Introduction
‘Shakespeare's Religious Afterlives’

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This special issue aims to participate in the ‘turn to religion’ experienced by Shakespearean scholarship in the last few decades by delving into an undeveloped field of research within the area of Shakespeare studies: the author’s religious afterlives. By focusing on specific case studies, we propose to analyse how the author and his work have been used to illustrate and support theological and educational concepts; translated considering the implications of biblical intertextuality; variously recreated in religious terms and in different religious contexts; and taught from religious and spiritual standpoints.

Shakespeare’s works were written during an era in which everyday life was permeated by and understood in terms of religious doctrine and practices and where the tensions between the residual Catholic discourse and the Protestant authority of his time were constantly surfacing. The permanent underlying presence of religious and theological themes in Shakespeare’s works, such as transcendence, redemption, compassion and righteousness, among many others, and his representation of the era’s religious ambivalence and complexity make them a very rich source for a variety of religious recreations that encompass different religions and spiritual modes of thought and experience. Religion is, therefore, not understood in this volume as a mere doctrinal or spiritual code or a set of ritual or liturgical experiences projected onto a literary text but as a much broader, lively and creative enterprise which engages in a dynamic relationship with Shakespeare and his readers. Conscious of the dubious etymology of the term (relegere, ‘to read again’; religare ‘to bind’), this volume focuses on religion as a discipline actively involved in compelling and still uncharted re-readings of Shakespeare’s production. Therefore, we intend to highlight the intersections of the different religious contexts of Shakespeare’s readers (translators, clergymen, playwrights, stage and film directors, scholars, teachers and students) with the religious and spiritual resonances they find in Shakespeare’s oeuvre and how they have engendered new approaches to them. The contributions to this volume intend to explore the cultural and ideological implications of these approximations to the work of Shakespeare.
The ‘turn to religion’ has taken place thanks to scholars who have placed religion, and spirituality, at the core of their critical analysis and not treated it as an instrumental discipline at the service of political discourses as has been the case in new historicist and cultural materialist Shakespeare studies. It is worth noting that whereas numerous labels are used to categorise contemporary theoretical approaches to Shakespeare (deconstructive, psychoanalytical, feminist, new historicist, cultural materialist, etc.) there is no established ‘religious critical approach’ to the author. The fact that religion is quite often (mistakenly) linked to irrationality, instinct, subjectivity or intuition draws the suspicion of certain sections of the academy who consider that the connection between literature and religion might not result in rigorous scholarly analysis and may be led by the religious orientations of the reader and not by his/her intellectual curiosity. The publication of The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion (2016) or the academic reputation of journals such as Religion & Literature, Literature and Theology, Christianity and Literature or Renascence clearly attest, however, to the validity of this intersection. In the more specific area of Shakespeare studies, whereas new historicists and cultural materialists such as Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Louis Montrose and Graham Holderness, among many others, have successfully implanted in the scholarly collective consciousness a ‘political Shakespeare’ – and despite the fact that the author’s work is pervaded by references to the Geneva Bible, the Bishop’s Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Psalter and the sacramental rites – there is still a feeling that ‘it might seem odd to entitle a study Religious Shakespeare or Shakespeare’s Religious Drama’. As Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti argue, this attitude has been denounced by authors such as Debora K. Shuger who, in works like Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure (2001), reminds scholars of early modern literary studies that to treat religion ‘as an outdated vocabulary for individual and social experience is a form of scholarly and cultural myopia’. Charles LaPorte, aware of the hindrance encountered by critics involved in research on Shakespeare and religion, proposes approaching this area ‘without special embarrassment or disapprobation’. As David Scott Kastan argues, ‘we recognize it [religion] now as an essential, if often perplexing dimension of early modern identity, and we sense its haunting presence in Shakespeare’s plays, even if we do not know precisely how to account for this and are not sure exactly what it might mean’. This unfathomable religious nature of Shakespeare’s works has fostered not only myriad analyses of the ambivalent engagement of the author’s works with the religious culture of the time, but also a rich variety of differing critical, literary and artistic religious readings of them that should no longer be relegated to the margins. The answer we propose to former Archbishop of Canterbury and Shakespearean scholar Rowan Williams’ question of ‘Is the question of “Shakespeare and Religion” simply a decorative excursion on the margin of Shakespeare reception and criticism?’ is a resounding ‘no’.

The ‘turn to religion’ might be interpreted more as a ‘return to’ or, as Julia Reinhard Lupton has argued, a ‘reaffirmation of’ religion within Shake-
speare studies since religion has been central in the analysis or reception of Shakespeare since the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{11} It was the author's exceptional intellect, more than his work, that was initially perceived as divinely inspired in the seventeenth century by Samuel Sheppard, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Lewis Theobald and in the eighteenth century in John Bell's edition where the author was described as 'sacred', 'venerable', 'divine', 'immortal', or even as a 'God'.\textsuperscript{12} Michael Dobson has shown how this sacralisation reached its peak during Garrick's 1769 Jubilee and Robert Witbeck Babcock has proven that until the turn of the nineteenth century allusions to the author's divine inspiration were recurrent.\textsuperscript{13} Charles LaPorte demonstrates that by the 1840s this reverential attitude towards the author pervaded British literary imagination.\textsuperscript{14} Thomas Carlyle's reference to Shakespeare as 'the Prophet of God' speaks for itself.\textsuperscript{15}

Since the late seventeenth century, when Anglican clergyman and historian Richard Davies declared that 'he [Shakespeare] dyed a Papist',\textsuperscript{16} Shakespeare's religious background has been a matter of controversy. Take for example The Religion of Shakespeare, based on Shakespearian scholar Richard Simpson's writings in the mid-nineteenth century, which challenged the authority of clerical men of letters such as Bishop William Wordsworth, who took Shakespeare to be an orthodox Protestant.\textsuperscript{17} Henry Sebastian Bowden described Simpson as 'a pioneer of “modern thought”' and relates his critical insights to those of Edward Dowden or Edward Caird, among others, who considered Shakespeare a 'positivist, a pantheist, a fatalist, in short, a typical agnostic'.\textsuperscript{18} In 1848 William J. Birch and in 1900 George Santayana tried to prove Shakespeare's irreligiosity, which in the twenty-first century is still being argued by authors such as Eric S. Mallin in Godless Shakespeare (2007).\textsuperscript{19} Multiple and differing theories on this matter have emerged, from Herbert Thurston's 'The Religion of Shakespeare' in 1912 – acknowledging Catholic overtones in his works but concluding that the question 'must remain forever uncertain'\textsuperscript{20} – to Graham Holderness's The Faith of William Shakespeare (2016), arguing for Shakespeare's Protestantism.\textsuperscript{21} Twentieth- and twenty-first-century studies dealing with Shakespeare's faith have originated powerful analyses of his dramatic engagement with the religious, philosophical, ideological and literary currents of his time.\textsuperscript{22} Other relevant works have focused on the author's dramatic indebtedness to Christian culture.\textsuperscript{23} Works such as Roland M. Frye's pioneering Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine (1963) presented Shakespeare primarily as a secular author, in opposition to 'the school of Knight' – led by G. Wilson Knight's spiritual approach to Shakespeare's plays – by arguing that the author was using theology for dramatic purposes only, an idea that Alison Shell and Gillian Wood have brilliantly developed recently.\textsuperscript{24} The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a revival of scholarly interest in Shakespeare and religion. The Hoghton Tower conference in 1999 – organised by Richard Wilson – on evidence for Shakespeare's Catholic connections, the 2000 meeting of the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford-upon-Avon, and the publication of Shakespeare Survey volume 54, Shakespeare and Religions,\textsuperscript{25} preceded a great
number of works on Shakespeare and the Bible, and other studies that combined historicist approaches with postmodern critical methods to explore the author’s dramatic representation of political theology, the Reformation, and early modern religious practices.

These contemporary studies on Shakespeare and religion have attested to the author’s alertness to the religious tensions of his time, focused on the author’s imaginative recreation of the different religious currents of early modern culture and the way he fused the sacred and the mundane. They show that Shakespeare and religion is undoubtedly a growing field within Shakespeare studies in contemporary Shakespeare critical discourse, as Hannibal Hamlin’s *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion* (2019) also attests. However, and despite the importance of the study of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives to fully appreciate the cultural impact of the author’s reception history, there is no comprehensive critical account of them and their literary, cultural, social and religious implications. The contents of Hamlin’s *Cambridge Companion* reflect this scholarly void. It compiles seventeen outstanding chapters by renowned Shakespeare scholars – and a penetrating afterword by Rowan Williams – dealing with Shakespeare’s faith, the author’s exploration and representation of the religious context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and his works’ engagement with religious themes, biblical allusions and theological controversies. However, there is not a single chapter devoted to how Shakespeare has been recreated in religious terms or to the academic relevance of the study of these recreations.

Some critical attention has, however, been paid to Shakespeare’s religious afterlives. In *Shakespeare Survey 54, Shakespeare and Religions* (2001), we find seven (out of sixteen) inspiring and pioneering articles by leading Shakespeare scholars on Shakespeare’s religious afterlives from different perspectives – commemorative, narrative, theatrical, and related to Shakespeare translations into Hebrew and Mexican indigenous languages – in different contexts, periods and locations since Garrick’s Jubilee. These articles are case studies embedded in the broad area of Shakespeare and religion, but they are not categorised as having specific underlying connections as Shakespeare’s religious afterlives with common key features and theoretical and methodological assumptions. Robert Miola’s description of the nine essays dealing with Shakespeare’s faith or the theatrical representation of religious practices and beliefs of his age as the volume’s ‘most important contribution to current critical discourse’, and his reference to the articles of the volume devoted to the analysis of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives as merely ‘rewarding’, show the marginality of this area of study at the time.

Twenty years later, this marginality is still manifest: examples of critical studies on the topic are scarce but they reveal powerful findings in the history of Shakespeare’s reception. For example, Péter Dávidházi’s examination in *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare* (1998) of the Romantic appropriations of Shakespeare in England and in Hungary as examples of a quasi-religious cult-formation and LaPorte’s study in *The Victorian Cult of Shakespeare* (2020)
of the religious dimension of Victorian Shakespeare criticism are two outstanding examples of how the exploration of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives is necessary to draw a precise picture of the author’s cultural authority over time. The research done by Marta Cerezo is in dialogue with both authors and related to two under-investigated areas under the scope of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives, such as the commemorative Shakespeare celebrations at the Vatican in 1964 and 2016 and the commemorative Shakespeare sermons tradition in Holy Trinity Church (Stratford-upon-Avon) from 1810 to our time.

Rowan Williams, Graham Holderness and Paul S. Fiddes, preachers of the Shakespeare sermons in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2006, 2018 and 2022 respectively, are authors of works that prove the cultural significance of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives. As clear illustration of the notion of ‘Creative Criticism’ – the continuity between literary criticism and creative writing – Holderness and Williams draw on some of the historical material about Shakespeare's Catholic background in the story ‘He dyed a Papist’ (2011) and in the play Shakeshafte (2013) respectively; Holderness is also the author of the play Wholly Writ (2014) on Shakespeare and the King James Bible. Paul S. Fiddes has analysed how contemporary theological thought can be shaped by reading Shakespeare’s texts and viewing his plays. Fiddes’ publications on his ‘liturgies for voices’ made out of extracts from Shakespeare's plays, Christian liturgical rites, and poems written especially for the liturgy are highly representative of the literary and religious power of Shakespeare's religious afterlives.

We must mention other relevant precedents of the critical analysis of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives, such as Christopher Baker’s chapter on ‘Religion in Performance’, which highlights the religious connotations of Shakespearean theatrical productions and filmic adaptations in the twentieth and at the turn of the twenty-first century. In the area of translation studies, Jenny Wong’s study published in 2018 of the translatability of the religious dimension in Shakespeare in Eastern traditions is also worth mentioning.

These valuable, though scant and isolated, precedents inspired the proposal for the seminar ‘Religion and Shakespeare’s Afterlives’ co-organised by Marta Cerezo and Olivia Coulomb at the World Shakespeare Congress (Singapore, 2020). The seminar invited contributions to reflect on, first, how both the religious and secular resonances of the author’s works have been critically and artistically perceived and reimagined from a religious point of view in different contexts and traditions throughout history; and how these recreations have engaged with relevant philosophical, cultural, social and political dimensions of their own time. The articles of this special issue, many of them based on the contributions to the WSC ‘Religion and Shakespeare’s Afterlives’ seminar, answer some of the questions raised during its two sessions in relation to how the complexities of translating Shakespeare between cultures have been addressed in religious terms; the kinds of dialogue that can be found between Shakespeare’s texts and religious texts; how this dialogue has been integrated into the public civic sphere by Shakespeare’s readers; how the circulation between secular and religious energies works in Shakespeare’s religious
afterlives; the ways in which Shakespeare’s explorations of spiritual themes have become pivotal in religious discourses worldwide; and the ethical value of Shakespeare’s religious afterlives in our globalised environment.

The first two articles of this volume deal with Shakespeare’s religious afterlives in translation. Per Sivefors’ ‘Sweden and Shakespeare’s Protestant Afterlife: Three Translators in the Nineteenth Century’ is a fascinating analysis of the unexplored Swedish nineteenth-century translations of Shakespeare’s works by Olof Bjurbäck, Johan Henrik Thomander and Carl August Hagberg. Sivefors analyses Rousseau’s influence and Romanticism’s impact on Bjurbäck’s translations, which expurgated the Bard’s plays to exalt Protestant virtues; Thomander’s defence of the Protestant egalitarian ideal of education; and Hagberg’s philological correctness as a reflection of the Reformation’s ideal of going *ad fontes*. Sivefors argues that despite their different approaches to Shakespeare’s oeuvre, these translators reflected the interrelation between the sacred and the secular at work during the period in the Swedish education system in which Shakespeare was used to promote a just and equal society by conveying Protestant ideals to the Swedish people.

Translation is also the focus of Luis Conejero-Magro’s article ‘“Our golden crown”: Analysis of Religious Intertextuality in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, and Its Translation into Spanish’. Conejero-Magro studies the biblical intertexts in *Richard II* (Act 3, Scene 2) and the Spanish translations by Astrana Marín (1941), Valverde (1967), Pujante (2008), Pasini (2009) and Merino (2012). Drawing on Lawrence Venuti’s model of intertextual relations in translation, this article’s analysis of the scriptural passages at stake and their translations into Spanish reveals Shakespeare’s recontextualisation of biblical intertexts in his portrayal of Richard II’s divine right concept of kingship and legitimacy and the extent to which Spanish translators have been faithful to it.

This volume also explores stage and filmic appropriations and adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays from a religious standpoint. In ‘Between Two Worlds: *The Dybbuk*, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and Reparative Tragedy’, Lisa Starks convincingly attests that through the reparative nature of Kabbalah (*tikkun olam*) and Jewish folklore, S. Ansky’s 1918 play *The Dybbuk* and its stage and screen adaptations (Michael Waszyński’s classic 1937 Yiddish film; Sidney Lumet’s 1960 television adaptation; Tony Kushner’s and Joachim Neugroschel’s 1997 stage production) transform Shakespeare’s play into a ‘reparative tragedy’ as they transplant Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* into a different religious framework outside the Christian tradition. Khonon and Leah’s spiritual afterlife together (as the Hasidic Romeo and Juliet) dismantles Shakespeare’s lovers’ tragic end and heals their families’ feud. But, on a deeper ethical level, their union of souls repairs the traumatic past of pogroms and their aftermaths and points to the individual and collective memory of the consequences of the antisemitism leading up to the Holocaust.

The connection between spiritual repair and *Romeo and Juliet* is also examined by Olivia Coulomb in ‘Transgressive Catholicism: Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)’ from a different but complementary perspective. The
author focuses on the way Catholicism is disrupted in Luhrmann’s film and presents a detailed analysis of the troubling nature of its numerous elaborate religious references, which are intimately linked to superstition, moral degradation, evil and sin. However, Coulomb proves that this religious transgression also evolves in Luhrmann’s film into a metaphysical dimension related to the characters’ spiritual redemption. The constant filmic reference to Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro points to a merciful and observing divinity whose presence signals that there is hope beyond desecration; Coulomb’s article contends that in the film Romeo’s and Juliet’s religious transgressions through murder and suicide question the redeeming force of religion but, at the same time, paradoxically also lead to conciliation.

Redemption is also central to ‘Redeeming Lady Macbeth: Gender and Religion in Justin Kurzel’s Macbeth (2015)’ by Marta Bernabeu. The author offers a compelling analysis of the ways in which Kurzel’s filmic adaptation relates to and problematises early modern gender perspectives through an appealing cinematic combination of Christian and Pagan discourses. Bernabeu examines Kurzel’s concern with the question of redemption through the presentation of Lady Macbeth’s grief, sense of guilt and penitential journey, envisioned as a consequence of what the author describes as the character’s haunting motherhood. Bernabeu’s engaging analysis of how Kurzel rewrites Lady Macbeth as both penitent and redeemed, even as a Christ-like character, is supported by Julian of Norwich’s theological consideration of sin and her concept of ‘divine motherhood’.

King Lear is the focus of the last two articles of this issue. Marguerite Tassi offers an illuminating reading of Edgar in ‘The Way of the Bodhisattva: A Buddhist Understanding of King Lear’. In opposition to pessimistic interpretations of the play, Tassi sees it as a profound ethical reflection on how enlightenment and compassion can be reached through suffering. Tassi’s analysis of Shakespeare’s play in light of Buddha’s teachings and The Way of the Bodhisattva, written by the eighth-century Indian monk Shāntideva, reveals a riveting interpretation of Edgar’s spiritual journey as the experience of the bodhisattva (‘awakened being’ or ‘enlightenment hero’) who cultivates bodhicitta (‘universal love’) in search of the spiritual well-being of others. Tassi’s reading of King Lear reflects on the need to care for each other in our de-humanised contemporary world where, as the author argues, ‘we bear witness to unprecedented sufferings worldwide’.

Communal suffering and healing are central to the last article of this volume by Mary Jo Kietzman, ‘Unaccommodated Religion: King Lear in Flint, Michigan’. Kietzman successfully combines a thorough analysis of the dialogue between King Lear and the Book of Job with the ways in which a King Lear adaptation by her Flint students turned into a religious experience inspired by John Keats and Flannery O’Connor. The students’ adaptation was called Lear Reassembled and helped them come to terms with their own suffering and to become aware of their own power and duty to fight for the well-being of their damaged Flint community in Michigan, devastated by de-industrialisation and,
with it, unemployment, drugs and crime. The play has been included after the seven contributions just described; I invite readers of this special issue to discover how Lear Reassembled is, like King Lear, a play about suffering but also about forgiving, healing, survival and hope.

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Notes

Research carried out for this article has been supported by the Research Project PID2021-123341NB-I00 ‘Shakespeare’s Religious Afterlives: Text, Reception, and Performance’ (SHAKREL) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.


18. Ibid., vii, viii.


20. Thurston, ‘Religion of Shakespeare’, 750


