamblichus' imprisoning matter – Other to the divine spirit – is annihilated in the divine fire, while its beloved – essentially identical – spirit is assimilated to it. In orthodoxy, the soul is Other to God, just like the body, and both are beloved, while the body is not necessarily Other to the soul. In dualism, the soul is the same as God, while the body is Other to the soul.

The notion of theosis is as mystical as Christianity can get without becoming something else. Henosis can only be a valid goal for the dualistic mystic.

6.1. INTO THE ONE: EROTIC HENOSIS IN RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM

In Renaissance Neoplatonism, although this was clearly verging on heretical ground, the ultimate point of ascent of either the still calm of ascetic contemplation or the fiery frenzies of erotic passion was henosis with the One. Ficino, though a Catholic priest, opted to interpret some orthodox doctrines – such as the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection – metaphorically, while taking his Hermetic and Neoplatonic sources very literally.

Consequently, Ficino adopts from Plato and his successors a very clearly and explicitly dualistic version of the ultimate point of erotic ascent: according to his theory of erotic love, we are currently imprisoned in our bodies and can only catch a glimpse of “the one truth, which is the single ray of the one God,” but we can return to the source of our being and become fully unified with God, called by that ray of love. The return journey is also through love, being the act of creation in reverse. The lover is first attracted by the outward beauty of the physical world, then that of virtue, soul and mind. Finally, the soul is seized by the brilliance of divine beauty itself and, “drawn upwards, itself becomes God.” (Line 2004: 5)

The beloved represents the divine and leads towards annihilation in it. The Eros of dualism demands that one become one with the beloved, a process which Ficino famously illustrated with his simile of the separate but amorous drops of water, yearning for each other, flowing towards each other, and finally completely dissolving into one.

This merging into one with the One is what is finally accomplished in the soul via the ray of divine love operating in it. Divine love first incites erotic love in the soul and purges it through suffering, and then, by a gradual movement towards purity from matter, finally assimilates it to its divine goal, itself. (Allen 2002: 62)

It is indeed possible, both Ficino and Bruno promise, for erotic desire to attain its final goal, but only at the very limits of this world and beyond this earthly life. Love can never be consummated within the material world and in the material body. Only after he has first passed through suffering and death and completely transcended matter, “at the

end of desire,” is the lover finally united with divine beauty itself. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 204)

Ficino explicitly – very daringly for a Catholic priest – defines erotic henosis:

Finally, when the soul has become one, I mean the one which is inherent in the very essence of the soul, it remains for it to be changed thereby into the One which is above essence. This is what heavenly Venus herself accomplishes through love, that is, through the desire for divine beauty and the yearning for the good. (Ficino 2006: 54)

Heavenly Venus draws the lover upwards, not only to the divine realm of spirit, but to being finally “changed” into “the One which is above essence.” Henosis is here shown as the logical end of the narcissistic Eros of the Neoplatonic dualistic tradition.

6.2. AS WATER IS IN WATER: EROTIC HENOSIS IN SHAKESPEARE

Antony envisions being dissolved into a shapeless nothingness and speaks about it to his beloved servant, perhaps overdeterminedly named Eros. The differently shaped clouds, as Antony notes, are mere temporary illusions that will be dissolved eventually “As water is in water.” Antony declares, with what seems to be a mixture of anxiety and desire:

My good knave Eros, now thy captain is
Even such a body. Here I am Antony,
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xiv. 13-15)

The matter of each individual body will dissolve in surrounding matter, but also, in Renaissance Neoplatonism, the spirit of each human being striving towards the divine will dissolve in the oceanic One, as, in Ficino’s simile, water merges with water. Margaret W. Ferguson observes in her “*Hamlet: letters and spirits*” that “Antony’s marvelous dialogue with Eros envisions death as a dissolving of boundaries that is more erotic than terrible.” (Parker/Hartman 2005: 303)

Antony's dialog with Eros illustrates several aspects of the tradition of dualistic erotic henosis: the erotic dissolving of boundaries between the lover and the beloved, the otherworldly nature of true love, the strong and persistent association of sex and death, the ultimate non-existence of identity, and the nothingness of death as the end of all desire – whatever and whomever human beings might (think they) desire.

6.2.1. A CONSUMMATION DEVOUTLY TO BE WISH'D: EROS AS THANATOS

A central theme of Bruno's *De gli eroici furori* is his interpretation of the myth of Actaeon, the hunter who stumbles upon the naked goddess Dian while she is bathing. Mesmerized by her beauty, he does not even notice when his own dogs turn against him and devour him. As Bruno interprets it, the myth is an allegory for the "love-death" of the heroic lover: the passionate frenzies he suffers kill him, but this erotic death transforms him into the ideal object of his desire. Dian is for Bruno a figure of the purely spiritual One: she is "the world, the universe, the nature which is in things, the light shining through the obscurity of matter." Thus Actaeon, the prototype of the heroic lover, is through his erotic death transformed into the inscrutable yet mysteriously immanent One:

From the vulgar, ordinary, civil, and common man he was, he becomes as free as a deer, and an inhabitant of the wilderness; he lives like a god beneath the towering forest, in the natural rooms of the cavernous mountains, where he contemplates the sources of the great rivers, vigorous as a plant, intact and pure, free of ordinary lusts, and converses most freely with the divinity, to which so many men have aspired, who in their desire to taste the celestial life on earth have cried with one voice: "Lo, I have gone far off flying away; and I remained in the wilderness." (Hanegraaff/Kripal 201-203)

Actaeon, significantly, never gets to carnally know the beautiful female he sees. He achieves far more than that. What seemingly starts as physical desire for a female shape is through Bruno's dualistic conjunction of Eros and Thanatos transformed into a successfully completed erotic henosis.

This conjunction of Eros and Thanatos is a commonplace in dualistically informed theories of erotic love and makes a regular appearance in Shakespeare's work – especially the tragedies.

Grady perceives a complex synergy of Eros and Thanatos at work in the final scene of Hamlet. As he reads it, “the anointing with poison of Laertes's sword – the emblem of his masculine honor – and then an envenoming of a chalice of wine – an emblem of pleasure, reward, and female sexuality now made a vehicle of death” strongly hints at the fatality of sex or the eroticism of death, but this is not the first hint that is offered in the play.

The very pretext for the fencing match is provided by Claudius' mention of the praise of Laertes's swordsmanship by Lamord, the apparently gratuitously mentioned gentleman from Normandy, whose name, significantly, “simultaneously evokes the French *la mort* (death) and the Latin *amor* (love).” (Grady 2009: 176) Death and love will have become indistinguishable by the end of the tragedy.

The next emblem of love-death appears after Gertrude has mistakenly drunk from the poisoned cup containing a precious pearl, otherwise named a “union,” and Hamlet, having learned of this, shoves it down Claudius' throat, yelling

Is thy union here?

Follow my mother.

(*Hamlet*, V. ii. 331-332)

For Hamlet, as Margaret W. Ferguson notes in her “*Hamlet: letters and spirits*,” “all unions are tainted with poison,” like the literal “union” in the cup that Claudius has prepared for Hamlet. (Parker/Hartman 2005: 302-303) Unions with the female Other certainly are tainted for Hamlet, and he has at that point already ascetically pronounced “we will have no moe marriage.” (*Hamlet*, III. i. 148) However, death in erotic union can also be seen in positive terms, as both Claudius and Gertrude die by this union almost simultaneously, which seems more orgasmic than terrible. Grady explains that this death by “union” is an illustration of

the concept of *Liebestod* (love-death), the ancient idea that death is in fact the true object of erotic desire – a theme hauntingly evoked in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* and in the medieval romances behind it – and one that has been connected to *Romeo and Juliet* several times. (Grady 2009: 202)

Hamlet and Ophelia’s own frustrated erotic union can also be seen as ultimately realized in death. As Jardine establishes, ritual “sexual banter, including lewd mocking rhymes and fairly explicit romping at weddings, was an acceptable part of social practice.” (Jardine 2005: 25) Mad Ophelia’s incoherent rhymes sound, more than anything, like sexually explicit wedding songs – those she would have heard at her own fervently desired wedding with Hamlet. It is during this “wedding” that she performs, as Showalter notes, that Ophelia first metaphorically “deflowers” herself – by divesting herself of all the flowers she has. (Parker/Hartman 2005: 80)

Berry notices another metaphorical defloration of Ophelia. She means to hang her garland of weeds on the willow tree, a symbol both of sexuality and disappointment in love, which, according to Berry, here also assumes the symbolic role of male genitals. However, Ophelia loses this circular wreath of flowers:

In slipping into the river, Ophelia’s loss of her “crownet” of flowers functions as a metaphorical defloration; indeed, she appears to fall into the brook backwards, as the Nurse’s husband told the infant Juliet that she would do, when “thou comest to age.” (Berry 2002: 27)

She falls into the water much like a Neoplatonic Narcissus, but in a strange conjunction of Eros and Thanatos she goes to her death still happily singing her wedding songs, ultimately ecstatically becoming one with the fluid element. Her drowning can be seen as both a sexual and a mystical experience.

Hamlet seems to seek his own erotic annihilation when he leaps into her grave, insinuating their impending union in death. As he has already said of death, ‘tis a consummation devoutly to be wished – and this is how his and Ophelia’s union is really to be consummated. His dive into Ophelia’s open grave can be seen as courting death in the best courtly fashion, much like Romeo does before Juliet’s tomb.

Both Hamlet and Romeo, but other fatally frustrated lovers in Shakespeare's tragedies as well, court death in this way, realizing that love cannot be realized in this world. This is no accident. Apparently, when her beloved Adonis died, Venus cursed – or blessed – those that “love best” with inevitable death:

Sith in his prime, Death doth my love destroy,
They that love best, their love shall not enjoy.
(*Venus and Adonis*, 1063-1064)

One possible dimension of interpretation of the consistent association of love and death in Shakespeare's tragedies is that pure lovers, those that “love best,” must ascend away from this cruel world in which true love is incompatible with life, so they can finally become one in death. De Rougemont has identified this as a central notion stemming from the consistent dualistic current at the core of the Western tradition of romantic love. (De Rougemont 1983) These unifying and liberating deaths are in Shakespeare usually erotically charged nearly simultaneous suicides – as is the case with Romeo and Juliet – or murder-suicides – as is the case with Othello and Desdemona. This tradition of fatal love is to blame for the fact that, even today, the media at times cover murder-suicides perpetrated by the male as “tragic” but “romantic,” investing them with an intriguing aura of almost otherworldly grandeur and mystique.

Knowles has observed in his interesting treatment of *Romeo and Juliet* from a carnivalesque perspective that, inconsistently with the conventions of carnival, “only death came from their love, not the renewal and thus reaffirmation of life.” (Knowles 1998: 58) *Romeo and Juliet* does not seem to fully belong to the medieval carnivalesque tradition with its medley of macabre and bawdy imagery which is ultimately monistic and life-affirming. It belongs, instead, to the dualistic tradition of erotic love which can only lead away from this dull and cruel world and straight into death. Quite possibly, it was the Neoplatonic view of love as Eros leading away from earthly life that made possible this novelty of treating love as fit subject matter for tragedy in the Renaissance.

De Rougemont has even flatly called *Romeo and Juliet* a “courtly tragedy,” and observed that, significantly, Verona was a major center of Catharism in Italy, and the

scene of violent struggles between Patarenes and the orthodox, which likely became the stuff of legends that spread throughout Europe. (De Rougemont 1983: 190) Accordingly, with a touch of pathos and in consciously Cathar terms, De Rougemont explains that, as Romeo and Juliet die together in the graveyard, “Death’s *consolamentum* has sealed the one kind of marriage that Eros was ever able to wish for.” (De Rougement 1983: 91)

Juliet anticipates the love-death resolution of her ultimately dualistic erotic infatuation for Romeo:

If he be married,
My grave is like to be my wedding-bed.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, I. v. 134-135)

He becomes married to her, and still her grave has served as a wedding-bed to her, with Death referred to, in erotically charged terms, as her lover. In a very similar combination of imagery, Desdemona asks for her wedding sheets to be placed upon the bed when she appears to anticipate her death, which will only precede Othello’s by a short while:

If I do die before [thee], prithee shroud me
In one of those same sheets.
(*Othello*, IV. iii. 24-25)

Troilus is the only lover to die in the comedies – as he explicitly desired to. In his description of his exalted erotic state, he is a lost soul on the banks of the River Styx that leads into the underworld of Hades, and appeals to Pandarus to ferry him across:

O, be thou my Charon,
And give me swift transportance to those fields
Where I may wallow in the lily beds
Proposed for the deserver.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, III. ii. 9-12)

Charney sees the erotic imagery used here as odd and disturbing. (Charney 2000: 70-71) Death, however, is the normal consummation of the kind of Eros that informs Troilus' reverie. The lily beds of Elysium, of course, denote flowerbeds, but using the word "bed" here automatically conjures the image of a bed – along with the carnal consummation of love that is usually associated with it. Eros and Thanatos are once more firmly linked.

Even though lovers in the comedies do not necessarily actually die, sex and death are consistently linked in imagery. Isabella's imagined martyrdom is, as has often been noticed, described in erotically charged images:

Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death, as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame.
(*Measure for Measure*, II. iv. 101-104)

Stripping herself to death as to a bed is an interesting image: it reflects the idea that the body will be stripped off her spirit before she becomes one with the One in erotic henosis. This is reminiscent of Ambrose's notion that the body is but a filthy robe to be discarded upon death – a strange notion indeed for a person that was to become a Catholic saint, but somewhat understandable given his Platonic philosophical education.

Isabella's keenness for martyrdom is also comparable to the dualistic heresiarch Origen's effusion from his *Dialogue*:

Bring wild beasts, bring crosses, bring fire, bring tortures. I know that as soon as I die, I come forth from the body. I rest in Christ. Therefore let us struggle, let us wrestle, let us groan, being in the body, not as if we shall again be in the tomb in the body because we shall be free from it. (Armstrong 1996: 181)

Armstrong offers a fascinating history of female martyrdom in her *Gospel According to Woman*. Martyrdom was first associated with sexual asceticism and hatred of the body when dualistic metaphysics began to seep into Christianity. In the Middle Ages, the martyr was already nearly always also a virgin, which signified a renunciation

of the bodily. (Armstrong 1996: 182) An interesting addition to the tradition appeared at some point before the 13th century: the virgin's martyrdom commenced to be depicted almost invariably in terms suggesting a sexual assault. (Armstrong 1996: 183) That Isabella's guarded virginity and distaste for all things fleshly should appear to be inseparable from her morbid sexual fascination with martyrdom seems a little less strange in light of this.

Claudio echoes his sister's sexually charged imagery of death:

If I must die,
I will encounter darkness as a bride,
And hug it in mine arms.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 82-84)

After Claudio's promise to "encounter darkness as a bride," Isabel admiringly declares:

There spake my brother; there my father's grave
Did utter forth a voice.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 85-86)

The image is a strange one indeed. The hollow darkness of a masculine ("father's") grave is imagined to speak in erotic terms about the feminine ("bride") darkness of death: a deathly darkness is ultimately erotically desiring a deathly darkness. The same will be dissolved in the same, which is ultimately the erotically desired nothingness of death.

The image of an erotic encounter with death is a common one in Shakespeare, frequently inspired by the early modern usage of the verb "to die" to refer to a sexual orgasm, which was itself perceived as a kind of death. (Deats 2005: 245) Lear declares "I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom," (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 198) and Antony sees himself as "A bridegroom in [...] death," who will "run into" Eros' sword "As to a lover's bed." (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xv. 100-101)

Miodrag Pavlović has noted in his “Antonije i Kleopatra” (Antony and Cleopatra) that Antony’s suicide is placed in a consciously symbolic framework, as the servant Antony desires should kill him is named Eros; when he refuses and commits suicide himself, Eros, in Pavlović’s phrase, transforms into Thanatos. (Pavlović 1990: 50-51) Antony’s desired erotic henosis is, interestingly, both homoerotic and heteroerotic, rendering Antony somehow androgynous, and both the penetrator (of Cleopatra) and the penetrated (by Eros’ sword).

Shakespeare offers in *Antony and Cleopatra* a more clearly and consciously ambiguous approach to love-death than in any other tragedy of his in which his lovers die. Antony and Cleopatra both seem to ascend to lofty dimensions in the imagery surrounding their demise and death, and yet are throughout openly and luxuriously carnal, in contrast with other lovers in Shakespeare’s world, who are almost ethereal by comparison. Unlike Antony and Cleopatra, Zamir notices, for instance, Romeo and Juliet never eat, which is consistent with “the noncorporeal passion that possesses them.” (Zamir 2007: 131) Lisa Starks notes in her ““Immortal Longings”: The Erotics of Death in *Antony and Cleopatra*” that Shakespeare, who frequently explores the theme of love and death, takes the exploration further in this late tragedy, allowing the theme to become more potentially disruptive of cultural norms. Shakespeare’s equation of desire and death usually serves, in her words,

not to valorize the fusion of death and sexuality but, rather, to reveal the abject loathing of the flesh and disgust of human mortality that ultimately results in the death *of* desire. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, Shakespeare transforms the death of desire into the ecstatic *desire of death*, a longing beyond the pleasure principle, a fusion of the destructive and the regenerative forces of Thanatos and Eros. (Deats 2005: 245)

The entire tragedy sometimes reads as an extensive treatment on the fusion of Eros and Thanatos, viewed from all sides. Enobarbus humorously puns on the double meaning of “to die” extensively:

Under a compelling occasion, let women die. It were pity to cast them away for nothing, though between them and a great cause, they should be esteem’d nothing.

Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. ii. 136-143)

The clown also persistently quibbles on both “to die” and the phallic “worm,” allowing sex and death to be even comically intertwined in this tragedy.

Cleopatra approaches her own death with a bit more gravity, but still persistently linking sex and death:

The stroke of death is like a lover’s pinch,
Which hurts, and is desir’d.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 295-296)

As she dies, she declares with pathos:

I am again for Cydnus
To meet Mark Antony.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 228-229)

She is referring here to their first encounter on the river Cydnus. Their deaths are thus depicted as a mystical union entailing the dissolution of both into the watery element, much like Ophelia was dissolved in her erotic drowning.

Through this ambiguity of the association of Eros and Thanatos, as either the negative terrible fatality of sex or the positive orgasmic eroticism of death, most accentuated in his *Antony and Cleopatra*, but present throughout his opus, Shakespeare seems to be deconstructing the usual Neoplatonic dichotomy of pure spirit and prime matter. Both the erotic ascent to henosis and the carnal descent to prime matter lead, ultimately, to nothingness and death. Death is inescapably the end of all desire in both meanings of the word: either as the inevitable end of all carnal desire or the desired end itself.

6.2.2. NOTHING BRINGS ME ALL THINGS: DEATH AS THE END OF DESIRE

Whether through ascetic contemplation, or through erotic ascent in chase of a chaste lady (or divine boy), the ultimate goal of dualistic ascent is henosis. The three caskets Portia's suitors choose from offer a clue as to what options are given to a pursuing subject in Renaissance Neoplatonism, whether he be a contemplative philosopher or a heroic lover:

1. The gold casket with its image of death,
2. The silver casket, containing the picture of a fool, and
3. The lead casket, holding Portia's "counterfeit."

Except for the silver one, which relatively straightforwardly represents breeding (knock a girl up by mistake and get foolishly trapped and burdened with a "fool" – that endearing Elizabethan term for an infant), they are both ambiguous. Love-death, Eros as Thanatos, dying in both its terrifying and its orgasmic meanings, could be seen as a gold death, while ascetic ascent towards still and contemplative henosis with the One is more in keeping with choosing the somber Saturnian lead. They both potentially lead to nothingnesses and they could both lead to perfect henosis.

An example of pure henosis is given in Prospero's successfully completed theurgical rites, after which he is finally to become God. As Corfield reads the play, Prospero's "rough magic" is rough simply because it is "unsubtle by comparison with the next degree of the mage's enlightenment." Having completed this degree, Prospero simply "sheds his magic as a snake sheds its outworn skin, and proceeds to higher things." These higher things are in effect henosis. Corfield cites Curry's conclusion, which he mentions has been drawn with the aid of studying Neoplatonic philosophy, that Prospero's "theurgical operations have accomplished their purpose. He wishes now to take the final step and to consummate the assimilation of his soul to the gods." (Corfield 1985: 33) As Line explains,

It would have been a heresy for Shakespeare to write this at the time but, in the Christian-Platonic tradition, the goal was not to become a lesser deity but God Himself. (Line 2004: 145)

Leaving the imprisoning island and returning home triumphantly can easily be interpreted as Prospero's henosis following his liberating death. The island can be read as his body, and the other characters as lower parts of himself that he must first theurgically put into order before he moves upwards still. Prospero finally leaves behind all but the divine spark, Prospero himself, which returns home to rule.

Prospero can thus be read as having chosen the somber lead casket leading to pure ascent and, finally, henosis. Freud's peculiar reading of the three caskets as three women to choose from can be interesting in this context. Freud notices that the lead casket bearing Portia's image is all "paleness" and that Cordelia, the good one among the three sisters, is "silent." These qualities are associated with dumbness, and Freud observes that "psycho-analysis will tell us that in dreams dumbness is a common representation of death." As Harris paraphrases Freud, "the choice of the pale or silent woman represents the choice of a dead woman, and more specifically of death itself." (Harris 2010: 80) In Neoplatonic terms, this is not surprising, as erotic henosis, chosen through the lead casket, is only achieved after death. Strangely enough, though, Freud does not pay much heed to the fact that another, much more ominous casket – the gold one – explicitly contains the image of Death. Thus two of the three caskets can be seen as ultimately leading to death.

In the unconscious, as Harris notes,

opposites such as death and love often represent one and the same content. For Freud, then, as for structuralists and deconstructionists, opposites are connected and contain the trace of each other. (Harris 2010: 81)

In Renaissance Neoplatonism, as has been seen, these need not really be opposites to begin with – love and death can both firmly stand for henosis. The lead casket and the gold casket can be two sides of the same coin.

The gold casket of death officially leads to what is usually negatively painted as carnally induced annihilation in the depths of matter, but erotic, orgasmic death can often be at least quite ambiguous in Shakespeare. Erotic death can, as has been seen, often be interpreted as a representation of a mystical union and the ideal consummation of heroic love – a consummation devoutly to be wish'd – at times explicitly expressed as a lover's death wish, as is the case with Othello:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
(*Othello*, II. i. 189-193)

Othello eerily (fore)sees in death the perfect consummation of his union with Desdemona – and devoutly wishes for it. His wish is fulfilled in their explicitly eroticized nearly simultaneous and uniting deaths. As he poetizes,

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
(*Othello*, V. ii. 358-359)

Whether pure and contemplative, as is the case with Prospero's proper theurgical ascent, or impassioned and destructive, as is the case with Othello's fiery frenzy, the annihilation of personhood into eventual nothingness is the ultimate goal of all dualistic desire.

As Clifford Leech has discovered in "The "Meaning" of *Measure for Measure*," the "meaning" of the play is what can rightly only be termed henosis. As Leech perplexedly observes, "the Duke offers no hint of Christian consolation: Claudio must welcome death because there is no real joy to be found in life: he denies even personality itself." (Stead 1971: 157) For this he cites the Duke's words

Thou art not thyself
For thou exists on many a thousand grains
That issue out of dust.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 5-43)

The trapped divine sparks are in dualistic systems ideally to be reunited with their source and thus annihilated in henosis with the originating One. Personality and identity are mere illusions that should – like Prospero’s “rough magic” – finally be discarded like outgrown snake skins.

Juliet also proves that identity is ultimately an illusion:

Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but ay,
And that bare vowel *I* shall poison more
Than the death-[darting] eye of cockatrice.
I am not I, if there be such an ay.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, III. ii. 45-48)

I am not I, as there is no “I”: “I” is fundamentally merely “a bare vowel” that poisons. She is not she, as finally, in their erotic annihilating union of death, she is him, as he is her. They have become one and their identities have evaporated as the mere illusions that they have always truly been.

Something similar happens in imagery when, in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus runs on his sword, much like Antony does, and his servant answers Messala’s question of where he is with

Free from the bondage you are in, Messala;
The conquerors can but make a fire of him;
For Brutus only overcame himself,
And no man else hath honor by his death.
(*Julius Caesar*, V. v. 54-57)

That the only thing the conquerors can do is give him a ritually proper funeral – “make a fire of him” – creates an interesting image wherein Brutus, because he “overcame himself” and, in one possible reading of these words, thus annihilated his identity, can now become the pure fire of spirit.

After the Duke’s speech, even Claudio’s thoughts temporarily take a philosophical turn, and he muses:

To sue to live, I find I seek to die,
And seeking death, find life.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 42-43)

A desire for erotic henosis, as has been seen, can at times hardly be distinguished from a world-weary death wish. As Victor Hugo has commented on Hamlet, in the best dualistic Platonic tradition of Romanticism:

Hamlet expresses a permanent condition of man. He represents the discomfort of the soul in a life which is not sufficiently adapted to it. He represents the shoe that pinches and stops our walking; the shoe is the body. Shakespeare frees him from it, and he is right. (Bloom *Hamlet* 2008: 180)

Hamlet has to beg Horatio to absent himself from “felicity,” (Hamlet, V. ii. 347) at least for a while, when he intends to commit suicide, and Constance amorously exclaims, as if to a lover: “Death, death. O amiable lovely death.” (*King John*, III. iv. 25) The object of erotic desire – and the true object of any strong desire – is in Shakespeare often explicitly shown to be death itself.

Richard II stumbles upon a significant philosophical discovery in the course of his vaguely suicidal musings:

Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas’d, till he be eas’d
With being nothing.

(Richard II, V. v. 1-66)

Timon similarly notices, while merrily writing his epitaph:

My long sickness
Of health and living now begins to mend,
And nothing brings me all things.

(Timon of Athens, V. i. 186-188)

“Nothing” is here explicitly shown to be the true goal of dualistic ascent. Whether this final step of death is an orgasmic leap into henosis with the One, or a plunge into the nothingness of feminine prime matter, can at times be indistinguishable, as both these nothingnesses irresistibly draw parts of each human being towards them.

6.3. BEING NOTHING: THE PARADOX OF DUALISTIC DESIRE

Suspended between the body, which is constantly threatened by dissolution into formless prime matter, and the spirit, which is irresistibly drawn towards annihilation into the inscrutable One, the Neoplatonic human is but a fleeting and ultimately false image. Identity, based on the temporarily formed matter of the body and the temporarily imprisoned forming spirit is less than a fiction – it is the shadow of a shadow, an afterthought of the lowly imprisoning body, precariously existing, as a frail bark thrown about on the waves between the sea and the sky, floundering between two powerful and eternal nothingnesses that offer annihilation to it.

Both prime matter and pure spirit can be seen as nothingnesses in this paradoxical and self-deconstructing dichotomy. For, if prime matter is in Neoplatonism an amorphous nothingness because it is as yet unformed and below form, then the One towards which all spirit strives is also a limitless nothingness because it is the origin of all forms and above any particular form. These twin nothingnesses both claim the split human being, the one threateningly, the other alluringly.

Annihilation in the nothingness of the One is the ultimate goal of the erotic ascent of dualistic Renaissance Neoplatonism – the final rung of the Platonic ladder of perfection, the last step on an arduous journey of suffering, purification, and, finally, death. It is achieved if the lover has avoided the lures of the shadowy and illusory world of matter and ascended upwards towards the pristine light of the spirit. If the lover, however, mistakes this erotic call of divine beauty for carnal stirrings and he will instead be drawn downwards and ultimately annihilated in the nothingness of prime matter.

Paradoxically, annihilating erotic deaths in Shakespeare, at least as often as not, appear to be impenetrably ambiguous on this very point. Shakespeare at times seems to be enjoying deconstructing the Platonic pure spirit/prime matter dichotomy in the theory of erotic love, while at other times he appears to be genuinely troubled and oppressed by it, as will be seen in the next chapter.

*All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.
(Sonnet 129)*

7.0. DESCENT

We have so far seen what Narcissus, standing on the brink of the muddy waters of matter, mesmerized by his beautiful reflection in them, ultimately ought to do. According to the vast majority of Neoplatonic thinkers, the purest option available to Narcissus is to look disgustedly away from the deceptive reflection of his beautiful divine face, and begin instead a purifying ascent towards the heavenly One, from which this divine form originated. The end of every desire is annihilating henosis – the soul’s dissolution into the One – and this is the drowning that Narcissus truly yearns for as he gazes into the reflecting waters longingly.

Of course, what Narcissus *ought to do* is not what Narcissus actually *does*. Plotinus, in his allegorical reading of the myth, bemoans the fate of Narcissus, who drowns in the reflecting waters, and relates it to the inevitable deadly downfall of any man who falls in love with a beautiful body of a mere mortal, forgetting that it is solely an image of divine beauty. He warns that

this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. (Allen 2002: 290)

Ficino likewise laments, in his interpretation of the myth, that Narcissus

abandons his own beauty, but he never reaches the reflection. That is, the soul, in pursuing the body, neglects itself but finds no gratification in its use of the body. For it does not really desire the body itself; rather, seduced, like Narcissus, by corporeal beauty, which is an image of its own beauty, it desires its own beauty. And since it never notices the fact that, while it is desiring one thing, it is pursuing another, it never satisfies its desire [...] it is racked by terrible passions and, stained by the filths of the body, it dies, as it were, since it now seems to be a body rather than a soul. (Allen 2002: 289)

Ficino's Neoplatonic hierarchy of the cosmic spheres kept changing throughout his lifetime, but it usually comprised four distinct levels: God (the One), Angel (the Mind), Soul (sometimes divided into its Intelligible and Sensible parts), and Matter (or the Body, depending on how ordered he felt the lowest part of the created universe to be at any given moment). Each sphere – on this his doctrine was unchanging – reflects, albeit imperfectly, the harmonious beauty of the one immediately above it. God is thus mirrored in the Angelic Mind, which is in turn mirrored in the Soul, which then reflects its form on the matter below it. Each cosmic sphere is thus a mere shadow of the one above it, and the higher spheres, being exalted and wise, are well aware of this:

God is certainly never so deceived as to love the shadow of His own beauty in the Angel and neglect His own true Beauty. Nor is the Angel so taken by the beauty of the Soul, which is its shadow, that it becomes preoccupied with its shadow and forsakes its own beauty. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 183)

Our soul, however, being so close to matter and thus itself volatile and unfixd, can be deceived by its reflection in the lower sphere:

Only our soul, I say, is so captivated by the charms of corporeal beauty that it neglects its own beauty, and forgetting itself, runs after the beauty of the body, which is a mere shadow of its own beauty. [...] This is greatly to be lamented, for this is the origin of all our woe. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 183)

Dualistic Eros, as has been seen, is informed by this theory of magic mirrors, which can accommodate itself to both pro-cosmic and anti-cosmic worldviews. This

paradox – that the beauty of creation is a reflection of divine beauty, and thus both legitimately desirable and alluringly deceptive – is at the core of the intense ambiguity and consequently quite disparate attitudes towards desire, sexuality, love, procreation, creation, and even existence, that were present in Renaissance Neoplatonism, and very often even all held by the same person simultaneously.

Ficino was certainly one of those persons. His constantly changing interpretation of the second of the two Platonic Venuses is an exquisite example of this paradoxical ambiguity. Heavenly Venus, masculine, divine, and purely spiritual, leading one unmistakably away from matter and towards the One, was for Ficino an unproblematically positive figure. Vulgar Venus, feminine, earthly, and focused on the material world, however, does not escape calumny.

On the one hand, she is responsible for the procreation of beautiful forms in nature, not least of which are human bodies, whose generation is duly lauded by Ficino as “virtuous and praiseworthy,” which is in keeping with the official teachings of both the Catholic Church and Plato. On the other hand, it is vulgar Venus that traps sparks of the divine in this basest of all possible worlds, thus bringing them all the evils and all the suffering that they experience, which is in keeping with the dark dualistic undercurrent of Western metaphysical and religious thought. It is true that in *De amore*, Ficino repeatedly stresses that the second Venus is called “vulgar,” or a *kakodaemon* (evil daemon) not because it is inherently evil, but because

on account of our abuse, it often disturbs us and powerfully diverts the soul from its chief good, which consists in the contemplation of truth, and twists it to baser purposes. [...] it leads us to prefer the beauty of the body to the beauty of the soul and thus leads us downwards instead of upwards. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 181)

However, his putative defense of her and himself is not entirely convincing, as the downward descent she leads one on due to “our abuse” can at times be virtually indistinguishable from her normal function in his system. There seems to be a discrepancy in Ficino’s thought between his theoretical acceptance of procreation and an abhorrence of what he refers to as “touching” – a term that can be taken as practically synonymous with “sexual activity,” even in the confines of marriage. The pleasures of

touch themselves, in Ficino's words, "remove the intellect from its proper state and perturb the man."

His revulsion at "touching" seems to have grown steadily more intense as he himself grew older: while in *De amore* the second Venus is at times described as "virtuous and praiseworthy," in *De vita* she is represented as a deceptive enemy stealing our vital energy in the interest of procreation and as a prostitute seducing the young by promising (but never actually giving) them the "lethal" pleasures of touch.

(Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 183)

"Touching" itself is never truly pleasurable, as it is always the end of a deceptively alluring fall into the material and away from the spiritual. It is difficult to ignore his explicit warning that

the desire for coitus and love are shown to be not only not the same motions, but opposite [...] No name which is suitable for God is common with sinful things. Therefore anyone who is of sound mind ought to be careful lest he heedlessly apply the term love, a divine name, to foolish perturbations. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 186)

When one desires another human being sexually, it is clear that the impulse has little to do with love, which is divine and purely spiritual. This is echoed in Adonis' retort to vulgar Venus' sexual pursuit of him, which could have been Ficino's:

Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled,
Since sweating Lust on earth usurp'd his name.

(*Venus and Adonis*, 793-794)

Bruno's treatise likewise preserves a clear Neoplatonic dichotomy between heavenly and vulgar erotic passions, sometimes rendering his attitude towards erotic desire extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, ascent from the earthly to the divine seems to be possible in his system only *via* contemplating the earthly beauty of the female body. On the other hand, sexual frustration is a necessary prerequisite of this mystical technique, as the desire of the "heroic lover" can only be satisfied by attaining the one "object," "beauty," or "fire" of the divinity itself.

A central figure in this mystical process is the “cruel and beautiful” goddess Diana, analogous to Ficino’s heavenly Venus. She causes the “sweet pain” of the heroic lover, who is then inspired to ascent by the burning passion – both in the sense of “desire” and in the sense of “suffering” – of his love, which can never be attained in this world, and which finally consumes him whole. Bruno believes this eternal frustration is the only praiseworthy option for the heroic lover, as “although the soul does not attain the end desired and is consumed by so much zeal, it is enough that it burns in so noble a fire.” (Hanegraaff/Krpial 2008: 198-201)

Bruno, conversely, pours scorn on those who allow something as insignificant as an actual woman to get them into such a condition. In a long accusatory litany, he bemoans all the things men do

for those eyes, for those cheeks, for that bosom, for that white, for that crimson, for that tongue, for that tooth, for that lip, that hair, that dress, that mantle, that glove, that little shoe, that slipper, that avarice, that giggle, that scorn, that empty window, that eclipsed sun, that torment, that disgust, that stench, that sepulcher, that cesspit, that menstruation, that carrion, that quartan fever, that uttermost insult and lapse of nature, which, with a surface, a shadow, a phantasm, a dream, a Circean enchantment plied in the service of reproduction, deceives under the guise of beauty; which simultaneously comes and goes, is born and dies, flourishes and rots, and may be somewhat beautiful on the outside, but truly and constantly contains within a shipload, a workshop, a customs-house, a marketplace of every foulness, toxin and poison that our stepmother nature has managed to produce: and once the seed she requires has been paid out, she often repays it with a stench, a remorse, a sadness, a weakness, a headache, a lassitude, and many more distempers known to all the world, so that it sorely aches where it itched so sweetly before. (From the Introduction; cited in Hanegraaff/Krpial 2008: 198)

The expression “sorely aches where it itched so sweetly before” refers to what happens when a lover fails to worship the true goddess Dian properly and purely, and instead attempts to improperly, as it were, “hunt” Dian down, pursuing her – or, rather, the woman in whom she is reflected – sexually. Instead of Dian, then, one catches something completely different – judging from his choice of phrase, possibly even a venereal disease.

Shakespeare, much like the other poets and dramatists of the time, was demonstrably very intimately acquainted with the idea of the two forms of love. The editors of the First Folio did not arbitrarily and by accident ensure that the two Cupids – divine Cupid, the oldest of the gods, as the representation of heavenly love, and young Cupid, born of Venus, as the representation of its earthly counterpart – be depicted on several headpieces in it. (Line 2004: 14) Distinguishing love from lust certainly has throughout been a topic of great interest to Shakespeare.

As Adonis claims,

Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire.
(*Venus and Adonis*, 149-150)

This is a clear demarcation of the two Venuses and the two kinds of love – earthly and heavenly. It is “gross” earthly “love” – which Adonis insists is but “sweating Lust” – that causes one to “sink” downwards into the cesspit of matter, while only true, heavenly love allows the spirit to “aspire” towards the One.

7.1. HUNTING DIAN

The Renaissance theory of erotic love, heavily saturated with the distinctive brand of Neoplatonic spirit/matter dualism, as we have seen, simultaneously legitimized romantic love and split its object into, on the one hand, an idealized representation of the divine, and, on the other, the despicable body of the actual human being in question. Both Ficino and Bruno warn the lover never to confuse this heroic passion for the One with carnal lust for a mere woman’s body and to keep heroically burning with the ever-unquenchable desire to ascend to the divine.

The mistake, it should be clear, is not in *desiring* Dian erotically, but in *hunting* Dian and attempting to have an actual sexual relationship with her. Dian can be worshiped and pursued chastely, according to all the rules of Neoplatonic ascent. Shakespeare’s comedies and romances tend to end in weddings which can easily be

interpreted as symbolic of spiritual ascent and successful henosis. Bassanio's successful quest for Portia is a pertinent example. These marriages, though, it should be pointed out, are certainly never sexually consummated within the world of the play. There *are* no happily consummated and enduring marriages between Shakespeare's heroes – only between his most troubling villains. (Greenblatt 2006: 137)

In the darker comedies and the tragedies, the heroes also pursue Dian, as they all fall deeply and almost mystically in love with a chaste lady, whom they cast in the role of an exalted anagogic figure, and certainly not a potential prosaic spouse and mother to their future children. However, then they make the grievous error – more terrible than Actaeon's – of pursuing her sexually. All the fallen heroes – would-be heroic lovers – of the problem plays and tragedies can be caught in the act of hunting Dian at some point.



Death of Actaeon (1562) by Vecelli

Troilus is seen desiring Dian in “stubborn-chaste” Cressida, whom he calls “a pearl,” an appellation significantly also used to describe Desdemona. As Krims notes – and psychoanalytic readings are useful, if somewhat tautological, in this context – Troilus invokes the nymph Daphne in his appeal to Apollo. Daphne is the chaste nymph who at one point frustrates Apollo's desire by metamorphosing into a bay tree. Krims interprets Troilus's allusion to the virginal Daphne as representing “his difficulty imagining Cressida as sexual”:

Perhaps then he thinks of her as chaste-stubborn not only because she resists him now but also because he has difficulty imagining her otherwise. Shakespeare thus presents us with a Troilus who not only idealizes Cressida but who also thinks of her as untainted by carnal desire. (Krims 2006: 96)

Bertram's first desire is for freedom. He flees from the very idea of marriage, escaping to the wars, where the young men's heroic courting of death sometimes seems indistinguishable from the erotic pursuit of love, as has been noticed by Helen Wilcox in her "Drums and Roses? The Tragicomedy of War in *All's Well That Ends Well*." (King/Franssen 2008: 90)

Then he pursues a literal Dian, who is explicitly opposed even to marriage – let alone fornication – and declares in no uncertain terms: "Marry that will, I live and die a maid." (*All's Well That Ends Well*, IV. ii. 74) She is, unsurprisingly, then, not overly amenable to his desire:

I'll lie with him
When I am buried.
(*All's Well That Ends Well*, IV. ii. 71-72)

Angelo's obsession with a "stubborn-chaste" virgin takes an even more extreme turn, as this apparently asexual puritan begins to pursue the epitome of inaccessibility, a young, fervent novice in a monastery. Isabel is tellingly first shown in the play

wishing a more strict restraint
Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 4-5)

It is, again, hardly surprising that her mind gladly conjures up all manner of gruesome torture and a martyr-like death that she would happily endure ere she'd yield her "body up to shame." (*Measure for Measure*, II. iv. 103-104)

Romeo's first love Rosaline – also depicted as having distinctly monastic aspirations – is explicitly likened to Dian, as

she'll not be hit
With Cupid's bow, she hath Dian's wit;

And in strong proof of chastity well arm'd,
From Love's weak childish bow she lives uncharm'd.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, I. i. 208-211)

His passion for Rosaline shows Romeo as a courtly or aspiring heroic lover. As Muir shrewdly perceives, "Romeo's passion for Rosalind becomes the typical romantic love of the sonneteers for a merciless instead of the sexual pursuit of a virtuous maid." (Muir 1956: 25-26) This might be said for the vast majority of Shakespeare's idealistic tragic lovers. Interestingly enough, Romeo moves on to Juliet without skipping a beat – much to Mercutio's amusement – with a similar frame of mind, but with different results, as Juliet is not a merciless maid. This will thus transpire to be another case of hunting Dian, at which the goddess will unleash her rage.

Othello at first sees a literal Dian in Desdemona, and later wistfully bemoans

[Her] name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage.
(*Othello*, III. iii. 386-387)

He swears his love for her is not physical when he pleads to be allowed to take her with him to Cyprus:

Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat (the young affects
In [me] defunct).
(*Othello*, I. iii. 261-264)

It should be noted that Desdemona, similarly, "saw Othello's visage in his mind." (*Othello*, I. iii. 252) They both appear to have been idealistic and idealizing lovers at the outset of their relationship.

Even the cynical, dark, ascetic prince Hamlet is caught red-handed – before his bitter disappointment in the entire female sex – writing poetry to the “celestial Ophelia,” whom he describes as “his soul’s idol.”¹⁰

Hunting Dian – pursuing the spiritually anagogic goddess of Neoplatonism sexually – does not bode well for the madly audacious lover, and will surely be penalized.

One way in which the goddess herself punishes a lover who pursues her improperly in Shakespeare’s darker plays is through what has usually been referred to as “the bed-trick.”

7.2. THE BED-TRICK: FROM DIAN TO HELEN IN ONE EASY STEP

Shakespeare’s bed-trick – the plot device whereby a sexually available woman is supplied for a lustful male character’s bed instead of the desired virgin, notably used in *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* – has at times been derided as an overly tidy and convenient resolution of a complex situation. I will attempt to demonstrate that, far from being a cheap ploy resorted to by the dramatist, the bed-trick represents a serious investigation into an issue not only of great personal significance to Shakespeare, permeating many of his works, but also one of great wider cultural import.

Shakespeare probably learned how to “perform” the bed-trick from the sources he used for *All’s Well That Ends Well*. In the ninth story of the third day in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Giletta di Narbona supplies the place of the desired nameless virgin in her husband Beltramo’s bed and consequently becomes pregnant with his twin sons, which finally wins over her reluctant husband. Shakespeare most probably read the story in William Painter’s 1575 book *The Palace of Pleasure*, where it appears with few alterations.

It is Shakespeare who introduces changes into the narrative. Instead of Beltramo’s unnamed virgin whose only barrier on the road to marriage is her poverty and consequent lack of a dowry, Beltramo is shown sexually pursuing an actual Dian who expresses a

¹⁰ The expression itself, it should be noted, can have a variety of meanings, as will be seen; one of them, however, certainly is in keeping with the idolizing and idealizing inherent in pursuing heavenly Venus.

strong desire to remain unmarried. As another important emendation, while Beltramo is clearly deeply moved by Giletta's, again, clearly beneficent persistence and the doting care she bestows upon their twin sons, Bertram is not as persuasively enthusiastic when he realizes he has indeed unwittingly consummated his marriage with the now obviously pregnant Helen.

Having attempted to evade consummating his marriage, he has instead made the fatal mistake of sexually pursuing the chaste Dian. Helen immediately schemes to take Dian's place:

Let us assay our plot, which if it speed,
Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
And lawful meaning in a lawful act,
Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact
(*All's Well That Ends Well*, III. vii. 43-47)

The plot will indeed "speed," and Bertram will be successfully bed-tricked by the combined efforts of Dian and Helen.

Perhaps the most symbolically significant of the changes that Shakespeare introduced is the naming of the two female characters. It would be difficult to find two names that are more explicitly indicative of what is at work in the bed-trick. Sexually pursuing an unattainable virgin explicitly named after the goddess Dian, Shakespeare's Bertram will thus unwittingly bed an eager Helen, whose name – associated in the play with Helen of Troy – is likewise no accident. She has, tellingly, explicitly renounced Dian and her protection:

Now, Dian, from thy altar do I fly,
And to imperial Love, that god most high,
Do my sighs stream.
(*All's Well That Ends Well*, II. iii. 74-76)

Bertram only has himself to blame, as a lover can only be bed-tricked because he has failed to heed the advice repeated *ad nauseam* by all the Renaissance love theorists, Ficino and Bruno in particular. A lover, they insist, must take great pains not to mistake vulgar Venus for heavenly Venus. If he sexually pursues the body of a female he believes he is in love with, then he has already succumbed to the snare of vulgar Venus. (Line 2004: 16) The Dian he believes he has attained will transpire to be a Helen instead, as is the case literally with Bertram. Sexually pursuing virginal Dian, he finds himself firmly trapped in a marriage with pregnant Helen.

Shakespeare uses the bed-trick explicitly in another dark comedy, written immediately after *All's Well That Ends Well*. In *Measure for Measure*, although nothing exists in the sources that would inspire it, we again encounter the plot to substitute vulgar for heavenly Venus, an eager Helen for a chaste Dian. Although the names are not as explicitly evocative, the contrast between the two female characters is more extreme in the later play – instead of a virgin and a virgin wife, we are introduced there to a novice and a fiancée, who may or may not be entitled to consummate her betrothal lawfully.

Angelo, carnally desiring the young aspiring nun Isabel, asks himself:

Dost thou desire her foully for those things

That make her good?

(*Measure for Measure*, 173-174)

That is precisely the snare of vulgar Venus that a lover is caught in if he is found to be hunting Dian: he desires her “foully” – that is, sexually – precisely for those things that “make her good” – that is, her utter “merciless” unavailability. Bed-tricked, Angelo will instead bed Mariana:

With Angelo to-night shall lie

His old betrothed (but despised);

So disguise shall by th' disguised

Pay with falsehood false exacting,

And perform an old contracting.

(*Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 278-282)

Not only will a hunter of Dian never attain her, but he will be hunted down by Helen and trapped in the lowly world of matter.

Bertram and Angelo are explicitly bed-tricked and there are two actual women that switch places in order to deceive them. All it takes for them to fall prey to vulgar Venus, falling into the trap of materiality, is one night, as it is the very fact of satisfying carnal desire that really tricks the heroic lover. There are, however, other Shakespeare's heroes who are also, in a manner of speaking, bed-tricked – during the course of their own one night of sexual consummation – although two separate women do not make an actual appearance.

When one starts examining the sex lives of Shakespeare's heroes – always an amusing pastime – one cannot avoid a striking discovery: they are typically accorded only a single night of carnal pleasure, which is then inevitably closely followed by a catastrophe. Shakespeare seems to be consistently making a point of ignoring the sources in this respect.

Chaucer's lovers, for instance, have three years together, while Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida only get one night. (Martin 1976: 19) Giletta only stops visiting Beltramo's bed when she is certain she is pregnant, whereas Bertram is trapped after a single night with Helen. In Arthur Brooke's poem, which served as a chief source for *Romeo and Juliet*, the fatal fight occurs a month or two into the regularly – if clandestinely – consummated marriage, while in Shakespeare, the consummation of the marriage is explicitly and significantly the couple's first and last night together. (Muir 1956: 25) In the story from Giraldi's *Hecatommithi* (III.7) which Shakespeare used as a source for Othello, Desdemona and the Moor live together in married harmony for years and even have a child together before the first sign of any trouble. (Muir 1956: 123) In Shakespeare's tragedy, Iago begins his accusation on the morning after Othello's marriage has been consummated – and is, unbelievably, believed. (Muir 1956: 136)

Although it has been much attacked by critics, this is not at all accidental. Shakespeare in fact takes great pains to reinforce the fact that Othello's marriage is consummated during their first night together on Cyprus and that it is *only* after this – but

immediately after this – that troubles ensue. He first has Othello invite Desdemona to their chambers:

Come, my dear love,
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;
That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.
(*Othello*, II. iii. 8-10)

To make sure that we have understood it well and that he has thoroughly driven this point home, he also has Iago confirm that “He hath not yet made wanton the night with her.” (*Othello*, II. iii. 16-17)

All these lovers – whether they are married to their Dians or not – will be bed-tricked and suffer various calamities immediately after their one night of sex. The different complications that ensue seem to serve only as symptoms of the real problem – the fall into sexual pleasure. What is constant about the bed-trick is that all manner of disasters immediately follow this single night of carnal pleasure, and that the much desired woman undergoes profound changes, at least in the male lover's mind.

Hunting Dian and expecting to have a relationship with her always spells trouble. Dian can never be attained, and if a hero believes he is sexually pursuing her, he is certainly in for a rude awakening. This is the true significance of the bed-trick – vulgar Venus will trick any lover who succumbs to the lure of the carnal. One way or another, when hunted down, Dian will become Helen.

There are different ways in which Dian becomes Helen, as there are different versions of lower Venus and different Helens. The very name “Helen” carried in the Renaissance several disparate negative connotations. Maguire records that Renaissance pamphlets counseled against christening one's daughter Helen, as it was a name associated with sexuality, adultery, and the downfall of ancient civilization. The false etymology of the ancient Greeks that saw in Helen the root “*hele*” (“destroyer”) prevailed in Renaissance England, leading to regular punning on Helen/hell/heaven. In Peele's *Edward I Mortimer*, for instance, plays on the name of his beloved: “Hell in thy name,

but heaven is in thy looks.” Helen could thus imply merely wanton sexuality, death and destruction, or even hell. (Maguire 2007: 77)



The Love of Helen and Paris (1788) by Jacques-Louis David

Dian or heavenly Venus, pursued chastely, will simply lead the pure lover upwards towards the One. Helen or vulgar Venus, however – if she is able to lure a careless lover downwards into her snare of sexuality – will do any one of a whole range of horrible things to him. She will trap him in a fertile marriage, or deceive him whorishly, or kill him, depending on whether she appears in the guise of a mother, a whore, or a fatal witch. Witchcraft is associated with all the faces of vulgar Venus and, apparently, all the things that actual women might do.

7.3.1. VULGAR VENUS

The bed-trick, as I have attempted to show, can be read as an allegorical representation of what happens when the lover does not heed Ficino’s and Bruno’s warnings. Since it is impossible to bed Bruno’s Dian, she will instantly transform into Helen; Ficino’s heavenly Venus will promptly become vulgar Venus. The lover, lusting after a virgin in a misguided attempt at ascent and liberty, falls and instead finds himself encumbered with an all-too-earthly woman, trapped in the material world of marriage and procreation, as transpires in the so-called “problem plays” – provided he is lucky. If he is unlucky, as is usually the case in the tragedies, his fall will lead him straight into the dark chaos of unformed prime matter.

It is in her most munificent form, then, that vulgar Venus “merely” tricks the unfortunate lover and traps sparks of divine beauty that issue from him, transfers them into lower Nature, and uses them to invest matter with beautiful new human forms. This is what happens to the questing lover who, desiring heavenly Portia, mistakenly chooses the silver casket with its picture of a fool – he has been, in Polonius’ phrase, tendered a fool, as he is now encumbered with a “fool,” a contemporary term for an infant. Desiring Dian, the lover has been bed-tricked by Helen, vulgar Venus, who, in her form of Mother Nature, imprisons men in a world of sexuality and fertility, which any heroic lover would have naturally preferred to avoid.

In Shakespeare’s sources, Beltramo is depicted as merely unhappy with Giletta’s social status, preferring to marry a more suitable lady, whereas Bertram seems reluctant to marry altogether. He tellingly complains when he finds himself married to Helen and decides to go into the wars instead:

Wars is no strife

To the dark house and the detested wife.

(*All’s Well That Ends Well*, II. iii. 291-292)

The “dark house,” interestingly enough, is the name of the hell Malvolio finds himself trapped in, as well, when he unworthily pursues the exalted Olivia. The expression also recalls Othello’s nostalgia for his “unhoused free condition” which he has sacrificed for his love of “the gentle Desdemona.” (Bloom 1991: 65) Marriage itself can here be read as a kind of a hell and a kind of a fall – the dreaded snare of vulgar Venus.

It is understandable how this theory of love wherein vulgar Venus is so easily able to trap one after a single night of pleasure could have gained ground in a time when contraception was at best dubious, and at worst unheard of, and a casual encounter could lead straight to forced marriage. Premarital sex, Greaves records, does not seem to have been the ordinary practice in Elizabethan society, but neither was it rare. Many weddings performed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England appear to have been the direct result of a pregnancy. (Greaves 1981: 204-205)

A wedding was sometimes not even required for a betrothed couple to be trapped in marriage if it transpired that their relationship had already been sexually consummated – which usually transpired because it was made obvious by the fiancée’s pregnancy. The folk custom of the time which recognized an official act of betrothal before witnesses as constituting marriage, a so-called “pre-contract,” was acknowledged by canon. (Wilson 1933: 43) It does not seem likely that this custom was devised to confer rights or grant permission or give license to the affianced couple. Otherwise, Prospero’s strong insistence on awaiting a proper wedding would be uncalled for, and Claudio and Juliet would not have reason to be as contrite as they at least appear to be. The “pre-contract” would rather seem to prescribe consequences: the engaged male who has consummated his relationship with his fiancée is now in effect married, no longer free to marry another person, and responsible for any child that might be on its way. It in practice most probably made a significant portion of shotgun weddings redundant, trapping men forever without even necessitating a church ritual.

Shakespeare himself, of course, quite probably ended up married in a way that resembled the bed-trick. The timing of his first daughter’s birth notoriously belied prenuptial sexual activities that trapped the young Adonis-like boy in a marriage with his own earthly Venus – or else the baby was born so extremely prematurely that her survival was a miracle. (Burgess 1970). It is quite conceivable (pun intended) that he would take a keen interest in ways to avoid falling into the snare of vulgar Venus, even if it was too late for him.

Bertram’s Helen is likewise pregnant – which means he will not be escaping the dark house and the detested wife after all – and her body, an icon of vulgar Venus, has trapped a divine spark from Bertram in it. It is now busy working on imprisoning it in a material body of its own.

Angelo is similarly bed-tricked and trapped, after a single night of carnality, in a valid marriage with Mariana, his “old betrothed (but despised).” He seems to bear this imprisoning punishment by marriage with only slightly more grace than Lucio, who complains that “Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging.” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, V. i. 522-523) Other couples are also forcibly married after their sexual escapades: from the promiscuous pair with a child growing in a brothel,

through the expecting couple we certainly believe “have embrac’d” more than once, to the pair whose fate is sealed after one night. Even the announced marriage of the pure virginal couple seems forced – perhaps precisely because they have both expressed freedom from erotic passions as one of their chief aspirations. Gay sees at the end of the play

a glum procession of the forced marriages of Angelo and Mariana, Lucio and his punk; even Claudio and his Juliet, parents of a new child, are, one assumes, marked for life by the traumatic events of the play. And, famously, Isabella makes no reply to the Duke’s repeated offer of marriage. (Gay 2002: 121)

Nobody seems to be allowed to escape marriage in the worlds of *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Their rulers like to play matchmakers, and even their dedicated virgins will end up married.

Vulgar Venus can in her indomitable persistence on trapping in marriage even make a comic appearance, as she seems to do in *The Merchant of Venice*, where it is enough to simply give rings to pretty, clever boys, and even they will as a result transform into nagging, scolding wives.

Cleopatra, in her “infinite variety,” is certainly also cast in the role of imprisoning vulgar Venus, even if she is simultaneously her heavenly counterpart as well – along with all the other versions of the goddess. Antony realizes:

These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,
Or lose myself in dotage. [...]
I must from this enchanting queen break off.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. ii. 116-117; 128)

Trapped in her snare of sexuality and fertility, Antony is not even imprisoned in a lawful marriage by his vulgar Venus, but somewhere even lower than that: in the “fetters” of mere “lust.” Cleopatra is disturbingly presented as a witch, who is able to “enchant” Antony and trap him by way of her craft.

She also traps him by way of her fertility. The couple is depicted as sitting on the throne with Caesarion, Cleopatra's son by Caesar, at their side,

And all the unlawful issue that their lust
Since then hath made between them.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. vi. 7-8)

Antony and Cleopatra, significantly, have a multitude of children, which makes them unique as an amorous couple in Shakespeare's entire opus. As Northrop Frye notes in his "Antony and Cleopatra," Cleopatra is represented as a fertile goddess of the overflowing Nile ruling an Egypt that is partly the Biblical Egypt, whose Pharaoh was referred to as "the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers," and whose ruler here is "the serpent of old Nile whom we last see nursing a baby serpent at her breast." (Bloom *Antony* 2008: 243) This fertility shared by the Nile, Egypt, and Cleopatra is serpentine, disturbing, and imprisoning.

Procreation is quite precarious both in Shakespeare and Renaissance Neoplatonism, as it requires a harmonious balance between spirit and matter. This is, of course, difficult to achieve in systems where clear extremes – spirit and matter, purity and filth, divine love and carnal lust – are so much insisted upon and mentioned with such frequency. Both heroic lovers and lusty lechers, Dians and Helens, virgins and whores, are more likely to be depicted without progeny.

7.3.2.1. DIAN'S VISAGE NOW BEGRIM'D AND BLACK: VULGAR VENUS AS A WHORE, OR CONSTRUCTING THE VIRGIN/WHORE DICHOTOMY

The Helen that the carnally desired Dian will often transform into during the bed-trick is Helen of Troy, the archetypal whore. Lucrece, looking at the painting of Troy, bemoans the fall of "cloud-kissing Ilion," and draws a parallel between the previously tall and heavenly city and a previously spiritual and rational man who is ruined by beastly

lust – like Paris was. Helen is to blame for the tragic fate of both: she is introduced and the city is then besieged by chaos and passion until it collapses, and her lover dies.

Wells sees in the image of the besieged city an “ancient and familiar symbol of reason threatened by the treacherous passions” and explains that

the Troy story haunted the imaginations of Renaissance writers as a symbol of our fallen human condition. Here was an archetypal tale about a city that fell, not as a result of the military superiority of the enemy, but because of an act of treachery within. (Wells 2005: 23)

Lucrece squarely blames all this lust which degenerates and disintegrates both man and city from within on Helen, and her imagination takes a particularly violent turn:

Show me the strumpet that began this stir,
That with my nails her beauty I may tear.
(*Rape of Lucrece*, 1471-1472)

The Helen of *All's Well that Ends Well* is deliberately linked with her Trojan namesake. The clown at one point sings a song about Helen of Troy which, as Muir believes, “may be meant to suggest that the Helena of the play is extremely beautiful,” (Muir 1956: 98) or, as I believe, may be meant to suggest all the other slightly less appealing attributes usually ascribed to Helen of Troy – such as whorishly luring Paris and other men downwards into a realm of war and lechery.

Shakespeare’s Helen also explicitly associates herself with Helen of Troy when she explains to the Countess:

My lord your son made me to think of this;
Else Paris and the medicine and the king
Had from the conversation of my thoughts
Haply been absent then.
(*All's Well That Ends Well*, I. lalala)

In Jardine's apt, if euphemistic phrase, the pun on Paris – both the city and the lustful lover of the other Helen – “does not help.” Impelled to notice that Helen, as she is depicted in the play, “appears as a schemer,” which seems to her is a deliberate allusion to all other Helens who whorishly govern male action, Jardine also sees Shakespeare's heroine – a match for Parolles in his quibbling on virginity – as too “knowing” for the innocent virgin she is supposed to be. The “knowing” woman, in any sense of the word, Jardine claims, can only precariously be a positive force in the Renaissance, despite the existence of writers who were enthusiastically propagating the education of women. Helen is a knowing woman in more than one way: significantly, she is intimately familiar with medicine and the dark secrets of the human body. (Jardine 2005: 53-57)

Allison P. Coudert reminds that female curiosity in general was a consuming topic for early modern males, who saw women as “so many Pandoras, Psyches, Lot's wives, and Eves, whose snooping, particularly into sexual matters, was categorically condemned.” (Hanegraaf/Kripal 2008: 252) The “knowing” woman, which Shakespeare's Helen betrays herself to be, bore in Shakespeare's time the suggestion of being sexually loose.

The Helen or vulgar Venus who sometimes seems to take pure Dian's place in a lustful lover's bed, and especially his mind, can drag him down into the material prison of marriage and procreation, if she appears in her most benevolent, wifely and motherly guise. But, if she drags him even farther downwards, towards mere lust, where not even beautiful human forms are being created, she can transpire to be a whore.

This is the fate that Troilus feels he has suffered. Having managed – or so he believes – to bed his Dian, the “stubborn-chaste” Cressida, he now feels bed-tricked, acting as if he were waking up next to a Helen instead. Girard notices that, as Troilus and Cressida are getting up after their first and only night together, he “no longer speaks like a man in love.” (Parker/Hartman 2005: 187) Krims conjectures that this is because “when Cressida reveals her desire, she shatters his childish idealization of her; now he fears she is a whore.” (Krims 2006: 101)

This childish idealization appears to have been shattered in Shakespeare's mind as well after the lovers have had their one night, as it is also “objectively” – in the world of the play, not just Troilus' mind – that Cressida is instantly transformed after it. It may be

good to remember here that Chaucer's Cressida was a young widow, who acted timidly and coyly among the Greeks for a long time until, because of her loneliness and fear, she finally succumbed to Diomedes' advances. Shakespeare's Cressida, by contrast, acts from the moment of her arrival to the Greek camp like a shameless flirt, and her unbridled lust apparently makes her go for the first male who shows any interest whatsoever. (Muir 1956: 79-81) Troilus' Dian has turned into a Helen following their one night of sexual pleasure and accordingly comports herself much as does the actual Helen of the play.

This is, in effect, what happens to Desdemona in Othello's mind, as well. The moment their marriage is consummated Desdemona miraculously transforms from a virgin straight into a whore:

[Her] name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black
As mine own face.
(*Othello*, III. iii. 386-388)

It is *only* after their single night together – but *immediately* after it – that it is possible for Othello to see his Dian as a Helen. The paradox of the timeframe (what is usually referred to as “double-time” in *Othello* criticism) enables Iago to begin his accusation on the very morning after the night in which Othello's marriage has been consummated, a fact, Muir reports, much attacked by critics. (Muir 1956: 136)

However, it is precisely this exaggerated absurdity that reveals what is actually taking place in Othello's mind. His revulsion is really caused by his Dian – the unattainable heavenly Venus – agreeing to have sex with him and thus proving to be a Helen, a vulgar Venus, a sexual woman made of flesh and blood. Thus she goes in his mind from virgin to whore, without stopping at wife. The morning after she loses her virginity to him he is absurdly able to ask himself “What sense had I in her stol'n hours of lust?” (*Othello*, III. iii. 338) Othello's jealousy is caused by the subconscious conclusion, heavily reinforced by the dualistic misogynist Iago, that “wife” already equals “whore,” which allows his imagination to run wild:

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known.
(*Othello*, III. iii. 345-347)

Holderness explains more lucidly this sudden leap in Othello's mind from imagining Desdemona as a heavenly Venus to seeing her as the whorish version of vulgar Venus the moment he realizes she is not Dian in person:

This is what Othello took Desdemona to be, in herself: not a type or image of the ideal, but the form itself. Desdemona's failure to measure up to the ideal is for Othello an unforgivable sin: he must kill her to preserve his own honour and the absolute perfection of his vision. If Desdemona is not the heavenly virgin of Cassio's annunciation – "Hail to thee, lady!" – then she can only be her contrary, the woman clothed in scarlet.
(Holderness 2010: 98)

This is the root of the enormous significance that the "lost" handkerchief carries in the tragedy. Lynda Boose has famously argued in her seminal "Othello's Handkerchief: The Recognizance and Pledge of Love" that the handkerchief represents the consummated marriage of the newlywed couple and their wedding sheets stained with blood, which she reads as proof that Desdemona has entered her marriage as a *virgo intacta*. For this conclusion she cites the folk custom of displaying the spotted wedding sheets as proof of the bride's virginity. (Boose 1975) Emma Smith asserts that it is precisely in the handkerchief that the double vision which Othello has of Desdemona can best be perceived, as, "when the handkerchief is first given" – which is, significantly, before their first night together in Cyprus – "it represents her virtue and their chaste love, but it later becomes a sign, indeed a proof, of her unfaithfulness." (Smith 2004: 233)

The word "spotted" connects the handkerchief with both roles that Desdemona is cast in: virtuous wife (in the objective reality of the play) and shameless whore (which she is forced to play in Othello's mind). The handkerchief *spotted* with strawberries is in imagery first implicitly associated with the newlyweds' wedding sheets *spotted* with her

maiden blood, and then explicitly by Othello when he decides that her “bed, lust-stain’d, shall with lust’s blood be *spotted*.” (*Othello*, V. i. 36)¹¹ As mere hours have passed since the consummation of their marriage on those very sheets, we can only surmise that Othello equates in his mind “lust’s blood” with Desdemona’s maiden blood. As Sinfield reminds, citing Snowden, to Othello’s injunction, “Think on thy sins,” Desdemona replies, “They are loves I bear to you,” to which Othello laconically comments: “And for that thou diest.” (*Othello*, V. ii. 40-41) What transpires here is that “Othello finds himself acknowledging that Desdemona’s offense resides in her *legitimately expressed* sexuality.” (Sinfield 1992: 76)

It should be stressed that Desdemona does not lose the handkerchief, which she personally values greatly. Othello himself discards it, throwing it on the floor and complaining that it is “too small.” Apparently, this signifier that she is a virtuous wife who has lost her virginity to him is just not good enough. She is no longer Dian, which makes her a whore.

Desdemona, Dympna Callaghan surmises based on her studies into Elizabethan and Jacobean performance, was most probably depicted in “whiteface,” as women’s characters were customarily represented by “excessive whiteness,” while the deliberately named Bianca must have been even more heavily made up to connote what she terms “the transgressive ultra-white femininity.” Cosmetics for women, which consisted primarily of whitening their faces, were in themselves a whorish enterprise, linking women with deceiving devils and enchanting witches. Depicting Desdemona on stage in whiteface already, to a degree, comprises calumny.

Interestingly enough, Othello was also depicted on stage using the despicable art of “face-painting,” as the actor playing his role would have been a white male wearing “blackface.” (Callaghan 2000: 81-88) Thus both Othello and Desdemona were represented by white males, one painted black, the other white, to denote the different ways in which these two characters are othered. As Karen Newman observes in her ““And Wash the Ethiop White”: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*,” the other “is constituted discursively in the play as both woman and black.” (Smith 2004: 227)

¹¹ Emphasis mine.

Both these otherings are based on the explicit Neoplatonic conception of matter as the “dark other” and would have been impossible without it. Both women and black “barbarians” were believed to be by nature more material and more carnal than Western white males. Both, however educated and civilized, were expected to be able to easily revert to this beastly fundament of their natures: the Black, however civilized, will thus become a savage barbarian, and the woman, however virginal, will become a whore.

Another signifier of the fact that both Desdemona and Othello are othered in the world of the play is noted by Peter Stallybrass in his “Transvestism and the “body beneath”: speculating on the boy actor,” in which he discusses at length the use of the name “Barbary” by both characters. In her willow song, Desdemona takes on the voice of “poor Barbary,” a maidservant by that name who was abandoned by her lover. (Zimmerman 2005: 56) The name “Barbary” was in Shakespeare’s time used for both the Berber-Arab people of the part of North Africa and the region they inhabited. They were, significantly, also referred to as “Moors.” (Holderness 2010: 47)

Iago uses the toponymical designation “Barbary” in his attack on Othello before Brabantio, when he warns Desdemona’s father that he will have his daughter “cover’d with a Barbary horse.” Barbary, Stallybrass concludes, is thus both “the name for bestial male sexuality” and “the name for a maid betrayed in love”:

A single signifier slides between male and female, animal and human, betrayer and betrayed, and at the same time between opposed notions of the “barbarian” as oppressor and as victim. (Zimmerman 2005: 57)

Othello is in Iago’s imagination thus a beastly barbarian, unfit for the gentle-born Desdemona. He later tellingly describes the precarious married couple as “an erring barbarian and [a] super-subtle Venetian.” (*Othello*, I. iii. 356) “Super-subtle,” of course, has a double meaning: Desdemona can be interpreted as being overly refined, delicate, and dainty, and thus not a good match for the barbaric Othello. It can, however, also imply her deceptive whorishness, and thus the way in which she herself is othered as a woman. This doubleness is both the doubleness of Venus and the doubleness of Venice, which was in Shakespeare’s time known for its superior culture and civilization, but also had a “distinct and controversial reputation as a city of pleasure,” one aspect of which

was “the legendary beauty of Venetian women.” (Holderness 2010: 28) Desdemona, the Dian and heavenly Venus of the play, has implicitly and explicitly been attacked in the course of it as a deceptive whore.

She is not the only one against whom this crime has, perhaps at times surprisingly, been perpetrated. The young, innocent Juliet is also under attack. After pursuing Rosaline, according to the eerie words of the Chorus,

Now Romeo is belov'd and loves again,
Alike bewitched by the charm of looks.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, II. Ch. 5-6)

If the Chorus is to be heeded, then young Juliet, much like Cleopatra, is a witch enchanting poor males with her bodily charms.

Perhaps she has learned only too well how to fall on her back once she is grown, in the bawdy phrase of the Nurse's husband. It is tempting to read these words as a comic retort to the already comic praise that Agrippa bestows on women's superior modesty: “when they fall they fall on their backs and not on their faces.” (Agrippa 1993: 15) Falling on one's back might be indicative of more “modesty,” but it can even more easily be indicative of sexual availability, which appears to be Shakespeare's snarky meaning here. Juliet has fallen on her back, apparently, and it somehow causes the fall in the play from the exalted balcony scene to the tomb – if it is a fall.

Antony and Cleopatra are also depicted as an intentionally ambiguous couple – much more so than Romeo and Juliet – potentially both divinely exalted and bestially depraved. Antony's fall, however, again, if it is a fall, undeniably transpires owing to lust. Philo, significantly, has the opening words, and they are ruthless:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now turn
The office and devotion of their view

Upon a tawny front; his captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy's lust.
Look where they come!
Take but good note, and you shall see in him
The triple pillar of the world transform'd
Into a strumpet's fool.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. i. 1-13)

There are two important Philos in the history of Neoplatonism who would have said something quite like this. One of them is Philo of Alexandria, who repeatedly and disgustedly refers to Egypt as the country of the body and carnal passions. (Philo 1995: 245-248) The other is Philo (Leone) Ebreo, a Renaissance Neoplatonist, who taught the familiar Neoplatonic doctrine of the two discrete kinds of love, of which the lower one was a child of lust, blind and careless, which would inevitably turn into violence and jealousy. (Garen 1988: 150) Whichever Shakespeare was referring to – and he could well have been referring to both – we are not meant to simply disregard as immaterial the venerable Philo's words, according to which Cleopatra is a lustful “gypsy” and a bewitching “strumpet.”

Caesar does not seem to think much better of Cleopatra when he plans to win her over:

Women are not
In their best fortunes strong, but want will perjure
The ne'er touched vestal.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. xii. 29-31)

Virgins can easily become whores, as is always the case in dualistic systems of thought, but Cleopatra is no vestal to begin with. Predictably, she does betray Antony in battle

repeatedly, at which he rages: “Triple-turn’d whore.” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xii. 13)
There seems to be a gratuitous elision of non-sexual betrayal with sexually connoted
“whoredom” – at least when women are spoken of.

Thus, when Ophelia acquiesces to being used by her father to discover the reason
behind the young prince’s “antic disposition,” Hamlet rages at her in explicitly sexual
terms, accusing her of whorishly deceiving men with her face-painting and implying she
will cuckold her as yet non-existent future husband. Both women in the tragedy, the
remarried widow and the young virgin, are tellingly used as “bait” at some point, which
reduces them to pieces of flesh in imagery and thus frames them as sexually loose.

Hamlet has already read Gertrude as a whore for remarrying with such haste, and
transposed this designation onto all womanhood – including Ophelia – in his pathetic
“Frailty, thy name is woman!” Apparently bed-tricked by his mother’s sexual “frailty,”
Hamlet instantly transforms “celestial” Ophelia into a whore in his mind.

Male minds make the Dian-to-vulgar-Venus, virgin-to-whore leap with
astounding speed and ease even in the comedies and romances. Claudio, for instance,
rants about his beloved Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing* after hearing one
unsubstantiated rumor:

You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown,
But you are more intemperate in your blood
Than Venus, or those pamp’red animals
That rage in savage sensuality.

(*Much Ado about Nothing*, IV. i. 57-61)

Posthumus similarly rages in *Cymbeline*, for similarly silly reasons:

We are all bastards,
And that most venerable man which I
Did call my father, was I know not where
When I was stamp’d. Some coiner with his tools

Made me a countefeit; yet my mother seem'd
The Dian of that time.
(*Cymbeline*, II. v. 2-7)

The Neoplatonic dualistic theory of erotic love, according to which any desirable female form is either heavenly Venus leading the heroic lover upwards to the pristine purity of masculine spirit or vulgar Venus dragging him downwards to the filth of feminine matter, had a pivotal role in constructing the virgin/whore dichotomy in much the same form as it still exists in the Western world today. Shakespeare, in turn, had a pivotal role in imprinting it in the minds of those throughout the following centuries who consumed his work – but he also seems to have provided the antidote.

7.3.2.2. GET THEE TO A NUNNERY: DECONSTRUCTING THE VIRGIN/WHORE DICHOTOMY

When Hamlet advises Ophelia to refrain from becoming a wife and mother, he significantly tells her: “Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (*Hamlet*, III. i. 123) As Williams asserts in his fascinating *Glossary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Language*, he is almost certainly, at least implicitly, alluding here to a brothel. One significant common denominator of both these female abodes was the supposed childlessness they entailed, he notes, as nuns were debarred from breeding, and whores were “allegedly incapable.” (Williams 1997) Hamlet’s “get thee to a nunnery” is a cry aimed at all women in dualistic systems of erotic love: you can legitimately be either virgins or whores, but not wives or mothers. A woman’s place is in a nunnery, whether it is to be understood as a monastery or a brothel.

Measure for Measure offers an abundance of material for a case study of this phenomenon. Isabel’s actual literal nunnery has a telling rule about speaking with men:

Then if you speak, you must not show your face,
Or if you show your face, you must not speak
(*Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 12-13)

Michael D. Friedman explains that because “these limitations apply only when a sister speaks with men, we may assume that they are designed to prevent the arousal of male sexual desire, which presumably occurs when women speak and display their beauty at the same time.” (Friedman 1996: 4) The regulations signify more than this, however. They diminish the threat of women by obviously and artificially splitting them into mind and body, spirit and flesh, nuns and whores, and forbidding them to be both at once. It should be noted that Isabel is advised by the Duke to demand “all shadow and silence” (*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 247) for her purported encounter with Angelo; a woman cannot be both spirit and flesh, but she is allowed, apparently, to be neither. (Igrutinović 2009: 114)

The entire play itself splits womanhood in such an obviously artificial way that makes it difficult to resist imagining Shakespeare deliberately providing ammunition for deconstructing this split all along the way. In all other versions of the story, it is the felon’s wife who is asked to sleep with the judge, in all other versions of the story she does in fact yield to save her husband’s life, and in no version of the story is she judged for it. According to the description on the title-page of Whetstone’s play – one of the sources that Shakespeare used – it concerns itself with the “venturous behaviours of a chaste Ladye.” (Stead 1971: 11)

It is only in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* that the dilemma posed before the heroine – a young novice, and not a wife – creates such an absolute chasm between charity and chastity, and only in the world of this play that chastity seems to be in effect incompatible with charity. Shakespeare artificially separates chastity from charity as he splits the chaste but yielding wife, and thus womanhood as well, into the mercilessly virginal Isabel and the gently yielding Mariana. The image of Mariana and Isabel – champions of charity and chastity – meeting at the moated grange with the Duke, is juxtaposed to that of the offenders against charity and chastity – Barnardine the murderer and Claudio the fornicator – rotting in Angelo’s prison together, awaiting their executions.

A woman in this world can either be a whore or a nun – inevitably an inhabitant of a “nunnery” – and there are no wives in the entire play. Charity and chastity, fertility

and sterility, love and legalism, the carnal and the spiritual are all radically opposed and always present only in their extremes. As Harriett Hawkins rightly observes, “the borderline between angelic and demonic extremes of virtue and vice” is “a very narrow one, and all too easy to cross” (Hawkins 1978: 109) in the dualistic world of *Measure for Measure*. Thus far almost incorporeal, the Puritan Angelo is, at the very first stirrings of sexual desire, driven “to embrace the basest of urges [...], since he believes that his prurient interest in Isabella indicates a complete depravity.” (Holloway 1998: 3) Or, in Ted Hughes’ terms, “behind Angelo’s face, Adonis has become Tarquin,” (Hughes 1992: 171) going from one extreme to the other in a matter of seconds. (Igrutinović 2009: 113) Shakespeare, apparently conscious of this radical split that occurs in dualistic systems, by taking it to the extreme, actually helps expose it.

Ernest Jones has famously attempted to explain, in his seminal “Hamlet and Oedipus,” the extreme virgin/whore dichotomy he has discovered in *Hamlet* in psychoanalytic terms as a result of

the splitting of the mother image which the infantile unconscious effects into two opposite pictures: one of a virginal Madonna, an inaccessible saint towards whom all sensual approaches are unthinkable, and the other of a sensual creature accessible to everyone. [...] When sexual repression is highly pronounced, as with Hamlet, then both types of women are felt to be hostile: the pure one out of resentment at her repulses, the sensual one out of the temptation she offers to plunge into guiltiness. Misogyny, as in the play, is the inevitable result. (Jump 1968: 57-58)

Misogyny is, of course, already inherent in the dualism of the Neoplatonic love theory which is the real metaphysical source of the highly pronounced sexual repression that the more idealistic amongst Shakespeare’s heroes – Hamlet being a case in point here – seem to suffer from. If we have any problem with the concept of the “splitting of the mother image” in the “infantile unconscious,” it is not necessarily crucial as a prerequisite for the analogous splitting of any female figure into the virgin/whore extremes which has existed in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought at least since the *Symposium*. Shakespeare offers in his extreme splittings of the feminine ample material for deconstructing the dichotomy.

The female characters involved in bed-tricks yield examples of womanhood split into extremes now miraculously united and conspiring against the males who insist on splitting them. Bloom has noted that there have been numerous critical theories of “interconnection between Diana and Helena, examining how they come together in the bed-trick to form one “super-woman,” comprised of otherwise incompatible paradoxes such as action and submissiveness, sexuality and chastity.” (Bloom *All’s Well* 2010: 14) As has been noticed, the woman in *Measure for Measure* is split into Isabella and Mariana, who then likewise form this “super-woman” when they too collude in the bed-trick. It can appear that the reason they are brought together is partly to accentuate that there has been, prior to the whole shenanigans and probably causing them, a split into these impossible extremes, and that it needs to be healed, if at least for a short while.

In the inexorably split world of *Measure for Measure*, Marian and Juliet, who belong to the loving, charitable, and fertile paradigm, fall squarely under what Sinfield calls the “whorish alternative to female sexuality,” along with the prostitutes. When opposed to the virginal Isabella, they constitute what Callaghan refers to as a “dynamic of the polarized feminine.” This dynamic can be found again and again in Shakespeare: the evidently still virginal young wife Lavinia is accorded the whorish Tamora as her counterpart, and Octavia – whose marriage is likewise apparently yet to be consummated in Shakespeare’s play – is given Cleopatra. In *Othello*, this role is taken by Bianca, while the divine Desdemona, Sinfield notes, “is the madonna in the customary madonna/whore binary,” quickly adding that “the two elements in such binaries are always collapsing into each other.” (Sinfield 1992: 75)

Another way in which Shakespeare sometimes helps deconstruct the virgin/whore dichotomy is by allowing it to collapse. Desdemona, whose name contains a “demon,” and Bianca, the white innocent one, are inextricably connected through Cassio. The designated Adonis of the play, Cassio duly worships heavenly Venus in the “divine” Desdemona, but consorts with vulgar Venus in (“white” or “white-painted”) Bianca, a prostitute whom he despises, abuses (calling her “a customer” [prostitute], “the monkey,” “the bauble” [toy], a “fitchew [polecat, thought to be lecherous and smelly] – marry, a perfum’d one!”), and has no intention of marrying.

Another link between the designated virgin and the designated whore is Desdemona's handkerchief which Bianca copies. (Klajn 1991: 338) Significantly, when Desdemona formerly known as the virgin loses it, it is Emilia the wife who snatches it and it ends up with Bianca the prostitute. This is one of the relatively rare straightforward appearances that the Triple Goddess deigns to make in Shakespeare.

The mythologies of both ancient and Renaissance Neoplatonism had the notion of the Triple Goddess, consisting of three goddesses associated with three separate phases of the moon. The Triple Goddess typically comprises the pure virgin in the heavens (Dian, the new moon), the fertile wife and mother on earth (Demeter, the full moon), and the deathly crone in the underworld (Persephone, the dark of the moon). These were usually seen, relatively unproblematically, as phases of a woman's life or the changing seasons in nature. The Triple Goddess, predictably, becomes in Shakespeare very problematic indeed, as his fertile wife – and there is a precious dearth of wives in his world – is already an imprisoning vulgar Venus, and his pure virgins do not escape calumny either. The deathly crones are abundant, though, and are forced to carry fertility, whorishness, *and* fatality. This causes the other guises of the goddess to collapse into the most disturbing one.

In *Othello*, we can see the Triple Goddess collapsing into a virgin/whore dichotomy which will then, of course, further collapse, as dichotomies are wont to. Desdemona, now a wife and no longer a heavenly virgin, has her handkerchief taken by the wife of the play, Emilia, only for it to be almost immediately conferred to Bianca, the prostitute of the play. The wives are already whores – as only virgins are not whores – and there are no more virgins. The conclusion practically imposes itself: there is no Triple Goddess, and there is no virgin/whore dichotomy either. All the women in the play are squarely whores.

On the other hand, Bianca the prostitute is obviously right to call herself honest, as she is certainly the least deceitful and the most loyal character in the play. All the women in the play can easily also be read as honest – at least more honest than the men they find themselves attached to. The female characters seem to resist the virgin/whore dichotomy imposed on them by the male ones.

Ophelia, who apparently, more than anything, wished to be Hamlet's wife – a wish wholeheartedly supported by her would-be mother-in-law – solves the virgin/whore riddle imposed on her in Hamlet's "nunnery" rant by being both and neither. In her mad frenzy she is shown both as a sexually repressed virgin desiring marriage and as a luxuriantly sensual woman capable of distinctly bawdy allusions. Showalter asserts in her "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism" that Ophelia is in this scene certainly meant to represent *both* innocence and whoredom, *and* simultaneously:

Her flowers suggest the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination; she is the "green girl" of pastoral, the virginal "Rose of May" and the sexually explicit madwoman who, in giving away her wild flowers and herbs, is symbolically deflowering herself. The "weedy trophies" and phallic "long purples" which she wears to her death intimate an improper and discordant sexuality that Gertrude's lovely elegy cannot quite obscure. In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the stage direction that a woman enters with dishevelled hair indicates that she might either be mad or the victim of a rape; the disordered hair, her offense against decorum, suggests sensuality in each case. The mad Ophelia's bawdy songs and verbal license, while they give her access to "an entirely different range of experience" from what she is allowed as the dutiful daughter, seem to be her one sanctioned form of self-assertion as a woman, quickly followed, as if in retribution, by her death.

(Parker/Hartman 2005: 80)

Ophelia's death can thus also be read as a form of punishment for daring to disturb the virgin/whore dichotomy and attempting to stand for both.

This is, interestingly enough, what Helen herself subversively does as a figure in the Gnostic tradition, managing to carry the double meaning of the name Helen, as representing both heaven and hell simultaneously, in a disturbingly paradoxical *coincidentia oppositorum*. Helen herself is an emanation of Sophia, feminine Wisdom who harks from the purely luminescent spiritual Pleroma and can lead lost sparks of spirit back to it, but simultaneously represents a tainting of the pleromatic divinity, as she is the cause of the fall into matter. Appropriately, she has found herself incarnated both as the beautiful Helen of Troy, whose face launched a thousand ships, and Helen of Tyre, the

prostitute that Simon Magus found in a brothel and took around as his companion. (Mitchell 2006: 22-25) Nuttall finds all these Gnostic elements quite explicitly reflected in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, which would in the very least indicate that they were not unknown in the dramatic circles of the English Renaissance. (Nuttall 2007: 41-42)

Helen is, significantly, associated in the Gnostic tradition with Selene (Luna), the moon, and given the seemingly paradoxical appellation "the sacred whore." (Mitchell 2006: 26) The "sacred whore" is simultaneously the whore *and* the moon goddess, who both firmly fuse into one in the Gnostic Helen. Bertram's Dian and Helen can thus transpire to be one and the same (as can Isabel and Marian or any other pairing of split womanhood). In this framework it is possible to offer the interpretation of *All's Well that Ends Well* that Tillyard does, according to which Helena stands for heavenly grace, without which Bertram is merely unredeemed man in all his glory or lack thereof. (Tillyard 1985: 108) Deconstructing the dichotomy of the bed-trick she stages, appearing in both the roles accorded to the polarized feminine figure, Helen can also be Dian, and lead both to ascent and descent, heaven and hell.

As has been seen, Dian, when hunted down sexually, can dramatically transform straight into the whorish version of vulgar Venus in the bed-trick, but the two female figures can also prove to be parts of a single female entity by seeming so extremely polarized as to invite deconstruction or by simply readily collapsing one into the other.

The virgin/whore dichotomy is thus both underscored and problematized in the bed-trick, and Shakespeare himself both seems to construct and deconstruct it.

7.3.2.3. MUCH MORE MONSTROUS MATTER: MOTHER, MONSTER, WITCH, OR (DE)CONSTRUCTING THE FERTILE/STERILE DICHOTOMY

Another dichotomy that imposes itself when one begins the Neoplatonic downward journey into the secret depths of matter, which will be briefly treated here to the extent that it relates to the virgin/whore dichotomy, is similarly only applicable to females and feminine matter. The fertile/sterile dichotomy is based on two pressing Neoplatonic questions: whether procreation is laudable and to what extent; and whether women and feminine matter can themselves be called fertile and to what extent.

These two questions and the different answers to them in Neoplatonic thought are already discordant and contradictory: on the one hand, procreation is officially praised as impressing beautiful spiritual forms on chaotic prime matter; on the other hand, it is the dirty work of vulgar Venus, impossible without the fall of forming masculine spirit into feminine matter.

As to the second question, the degree of agency accorded to the woman, the womb, and menstrual matter in procreation varied in Neoplatonism from those thinkers who thought of prime matter as utterly dead and dark to those who saw it as almost always infused with vital spirits and indomitable life. Women, ever – for some strange reason – the carriers of humanity’s symbolic connection with matter and procreation, could thus be seen as either passive receptacles of men’s forming spiritual seed, without which there would be no new life, or as innately teeming with new life, but also dangerously chaotic and in need of male spiritual control. It should be noted that more agency also inevitably entailed more fear and disgust in male minds.

Procreation is thus far lower in the Neoplatonic hierarchy than ascending away from filthy matter altogether, but formed matter is still far higher than that feminine matter which refuses to even be formed. Mothers are thus already fully immersed in the fallen material world, even if they are officially seen as somewhat better than prostitutes. Childless women, conversely, are either too unnaturally spiritual for their sex, or else too unnaturally recalcitrant and depraved to even be able to conceive by allowing male spirit to form the dark menstrual matter of their dark watery wombs.

The fertile/sterile dichotomy in Neoplatonic thought thus self-deconstructs even before it is properly constructed. This is apparent in the act of sending women to the “nunnery,” where both virgins in the monastery and whores in the brothel are imagined as childless. Shakespeare does give one of his episodic whores a child, but there is generally a stunning absence of mothers in his opus and there are certainly no “good” mothers anywhere to be found.

Shakespeare’s mothers are either pathetically weak (Constance, Lady Macduff, Valeria), sexually inappropriate (Helen, Juliet, Kate Keepdown), pathetically weak and sexually inappropriate (Gertrude), monstrously domineering (Volumnia), or sexually inappropriate and monstrously domineering (Tamora, Joan of Arc). This short list fully

exhausts all of Shakespeare's female characters appearing before the romances who have at some point at least conceived a child (almost half of these children do not get born during the course of their respective play), and not all of these mothers even appear on stage.

The mother, when she appears as a figure, is usually already a disgusting, disturbing whore – if she is not a mere figure – but virgins can be at least as disturbing. Virgins are often seen in Shakespeare's world as disruptive figures that need to be coerced into marriage, as Kathryn R. Finin notices in her "Ethical Questions and Questionable Morals in *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*." (Bristol 2010: 105) Bertram calls Dian "cold and stern" and Parolles maintains that a virgin is "a desperate offendress against nature." Romeo's Rosaline's

beauty starv'd with her severity
Cuts beauty off from all posterity
(*Romeo and Juliet*, I. i. 219-220)

Womanhood is, it appears, somehow naturally inextricably associated with sexuality and carnality, and a deliberate virgin is thus unnatural. Angelo, persuading Isabel to sleep with him, urges her to

Be that you are,
That is a woman; if you be more, you're none.
(*Measure for Measure*, II. iv. 134-135)

This suggests that sexual prurience is merely normal female nature, which is firmly in keeping with early modern notions of female reproductive physiology and of what constituted socially acceptable female sexual behavior. These notions, for instance, often precluded the recognition of rape as a crime, as the very fact that a woman had admitted to having been involved in a sexual act, however unwillingly, could signify her unchastity, because the *normal* expression of female sexuality was generally understood as a yielding response to male desire. If she became pregnant as a result of the rape, her

complaint became immaterial, as it was widely believed that a woman could only conceive if she had experienced an orgasm. (Ward 2008: 46)

It is in *Measure for Measure* that the simultaneous deconstruction of the virgin/whore and the fertile/sterile dichotomies is perhaps at its most obvious. In the world of the play, on the one hand, a Puritanical, Manichean hatred towards flesh as innately evil is displayed by several characters and masqueraded as true Christian religiosity; on the other hand, a subversive undercurrent makes certain our sympathies will side with fertility and motherhood, pitted against and starkly contrasted with sexual purity. Filial, motherly, and “conjugal” love, kindness, fertility, and extramarital sex all belong to the same paradigm. The prostitute Kate Keepdown’s illegitimate child is in the motherly care of the prostitute Mrs. Overdone – “a bawd of eleven years’ continuance.” (*Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 196). Juliet’s premarital pregnancy is announced to Isabel by the satanically subversive Lucio in positive images of love and fertility:

Your brother and his lover have embrac’d.
As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. iv. 40-44)

As charity and chastity are radically opposed and fully exclude one another in the play, it is to be expected that we will gladly choose the lechers and the whores – and rightly so. Chaste Isabel is capable of uttering “More than our brother is our chastity” (*Measure for Measure*, II. iv. 185) and “I had rather my brother die by the law than my son should be unlawfully born.” (*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 189-190) This is the other paradigm, consisting of “precise,” cold, sterile legalism, apparently opposed to love and life itself. It is interesting to note that Claudio is sentenced to death not for fornication, but “for getting Madam Julietta with child,” (*Measure for Measure*, I. ii. 72-73) and Lucio rightly observes of Angelo that “This ungenitur’d agent will unpeople the province with continency.” (*Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 174) Angelo would have probably

agreed with the “Precisians” condemned by the Anglican Church for condemning “the white veil accustomed by women in their giving of thanks [after childbirth] as a whorish attire.” (Fissell 2006: 125)

This readily rouses our sympathies, as we will both agree with Claudio that creating new life is a positive act and with Claudio himself that he is being judged over a mere technicality. Claudio could have, however, probably married Juliet in a similarly clandestine but actual church ceremony that Romeo organized with his own Juliet, and this would have been even less perilous and public than the exchange of vows they did have. This would fail, however, to make the necessary point of their being the loving, fertile, but fornicating couple, and as such, destructive to the cold, restrictive, puritanical world of Angelo. (Igrutinović 2009: 114)

Sarah C. Velz, interpreting the play in terms of the Gospel parable of the seeds, finds that the “good ground,” those bearing spiritual fruit, relates precisely to Mariana’s love and Juliet’s pregnancy. The “good ground” is thus equated in the play with physical love and physical fertility and not only are we today far more likely to side with it, but even the puritanically inclined theatergoers of the time would have been expected to at least question their strict worldview.

This might have been slightly more difficult with Cleopatra, but a similar mechanism is certainly at work in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Apparently misreading Charmian’s palm, Iras announces “There’s a palm presages chastity, if nothing else,” to which Charmian wittily retorts “E’en as the o’erflowing Nilus presageth famine.” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. ii. 47-48) Chastity is in two brief comments firmly associated with the barrenness of the drought and starkly opposed to fertility. A culture whose very survival is dependent on the overflowing of the slimy, serpentine Nile, is highly unlikely to value dry adherence to puritanical norms. Cleopatra’s Egyptian, serpentine fertility is thus juxtaposed to Octavia’s Roman, cold and virginal childlessness, which is another of Shakespeare’s inventions apparently meant to force his audience to pick the side they would have otherwise been unlikely to.

Truly monstrous – both murderous and inordinately lustful, and thus opposed to both charity and chastity – characters in Shakespeare are somewhat more likely than not to be sterile. In the sources that Shakespeare used for *King Lear*, Cordelia’s evil sisters

have children. (Muir 1956: 143) Not so in Shakespeare's tragedy, where all three of Lear's daughters are depicted as childless. Apparently, Cordelia is too purely spiritual to be tainted by childbearing, and her sisters, conversely, too carnal and sunken into the hell of unformed matter, where sterility lies. Lear himself curses his lustful and cruel daughter to barrenness:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her.

(*King Lear*, I. iv. 275-283)

Shakespeare appears to generally take a more passive view of female fertility, according to which dark feminine matter itself is dead and sterile unless and until it is infused with life from the forming masculine spirit. Thus cruel virgins and depraved monsters are barren, while a slightly slutty fiancée and a wife, as well as a gentler kind of whore, can be allowed to conceive – but not escape calumny, of course.

Lady Macbeth is, apparently, somewhere in between. Having self-admittedly breastfed, she is also apparently sterile. Peter Sallibrass suggests that we are “asked to accept a logical contradiction for the sake of a symbolic unity: Lady Macbeth is *both* an unnatural mother *and* sterile.” (Sinfield 1992: 77) Instead of trying to explain away this paradox by imagining her employed as a wetnurse or in a prior marriage, we can instead see her as fully embodying the paradox of the anti-Madonna. Like the Madonna is paradoxically both a virgin and a mother, so Lady Macbeth, her opposite, is *both* motherly in a cruel, unnatural way, *and* childless. Lady Macbeth, representing the

inversion of proper – passively nurturing – womanhood and motherhood, becomes analogous to the figure of the witch.

Mary Elizabeth Fissell finds, studying in her *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* a number of Renaissance pamphlets against witches and murdering mothers, a firm link between these two unnatural kinds of women. The link is in the monstrously and distinctly materially maternal, as witches

can be understood as excessively maternal towards their familiars, the small magical animals that supposedly did their bidding, while murdering mothers were insufficiently maternal towards their offspring. In both kinds of pamphlets, motherhood in all its depraved varieties is described in intensely bodily terms, with a near obsession with blood and milk. Murdering mothers and witches intersected in the harm they caused to children. They also resembled each other in their links to the supernatural. (Fissel 2006: 75)

Heidi Breuer notes in her *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* that, as witches suckled their familiars, but were most commonly accused of harming their neighbors' children, they were in themselves framed in maternal terms. In her words, maternity structures

1) the way the witch gets her power (through her sexual liaison with the devil, she obtains a child-substitute in the form of the suckling familiar) and 2) the way she exerts it (the domestic nature of the conflicts themselves). Witches are maternal, but their maternity is inverted – they suckle demons and harass human children. Witches are anti-mothers, notmothers, women who have rejected traditional motherhood in favor of a demonic alternative. Stigmatizing women who are not mothers works to reaffirm the primacy of motherhood as the essential female role. Not a mother? Must be a witch. At the same time, these writers abject actual maternal figures, erasing any space for a positive notion of motherhood, for a good mother (Breuer 2009: 110)

She finds in the culture of early modern England a variety of representations of maternity gone wrong. This image was, in her words, so powerful that “the invocation of the murderous mother in Lady Macbeth’s speech allows Shakespeare to conjure an entire

legacy of monstrous maternity and to tap into the popular interest of his audience in just a few lines.” (Breuer 2009: 128)

The witch is thus somehow between the fertile and the sterile, between the horror of the mother and the “notmother” – and both seem to produce a horror in dualistically inclined male minds. Lady Macbeth is both mother and anti-mother and thus a witch. Unlike the cross-dressed virgin, or the boy dressed as a boy on Shakespeare’s stage, the manly, “unsexed” virago – deprived only of her “feminine” gentle and feeble passivity, but not her sexuality and womanly body – is a lethal witch, both disgustingly fertile and deathly sterile.

Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc fully embodies the virgin/whore, masculine/feminine, and sterile/fertile paradoxical self-deconstructing dichotomies inherent in the figure of the witch. She begins as an unyielding virgin, declining marital offers:

I must not yield to any rites of love,
For my profession’s sacred from above.

(*Henry VI 1*, I. ii. 113-114)

That trouble is ahead is apparent already in the adoring words of Charles the Dolphin:

Bright star of Venus, fall’n down on the earth,
How may I reverently worship thee enough?

(*Henry VI 1*, I. ii. 142-143)

The image of the bright star of Venus “fall’n down on the earth” does not bode well. Lucifer, of course, is one of the names given to planet Venus, and his fall did not go too well for him. Additionally, the image implies the fall of heavenly Venus down to earth and her instant transformation into earthly Venus.

Joan claims she has been “a virgin from her tender infancy” only to exclaim, seconds later, that she is pregnant, and that, in her words, “the fruit within my womb” should at least be spared. Warwick asks “Is all your strict preciseness come to this?” and concludes that “she hath been liberal and free.” York yells with a righteous zeal:

“Strumpet, thy words condemn thy brat and thee.” (*Henry VI I*, V. iv. 36-91) She remains suspended between the whorishly fertile and the lethally sterile, as her womb instantly becomes, in her death, her unborn child’s tomb.

The representation of Joan of Arc already reveals all the themes associated with the dread of the abject carnal feminine that Shakespeare was to develop later: the virgin turned whore, heavenly Venus become earthly Venus in an instant, the unnatural virgin juxtaposed with the fertile whore, and the “manly” – but in effect merely “unsexed” from her passivity, not her carnal femininity – virago who is discovered to be a whore, a murderess, and a witch.

Both images of monstrous sterility *and* of monstrous fertility are in Renaissance Neoplatonism associated with feminine prime matter and its refusal to yield to masculine spirit. Monstrous sterility, as in the case of Goneril and Regan, occurs when dead and dark feminine matter opposes the life-infusing masculine spirit without which conception is impossible. Monstrous fertility, on the other hand, happens when chaotic and watery feminine matter is not properly controlled by the forming masculine spirit, resulting in the rank overgrowth of slimy, deformed, irrational life. Either way, the dark feminine is always to blame for not cooperating properly with the divine masculine.

A fascinating, if disturbing example of monstrous fertility can be found in the first Canto of *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser, who appears to have had more fear and loathing towards carnality and materiality constructed as feminine than most Elizabethan Neoplatonists, has his purely virginal knight Redcross encounter the female monster Error, who, though meant to represent religious heresy, is invested with a seemingly gratuitous monstrous fertility:

This is the wandring wood, this Errours den,
A monster vile, whom God and man does hate [...]
Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,
But th’ other halfe did womans shape retaine [...]
Of her there bred
A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed,
Sucking upon her poisonous dugs, each one

Of sundry shapes, yet all ill favored:
Soone as that uncouth light upon them shone,
Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone [...]
She poured forth out of her hellish sinke
Her fruitfull cursed spawne of serpents small,
Deformed monsters, fowle, and blacke as inke,
Which swarming all about his legs did crall,
And him encombred sore, but could not hurt at all.
(Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, Canto I, xiii-xxii)¹²

Errour's monstrous uber-fertility has her spawning amorphous serpentine monsters that are, deprived of the light of forming masculine spirit, little more than deformed chunks of slimy prime matter.

Even though Shakespeare appears to generally take a more passive view of matter and female fertility, he has his share of images of monstrous feminine fertility associated with uncontrolled formless prime matter very reminiscent of Spenser's Errour, if not quite as aggressive and extreme. There is, for instance, the figure of the "cestern" teeming with slimy, half-formed life. Cleopatra invokes it in her anger, as if it were actually in her power to fluidize her domain thus:

So half my Egypt were submerg'd and made
A cestern for for scal'd snakes!
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, II. v. 94-95)

Othello, conversely, recoils from it in fear and disgust at the watery hyper-fertile and hyper-carnal female sexuality, which is for him, in Holderness' words, "a sticky cloacal swamp heaving with amphibious life," or, in Othello's words,

a cestern for foul toads

¹² Heidi Breuer offers in her *Crafting the Witch* a fascinating reading of the Errour scene based on Lacan and Kristeva. The above citation is taken from her book. (Breuer 2009: 124-126)

To knot and gender in!
(*Othello*, IV. ii. 61-62)

Holderness explains that in Iago's mind – and later Othello's as well – an “honest man” is “one who has a horror of mud, and associates it with vice and shame,” consequently denying “any relationship with the stench and slime of ordinary human functions.” (Holderness 2010: 99) The object of disgust here sounds increasingly, as we descend further downwards towards it, like the common Neoplatonic descriptions of slimy and formless prime matter.

Shakespeare's single instance of the simultaneously monstrously sexual and monstrously fertile woman is Tamora. As Coppélia Kahn notices, the fecundity of the monstrously fertile Roman mother of the twenty-six Andronici – a fertile Roman is apparently an oxymoron – is displaced onto her, the Gothic outsider, and “demonized with a ferocious linguistic and theatrical inventiveness”:

With every reference to Tamora's maternity, we are also reminded of her lasciviousness. She flaunts sacralized chastity and also the Roman ethnic purity it protects, her bastard child being by blood half-Goth, half-Moor. This nameless infant embodies the anxieties about the unconstrained maternal womb represented by the pit in act two.

The ultimate source of all the crimes in the tragedy is, in Kahn's reading, the othered, “offended, alienated mother.” (Kahn 2002: 53-69)

Many references are made in *Titus Andronicus* to Tamora as a beastly mother, and she is finally likened to the panther in Aaron's symbolically economical lie told to two Titus' sons:

Straight will I bring you to the loathsome pit
Where I espied the panther fast asleep.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 193-194)

The pit – which, among other things, represents the monstrously fertile womb – is associated with Tamora as the panther – the “all-beast.”

7.3.2.3.1. A BEAST THAT WANTS DISCOURSE OF REASON OR WHAT REMAINS IS BEASTLY: THE HUMAN ANIMAL OR HUMANS DESCENDING TO THE ANIMALISTIC

Many Shakespeare's more lowly characters are explicitly compared to animals. Prospero calls the bodily one of his two slaves "the beast Caliban," (*The Tempest*, IV. i. 140) and, in *Cymbeline*, Guiderius concludes that Cloten's name could be Toad, or Adder, or Spider, and that he is "an arrogant piece of flesh." Coriolanus finds himself exiled by "the beast with many heads," while Menenius refers to the representatives of the people as "the herdsmen of the beastly plebeians." (*Coriolanus*, II. i. 95)

Women are naturally more beastly owing to their inextricable association with matter and sexuality. Lear notoriously compares the "simpering dame" with beasts on account of their shared lust:

The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above.
(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 115-118)

Hamlet disparagingly compares his mother with an animal and even then finds her wanting, as

a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer.
(*Hamlet*, I. ii. 157-158)

It can appear that some despicable human specimens just naturally find themselves occupying the level of the beast. The Ghost, however, for instance, reveals to Hamlet his mother's fall to this animal state:

O Hamlet, what [a] falling-off was there
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the vow
I made to her in marriage, and to decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!
But virtue, as it never will be moved,
Though lewdness court it in the shape of heaven,
So [lust], though to a radiant angel link'd,
Will [sate] itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage.
(*Hamlet*, I. v. 47-57)

Renaissance Neoplatonism saw humans as very easily sliding down the scale of perfection from the exalted spiritual to the depraved material – from the angelic to the beastly – and lust was very often the culprit. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico della Mirandola has God tell man as He created him: “Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul’s judgement, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.” Giordano Bruno, reiterating this point in *De gli eroici furori*, published in London in 1585, warns that “there are not two contrary essences, but only one essence subject to two extremes of contrariety.” The human soul is capable of ascending to the divine – but also of descending to the beastly. (Wells 2005: 13) The same view of man’s essentially double nature continued to be restated, according to Wells, well into the eighteenth century. (Wells 2005: 14)

It seems to have been at its most pronounced around Shakespeare’s time, when the anxieties surrounding it were at their strongest. Medieval man was not expected to be as removed from his body as Renaissance man, who had recently discovered, via the strong infusion of Neoplatonism into the culture, that in spirit he was truly divine, and would fully ascend to the divine – if he could only rid himself of the beastly body. Erica

Fudge investigates this cultural faultline in ““The dog is himself”: Humans, Animals, and Self-Control in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.” The presence of an actual dog on stage in this comedy is in her reading “a representation of nature as the uncivilized that stands against the rational civility that is understood to be truly human.” (Maguire 2008: 194) Fudge cites Greenblatt’s research into the behavior manuals of the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries and finds that they are positively obsessed with the management of urine, feces, mucus, saliva, and wind. Proper control of each of these bodily products distinguishes the child from the adult, the cultured from the vulgar, the civilized from the barbaric, the upper classes from the lower – the truly human from the beastly. Crab urinating under the table, Fudge asserts, “begs to be added to this list of dichotomies,” signaling “in the most explicit way possible the very real danger of incivility that hangs over the play.” (Maguire 2008: 197-199)

The danger of falling into the animalistic seems to hang over every play and the more exalted characters seem to notice this more. Cassio expresses a great deal of anxiety over it in *Othello*:

To be now a
sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast!
O, strange!
(*Othello*, II. iii. 298–300)

He sees this fall in *Othello*, but also in himself when he laments: “Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.” (*Othello*, II. iii. 262-264) It may sound trite and narcissistic to modern ears, but seeking soldierly fame is in Plato’s *Symposium* actually one of the lower modes of pursuing immortality. “What remains” in any dualistic system after the immortal part is lost is the mere body, which is “bestial.”

Lear discovers in his descent from kingly pomp towards the bare base of humanity that the “thing itself” (Edgar in his guise of Poor Tom) is but “a poor, bare, fork’d animal.” (*King Lear*, III. iv. 102-109) Edgar explains – and there is some question,

of course, as to whether we should be taking his moralistic warnings seriously, as they are based entirely on a fabricated identity – that he was a “servingman,”

proud in heart and mind; that curl'd my hair; wore gloves in my cap; serv'd the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her [...] one that slept in the contriving of lust, and wak'd to do it [...] out-paramour'd the Turk [...] hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey. Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman. Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend. (*King Lear*, III. iv. 85-98)

It is, apparently, vulgar Venus in the guise of lustful mistresses that drags men down to the level of the animalistic.

The sometimes disturbingly puritanical Duke orders the “bawd” – or pimp – Pompey in *Measure to Measure* to say to himself:

From their abominable and beastly touches
I drink, I eat, [array] myself, and live.
Canst thou believe thy living is a life,
So stinkingly depending?

The Duke then orders:

Take him to prison, officer,
Correction and instruction must both work
Ere this rude beast will profit.
(*Measure for Measure*, III. ii. 19-33)

Lust is seen by the ostensibly good ruler of the play as firmly beastly and being linked to it makes a man no more than an animal. Othello likewise has a violent disgust at the idea of sexual promiscuity and firmly associates it with the beastly:

I had rather be a toad

And live upon the vapour of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses.
(*Othello*, III. iii. 272–5)

Iago's puritanical but filthy mind easily conjures up animalistic images of "lust in action" in his description of Desdemona and Cassio to Othello, picturing them

as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross
As ignorance made drunk.
(*Othello*, III. iii. 403-405)

The lovers are imagined both as beastly and as sunken into the oblivion of the material ("ignorance made drunk" recalls Barnardine's state in the depths of Angelo's prison). These images of animalistic lust ironically also recall Iago's warnings to Brabantio, with images of "an old black ram tugging" his "white ewe," (*Othello*, I. i. 90-91) his daughter "cover'd with a Barbary horse," (*Othello*, I. i. 111-112) and his daughter and the Moor "making the beast with two backs" (*Othello*, I. i. 116-117)

Othello's suicide is significantly announced by way of his reminiscing about his martial feat:

in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him - thus.
(*Othello*, V. ii. 352-356)

Othello has now himself become the “circumcised dog” to be smitten by no one other than himself. He has also, evidently even to himself, fallen to the level of the animal. The beastly Tamora also apparently deserves a beastly death:

And for that ravenous tiger Tamora [...]
throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey:
Her life was beastly.
(*Titus Andronicus*, V. iii. 179-200)

It should be noted that voluntary stripping to the level of the animalistic – just like the voluntary descent of Gnostic Christ figures into the depths of the carnal to save the lost sparks of spirit – can be couched in distinctly positive terms, as it is when Edgar becomes poor Tom:

I will preserve myself, and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury, in contempt of man,
Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
Blanket my loins, elf my hair in knots,
And with presented nakedness outface
The winds and persecutions of the sky.
(*King Lear*, II. iii. 6-12)

Lear eventually mirrors this descent. Though the king, he finds himself, in the stormy wilderness, worse off than any animal, and, it appears, defiantly and willingly so:

This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs,
And bids what will take all.
(*King Lear*, III. i. 3-14)

This kenotic humiliation of the king sunken below the level of the animal is Christ-like and in fact directly recalls Christ's observation that "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the son of man hath not where to lay his head." (Matthew 8: 20, KJV) This is, however, a rare occurrence in Shakespeare. The animalistic is far more frequently associated with a moral fall into carnal, beastly passions.

The entire island of Cyprus appears to fall into carnal passions in the night when Othello and Desdemona physically consummate their love. While it was purely spiritual, apparently, it could order the elements. Now, while they have their one night of "lust," a sort of a drunken orgy takes place on "this warlike isle" in the middle of the sea, and it brings them all apart and down into the watery depths of the material. "What is the matter?" is asked three times during the course of this festival. Cassio is again the one to realize what has happened, and laments "that we should, with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!" (*Othello*, II. iii. 291-293) Without love, and instead sunken into the carnal depths of lust, men have become beasts, and chaos is come again.

7.3.2.3.2. CHAOS IS COME AGAIN

Shakespeare found in chaos itself, Goddard claims, "a subject that continued to enthrall him to the end of his days." All the significant characters in his opus, he finds – Brutus, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Antony, Cleopatra, Coriolanus – confront chaos in some way. (Goddard I 1960: 28-29) J. Dover Wilson explains that this was not an idiosyncratic fascination, but a hot topic of the time, as the "apprehension that the whole order might suddenly revert to Chaos haunted men's imagination." (Wilson 1933: 16) He explains where this sudden fear of chaos originated in turn-of-the-century England:

the beheading of Robert, Earl of Essex, on February 25, 1601 [...] and not the death of the Queen in 1603, was the end of the true Elizabethan age, those halcyon days of happy ease, illimitable hope and untarnished honour [...]. The brilliant but erratic young earl, the principal star in the Elizabethan firmament for the last ten years of the century,

suddenly fell like Lucifer from heaven [...] the harmony was broken; the Elizabethan balance overthrown. England awoke with a start to the grim realities of life, and the accession of James I ushered in a period of cynicism and gloom, self-indulgence and crime. (Wilson 1933: 36)

Other authors explain this fascinated fear of chaos in other ways, all solidly political. That the notion of chaos looming just beneath the surface of the seemingly ordered cosmos coincided in time with the strong anxieties surrounding the demise of Essex, the uncertain succession of Elizabeth, or even the burning of Giordano Bruno at the stake is, of course, no coincidence. The political is, apparently, always associated with the metaphysical. However, attempting to determine which came first – the political or the metaphysical – resembles the chicken-and-the-egg debate. Shakespeare and other Englishmen at the turn of the century were faced with an objectively chaotic political situation and those metaphysical tools available for interpreting it that existed in Renaissance Neoplatonism heavily reinforced the fear of “chaos come again” – whichever came first.

This fear of “chaos come again” and the consequent obsession with it – that much is clear – is dualistic in its metaphysics. None of the truly monistic orthodoxies – in which the divine Maker fully creates and controls the world He has created out of nothing – had the notion of primeval chaos which might return, apparently, at any point. Dualisms, conversely, all held to some degree the view that the basis of the created universe was somehow something fundamentally dark and chaotic, on which divine order had to be imposed from the outside, more or less unsuccessfully. Neoplatonism, in Plotinus’ time as much as Ficino’s, maintained that the cosmos was created out of chaotic and recalcitrant feminine prime matter.

This feminine prime matter was inherently and eternally chaotic and thus the culprit for any disorder in the created universe. In *Troilus and Cressida*, which Una Ellis-Fermor called “an implacable assertion of chaos as the ultimate fact of being,” (Martin 1976: 91) the chaos is unproblematically to be blamed on Helen.

Hamlet’s unweeded garden that grows to seed in which the time is out of joint can likewise be seen as simply feminine matter refusing to be controlled. Philippa Berry

notices in “Hamlet’s ear” that Hamlet’s misogyny attributes the “degenerative trend in nature to the female body and female sexuality in particular.” (Alexander 2004: 204)

Some heroes and anti-heroes, having descended to the point where chaos has overtaken them, express a desire for all form to vanish and for the chaos of prime matter to return. Macbeth has dragged his world down to primeval chaos and now wishes to see it fully divested of all light and order:

I gin to be a-weary of the sun,
And wish th’ estate o’ th’ world were now undone.
(*Macbeth*, V. v. 48-49)

On being told Antony is now married – after first hitting the messenger and drawing a knife at him – Cleopatra invokes chaos:

Melt Egypt into Nile! and kindly creatures
Turn all to serpents!
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, II. v. 78-79)

Antony has an almost identical response to the slightest intimation that he is to be taken away from Cleopatra:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the rang’d empire fall!
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. i. 33-40)

They both want the cosmos to dissolve into the watery chaos of matter. Rome melting in Tiber is arguably a strange image, while Egypt melting in Nile is a familiar one, with intimations of fertility, however disturbing and disgusting they might be.

Timon spouts an elaborate inventory of evils he wishes should befall Athens, and every one is essentially a desire for order to cease its rule, and chaos to reign supreme instead:

O thou wall
 That girdles in those wolves, dive in the earth.
 And fence not Athens! Matrons, turn incontinent!
 Obedience, fail in children! Slaves and fools,
 Pluck the grave wrinkled Senate from the bench,
 And minister in their steads! To general filths
 Convert o' th' instant, green virginity!
 Do't in your parents' eyes! [...] Maid, to thy master's bed,
 Thy mistress is o' th' brothel! [...] Piety, and fear,
 Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
 Domestic awe, night-rest, and neighborhood,
 Instruction, manners, mysteries, and trades,
 Degrees, observances, customs, and laws,
 Decline to your confounding contraries;
 [...] Lust, and liberty,
 Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth,
 That 'gainst the stream of virtue they may strive,
 And drown themselves in riot!
 (*Timon of Athens*, IV. i. 1-36)

Lear similarly dissolves into a mad rage and immediately a chaotic tempest, overtaking the entire world of the play, follows:

you unnatural hags,
 I will have such revenges on you both
 That all the world shall – I will do such things –
 What they are yet I know not, but they shall be
 The terrors of the earth! You think I'll weep:
 No, I'll not weep.
 I have full cause of weeping, but this heart

[*Storm and tempest*]

Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws

Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad!

(*King Lear*, II. iv. 278-286)

Having descended to a chaotic state, for which females are, of course, to blame, the king faces chaotic prime matter in the form of the stormy wilderness he finds himself exiled in, and wishes to drag his entire kingdom down with him, right to the destruction of all order and form:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage, blow!

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drench'd our steeples, [drown'd] the cocks!

You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,

Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,

Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,

Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!

Crack nature's moulds, all germains spill at once

That makes ungrateful man!

(*King Lear*, III. ii. 1-9)

“Moulds” refer here to the forms Plato saw as existent in the creator’s mind, which served to shape everything that is – as indicated in the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus*. George Williams believes it is likely that Shakespeare’s allusion to the Platonic moulds in *King Lear* stems from the commentaries made on Plato’s writing by Plotinus and the Neoplatonists and reported in the writings of Ficino and his Florentine Academy, which would have still been far more available at the time than Plato himself. It is, whatever its source in Shakespeare, certainly an ancient Platonic and Neoplatonic notion that the moulds of nature will crack and the world will at some point revert to primeval chaos – even if it is only to begin a new cycle of creation once more. (Williams George 1951: 67-68)

It appears that the desire for this world-destructive reversion to chaos only materializes in those heroes – and villains – who have already sunk to the level so low on the Platonic scale of perfection that their souls cannot endure the chaotic nature of the surrounding matter any longer. It is again vulgar Venus – notably in the guise of Goneril, Regan, Gertrude, Cressida and Helen of Troy – that is caught in the act of dragging Shakespeare’s male heroes down to the level of chaotic prime matter where they seem to have little option but to wish for the destruction of the cosmos. She has come a long way: from merely trapping in marriage and procreation, through being whorish, beastly, and a witch, and – usually by lust – to dragging men right down to prime matter, where there are no more beautiful forms to breed, but instead only dark, deadly chaos.

7.3.3. MORTAL VENUS

As has been seen, Bruno’s Dian and Ficino’s heavenly Venus can never be attained, and will, if a lover pursues them sexually, transform in the bed-trick into a version of Helen or vulgar Venus. In the tragedies, the version of the lower Venus the hero is likely to encounter is the most lethal of her incarnations, who can bring only death and destruction, and not form new life.

The lover cannot say he has not been properly warned. Ficino explicitly stresses in his *De vita* the importance of distinguishing pure Dian from perilous lower Venus:

For those flavors you perceive in things which are pleasing because of their moderate temperedness, those Diana gave you by the gift of Apollo and of Jupiter. But those wonderful allurements of taste by which daily you, secretly miserable, lose your life like people caught on a hook – these are the ones that insidious Venus fashions. (Ficino 1998: 211)

Cleopatra’s fishing scene, which has already been mentioned, is much more eerie in this context:

as I draw them up,
I’ll think them every one an Antony,

And say: “Ah, ha! y’ are caught.”

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, II. v. 13-15)

We may want to remember here also Ficino’s image of the soul, which, captivated by the beauty of the pure beloved, “is drawn upward as by a hook,” (Line 2004: 95) and that one way of interpreting this scene is to see Cleopatra as heavenly Venus drawing Antony’s soul upwards. In her infinite variety, of course, Cleopatra is also “insidious Venus,” who causes Antony to lose his life “like people caught on a hook.” Ficino spares no effort in cautioning the young would-be lover against this deathly lower Venus:

Against her multiple deceptions equip yourselves with the eyes of Argus; fortify yourselves with the shield of Pallas; and stop your ears to her flattering promises as to the lethal songs of the Sirens; finally, accept from me this flower of prudence with which you may avoid the sorcery of this Circe. (Ficino 1998: 211)

Cleopatra is, like a Siren or a Circe, a lethal, deceptive witch – something Antony himself appears to recognize when he realizes that he “must from this enchanting queen break off.” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. ii. 128) It is precisely because he fails to do this that he eventually dies.

Catherine Belsey sees a similar mechanism at work in other Shakespeare’s plays in her “Desire’s excess and the English Renaissance theatre: *Edward II*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*,” and explains that, according to Renaissance medical theory, sexual desire itself is an effect of an excess of blood, resulting in lovesickness or *erotomania*, which can have lethal consequences. *Troilus and Cressida*, in her view, shows a world where “desire is everywhere,” and this sick condition “commonly exceeds its outward motive, its object” – which somehow inevitably leads to fatal consequences. Helen’s worth, in Belsey’s phrase, “is a topic for debate” as the “mortal Venus” (*Troilus and Cressida*, III. i. 31) is also a whore. (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV. i. 67) (Zimmerman 2005: 72)

Helen of Troy is indeed at one point called by a servant “the mortal Venus, the heart-blood of beauty, love’s invisible soul.” (*Troilus and Cressida*, III. i. 31-33) And while this is certainly meant to serve as a panegyric which is later to be contrasted with

“whore,” it is in itself more than a little disturbing. The mortal Venus is not only a beautiful mortal woman generously compared with the immortal goddess Venus. The *mortal* Venus is also the *deadly* lower Venus.

Pandarus, significantly for Troilus, asks at this very moment “Who? my cousin Cressida?” Cressida proves to have been his own mortal Venus, lethal to him, which is apparent to Pandarus himself when he says to Cressida: “I knew thou wouldest be his death.” (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV. ii. 86)

Lust is what causes Troilus’ personal death, and the death of many in the war caused by lust itself. When Helen sentimentally and somewhat frivolously hums: “Let thy song be love. This love will undo us all. O Cupid, Cupid, Cupid!” (*Troilus and Cressida*, III. i. 110-111) any Neoplatonist worth his salt will instantly know that this “love” she speaks of is in fact lust, lethal to those that pursue it.

Troilus is aware that he has succumbed to mortal, destructive lust before his final battle. Though it is clear that the battle itself will be the *apparent* cause of his death, the *real* cause is his fall into the devastating snare of lust that has first damaged and disintegrated him from within, as Helen had done to Paris, and as the Trojan horse will analogously do to the entire city:

Why should I war without the walls of Troy,
That find such cruel battle here within?
Each Trojan that is master of his heart,
Let him to field, Troilus, alas, hath none.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, I. i. 2-5)

Mortal Venus doing away with her unfortunate lover is the dark underbelly of the persistent association of sex and death, or Eros and Thanatos, noted in the chapter dealing with henosis. The lead and golden caskets, available to the would-be heroic lover hunting Dian, can, as has been seen, both signify death.

The golden casket explicitly connotes erotic death or death by lust. Morocco is the one to choose it – the ostentatiously solar candidate, whose black “complexion” is, in his words, the

shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun,
To whom I am neighbor and near bred.
(*The Merchant of Venice*, II. i. 1-3)

This association of the black “complexion” with the solar, of course, recalls Cleopatra’s boast that she is “with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black.” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. v. 28-29) Both these African characters appear to be associated with lust and, consequently, death by lust, as Morocco’s prize, found within the golden casket, is

A carrion Death, within whose empty eye
There is a written scroll [...]
“All that glisters is not gold,
Often have you heard this told;
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded [tombs] do worms infold.”
(*The Merchant of Venice*, II. vii. 63-69)

Bassanio knows to avoid it because he knows how mortal Venus tricks lovers by deadly dead matter straight to death:

Look on beauty,
And you shall see ‘tis purchased by the weight,
Which therein works a miracle in nature,
Making them lightest that wear most of it.
So are those crisped snaky golden locks,
Which [make] such wanton gambols with the wind
Upon supposed fairness, often known
To be the dowry of a second head,
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre.

(The Merchant of Venice, III. ii. 88-96)

Golden locks of hair are in Neoplatonic astrology a sign of solar influences, and we see them here directly associated with death. The sun and cadavers in conjunction with lust are very frequently connected in Shakespeare's imagery, whether it is the solar snaky golden locks that would usually incite to lust but that actually derive from entombed skulls of long dead women, or, in Hamlet's unforgettable speech, the sun "kissing" carrion:

the sun breed maggots in a dead dog,
being a good kissing carrion.
(Hamlet, II. ii. 181-186)

The female body is in fact dead female carrion matter, only temporarily infused with the "kissing" male sun of the spirit, which gives it life, even if this life is maggot-like.

Because matter is mere carrion, then lust, being the hungry desire for it, becomes associated with the vulture. Venus' thought of lust is described as her "vultur thought" in *Venus and Adonis* (551) and Tarquin's is a "vulture folly" in *Lucrece* (556). The conclusion is clear: lust is vulture-like as what it preys on is nothing but dead matter.

Lust, as a desire for the body, which in itself is dead matter, can also bring death to those that pursue it. One implication of the persistent link between Eros and Thanatos that can be found in Shakespeare's work is that death somehow always seems to follow sex and blood is always spilled – even, sometimes, innocent blood – as some sort of catastrophe inevitably closely follows the single night of carnal pleasure that Shakespeare's lovers are invariably accorded.

Romeo significantly kills Tybalt on the very day he consummates his marriage with Juliet. Both acts are, in Leggatt's reading, "a shedding of Capulet blood, and a loss of innocence: the lovers' first sexual encounter, and Romeo's first killing." (Leggatt 2005: 3) Leggatt notices a similar pattern in Othello. Preparing to murder Desdemona, Othello threatens that her "lust-stain'd" wedding sheets will be "spotted" with blood.

(*Othello*, V. i. 36) These are the same wedding sheets that are already spotted with her maiden blood, as “her murder is also her wedding night.” (Leggatt 2005: 3)

Interestingly enough, Cassio the Venus-worshipping Florentine is wounded in the thigh, just like the mythical Adonis he resembles so much, in the same night when Desdemona loses her virginity. Shakespeare’s own Adonis significantly dies right after he succumbs to Venus. Being sexually seduced by lower Venus, he is no longer a capable, manly, dexterous hunter.

He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
But by a kiss thought to persuade him there;
And nousing in his flank, the loving swine
Sheath’d unaware the tusk in his soft groin.
Had I been tooth’d like him, I must confess,
With kissing him I should have kill’d him first.

(*Venus and Adonis*, 1011-1018)

The conclusion imposes itself: mortal Venus incites to deadly animalistic lust and kills after, or during, or even instead of sex, destroying the guilty and the innocent.

In one of her guises, Tamora is mortal Venus, implicating all around her in her lethal lust. One clear conjunction of blood, violence, sex, and death that she brings about begins in her order that her sons should rape Lavinia: “let my spleenful sons this trull deflow’r.” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 191) When Martius falls into the pit, Quintus says:

What, art thou fallen? What subtile hole is this,
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood
As fresh as morning dew distill’d on flowers?
A vey fatal place it seems to me.

(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 198-202)

The freshly murdered Bassanio's blood – covering the vaginally overdetermined pit and described as “dew” on “flowers” – is clearly related to the violent deflowering of the thus far apparently virginal Lavinia. Sex, death, violence, and blood all follow in mortal Venus' wake.

In *Measure for Measure*, death is officially and legally the punishment for sex, as was the case in Puritan Geneva. The medieval church and the Bible, Shuger notes, show no precedent for the Puritan insistence on harshly punishing premarital sex (the combined response of the medieval church and the Bible would simply boil down to Isabella's “O, let him marry her!”). Plato's *Laws*, significantly, do. (Shuger 2001: 2-12) The conjunction of sex and death is a distinctly dualistic concept.

Troilus, as has been seen, dies in war because he has already been defeated from within by the lethal lust of mortal Venus in a play where all is, finally, but “wars and lechery.” Mars and Venus are not conflicted in this lowly and chaotic world – both squarely lead to fall and death, as they do in the very similar universe of *All's Well That Ends Well*. Here, as Wilcox notes, “the parallels between love and war are so extensive that we begin to wonder if the one is not an allegory of the other” – and both are similarly lethal. We are left uncertain, she observes, whether the “patch of velvet” on Bertram's cheek is covering up a scar gained in battle or one caused by syphilis. (King/Franssen 2008: 90-92) Syphilis itself – a relatively recent occurrence in Shakespeare's time – connected, in a very graphic way, sex with disintegration, rotting matter, and death, putting a damper on the comparatively bawdy medieval attitudes towards the body and physical expressions of love.

Whether the setting is tragic or comic, the lust of lower Venus consistently disintegrates and destroys Shakespeare's male heroes and anti-heroes, dragging them – in soul, body, or both – downwards towards the hell of formless prime matter.

7.4. HELLEN

Venus is, as has been seen, radically divided in Renaissance Neoplatonism and in Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic worlds into heavenly and vulgar, pure spirit and base matter, the one leading up to Heaven and the one dragging down to Hell. In the bed-trick,

heavenly Venus turns into vulgar Venus, chaste Dian into whorish Helen, who, in her most pernicious version, could more rightly be named “Hellen,” though the names given to this figure are already many. The infernal aspect of the triple goddess is Persephone, who shares in Hades this dark aspect with Hecate. (Line 2004: 28) In Ted Hughes’ mythological reading of Shakespeare, she is termed the Queen of Hell. (Hughes 1992) Whatever they call her, most critics who have dealt with Shakespeare from a religious or mythological perspective will agree that there is in his work a persistently recurring figure representing the infernal feminine.

The original Dark Lady, whoever she may have been, may well have been the initiatory inspiration for exploring and developing this figure. In Sonnet 147, the bed-tricked poetic subject’s seeming heavenly Dian transpires to be an infernal Hellen instead:

I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.
(Sonnet 147, 13-14)

“Lust in action” is what finally causes the male spirit, bed-tricked by the promise of heaven, to fall into the feminine hell of matter, as is apparent in Sonnet 129:

Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjur’d, murd’rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoy’d no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
[Mad] in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
A bliss in proof, and prov’d, [a] very woe,

Before, a joy propos'd, behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.
(Sonnet 129)

“Hell,” is, of course, slang for “vagina” – a fact which allowed Shakespeare much humorous punning, especially in the Sonnets. This is not without its metaphysical basis. Semen is, both in Plato’s and Aristotle’s reproductive theories – which were still extant in the Renaissance and continued to be rehearsed well into the eighteenth century – a product of the male mind/spirit. When this spirit is “wasted” in the “waste/waist” parts of a woman’s body, where unformed menstrual matter lurks, it has in fact fallen from the highest to the lowest point possible in one easy step, self-injurious to the male. Sex is in the thought systems of the time thus both metaphysically and physiologically the tragic fall of spirit into the very hell of matter, and infernal women are to blame.

This can sometimes be very discreetly indicated. Hamlet, before renouncing Ophelia, seemingly romantically calls her “my soul’s idol.” The soul’s idol or *eidolon* can have a very specific meaning in Neoplatonism, pertaining to the question of Heracles’ presence in the Hades, as mentioned in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Ficino follows Plotinus in elucidating that it is not Heracles that Odysseus finds in Hades, but only his *eidolon* – the soul’s infernal reflection. Since the heroic Heracles lived the life of action, Plotinus explains, “something of him remained below,” whereas if he had been a contemplative philosopher, his whole soul would have remained in the intelligible world, where it rightly belongs. (Allen 2002: 169-171) The “soul’s idol” is thus the infernal reflection of the soul which has not renounced the life of action. This makes “my soul’s idol” about as flattering an appellation as “good kissing carrion.” Hamlet accordingly leaves Ophelia along with all “baser matter.”

Sometimes the fall of light into the darkness of hell is explicit, as in Antony’s lament:

my good stars, that were my former guides,
Have empty left their orbs, and shot their fires

Into th' abysm of hell.

(*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. xiii. 144-146)

If the Promethean fire of divine love is snatched by an undeserving, lecherous lover, Line observes, a fall into the hell of lust is the consequence. Malvolio, in her words, pursues Olivia, the heavenly Venus, as if she were the earthly Venus. She quotes Ficino as noting that "Plato says that this kind of love is born of human sickness" and "does not look up to the heavens, for in its black prison it is shuttered by night." Line explains that Malvolio is punished by being bound and imprisoned in a dark house, which is "Plato's black prison shuttered by night, the dark recesses of the earthly cave." (Line 2004: 130) Claudio is similarly shut in Angelo's dark dungeon for his sexual escapade with Juliet, and Caliban is bound in his cell for attempting to rape Miranda.

The fall into the hell of matter is at times perceptible in Neoplatonic stages of emanation or cosmic spheres. Plotinus terms these stages the One, Mind, Soul, and Matter, and Ficino usually names them God, Angel, Soul and Matter. (Allen 2002: 48) In *Measure for Measure*, the fall to the prison is depicted in ever-darkening degrees, which correspond to the Neoplatonic ones: the celestial Duke's Palace, Angelo's house where legalistic justice is dealt, the nunnery and the monastery, and finally the dark hell of the prison.

Othello finds his celestial love in Venice, but takes her on a tempestuous sea voyage that will transport them to Cyprus, where chaos breaks loose in the single night of physical love that Othello and Desdemona share. In Venice, before the marriage is consummated, there was pure love between Othello and Desdemona, and a friendly bond between Othello and Cassio. Both bonds dissolve when "lust" takes over and the downward fall continues. Venetians appear, deputing Cassio in Othello's place, and ordering him to go to Mauritania. Being the next stage of this punitive descent, we can safely assume that, had Othello lived to see it, Mauritania would have been a truly hellish place.

There is a distinct downward movement in the settings of *King Lear* as well. The tragedy begins in Lear's court where the king hands government to evil "deputies," just like the Duke does in *Measure for Measure*. Absconding the increasingly hostile houses

of Goneril and Regan, the king finally finds himself in a dark, tempestuous wilderness, while Gloucester simultaneously takes a plunge into the watery abyss from the cliff of Dover.

It appears that, as the hero or villain descends towards the hell of unformed matter, his entire realm is dragged along with him. Saturninus' lust for Tamora transforms the once happy Rome into hell. Paris and Troilus both allow their respective domains – the collective and the individual – to fall into the chaos of “wars and lechery,” and the cruel demigod Angelo's entire world is dragged into the dark prison as he himself falls prey to lust. Claudius, the devilish usurper, has transformed the apparently once garden-like Denmark into a dark, infernal place, as Macbeth has done to Scotland. Both usurping tyrants continue to drag their domains downwards, into the apparently bottomless abyss of hell.

This, paradoxically, carries a pro-cosmic message: this world is not in itself already as bad as it can be. It can always be worse, and we can always fall downwards still, which can apparently transpire to be good news, as we can then also rise and improve our worlds. This is not the only good news that the hero can find in the dark hell of unformed prime matter when he finally comes face to face with it – as will be seen in the next chapter.

Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds

(Titus Andronicus, II. iii. 96)

8.0. NOTHING

In the Neoplatonic interpretation of the myth, Narcissus finally tragically drowns in the watery realm of unformed chaotic matter towards which the insidious beauty of his reflection has lured him. Masculine spirit can thus descend to the very bottom of feminine prime matter and find in it nothing other than hell. That hell is no more – or less – than being banished into the realm of the unformed elements was a common tenet of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and advocated most famously by Paracelsus. (Wain 1968: 284)

This is, quite possibly, the hell that *Macbeth* is set in. The answer to J. Dover Wilson's question "Where does *Macbeth* open, on earth or in hell?" (Wilson 1933: 32) can thus also be "neither." Neoplatonic hell is not a place one visits after death, but a state one may find oneself in at any point in the life of one's eternal soul – the dreadful state of the spirit sunken to the very dregs of the universe. As W. A. Murray argues in his "Why was Duncan's Blood Golden?" Lady Macbeth belongs to this "darkness of hell, to the sightless world of the elements" that the witches inhabit, and their combined efforts finally drag Macbeth and his entire domain down there as well. (Wain 1968: 284)

As has been seen, the tyrant's domain is very commonly represented as a hell in Shakespeare, simply inviting anti-cosmic interpretations invoking the figure of the "prince of this world." If we look closely at the usual usurper's career, however, he is typically revealed as a fallen potential hero (rather than the archetypically evil ruler of the

world) and his domain has fallen along with him (not originally being hellish at all). As Anne says to Richard III, “thou hast made the happy earth thy hell.” (*Richard III*, I. ii. 51)

Macbeth only usurps and falls because of the joint temptations of the four witches (his wife included). The *real* villain of the tragedy – and the *real* ruler of the infernal domain – is thus none other than Hecate.

8.1. BUT TO THE MATTER: MY MOTHER. HECATE AS QUEEN OF THE WORLD

To mangle the notorious benignly sexist dictum, behind every usurping tyrant there is a Hecate, a “manly” witch, representing indomitable dark matter, from whom his power is truly derived. Lady Macbeth and the three witches, led by Hecate, govern Macbeth, and Lear’s evil daughters rule over their husbands and the entire hellish domain.

Hamlet’s “O most pernicious woman!” precedes his “O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!” (*Hamlet*, I. v. 105-106) and he is far quicker to judge his mother than his “uncle-father.” Claudius derives his power from Gertrude even in practical legal terms – according to the law extant in Shakespeare’s England, the marriage of a widow to her late husband’s brother sufficed to threaten the son’s inheritance claim (Jardine 2005: 39) – and we can safely surmise that Claudius’ power originates in Gertrude. He himself freely confesses that the queen

is so [conjunctive] to my life and soul,
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her.
(*Hamlet*, IV. viii. 14-16)

Saturninus is similarly entranced by the infernal Tamora to the degree that it becomes apparent it is her will that rules Rome. When she says “Where is my lord the King?” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 259) she only stresses that she is the real mistress of this hellish world.

Hecate also makes an appearance in *The Tempest* – if only in the reminiscences of its characters. The “foul witch” Sycorax, decidedly carnal and material in imagery, is brought pregnant to the island, where she reigns supreme over the entire realm, except Ariel,

a spirit too delicate

To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands.

(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 272-273)

Her son, Caliban – “Thou earth” as called by Prospero – claims the island is his “by Sycorax my mother,” and he may well be right. The material, “earthy” domain to which Prospero has been exiled rightfully belongs to Sycorax the witch, and the magus can only with great difficulty tame it and bring it under his rational and spiritual control.

The male heroes and anti-heroes of the tragedies have no such luck, as they are unable or unwilling to resist the allure of Hecate. The Queen of Hell is revealed as the real tyrant of Shakespeare’s tyrannical regimes, and the usurping “prince of this world” is merely her consort, governed by her. We empathize with Saturninus, Macbeth, and Claudius, and easily condemn Tamora, Lady Macbeth, and even poor old Gertrude.

Hecate, queen of the daimons and first among the witches, personifying all the powers of lower nature, is, interestingly enough, in Neoplatonic thought firmly *identified* with matter itself. Shaw explicitly elucidates that, for Neoplatonists, Hecate does not merely preside over matter or have a symbolic association with matter – she *is* matter. (Shaw 1995: 41)

The infernal feminine of Neoplatonism thus does not only lead to and govern this dark realm, she is identified with it. Unlike the female anagogic figures that merely mirror or reflect the pristine purity of spirit they lead their male adorers towards, the seductress causing a male hero’s fall is also the place to which he falls. She is the thing itself, and the thing itself is a nothing – a void.



Hecate: Procession to a Witches' Sabbath (17th century) by de Ribera

8.2. O: FACING THE “OOMB”

Several critics have noticed the significance of what Berry, perhaps most illuminatingly, terms “Shakespeare’s tragic ‘O’s.” Shakespeare’s O’s, she notes, frequently appearing in conjunction with his lethal and whorish queens/queans, elide these infernal female figures with “bodily openings or dilations that are similarly amoral,” connecting the “gynaphobic” with the “reginaphobic” strand in his tragedies. (Berry 2002: 50) The O with which heroes defeated by the infernal feminine figures die on their lips is simultaneously the O of the vaginal orifice, but it is also the womb/tomb – Joyce’s brilliantly coined “oomb” – of Mother Earth, the O of dark feminine prime matter to which every descent ultimately leads.

The first – and also the most elaborate and explicit – appearance of an actual O on Shakespeare’s stage is Tamora’s infernal pit, with which the dark queen of Rome is identified in multiple ways. She is the first to mention it, and does a fair job of describing both its surroundings and the hole itself:

A barren detested vale you see it is,
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,
Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe;

Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds,
Unless the mighty owl or fatal raven;
And when they show'd me this abhorred pit,
They told me, here, at dead time of the night,
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,
Would make such fearful and confused cries,
As any mortal body hearing it
Should straight fall mad, or else die suddenly.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 93-104)

The pit is a fascinating amalgam of the monstrously sterile (barren vale) and the monstrously fertile (hissing snakes and swelling toads) and thus clearly represents matter itself. The delicious ambiguity of “here nothing breeds” must be especially emphasized, as it can denote both the utter sterility and the uber-fertility of the nothingness of misshapen dark prime matter, untouched by the forming, life-infusing sun.

Attributes are added to the image of the pit when Martius falls into it, and Quintus eloquently muses on it before attempting to aid his brother:

What, art thou fallen? What subtile hole is this,
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood
As fresh as morning dew distill'd on flowers?
A vey fatal place it seems to me.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 198-202)

Gordon Williams classifies the circular hole of Tamora's pit under “O” in his *Glossary of Shakespeare's sexual language* and explains both as meaning “vagina,” elucidating that “briars” were a common appellation for pubic hair. (Williams G. 1997) O as the vagina is also “the swallowing womb” of “this deep pit, poor Bassianus' grave.” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 239-240) The womb is, of course, simultaneously the tomb.

This tomb is also a mouth that devours all: the “detested, dark, blood-drinking pit” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 224) and “this fell devouring receptacle” which is as “hateful as [Cocytus’] misty mouth.” (*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 235-236) Hades represented as a “hell-mouth,” equipped to emit smoke, it should be noted here, was a standard stage-property of Renaissance theater. The devouring “receptacle” – a word reminiscent of Plato’s term for the matrix of the world – is also hell, another term for vagina; and thus the circle of O closes.

Kahn explains that Tamora’s explicit

self-association with hell is more than conventional, given the imagery of the pit that connects hell not only with female sexuality (a connection ubiquitous in the Shakespearean canon as well) but more specifically [...] with the malign fecundity of the maternal womb. (Kahn 2002: 69)

The O of the vagina, womb, and tomb is finally, Berry notes, “the O of Tamora’s gaping mouth, when she devours her own children.” (Berry 2002: 139)

Romeo’s own descent into the O of Juliet’s grave shows a similar over-elaborate elision of the gaping devouring mouth with the womb and the tomb of earth:

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,
Gorg’d with the dearest morsel of the earth,
Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,
And in despite I’ll cram thee with more food.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, V. iii. 45-48)

In *Macbeth*, the witches significantly prepare their “hell-broth” in an O-shaped cauldron, and its ingredients should make it clear that we have now descended to the very bottom of the universe. Being bits and body parts of mostly formless, slimy animals like toads, lizards, and snakes, they plainly indicate primordial matter – chaotic, disordered, and disgusting. An especially intriguing addition to the mix is a

Finger of birth-strangled babe

Ditch-deliver'd by a drab.
(*Macbeth*, IV. i. 30-31)

This links women as whores and mothers with witches as women suspended between the two, proliferating nothing but dead misshapen matter. Hecate is understandably pleased.

Othello descends in his mind into the O he believes Desdemona to be: a “subtile whore” and a “closet lock and key of villainous secrets.” (*Othello*, IV. ii. 21-22) A woman’s closet, as her most intimate chamber where she is likely to entertain lovers, (Jardine 2005: 148) is linked in imagery with every facet of what Shakespeare’s O represents, an association reinforced in Othello’s accusation aimed at Emilia of having “the office opposite to Saint Peter” and keeping “the gate of hell.” (*Othello*, IV. ii. 91-92) Presumably, as she has allowed lovers into Desdemona’s closet – and thus into her vagina as well – Emilia is cast in the role of the hell porter.

Lear similarly descends in his mind into this vaginal hell or feminine prime matter:

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiends’: there’s hell, there’s darkness,
There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!
(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 126-129)

Muir warns against interpreting this disgust as “Shakespeare’s own revulsion against sexuality” as it may have been suggested by Harsnett’s account of the exorcists’ pretence that Sara Williams was, during menstruation, possessed with a devil “in a peculiar part of the body,” “in the inferior parts,” and “in the most secret part of my body.” It must be noted, however, that the vocabulary used here is quite rational and mild. Harsnett, as Muir has argued, does indeed mention evocative phrases such as “filthy fumes,” “the bottomlesse pit of hell,” “scalded,” “thicke smoake & vapour of hell,” “brimstone,” “vgly blackness, smoake, scorching, boyling and heate,” (Muir 1956: 160) but in a completely separate context, fully unconnected with women’s sexual organs. This would in fact

prove that it is Shakespeare (or, at any rate, Lear) who makes the connection between the dark, sulphurous pit of hell and women's genitals, and not Harsnett, or Jesuit exorcists, or poor misguided Sara.

Timon suffers a parallel plunge into a feminine gynecological hell:

Common mother, thou
Whose womb unmeasurable and infinite breast
Teems and feeds all; whose self-same mettle
Whereof thy proud child (arrogant man) is puff'd,
Engenders the black toad and adder blue,
The gilded newt and eyeless venom'd worm,
With all th' abhorred births below crisp heaven
Whereon Hyperion's quick'ning fire doth shine:
[...]
Ensear thy fertile and conceptious womb,
Let it no more bring out ingrateful man!
Go great with tigers, dragons, wolves, and bears,
Teems with new monsters, whom thy upward face
Hath to the marbled mansion all above
Never presented!

(*Timon of Athens*, IV. iii.177-192)

Burgess notices that *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* were written roughly at the same time and have in common a strong, seemingly unwarranted revulsion at womanhood and sexuality. Timon, in his apt phrase, has a "gratuitous venereal obsession," and Lear "finds in sex a symbol of the hell he wishes on the whole world." Burgess argues that both Lear and Timon "go beyond simple dramatic necessity in invoking woman as the source of degradation and disease" and surmises that if "Shakespeare was ill with something other than overwork, that something was venereal disease." (Burgess 1970: 197-199)

Although personal experience with venereal disease can certainly cause one to become more puritanical, invoking woman – or, rather, infernal feminine prime matter located in and identified with female sexual organs – as the source of degradation and disease hardly necessitates contracting syphilis. Neoplatonism will suffice. Lear and Timon rage at female sexuality because they have descended into the bottom of their universes’ O’s, and are there faced with this prime matter, which they rightly (according to Neoplatonists of all persuasions) see as the root of all that is rotten.

The O of infernal prime matter was often quite literal, tangible, and visible on Shakespeare’s stage. Its role was played by the trap on the stage, a standard theatrical property. As Kinney explains:

The trap in the middle of the stage, in the *platea*, serves the gravediggers in *Hamlet* as they dig in unsacred ground and find Yorick’s skull [...]. It is the pit in *Titus Andronicus* into which Bassianus’ body is thrown and where Quintus and Martius fall, smearing themselves in his blood and thus appearing guilty of his death (2.3). It is also, most commonly, infernal. Joan de Pucell’s familiar spirits are “culled Out of the powerful regions under earth” (1 *Henry VI*, 5.3.10-11); it is where the spirit rising for Mother Jordan the witch is commanded by Bolingbroke to “Descend to darkness and the burning lake!” (1 *Henry VI*, 1.4.39). This may be why the trap seems so fitting a place for Malvolio and why Feste thinks of exorcism as the way of bringing him back onstage. But ghosts may issue from the trap, too [...] Hamlet’s father seems doomed to remain in the trap as one who “*cries under the stage*” (1.5). [...] But it is used most frequently by the weird sisters in *Macbeth*, who enter and exit by it. (Kinney 2003: 22)

From it emerge the deceiving liars, demons, witches, and, interestingly enough, Old Hamlet. Iamblichus’ warning that “from the hollows of the earth leap chthonian dogs (i.e., daimons), who never show a true sign to a mortal” (Shaw 1995: 41) is strangely appropriate here.

A hero can also actively descend into an O as part of a daring exploratory feat. Part of Hamlet’s timeless allure may stem from the fact that his adventurous dealings with matter appear voluntary and that his descent seems to leave him relatively unsullied. He does not fall into the abyss of matter owing to, say, inordinate lust – he plunges in because he feels it his duty to investigate what is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Hamlet in fact undergoes not one, but *three* separate descents into three separate O's analogous with the three faces of the Triple Goddess: the virgin, the mother, and the queen of the underworld.

His first encounter is with the virgin. When he intrudes in Ophelia's closet, her private chambers, "all unbrac'd," he has entered his first O. He renounces her along with all "baser matter," but has still to solve the riddle. Ophelia, though she belongs to the female sex, is not the source of all corruption in Denmark, and ridding himself of her resolves little. As Showalter notes, Hamlet's "fixation with "matter" [...] increasingly takes on the moralised burden of the maternal body." Shakespeare swiftly moves from the "country matters" of Hamlet's banter with Ophelia to a

more intricate pun on mother/matter, *mater* (Latin for "mother") still providing the root of the word *maternity*: "My wit's diseased ... as you say, my mother. Therefore no more, but to the matter. My mother, you say ... / O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother!" (III. ii. 303-310) Weighted with the hierarchical sexual biology of Aristotelian embryological theory, which defined the female contribution to conception and gestation as gross "matter" acted upon by the masculine motive principle of generation, Hamlet's imaginative penetration into the anatomical reaches of the womb turns it into the origin of the "corruption" which plagues the state. (Laoutaris 2008: 65)

Hamlet's second plunge is into the O of his mother's closet – the place Berry refers to, in Lacanian terms, as the "hollow phallus of the mother." (Berry 2003: 79) Line lucidly observes that Hamlet asks "Now, mother, what's the matter?" (Hamlet, III. iv. 7) on "entering the womb-like cavern of her closet to look into the face of his own substance." (Line 2004: 129) For in Gertrude's private chamber, Hamlet is faced with his material origins. The presence of dead Polonius in Gertrude's closet, much like that of dead Bassanius in Tamora's pit, is no accident. What Hamlet discovers in the O of the mother is dead, bloody, maternal, menstrual matter that is at the basis of his mortal body. Screaming insults at her, however, does not solve his quandary, as the originating source of all rotteness lies elsewhere.

The O that Hamlet faces last is the gaping hole of Ophelia's grave. Dug in unhallowed ground and spewing forth a medley of skulls and bones, it is eerily

reminiscent of the witches' hell-broth, and similarly comprises chaotic, disgusting dead matter. Hamlet has discovered the womb/tomb of Mother Earth, the very bottom of the universe where the hell of prime matter lies, and the real culprit for all chaos, rottenness, and death. He muses on human mortality and the volatility of the earthy matter that even great kings were made of:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
O that that earth which kept the world in awe
Should patch a wall t'expel the [winter's] flaw!
(*Hamlet*, V. i. 208-216)

Ophelia's grave, significantly, spits forth the skull of Hamlet's beloved jester Yorick, who, in Rutter's interpretation, comes to speak for her one last time:

Bizarrely, proleptically, Yorick is Ophelia's double, for "to this favour she must come." The skull makes the audience face up to death's horrors in a materially specific way that Hamlet's philosophizing has managed to avoid. Death, the prince learns from Yorick, stinks. The jester is a substitute who grounds ghastliness, displacing it from Ophelia *now*, for, newly-dead, her corpse still registers her sweetness, while casting imagination forward to Ophelia *then*, in the grave, "instant old," no longer even a body but rotten flesh and jumbled bones. The words Hamlet puts into Yorick's mouth let Ophelia, strangely, speak for the last time – "to this favour she must come." (Rutter 2001: 41)

However, when Hamlet instructs Yorick's skull "Now get you to my lady's [chamber], and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that," (*Hamlet*, V. i. 192-195) we are not necessarily certain which lady Hamlet has in mind. He has been to both his ladies' chambers and ascertained that both Gertrude and Ophelia are feminine dead matter that is mere bait and not to be trusted. "My lady"

can, in fact, be *any* lady: a woman luring her lover towards carnality; a mother trapping her child in a mortal body; or Mother Earth, the dead matter from which it is made merely being painted over with a pleasing shape. Hamlet seems to be echoing Plotinus' sentiment that the material world (and any beautiful body in it) remains forever but a "corpse adorned." (*Enn.*, II.4.5.18, cited in Allen 2002: 79)

Yorick also serves as a surrogate for Hamlet's deceased father – and certainly appears in his memories as more of a true father figure than the late king ever does. Old Hamlet's still fresh grave is, interestingly enough, never visited in the course of Act V, but he is briefly remembered by the gravedigger, who significantly began his career on the day of the late king's victory over Old Norway. Even more significantly, the gravedigger started digging on the very day when Hamlet was born. A more chilling *memento mori* specifically meant for Hamlet would be hard to devise. The two events are actually linked in the graveyard scene as Hamlet contemplates the death of his father, his own impending death, and the end of his line. There is no grandson following Old Hamlet's death that would be heir to his conquest – just like there was, sadly, no grandson following John Shakespeare's death – either recent or impending at the time *Hamlet* was written. (Welsh 2001: 36-37)

Ophelia, who might have been Hamlet's true earthly Venus, his unear'd womb to produce his sons and his bodily immortality, is discarded as "baser matter" and "good kissing carrion," and fittingly thrown into the gaping O in the middle of the stage – and Hamlet leaps in after her, daring the pit to devour him, much as does Romeo. The pit finally does devour all. The Ghost proves to have been her consort, doing her bidding and at last bringing death upon everyone. She wins, as does every O that opens in the tragedies, and there is no escaping this Charybdis.

8.2.1. MOTHER, WHAT'S THE MATTER? MOTHER (EN)MATTERS

Jacqueline Rose, replying in her "Sexuality in the reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*" to Eliot's notorious judgment that Hamlet's "mother is not an adequate equivalent" for his disgust, which "envelops and exceeds her," (Eliot 1920) issues a bold statement. Reversing Eliot's argument, she suggests that, rather than

attacking the very existence of something “inscrutable, unmanageable or even horrible,” one should instead question “an aesthetic theory which will only allow into its definition what can be controlled or managed by art” – such as was Eliot’s (although in practice he certainly had his share of excessively disgusted and horrified moments). Rose finds that the true object of horror and disgust in *Hamlet* is “nothing other than femininity itself.” (Drakakis 2002: 103) Given that femininity is in the entire tradition of Western dualistic thought identified with maternity and materiality, and matter is seen as the root of all evil, Hamlet’s disgust seems only natural.

The view that the mother provides only base menstrual matter in procreation while the father provides the spiritual form was expounded by Plato, elaborated by Aristotle, and even propounded by the likes of Aquinas. All-pervasive before the discovery of the ovum, (Allen, Prudence 1997) it was demonstrably held by Shakespeare. Helen herself warns a potential husband:

You are too young, too happy, and too good,
To make yourself a son out of my blood.
(*All’s Well That Ends Well*, II. iii. 96-97)

Sebastian likewise explicates this distinctly dualistic view in *Twelfth Night*:

A spirit I am indeed,
But am in that dimension grossly clad
Which from the womb I did participate.
(*Twelfth Night*, V. i. 236-238)

The mother does not merely make us material; she also makes us mortal, as without embodiment, we could have happily remained pure eternal spirits. As Janet Adelman explains:

The mother’s body brings death into the world because her body itself is death: in the traditional alignment of spirit and matter, the mother gives us the stuff – the female

matter – of our bodies and thus our mortality. (Adelman 1992: 27, cited in Armstrong P. 2006: 185)

This “traditional alignment” which harks from Plato and Neoplatonism necessitates Hamlet’s and other tragic heroes’ realization that maternal matter makes us mortal and that vulgar/mortal Venus creates us only to destroy us.

This is at the root of the persistent and sinister association between motherhood and mortality, between mothering and murdering, between womb and tomb. It appears in Cleopatra’s disturbing oath made to Antony:

The next Caesarion [smite],
Till by degrees the memory of my womb [...]
Lie graveless.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, III. xiii. 162-166)

It varies from Romeo’s “womb of death” aimed at Juliet’s tomb through Friar Lawrence’s jovial and casual “The earth that’s nature’s mother is her tomb” to Rosse’s lament that Scotland can no longer be “call’d our mother, but our grave” (*Macbeth*, IV. iii. 166) which seems on the surface to have little to do with metaphysical issues. That the enmattering mother is also a murderess plainly follows from the dualistic logic of Neoplatonism, and finds many expressions in Shakespeare’s work.

Cases in point are the disturbing images of breastfeeding portraying a helpless male child in danger of bloody violence perpetrated by the mother. Lady Macbeth notoriously threatens her perhaps imaginary infant:

I have given suck, and know
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out.
(*Macbeth*, I. vii. 54-58)

Volumnia's threat to her own son is perhaps less direct but no less disturbing:

The breasts of Hecuba,
When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood
At Grecian sword.
(*Coriolanus*, I. iii. 40-43)

She finally manages to effect Coriolanus' death by equating her womb with Rome as his native land:

thou shalt no sooner
March to assault thy country than to tread
[...] on thy mother's womb
That brought thee to this world.
(*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 122-125)

For Coriolanus, Rome is the monstrous multitude which desires his bloody wounds – much like his mother does. The multitude, elsewhere associated with chaotic lower matter, is here explicitly linked with the mother's womb. The many-headed monster that finally overwhelms Coriolanus certainly also comprises his mother, as well as the two mutually indistinguishable multitudes – the Roman and the Volscian – that offer to destroy him at differing points in time. Defeating her son, this monstrous maternal O will devour him:

O mother, mother!
[...] O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son
[...] most mortal to him.

(*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 185-189)

Rome and Volumnia are thus one – the mother that here metaphorically eats her young. Timon is even more explicitly being eaten by the multitude of Athens. As Apemantus notices, “what a number of men eats Timon, and he sees ‘em not!” (*Timon of Athens*, I. ii. 39-40) Tamora is *literally* a mother that eats her young, as Titus uses deception to force her to “like to the earth swallow her own increase.” (*Titus Andronicus*, V. ii. 191)

The womb tomb that eats her own young is not Shakespeare’s invention nor is it without precedent. In Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Errorr’s misshapen offspring crawl around her in the darkness, but

Soone as that uncouth light upon them shone,
Into her mouth they crept, and suddain all were gone.
(Spenser, *Faerie Queene*)

This is simply what the O of maternal prime matter does in Neoplatonic dualism.

8.2.2. NOTHING OF WOMAN: MOTHERFREE

It is understandable – given the usual attributes coupled with maternal materiality in Renaissance Neoplatonism – that so many Shakespeare’s heroes attempt to evade any association with the feminine. Before her death, as Cleopatra grows determined and “marble-constant,” she feels impelled to claim:

I have nothing
Of woman in me.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 238-239)

Renouncing her femininity apparently allows Cleopatra to assume a masculine fixity of spirit. The statement can also be read as a humorous aside of the boy actor playing

Cleopatra's role, who truly would have been granted the liberty to claim to have nothing of woman in him.

"Nothing of woman" can, however, also be linked with the desire that some heroes have to break free from the maternal body in which they were tragically enmattered and thus to *not have anything* of woman in them. I would like to term this an aspiration to be "motherfree" – adding the suffix which is used to denote a "lack" that is seen as positive and advantageous.¹³ If we remember, Ficino's "heavenly Venus" is said to have been born without a mother, which makes her a stranger to matter, and thus exalted and free.

To be of woman born is a heavy burden to bear and makes one vulnerable to all that flesh is heir to: pain, illness, death, and worst of all – lust. When the puritanical boy rejects her advances, Vulgar Venus asks Adonis:

Art thou a woman's son and canst not feel
What 'tis to love, how want of love tormenteth?
(*Venus and Adonis*, 201-202)

She scolds him that he is a "Thing like a man, but of no woman bred!" (*Venus and Adonis*, 214) A similar sentiment is found in Sonnet 41:

And when a woman woos, what woman's son
Will sourly leave her till [she] have prevailed?
(Sonnet 41, 7-8)

Freedom from being born to a mother is freedom from lust and entanglements with women – which does not seem like a bad thing at all in the Neoplatonic value system.

Being motherfree carries other privileges as well. In a vision provided by the witches, a bloody child tells Macbeth that

¹³ Note the use of the suffix "-free" in the name for the Childfree movement – the movement of happily and intentionally "childless" individuals and couples.

none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.
(*Macbeth*, IV. i. 80-81)

What Macbeth does not immediately realize is that he will indeed be harmed – only by someone not “of woman born.” The bloody child anticipates Macduff, who, “untimely ripp’d” from his mother’s womb, and thus free from the maternal body, can slay Macbeth and carry a victory over Hecate. To be motherfree is to be virtuous, valiant, truly masculine, and impervious to the evil effects of matter. Posthumus (also “ripp’d” from his mother) asserts that

There’s no motion
That tends to vice in man, but I affirm
It is the woman’s part.
(*Cymbeline*, II. v. 20-22)

Minimizing “the woman’s part” in a child maximizes the chances that the child will be a decent and virtuous human being. Leontes is glad that Hermione did not nurse the boy, as she already has “too much blood in him.” Mother’s milk, as the contemporary physician John Sadler insists, it should be noted here, “is nothing but the monstrous blood made whitte in the breasts.” (Laoutaris 2008: 171)

8.2.3. MORTAL VENUS IS IMMORTAL (THE LADIES HAVE PREVAIL’D)

Would-be motherfree heroes may sometimes attempt to sever their associations with maternal matter in somewhat violent ways. Coriolanus faces this chaotic substance in “the mutable, rank-scented meiny” which, according to him, is a Hydra and a monster – the beast with many heads. (*Coriolanus*, III. i. 66-71) He “banishes” the maternal material multitude:

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek a' th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air – I banish you!
(*Coriolanus*, III. iii. 120-123)

It is this maternal material monster that he attempts to escape when he “elopes” into Aufidius’ open arms – much like Othello does with Iago.

However, there is really no banishing or escaping one’s feminine basis and origins. The triple goddess, who reigns over matter, will usually win in Shakespeare’s darker plays. It might be useful to remember here that the triple goddess – part of the Neoplatonic tradition – was comprised of three goddesses: infernal Persephone/Hecate, benevolent maternal nature represented by Demeter/Ceres, and Artemis/Diana, the virgin goddess of the new moon. (Line 2004: 28)

It is precisely this trio of goddesses that appears before Coriolanus and assures him that resistance is futile and that he cannot destroy or escape the maternal womb and the monstrous multitude of his native Rome: Volumnia, “the most noble mother in the world” – and the sinister manly witch who is fooling no one, Virgilia, the benign young wife and mother, and the utterly gratuitous virgin Valeria – clearly there only to complete the triple goddess in the most clichéd way imaginable –

The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle
That’s curdied by the frost from purest snow
And hangs on Dian’s temple.
(*Coriolanus*, V. iii. 65-67).

“The ladies have prevail’d,” (*Coriolanus*, V. iv. 40) the news goes, and when the three ladies enter Rome triumphantly, a Senator exclaims “Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!” (*Coriolanus*, V. v. 1) For all the talk of virtue and virility, Rome in effect worships – and is apparently ruled by – the triple goddess, and Coriolanus does not stand a chance against her. He belongs to her.

For Coriolanus is “a thing of blood.” Frequently covered in blood, he may superficially resemble in imagery the “bloody man”/“bloody child” of *Macbeth*. The “bloody child” in *Macbeth* – bloody because he has been “ripp’d” from his mother’s womb – indicates, however, a radical cut from the mother, being motherfree and thus free from matter as well: Macduff, free from the materiality of the maternal body, can slay Hecate’s consort Macbeth. Coriolanus, on the other hand, who “from face to foot” is “a thing of blood,” (*Coriolanus*, II. ii. 108-109) is entirely his mother’s, a part of her body, constantly returning to it, struggling to be born and separated, and will be reabsorbed by her when he is devoured by the multitude.

The ladies have similarly prevail’d against Bertram in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. The triple goddess tricks him after he has attempted to renounce women, and he is finally faced with a trio of women: the pure virgin Dian, the pregnant mother Helen, and the old Widow, who demonstrate to him that he cannot flee materiality and that he is indeed already trapped in it.

8.2.4. NOTHING OF WOMAN: O = 0

There is yet another way in which to interpret Cleopatra’s assertion that she has “nothing of woman” in her. In most Neoplatonic thought, prime matter is viewed as privation – and thus literally *nothing*. (Allen 2002: 75-76) Therefore, whoever is meant to be saying this – however “constant” Cleopatra is and however male-bodied the boy actor is – neither can escape the fact that they were enmattered in their mothers’ wombs and that they consequently have in them the nothing of prime matter that is at the basis of every living human being. We all have, according to Neoplatonists, the *nothing* of woman in us, the nothing of maternal mortal matter we inherited from our mothers. This enables Hamlet to play with his eerie rhymes and claim that

The King is a thing -

Guildestern: A thing, my lord?

Hamlet: Of nothing, bring me to him.

(*Hamlet*, IV. i. 27-30)

It is irrelevant here which king Hamlet has in mind, as the (still) living king is, just as much as the dead one, a thing of nothing, made of the nothingness of matter.

The fact that Neoplatonism so often equated prime matter with privation, the void, nothingness itself, solidifies the meanings associated with “Shakespeare’s tragic O’s” and adds to them. “O,” “nothing,” and “hell” are all things an Elizabethan might use to refer to female genitals; they can also, significantly, denote feminine maternal matter. The void of O is the womb we are enmattered in and the tomb we will be devoured by in death.

Showalter declares in her “Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism” that Ophelia, consistently with the customary representations of femininity, is “certainly a creature of lack.” “I think nothing, my lord,” she says in the Mousetrap scene, to which he retorts:

Hamlet: That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.

Ophelia: What is, my lord?

Hamlet: Nothing.

(*Hamlet*, III. ii. 117–19)

Showalter notes that in Elizabethan slang “nothing” was a term for the vagina, but that its meanings are further proliferated in a distinctly feminine paradigm. To Hamlet, she explains,

“nothing” is what lies between maids’ legs, for, in the male visual system of representation and desire, women’s sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, “represent the horror of having nothing to see.” When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that “Her speech is nothing,” mere “unshaped use.” Ophelia’s speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia’s story becomes the Story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality. (Parker/Hartman 2005: 78-79)

The nothing of the vagina and the nothing of the chaotic, irrational incoherence of feminine madness are both ultimately the nothing of unformed prime matter.

“Nothing” is thus deservedly the crucial key word of the tragedies – the original problem, the posed question, the stumbling block, but also the usually unsatisfactory solution. All the “ocular proof” and “auricular evidence” that the tragedies ultimately give in response to the probing questions of the neurotic male heroes can boil down to “nothing” – the nothing of dark, unformed prime matter.

The apparently widespread contemporary notion that “prime matter” could fully be equated with “nothing” is attributable to one of the bolder moves in the history of ideas, occurring right around Shakespeare’s time as part of an effort to reconcile traditional monotheistic religions with the increasingly popular dualistic ideas spreading as part of the package of Renaissance Neoplatonism.

The entire subject of the origin of the cosmos was rife with controversy in Shakespeare’s time and there was an ongoing debate between the so-called pagan prima-materialists and the Christian ex-nihilists. Plato and Aristotle unproblematically claimed that the cosmos was created from chaotic prime matter in a culture whose creation myths shared the same narrative. However, adherents of the Judeo-Christian tradition had to see the very notion of prime matter as heretical because it directly contradicted the Biblical doctrine of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This notion was, nonetheless, being heartily espoused by learned people who read Plato and Aristotle, and with increasing frequency.

William R. Elton cites in his informative “*Deus Absconditus: Lear*” some of the arguments that Christian authors used to denounce the pagan notion of prime matter. Some of these belie a great deal of anxiety, as the arguments of pagan philosophers seemed to make quite a bit of logical sense. Mutian categorically announces: “We leave behind the entelechy of Aristotle and the ideas of Plato. God created all things from nothing.” Montaigne sees the reasoning that “Because nothing is made of nothing: God was not able to frame the world without matter” as proof of the vanity of feeble human understanding, and Robert Parsons similarly exalts the doctrine of ex-nihilism as “high and hidden doctrine,” beyond the merely human capacity of comprehension. A contemporary of Shakespeare’s, R. B., Esquire, prays to God in *The Difference betwene the Auncient Phisicke and the Latter Phisicke* (1585) to “teach, ayd, & assist thy servants

against the heathnish and false Philosophie of Aristotle, which teacheth” that “of nothyng, nothyng can be made.” (Bloom *Lear* 2008: 252) Apparently, this was a hot and anxiety-inducing issue.

A potential solution was long before offered by the early Neoplatonists – who, not being bound by the Torah, needed no such solution. According to Plotinus, as paraphrased by Allen, “matter, even when informed, retains its ontological status as anti-substantial, evil privation.” (Allen 2002: 79) This solution was then embraced by some of the dualists who wished to hold on to at least part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Gnostics saw the cosmos as formed from dark prime matter by the blundering Demiurge – very differently than the Jews and the Christians. This matter, however, resulted from the shadow cast by the curtain separating the realm of light from Sophia’s prideful creation. The substance of matter is, thus, nothing but shadow, which is nothing other than the absence of light – which is *nothing*. Cabalists – notably Maimonides – similarly took the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* very seriously, but saw this “nothing” as the abyss of prime matter that was within En Sof and has since been continuously being overcome in creation. (Armstrong 2007: 149)

Christian Neoplatonists in the Renaissance, faced with a similar problem, adopted a similar solution. The brilliant, if audacious turn in contemporary thought connecting and reconciling the debating parties – the traditionally and “naïvely” monotheistic with the popularly and “scientifically” dualistic – appears to have originated in the mind of the mathematician Thomas Harriot, Raleigh’s protégé, member of the mythical School of Night, and probably an acquaintance of Shakespeare’s. According to Aubrey, at one point, Harriot did not value “the old storie of the Creation of the World. He could not beleve the old position; he would say *ex nihilo nihil fit*.” (Bloom *Lear* 2008: 254) However, in his writings there is also a marginal note that states: “*Ex nihilo nihil fit; sed omnia fint ex nihilo*” – out of nothing nothing is made; yet everything is made out of nothing. (Turner 1999: 35) This seemingly paradoxical addendum to Aristotle’s insufficiently imaginative dictum in effect reconciles the “pagan prima-materialists” with the “Christian ex-nihilists” in the Christian Neoplatonic vision of the cosmos fashioned from the “nothing” – the void, the O/0 – that *is* prime matter.

For the womblike and vaginally suggestive “nothing” – the O – of feminine matter is simultaneously the absolute nothing – the 0 – that prime matter is. As Frederick Turner reveals in his brilliant *Shakespeare’s Twenty-First-Century Economics: The Morality of Love and Money*, despite centuries of previous contact between the Arab world and Europe, the zero only made its way into Christendom in the fourteenth century, and “it was only in Shakespeare’s time that its full power as a concept and as a source of mathematical ideas began to be realized.” Lear’s Fool is obviously fascinated by its ramifications:

When Lear’s Fool wants to find the ultimate description of the nonexistence to which Lear has reduced himself by giving away his kingdom, he says to his master: “Now thou art an O without a figure” (*King Lear*, I. iv. 193). What he means is that if Lear had a figure or digit, say 8 or 2 or 5, followed by a zero (an “O”), then he would have eighty or twenty or fifty; but as it is, he has only the zero, he has nothing. Or rather, is nothing. There is something utterly chilling about this image; the Fool is insisting on a meaning for zero that is not simply as a conventional placeholding sign to signify tens or hundreds or thousands, but the mysterious void itself. (Turner 1999: 36)

This is what Lear encounters in the stormy wilderness: the void of prime matter as the basis of the cosmos and his own frail body – and this is what he has been reduced to. Gloucester lucidly observes, on seeing Lear mad:

O ruin’d piece of nature! This great world
Shall so wear out to nought.
(*King Lear*, IV. vi. 134-135)

Lear is here compared to the cosmos, and both will, without the forming spirit, eventually revert to the “nought” – the zero – of chaotic, unformed matter. The abdicated king is being schooled in the paradoxical cosmogony and cosmology of Christian Neoplatonism, which is at variance both with the naïve-sounding traditional monism of *creatio ex nihilo* and with the popular scientific-seeming but unimaginative materialism of Aristotle’s *ex nihilo nihil fit* which Hobbes dryly explicates “because nothing, however it be multiplied,

will for ever be nothing.” (Bloom *Lear* 2008: 254) Apparently, Lear is initially a staunch follower of Aristotle and Hobbes, as can be seen in his opening dispute with Cordelia, who has “nothing” to offer him:

Lear: what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.

(*King Lear*, I. i. 85-89)

Conversely, Lear is able to say to Goneril when Regan only allows him to keep twenty-five retainers:

Your fifty yet doth double five and twenty,

And thou art twice her love.

(*King Lear*, II. iv. 268-269)

Both their “loves” will eventually “wear out to nought” – deflate to zero – as neither daughter will ultimately allow him a single servant. An O/0 without a figure, however it be multiplied, remains nothing. The characters heavily associated with lower matter – Edmund, Goneril, and Regan – will, attempting to multiply their material possessions (which are in themselves nothing, as matter is nothing) predictably end up with nothing.

In contrast, the less materialistic characters – Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, Gloucester, and Lear – are all more or less voluntarily reduced to nothing/0 in the course of the play. Cordelia has “nothing” to offer both to her father and her new husband. Edgar becomes poor Tom, a “poor, bare, fork’d animal,” “the thing itself,” realizing that “Edgar I nothing am.” (*King Lear*, II. iii. 21) Kent is put in the stocks for serving the King, and Gloucester is blinded and leaps into the abyss. Lear is reduced to an O/0 without a figure, and he has apparently still not learned his lesson:

Fool: Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

Lear: Why, no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing.

(*King Lear*, I. iv. 132-133)

What he needs to realize is that everything is made out of nothing – something even young Romeo seems to understand when he exclaims “O any thing, of nothing first [create]!” (*Romeo and Juliet*, I. i. 177) The universe is created out of the nothingness of feminine prime matter, the “Nothing, the middle, the female genitals, procreation” (Berry 2002: 152) that Lear has attempted to banish with Cordelia, the spurned, despised zero which turns out to be “the womb of all.” (Turner 1999: 43) Apparently, the appropriate mathematical operation is putting a figure before the 0, and not multiplying it. The chaotic dark feminine nothing of matter, led, guided, and lovingly formed by masculine numerical spirit, makes the universe. The way the universe is created on the cosmic level is analogous to the way a child is made by the male spirit forming the nothingness of menstrual matter.

But the male must be willing to descend into this feminine hell and “spend himself upon her” – Elizabethan slang for ejaculating inside a woman – investing his most precious life-giving spirit in this nothingness, this zero. He is indeed a hero if he dares do it: in Turner’s words, “like a merchant adventurer he risks himself in that dark and oceanic passage, that the profit of a child may emerge from the trade.” (Turner 1999: 59-60)

This is how the nothingness of dead matter can be seen as “good kissing carrion” in which the sun will breed life. Analogously to the fertilizing male, the sun amorously and generously infuses life into dead earth, just like the spirit of God graciously animates dark feminine matter. The darkest, blackest matter is paradoxically closest to what is, in Timon’s phrase, “Hyperion’s quick’ning fire”: Morocco’s dark “complexion,” we might recall, is the “shadowed livery of the burnish’d sun,” (*The Merchant of Venice*, II. i. 1-2) and Cleopatra is “with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black.” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. v. 28-29) Black matter is “good kissing carrion” because it lures towards it the sun’s creative, forming, life-infusing gaze.

The idea of “good” feminine matter, fully animated by the loving masculine spirit, appears in the so-called animist or vitalist brand of Neoplatonic dualism, expounded in diverse works of late Renaissance literature by authors such as Pierre de Ronsard, François Rabelais, Michel de Montaigne, and, in England, Samuel Daniel, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and John Milton, as well as philosophers and natural philosophers such as Bernardino Telesio, Francesco Patrizi, Girolamo Cardano, and Giordano Bruno. It has as its central philosophical motif the conception of matter utterly infused with spirit and therefore the living mother of all. (Berry 2002: 12-13) This is as pro-cosmic as Neoplatonism can get without becoming something else.

8.3. THIS THING OF DARKNESS

The descent that leads heroes to the very bottom of their universes’ O’s ultimately forces them to acknowledge the nothingness of dark feminine matter as the basis of the cosmos and the basis of their own mortal bodies. This is not an easy feat, and all but few fail at it. Prospero’s is a rare and exemplary success story. He was exiled with his daughter in

A rotten carcass of a butt, not rigg’d,
Nor tackle, sail, nor mast, the very rats
Instinctively have quit it. There they hoist us,
To cry to th’ sea, that roar’d to us; to sigh
To th’ winds, whose pity, sighing back again,
Did us but loving wrong.
(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 146-151)

This is very reminiscent of the allegorical exegesis of the book of Jonah from the Cabalist book of *Zohar* as a gripping representation of the soul’s fall into the body: Jonah descends into the sail – the soul into the body – and there endures the tempest of materiality, wherein he is ultimately devoured by a whale. (Scholem 1999: 101-103) In *The Tempest*, the mind (Prospero) and soul (Miranda) descend into the storm-toss’d body

and are exiled onto the earth. When they arrive, only the “hag-born whelp” and the imprisoned spirit exist on the island, forming an unresolved duality of base matter derived from a monstrous witch and pure spirit of air, suffering in his prison.

Caliban is the material part, as can clearly be read from the salacious insults leveled at him by Prospero: “Thou earth,” “Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself,” (*The Tempest*, I. ii. 319-320) and many more, and his fully unenlightened desire, reminiscent of Barnardine’s, to remain asleep. First coddled and stroked by the inexperienced Prospero, he tries, apparently according to his unalterable nature, to rape Miranda. The material part has rebelled in lust. What follows is the other extreme: a misguided asceticism wherein Caliban is imprisoned and abused, repressed and forgotten. This will apparently not do, either, and Prospero’s wedding ceremonies performed for his daughter come to an abrupt end when a graceful dance of Nymphs and Reapers vanishes, and the magus remembers:

I had forgot that foul conspiracy
Of the beast Caliban and his confederates
Against my life.
(*The Tempest*, IV. i. 139-141)

Perhaps the Reapers reminded him of his mortality, which his body conspires to effect. Not long after this, Prospero is capable of uttering, in reference to Caliban, this revolutionary statement:

this thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine.
(*The Tempest*, V. i. 275-276)

Prospero has faced and acknowledged his dark, bestial, material basis, and can now proceed to be truly liberated from it.

The alchemists would say that in order for prime matter to be transfigured, it must first be acknowledged and integrated, and the Neoplatonic Hecate, Shaw explains, was

not merely evil matter incarnate. She was, in fact, also “a mirror of the embodied soul, reflecting the soul’s experience of matter.” In this sense, he elucidates, “matter (Hecate) functioned as an index of the soul’s spiritual condition and was evil only in proportion to the soul’s attachment to its material existence.” (Shaw 1995: 41-42) A journeying hero must look into the mirror of Hecate in order to ascertain to what extent he is in her thrall and proceed with this knowledge. We might want to remember that the virtuous Banquo, for instance, is entirely unimpressed by the witches.

The ultimate goal is to be liberated from matter entirely, but this appears to be an impossible feat without first being truly faced with it. Descent into the bottom of the material world can thus bring enlightenment and actually appear to be the *sine qua non* of one’s final salvation from it.

8.4. LOOK HERE COMES A WALKING FIRE: THE SPARK OF SPIRIT IN THE “O”

Ficino waxes poetic on the seemingly paradoxical blessings of the soul’s descent into the dark world of matter:

For whoever is dull in his wits and strong in body will not know how to value his good health. One must be sick from time to time so that by way of comparison at least one may recognize the value of health, and with renewed pleasure enjoy one’s renewed health. Man’s soul, being more obtuse than all minds, needs this comparison in order to make the most comprehensive judgment about the weightiest matters. Thus, shaken by the storms of this world, it will prophesy more accurately here, and discern more keenly there, how calm and pleasant is the refuge in God; it will cling to it with greater intensity and enjoy it with greater pleasure. Plotinus seems to approve highly of this proof; and Porphyry especially when he says that the soul which has experienced these ills too often eventually will cling completely to its parent and no longer ever return to them. (Ficino 2005: 261)

Only when it descends to the darkest uttermost bottom of the universe can the “obtuse” human soul learn to value the light of divine love that remains high above.

When Shakespeare's tragic heroes are "drawn through the material world to the grossest level of existence," Line observes, this "light dwindles to barely a glimmer in the darkness of original chaos." (Line 2004: 122) But it is only here, paradoxically, that this glimmer will be appreciated, and it can, apparently, never be fully extinguished:

Those who penetrate deep into the darkness of matter and manage to keep their reason [...] may still come face to face with chaos, the formless darkness from which we are created. But they are never completely lost, for the spark of love that drew the unformed mind to the love of God, although buried in the darkness, still faintly flickers. The highest light is reflected in the deepest dark. (Line 2004: 124)

King Lear loses sight of the light of divine love and "his mind dissolves into madness as he descends through the material world into the chaos of unformed matter" through "a storm in which all nature appears to be disintegrating and the very body of the world is flattened into primary chaos." Lear can now see nothing of the world "except its gross matter." (Line 2004: 126) However, it is precisely in this O of prime matter that a spark of light first appears:

Fool: Prithee, nuncle, be contented, 'tis a naughty night to swim in. Now a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart, a small spark, all the rest on's body cold. *Enter Gloucester with a torch.* Look, here comes a walking fire. (*King Lear*, III. iv. 110-114)

The walking fire, Line observes, is Gloucester with a torch, "arriving to lead them to better lodgings, one step at least out of the underworld." (Line 2004: 129) Figures that make a salvific appearance in this underworld of darkness include Feste in Malvolio's dark house, the disguised Duke in Angelo's prison, and Marina in the brothel – to name but a few. It is this hell that Neoplatonic Christ comes to harrow and it is here that Shakespeare's Christ figures, who come to enlighten and teach, can be encountered. It is in the chaotic, watery darkness of prime matter – "a naughty night to swim in" – that a spark of spirit appears, bringing enlightenment and beginning the hero's resurrection.

8.5. SEA-CHANGE

Disintegration in the fluid element can bring about a transfiguration. This is how Ariel describes sea-change in his song:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are corals made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 397-402)

The song is usually read as saying that everything of his body that is disintegrated is also transformed, and this is certainly the more obvious meaning. There is, however, another reading that works syntactically and adds a further layer of meaning to this most explicit elucidation of the motif of sea-change extant in Shakespeare. “Nothing of him” that “doth suffer a sea-change” can be read alchemically as the nothing of prime matter which forms him being transformed into something purer, more precious, and more permanent. Corals and pearls replace rotting flesh when putrified in the depths of water.

Water is, of course, one of the most picturesque and widely used representations of prime matter, both in myth and philosophy. One need only remember Plotinus’ usage of Plato’s “bottomless sea of unlikeness” (*Pol.* 273d6–e1) to express the experience of the soul fallen into matter – or the “mud of Hades.” (Turner/Majercik 2000: 39) Shakespeare’s work readily yields examples of a persistent association between tempestuous water and chaotic matter. In *Macbeth*, it is the witches, Hecate’s underlings, who cause tempests. Othello is separated by the tempestuous sea of materiality and carnal passions from his beloved Cassio and Desdemona. Examples of the fluid element being directly linked to matter are too numerous to count.

The tempestuous watery chaos of prime matter has to be endured so this womb/tomb would deign one the opportunity for rebirth. The notion has helpfully been

termed by Jung *nekyia* and defined as “the night sea journey” in exploration of the chaotic material basis that leads one towards enlightenment and transformation. (Jung 1984: 57-60) *Nekyia* is closely associated with a Neoplatonic interpretation of Christ’s death, in which he bravely descends into the hell of prime matter and is then resurrected. This rebirth through water is quite tentative and problematic in the tragedies and the dark comedies, where the womb/tomb of prime matter is more likely to simply devour everyone and everything.

Hamlet, however, arguably experiences some sort of transformation when he is returned by the sea in one piece after his tempestuous adventure:

High and mighty, You shall know I am set naked on your kingdom. To-morrow shall I beg leave to see your kingly eyes, when I shall, first asking your pardon thereunto, recount the occasion of my sudden [and more strange] return.
(*Hamlet*, IV. vii. 43-47)

“Naked,” as Hamlet himself explains it in his footnote, means “alone,” but babies are born naked, and he is, as it were, reborn. Having sailed literally to his death, grappled with pirates, and become their sole prisoner, he miraculously returns a changed man: at ease with his mortality and trusting “Providence” to aid him in his dilemmas.

C. J. Cisson notices in “Justice in *King Lear*” that, in “the great storm of events,” the king also “suffers a sea-change, purged by suffering.” (Kermode 1969: 236) The choice of words is significant, as Lear clearly suffers in the watery element, and imagery of water is omnipresent throughout his ordeal. Gloucester explicitly associates Lear’s purging storm with a violent sea tempest:

The sea, with such a storm as his bare head
In hell-black night endur’d, would have buoy’d up
And quench’d the stelled fires.
(*King Lear*, III. vii. 59-61)

With the associated images of the sea and hell, Lear has obviously suffered a potentially transfiguring descent into primeval chaos – a sea-change. As Ficino asserts, “the soul,

even as it is tossed about in the mighty tempest of this sea [of life], always gazes up at heavenly things, and in gazing up at them it is daily seized by a yet more vehement love of them.” He goes on to elucidate, quoting from Plato’s *Republic*:

Whoever glimpses the sea[-god] Glaucus worn and disfigured from his long sojourn in the waves, all covered moreover with pebbles, sea-weed, and oyster shells, will think of him as not a sea but a wood creature. Likewise, when we witness the soul distracted and overwhelmed by earthly desires and habits, we regard ourselves as an earthly rather than a heavenly being. Were we to uncover the soul, however, and consider it in its purity when it has already emerged from this sea through a love of things divine, we would surely know that the soul, because it is akin to things divine and eternal, yearns for such; and that, as soon as it has emerged in its purity, it attains them and dwells with them in the light serene, and in this company becomes altogether divine. (Ficino 2005: 307)

This description is strangely reminiscent of Lear’s appearance after the wearing but transforming storm, as described by Cordelia:

As mad as the vex’d sea, singing aloud,
Crown’d with rank [femiter] and furrow-weeds,
With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flow’rs,
Darnel, and the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn.
(*King Lear*, IV. iii. 2-6)

Gloucester undergoes a similar sea-change in his frustrated suicide attempt. As he explains to his disguised son:

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep.
Bring me but to the very brim of it.
(*King Lear*, IV. i. 73-75)

Leaping into this imaginary but symbolically significant watery abyss allows Gloucester to finally accept that his life is a miracle.

Water, though a powerful and prevalent metaphor for it, is but one way to represent prime matter, and adventures in any sort of wilderness are similar to this sea change. As Berry explains, for instance, “the setting of a forest (*silva* in Latin) allegorically evokes the disorderliness of primal matter (as *silva*, *hyle* or *chora*)” (Berry 2002: 51) and there are arguably many forest settings in Shakespeare’s comedies and romances where miraculous enlightenments, transformations, and rebirths occur. Elisabeth Bronfen also notes in “Shakespeare’s nocturnal world” that night in Shakespeare’s work signifies both “chaos” and “the possibility of transformation.” (Drakakis/Townshend 2008: 21) Darkness, the opposite of the forming spiritual light of the sun, is the hallmark of prime matter.

Dark and confined spaces, such as pits, cells, and hovels, as has been noted, can also represent the bottom of the material world, the womb/tomb of prime matter where Shakespeare’s rebirths can – but by no means necessarily *do* – take place. The notion that the experience of these cavernous spaces, symbolizing prime matter and reminiscent, of course, of Plato’s cave, can bring one closer to enlightenment, was reflected in a contemporary architectural trend noticeable in the more affluently built Renaissance houses – a garden path leading the walker through a dark underground grotto into a sunlit and intricately designed grove. A symbolic movement from darkness into light, “from a recognition of the elemental basis of creation, realised in the darkened space of the artificial cave or grotto, to a garden of light,” represents, in Laoutaris’ view, a striking dramatization of this commonly held “neo-Platonic world-view.” (Laoutaris 2008: 104-106)

In *Cymbeline*, Guiderius and Arviragus, “sparks of nature,” true heirs of their kingly father, are trapped in a literal cave which is visited by their sister Imogen, a Christ figure. In Line’s reading, divine light enters the dark cave, symbolically dies and is then reborn. (Line 2004: 133-134) All the sparks can then, liberated, return to their father, who is now free of his own Hecate, the evil queen.

Rebirths through water more closely resembling the story of *nekyia* tend to appear in the romances with some regularity: The various tempests of *The Tempest* bring

transformation to virtually all involved; in *The Winter's Tale*, the violent storm that drowns many also brings a newborn to the shore of Bohemia; and all the characters in *Pericles* who die by water return resurrected. When Marina is taken by the sea, Pericles is told that she is dead, to which

He [puts] on sackcloth, and to sea. He bears
A tempest, which his mortal vessel tears,
And yet he rides it out.
(*Pericles*, IV. iv. 29-31)

Each of the principal characters endures a *nekyia*: a sea-change involving riding out a tempest, symbolic death and rebirth. Thaisa significantly asks Pericles:

Did you not name a tempest,
A birth, and death?
(*Pericles*, V. iii. 33-34)

Perhaps unwittingly, she has recounted the essence of the entire play – and many other plays centering on sea-change that Shakespeare wrote toward the end of his career.

It is mostly in Shakespeare's romances that resurrecting returns which "offer the opportunity for transformation, but a transformation that will take up and redeem the past" are allowed to take place. (Perry/Watkins 2009: 48) However, the potential for a transfiguring encounter with the watery chaos of prime matter is already indicated in *Hamlet* and developed, but left ambiguous in *King Lear*. Coming face to face with the material basis of all creation, the nothing that everything is made of, is revealed in the tragedies to be, if not necessarily enlightening and revitalizing, then at least inescapable and unavoidable.

As has been noted, this descent into the void can also at times, especially when appearing in conjunction with erotic themes, be indistinguishable from henosis, and the two nothingnesses of pure spirit and prime matter can be quite difficult to tell apart. Far

from being limiting, this ambiguity adds to the possibilities of interpreting Shakespeare's work, and potentially shows him as personally deconstructing spirit/matter dualism itself.

... *they cannot touch me for [coining,] I am the King himself.*
(King Lear, IV. vi. 83)

9.0. THEURGY

Plotinus firmly believed that Narcissus, fatally betrayed by the lovely reflection of his spiritual being in the shadowy material waters, suffered the worst fate that could befall a soul: lethal immersion in the depths of matter. The story of primordial, purely spiritual Man, as it is told in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, however, paints an entirely different picture of what entanglement with matter might entail:

Man [...] leant across the armature of the spheres, having broken through their envelopes, and showed to the Nature below the beautiful form of God. [...] Nature smiled with love, for she had seen the features of that marvelously beautiful form of Man reflected in the water and his shadow on the earth. And he, having seen this form like to himself in Nature, reflected in the water, he loved her and wished to dwell with her. The moment he wished this he accomplished it and came to inhabit the irrational form. Then Nature having received her loved one, embraced him, and they were united, for they burned with love. (Yates 1964: 23-25)

This version of Narcissus is not tricked by his reflection in the material waters of Nature: he consciously and graciously chooses to lend her his form, becoming united with her. She, in turn, does not deceive him or wish to imprison him: instead, she lovingly yields to his forming embrace.

Along with Iamblichus' theory of the fully and productively descended soul, this creation narrative from the *Corpus Hermeticum* seems to have played a pivotal role in

informing Ficino's cosmology as it concerns the interactions of male spirit with female matter. He, however, never forgot Plotinus, either. Koderá explains that

the erotic, potentially uncontrollable involvement of soul with matter deeply worried Ficino, yet, paradoxically he developed a cosmology that put particular emphasis on the domination of matter by soul by transferring the model of the Narcissistic and creative gaze to the story of divine Creation. (Allen 2002: 294)

In a central passage in his *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino explains that, apart from a limitless and limiting God, there is also a "shadow," which he openly identifies with "most common matter." God looks at this shadowy matter and it is, by virtue of His creative gaze, converted into a mirror, reflecting the image of the creator. This matter is a nothingness and has no definite characteristics: it is malleable, pliable, and yielding. Ficino's *Philebus* commentary once more describes the act of creation as a Narcissistic process in which "God is mirrored in a shadow, matter or otherness." (Allen 2002: 296)

This creative Narcissistic mirroring can and does, according to some Neoplatonists, recur on every level of the cosmos on which ordering masculine spirit abides, including the level of our own earthy existence. Aiding the demiurgic process of forming feminine matter and persuading her to faithfully mirror the divine is what was known in both ancient and Renaissance Neoplatonic circles as *theurgy*. In contrast to "*theologia*" (talking about the gods), the term "*theourgia*" refers to "doing divine works," as John P. Anton clarifies in his "*Theourgia – Demiourgia: A Controversial Issue in Hellenistic Thought and Religion*." (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 16) Birger A. Pearson explains in his "Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism and Iamblichus's Conception of Theurgy" that the concept of theurgy afforded one the possibility to – instead of seeing it as a catastrophe of imprisonment – view one's embodied existence as an opportunity to courageously cooperate in the divine work of creatively ordering matter. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 256)

This is the other, decidedly pro-cosmic side of the coin of post-Platonic thought, inviting one to active involvement with the material world (*vita activa*) instead of a passive withdrawal from it (*vita contemplativa*). It was Iamblichus that most wholeheartedly embraced theurgy, not merely allowing the rites that involved dealings

with filthy matter, but instead viewing them as a prerequisite for salvation, thus virtually reversing Plotinus' view on the urgency of the soul's ascent as a *sine qua non* of its redemption. Certainly a new development in the Platonic tradition, this leaning towards theurgy is not entirely without basis in the dialogues. In Plato's doctrine of recollection, the soul was reawakened by its contacts with objects in the material world which functioned as mnemonic prods that helped remind the soul of the Platonic Forms. Theurgy, Shaw explains, accordingly exemplified "a ritual praxis where the prods of sensate experience were carefully controlled in rites designed to awaken the soul to the Forms." (Shaw 1995: 24)

It is clear that this proactive, enthusiastic pro-cosmic Neoplatonism is still fully dualistic in its metaphysics. The spirit, instead of fleeing from it in disgust, deigns to instead engage matter bravely and lovingly form it. The ultimate goal is still ascent towards henosis, now viewed as impossible without a corresponding theurgical descent in which the material base is acknowledged, transformed, and then finally left behind.

We have seen that the comedies and romances offer instances of successful ascents, whereas the tragedies yield mostly examples of how a misguided attempt at ascent can instead cause a hero to be dragged downwards to the bottommost dregs of the material universe. Similarly, successful attempts at theurgy can most readily be found in the romances, while in the tragedies we can see the cosmos reduced to chaotic prime matter, and its potential theurgical agents banished, maimed, and/or killed. As much as it is possible, the discussion of theurgical moments in Shakespeare's work will be focused on the tragedies and "problem" plays, but when mentioning instances from other plays seems necessary in order to illuminate a significant point, this will not be avoided at all cost.

9.1. GOD KISSING CARRION (HIS FULL TILTH AND HUSBANDRY)

Mentioned in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Berry relates, the notion that both individual souls and the *anima mundi* were of a fiery substance that animated individual bodies and the body of the world was then restated by many a classical commentator, and Cicero notably cited the Stoic view that a "creative fire" pervaded the world. Marsilio Ficino wrote:

The sun of the world, the substance of natural life, completely possesses and bears that which the rest of the world has parts of. Therefore some have placed the soul of the world in it, on account of its rays being everywhere diffused. (Berry 2002: 30)

Berry interprets this notion of vitalism/animism as being pro-cosmic to the extent of according some form of independent source of life to matter itself. However, there is very little in the contemporary sources that would substantiate that view – even the “seeds” and “vital spirits” abiding in Nature according to the most enthusiastic vitalists were explicitly seen not as attributes of matter *per se*, but instead as benevolent infusions of life-giving and forming spirit into it. The feminine nothing that everything came from was apparently only good – and living – to the extent that it was passively yielding to the animating and forming influence of the infinitely superior masculine spirit that was the sole originator and proprietor of life. Ficino even emphasizes:

Heaven, the husband of earth, does not touch the earth, as is the common opinion. It does not have intercourse with its wife; but by the rays of its stars alone as if with the rays of its eyes, it illuminates her on all sides; it fertilizes her by its illumination and procreates living things. (Ficino 1998: 401)

It is the rays of the heavenly light of spirit that fertilize – safely *from afar* and without *touching* – earthly matter, thus giving it any life that might issue from her. Shakespeare frequently employs the image of the divine solar animating dead matter, but he apparently allows some “touching” (so abhorrent to Ficino) to take place in the process. The other possible wording of the famous “carrion” crux in *Hamlet* enables a somewhat different reading of it:

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog,
being a *god* kissing carrion – Have you a daughter?
Polonius: I have, my lord.

Let her not walk i' th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive,
friend, look to't.

(*Hamlet*, II. ii. 181-186)¹⁴

The divine male solar spirit deigns to lovingly animate dead female matter, much as some male might impregnate Ophelia if she walks too much in the sun. Female carrion matter in itself is not necessarily “good” in any way, as is implied by the other wording; instead, it is graciously kissed and thus given life by the divine spirit, the sun “god.” Conception is a blessing, Hamlet says, and we can infer that fertility in nature can be precariously positive if matter is sufficiently passive and tame and yields to the god kissing it. However, the imagery surrounding solar fertilization of matter is always ambiguous and at least somewhat disturbing. Lepidus, for instance, explains this animating process: “Your serpent of Egypt is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun. So is your crocodile.” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II. vii. 26-27) The image of serpents and crocodiles emerging from the primordial mud of the Nile would not necessarily regale the hearts and souls of squeamish Neoplatonists such as Ficino.

The spirit animates and forms, but also *transforms* matter. As King Philip of France explains to Constance:

To solemnize this day the glorious sun
Stays in his course and plays the alchymist,
Turning with splendor of his precious eye
The meagre cloddy earth to glittering gold.
(*King John*, III. i. 77-80)

The sun performs alchemy on prime matter, transforming it into pure gold, a transformation which is itself in alchemy a symbol for the transfiguring – but also animating and ordering – action of spirit upon matter.

As Rebecca Lemon argues in her “Sovereignty and treason in *Macbeth*,” Duncan similarly performs multiple functions in *Macbeth*, each associated with the distinctive solar imagery surrounding him. As the sun, Lemon notes, Duncan shines forth light on all his noblemen who as a result appear “like stars.” (*Macbeth*, I. iv. 41) He graciously

¹⁴ Emphasis mine.

declares he will “plant” Macbeth and make him “full of growing,” (*Macbeth*, I. iv. 28-29) which will unfortunately not come to fruition, in contrast with Banquo’s willing “harvest” (*Macbeth*, I. iv. 33) which he intends to present himself as to his sovereign. (Moschovakis 2008: 74)

A man can thus be a representation of the divine spirit forming and fertilizing matter, just like the sun is. Duncan is the Neoplatonic sun shining forth life and order into his domain. This solar figure of the king is a mirror image of God – and this mirroring is repeated on all hierarchical levels of the universe.

9.2. I AM THE KING HIMSELF: THE THEURGIST

The hierarchical notion of a higher, more spiritual sphere forming a lower, more material one in its own lofty image is frequently represented in the figure of coining. The Duke significantly asks Escalus “What figure of us do you think he will bear?” (*Measure for Measure*, I. i. 16) when he confers his royal authority on Angelo, and the unhappy deputy himself asks:

Let there be some more test made of my mettle
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamp’d upon it.
(*Measure for Measure*, I. i. 47-49)

The figure of the king is stamped on a coin like the figure of kingly and/or divine authority is stamped on Angelo, whether he is meant to represent Ficino’s Angel (the sphere immediately reflecting God), or secular authority, or both.

The figure of the father is likewise imprinted on the child, as his divine spirit forms the menstrual matter provided by the mother. Shakespeare has some fun with the image, allowing Angelo to judge “felons” procreating outside of marriage as those

that do coin heaven’s image
In stamps that are forbid.

(*Measure for Measure*, II. iv. 45-46)

“Heaven’s image” is any human being created in the image of God – a fairly orthodox notion. Stamping this spiritual image on pre-existent matter in order to create a child, however, is not. Posthumus rages at all womanhood in words that are, similarly to Angelo’s, difficult to take too seriously:

We are all bastards,
And that most venerable man which I
Did call my father, was I know not where
When I was stamp’d. Some coiner with his tools
Made me a counterfeit.

(*Cymbeline*, II. v. 2-6)

The figure of coining ultimately refers to stamping onto lower matter the image of God as the ultimate Father and the ultimate King. Like the husband has the right to imprint his form on his wife’s menstrual matter, so the king has the authority to coin – to rightfully stamp his image on base metal and thus give it value and significance. God as the Father and King of all stamps His image on the metal (or “mettle,” or matter – all virtually interchangeable words in Elizabethan English) that all is made of and thus forms and creates everything.

When Lear claims “they cannot touch me for [coining,] I am the King himself,” (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 83) he is speaking as the king – or, at any rate, the abdicated king – of his domain, but also, significantly, as its Everyman. For, unorthodoxly, audaciously, subversively, the proponents of theurgy in Renaissance Neoplatonism hold it that each man, being in spirit essentially identical to God, has the “right – indeed, the responsibility – to reshape the world” in his own divine image. (Mebane 1989: 7) “With his super celestial mind,” Ficino writes in his *Theologia Platonica*, man, who “transcends heaven” and “provides generally for all things both living and lifeless, is a *kind* of God.” Possessing virtually the same genius as the author of the heavens, he could also make the

heavens had he the materials. (Dollimore 2004: 162-163) Elsewhere he simply asserts that man “Est utique deus in terris.” (Allen 2002: 51)

This view is not unprecedented in the history of Neoplatonism. Iamblichus first interpreted Plato’s notion that the Demiurge gave to each soul a spark of himself (*Tim.* 41c) as implying that each soul had the responsibility to perform its own demiurgy, i.e. its own theurgy, creating a cosmos out of the chaos of its embodiment. (Shaw 1995: 15) Hermetic and Paracelsian magicians followed suit, acting on the belief that humanity is “in part divine and therefore capable of controlling at least the lower spheres of the cosmos.” (Mebane 1989: 6-7) This predictably resulted in the view the humanists held, that in order to, as Mebane paraphrases,

realize our divine potential, we must, like God, exercise our powers in creative acts through which we reproduce in the external world the perfection we have come to see within our own minds. (Mebane 1989: 11)

The proto-atheistic humanist focus on man as the god of his own domain thus stems from an old and venerable tradition which is actually religious and metaphysical in origin. It is the subsequent sanitization of early modern science and mystification of the early modern occult that has obscured this connection between the rationally active humanist and the magus – it is, for instance, still bad form to issue a reminder that Newton spent more time and effort on alchemical experiments than on “legitimately” scientific ones.

The *homo faber* of the humanists is, understandably if we take this into consideration, at times difficult to distinguish from the occult Renaissance figure of the magus: for Giordano Bruno, the “*magus* signifies a wise man with the power of acting,” while Paracelsus describes the figure in slightly more religious terms. (Nuttall 2007: 5) Pico’s description of Zoroaster as a magus is an amalgam of the two:

the son of Oromasius, in practicing magic, took that to be the cult of God and the study of divinity; while engaged in this in Persia he most successfully investigated every virtue and power of nature, in order to know those sacred and sublime secrets of the divine intellect; which subject many people called theurgy, others Cabala or magic. (Allen 2002: 143)

Ficino with his priestly medicine and cautious astrology, merely mentioning talismans and statues without necessarily advocating their use, and Pico with his pious and gentle Cabala, stand on the benign and more rational-seeming extreme of Renaissance magic. On the other extreme is Agrippa, with his complex, demon-invoking, and otherwise quite intimidating practices. (Yates 1964: 141) Somewhere in the middle is the mathematician-magus John Dee – revered in the golden age of Elizabethan magic, and feared after the age had passed for ever; accused of unspeakable rites, but also at one point “a very clear example of how the will to operate, stimulated by Renaissance magic, could pass into, and stimulate, the will to operate in genuine applied science.” (Yates 1964: 150) Dee is but one example of this. Nuttall notes that the branches of occult knowledge that grew in popularity after Ficino’s apology for magic (alchemy, astrology, chiromancy, physiognomy, the art of memory, numerology and word-magic) at times actually resulted in objective and systematized knowledge, and thus spurred on the advent of modern science, but warns that to “see them only as precursors of the science we know” would be “to misunderstand them by completely removing their spiritual dimension.” (Nuttall 2007: 28-29)

Thus the theory and practice of Renaissance magic appear to have diverged into two roads – one that would eventually result in a “rational” and “scientific” will to manipulate the world, and one that would prove to be, more or less, a dead end. As Mitchell sees this issue, the Renaissance Magus at one point becomes split into two figures: the “engineer” (and empire-builder), and the “eccentric” (the poet and visionary). (Mitchell 2006: 105) Shakespeare’s Prospero is apparently meant to be both.

Jonson, according to Mitchell, shows a thorough knowledge of alchemical terms in *The Alchemist*, and there is absolutely no reason to suppose that Shakespeare would have been any less acquainted with the currents of Gnostic/Hermetic thought. (Mitchell 2006: 83) Bloom notes that Prospero’s name is the Italian word for “the favored one,” a direct translation of “Faustus.” (Bloom *Tempest* 2008: xii) In Prospero, Shakespeare certainly appears to be portraying a magus.

This magus at first takes the eccentric, contemplative road, neglecting practical affairs of the state. In this, as many critics have noticed, he greatly resembles Rudolf II,

the Emperor of Bohemia, who dedicated himself solely to scientific and occult study, eschewing his practical duties to the point that, in 1606, the archdukes reassigned his authority to a deputy, commenting that “[h]is majesty is interested only in wizards, alkymists, Kabbalists,” and noting his “whole library of magic books.” The parallels with another ruler “rapt in secret studies” (*The Tempest*, I. ii. 77) who would be deposed by his brother for “neglecting worldly ends” (*The Tempest*, I. ii. 89) are clear. (Kastan 2005: 177)

Prospero, however, eventually proves his true theurgical prowess when he exercises full control over the watery element in the tempest of his own making. The Boatswain scathingly asks the King of Naples and the usurping Duke of Milan, referring to the waves, “What care these roarers for the name of king?” and challenges them: “if you can command these elements to silence [...] Use your authority.” (*The Tempest*, I. i. 16-17; 21-23) Redmond is right in noting that the Boatswain’s words point to the fact that these “great leaders are powerless against the tempest because their titular authority does not coincide with any practical ability to govern the vessel.” (Redmond 2009: 123) There are, however, additional multiple meanings of this exchange, most of them Neoplatonic in origin.

The metaphor of the ship of state harks back to Plato’s *Republic* and is complemented by the myth in the *Statesman* depicting the demiurge as ideally at the helm of the ship that is the cosmos. (Plato 1997: 206-207) Plotinus compares the individual soul to a sailor, while Numenius likens his “Second God” to a helmsman sailing over the sea of Matter and controlling it, all the while fixing his gaze on the “First God” above. (Wallis/Bregman 1992: 469) Iamblichus explains that sailing in a ship “represents the sovereignty that governs the world,” (Iamblichus 2003: 293) and Ficino clarifies Plato’s ship metaphors as asserting that “the king should also be called the helmsman of human life, as though it were a ship,” for “human governance is identical to divine governance, and the one God is ruler of the whole world.” (Ficino 2006: 60) Plato, according to Ficino,

undoubtedly teaches us, in an allegory, that we do not have a true and lawful king, unless it be He whom the King of heaven Himself has placed as a shepherd over us in heaven

and on earth, a shepherd who fully represents the King of heaven Himself, not in name alone, but also in pattern of life. (Ficino 2006: 63)

Sailing a ship over tempestuous seas thus represents theurgical governance over matter on all levels: individual (the soul ruling over the body), state (the rightful ruler governing the state), and cosmic (the demiurge ordering primordial chaos into a cosmos). Prospero is the clearest example of an ultimately successful theurgist and ruler, but there are other rulers who, achieving personal equilibrium, govern the state justly and assume divine proportions. As Redmond notices, there are, for instance, distinct “similarities between how Prospero secretly controls the action on the island and the dominating, manipulative presence of the disguised Duke of Vienna in the earlier *Measure for Measure*.” (Redmond 2009: 124) Though not necessarily universally appreciated by the critics, the figure of the theurgist manipulating the cosmos into order clearly recalls the real Platonic divine ruler, though he may not currently be the one with the title. As Angus says of Macbeth:

Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.
(*Macbeth*, V. i. 19-22)

The title does not help the usurpers contain the chaos in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* either, and the theurgical message is clear: the real ruler is not the one with the title, but the one who can command the elements to silence – like Prospero does, like Duke Vincentio does, like Old Hamlet apparently could, and like divine Duncan demonstrably did.

This figure of the divine ruler commanding the tempestuous elements conjures, of course, another well-known image – that of Christ calming the storm on the Lake of Gennesaret and walking on water towards His stunned disciples. He, apparently, was the one who had the authority to command the elements to silence – an ability lacked by the tempest-tossed titularies of *The Tempest*.

Christ as a powerful, ordering theurgical figure, as opposed to the docetic Christ of anti-cosmism we encountered earlier, makes a regular appearance in Shakespeare's work, usually arriving at the very end to set right the time that was out of joint. These returns of the rightful kings who come to order their universes are usually endowed with the common trappings of the Second Coming of Christ.

One of the most striking paraphernalia of Doomsday as described in the Bible is the sound of trumpets beckoning all to their reckoning. When the Duke returns publicly in *Measure for Measure* – as Christ is also expected to, in direct contrast with His first incognito sojourn on the earth – the citizens know to gather at the gates because the trumpets tell them to:

Twice have the trumpets sounded;
The generous and gravest citizens
Have hent the gates.
(*Measure for Measure*, IV. vi. 11-12)

When the king arrives in *All's Well That Ends Well* to bring justice and order and thus end it all well, Lafew portentously utters: "The King's coming, I know by his trumpets." (*All's Well That Ends Well*, V. ii. 51-52) Lafew knows, as we know, by the King's trumpets, that Judgment Day is coming. Trumpets also, significantly, sound as Macduff and Malcolm charge to set the time free of Macbeth, and when the Venetians appear to depose Othello – both arrivals signaling the end of chaos and the advent of a new order.

Some of the divine rulers arriving to overthrow tyrants and bring order are dukes and kings; some are imprudently absconding or unjustly overthrown rightful rulers; and some are, disturbingly, themselves "usurpers" with no inherently justifiable right to rule. In these examples we can clearly see how the right to rule is decentered in pro-cosmic dualism: each man, as a spark of the divine demiurge and thus invested with both the right and the responsibility to participate in theurgically ordering the universe, is indeed born to set right the time that is out of joint. This makes pro-cosmic dualism arguably even more politically subversive than anti-cosmic dualism, which might well be more

inclined to see *all* current rulers as agents of the devil, but is also less inclined to inspire its adherents to strive to *do* anything about it.

This pro-active tendency of pro-cosmic dualism to encourage one to, magus-like, rule over lower matter and order it inspired more than just the inception of modern applied science and insufficient meekness in royal subjects: it made possible the widespread enthusiasm and support for the onset of colonization. *The Tempest* is, among other things, as Kastan would have it, “a telling document of the first phase of English imperialism,” (Kastan 2005: 170) and the figure of the magus as colonizer makes a potent appearance in Prospero as the subduer and would-be civilizer of Caliban. As we have seen when discussing Othello and Desdemona, the othering of non-whites follows a metaphysical pattern similar to that of the othering of women in dualistic systems of thought: dark, chaotic matter needs to be ordered and controlled by divine spirit; analogously, as some human beings (white males) are thought to be more spiritual, and others (females, non-whites, and especially non-white females) more material, it follows that the divine magus has both the right and the responsibility to rule over those who are lower on the Platonic ladder of perfection in a benevolent attempt to civilize them and bring order into their savage, brutish lives. It should not be surprising, then, that Dee, the theurgical mascot of the Elizabethan age and its most notorious magus, far from being “rapt in secret studies” and unconcerned with matters of state, was instead an active supporter of Britain’s first maritime exploits. He is even traditionally credited with coining the very term “British Empire,” and was one of its “earliest, boldest, and most ingenious advocates.” (Sherman 1995: 148) The theurgical goal of conquering and ordering the watery chaos of matter offered a natural impetus to one possible justification of the imperialist project of conquering – for the purported purpose of ordering – the more carnal and animalistic chaos of the “barbarians.”

9.3. THE MAGUS vs. THE WITCH: THE THEURGIST AND HIS OBJECT

Conquering and ordering watery chaos is firmly a manly, magus-like theurgical exploit. Antony thus quite understandably berates himself:

I, that with my sword
Quarter'd the world, and o'er green Neptune's back
With ships made cities, condemn myself to lack
The courage of a woman.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xiv. 57-60)

From being able to control earth and water with straight lines and craftsmanship, Antony and his soldiers are reduced to being “women’s men” – out of their element, fighting at sea, and being predictably conquered by the watery chaos that is ultimately Cleopatra’s doing.

Unmanning Antony, Cleopatra is a witch, who enchants him with her artifice – which ominously outdoes nature. (Armstrong 1996: 101-103) For women who attempt to change nature are witches and whores, whereas men who do the same are magi and theurgists. Prospero paints a frightening picture of Sycorax, who

was a witch, and one so strong
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,
And deal in her command without her power.
(*The Tempest*, V. i. 269-271)

It is easy to forget that Prospero in fact performs quite similar feats, but that these are somehow laudable in his case. A man operating on nature is a divine theurgist; but should a woman dare attempt agency, she is doomed to be seen as an unnatural, manly witch, who needs to be put in her place.

Kate gives a full theological explanation for this seeming paradox in the Quarto version of the ending of *The Taming of the Shrew*:

The first world was, a forme, without a forme,
A heape confusd a mixture all deformd,
A gulfe of gulfes, a body bodiles,
Where all the elements were orderless,

Before the great commander of the world,
The King of Kings the glorious God of heauen,
Who in six daies did frame the heauenly worke,
And made all things to stand in perfit course.
Then to his image he did make a man.
Old Adam and from his side a sleepe,
A rib was taken, of which the Lord did make,
The woe of man so termed by Adam then,
Woman for that, by her came sinne to vs,
And for her sin was Adam doomd to die.
(*The Taming of the Shrew*, Quarto version, V. ii. 136-149)

Only superficially orthodox, this misogynist tirade is in fact largely dualistic. God operates on pre-existent prime matter, orders it and forms it, finally creating man in his image. Woman, on the other hand, is explicitly *not* made in God's image, but, implicitly, in the disturbing image of the very matter that God has conquered. As prime matter was ordered by God, so woman-as-matter must be controlled by divine man – and *not* the other way around. Luciana develops this theme in *The Comedy of Errors*:

The beasts, the fishes, and the winged fowls
Are their males' subjects and at their controls:
Man, more divine, the master of all these,
Lord of the wide world and wild wat'ry seas,
Indu'd with intellectual sense and souls,
Of more pre-eminence than fish and fowls,
Are masters to their females, and their lords.
(*The Comedy of Errors*, II. i. 18-25)

Divine man rules over *both* animals and women. Women are generously put in the same category as beasts, fishes and winged fowls – the category of the material which male spirit naturally subjects to his control. If she cannot be transcended and escaped, then

woman as matter should at least ideally be but a malleable object, sufficiently pliable and amenable to the forming gaze of the male spirit. Using Ficino's mirror imagery, Isabel accedes to Angelo's accusatory "Nay, women are frail too" and expands upon it:

Ay, as the glasses where they view themselves,
Which are as easy broke as they make forms.
Women? Help heaven! men their creation mar
In profiting by them. Nay, call us ten times frail,
For we are soft as our complexions are,
And credulous to false prints.

(Measure for Measure, II. iv. 124-130)

Isabel subverts Angelo's allegation by pointing out that "good" women, behaving like "good" Neoplatonic matter should, cannot be blamed for being "frail": if they are to be controlled and formed by men, then they must indeed be frail – soft, credulous, and easily broken. Lucrece does the same in her speech to Tarquin:

For men have marble, women waxen minds,
And therefore are they form'd as marble will;
The weak oppress'd, th' impression of strange kinds
Is form'd in them by force, by fraud, or skill.
Then call them not the authors of their ill,
No more than wax shall be accounted evil,
Wherein is stamp'd the semblance of a devil.

(The Rape of Lucrece, 1240-1246)

It is not difficult to conceive how this pro-cosmic extreme on the dualistic spectrum – where female matter can and must be controlled – could produce even more anxiety in the male mind than the anti-cosmic kind. If feminine matter is "good" (obedient and easily formed) then women are not to blame for their actions, as it is solely up to men to direct and control them. If, on the other hand, matter is "bad" (recalcitrant

and disobedient), the responsibility is still firmly on male spirit – but his task is significantly more challenging. As Kodera explains, one effect of this seemingly benevolent notion of forming female matter lovingly by way of a creative male gaze in Renaissance Neoplatonism is that

disobedient matter poses an alarming threat to divine omnipotence. The idea that matter could become such an obstacle to the divine is, I think, a direct result of the Narcissism involved in the process of creation, which always conveys a solipsistic fantasy of absolute power that does not tolerate any opposition. (Allen 2002: 296)

Rebellious matter is frequently figured in Shakespeare by rebellious women – wives or daughters – who, by not properly submitting to husbands and/or fathers personify the terrifying mutiny of matter against the ordering spirit. Shylock notably cries in dismay, upon hearing that his daughter has abandoned him: “My own flesh and blood to rebel!” to which Solanio wryly retorts: “Out upon it, old carrion, rebels it at these years?” (*The Merchant of Venice*, III. i. 35-36) The allusion is clearly sexual: rebellious daughters are elided with rebellious and lustful flesh. In *King Lear* it is similarly said:

Our flesh and blood, my lord, is grown so vild
That it doth hate what gets it.
(*King Lear*, III. iv. 145-146)

What “gets” – begets or conceives – any human being is spirit that animates and forms prime matter. One meaning of this can be that our bodies lustfully rebel against the spirit and we become mere animals. The first meaning, of course, is that children – especially (but not exclusively) daughters – rebel against their fathers. The two notions are at times difficult to separate, as the two themes are multiply intertwined.

9.4. ACCORDING TO MY BOND: LOVE AS THEURGY

Juan Luis Vives tells in his 16th century manual *Education of a Christian Woman* the gripping tale of Justina, a noble Roman virgin, given in marriage to a rich but

irascible man, who instantly became suspicious of her extraordinary beauty. On their wedding night, just after the marriage was consummated, spotting her white neck as she was bending down to untie her shoes, and overpowered by a jealous rage, he brutally murdered her, as is described in the epigram that Vives quotes:

My cruel husband cut off my head
As I stooped down to loose the fastenings
Around my snow-white foot,
Pitilessly, and beside that very bed
Where I had lain with him not long before,
And where I lost the honor of my maidenhood.
And yet I did not merit this cruel death,
I call upon the gods to be my witnesses.
But here I lie, the victim of harsh fate.
Learn, fathers, from the example of Justina
Not to marry your daughter to a senseless man.
(Vives 2000: 163)

Othello, it will easily be noted, in fact does exactly the same, killing his beautiful young wife for the sin of having loved him. What is striking is the moral that Vives offers. To our modern eyes, it looks quite bizarre, yet it is one that some of Shakespeare's heroes will actually agree with:

It will be evident that a girl must not give even a sign of her desire for marriage or that she loves a young man in order to marry him. If you love him before he is your husband, what will he suspect but that you will easily fall in love with someone else other than him, to whom you should not yet have shown your love. Naturally, he will think that he is not the only one loved, since there is no reason to think that you will not love others; and after you have been legitimately joined to him, you will fall in love with others, since you have such a strong inclination toward love.

Others may gloss over this fact with whatever pretexts they wish: A woman who loves a man who is not her husband is a prostitute in her body if she has carnal relations

with him, and in her mind if she does not. It does not matter who the man is, if she does not yet love her husband. (Vives 2000: 170)

One of the striking emergent changes in the Renaissance – what Sinfield has repeatedly referred to as “faultlines” – is an increased agency enjoyed by a woman in her choice of a spouse. The new-and-improved “choice” model of marriage, Jardine asserts, far from being an unproblematically positive development for the female sex, powerfully stirs male anxieties by transforming a woman’s love from “a simple reflection of duty” to an expression of her own will. Here Jardine sees the origin of “the potential unruliness not only of Cordelia [...], but of Desdemona.” (Jardine 2005: 117) The “familiar comic pattern, in which daughters routinely leave blocking fathers in order to marry,” (Adelman 2008: 39) does not even always work in Shakespeare’s comedies, except when the blocking father is a Jew and his daughter is converted by leaving him, as is the case in *The Merchant of Venice*. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, rebellion against the father, however justified, will frequently eventually cost a girl her life, as Juliet, Desdemona, and Cordelia can testify. Having the opportunity to choose her own spouse, apparently, a young woman is forced to choose between love and duty, and the two common virtues are thus divided and juxtaposed, forming a new dichotomy.

This dichotomy is especially potent if “love” is equated with “lust.” From young and innocent Adonis’ claim that “Love to heaven is fled” since “sweating Lust on earth usurp’d his name” (*Venus and Adonis*, 793-794) to the cynical, paradoxically puritanical lecher Iago’s view of love as “merely a lust of the blood and permission of the will,” (*Othello*, I. iii. 335) Shakespeare’s characters are notoriously prone to making this equation. Seeing all love as carnal lust, Iago acknowledges only vulgar Venus, and manages to impart this view onto Othello, who consequently begins to view Desdemona from Brabantio’s point of view: if she has neglected her duty towards her father for the sake of “love,” then she might do it again, this time to her husband.

This is how a fatal error is made, an error diametrically opposed to that made by the bed-tricked heroes: wary of mistaking lust for love, some Shakespeare’s heroes instead mistake love for lust. Cordelia and Desdemona are ultimately rejected by Lear and Othello because they are mistakenly believed to put love, which is mere lust, above

duty. Because they freely choose and love their husbands, they are discarded as lecherous – and chaos ensues.

Why chaos would ensue when love is banished from a cosmos is explained at length in Neoplatonic literature. The Neoplatonic “golden chain” – the divine ray of light permeating and binding all – is the ordering backbone of the universe and was commonly known as such in Shakespeare’s time. Ben Jonson refers to this bond in his *Hymenei* as a “golden chain let down from Heaven,” citing Homer and Macrobius, the fourth-century Neoplatonist, as his sources in a marginal note: “from the Supreme God to the bottommost dregs of the universe there is one tie, binding at every link and never broken.” This, Jonson explains, is “the golden chain of Homer which, he tells us, God ordered to hang down from the sky to the earth.” (Line 2004: 117)

This golden chain that binds all is, in fact, indistinguishable from love itself. Iamblichus explicitly states in his *De mysteriis* that this principle that binds the cosmos together is its universal love “which contains all things and produces this unifying bond by means of an ineffable communion.” (Shaw 1995: 123) In the beginning, it was Eros himself who coordinated the Ideas in the intelligible world and “knitted the cosmos together in a unified bond.” The creator “sowed the bond of love, heavy with fire, into all things” so that “the All might continue to love for an infinite time and that the things woven by the intellectual light of the Father might not collapse.” It is only through this “Love that the elements of the world remain on course.” (Shaw 1995: 123-124)

Love is thus the divinely infused bond of the universe. “Why is Love called a Magus?” asks Ficino in *De amore* and immediately answers:

Because all the force of Magic consists in Love. The work of Magic is a certain drawing of one thing to another by natural similitude. The parts of this world, like members of one animal, depend all on one Love, and are connected together by natural communion.

(Yates 1964: 126)

Using a different metaphor to illustrate the same point, Ficino asserts:

Since they are the work of a single artificer, all the components of the world, as parts of the same machine, similar to one another in essence and life, are bound together by a

certain reciprocal affection. Hence *rightly may love be called the everlasting knot and bond of the world*, the immovable support of its parts and the firm foundation of the whole machine. (Ferruolo 1955: 17)¹⁵

In light of this, let us revisit Cordelia's "inadequate" reply to her father's demand for a public display of affection:

I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.
(*King Lear*, I. i. 92-93)

Cordelia's reply, which failed to satisfy Lear, Johnson, Bradley, and several critics following in their wake, offers her father nothing less than love as the divine ordering bond of the universe. When this love is banished, the entire cosmos dissolves into chaos. Ficino explains how this may be possible in *De Amore*, where he relates how "the matter of this world," which in the beginning "lay a formless chaos," received, by submitting to divine love, "the ornament of all the forms." And so, through love, "out of chaos it became a world." (Devereux 1969: 163) Conversely, without love, the universe collapses once more into primordial chaos. Othello obviously knows his "Platonicks" when he portentously claims:

and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.
(*Othello*, III. iii. 91-92)

Divine love being indistinguishable from divine beauty, Venus in effect says as much upon the death of Adonis:

For he being dead, with him is beauty slain,
And beauty dead, black chaos comes again.

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

(*Venus and Adonis*, 1019-1020)

When the ordering bond of love is banished, primordial chaos returns. Othello knows it but murders Desdemona anyway, Lear learns it after he banishes Cordelia, and Leontes is faced with a long, dark, barren winter which begins when he has Hermione and all her women thrown together in the dungeon, symbolically exiling the entire female sex into the underworld. If we remember that “Hermione” was in the seventeenth century identified with Harmonia, (Bloom 2004: 509) the mythical daughter of Mars and Venus and the harbinger of harmony and balance, we can understand why banishing and killing her love brings a dark, chaotic winter to Leontes’ court.

Deconstructing the love/duty dichotomy in these instances of banished representatives of love who are simultaneously found to be the bearers of harmony and order, Shakespeare proves that love *is* duty, order, and the bond of the universe, and that the two cannot be separated. Sonnet 26 is thus dedicated to

Lord of my *love*, to whom in vassalage
Thy merit hath my *duty* strongly knit.
(Sonnet 26: 1-2)¹⁶

Horatio promises to Hamlet his loyalty in the same vein: “As needful in our loves, fitting our duty”; and Kent rages at Oswald:

Such smiling rogues as these,
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain
Which are t’ intrinse t’ unloose.
(*King Lear*, II. ii. 273-275)

The holy cords are the bonds of love and duty, which Kent both amply demonstrates towards his king. The word “cord,” significantly, puns on the name Cordelia, which can in French, among other things, mean “the tier of cords.”

¹⁶ Emphases mine.

If female figures cannot be allowed to display any real theurgical agency with impunity, they certainly can represent a passive, easily lost and easily destroyed harmony of the universe. The deception surrounding the female sex revealed in the bed-trick can thus work in the opposite direction as well. Heavenly love can be mistaken for vulgar lust, and the ordering bond of the universe thus carelessly discarded, like Othello's handkerchief. Whichever direction is taken, one thing is certain for male heroes: one way or another, female figures are potentially deceptive and can easily transpire to be the exact opposite of what they seem. Anxiety surrounding women and love (damned if you do, damned if you don't; can't live with them, can't live without them) is a natural consequence of the doubleness of Neoplatonic Venus.

9.5. MIRROR UP TO NATURE: NATURE(S) IN NEOPLATONISM. HIGHER NATURE AS THEURGY

Another natural consequence of the doubleness of Neoplatonic Venus is the doubleness of Neoplatonic nature. As L. C. Knights finds in "Some Contemporary Trends in Shakespearean Criticism,"

In Shakespeare's poetic thought we find two apparently contradictory intuitions regarding man's relation to the created world existing independently of human choice and will. Nature and human values are felt as intimately related, and at the same time as antagonistic. (Wain 1968: 229)

This is because, as appears to be the case with many key concepts, there are, in fact, two separate and radically opposed natures in Renaissance Neoplatonism, corresponding to the two aspects of the goddess of nature, usually indistinguishable from aspects of Venus herself. As Line explains, one is a munificent, forming, spiritual figure, and the other a dark, chaotic, evil one. In her dark aspect, in Line's words, the goddess of nature "is Hecate; hers is the uncreated nature of the body of the world, as yet unawakened by love," and her attributes "darkness and lack of form." (Line 2004: 27) She is as close to unformed matter as nature can get.

In her more elevated aspect, nature is the divine forming principle that orders her own material lower aspect, and Ficino identifies this higher nature with the forming, fruitful aspect of Venus, who must not be despised, as she was “born of heavenly origin” and “beloved above others by an ethereal god.” (Line 2004: 40) Ficino habitually praises this munificent Venus, who is “universal nature itself, that is to say, a seminal, life-giving [power], infused through the whole world,” whose roles include “presiding over matter and giving birth to things.” (Allen 2002: 263)

These two separate aspects of nature are in Shakespeare’s opus most dramatically and elaborately juxtaposed in *King Lear*. Both aspects are so persuasively present in the tragedy that “nature” itself becomes a perplexing and anxiety-ridden word. Cordelia’s bond of love, discussed previously, certainly corresponds with higher nature. As John F. Danby interprets in “Cordelia as Nature,” for Cordelia “bond” means “natural tie,” a “duty willingly accepted and gladly carried out because it answers to right instinct.” When she says she loves Lear according to her bond, what she means to say, in Danby’s paraphrase, is “I love you as every normal girl loves her father – naturally!” (Bloom *Lear* 2008: 204)

According to the spiritual rules of higher nature, it is *natural* for elderly parents to be loved, obeyed, and honored. According to the material rules of lower nature, those with physical power *naturally* rule over those who are weaker – adult children over their enfeebled parents – as advocated in the falsified letter from Edgar. As per higher nature, the King is the King by divine right. As per lower nature, a dethroned King is but a poor, bare, fork’d animal. Under higher nature’s rule, the cosmos makes moral sense and thunder is an unproblematic signifier of divine justice. Under lower nature’s rule, the storm is hellish chaos let loose, the unleashed fury of the elements.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare’s source for the play, a single thunderclap dissuades the murderer sent by Ragan from killing the king, (Muir 1956: 147) which is in keeping with Kermode’s observation that “Elizabethan playwrights made conventional use of the inherited belief in thunder as the voice of the Divine Judge.” (Kermode 1969: 148) Lear also, at least initially, sees the thunder as an instrument of justice, which is apparent from his first reaction to it:

Tremble, thou wretch
That hast within thee undivulged crimes
Unwhipt of justice!
(*King Lear*, III. ii. 51-53)

However, the storm he endures transpires to be a much less benevolent and just affair. As a manifestation of primordial chaos, it corresponds to Edmund's view of nature to a much greater degree than Lear's or Cordelia's:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess, to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition, and fierce quality,
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate.
(*King Lear*, I. ii. 1-18)

He *is* base, according to Neoplatonism, as he is only able to grasp lower, material nature, the nature of animals. Recognizing no bonds of love, duty or custom, he renounces higher nature and embraces lower nature.

Significantly, Edmund despises astrology. He certainly has a point – “An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star!” – but his disbelief in astrology would certainly make it clear, to any Neoplatonist at least, that, for Edmund, heaven has no relevance and only chaotic matter exists. For, from Philo to Ficino, the followers of Plato have insisted on the significance of stars as windows into divine light and powerful portents of providence. Understandably then, to Northrop Frye in his “*King Lear: The Tragedy of Isolation*,” Edmund’s contempt of astrology signals the fall of the entire universe of the play from being ruled by higher nature to being usurped by lower nature:

The royalty of Lear held his society bound to that greater nature which is symbolized by the stars in their courses, the world of order and reason that is specifically the world of human nature. With the abdication we are now wholly confined to the lower physical nature of the elements, an amoral world where the strong prey on the weak. It is this lower nature, the Dionysian wheel of physical energy and fortune, to which Edmund attaches itself. He is Gloucester’s “natural” son, and on that level of nature he will act naturally. (Kermode 1969: 266)

For Edmund, the goddess of nature is Hecate. Significantly, the murdering Lucianus in *The Mousetrap* sees nature as Hecate too:

Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecat’s ban thrice blasted, thrice [infected],
Thy natural magic and dire property
On wholesome life usurp immediately.
(*Hamlet*, III. ii. 257-260)

What Hecate’s natural magic might entail is apparent in Macbeth’s speech to the witches:

Though you untie the winds, and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodg'd, and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's [germains] tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you.

(Macbeth, IV. i. 51-61)

Hecate's wild lower nature (winds and waves) unleashed by her minions is seen as rebelling against and overturning the higher nature of humanity and civilization, as evident in the destruction of symbols of divine and regal power (churches, castles, palaces, and pyramids), but also of all formed and begotten life on earth (corn, trees, and even the very "germains" – spiritual seeds – of higher nature themselves). Regicide is clearly part of this paradigm. When Lennox describes the night in which the king was murdered as "unruly" and goes on to relate that "the earth was feverous, and did shake," (*Macbeth*, II. iii. 54-61) we may easily get the impression that it was the unruly night itself, a personification of Hecate, that killed the divine king.

Lower nature is apparently unleashed in that infernal night: darkness refuses to succumb to daylight, as nocturnal owls eat diurnal falcons and as Duncan's horses, "[t]urn'd wild in nature," break their stalls, rebel against "mankind," and eat each other. However, in Rosse's understanding, the events of the night show without a doubt that

the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threatens his bloody stage.

(Macbeth, III. iv. 3-19)

Like Lear's storm, these portents can *simultaneously* be interpreted as *both* higher nature lamenting for her ruler *and* lower nature rebelling against him. Having two different natures as available concepts bearing the same name renders some of the customary questions any culture asks itself ("what is nature?" and "how normative should whatever it is be?") even more complex than usual.

9.6. THE ART ITSELF IS NATURE: ART vs. NATURE. ART AS THEURGY

The existence of two separate natures in Renaissance Neoplatonism also further complicates the perennial art-*vs.*-nature debate, which enjoyed a renaissance of its own in the Renaissance.

Perdita and Polixenes famously stage one version of it in *The Winter's Tale*. Perdita represents the primitivist position, usually espoused by the orthodoxly devout and the naïvely optimistic: nature, being divinely created, should not be adulterated with inferior, deceptive, and sacrilegious human artifice. (Wells 2005: 92) Polixenes retorts by pointing out that, being ultimately derived from nature, all that is must of necessity be natural:

Nature is made better by no mean
But Nature makes that mean; so over that art
Which you say adds to Nature, is an art
That Nature makes [...]

In the continuation of his argument, citing the example of grafts, however, Polixenes seems to somewhat expand his point of reference:

This is an art
Which does mend Nature – change it rather; but
The art itself is Nature.

(*The Winter's Tale*, IV. iv. 87-97)

There now appear to be two natures present in his final argument: the nature which needs to be mended and changed and the “artful” nature which does this mending and changing. The former is consistent with Neoplatonic lower nature, in need of additional forming; the latter with higher nature, which operates upon it and benevolently reorders it.

Polixenes, as Wells notes, presents “a classic humanist view,” proposing that “nature’s deficiencies can be remedied by art.” (Wells 2005: 92) Polixenes’ view, as well as the humanist view itself, however, is largely derived from the classic Neoplatonic view, and would have been difficult without the resurgence of Platonic ideas. The defense of the arts in Neoplatonic thought included a reminder that all we can perceive in the sensible world is already a mere imitation of Plato’s Ideas, as can be seen in the following passage from Plotinus:

If anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives. (Line 2004: 31)

Plotinus does not only defend the arts as *no worse* than nature; he also explicitly states that, by reaching the very molds in the intelligible realm that shape it, they are in fact *better* than sensible nature. Lower nature is a more material imitation of higher spiritual nature, and divine man can, as has been seen, transcend the earthly realm and theurgically order it from above.

Ficino bases his own apotheosis of the arts on this theurgical premise. In his *Platonic Theology*, he insists that “man imitates all the works of the divine nature, and perfects, corrects and improves the works of the lower nature.” (Burroughs 1944: 233) In *De vita*, he makes the same point, this time significantly comparing a magus with a gardener: in his words, “a Magus seasonably introduces the celestial into the earthly by particular lures just as the farmer interested in grafting brings the fresh graft into the old stock.” (Ficino 1998: 387) The imagery of grafting would certainly please Polixenes, but also Hamlet, though he is much less optimistic about “our old stock” in the nunnery

scene. Art in Neoplatonism hopefully *is* higher nature itself “gardening” lower nature: introducing order, weeding the chaos, and grafting the earthly with the celestial. This gardening image apparently applies for all meanings of the word “art” – which ranged from poetry and painting, through all practical and mechanical skills, to magic and alchemy (Turner 1999: 19) – as well as all that could be referenced by “higher nature” and “lower nature.”

The image of the garden, wherein higher nature orders lower nature is, according to Caroline Spurgeon, the most frequent mode in which Shakespeare alludes to nature – not only nature represented by the vegetation, but also human nature, and the nature of the state. (Spurgeon 1971: 164) Notable is the use of this image in *Richard II*, where the royal gardeners rightly wonder:

Why should we in the compass of a pale
Keep law and form and due proportion,
Showing as in a model our firm estate,
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers chok'd up,
Her fruit-trees all unprun'd, her hedges ruin'd,
Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars?
(*Richard II*, III. iv. 40-47)

The state is, apparently, in great need of the art of gardening itself – as is Hamlet's Denmark, an unweeded garden – and gardening the state is certainly a noble calling for an exalted theurgist. The highest arts, according to Ficino, are

those arts which, imitating the divine rule, take care of human government. Individual animals are hardly capable of taking care of themselves or their young. Man alone abounds in such a perfection that he first rules himself, something that no animals do, and thereafter rules the family, administers the state, governs nations and rules the whole world. (Burroughs 1944: 234)

The Neoplatonic/humanist view espoused by Ficino, the gardeners, and Hamlet is starkly opposed to that of Gonzalo, whose utopian primitivist commonwealth will have no law, letters, authority, traffic, or work – and

nature should bring forth,
Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.
(*The Tempest*, II. i. 163-165)

Gonzalo's ideal is, as has been noted, in keeping with Montaigne's essay on "Cannibals," in which he praises the society of "primitive" American Indians, deeming it to be superior to Plato's republic:

It is a nation, would I answer Plato, that hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politic superiority; no use of service, of riches, or of poverty; no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred but common, no apparel but natural, no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corn, or metal. (*The Riverside Shakespeare*, Introduction to *The Tempest* by Hallet Smith, vol. 2, p. 1657)

It has been said that Caliban – pure and unadulterated lower nature in all its glory – is "Shakespeare's refutation of Montaigne's primitivism." (*The Riverside Shakespeare*, Introduction to *The Tempest* by Hallet Smith, vol. 2, p. 1657) It is, moreover, a Neoplatonic refutation – Gonzalo's concept of nature is similar to Edmund's and it is demonstrably erroneous in the world of the play, as lower nature cannot be left to its own devices, but must instead be ruled by higher nature, just as matter must be formed and ordered by spirit, or chaos will ensue.

Art as higher nature gardening lower nature can thus be taken to mean, among other things, colonization, proper government, civilization, but also artistic expression in its more narrow contemporary sense, operating upon human nature and improving it. (Wells 2005: 91) The Neoplatonic concept of art as higher nature persuading lower nature to mirror it with more fidelity overlaps almost in its totality with the concept of

theurgy. Prospero is an artist in all of these variations of the concept of art as theurgy: a civilizing colonist, a Magus, but also, significantly, a poet, musician, and theatrical performer.

9.6.1. WELL TUN'D NOW: POETRY AND MUSIC AS THEURGY

When Philip Sidney boldly stated in his *Apology for Poetry* that Nature's "world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden," (Pollard 2004: 184) his argument in poetry's defense was Platonic. The world was golden, Plato had insisted, when the demiurge's hand was still firmly on the helm of the cosmos, ordering and directing it; having since deteriorated into a more chaotic brazen state, it can, presumably, be mended – not only in fancy, but, operating on the recipients' human natures, in reality as well – via the theurgical prowess of the divinely inspired poets. For, according to Ficino's interpretation of Plato, "poetry springs from divine frenzy," (Line 2004: 62) and it is by divine frenzy that "man is lifted above the nature of man and passes into God." (Ficino 2006: 53) Therefore the task of poetic frenzy is

firstly, through musical tones, to arouse those parts which slumber; through harmonious sweetness, to soothe those which are disturbed; and finally, through the harmonising of diverse elements, to dispel dissonant discord and temper the various parts of the soul. [...] it recalls the soul from the sleep of the body to the wakefulness of the mind; from the darkness of ignorance to the light; from death to life; from the oblivion of Lethe to the memory of the divine. (Ficino 2006: 53-55)

As can be seen, poetry was not necessarily easily separable from music, and both have multiple functions, deriving from Pythagoras' theory of the music of the spheres. (Dunn 1969: 391) One of the functions is, as has been noted, to inspire ascent towards the purely spiritual realms where this heavenly harmony can be enjoyed without the encumbrance of base matter. Pericles, for instance, explicitly hears "the music of the spheres" when he finds his lost daughter Marina, and then the goddess Dian appears to him, summoning him to the elevated realm of Ephesus. Lorenzo and Jessica strive to hear it when they initiate their ascent of love, and Prospero, abjuring his rough magic, has one

last request from Ariel: “some heavenly music.” All these instances of music appearing in Shakespeare’s work indicate ascent.

Music can be used theurgically to order and reorder the cosmos as well. As Pico della Mirandola claims, “nothing is more effective in natural magic than the hymns of Orpheus, if the right kind of music, intention of the mind, and other circumstances are applied which are only known to the wise.” (Allen 2002: 227-228) His teacher, colleague, and friend Ficino had taken this apparently matter-of-fact piece of advice quite seriously, as he spent some time attempting to discover this ideal combination of circumstances – in theory by combining Plato’s theory of correspondence between man and cosmos with Hermetic lore, and in practice by singing Orphic songs to what he believed to be an imitation of the music of the spheres. He was adamant that he had succeeded in drawing down the influence of the astral deities and absorbing a “certain celestial virtue” through this artistic/theurgic endeavor, a virtue he was then able to share with the surrounding cosmos – primarily his enchanted audience. (Wells 2005: 96)

Certain characters in Shakespeare’s world are able to do as much – notably Ariel, at least according to Ferdinand’s rapt review of the spirit’s virtuosity:

Sitting on a bank,
Weeping again the King my father’s wrack,
This music crept by me upon the waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion
With its sweet air.
(*The Tempest*, I. ii. 390-394)

Music creates harmony both in lower nature, calming and ordering the tempestuous waters of matter, and in an individual, allaying his passions, thought to derive from his material basis. Properly applied, then, harmonious heavenly music can theurgically help order physical nature and human nature.

Music can reorder wounded nature as well, infusing life-giving spirit into it. The Pythagoreans, Ficino notes, who “used to perform certain wonders by words, songs, and sounds in the Apollonian and Orphic manner,” apparently “knew how music healed, and

they knew that the more clearly the laws governing the cosmos could be reproduced in sound, the more effective the healing.” (Allen 2002: 239) Lord Cerimon reviving Thaisa and Paulina bringing Hermione to life both use music to help their ambitious theurgical performances.

The romances, in Dunn’s apt phrase, “reveal a world which operates largely according to Neoplatonic principles. This world is like a gigantic instrument upon which the gods play.” (Dunn 1969: 394) This is in stark contrast with what happens in the tragedies, where most attempts at theurgy are frustrated, their would-be agents maimed and/or murdered. Lavinia has her harmony-creating faculties forcibly taken away from her – when her rapists cut off her hands and her tongue, they rob her not only of her ability to communicate the crime to others, but also of her music, which apparently had the capacity to order the cosmos:

O, had the monster seen those lily hands
Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute,
And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not then have touch’d them for his life!
Or had he heard the heavenly harmony
Which thy sweet tongue hath made,
He would have dropp’d his knife, and fell asleep,
As Cerberus at the Thracian poet’s feet.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II. iii. 44-51)

Lavinia is here explicitly likened to Orpheus, the Thracian poet who famously quieted Cerberus with his lyre on his way to rescue Eurydice from Hades. Unlike Orpheus, Lavinia does not get her chance to use her music theurgically, and monstrous chaos finally devours all.

Orpheus was not only revered as a tamer of mythical beasts, but of real ones as well – including, apparently, the beast in human nature. In the *Arte of English Poesie*, George Puttenham relates that Orpheus “assembled the wild beasts to come in herds to hearken to his music, and by that means made them tame,” which can be taken to imply

that via “harmony and with melodious instruments” he was able to bring “the rude and savage people to a more civil and orderly life.” Wells interprets this as one more piece of evidence that the Orpheus story was for Renaissance humanists “a fable about the origins of civilization.” (Wells 2005: 12) Music, when used theurgically, can order and elevate – tame and civilize.

In light of this, it is both touching and eerie to hear Othello praise Desdemona as “an admirable musician! O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear.” (*Othello*, IV. i. 187-188) We know that, like Lavinia, she will not be allowed to do so, and the savageness of brutish humans – her husband, most notably – will be the death of her and her harmony-creating faculties.

Iago is a conscious destroyer of this musical harmony: “O, you are well tun’d now! But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music.” (*Othello*, II. i. 199-200) Cassio – the presumably Ficinian Florentine – attempts in the morning after the skirmish to restore it, apologizing to Othello by bringing musicians in front of his house. The plan does not come to fruition. The Clown ominously observes that “the general so likes your music, that he desires you for love’s sake to make no more noise with it,” further explaining that “to hear music the general does not greatly care.” (*Othello*, III. i. 11-17) Had the general cared more for the heavenly harmony of music, one feels forced to infer, he would have been far more reluctant to murder its source – and chaos would hopefully not have come again.

9.6.2. THE PLAY’S THE THING: THE THEATER AS THEURGY

Though there are fewer direct references to theatrical art as an instrument of theurgy in contemporary Neoplatonic and humanist sources – presumably as it had still not become one of those arts deemed to be respectable enough – it is not difficult to see how this complex and complete mode of artistic expression, including in Shakespeare’s time poetry, music, and visual representation, could have been embraced by dedicated would-be theurgists as a powerful means to reorder the cosmos and human nature.

The stage was, after all, already widely accepted as an apt metaphor for the world: Plotinus, as only one example, famously claimed that we should regard public calamities

as “stage-plays,” (Inge 1900: 331) and the notion of the world being like a stage was expressed in the writings of Pythagoras, Plato, and Petronius, recurring in medieval writers such as John of Salisbury and Wycliffe. Shakespeare’s England appears to have merely introduced the practice of putting this notion into the mouths of dramatic characters, (Pollard 2004: 20) turning it from a world-weary meditation on the illusory quality of terrestrial life into a fascinated reflection on the power of theatrical illusion.

“All the world is a stage” can be turned on its head and read as “a stage is all the world” – and more than that, an entire cosmos, at least in Yates’ ambitious interpretation of Fludd’s Hermetic memory system, which was allegedly based on the Shakespearean Globe Theatre. According to it, the Shakespearean stage had several distinct levels representing different cosmic spheres. The subcelestial world was depicted by the square stage on which ordinary men played their parts, the round celestial world which hung above it was meant to portray the “shadow of ideas,” the vestige of the divine, and above these “heavens” was the supercelestial world of ideas which shine down through the heavens onto the sensible world.

Yates conjectures that “scenes of higher spiritual significance in which the shadows are less dense” would have been played high up – such as Juliet’s solar appearance to Romeo on her balcony, or Cleopatra’s death high in her monument. Prospero once, according to stage directions, emerges “on the top,” invisible to the actors on the stage below the “heavens,” but visible to the audience, and his appearance would have been “singularly impressive as the apotheosis of the benevolent Magus who had risen beyond the shadows of ideas to the supreme unifying vision.” (Yates 1964: 365) As has been suggested here previously, the trap in the middle of the stage, often a pit leading into the underworld, and a portal to the demonic and chthonic, would have been likely to represent the O of infernal prime matter.

Apparently, then, the notion of the world as a stage – or the stage as the world – had at its core a stage which encompassed the entire Neoplatonic cosmos, including those parts of it which were normally outside of ordinary humans’ reach, as they were situated above the realm of the sensible world. In light of this, there can be two distinct interpretations of Hamlet’s famous exposition on

the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (*Hamlet*, III. ii. 18–22)

Theatrical performance can, on the one hand, be seen as simple mimesis – in which case Grady is right to refer to *The Mousetrap* as a “mimesis of mimesis.” (Grady 2009: 172) On the other hand, if seen through the lens of theurgical Neoplatonism, this “mirror up to nature” that Hamlet speaks of acquires an entirely different meaning. In Kodera’s fascinating study on mirror imagery in Renaissance Neoplatonism, he demonstrates that the mirror, which is “a signifier for matter, shadow and otherness,” grows into the “omnipresent image of all transactions between “above” and “below,” between spiritual and corporeal substances, between form and matter,” and thus comes to represent “reproducing divine order on a lower level.” (Allen 2002: 299) Hamlet’s view of theatrical performance as “the mirror *up* to nature” becomes, in light of this, interpretable as an endorsement of a theatrical theurgist’s effort to manipulate and persuade lower nature – at least that portion of lower nature at his disposal – to faithfully reflect higher spiritual nature.

A play is a shadow of a shadow only if it portrays life mimetically. However, if it instead shows the true face of the more spiritual and superior forming nature, it is in fact more real than “reality”; not a mimesis of mimesis, but an anti-mimesis, as it were: a return from the Other of matter to the originating “form and pressure” of Platonic and Hermetic higher nature. In this sense, Hamlet’s theater as the mirror up to nature is fully in keeping with Plotinus’ contention that “the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives.” (Line 2004: 31)

A theatrical theurgist does not merely imitate life in the subcelestial world, he attempts to do far more than that – offer a glimpse into the supercelestial world and persuade the former to mirror the latter – mending lower nature with the higher nature of art and ordering the base matter at his disposal. It is in this light that we can draw a further implication from Shakespeare’s pun on his theater as “the wooden O” in the Prologue to *Henry V* – not necessarily a merely sexual allusion to the “vaginal orifice,” which, as Gordon Williams cautions, should not always be resorted to whenever an “O”

is mentioned, (Williams 1997) but the Neoplatonic O, the nothing of matter that everything comes from and that the theurgist is invited to help animate and order. The “wooden O” is that little piece of matter available to this particular dramatist for theurgical manipulation.

The idea that a dramatist wields awesome power over his audience, affecting their minds, bodies, and souls, (Pollard 2004: xi) as his plays are able to “reconstitute us in their own image,” was one which defenders of the theater actually shared with the antitheatricalists. (Pollard 2004: 22) This is the primary way in which the theurgical function of the theater may have been manifested in actuality: a Neoplatonically inclined dramatist would have been eager to garden the natures of his characters – and his audience – weeding the passions and pruning the excesses.

He was able to do this by confronting them with their actions (as is done to Claudius in *The Mousetrap*) or by putting them through a purgatorial tempest of the chaos these actions naturally cause (as is done to Lear). Leontes undergoes both, but most notable is his remark on the effect that the “statue” has on him:

No settled senses of the world can match
The pleasure of that madness.
(*The Winter's Tale*, V. iii. 72-73)

It seems like the artist (Paulina or Shakespeare or both) is also capable of transferring the divine frenzy received from the supercelestial world onto the subcelestial one and inducing it in the stupefied spectator in order to gently inspire him to change.

The statue scene (along with its critical reception) is a good example of the ramifications of the theurgical aspect of the theater. Huston Diehl argues in ““Strike All that Look Upon With Marvel”: Theatrical and Theological Wonder in *The Winter's Tale*” that naming Paulina after Paul is a deliberate act on Shakespeare’s part, through which he explicitly joins the art vs. nature debate, as “Paul fosters a wonder in the natural world, understood to be God’s creation, while arousing suspicion of all human creations.” (Reynolds/West 2005: 25) In the statue scene, according to Diehl, Shakespeare

locates the source of true wonder in God's creations, not his own, and creates a theater that, in Perkins' words, is "wholly within the powre and practice of nature." In the process, Shakespeare differentiates his medium – the actor's body – from the sculptor's stone and naturalizes his own artifice by identifying his fictional characters with the actors who embody them. The statue scene succeeds in part because it focuses its spectators' gaze on the material body of the living actor who plays Hermione, an actor who, however skillfully *she* imitates a stone statue, cannot help but breathe, have "motion" in *her* eye, and appear to the audience as if "the very life" were "warm upon *her* lip."¹⁷

Paulina, by apparently bringing a statue to life, orchestrates a "wondrous theatrical spectacle that culminates in the revelation that the statue is no work of art at all, but a living woman, wrinkled by time." (Reynolds/West 2005: 26) In that, Diehl argues, Shakespeare refutes the accusations of primitivist antitheatricalists, in apparently claiming to only be presenting what God and Nature have wrought. (Reynolds/West 2005: 27)

The body Shakespeare presents on his stage, however, is *not* that of "a living woman, wrinkled by time." It is that of a young boy. If Shakespeare is denying the charges of magic or witchcraft in his theater, he is doing it with his tongue firmly in his cheek. For Hermione herself is an illusory product of the witchcraft of his wit, which transforms the materials available to him – the bodies of his actors – into whatever his imagination requires, whether that be dead bodies, moving statues, or aged women. The artist as theurgist organizes and manipulates the materials at his disposal to perform a ritual, as it were, showing a truth that is above a merely mimetic one, and through it reform the hearts and souls of those observing it.

In the character of Paulina, Shakespeare makes a Neoplatonic argument, resembling those made by the likes of Plotinus and Ficino, and reiterated in Polixenes' claim that "the art itself is nature." Significantly, Paulina is both a midwife and a theurgical artist. Her "art" therefore brings forth both nature in the primitivist sense – when she delivers Perdita – and art as higher nature in the Neoplatonic sense – when she

¹⁷ Emphases mine.

animates a statue and resurrects Hermione, both of which were feats notoriously performed by the Magi.

9.6.3. THE WITCHCRAFT OF HIS WIT: WORLDLY ILLUSION vs. THEATRICAL ILLUSION

Iago at one point says to impatient Roderigo “Thou know’st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft,” (*Othello*, II. iii. 372) and the witches in *Macbeth* actually function in the same way. That is, apparently, the only witchcraft that exists. Evil is in Shakespeare’s world never effected through magic – only the deceptive power of words.

“Good deception” – the transformative theurgy wrought by theatrical illusion – is likewise magical usually only as the witchcraft of wits. As Greenblatt explains in “Shakespeare and the exorcists,” Harsnett’s pamphlet, used subversively by Shakespeare in the creation of *King Lear*, implies that “*exorcisms are stage plays* fashioned by cunning clerical dramatists and performed by actors skilled in improvisation.” (Parker/Hartman 2005: 169)¹⁸ As Shakespeare always seems to maintain a problematicized, two-directional, close link between religious and theatrical expression, (Rozett 2003: 89) one could easily argue that Shakespeare turns the assertion on its head, suggesting that, instead, *stage plays are exorcisms*. As Marion Gibson notes in her *Possession, puritanism and print*, exorcism has long functioned as a strong metaphor for catharsis, both in the theatrical sense and “at a deep emotional level.” (Gibson 2006: 154)

The exorcism whose portion Edgar fakes is in actuality being performed on Lear and Gloucester – and, hopefully, the audience as well – as they are being purged and transformed. As Jan Kott shrewdly observes in “*King Lear*, or Endgame,” the “precipice at Dover exists and does not exist” (a paradox possible only in theater, and a theater with modest scenery at that), as the audience is “taken in” as much as Gloucester is. (Kermode 1969: 273-274) Edgar’s words – the witchcraft of his wits – create the theatrical illusion of the cliff at Dover for Gloucester and us. “Thy life’s a miracle,” Gloucester learns, as he could not have without the illusion of a close shave with death, and so do the spectators, similarly deluded into being afraid for his life.

¹⁸ Italics mine.

Hamlet's *Mousetrap* reveals another plane of reality in the cosmos of the play, forming a specific Platonic ladder within in. (Forker 1963: 215) The added rung on the ladder is arguably the highest of them all, as it is by way of theatrical illusion that more truth is revealed than is available in the rest of the play. Not only us Claudius' crime clearly shown to him – and us – for the first time, but Hamlet is also allowed to see himself identified, in the character of Lucianus, “nephew to the King,” with his nemesis Claudius as a potential parricide, regicide and thus deicide. Theurgical agency being usually frustrated in the tragedies, Hamlet's theatrical production fails to actually accomplish anything: Claudius may be somewhat contrite, but not sufficiently to change his course of action, and Hamlet himself is no less paralyzed with regard to his own.

Prospero is ultimately the most complete figure of the magus-playwright who weaves an elaborate web of theatrical illusion around his literally captive audience. Ending his – and Shakespeare's – theatrical production, Prospero concedes its illusory nature, but not without indicating that it is no more illusory than the globe (and the Globe) itself:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
(*The Tempest*, IV. i. 148-158)

The world itself being but a dreamlike illusion, the theurgical dramatist transpires to be an even more trustworthy figure than the demiurge. He does not even pretend to

offer “reality,” but, under the guise of apparent illusion, a dramatist-as-theurgist might approach what is even higher than this, merely subcelestial reality; he might reach the supercelestial world of originating ideas and infuse them into the world of his spectators, changing it and them for the better. Illusion in the *Tempest* – as elsewhere in Shakespeare’s opus when characters in need of correction are misled and manipulated – is benign and instructive, unlike the lies of those “most seeming virtuous” villains that deceive for selfish purposes.

Prospero the magus and Prospero the playwright are thus not really separable as figures, and, in light of this, the *Tempest* “gains additional pathos as the theatrical magician’s farewell to his art.” (Mitchell 2006: 83) For, as Yates has remarked, although “Shakespeare never wielded a wand, nor thought of himself as a magus, he *is* a magician, master of the spell-binding use of words, of poetry as magic.” (Yates 2003: 190)

*Man, more divine, the master of all these,
Lord of the wide world and wild wat'ry seas,
Indu'd with intellectual sense and souls,
Of more pre-eminence than fish and fowls,
Are masters to their females, and their lords.*
(The Comedy of Errors, II.i.15-25)

10. THE LEGACY OF DUALISM: A CONCLUSION

10.1. SHAKESPEARE'S DUALISM: A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A NEOPLATONIST

An analysis of dualistic concepts appearing in Shakespeare's work demonstrates how the complex and inherently inconsistent dualism of Renaissance Neoplatonism offers a plethora of aesthetically pleasing paradoxes. Fair is foul, and foul is fair. An attempt at ascent towards the purely spiritual can through illusion lead to one's fall, but, conversely, a descent into the depths of the material can bring regeneration and wisdom. Henosis – becoming one with the One – can be virtually indistinguishable from being dissolved in the nothingness of prime matter. Nothing can be made out of nothing, yet everything is made out of nothing. Although a dead nothingness, matter yields life when made fertile by the spirit, just like carrion kissed by the sun breeds maggots. What gives us life and substance is also what makes us mortal and thus kills us. The womb is a tomb and the tomb is a womb. Though best escaped, the cosmos is a masterpiece of divine harmony, which man has a duty to aid. Love can be a divine calling towards the purity of spirit, or it can be mere deceptive lust. One can, tragically, mistake it for mere deceptive

lust and banish it, only to realize that it was the bond of the universe, without which the world has reverted to primal chaos.

10.1.1. THE ARTIFICE OF ETERNITY: THE IMPACT OF DUALISM ON SUBSEQUENT LITERATURE

It is easy to see how Shakespeare's works easily served as a conduit for Neoplatonic spirit/matter dualism and how these entertaining paradoxes stemming from this dualism would continue to be rehearsed for centuries to come even if – or, rather, especially if – they were not expressed in explicit philosophical terms.

Allegory, arguably, does a better job at imprinting basic metaphysical concepts into human minds than dry philosophical systems. Ebreo, the author of the wildly popular dialog *Philo and Sophia*, notably agreed with Ficino that philosophical wisdom is best taught through the allegorical mode, not only because these lessons tend to stick better, but also because “allegory best corresponds to the metaphysical dualism of matter and form.” (Frank/Leaman 1997: 456-457) The snobbish division into the more spiritual and the more material castes of humans that dualistic systems are prone to can be seen manifested in their potentially different respective consumptions of the allegorical mode. The enlightened would, for instance, be able to see the highest meaning of Ebreo's work – the union of Love and Wisdom – whereas the uninitiated would think they have read nothing more than a mere love story. We can similarly envisage the groundlings in the Globe only being able to grasp Shakespeare's basic story, which might end in marriage or death, but those more elevated theatergoers – both intellectually and spatially – instead perceiving a union with the One, or a fall into the carnal, or possibly both, if they were watching a performance of one of his more ambiguous plays, such as *Antony and Cleopatra*.

This potential for ambiguity and paradox combined with the dignity accorded to the poet as a theurgical agent of divine ordering spirit could be what endowed Neoplatonic metaphysics with its enduring influence and its magnetic appeal to artists of all hues. Bloom has famously argued that Gnosticism is the real religion of poetry, but Neoplatonism – or, at any rate, the complex and anxiety-ridden amalgam of deliciously

paradoxical inconsistencies that Renaissance Neoplatonism presented – seems better suited for the role. Its influence on literature has certainly been more pervasive and enduring than that of Gnosticism proper, though all brands of dualism have left their mark on literature following Shakespeare. Several instances will be mentioned here for the sake of illustration.

Blake is generally allowed to have been a Gnostic, though many marvel at that apparent aberration, and his poetry is now frequently enough interpreted in this key. (Nuttall 2002) His so-called prophetic works show Gnostic sensibilities even more explicitly, and his Urizen is a figure which arguably resembles the Gnostic Demiurge or Lurianic Din more closely than any other in the history of English literature, ruling his material prison-like world through constricting laws.

Caroline drama had already reverted to the adulation of virginity under strong Platonic influences, (Dusinberre 1975: 48) and it is in Romanticism that Neoplatonism flourishes once more, one of its manifestations being the reemergence of idealized romantic love, preferably towards a woman who is dead and thus conveniently disembodied. The beloved woman could, spirit-like, be idealized, or, matter-like, depicted as terrifying, dark, carnal, or serpentine.

In his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge faces his protagonist, after a descent away from civilization, reason, and religion, with prime matter itself in the disturbing guise of sea snakes:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.
About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.

After initial disgust, the Mariner learns to embrace the material basis of the cosmos:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware.
(Coleridge 1961)

He is finally forced to, much like Prospero, acknowledge this thing of darkness his, and this is what ultimately brings him salvation.

Plato's eternal and pre-existent soul makes an appearance in Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy.
(Wordsworth 1854)

Coleridge and Wordsworth were clearly and openly Neoplatonists, and some poems of Shelley and Keats display Neoplatonic elements. Neoplatonic metaphysics and aesthetics most noticeably impacted the German Romantics, though these were not their only dualistic formative influences. Goethe confesses in his *From My Life: Poetry and*

Truth to the many unorthodox origins of his philosophy: “Neo-platonism was its basis; Hermeticism, mysticism, and cabalism also contributed something, and so I built myself a very strange-looking world.” (Ebeling 2007: 130)

Modernism commenced with scientific discoveries which seemed to resonate with dualistic notions, as did the law of entropy (allowing an understanding of the world as having a chaotic fundament), as did Darwin’s theory of evolution (allowing the conception of an animalistic basis for man), and as did Freud’s psychoanalysis (allowing a primitive, chaotic, irrational Id to be envisaged at the core of the human psyche). Freud, significantly, extensively read both Plato and Shakespeare, (Deats 2005: 245-246; Finucci/Scwartz 1994: 3)¹⁹ while Jung was heavily into alchemy and the Hermetica, which helps explain his concept of the Shadow as the dark, carnal, animalistic side of human nature which, however odious, needs to be faced and integrated.

The literature of the period reflects its spirit/matter dichotomy, mostly implicit and experienced and/or couched in different terms, but sometimes bluntly explicit, as is the case in Yeats’ work. His “Sailing to Byzantium” describes the yearning of the poetic subject to flee the carnal, sensible world of becoming for a world of purely spiritual being:

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another’s arms, birds in the trees –
Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.

¹⁹ As Armstrong points out, “Shakespeare has been in *psychoanalysis* for as long as psychoanalysis itself has been around, and in two senses: that is, Shakespeare has been both subject *to* psychoanalysis and a constitutive presence *in* psychoanalysis,” (Armstrong P. 2006: 5) both to such an extent that it can be said that “there is a Shakespearian myth at work in psychoanalysis,” (Rabaté 2001: 68) which is why, tautologically, “psychoanalysis ‘works’ in reading Shakespeare.” (Armstrong P. 2006: 225) Both discourses have in turn been heavily influenced by Platonic ideas, which is what enables a psychoanalytic critic such as Krims to assert that, Hamlet being disgusted with his mother’s sexuality, “Gertrude is but a seething mass of female Id for him now.” (Krims 2006: 67) The Id greatly resembles Neoplatonic matter, being the dark, chaotic, irrational, animalistic basis of a human that is somehow fluid and somehow feminine.

Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.
[...]
Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing.
(Yeats 1962: 101-102)

Yeats' *Mythologies* contain a fully explicit exposition of his Gnosticism. There are also implicitly dualistic modernists, notably those who intensively read Shakespeare and extensively quoted and paraphrased his words, such as Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf. Their spirit/matter dualism is mostly expressed in symbolic dichotomies such as the fixed/the fluid. All these dichotomies are implicitly or explicitly gendered. Young Stephen, for instance, is explicitly (and most probably at least somewhat scathingly) shown in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to be toying with a "novel" gendered spirit/matter cosmology.

10.2. OTHERING MATTER, OTHERING MOTHERING: THE IMPACT OF DUALISM ON CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER

The influence of gendered spirit/matter dualism has not been merely literary. Women have always been, in Iris Marion Young's phrase, "asymmetrically associated with sex, birth, age, and flesh," (Young 2005: 14) and Neoplatonic matter easily became another concept to link them with in popular imagination. As this matter was dark, irrational, and disturbingly chaotic, this is how women began to be perceived as well – and no longer as "merely" weaker and otherwise inferior.

As Coudert notes, it is in the early modern period that this phenomenon became pronounced:

The connection of women with the body and matter and men with the soul or spirit goes back to Aristotle and appears as a constant theme in the literature of the Middle Ages, but in the early modern period this dichotomy was drawn in starker terms than ever before as the genders became increasingly polarized. (Hanegraaff/Kripal 2008: 271)

It is quite conceivable that the resurgence of post-Platonic dualistic concepts contributed to the growing polarization of the genders, with an intensifying expectation that males conform to the notion of active, fixed, forming and ordering rational spirit, and females to the notion of passive, pliable, but also disturbingly fluid and irrational matter.

For many European countries, notably including England, the metaphysical shift towards a gendered spirit/matter dichotomy as a basis for determining proper gender identities and relations was partly introduced through strains of Protestantism. The notions of Calvin and Zwingli, who were themselves influenced by Renaissance Neoplatonism, and had some distinctly dualistic features, (Kristeller 1961: 63) made their way into the practical, everyday religiosity of women and men.

Late medieval Christianity had been “interpreted and performed in very bodily ways,” and Catholic women, including Englishwomen, had long been taught to identify with the Virgin Mary while pregnant, in labor, or nursing their infants – all states and actions depicted in positive bodily images by medieval Catholicism. When some reformers went so far in their iconoclastic zeal as to begin resembling anti-cosmic heresies of old – denying Christ’s human body, denying the reality of the Eucharist, saying Mary was “an empty sack of saffron” – the bodies of ordinary men and especially women were demoted as a result. Pregnant and laboring women were forbidden to pray to the Virgin Mary and instructed instead to remember Eve’s sin and pray to Christ. Christ himself was masculinized as a figure, his medieval representation as a mother of all overflowing with milk being inconceivable in the Reformation. (Fissell 2006: 10-55)

The womb, which had been considered wondrous and miraculous, was now represented as monstrous. Women were, like Coriolanus (but with a diametrically opposite meaning), having their “nothings monster’d.” Pamphlets about monstrous births resulting from lustful, uncontrolled wombs, went hand in hand with those about

murdering mothers and witches. (Fissell 2006: 10-55) Interestingly, midwives were often accused of practicing witchcraft at a time when control over the birthing process was increasingly being taken over by male doctors. (Laoutaris 2008: 269)

Gendered spirit/matter dualism built into the incipient obstetrics of early modern times and manifested in treating the laboring woman as a material object to be managed (Young 2005: 55-61) – and a potentially recalcitrant and perilous object at that – continues to plague the Western world. In its benign form, the laboring woman is construed as being heroically defended against her body – chaotic, irrational, dangerous and inimical both to her child and to her own true “self” – via elective caesarians or “active birth management” which contains various, usually unnecessary, and almost invariably unpleasant interventions. In its less benevolent aspects, it is manifested in punishing the woman’s body for its demonstrated sexuality, which is sometimes even explicitly stated, as was the case with symphysiotomy in Ireland, openly practiced in order to discourage women from having further sexual relations.

The man – and especially woman – of orthodoxy were humbled, but whole. The man – and even woman – of dualism could hope to achieve godlike status and become one with the deity, but only provided that said man – and especially woman – be willing to forfeit the gross material body. It is little wonder that many women feel impelled to construct their identities in stark opposition to their bodies, especially in contexts involving pregnancy, birth, and childrearing, which seem to designate them as animalistic and carnal. Opting for caesarians (“because I don’t want to risk it”), opting out of breastfeeding (“because I’m not a cow”), and delegating “menial” childcare to even lower beings, such as immigrant nannies (instead of, say, sharing it with the children’s father), are all perfectly understandable personal choices in post-Platonic cultures. Second-wave feminism attempted to solve the conundrum of association with procreation and its resulting demotion of women in a manner similar to what anti-cosmic dualisms offered their female adherents. Women were warned that having children will ruin their chances of amounting to anything in those spheres that really matter – which are a historical continuation of those spheres traditionally allotted to male spirit: spiritual, then intellectual, and finally professional pursuits.

The impact of dualistic metaphysics is perceptible in contemporary abortion debates, where one commonly used argument is othering the unborn human as “a cluster of cells” or “a blob of tissue,” which is unformed and lacks consciousness (Platonists might say “unensouled” or “devoid of spirit”), and opposed and inimical to the woman inasmuch as she is a conscious, rational, productive subject, and not a primitive, animalistic “breeder.” Othering the child in dualistic discourses enters into childrearing ideologies as well, especially those belonging to those Protestant currents which are inimical to the body. In these ideologies, the importance of feeding and sleeping schedules, imposed in order to “civilize” the infant, is stressed, and we can see the crying infant labeled as being “carnal” (which is apparently a sin) for demanding food or the close presence of another human body. A somewhat similar mechanism is at work in ideologies surrounding artificial reproductive technologies which employ donor gametes (and sometimes even adoption): the new parents view themselves as having merely taken base matter from the inferior (less affluent) biological parents, which they have the right to fashion in their own image. Consequently, they feel free to disregard the resulting offspring’s genetic origins as insignificant, sometimes much to their chagrin. All these instances of adultism – othering small children as not fully human – are justified via an implicit spirit/matter dichotomy.

Women allow the othering of their bodies and their children in an attempt to redeem at least their “true inner selves,” as they seem to have but one choice: the choice of *how* to respond to the invitation to be identified with the material and the carnal. Should they accept, then they might, conversely, feel driven to embrace eco-feminism, Neopaganism, or Wicca, and end up giving birth in a pool while chanting to various goddesses. Deconstructing these dichotomies, or at least becoming aware of them and their origins, might be a first step out of the various double binds that women find themselves in.

Queen Elizabeth herself might have contributed to some double binds in an effort to legitimize her rule as the first female monarch of England. She famously elided the dualistic emergent early modern concept of interiority as essential and real with the distinctly non-dualistic medieval concept of the king’s “body politic” as opposed to his “body natural,” (Kantorowitz 1997: 144-145) with some strange and disturbing results,

noted by Stephen Cohen in his “(Post) modern Elizabeth: Gender, politics, and the emergence of modern subjectivity.” By divorcing identity from biology, Cohen claims, she invited uncertainty as to what her gender was – “an anxiety that produced a growing obsession with Elizabeth’s sexuality.” (Grady 2002: 24-29) Ben Jonson is quoted as saying that “She hath a membrana which rendereth her incapable of man,” whereas she is elsewhere accused of being given to an “unspeakable and incredible variety of lust.” (Burgess 1970: 69) The somehow essentially masculine, but distinctly female-bodied Virgin Queen – an “unnatural” figure either way – ended up occupying both extremes of the virgin/whore dichotomy.

The virgin/whore dichotomy, itself a product of dualistic metaphysics, as has been noted, split womanhood into the idealized spiritual virgin and the carnal whore. On the one hand, it has caused women to be seen as more frail, irrational, and fleshly. On the other hand, it has also resulted in aberrations such as the Victorian concept of the woman as the “angel in the house” – asexual and childlike – and the accompanying barbarization of men, who were now seen as the lustful ones, unable to control themselves. This led, like all gender stereotypes are wont to, to different but equally unfortunate consequences, some of which can still be felt, such as the easy proliferation of rape culture.

Many notions derived from dualistic concepts (such as, for instance, the notion of ecstatic and all-consuming erotic love) are difficult or impossible to integrate into our cultural practices (such as the choice model of marriage), but are also difficult to eradicate, which is why it is important to at least raise awareness of their originating context (dualistic metaphysics inimical to procreation and marriage) and the implications stemming from that context (death and union with divinity is the true consummation of dualistic Eros, and not “happily ever after” with a spouse). Many fascinating implications of dualistic metaphysics can be found everywhere in our current ideologies, which could be explored in great detail, but will only be mentioned here: the ideology of pro-ana websites and forums (exhorting their adherents to control their gross carnal desires, get rid of loathsome fluid flesh, and reach the ideal – which is being reduced to “pure” solid bones); the ideologies of Trans* (positing an essential gendered identity inimical to the inconsequential body) as opposed to Queer (doing the exact opposite) activism; the disgusted misogyny of some male homosexual cultural discourses, and many more.

10.3. HEAVENLY ORDER OR ITS SUBVERSION? THE IMPACT OF DUALISM ON POLITICS

As is the case with women, whenever any humans need to be othered in order to justify subduing them, they will almost inevitably be depicted in terms positioning them as “matter” in the hierarchical spirit/matter dichotomy. This was demonstrably the case with various “barbarians” that were being colonized by the burgeoning English Empire in Shakespeare’s time. The Renaissance Magus, dominating and ordering the world of chaotic matter, easily transformed into the colonist, ruling and civilizing the carnal, wild, irrational brutes. (Mitchell 2006: xvii; Laoutaris 2008: 96)

This is not to claim that this civilized/brutish dichotomy, based on spirit/matter dualism, did not begin to collapse soon after it was constructed. In his *Religio Medici*, Thomas Browne already warns us that, being carnal, “we are what we all abhorre, Antropophagi and Cannibals, devourers not onely of men, but of our selves.” (Laoutaris 2008: 121) In a way, Prospero deconstructs the dichotomy – while in the process of constructing it – the moment he is forced to utter of Caliban “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.” Laoutaris observes that as “the boundaries between the beast and the natural historian become blurred, the neo-Platonic scaffolding that had shored up the colonial project begins to seem very weak indeed.” (Laoutaris 2008: 129)

The dichotomy will be further expounded and further destabilized during the next great English colonial expansion, ushering in the era of Modernity. Conrad’s Kurtz notoriously descends into an African heart of darkness on an exalted mission to civilize its dark, irrational, carnal barbarians, only to end up barbarically exclaiming “Exterminate all the brutes!”

The notion of divine man being able and invited to replicate divine order onto baser matter was a staple of Renaissance Neoplatonism, and Neoplatonic concepts such as the great chain of being resonated well with royalist doctrines such as the divine right of kings, which has sometimes been presented as unproblematic. “It was a commonplace” in the Renaissance, Tillyard noted, “that order in the state duplicates the order of the macrocosm.” (Tillyard 1972: 96) However, dualistic metaphysical systems, though they

can hold notions of corresponding macrocosm/microcosm harmonies, also have a tendency to ask further subversive questions such as Is there order in the macrocosm? And if there is, is it being properly duplicated?

The dualistic notion of a divine spark in each human decenters the right to rule. Anti-cosmic dualisms – whose one true God is unknown and unknowable and infinitely removed from this world, which is instead ruled by a usurper far beneath the divine sparks he is keeping imprisoned – are more overtly politically subversive. They are also, however, less inclined to inspire their adherents to be actively involved in changing this irredeemable world than pro-cosmisms, less squeamish and more optimistic about it.

It is, arguably, the Neoplatonic notion of an interior, spiritual self that really matters, essentially identical to other divine sparks, which humanism adopted, that made democracy and equality as we now know them possible. The Neoplatonic brand of dualism quite possibly also inspired religious tolerance, as any differences in ritual practices began to be seen as relatively unimportant. It is within Renaissance Neoplatonism that Judaism came to be studied and respected after yet another dark period of pronounced anti-Semitism among Christians, and prominent Neoplatonists such as Nicolas of Cusa and Ficino were notably involved in ecumenical movements.

10.4. A POST-PLATONIC WORLD

It is frequently stated that we live in a post-Christian world, but it is becoming increasingly clear that, in many ways, this world is instead post-Platonic. Perhaps the reason we have lost sight of this is our tendency to mystify the occult on the one hand, and sanitize the origins of modern philosophy and science on the other.

Platonism has admittedly long been disregarded as “the foundation of much of modern philosophical thought,” and the syllabi of many university courses in the history of philosophy generally start with Descartes, (Hutton/Hedley 2008: 2-3) not even taking into consideration that Descartes himself was heavily indebted to the Platonic tradition in his metaphysics. In this, he was not alone: Spinoza, Leibniz, and Kant, to name a few, were all demonstrably influenced by it. (Kristeller 1961: 68) German Idealism was

perhaps the clearest continuation of such “pure” Neoplatonism as was expounded by Plotinus and Proclus – a conclusion, for instance, not resisted by Schelling and Hegel.

Platonic notions were built into the foundations of modern science as well. “Neoplatonic metaphysics,” Clucas argues, “played a significant, albeit unrecognised, role in the development of modern science.” (Clucas 2006: 3) As Mitchell claims, “the new scientific age began not with a rejection of magic, but with a revival of interest in occult theory and practical magic.” (Mitchell 2006: 5) Dualistic metaphysics were also used to justify technology subduing nature, and the “occult traditions themselves were annexed to allow the development of technology. The Magus metamorphosed into the engineer,” once more conquering the world of matter, only by different means. (Mitchell 2006: xvii)

In this post-Platonic world, we no longer mention categories such as “spirit” and “matter,” just like we do not believe in Plato’s Ideas. Our new ideologies with their new dichotomies, however, still rehearse this split, only couched in different terms. The dark otherness of matter, though no longer explicitly stated, is still firmly built into the foundations of our civilization.

10.5. THIS DUALISM WILL SELF-DECONSTRUCT

This thesis, which began with quoting Psalms and Plato, will have to be excused for ending with a cartoon reference. Attempting to chop a worm in half with an axe, Foghorn Leghorn places it on a tree stump on which he has drawn a line. Evading the axe, the worm wiggles now to the one side of the dividing line, now to the other, creating the illusion each time that one half of the worm is somehow gone. This leads Foghorn Leghorn to conclude:

I know what you’re gonna say, son. When two halves is gone, there’s nothin’ left. And you’re right, it’s a little ole worm who wasn’t there. Two nothin’s is nothin’. That’s mathematics, son! You can argue with me, but you can’t argue with figures! Two half nothin’s is a whole nothin’!

Something similar ultimately happens with spirit/matter dualism. When either side of the dichotomy is seen in its final extreme, both are shown to be nothingnesses. Pure spirit, only able to be described in negative terms, can only be experienced after a final dissolution into the nothingness of henosis. Prime matter, on the other hand, is an absolute darkness, privation, and void. Any thing or being or cosmos composed of the two will also be a nothingness, as two half nothin's is a whole nothin' – and the dichotomy neatly collapses.

We can keep attempting to arbitrarily slice the worm in half and hold on to its real, important, or valuable part. Or we can believe Foghorn Leghorn that two nothin's is nothin' – though it might be wise to remember that he is here trying to take the whole worm for himself – and give up. We can, conversely, refuse to be taken in, and insist that the worm, at any rate, is real – and whole.

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