

8-9-2010

# "A Lass Unparalleled": The Scriptural Underpinnings of Women in Selected Shakespearean Plays

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“A LASS UNPARALLELED”: THE SCRIPTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF WOMEN  
IN SELECTED SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2010

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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Shakespeare's familiarity with and interest in the Bible have been studied in detail since the early twentieth century. J. A. Bryant, Richmond Noble, and Roy Battenhouse are among the prominent scholars who see in Shakespeare's plays biblical underpinnings and resonances. This tradition of scholarship, which has opened up wholly new dimensions, reveals that Shakespeare knew the Bible's doctrines and systematically assimilated its language and imagery in his plays. Although a great deal of scholarship thoroughly traces the biblical influence on Shakespeare, studies which connect the biblical view of women and Shakespeare's plays have, surprisingly, not been attempted. Notwithstanding that feminist criticism of Shakespeare is a rich field, feminist biblical approaches to Shakespeare are extremely rare, mainly because the religious discourse itself has long been viewed as the foundation for discrimination against women.

This dissertation endeavors to scale the heights of Shakespeare's iconoclasm by studying his radical feminist agenda in conjunction with the biblical affirmation and veneration of womankind. It explores the biblical impact on Shakespeare's depiction of his female characters by drawing attention to the various ways in which the Bard adapts biblical language, tropes, phraseology, imagery, narratives, and themes in order to subtly echo and articulate the biblical view of women, inculcate his radical feminist vision, and reinforce an image of women that subverts contemporary patriarchal, hegemonic

discourses. It illuminates the various ways in which the Bard reworks and retools these biblical elements in order to agitate early modern sensibility and subtly steer his audience toward this alternative, meliorative, and counterdiscursive view of womankind.

Recent feminist biblical hermeneutics, offering new insights regarding the positive view of women in the Bible, reveal the various misconceptions, especially in the Pauline Epistles, about the biblical view of women, challenge fallaciously-based interpretations of the biblical texts, and exegete the Scripture in a female-friendly light. This study moves beyond these useful but cryptic probings to show that the scriptural underpinnings and echoes in Shakespeare's plays constitute the philosophic foundations in three main areas: 1) veneration of parturition and maternity, 2) affirmation of female wisdom and truth-telling, and 3) celebration of female sexuality and spirituality.

## ACNOWLEDGMENTS

In completing this project, I remain eternally indebted to dissertation Chair Professor Ronald Shafer without whose constant faith in me, this task would not have become a reality. Although I could write smoothly when I was working on this project, I struggled to find words with which to express my gratitude for him. I would like to express my appreciation for his gentle attitude, consistent positive vision, constant optimism, and friendly gestures. I would like to thank him for his patience, guidance, and encouragement which sustained me to complete this project. I am grateful for all the exciting hours of discussion we had, all the valuable books and documents he lent to me, his prompt email responses, and constant commitment to me and my work. Even in moments of near despair and frustration, (when thoughts of terminating this project was about to materialize in my mind), Dr. Shafer not only boosted my morale and whet my will, but he also stood to my side and comforted me as a true friend and mentor. This constant encouragement, indeed, augmented my perseverance and enhanced my insistence to perfect this study. In fact, not only did I learn from Dr. Shafer to love and appreciate literature and its makers more, but I also gained new insights about life, the world, and even about myself, and this, I acknowledge, has widened my horizons, opened my vision, and enabled me to view things differently.

I also cannot forget here to express my deep gratitude for committee members Dr. Lingyan Yang and Dr. Allyn Ricketts for their guidance, support, prompt responses, commitment, and encouragement. I thank Dr. Yang for her gentleness and kindness and all the stimulating conversations which deepened my thoughts, polished my ideas, and expanded my horizons. I highly appreciate Dr. Allyn Ricketts' positive attitude, patience,

gentleness, and assistance in this process, and I thank him for his agreement to be a member of this dissertation committee, since I needed a committee member who was a specialist in Reformation and Renaissance Europe. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Ricketts and Yang for all the packets and references they provided me. To all the above mentioned, I am eternally grateful.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Women in medieval and early modern England were trampled and incapacitated by an oppressive patriarchal system that legitimated their subservience, subordination, inarticulateness, and inferiority. In that male-dominated and gender-based culture, females were denigrated, humiliated, depreciated, treated as second-tier beings, and marginalized excessively. Social, political, and intellectual institutions, to perpetuate patriarchy and male superiority, not only undervalued and trivialized women's contributions and experiences, but they also channeled women to internalize a sense of inferiority and low self-esteem. Women, thus, were denied self-reliance, self-assertiveness, self-expression, and power to define and create their own destinies. This low status of women owes much to the unwarranted negative, constructed view of the nature of womankind.

In fact, women were misrepresented by the patriarchal hegemonic discourses of that era. Because the English culture at the time was phallogocentric, power over ideas and concepts was in the hands of men. Male views of the world, especially of women, was universalized and perceived as ontological givens and unarguable truths. Therefore, to promote a negative picture of womankind, patriarchal authorities prejudicially associated women with negative stereotypes: women were viewed as physiologically, intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior. The majority of these pejorative stereotypical pre-assumptions were promulgated by contemporary medical and religious discourses.

Based on the theories of Galen and Aristotle, the medical discourse presented an inferior picture of woman. According to these ancient postulates, the standard, normal

version of the human body was the male, whereas the woman's body was viewed as deviant, an aberration from the norm, hence, abnormal, incomplete, and, even defective. Further, in reproduction, the male was believed to supply the soul of the fetus, whereas the female provided the flesh, or the matter—namely, the inferior part. Thus, the pervasive view of women as inferior was directly linked to the pre-existing view of the female body and its physiological construction and processes. Based on these constructed medical observations, many debilitating and stereotypical views surrounded women. Parturition, a supposedly honorable feminine experience, was transformed into an ugly humiliation for women due to the general view of the womb as unclean and polluting and to the contemporary belief that a woman in reproduction merely supplied the matter, the inferior part. The view of parturition in this fashion rendered this distinct female experience a humiliating experience partly because of the prevalent negative view of the womb and also because the woman's contribution in the reproductive process was allegedly inferior. Thus, the male, and not the female, was the center of this experience because only the male supplied the superior part, the soul. A woman was viewed as a baby machine to perpetuate patriarchy and serve male ends. Thus, maternity, a happy and respectful feminine experience, was robbed of the status it deserved.

Further, while the penis was associated with intellectual power, the womb was associated with women's alleged inability to think clearly and reliably. Therefore, women were thought to be irrational and untrustworthy because their female bodily processes, such as menstruation, hampered their thinking power. Menstruation was thought to influence women's thinking and emotions, therefore, women were not appreciated as reliable and honest truth-tellers. In other words, a woman was not viewed as a credible,

wise, and honest thinker because it was believed that her bodily processes negatively influenced her intellectual, moral, and spiritual maturation. In addition, women were believed to be sexually insatiable; therefore, their perceived uncontrollable sexual impulses negatively influenced their reasoning and rational powers. Notwithstanding that the role the medical discourse played in creating these derogatory views of women is undeniable and unmistakable, the impact of religion was far deeper, more crippling, and more influential because the English culture at the time was religion-oriented and church-guided: the church was a dominant, powerful, and authoritative institution, a social, economic, and political structure, and the Bible was a major element in the lives of people.

During the medieval era in England, the Roman Catholic Church was the dominant religious authority. People were under the mercy of churchmen in their religious beliefs because the majority of the people were illiterate and could not read the Scripture since they did not know Latin. Because Holy Writ was preached in Latin, the Bible was accessible only to the priests and filtered to the people through a complex labyrinth of traditions, papal bulls, labyrinthine enculturation, and institutionalized practices. Hence, people lived in complete ignorance about the true message of the Scripture. They were unaware of the truth about God and of even elementary truths—for instance, how salvation was gained. In fact, the priest was viewed as a God-ordained representative; therefore, what the priest preached was taken as infallible and unarguable truths by the public. It was believed that the priest enjoyed a special relation with God because, as Christ's anointed representative on earth, he had a status higher than regular individuals. Overwhelmed with their sense of guilt and fear of a wrathful, unforgiving

God, which was based on the common belief that all human beings sinned with the Fall when Satan beguiled Adam and Eve, the ignorant laity turned to their only available source of enlightenment, the church. At that time, the church was not only a religious power, but also a state power that was involved in politics and economics. In fact, church authorities carried subtle, self-serving political, social, ideological, and economic agendas. For instance, greedy and megalomaniacal, church leaders took advantage of the poor people and egregiously exploited them by promoting the belief that salvation could be won only through the priest's intercession for individuals. In other words, church authorities were not objective in their interpretations of Holy Writ; rather, they exegeted it in ways that served their selfish goals and supported their agendas, and the illiterate people had to accept those readings without questioning their veracity.

Furthermore, because the Roman Catholic Church back then was male-dominated and patriarchal-serving, it sought to suppress women and reinforce the power of patriarchy. Angela Pitt contends that "the church was immensely influential in shaping society's expectations of women" (15). Hence, not only did church authorities endorse the medical discourse, but they also augmented it by giving it a religious ground through exploiting the Bible in a way that suited their self-serving agendas. They fallaciously presented the Bible in a way that legitimized women's physical and spiritual inferiority. To achieve their ends, Catholic religious authorities approached the Bible selectively by highlighting and accentuating a handful of biblical passages that ostensibly denigrated women; however, the luminous passages that supported the cause of womankind were conveniently ignored. Further, contemporary theologians, to reinforce the image of woman as inferior, devised and inculcated wildly errant biblical interpretations and

presented and sanctioned them as unarguable ontological givens. They took out of context, warped, and mistakenly twisted many biblical passages, especially those from Genesis and the Pauline Epistles, errantly interpreting them in ways that served their prejudiced and patriarchal agendas. Thus, based on their selective reading and mistaken interpretations of Holy Writ, patriarchal religious authorities professed that woman was created after man, from man, and for man, as his subordinate and inferior. To them, it was woman who blatantly disobeyed God's Will, and it was her initial transgression that prompted the fall of the entire race by seducing Adam and leading him away from God. Woman's inferior nature, to them, was an undisputable truth ordained by God. Distorting the biblically wholesome view of women, religious authorities presented the Bible as the ultimate universal discourse that legitimized an antagonistic view of womankind. Affirming and reinforcing the medical discourse, they viewed women as evil, lascivious, irrational, and physically and spiritually inferior to man; therefore, they deemed women unreliable truth-tellers and debarred them from preaching, teaching, and interpreting the Word of God. Besides, convinced that women were monstrous, lustful, sinful, and immoral, they proclaimed that sexual contact with women could compromise and even destroy men's spiritual growth, so they advocated celibacy and, affirming the body/spirit dichotomy, proclaimed that the woman's body was not only physically corrupting and dangerous, but also spiritually and morally inferior. Upon purely misogynist grounds, Roman Catholic religious practitioners professed that women led men away from the divine path because they were evil and sinful enchantresses. Moreover, due to their perceived intrinsic sinfulness, women had to atone for their sins by abstaining from sexual intercourse and cloister themselves in religious convents. This constructed,

unwarranted view of the nature of womankind was what grounded many of the antagonistic attitudes toward and discriminatory treatment of women, what denigrated women's status, and what reinforced and inculcated patriarchy.

Before the rise of the Reformation in England and Europe and the completion of the first English translation of the Bible in 1526 by the English Reformer William Tyndale, people, as I noted above, had no access to the Bible; as a result, they were manipulated by Roman Catholic personal agendas, and the Bible was not exegeted honestly and objectively, especially in regard to women. David Daniell posits that “the church made increasingly popular expansions of the Gospels which gave fanciful accounts of things nowhere to be found in the Bible at all” (Reading the Bible 161). The fallaciously-based interpretations of the biblical texts were presented by medieval and early modern Catholic theologians widely disseminated throughout the English culture and the entire Western world after the decline of Protestantism in the mid seventeenth century. During the Age of Reason, people marginalized the Bible and espoused a scientific approach to life; therefore, the old negative views of women which had been established by the Catholic theologians during the Middle Ages began to resurface and gain momentum and, as a result, the status of women started to decline.

But during the Reformation when the Bible was introduced into the culture and objectively exegeted, the whole belief system of the Catholic church started to tumble. The Reformers exploded the Mass-based centerpiece of the church, especially the notion of how salvation was attained. Preaching that God could be reached by anybody through reading the Bible and interpreting it personally, they obliterated the seminal notion that the priest's utterance during Mass miraculously caused the bread and the wine to actually

become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Reformers taught that worshippers no longer needed to ingest Jesus through the Eucharist since He was domiciled permanently within the believers' hearts. The Bible, thus, became a liberating force for all people regardless of race or gender.

Among the new ideas that began to surface, once the Bible was dusted off and read again, was its positive treatment of women. Holy Writ, in fact, abounds with women who are courageous, articulate, caring, assertive, prophetic, and highly intelligent. The woman's body in the Bible, furthermore, is not viewed in terms of the taboos of uncleanness, for Christ, while on earth, healed many women, touched them, and allowed them to touch Him. Christ and the Apostle Paul even use birth and maternal imagery in their religious ministries. They included women in their ministry and entrusted them with divine missions that were previously restricted to men. In addition, women in the New Testament are well attuned to the intellectual sphere. They are even given prophetic roles such as Lydia, Priscilla, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Phillip's four daughters. The Reformers taught that the biblical language, themes, narratives, incidents, ideas, and tropes do not in any sense suggest any negative view of women, be it regarding their physiology, morality, sexuality, or spirituality. In fact, the Bible, in no way gender-based, empowers women and treats them with respect; thus, the old pejorative medical and religious discourses against women's bodies and female bodily processes are unwarranted in the Gospel. This positive biblical view of the female body was subversive in both the Jewish culture of Christ's day and the culture of the Middle Ages.

The Reformers, who staunchly espoused biblical thinking in Europe and England, advocated and promoted a uniform view of women in their writings. Calvin, Luther,

Zwingli, Bullinger, and many others promulgated an emerging meliorative view of women. While religious authorities in medieval and early modern Europe interpreted biblical texts in a prejudiced manner and played down those passages that supported the cause of womankind, the Reformers espoused a Bible-based thinking that subverted the deep-seated irrational religious discourses that denigrated women. Therefore, they dismissed the biased reasoning of church fathers in favor of the biblical view, which radically diverged from the pre-established patriarchal assumptions about women. Presenting woman in a new positive light, the Reformers taught that women have the right to read and interpret the Scripture, access the public sphere, and determine their own destinies. Thus, as the Bible slowly became the touchstone of truth and mainstay of religious authority, people were influenced by its view of women: they could see how Christ treated women positively, how He trusted them, and how He championed their cause in a patriarchal world. Readers of the Bible, especially women, were astonished to see Christ's consistently respectful, humane, and caring view of women. The treatment of women which He modeled radically diverted from traditional treatment in Palestine—and indeed the larger Roman world—at the time.

This objective view of the Bible's treatment of women has, in fact, been resurrected by the recent feminist biblical scholarship. While the Bible was historically viewed by many feminist scholars and thinkers—one thinks of Mary Daly in her Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation, Joslyn Gage in her Woman Church and State, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her influential The Woman's Bible—as sexist and antifeminist, with the rise of feminist consciousness and the feminist movement in the early 1970s, the Bible was exegeted in a new positive light and in the



Reformed tradition of biblical theology; thus, a whole new biblical picture of women was resurrected and rediscovered. Based on such female-friendly readings, the Bible was deemed to be the unbiased Word of God that elevated both sexes equally. Thus, according to this notion, the Bible is not the source of women's oppression; rather, it is the sexist and fallaciously-based interpretations that have distorted God's Word to justify women's subordination and inculcate patriarchy. Feminist biblical scholars who have utilized this approach, such as Elizabeth Fiorenza, Phyllis Tribe, and Letty Russell, have claimed that exposing the sexism and misogyny of male interpreters, especially medieval and early modern Catholic theologians, redeems the Bible from the historically-perceived misogyny. These prominent scholars concur that the Bible is the dominant liberating force in the lives of women and believe that, since both women and men are faithful followers and believe the Bible to be sacred, it is extremely important to redeem Scripture from senseless chauvinism.

Fiorenza believes that the Bible has been used to justify women's subordination: "if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and dehumanization" (Bread Not Stone xiii). In "Women in the Early Christian Movement," Fiorenza presents new positive insights into the general view of women in the New Testament with an emphasis on Christ's affirmative, empowering treatment of women: "This inclusive character of Jesus' message and movement made it possible for women to become his disciples. All four Gospels note that women were found in the fellowship of Jesus and that they were the most courageous of his disciples" (88). Approaching the Bible in a similar positive light, Phyllis Tribe, in her "Depatriarchalization in Biblical Interpretation," denies that Eve's transgression resulted

in women's total subordination to man: "they are equal in responsibility and in judgment, in shame and in guilt, in redemption and in grace. What the narrative says about the nature of woman it also says about the nature of man" (40). Moreover, in her Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective, Russell claims that the Bible is a source of strength for the oppressed, as it is revealed in Christ's promise of Salvation: "The gospel is a message of liberation in Jesus Christ. It is good news to all people in every situation. Concretely, and in every place of external or internal oppression, liberation has arrived in the form of One sent as the bringer of a new humanity" (18). These feminist biblical scholars not only have presented wholly new and positive readings of the general biblical view of women—as seen in the biblical narratives—but they, and many others, have observed the Bible's affirmative language, imagery, and tropes in reference to women. They also present new positive re-interpretations of many problematic passages that ostensibly seem to denigrate women, especially the Pauline Epistles.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, it is important to note that the secularization that the Western culture underwent after the Reformation, together with the rise of the scientific revolution, leveraged people away from the Bible and its language, themes, tropes, and imagery. As the Bible continued to be marginalized, people, in time, became less exposed to the Bible and its phraseology, language, and stances. The rise of secular systems caused the Bible to be less frequently read, heard, and preached. However, this had not been the case in English culture, and even the entire European world, during the earlier Reformation when the Bible was a powerful element that shaped people's intellectual, social, and moral constructs. The Bible at that time "was not, as it can be in modern times, a file to be called up: it was the life-blood, the daily, even hourly, nourishment of

the nation and of ordinary men and women. It was known with thoroughness that is, simply, astonishing” (Daniell, Shakespeare 170). Hamlin avers that “the Bible pervaded virtually every aspect of culture, shaping ideas not just about religion, but about politics, marriage and social relations, trade and exploration, warfare, agriculture, even astronomy and medicine” (227). Hamlin maintains that “Biblical characters and episodes were depicted on painted cloths hung in the local taverns, on dinner plates, purses, jewelry, swords, and furniture” (227). It is not surprising then that people’s intellectual constructs were inspired and informed by the biblical thinking, language, themes, stances, and, above all, the biblical view of women.

Renaissance literary authors were tremendously influenced by these recently discovered biblical elements. This biblical influence can be clearly seen specifically in the writings of Thomas Heywood, George Herbert, John Donne, John Milton, and many others as well as generally within the larger culture. It is not surprising then to learn that this tremendous biblical influence shaped the culture’s view of women as reflected in the writings of many Renaissance authors. We see that clearly in the writings of the Puritans, like Milton, as well as Anglican divines like Donne and Herbert. In Milton this altered view of women is manifested in his holding Adam as responsible for the Fall as Eve, since Adam with full cognitive volition deliberately chose to eat from the forbidden fruit. Milton even implies that Adam’s sin was greater than Eve’s because he was not tempted by higher-level, Satanic intelligence as was Eve. Adam’s complicity and decision to eat from the forbidden fruit is foregrounded over Eve’s in Milton’s revolutionary handling of the Fall. Thus, we can safely deduce that the biblical impact on the culture was pervasive, radical, provocative, and even manifest in major literary texts.

In this context, it is important to note that the theatre at the time played an influential role in shaping early modern English sensibility, morals, and political and religious stances. Because the Bible was a primary component of the culture's construct, it had an impact on Renaissance dramatists; that is to say, Renaissance drama was not isolated from the impact of religion, particularly the Bible. Playwrights, influenced by the Bible, had direct contact with it and utilized its language, themes, narratives, and teachings as a background for their writings. That is, since the early modern culture was Bible-based, as had been established by the Reformers, it was to the best interests of playwrights to work within the Reformed ideology and not to counter-culturally secularize their writings excessively. Hence, to please the early modern taste, to achieve more success, and to achieve the desired impact on their audiences, dramatists could not divorce their product from what captivated and overwhelmed people's minds and hearts—the Bible. Further, playwrights could utilize the Bible to reinforce a theme more influentially—namely, to use the Bible to fortify their ideas and agendas. Furthermore, the theatre was even “enlisted as a means for promulgating the Gospel. Foxe even classed the theatre with sermons and books as a didactic tool. Protestants such as Martin Bucer, John Bale, and Foxe embraced the didactic potential of theatre” (Groves 15). Many dramatists in Reformation and Renaissance cultures wrote plays that were informed by biblical themes and subjects, including Bale's *God's Promises* (1538), Foxe's *Christus Triumphans* (1556), Robert Green's *A Looking-Glass for London an England* (1594), and Anthony Munday's and Thomas Dekker's *Jephthab* (1602). Indeed, as Groves rightly observes, “the Bible was a unique resource for early modern playwrights” (11):

The currency and status of the Bible made it a uniquely powerful source, and a brief allusion to a biblical story could open up a fund of associations, ambiguities, and analogues. The biblical plays of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries are evidence that religious theatre remained popular with audiences who knew the Bible and could be expected to connect their knowledge with what they saw on the stage. (25)

William Shakespeare was obviously among those great literary figures who were influenced by the Bible either through reading it himself or hearing it preached in Sunday sermons. Either way, the biblical language, tropes, imagery, incidents, narratives, and themes clearly resonate in his plays and sonnets, as numerous scholars have convincingly detailed. Daniell contends that “Shakespeare knew his English Bible well” and “expected his audiences and readers to take [his biblical references] on the spot, because they knew their English Bible” (Shakespeare 7). Daniell maintains that Shakespeare not only assimilated the biblical language, but he also based his characters on adaptations of Gospel characters, their life, suffering, and so on (12). Shakespeare “met suffering people [...] in the texts of the Gospels” (12) and “had no need to walk to Coventry to see the mystery plays in order to meet ordinary people in dramatic conflict. He could find those everyday images, heavily pregnant with apparently infinite meaning, at home, in the Gospels” (11-12). Hamlin posits that “some plays, like *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*, are not fully comprehensible without some biblical knowledge. This is hardly surprising, since the Bible was the most important book in Shakespeare’s culture” (225).

It has been established since the early twentieth century, with scholars such as Charles Wordsworth in Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible (1864), J. B. Selkirk in Bible Truths with Shakespearian Parallels (1872), William Burgess in The Bible in Shakespeare (1903), and Thomas Carter in Shakespeare and Holy Scripture (1905) that Shakespeare read the Bible himself, assimilated its language, and absorbed its message. Battenhouse observes that Selkirk “arranged parallel quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible on more than a hundred topics. He [Selkirk] concluded that Shakespeare's genius had so assimilated and reproduced the Bible's great truths that his words seem to renew its authority” (2). Burgess opines that “Shakespeare drank so deeply from the wells of the Scripture that one may say, without any straining of the evidence, without the Bible Shakespeare could not be” (13). Carter posits that “no writer has assimilated the thoughts and reproduced the words of Holy Scripture more copiously than Shakespeare” (3). Indeed, “the spontaneous flow of Scriptural ideas and phrases which are to be found everywhere in the plays reveals the fact that the mind of Shakespeare must [...] have been saturated with the Word of God” (4).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, interest in the linguistic, thematic, and narrative biblical resonances and echoes in Shakespeare increased, deepened, and gained enormous momentum. Scholars such as J. A. Bryant in Hippolyta's View: Some Christian Aspects of Shakespeare's Plays (1961), Norman Crawford in Shakespeare and the Bible (1967), Richmond Noble in Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge (1970), and, more recently, Roy Battenhouse in Shakespeare's Christian Dimension (1994) and Naseeb Shaheen in Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays (1999) are among those prominent critics who see in Shakespeare's plays biblical underpinnings and resonances.

Bryant, who believes that “Shakespeare was a genuine typologist in his use of Scriptural allusion and analogy” (16), opens new insights into Shakespeare’s allusions to important biblical themes and episodes, such as the murder of Abel by his brother Cain in *Hamlet*, the theme of mercy versus law in *The Merchant of Venice*, the theme of the need for abstinence from criticizing others in *Measure for Measure*, and the presence of Providence in *Macbeth*. Crawford’s insightful study illustrates that Shakespeare dealt with important biblical themes, doctrines, and events, such as pride (in *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*), reputation (in *Othello* and *Richard II*), appearance versus reality (in *Othello* and *Hamlet*), Judgment Day (in *King Lear*), and love of money and gold (in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Timon of Athens*). Furthermore, Noble, who “find[s] references in the plays to no fewer than 42 different biblical books” (qtd. in Baker 59), points out that although Shakespeare did allude to the biblical themes, incidents, and doctrines in his plays, he may or may not have had a doctrinal purpose in mind. That is, Shakespeare may have “relied on biblical allusion [simply] for enhanced appreciation of some of his points” (22). Irrespective of how the Bible informed Shakespeare’s oeuvre and influenced his mind, it is an accepted fact that familiarity with the Bible is a necessary pre-condition for a full understanding of the Bard’s plays. For instance, Shakespeare’s political agenda may have been informed by biblical characters and stories: “the subject of kingship or government, [...] the focus of Shakespeare’s English Histories, would naturally suggest the stories of Saul, David, and other Old Testament rulers” (Hamlin 227). Indeed, as Hamlin rightly observes, “the Bible [for Shakespeare] was a peculiarly rich source for complex and fascinating characters and stories not just of faith, but of love, heroism, battle, and betrayal—even incest, fratricide, and genocide” (227).

Although, as noted here, a great deal of scholarship thoroughly traces the biblical influence on Shakespeare, studies which connect the biblical view of women and Shakespeare's plays have, surprisingly, not been attempted. The purpose of this study, thus, is to tackle the impact of the Bible on Shakespeare's treatment of women. I argue that the Bible's language, themes, tropes, episodes, narratives, ideas, and stances constitute the philosophic underpinnings of the image of woman in Shakespeare's drama. Scholars and Shakespearean aficionados have long noted the Bard's foregrounding women and their central roles in the plays. For instance, Beatrice is an easy match for Benedick in their perennial wit combat in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and Viola's intellect in *Twelfth Night* towers over the men who, compared to her, are dim-witted if not stooges.

Shakespeare's drama has been a fertile soil for feminist criticism, especially since the rise of the feminist movement in the early 1970s. Prominent feminist scholars, such as Marianne Novy, Carol Hansen, Carol Thomas Neely, Rose Mary Beth, Catherine Belsey, and Lisa Jardine have ascertained Shakespeare's radical view of women and established that the image of woman in his drama counteracts that in his contemporary culture. In Woman as Individual in English Renaissance Drama: A Defiance of the Masculine Code, Hansen argues that Shakespeare revolutionarily challenges his culture's conventional views of women by introducing strong, savvy, outspoken, and self-assertive female characters, such as Paulina and Beatrice, who transgress gender boundaries, challenge patriarchal hegemony, and violate discursive definitions of woman. In Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare, Jardine illumines Shakespeare's powerful female characters who resist patriarchy and assert their



subjectivity, autonomy, and articulateness. In Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare, Bamber addresses issues of gender, female autonomy, and sexuality and avers that Shakespeare's women, such as Cleopatra, are bold enough to express their sexuality and assert their subjectivity. In Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare, Novy underscores Shakespeare's affirmative view of women's sexuality and intellectuality and argues that female characters, such as Rosalind, Cleopatra, and Beatrice, unlike their male lovers, betray their culture's gender expectations through their bold expression of emotions and desires and refusal to comply with restrictive rules.<sup>2</sup> It is obvious, then, that Shakespeare's view of women was radically subversive of his culture's patriarchal discourse which legitimated women's silence, submission, and inferiority.

In light of the feminist biblical criticism which resurrected the meliorative image of woman in the Bible, as it had been long-ago observed and advocated by the Protestant Reformers, this dissertation moves beyond the findings of this critical trend and endeavors to open new insights into Shakespeare's progressive and radical view of women in conjunction with the biblical affirmation. This study provides new feminist religious dimensions to feminist criticism in Shakespeare. While feminist Shakespearean scholars—in the main—have tended to secularize their approaches to Shakespeare's view of women, since they have historically perceived the Bible as sexist and anti-feminist, this dissertation, in view of the biblical affirmation and veneration of women, creates a paradigm shift in the feminist critical tradition in Shakespeare by reconciling it to the biblical presence in the Bard's oeuvre. This study gives new feminist biblical dimensions to the image of women in Shakespeare by showing that the Bard subtly echoes the

biblical view of women in order to, directly or indirectly, agitate his culture's sensibility, to enhance his audience's identification with and appreciation of his feminist agenda, and to steer them towards an alternative, counterdiscursive view of women. I argue that the biblical language, imagery, themes, lessons, narratives, episodes, tropes, phraseology, doctrines, and stances constitute the philosophic foundations for Shakespeare's treatment of women.

Chapter two tackles the biblical underpinnings of parturition and childbirth in *The Winter's Tale*. I argue that the biblical language, themes, narratives, tropes, imagery, episodes, and stances constitute Shakespeare's ground and vehicle for his subversive and revolutionary view of parturition and maternity. Reflecting and echoing the biblical view of maternity and childbirth, Shakespeare counterdiscursively depicts this female creative process as female-centered, characterized by joy, dignity, and honor for the maternal, not humility, disrespect, and shame, as it was conventionally viewed. Shakespeare, who seems to have assimilated the biblical celebration and veneration of maternity and parturition, exalts this distinct female experience by echoing the biblical language, tropes, imagery, allusions and narratives, particularly that of the Virgin, to elicit his audience's empathy for, augment their appreciation of, and subtly express his veneration of maternity and childbirth. I argue that Shakespeare conflates his maternal agenda with the typically-polarized stories of the Fall and the birth of the Messiah and makes them the informing metaphor for his play in order to influence his audience's sensibility and invite them to rethink their discursive, conventional assumptions about maternity and childbirth. By modeling maternity and childbirth on the Virgin's immaculate conception, Shakespeare radically shifts the paradigm: he portrays parturition and childbirth as

empowering experiences that are more advantageous for the mother than the father, thereby disrupting his culture's discursive belief system which marginalized the woman's role in this process and, as had been pre-established by the medical and religious discourses, attributed credit and honor to the male. Echoing the biblical view, stances, and nuances, Shakespeare, in direct violation of his culture's view of this female experience, presents a new redefinition that dignifies and venerates maternity and subverts the prevalent contemporary, objectifying view of the mother as a womb or a receptacle to preserve male seed and produce offspring to perpetuate patriarchy and serve male ends. To exalt and sanctify the maternal, Shakespeare not only superimposes upon it the most revered Christian imagery, but he also describes the maternal in religious language that retools biblical references and tropes.

Chapter three discusses the biblical dimension of female truth-telling and wisdom in *King Lear*. I argue that Shakespeare, echoing the biblical view of women as reliable, wise, and authoritative truth-tellers and capable promulgators of high biblical truths, subverts the early modern patriarchal discourses which trivialized and undervalued women's perspectives and viewed them as irrational, incapable of wisdom and insight, lacking persuasion skills, such as eloquence, reason, logic, and rhetoric, and ineligible to preach and teach the Gospel. In direct challenge to his culture's patriarchal ideologies which gendered truth-telling and wisdom, Shakespeare radically chooses a female to emblemize and elucidate central biblical truths that greatly impacted his culture. I maintain that Shakespeare, in order to steer his audience's empathy for his biblically-informed view of women and agitate early modern sensibility, exalts a female by depicting her as the exemplar of messianic wisdom, truth, light, and spiritual motherhood.

Reflecting the biblical affirmation of and reverence for women's truth-telling, wisdom, and insight, Shakespeare positions a female to demonstrate biblical-based, not logic-based, thinking and function as the ultimate truth-teller who, with her Christ-like, Spirit-enlightened mind, serves as the prophetic, divine minister who leads blind people out of darkness to the light. Thus, she approximates the Christ and is modeled on the ultimate truth-teller, preacher, educator, and enlightened progenitor of Christianity.

Chapter four focuses on Shakespeare's reflection of the biblical view of sexuality and spirituality and his destabilization of sexuality/spirituality dichotomy in *Othello*. Echoing the biblical view that sexuality is not sinful and not antithetical to spirituality and that the body is not inferior to the spirit, Shakespeare challenges contemporary patriarchal discourses which viewed women as lustful, monstrous, sinful, and evil enchantresses who led men away from God and corrupted their spirituality. To achieve this end, I argue that Shakespeare chooses a female, and not a male, to embody the union of sexuality and spirituality. Challenging his culture's polarization of sexuality and spirituality, the body/spirit dichotomy, and the resulting perceived monstrosity and sinfulness of women's sexuality and spiritual depravity, Shakespeare radically chooses a female who is boldly sexual and singularly spiritual. Although Desdemona is sexually aggressive, she models true and high spirituality, as manifested in her religious language, the language used in reference to her, her messianic attributes—especially agapic love, mercy, grace, forgiveness—and her serving as an agent of reconciliation and salvation. Although discursively perceived by Iago and Othello as a threat to men's spirituality, Desdemona serves as Othello's savior and spiritual guide. By juxtaposing the Roman Catholic unwarranted ideology against sexuality beside the radical biblical view,

Shakespeare, I contend, influentially and counterdiscursively critiques and subverts contemporary antagonistic attitudes and derogatory pre-assumptions about women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further female-friendly reinterpretations of biblical texts, see Letty Russel, ed., Feminist Interpretations of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster P, 1985); Barbara Reid, Choosing the Better Part? (Collegeville: Liturgical P, 1996); Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler, eds., Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Louisville: Westminster John Knox P, 2006); Alice Laffey, An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress P, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> For further readings on feminist criticism in Shakespeare's drama, see Carolyn Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Neely, eds., The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1984); John Drakakis, ed., Alternative Shakespeares (London: Methuen, 1985); Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Irene Dash, Wooring, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays (New York : Columbia University Press, 1981); Peter Erickson, Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Plays (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985).

CHAPTER 2  
“[I] HAVE PRESERVED / MYSELF TO SEE THE ISSUE”:  
THE BIBLICAL DIMENSION OF PREGNANCY  
AND PARTURITION IN *THE WINTER’S TALE*

An important feminine area where the Bible poses as a liberating and empowering force for women is pregnancy and childbirth. Throughout history, most cultures have not viewed these female creative processes positively due to the deep-seated pejorative beliefs about the female body, especially menstruation and birth. This feminine bodily experience has typically been a source of humiliation and indignity for women. This negative attitude towards childbirth and pregnancy, a part of the whole hegemonic discourse, denigrated women and assigned them an inferior status in society. The attitude towards the female body reflected the wider cultural context in which women were viewed as less than human. Thus, this distinctly female phenomenon—upon which their uniqueness in large measure centers—did not enhance the status of women; rather, it was a source of shame and disrespect. In this context, before delving into the biblical view of the female body, pregnancy, and childbirth, I find it necessary to explore the historical backdrop of these negative views toward the female body in medieval and early modern cultures.

Early modern attitudes toward the female body were constructed based on the medical writings of the Greeks and Romans, especially Galen and Aristotle. According to these medical theories, the female body was viewed in terms of taboo, filth, and uncleanness. The womb was believed to be a source of all diseases and infections. In fact, the female body was perceived as a less-than-perfect version of the standard male body. The general negative cultural attitude towards menstruation centered on the pejorative view of the womb and, by extension, the entire female body. It was held “that women had

more blood in their bodies than men, but it was of a much inferior quality. It was therefore a scientific fact that a female is a thing more imperfect than a male” (Eccles 26). Thus, sterile women, who did not menstruate, were healthier physically and mentally: “women of a naturally hot manly temperament, who did not menstruate, were much healthier than moister women and really needed no treatment, except that they would then be sterile” (26-7). Pollock observes that “medical practitioners [in medieval and early modern cultures] considered women to be particularly prone to disease, subject to fevers and ill vapors arising from a malfunctioning menstrual cycle, to hysteria resulting from a diseased womb, and to a general bad health” (45). This negative attitude toward the female bodily processes begot an unfavorable view of childbirth and pregnancy: “rather than associating childbearing with a sense of well-being and joy, pregnancy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was correlated with physical discomfort and mental unease” (45).

These medical writings, reflecting and articulating the wider hegemonic patriarchal discourse against women, copied and endorsed, in the main, the pre-existing and long-established ideas about women’s inferiority. Cressy asserts that medical writers at the time were highly influenced by each other; in fact, they blindly repeated each others’ ideas. Motivated by personal gain, public support and acclamation, they vehemently advocated their culture’s long-entrenched patriarchal beliefs. Because they were not objective in their writings, most of what was offered in these medical tracts did not rely on empirical truth, reflecting, rather, prevalent patriarchal ideas (36-7). Of course, the world at the time was seen from the male view, for almost all historians and medical writers were males, and everything they wrote about women, though skewed and



biased, was taken as universal and infallible truths. Crawford asserts that even maternity was defined from the male perspective, and attitudes of maternity directly correlated to the attitudes of female sexuality as generally promulgated by divines and medical practitioners, who inculcated similar assumptions about women (Construction 27). Thus, these essentialist views of the female body and its processes were socially constructed and taken as natural givens.

Furthermore, the religious discourse was a part of the alliance for viewing the female body, childbirth, and pregnancy negatively. Church fathers in medieval and early modern Europe exploited biblical passages to confirm the general patriarchal discourse against women. Besides, biblical passages that affirmed pregnancy and childbirth in a wonderfully wholesome light were overlooked or misinterpreted. The story of the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, in which Eve was punished by pain in childbirth, was used to spin the view of childbirth as shameful and disgraceful, not fulfilling and awe-inspiring. Further, many practices in the Hebrew culture, as reported by the Bible, were taken as biblical affirmations. That is, the Bible sometimes reports incidents or cultural practices, but the fact that they are contained in it does not mean that the Bible, or God, and Christianity affirm or endorse them. The Bible, that is to say, often reports the cultural beliefs of the Hebrew culture, but it does not necessarily approve it. For instance, the fact that the Bible reports Hebrew purity regulations for women does not in itself need to be interpreted as perpetuating a negative view of women. According to Leviticus (12; 15:19-24), to cite one example, a woman remains unclean for seven days after menstruation; anything she touches during this period becomes unclean. She has to atone for her unclean discharge by bringing two birds to the temple (15:29). The

time of purification following birth is longer: seven days of uncleanness followed by thirty three days of purification if the newborn baby is male, and two weeks followed by sixty six purification days if the baby is a female, plus, offering a lamb and a bird (Hammer 36). Unfortunately, such biblical reports were used by church fathers and religious authorities to denigrate the place of women generally. Palladius writes in his journal *En Visitas Bog* 72 that under the papacy, people “spoke derisively of the woman in childbirth. They said she was unclean and defiled, and that she had more to do with the devil than with the lord” (qtd. in Hammer 36). Palladius dismisses all this as foolery: “that kind of Mardi Gras foolery is plain evidence. We have been certainly way out” (qtd. in Hammer 36). These practices, however, continued until they were rejected by the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century.

Thus, the rise of the Reformation witnessed divergent views towards the female creative processes. Fissell observes that pre-Reformation Europe viewed the female womb as a source of numerous infections and diseases, especially in pregnancy and childbirth; that is why women were treated as unbaptized following birth (38). Further, Mclaughlin asserts that in the middle ages “a menstruating woman should not receive [Holy] Communion, or even enter a church. Menstrual blood was thought to be attractive to devils and unclean spirits, and a menstruating woman would by her presence sour milk and kill the grass she walked upon” (229). However, Mclaughlin acknowledges that the Reformation departed from such irrational stereotypical views (230). Thomas Cranmer, a leading English Protestant Reformer, and his contemporary Reformers even “dismissed the need for sprinkling with holy water; the parturient woman was no longer treated as unbaptized. The theme of purification was replaced by an emphasis on the preservation of

the woman from the dangers of childbirth by the Lord's goodness, which was all included in the 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer" (Hammer 118). Wilson argues that the origin of the ritual of churching, the baptizing of a woman after childbirth, was the primitive view of women as shameful and unclean, which, in turn, perpetuated the view of women's inferior capacity (89).

Wilson concludes that the churching and purification ritual, taken together, were patriarchal constructs "since the women who thronged around the mother, during and after delivery, did not behave as if they felt her to be impure" (90). Indeed Wilson asks a legitimate question: how is a woman after birth deemed corrupt and unclean to males and not to females? Wilson rightly observes that the churching process in the medieval period was a social construct borne out of the wider patriarchal system and regulations which othered women and viewed them as second-class beings (90). Of course, these social stereotypes about women were presented as ontological axioms. However, the Reformation provided a new, counterdiscursive thinking vis-à-vis the female body, parturition, and pregnancy. The Reformers rejected the preconceived patriarchal ideas that dominated the early modern culture. Affirming this assumption, Wilson contends that the Puritans' criticism of the churching ritual "had done something to raise women's status" (90). While religious authorities interpreted biblical texts in a prejudiced manner and played down those passages that supported the cause of womankind, the Reformers espoused a Bible-based thinking that subverted the deep-seated irrational religious discourses that denigrated women. Therefore, in the area of maternity and childbirth, the Reformers dismissed the biased reasoning of church fathers in favor of the biblical view, which radically diverged from the pre-established patriarchal beliefs about maternity and

childbirth. McLaughlin summarizes the contrasting views during the two periods: “the role of mother and nurturer of children was by no means accorded the honor given it in the post-reformation world” (230).

This newly emerging biblical perspective is reflected in many of Shakespeare’s plays. In this chapter, which explores the biblical underpinnings of maternity, pregnancy, and childbirth in *The Winter’s Tale*, I argue that Shakespeare’s view of maternity and childbirth echoes the biblical view, as manifested in his language, images, themes, and allusions—a revolutionary, even subversive, view that portrays the mother as empowered through childbirth. To Shakespeare, parturition is an empowering experience, a source of joy and dignity, not shame and disrespect. Because this respected, creative process reflects the divine design in human beings, mothers gain subjectivity and authority derived from divine powers. The mother is not an objectified being who exists to produce offspring to advance society and perpetuate the patriarchal system. To Shakespeare, mothers are not passive agents whose sole function in life is to enhance patrilineage. Whereas early modern culture viewed this female creative process as essentially a bothersome necessity that had to be endured to advance male interests, the Bible departs from this patriarchal thinking in favor of a new empowerment for mothers. Historically, the male, not the female, was the center of this process because, according to contemporary medical tracts, the male seed determined the formation of offspring and, accordingly, the offspring were the male property. Before delving into the Shakespearean view of maternity and childbirth, it is necessary to discuss this radical biblical view.

The female body in the New Testament is treated in a way that clearly subverts the preconceived ideas in Jewish and other cultures of Christ’s time. The Hebrew culture,

as indicated earlier, viewed the female body in terms of taboo and corruption. The female body was believed to be the source of many diseases and maladies especially during menstruation; at least the Hebrew purity regulations, rightly or wrongly, were traditionally interpreted in this light. Menstruating and menopausal women were not supposed to be touched, since anyone, upon touching such a woman would become sick or contaminated. In other words, the female body was treated as a source of pollution and uncleanness, a view that stemmed from an errant understanding of the story of the Fall in which Eve was punished by pain in childbirth. As a result of the Fall, it was concluded, God punished women through their maternal roles—namely, in childbirth and in all the other feminine bodily processes, historically viewed as disgusting by patriarchal societies. Thus, perceived as God’s punishment to Eve, childbirth had always been treated as a source of humiliation to the woman rather than a source of empowerment and joy. Of course, many, perhaps most, of these biblical texts were misinterpreted, possibly by the Hebrew culture and certainly by the later Roman Catholic church. Such misinterpretations carried over into the early modern culture and filtered through the priests’ prejudiced perspectives. However, recent feminist biblical scholarship has reinterpreted such texts in a new light that shows the Hebrew culture’s mistaken understanding and application of these texts. These scholars present new objective readings that reveal the actual biblical intent of maternity and childbirth passages in the Bible. They show the biases and misunderstandings of the earlier exegetes. Indeed, the hidden message of the Bible clearly contravenes the views that predominated both in the Hebrew culture and in the early modern period too.

Christ, the main representative figure of Christianity in the New Testament, radically diverges from Hebraic culture's preconceptions. As God's representative on earth and the chief practitioner and exemplar of His message, Christ never treats the female body as inferior to the male body; rather, He treats it with respect. In many incidents, Christ, in direct violation of the teachings and practices of Hebraic culture, touches women, treats their ailments, and lets them touch Him. Swindler asserts that Jesus "rejected the stereotypical ideas about women's bodies being impure and unclean because he touched them, treated them, and allowed them to touch him [...]; being a champion of women and children, he was despised for being a feminist, and was politically denounced as a feminist" (276-77). The female body was not repellent to Christ, as reflected in numerous passages in the New Testament. For instance, in the episode where Christ heals Peter's mother-in-law, Christ shows a clear recognition of women's physical needs:

On leaving the synagogue, he [Christ] went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the hand and held her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them. (Luke 4:38-9)

This passage illustrates that Christ treated the female body with respect, not balking at the idea of approaching an incapacitated—possibly menstruant—woman.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke register another impressive episode, relevant to this matter, when Jesus was approached by a hesitant and embarrassed woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years. Of course, the woman, inhabiting a culture that

viewed women's bodies as unclean and impure, approached Jesus with fear and apprehension because she expected yet another instance of public rejection and further humiliation in public as she had for twelve mortifying years: "If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well" (Matthew 9:21; Mark 5:28; Luke 8:44). To the surprise of all those attending the crowd, Christ did not reject the woman; rather, He treated her from her malady and dramatically supported her in public. Although the woman approached Him with embarrassment and fear of rejection and humiliation, she was accepted by Him and told, "Your faith has restored you to health; go in peace and be free from your affliction" (Luke 8:40-56). Not accepting the notion of uncleanness associated with menstruating or bleeding women, Christ rejected His culture's misconceptions about one's getting polluted if a woman with a flow of blood was touched; to Him, these were mere irrationally constructed ideas. Further, in another episode in Luke 3:10-17, Christ treats a woman on the Sabbath; He laid His hands on her and told her, "woman, you are rid of your infirmity." In addition, in Matthew 15:21-8 Christ heals the Syrophenician woman's daughter. These examples show that the actual message of Christianity, dramatically represented by Christ's acts and embodied in His bold message, clearly subverted the stereotypical views of the female body.

It follows from this that the Bible views childbirth, pregnancy, and maternity positively and respectfully. In both the New Testament and the Old Testament, maternal imagery is positively used. In John 16:16-22, for instance, Christ uses childbirth imagery in a way that suggests His great regard for the female creative process:

"In a little while you [His disciples] will not see me any longer, and again, in a little while you will see me." At this some of his disciples remarked to each other,

“What is this that he tells us now, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again, in a little while you will see me’ and ‘for I am going away to the Father’? What is the ‘little while’ that he talks about?” they were saying. “We simply do not know what he means!” Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him what he meant, so he said to them, “Are you trying to find out from each other what I meant when I said, ‘In a little while you will not see me, and again, in a little while you will see me’? I tell you truly that you are going to be both sad and sorry while the world is glad. Yes, you will be deeply distressed, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman gives birth to a child, she certainly knows pain when her time comes. Yet as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers her agony for joy that a man has been born into the world. Now you are going through pain, but I shall see you again and your hearts will thrill with joy—the joy that no one can take away from you—and on that day you will not ask me any questions.

In this incident Christ clearly viewed conception and parturition as a triumphant event for a woman, and He even dignified childbirth imagery in His religious language to reflect His appreciation of this female experience. Christ viewed the delivery of a baby as a source of joy, empowerment, and dignity for the mother. Jesus respected women’s creative power so much, in fact, that He used its imagery as the basis of some of His most profound and endearing postulates. He likens the sadness which the disciples feel at His forthcoming ascension, for instance, to child labor: in the same way a woman’s prolonged joy follows her brief pain in childbirth, so too will the disciples’ ecstatic joy at Christ’s return follow their period of labor and sorrow concerning His absence. Again,



we see the foregrounding of women who, instead of men, are used to picture messianic-based joy, an additional indication of the Bible's affirmation of maternity.

Christ's employment of maternal imagery as the basis for personal applications and private references indicates how amelioratively He regarded maternity. In Luke 13:34, He likens Himself to a hen holding and protecting her baby chicks under her wings: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you refused!" This is a compelling image in that Christ likens Himself to a mother hen: just as a mother hen protects her chicks, so too did Jesus attempt to offer protection to the Hebraic culture from the forthcoming invasion by the colonizing Romans in 70 A.D which resulted in the total annihilation of Israel. This is an astounding and highly revelatory image: instead of Christ's likening Himself to a mighty king or a powerful emperor, He likens Himself to the maternal instead of the paternal.

In John 7:37-9, Christ again likens Himself to a mother feeding her children from her breast:

On the last and greatest day of the festival [of Succoth], Jesus stood there and cried out: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me! Let him come and drink who believes in me!" As Scripture says: "from his breast shall flow fountains of living water" He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Of course, the image of drinking from a human breast suggests, in the obvious interpretation, drinking milk from a female breast. Christ likens the female milk to the Spirit that spiritually nourishes the newborn Christians. He holds the female experience

of maternity in such high esteem that He, again, applies it to Himself, believing in the mystique of maternity and not hesitating to use it in his ministry. He frontally attacks the negative views of his patriarchal culture towards women and their maternal role, subverts these stereotypical views, and preaches to his followers to change their hostile attitudes, modeling for them how to do so. Since the early middle ages, this image of Christ as a mother has been a source of inspiration and empowerment for female writers who fought against discriminatory treatment, even if they could not unseat the predominant patriarchy of that era.

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul, to whom most feminists refer as a misogynist, uses birth imagery in his ministry, which suggests his acclamation and esteem of maternity and childbirth rather than his denial or deprecation. In Galatians 4:19, Paul uses birth imagery by referring to himself as a birthing mother: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail, until Christ be formed in you!” Paul’s use of this maternal imagery to get his point across—the point being that the Galatians cause him pain as the baby causes pain to a birthing mother upon delivery— clearly shows his regard for this awe-inspiring female experience. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7, Paul again likens himself to a mother: “we were gentle among you [the Thessalonians], like a mother caring for her little children.” Paul indirectly compares himself to a mother feeding her baby with milk in 1 Corinthians 3:2: “Brothers, [...] I gave you milk, not solid food.” Christ and Paul—the two main proponents, exemplars, and practitioners of the Christian faith— in short affirm the female experience repeatedly in their ministries and writings. Rather than neglecting this female experience, both regarded it as a source of dignity and power; thus, maternal imagery figures prominently in their preachings. This clearly shows that they

not only dismissed the pre-existing patriarchal views that held this female experience as a source of humiliation and shame to the woman, but they also perceived maternity as the basis of affirmation and power and used it as a primary means to convey their teachings.

In the Old Testament too maternity and childbirth, upon a closer look, appear in a positive light. Of course, there are a few passages, which will be discussed below, that were misinterpreted or mistranslated by religious authorities and by those who supported patriarchal agendas in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. However, the general picture of maternity and childbirth in the Old Testament is nevertheless positive. In Isaiah 42:14, God Himself speaks like a birthing mother in travail: “Now I will cry out like a woman in travail.” In Jeremiah 4:19-22, God is again likened to as a birthing mother:

Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent. For I have heard the sound of the trumpet; I have heard the battle cry. Disaster follows disaster; the whole land lies in ruins. In an instant my tents are destroyed, my shelter in a moment. How long must I see the battle standard and hear the sound of the trumpet? My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children.

The use of language of groaning in birth and travail, which expresses God’s distress at the suffering the people of Israel brought on themselves, evokes the central image of parturition. Further, in Hosea 11:1-9 God compares himself to a mother—a mother to the people of Israel:

When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed to Baalim, and burned

incense to graven images. I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid food for them. [...] How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah?

Further, Hosea 13:7-9 contains a strikingly powerful maternal image: a fierce mother bear, wrathful at the loss of her cubs, defends and protects them. This image will be explored in my discussion of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the scene when Antigonus is pursued and devoured by a fierce bear. This suggests that God, who created Adam and Eve and meant them to be equal, does not view the female creative process as a degrading experience: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). It is impossible that the merciful God would denigrate childbirth throughout the Bible and maternity. Instead, childbirth is portrayed as a divine process that was created by a loving and sovereign God.

Childbirth throughout the Old Testament is also shown as a source of joy and blessing. Deuteronomy 7:14 and Genesis 1:22 and 17:5 portray pregnancy and childbirth as a joint operation of God and human beings. God's involvement in human fertility is manifested in His healing many barren women, such as Sarah, Rachel, and Elizabeth, and promising them offspring. Of course nothing in the Bible is more emblematic of the divine involvement in human reproduction than the story of the Virgin, whom God blessed with the conception of Jesus. Tikva Frymer-Kensky holds that God is the controller of pregnancy and childbirth; His constant presence in this process suggests that

childbirth is God's creation, not an accomplishment of human beings, for women get pregnant only with the involvement and help of God, irrespective of the human sexual intercourse (189-91). Thus, it can be deduced from Frymer-Kensky's argument that all women's conceptions are the result of God's divine orchestrations and echo, to some degree, the Virgin's conception.

Notwithstanding that the general biblical view of parturition and maternity is obviously positive, there are a handful of problematic passages which have been interpreted errantly, taken out of context, and institutionalized to inculcate patriarchy. Such passages were historically used as evidence of the Bible's denigration of childbirth and maternity. The Roman Catholic priests in the Middle Ages approached the Bible selectively: they picked those seemingly negative passages, accentuated them, simultaneously overlooked the positive ones, and kept the Bible, especially its typically-liberating treatment of women, out of the hands of the common people. They took many passages out of context, distorted their meanings, and, prejudicially, interpreted many others incorrectly. Such distortions of biblical passages were reinforced across time and eventually accepted as universal truths. Instead of focusing on Christ's attitude to the female body and parturition, or the Apostle Paul's attitude, church fathers, motivated by self-aggrandizement and their desire to perpetuate patriarchy, presented biblical precepts that had been selectively and selfishly filtered through their subjective reasoning.

For example, 1 Timothy 2:12-15, which states that women are saved in childbirth, has been taken by religious authorities as a solid biblical evidence that women are valued only for their procreative functions—to produce offspring, to perpetuate patrilineage, and to enhance the prosperity of society. To these historical authorities,

hence, a woman was synecdochically perceived as a mere womb—that is, a reproductive machine. Based on an errant reading of this passage, a woman’s complex and demanding maternal roles, which far exceed mere biological physicality, are ignored in favor of a biased patriarchal reading that reduces women to simply one physiological function. This interpretation of course defines childbirth as a humiliating experience for women. By limiting women’s role to their physicality, patriarchal medievalists negated maternity all together, for maternity encompasses much more than being a womb for manufacturing babies. In fact, this reading went so far as to put the father at the center of this process, which was reinforced by the biased medical theories at the time. The woman was reduced to a mere womb, a passive receiver of the male sperm, and a mechanical vessel which preserved the fetus for a few months. The women’s role was passively limited to the body, whereas the father’s role was much more important: after all, it was thought that the semen formed the spirit of the fetus and was alone the source of life. Thus, childbirth enhanced paternity, not maternity—the male’s active involvement, not the female’s passive loan of a body part for nine months. The father was placed at the center, not the mother.

However, reconciliation of this twisted interpretation with Christ’s attitude in Luke 11:27 proved to be futile. This passage relates Christ’s talking to a crowd of people when suddenly a woman, moved by Christ’s preaching, comes out of the crowd and shouts at Him, “blessed is the womb that gave birth to you.” This woman creates an implied image of valuing a woman simply because she possesses a womb, thereby perpetuating the traditional image of a woman as mere womb, as programmed by her patriarchal Hebrew culture. However, Christ’s reply, “blessed rather are those who hear

the word of God and obey it,” clearly suggests his dismissal of the woman’s conviction, as signaled by His mention of the word “rather.” In other words, women are not important simply because they have wombs and can bear a man’s child but because they are rational and intelligent beings who, like men, can hear, absorb, and act on Christ’s heady maxims every bit as thoroughly and rationally as men. This constitutes a major paradigm shift: women are important not for being a body part but for being a whole person, capable of intelligent thought and action.

Further, we see how the medieval church fathers’ interpretation that women will gain salvation from God through their reproductive function contradicts the whole biblical message that salvation is only won through God’s grace and mercy as embodied in Christ’s sacrifice, not through good works. This is articulated in Titus 3:4-8: “God [...] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our savior.” Interpreting 1 Timothy in accordance with medieval Catholicism is, in effect, to deny Christ’s crucifixion all together. The Reformers’ chief agenda was to emphasize that salvation could be won only through God’s grace and faith in Christ, not through good works. Accordingly, then, how can women be saved through childbirth? The Reformers saw the folly of the patriarchal medieval logic and assiduously dismantled it.

Further, feminist biblical exegetes did not let such passages go unnoticed. Hammer presents an alternative, more convincing and insightful interpretation of 1 Timothy: he reads it that “women will be preserved through (not by virtue of) the hardship of childbirth much as Noah and his family were saved through the waters of the

flood in 1 Peter 3:20. Thus, saved through a danger by God makes the best Christian sense” (75). Hammer’s rationale, then, forces an alternative view of God as the ultimate caretaker for parturient women, not their punisher. Again this provides further evidence that God is on the side of the maternal, an idea that will be explored in detail in my discussion of *The Winter’s Tale*.

Another major biblical passage emphasized by medieval religious authorities is Genesis 3:16: God tells Eve after the Fall, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” This passage was heavily highlighted by patriarchal cultures to reinforce the belief that childbirth was God’s punishment for Eve. It follows that this female creative process was viewed as a shameful and humiliating experience— a punishment—and therefore degrading. But if God, Christ, and the Apostle Paul affirm this female experience, as I discussed above, then why would God make it a punishment characterized by pain and suffering? Noting this inherent contradiction, Helen Wessel and Carol Meyers, feminist biblical scholars, contend that “reading pain into Genesis 3:16 is a culturally conditioned misunderstanding” (qtd. in Hammer 76). In her popular book National Childbirth and the Christian Family, Wessel presents a critique of this prejudiced interpretation of the Genesis passage. She points to the discrepancy in the interpretation of the Hebrew word “issabon” in Genesis 3:16 as “pain” when referring to women and “toil” when referring to the man. She attributes this discrepancy to the interpreters’ bias which resulted from their cultural beliefs (Hammer 76). Meyers also shares Wessel’s interpretation of “issabon” as toil based on her lexical and syntactic studies.



These two critics, then, posit that it is foolish and inaccurate to interpret “issabon” as mere toil in childbirth because such a reading ignores the pain involved in the birth process, particularly the “strong uterine contractions” (Hammer 18). Therefore, Meyers maintains that the Hebrew word “heron” in Genesis 3:16, often interpreted parturition, refers to pregnancy, not parturition. Hence, she concludes that the final and most convincing interpretation of the Genesis passage would be “toil in pregnancy” rather than “pain in parturition.” Expanding this interpretation, Hammer asserts that it “better reflects the universal scope of the story in which the verse is embedded. It points to the increased toil involved in any pregnancy as ongoing daily tasks are compounded by the body’s extra burden” (18-19). Although Genesis 3:16 was historically interpreted as God’s curse on women due to Eve’s fall into sin, Hammer observes that the word “sin” does not figure in this narrative at all. The Bible does not describe the distress and toil in childbirth as a “curse,” nor is the notion of curse even indirectly connected to the woman (23). The biased interpretation of Genesis 3:16, which Wessel, Meyers, and Hammer expose, intensifies the cultural view of female sexuality as suspicious, degrading, and corrupt. The negative view of women’s sexuality as suspicious and sinful in large measure accounts for the general attitude toward parturition as unclean. This is reflected, as I discuss below, in Leontes’s reading of Hermione’s body as corrupt and sinful in *The Winter’s Tale*.

It is important to note that childbirth and maternity have been marginalized and neglected by male theologians and historians as a female experience. Women’s history has been written by males; therefore, due to their prejudices, they have historically failed to appreciate or accurately report this female experience (Lerner 4-5). Seen from the male

historians' biased perspective, it was essentially dismissed and given minor attention. Had it been written by females, it would have been, most likely, highly emphasized as an important and identity-shaping experience. Crawford argues that motherhood as a feminine experience was neglected by historians until the rise of the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s when writers started to focus attention on women's history and past experiences (Construction 5). Male historians, she maintains, "did not have interest in women's experiences. This new interest in women's past lives, as established by the feminist movement, sparked an interest in the history of maternity, as an important aspect of women's lives [...]; thus, women's experiences are no longer seen through males' perspective" (5). In fact, owing to the pre-dominant negative attitude towards women in general in patriarchal societies, maternity, as a powerful female experience, has been marginalized at best and obliterated at worst. Because, nowadays, we live in a highly secularized culture and have moved away from the Bible as the shaping ideological construct of our lives, we have forgotten the various stories of biblical mothers, such as the Virgin, Rachel, Hannah, the Shunammite woman, Bathsheba, Naomi, Esther, Deborah, Miriam, Tamar, and Ruth. We forgot what maternity meant to these mothers and that Solomon "had a throne for the Queen mother, and she sat on his right" (1 Kings 2:19).

However, Renaissance culture in time became a biblically-informed and defined culture. The man-made traditions were discredited in favor of a higher authority, the Bible. People at that time knew the Bible and read it much more than we do nowadays. The Bible was seen as a liberating text that emancipated people from the institutional manacles and ideological chains that had bound people, especially women, for ages.

Once the Protestant Reformers put people back in contact with the previously closeted Bible, people were more enlightened about how Christ and the Apostle Paul treated women. The biblical thinking about maternity and childbirth were incrementally comprehended and foregrounded during the Renaissance, albeit the pre-existing traditional views were present too. This chapter explores how Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* assimilates the biblical thinking vis-à-vis its celebration and veneration of maternity and childbirth. I argue that Shakespeare's acclamation and exaltation of this powerful female experience echo biblical language, themes, stories, imagery, and allusions in this play.

Many critics, as I stated earlier in this dissertation, contend that Shakespeare assimilated the Bible's language, imagery, and phraseology in order to reinforce a theme. He uses such biblical tropes, I contend, to elicit his audience's empathy and to accentuate their appreciation for his subject. Renaissance people were very sensitive to biblical language and nuance. Because they were quite familiar with its imagery and tropes, Shakespeare made his audience more receptive to and empathetic with some of his plots and themes by couching them in biblical language. When Shakespeare, I suggest, is concerned with maternity and childbirth, he assimilates biblical maternal imagery in his plays in order to effectively challenge his patriarchal culture's preconceived notions about these female experiences. By using the biblical tropes as a vehicle for his dramatic purpose, he reinforces his theme and buttresses his claims more efficiently. Layering his language with biblical maternal imagery enables Shakespeare to influence his audience's sensibility and subtly express his veneration of maternity and parturition. What is more, Shakespeare, in numerous plays, challenges his patriarchal culture's prevailing beliefs by

making his male characters, strikingly, the ones who predominantly use maternal imagery to refer to themselves. By having his male characters use maternal imagery, Shakespeare critiques the deep-seated stereotypical assumptions prevalent in his extremely patriarchal culture and in the process champions the cause and plight of women in biblical fashion.

The Apostle Paul, who existed during the heyday of Roman Empire colonization which viewed parturition in terms of disgust and uncleanness, uses maternal and birth imageries to refer to himself in his ministry. For a male to use feminine imagery like this in a hegemonic culture that emphasized gender boundaries and suppressed women was extremely subversive and radical. In Galatians 4:19, as I discussed earlier, he likens himself to a birthing mother in travail; in 1 Corinthians he compares himself to a mother suckling her child. Further, notwithstanding the reality that Christ preached in a culture entrenched with patriarchal beliefs, in John 7:3-9 He compares himself to a mother suckling her baby. Also, to review a point I made above, God, in Isaiah 42:14 and Jeremiah 4:19-22, likens Himself to an anguished, parturient woman shouting in travail. For Christ, Paul, and, above all, God to use imageries of maternity and parturition suggest their great reverence for this female creative experience.

These biblical tropes figure abundantly in Shakespeare's plays. Ironically and astoundingly, many of his male characters use maternal and birth imageries to express their emotions, thereby disrupting their society's gender expectations and excoriating patriarchy. For instance, when he is reunited with his daughter, Pericles uses this rhetoric: "I have suffered like a girl," and "I am great with woe, and shall deliver weeping" (*Pericles* V.i.38; 107). In *Cymbeline*, upon reunion with his children, Cymbeline says, "O, what am I? / A mother to the birth of three? Ne'er mother / Rejoiced deliverance

more” (V.v.368-70). In *The Winter’s Tale*, Camillo, expresses his emotional longing for his country, after a long exile, using imagery of pregnancy and childbirth: “I shall re-view Sicilia, for whose sight / I have a woman’s longing” (IV.iv.655-56). The word “longing” suggests birth and conception. Camillo seemingly compares his nostalgia for his country to a woman’s longing for pregnancy after a long period of barrenness. In *Henry VIII*, Henry, comparing his grievance to a woman’s groans in birth, cries, “I weigh’d the danger which my realms stood in / By this my issue’s fail; and that gave to me / Many a groaning throe” (II.iv.194-96). Henry VIII, the quintessence of patriarchy, uses a female image to express his grief at his “issue’s fail.” Such a behavior represents an astoundingly radical deviance from the established cultural norms. In *The Tempest*, after he is swept ashore, following a shipwreck, Prospero expresses his distress and the perils he undergoes in his journey and utilizes a rhetoric that suggests pregnancy and childbirth: “When I have decked the sea with drops full salt, / Under my burthen groaned; which raised in me / An undergoing stomach to bear up” (I.ii.155-57). In all of these instances female imagery is used in a wholesome, affirming light, and as if that is not revolutionary enough, Shakespeare’s males describe their situations with female, not male, imagery. This speaks to how inflammatorily counter-cultural his plays were.

Existing in a culture that viewed pregnancy as shameful and childbirth as repellent, these male characters are subversive and their assimilation of imagery, which is derivative of feminine experiences, explosive. Shakespeare, like Christ and Paul, lived in a culture that placed high emphasis on gender boundaries. Parturition, in Hebrew and early modern cultures, was viewed in terms of uncleanness and taboo, a shameful and demeaning female experience. The stereotypical views associated with the female

reproductive process at the time were no more than discursive constructions that denigrated women in general. Christ and Paul apparently were aware of this fact; therefore, through their application of maternal imageries to themselves, they intended to destabilize the pre-existing, prejudiced patriarchal notions. Thus, since they were religious iconic models in their cultures, they sought to change those prevalent prejudiced attitudes by modeling new ones. Christ and Paul did not feel ashamed to appropriate feminine imagery to refer to themselves or to illustrate their teachings, because they viewed this female experience with respect. By the same token, Shakespeare's male characters, though existing in an intensely patriarchal culture that viewed childbirth as feminine and degrading, do not hesitate to refer to themselves with imagery derivative of childbearing and labor. Christ and Paul, the bastions of Christianity, would not have used childbirth imagery to describe their emotions had they not revered and appreciated this feminine experience. Indeed, they would not have used such rhetoric, especially in public settings and in texts that would in time enjoy phenomenally wide distribution, had they not viewed childbirth and parturition positively. Similarly, holding similar beliefs, Shakespeare's male characters use maternal tropes in order to express his veneration for parturition and conception. Thus, I maintain that Shakespeare is inspired by the biblical thinking regarding this matter. However, the biblical dimension for his portrayal of maternity and childbirth was not limited to mere rhetoric.

In *The Winter's Tale*, the explication of which constitutes the central concern in this chapter, the biblical underpinnings of Shakespeare's acclamation of maternity moves beyond rhetoric: biblical stories, themes, and language cohere to advance his plotline and augment his theme. He makes the stories of the Fall of Adam and Eve and, allegorically,

of the birth of Christ the Messiah by the Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit the informing metaphor for his play. Shakespeare conflates his maternal agenda with these two typically polarized stories in order to portray maternity in a new and positive light that iconoclastically challenges pre-established cultural norms. Within the deep-seated medieval and early modern cultural notions about maternity lay the belief that women existed to produce offspring which would serve male interests—in other words, to perpetuate patrilineage and to help maintain the prosperity of male-dominated society. Producing offspring, since it serves male interests, does not serve or empower women; rather, it empowers men. If we take into account that early modern culture instilled the belief that the male's sperm formed the fetus, and even the baby's soul, then conception depreciated and degraded women. The female's role in this process was greatly marginalized: she contributed the base part of the creative process, her body or the flesh, and functioned only as a vessel to preserve the male's deposit in their wombs during the loaning period of several months. In other words, the male was the center of this creative process and the female, totally marginalized, was reduced to a mere passive receptacle.

Shakespeare, in *The Winter's Tale*, discounts this flawed logic and perception. He espouses the biblical view that a woman's maternal role surpasses its culturally—and institutionally—limited assessment in favor of a more positive perception. Childbirth, in the biblical and Shakespearean view, transcends its constructed definition to a more positive redefinition. Shakespeare challenges the conventional notion that female fertility privileged the male. Dismissive of these patriarchal assumptions, he portrays childbirth as a dignifying and empowering experience that is more advantageous for the mother than the father, since this female experience reinforces women's subjectivity and self-

assertiveness. Masculine sexual dominance is obviated, and the view that men reduced women to a mere reproductive machine becomes ludicrous.

The story of *The Winter's Tale* opens with an exposition of the preconceived cultural beliefs about women as the cause of the fall of mankind from the Garden of Eden. In this biblical story, Eve sinned first, seduced Adam to sin, and caused a permanent rupture in mankind's relationship with God. Thus, the medieval and early modern belief blamed Eve alone for the Fall. This misconception of the biblical narrative is evinced in the conversation between Polixenes and Hermione in act one:

Polixenes. We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk I' the sun,

And bleat the one at the other: what we changed

Was innocence for innocence; we knew not

The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd

That any did. Had we pursued that life,

And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd

With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven

Boldly not guilty; the imposition clear'd

Hereditary ours.

Hermione. By this we gather

You have tripp'd since.

Polixenes. O my most sacred lady!

Temptations have since then been born to's; for

In those unfledged days was my wife a girl;



Your precious self had then not cross'd the eyes

Of my young play-fellow. (I.II.70-81)

Polixenes, articulating his culture's predominant views, believes here that women are evil seductresses who lead men into sin. He holds that his childhood friend King Leontes and he were "innocent" "twinned lambs" in those "unfledged days," when they enjoyed prelapsarian status until "tempt[ed]" by women. His juxtaposition of "temptation" and "sacred[ness]," when referring to Hermione and his wife, is ironic and perhaps playful. His seriousness in this conviction, however, is later seen in his accusation of Perdita for seducing his son Florizel and his insistence that Florizel terminate his relationship with her. What provokes one's suspicions about Leontes is that he does not share in the argument about this point, which forces one to suspect Leontes' confirmation of Polixenes' view. This assumption materializes with the sudden and unwarranted eruption of Leontes' rage. In fact, Leontes' sudden frantic rants provoke a long-standing debate concerning the actual cause of his jealousy. Readers are not told by any of the characters in the play that Leontes is impulsive and rash in nature. His rage is not provoked by an evil agent, like Iago; it seemingly materializes out of nowhere. This leads one to deduce that Leontes' ill convictions smolder in his mind and merely await a spark. Hermione's success, following Leontes' failure at convincing Polixenes to delay his departure from Sicilia, is what catalyzes Leontes' deep-held beliefs, which we see in his prompt, "at my request he [Polixene] would not [lengthen his stay]" (I.ii.89).

From this point on Leontes begins to perceive Hermione's every gesture as evidence of sexual indiscretion. He reads her friendly hospitality toward the guest as a sign of sexual liaison. When Hermione gives her hand to Polixenes out of kindness,

Leontes reads that as “mingling blood,” causing him “tremor cordis” and causing his “heart” to “dance” but “not for joy” (I.i.110-12). He tells Camillo that Hermione’s sexual acts will “sully the purity and whiteness of my sheets— / Which to preserve is sleep, which being spotted / Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps” (I.ii.328-30). Leontes further believes that his “wife is slippery” (I.ii.275). These invectives suggest that Leontes agrees with his friend’s view of women as licentiously prone to sexual sin.

However, Polixene’s conversation with Hermione alludes to the story of the Fall at an even deeper and more thematically-revealing level. The narrative of the Fall, suggested by Polixene’s allusions, reminds readers of God’s punishment of Eve to “suffer pain in childbirth.” The play’s maternal agenda, in the subsequent scenes, legitimizes reading the play in conjunction with God’s assigning Eve the procreative role. The story of the Fall, as noted earlier, was interpreted by prejudiced patriarchal religious authorities to serve men and relegate women to an inferior status. In their errant interpretation of the biblical text, God, as a punishment, sentenced Eve to a second-tier status—to exist for the service of Adam, emblemized in her birth from his rib. At the center of the Fall story is the childbirth issue. The big question is, Is the childbirth meant to serve man or woman? As it was interpreted in the Middle Ages through the early modern period, a woman’s role in life is merely biological—to produce the offspring that would perpetuate patrilineage, thereby keeping the male at the center and the woman at the margin. This was woman’s punishment by God, not her reward. What also reinforced these beliefs was the early modern medical discourse which emphasized the role of male semen in forming the fetus. Mclaughlin opines that in the middle ages “Aristotelian biology assured a passive, auxiliary, and subordinate status [to mothers] so that the mother [...] [is reduced

to a mere] tube through which the male semen passes to emerge, if nothing untoward happens, a man child, educated and trained by his father after a brief period at his mother's breast" (230). This shows, then, that the mother does not exist outside the constructed biological image: she is a "tube" and a "breast." Mclaughlin maintains that "even that which is peculiarly the woman's, the generative function, is inferior to the male equivalent, for the man is the active and fecund force, the woman but a passive and receptive instrument" (218). It follows, then, that the male is the one who controls reproduction, not the woman, for he is the "active force" who makes conception happen. In fact, according to medieval and early modern cultural ideals, controlling one's wife's fertility constituted much of the male's masculinity and self-pride.

Thus, Leontes' rage about his wife's assumed sexual transgression cannot be read in isolation from his anxiety about her pregnancy. Hermione's pregnant body becomes the target of his vituperative attack because it is out of his control, for there is no way for him to know who impregnated his wife. In addition, pregnancy in the early modern period, besides being viewed as a proof of sexual activity, was a natural immunity and safeguard against sexual detection; it provided women with sexual license. Leontes admits his inability to control conception, for there is "no barricado for a belly" (I.ii.205). He compares the womb of the pregnant woman to a gate that "will let in and out the enemy / With bag and baggage" (206). Frustrated at his inability to control Hermione's pregnancy, Leontes describes women's reproductive organs in language that suggests disease and infection: "Many thousand one's / Have the disease and feel't not" (208); even his "wife's liver" is "infected" (301). He tells Hermione that Polixene "has made thee swell [suggesting disease] thus" (II.i.64).

What is important to note about Leontes is that he refers to Hermione's body with the language of possessiveness. He believes that "his pond [is] fished by his next neighbor," and that "other men have gates, and those gates opened, / As mine, against their will" (I.ii.170-73). He believes that she is the property of another man: "why, he that wears her like medal, hanging / about his neck" (1.2.309-10). He compares her to an object worn by men like a medal, a mere ornament that men show off in front of other men to enhance their self-esteem. Further, he refers to her in commercial terms: he believes that his "honour" [wife] is stolen by others and made "their profits" (I.ii.311-12). That is how men like Leontes, who, to assert their masculine ideal, treat women as an object upon which they exercise their subjectivity. But also, female sexuality is a threat for masculinity due to the continuous fear of being cuckolded, which is what worried most men in that patriarchal culture. In other words, a woman is used as an object in the hands of men—a tool or instrument to empower men at the expense of women's autonomous self-confidence or dignity. What is more, since women's bodies were treated by men as sexual objects, upon which they exercised their sexual prowess and sported their superior manhood, men viewed procreation as the means to enhance men's bloodline. This view of women as procreative machines to perpetuate patrilineage obliterated their identity as human beings and negated their maternal role.

While I will tackle the larger issue of how women's sexuality was treated in the early modern culture in the next chapter in greater detail, my main concern here is to discuss one limited but important point—Shakespeare's reinvention of maternity. Plugged into and working out of the biblical tradition, Shakespeare presents a new definition of maternity. Whereas the early modern culture placed men, since they

contribute the soul of the fetus through insemination, at the center, Shakespeare discounts the early modern medical discourse and places the mother at the center, thereby exalting maternity and destabilizing the stereotypical image of a woman as a procreative machine. Shakespeare rejects equating woman with womb and insistently resists such narrow prejudiced definition.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes not only views Hermione as a sexual object for his, or other men's, enjoyment, or a place where they exercise their sexual superiority, but also he views her as a womb to produce offspring to perpetuate patriarchy. Production of "issue" for Leontes is another way by which he enhances his masculine power; therefore, he is so anxious, first, about controlling Hermione's sexuality and, second, her reproduction. In other words, he installs himself as the owner of Hermione's children. He places himself at the center of the creative process because he contributes the precious element to form the fetus. In short, he treats Hermione's children as essentially belonging to him. Owing to this rationale, maternity is marginalized and paternity is reinforced—no balance between them.

Amidst his rage about Hermione's alleged illicit sexual liaison with Polixenes, Leontes, anxious about the possibility of his bloodline's contamination, turns to his son Mamillius to investigate his legitimacy. He expects Hermione to produce offspring who bear strong resemblance to his own image. Perceiving Hermione as a copying machine, he expects her to produce exact reproductions of his physiognomy, thereby dismissing the possibility of the children bearing resemblance to their mother, an idea that further shows Leontes' obsession with meeting the masculine ideal. That is, the more resemblance to him his children bear, the more secure he feels about his masculinity.

Suspicious about the purity of his progeny, he asks Mamillius, “Art thou my boy?,” and “Art thou my calf?” (I.ii.122; 129). Obsessed about Mamillius’ resemblance to him, he asks, “Why, that’s my bawcock. What? Hast smutched thy nose? / They say it is a copy out of mine” (I.ii.123-24). Leontes is totally dismissive of the likelihood that Mamillius’ nose be a copy of his mother’s, which shows how obsessed he is with the masculine ideal. Leontes is not satisfied that “women say” that he and Mamillius are “almost as like as eggs” (I.ii.131-32). What concerns Leontes is not assurances from women, for women might “say anything” (I.ii.133). Rather, probably he needs assurances from men, for it is men’s opinion of him that matters the most. Leontes is so blinded by his obsession with his own image as it exists in men’s eyes that he wants his children to be the exact copy of himself. Leontes looks for doubles of himself to improve his self-esteem. When Leontes first meets Florizel in the final act, the first thing that catches his attention is the great resemblance between Florizel and his father:

Your mother was most true to wedlock, prince;

For she did print your royal father off,

Conceiving you: were I but twenty-one,

Your father's image is so hit in you,

His very air, that I should call you brother, (V.i.123-27)

To Leontes, a good wife is a good womb; a good womb is a good copying machine, and a good copying machine makes a woman a faceless non-entity. He values a wife, not for being a soul mate, but for her reproductive role in “print[ing] father[s] off.” According to such thinking, Hermione’s maternal role does not have existence. A woman like Hermione has existence only within males’ definition.

As he uses possessive language to refer to Hermione's body, Leontes speaks of his son in similar terms: Mamillius is his "collop" and "calf." Leontes is worried that Hermione's assumed sexual infidelity will "give scandal to the blood o'th' prince, my son— / Who I do think is mine, and love as mine—" (I.ii.131-34). He speaks with Polixenes about Florizel, Polixenes' son, in a language that suggests rivalry about ownership: "Are you so fond of your young prince as we / Do seem to be of ours? (I.ii.165-66). When Polixenes states that his son is his "exercise," "mirth," "friend," "parasite," "soldier," and "statesman," Leontes assures his friend that Mamillius represents the same to him: "So stands this squire / officed with me" (1.2.174-75). Of course, amidst all this we note, distressingly, that the mother has no existence, for the child is the father's property. In fact, while Leontes tries to erase the mother, in Polixenes' world the mother is erased already.

The second act starts with Mamillius being in the presence of women after meeting with his father. When he first meets with his mother, her reaction to him is a bit confusing; her first line to her women is, "take the boy to you. He so troubles me / 'Tis past enduring" (II.i.1-2). Although it is not clear why Hermione is so upset with the child, we can speculate that probably he meets her with coldness after having been poisoned by his father's suspicious thoughts. Mamillius also acts coldly toward Hermione's women; when the First Lady asks him to "come, my gracious lord / Shall I be your play-fellow?" he declines her request: "No, I'll none of you" (II.i.3-5). When queried why he shows this coldness towards them, the First and Second Ladies, Mamillius responds, "You'll kiss me hard, and speak to me as if / I were a baby still" (II.i.8-9). Although his attitude might be dismissed as a mere normal childish behavior, one must not overlook Shakespeare's

possible dramatic purpose: the child seems resistant to women or the maternal. Mamillius is in a transitional stage between the symbolic, the father's realm, and the semiotic, the mother's realm. To put it in Kristevan terms, the child exists in the semiotic stage for the first few years, then s/he enters into the symbolic, or the realm of language, which is the stage when the child begins to mature. The semiotic is dominated by the mother, whereas the symbolic is dominated by the father. Mamillius seems to be more attuned towards the father since he does not want the women to treat him "as if" he "were a baby still," an indication that Mamillius is closer to the symbolic than the semiotic. Mamillius does not want to be treated as immature, a baby; rather, he seemingly wants to be treated as a mature child, in the symbolic order of maturity—the father's realm. When Hermione returns to speak with Mamillius, she asks him to tell her a tale. Sensing that he is at distance from her, she asks him to "sit by" her (II.i.22). Demanding more closeness, Hermione asks him to "come on" and "on" (32). Unsatisfied, she requests him to "give't me in mine ear" (34). Hermione seeks a closer union with the child, or a return to her womb, which suggests her struggle to reclaim her usurped maternal role.

Anxious about Mamillius' closeness to the maternal, Leontes takes him from Hermione: "Give me the boy. I am glad you did not nurse him / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him (II.i.57-9). Commenting on the maternal influence, Janet Adelman opines that the maternal was culturally constructed as dangerous: "the maternal body must have seemed especially dangerous to little boys: fed in uterus on her menstrual blood and then on her milk that is its derivative" (7). Hence, Leontes is apprehensive that Mamillius has "too much blood in him" that would threaten his masculine authority. He assumes that it is not normal for the child to have signs of his



mother's influence. For Mamillius to bear more resemblance to his mother than his father represents a weakness in and a threat to the masculine authority. Leontes believes that Mamilius' closeness to the maternal impedes his maturity and entrance into the masculine world—the symbolic stage. Therefore, he asks his servant to “bear the boy hence. He shall not come about her. / Away with him, and let her sport herself / With that she's big with” (II.i.105-06). To ensure the mother's separation from the child, Leontes orders that she be sent to prison.

Leontes' prison represents the masculine constriction of the maternal. Hermione's maternity is suffocated since she is deprived of all maternal privileges. At the trial, Hermione declares that, at prison, she is “denied” “the child-bed privilege which 'longs to women of all fashion” (III.ii.89; 106-07). In addition, she is deprived the company of her women. When she requests that “my women be with me, for you see / My plight requires it” (II.i.119-20), Leontes declines, trying everything possible to reduce the maternal to nothingness. By denying Hermione's request of keeping the company of her women, he intends to weaken her female network, her only source of solace and comfort. He wants to disturb this maternal solidarity. Instead of lying in a comfortable chamber where women form an autonomous network independent of the authority of the male world, Hermione gives birth in a masculine chamber, a prison, where the male jailer has “express commandment” (II.ii.11) not to let any female in, thereby subsuming the maternal totally within the domain of men. In fact, the maternal world is penetrated by the male interference. At the trial scene Hermione complains that she was “hurried to this place, [the prison], I' the open air, before / I have got strength of limit” (III.ii.104-05). For a parturient woman to be exposed to the open air was thought to be very dangerous.

Hermione, like all women, is expected to give birth in an enclosed place, a place where the birthing woman is surrounded by women only. It should be a feminine chamber isolated from the males, and Hermione's body, upon birth, should be isolated from male intrusion or even male sight.

But, here, Hermione's body is denied this privilege; she gives birth in a male-dominated prison cell where her weak body is penetrated by male "air." When Paulina asks the jailer if it is "lawful" for Hermione "to see her women," the jailer stipulates that he "must be present at [their] conference." Leontes here turns the birthing process, which is supposed to be a moment of maternal strength and a place where women experience the joy of childbirth, into a suffocating hellish experience, thereby denying her the joy and triumph of giving birth. Indeed, Hermione is totally suffocated. One might wonder why Shakespeare hides the birthing scene from his audience. Hermione gives birth at prison silently; we do not hear her shouting in travail. A birthing woman's pain in childbirth shows her strength, since pain is the woman's opportunity to demonstrate her strength and courage. But Hermione is denied this experience. The maternal experience is, indeed, reduced to a humiliating experience, one that is full of pain, suffering, male intrusiveness, agony, and characterized by loneliness. When Paulina inquires Emilia about "how [her] gracious lady" "fares," Emilia says, "As well as one so great and so forlorn / May hold together: on her frights and griefs, / Which never tender lady hath born greater, / She is something before her time deliver'd" (II.ii.25-9). Leontes transforms the childbirth process from a feminine realm to domination by oppressive male tyranny. Anguished at being deprived of her children and not caring about Leontes' punishment, Hermione complains courageously:

Sir, spare your threats:  
The bug which you would fright me with I seek.  
To me can life be no commodity:  
The crown and comfort of my life, your favour,  
I do give lost; for I do feel it gone,  
But know not how it went. My second joy  
And first-fruits of my body, from his presence  
I am barr'd, like one infectious. My third comfort  
Starr'd most unluckily, is from my breast,  
The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth,  
Haled out to murder (III.ii.89-99)

Hermione values her maternal role more than her duty as a wife or her love of her life. To her, life is “no commodity” after the “first-fruits of [her] body from his presence she is barr’d.” In fact, while her role as a subservient wife causes her demise, her maternal role restores her to life, as will be discussed below.

However, in the final and most significant scene of the play, Shakespeare powerfully vindicates and venerates the maternal. It is important to note that this scene is Shakespeare’s pure invention, meaning it was not included in his source play, Robert Green’s *Pandosto*. Although critics puzzled at his purpose for creating this scene, I contend that this scene relates to and harmonizes brilliantly with the play’s maternal agenda. In this scene, Hermione is restored to life, reunited with her long-exiled child, Perdita, and her child-bed privileges are restored. At this juncture in the play, Leontes at last recognizes and accepts the power of the maternal. What concerns me the most in this

scene is the abundant biblical underpinnings of Hermione's restoration to maternity. The central biblical image that Shakespeare emphatically invokes is that of the Virgin and Jesus Christ. Shakespeare's integration of the Virgin's maternal experience serves as his vehicle—his informing metaphor, as it were—for veneration of the maternal.

The play in general and the final scene in particular contain many biblical allusions that suggest correspondence between the story of Hermione and the Virgin Mary. First, both stories are characterized by divine presence and support of the maternal. In the play, as in the story of the Virgin, the divine powers clearly side with the maternal; the oracle of Apollo, for instance, announces Leontes guilty, and a lord in act two scene one, proclaims that Hermione is “spotless / In the eyes of heaven” (132-33). When Hermione is to be escorted to prison, she appears resolute and trusting of divine powers: “I must be patient till the heavens look / With an aspect more favorable” (II.i.107-08). In high morale, Hermione tells those lamenting her miserable state that the “action [she] now go on / Is for [her] better grace” (II.i.123-24); she trusts that “powers divine / Behold our human actions” and “I do refer me to the oracle: Apollo be my judge!” (III.ii.26-7). Hermione's lines, I contend, echo the Virgin's speech in the Magnificat: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant” (Luke 1:46-8). Second, both the Virgin and Hermione are accused of sexual indiscretion and illegitimate conception; both the Virgin's and Hermione's conceptions are doubted by their husbands. Third, Hermione's pregnancy is characterized by Messianic-based joy and blessing; both the Virgin and Hermione are lifted up through childbirth. While the Virgin rejoices that “all generations will call [her] blessed” (48-9), Hermione claims that “this action is for my better grace,” suggesting that

her delivery of Perdita is going to be a source of exaltation and grace for her. Perdita is referred to as a blessing and joy of her mother. In her last speech before her resurrection, Hermione describes her children as “joy,” and “fruits of her body”; in fact, Hermione’s restoration to life occurs only after the reappearance of Perdita (III.ii.94). By the same token, if we compare the Virgin’s status before and after the Annunciation, we find correspondence in both stories, especially if we take into account the Virgin’s sorrows while barren and her joy after Gabriel’s revelation (see Luke 1:46-9). Fourth, in both stories, the newborn child is given a name by the mother and not the father. The custom in Christ’s Jewish culture was that the father was the one who named the child, as it is the case with Elizabeth upon the birth of John the Baptist; Elizabeth, as foretold by the Angel, insists on naming the child John, but people disregard her request and headed to the father, the acknowledged authority. Last, the numerous associations of Hermione with grace reminisces angel Gabriel’s greetings to the Virgin; Gabriel carries to the Virgin the great, favorable news that she is going to receive God’s grace through her conception: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). In a similar sense, Hermione is associated with grace through conception of Christ-like Perdita. After Leontes is penitent, he describes Hermione as “tender / As infancy and grace” (V.iii.26-7). Hermione is lifted up by the rebirth of Perdita. She is, in a sense, resurrected through Perdita. After Perdita is taken by Antigonus and left to die, Hermione dies, but she “know[s] by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved / Myself to see the issue” (V.iii.126-28).

Similarly, Perdita is referred to in language that is reminiscent of the Messiah. The birth of Christ was revealed to shepherds; by the same token, Perdita is found by a

shepherd who describes her in a language that suggests Messianic-styled language of rebirth and hope: “though met’st with things dying, I with things new-born” (III.iii.112-13). The birth of the Messiah signaled a spiritual rebirth of Israel. Perdita’s disappearance represents the coming of chaos to the world, but when Perdita reappears, order is restored in the kingdom of Sicilia. Perdita, a source of grace and blessing to her parents, is portrayed as the Messiah whose resurrection brings order and peace back to the world. Before the birth of Christ, people of Israel were living in a chaotic and dark world characterized by spiritual death:

It will be for you [Christ] to give his people [Israel] knowledge of their salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. Because the heart of our God is full of mercy towards us, the first light of Heaven shall come to visit us—to shine on those who lie in darkness and under the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1:76-9)

Similarly, only with the resurrection of the messianic Perdita are order and peace restored. Echoing Israel’s loss of faith in Christ, their clouded judgment, and the subsequent destruction that followed, Leontes’ “unsafe lunes,” “weak-hinged fancy,” and “diseased opinion” (II.ii.34; II.iii.118; I.ii.298) wreak chaos in his kingdom. Reminiscing Israel’s attitude to Christ, Leontes wishes to see Perdita “consumed with fire” (II.iii.132). Although Paulina, the divine voice of justice, tells him that Perdita is “a better guiding spirit” (II.iii.127), he remains adamant: “Our prerogative / Calls not your [his subjects’] counsels”; [...] “we need no more of your advice. The matter, / The loss, the gain, the ord’ring on’t, is all / Properly ours” (II.i.165-66; 170-73). The consequences of his

intransigence is, of course, as his subjects Dion and Cleomentes declare, menacing “dangers” that “drop upon his kingdom and devour [it]” (V.i.27-8).

Thus, Perdita’s rebirth is painstakingly analogous to the birth of the Messiah. Perdita is the divine savior through whom salvation can be attained and the era of peace achieved. Shakespeare, in addition to this obvious analogy, further exalts Perdita by couching her language in biblical echoes. She is described by a Servant as “the most peerless piece of earth [...] / That e’er the sun shone bright on,” (5.1.93-4) a “creature” who if she were to “begin a sect, might quench the zeal / Of all professors else” (108-09). “Begin[ning] a sect” is reminiscent of Christ’s God-ordained mission to begin a sect of Christian believers. As Jesus was favored by God to go on this mission, so too Shakespeare favors Perdita by describing her in this exalting and favorable fashion. While Antigonus is in the forest intending to leave her, he, speaking to the baby, says that “some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens / To be thy nurses” (II.iii.185-87). This image is, in fact, reminiscent of the story of prophet Elijah who, to escape king Ahab’s rage, was instructed by God to hide while the ravens, commanded by God, fed him: “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerithe Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there” (1 Kings 17:2-5). God’s sending of the “ravens” suggests His concern and nurture of Elijah; in a similar sense, “some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens” to “nurse” Perdita, an indication that the maternal is supported by divine forces. More, in the Bible, the ravens were sent by God to help a male; here Shakespeare has “the ravens” help a female—a further proof of his support and affirmation of women. Furthermore, Polixenes’ refusal to legitimize Leontes’ actions after ordering Perdita’s exile bears a striking reference to

Christ when he declares that he would be joining that “who betrayed the best”—alluding to Judas’s betrayal of Christ— if Polixenes assents to his friend’s groundless, unwarranted atrocities.

The big question, apropos of this mountain of meticulously chosen allusion which Shakespeare amasses, is how the story of the Virgin serves his purpose to venerate and reinvent the maternal? First of all, as explored earlier, the early modern culture placed the male at the center of the creative process, since the male semen supposedly formed the fetus and greatly marginalized the role of the female whose womb was borrowed to further male ends for a brief nine-month period. However, the Virgin’s immaculate conception reverses this thinking because it is the female, Mary, not Joseph, who is placed at the center. The Virgin becomes pregnant without male insemination; therefore, the definition of traditional conception as a biological act made possible only through the male is discounted. That is, in the Virgin’s pregnancy it is Mary who is exalted and lifted up, not Joseph; indeed, Joseph remains on the far periphery throughout. She is placed at the center because she is approached by Gabriel and announced as the chosen woman, not Joseph. The Virgin finds herself suddenly pregnant through the Holy Spirit without the biological act; the masculine role of insemination is excluded. In this story, God and the Virgin work in tandem while men are sidelined. The Virgin’s conception dignifies and exalts the lot of women because the pregnancy happens without male assistance; more accurately, it happens with the help of God. The significance of the event is profound: nothing defines maleness more than the sex act and the male’s designation as the carrier of the procreative seed. But in this momentous birth, both are completely eclipsed: the male receives no credit, and the female all. The fact that she was chosen by



God to be the mother of Christ greatly exalts Mary specifically and women generally. In fact, in the entire nativity account, Scripture repeatedly marginalizes the male every time the birth of the Messiah is mentioned, and this even applies to all the Old Testament prophecies, as in Genesis 3:15 when the writer, boldly and shockingly, says, “the woman’s seed [...] shall bruise [Satan’s] head.” Thus, by reworking the story of the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception in his play, Shakespeare, I suggest, aims to invite his audience to view pregnancy and parturition positively. He reminds his audience that this female creative process should be viewed as a dignifying, not demeaning, female experience that involves divine presence.

In *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare juxtaposes the story of the Fall and the story of the Virgin’s immaculate conception in order to remind his audience of two crucial points: first, God has forgiven women of their disobedience, as represented by Eve’s sin which caused the Fall; second, He chose another woman, Mary, to give birth to the Messiah, the Savior of mankind in Christianity. God’s privileging of a woman for this noble role presents a new view of birth and pregnancy. Shakespeare invites his audience, directly or indirectly, to rethink their stereotypical ideas concerning this female creative process. Instead of embracing the Fall’s model, thereby perpetuating patriarchy, Shakespeare invokes the much more positive Virgin’s model which places the focus on the female not the male. I am not suggesting that he denies the biological aspect of childbirth and the role of the male in it; rather, I contend that he favors a new view of this female experience as a way of challenging patriarchy. Shakespeare discounts his culture’s prevalent belief system which places the male at the center and female at the margin. To him, childbirth empowers all women as it did the Virgin. This radical view rejected

contemporary patriarchal medical discourse which defined childbirth as woman's sole role in life through which she serves men by producing offspring to perpetuate patrilineage. Shakespeare views parturition as an empowering and dignifying feminine experience that, far from being woman's curse, is a source of joy and blessing. Shakespeare invites his audience to think of this female experience in terms of the Virgin's story, not Eve's story.

Similarly, Hermione's pregnancy is not a curse at all to her; rather, it is a source of joy and blessing. However, it is made a curse through the dated lens of Leontes' ossified patriarchal misconceptions. Before the Annunciation, the Virgin was overwhelmed with sorrow, but once announced by Gabriel as the chosen woman to bear the Son, she is elated with joy, manifested in the Magnificat (see Luke 1:46-55). As the Virgin, in a sense, was resurrected from her death, barrenness, and lifted up by God, so, similarly, Hermione is resurrected through her maternal role: her death signifies the death of the maternal. Hermione is restored to life only when the messianic Perdita reappears. Through her sacred maternal role Hermione survives patriarchal oppression, as she declares: "knowing by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved / Myself to see the issue" (V.iii.126-28). Hermione, like the Virgin, triumphs in the maternal role. To Shakespeare, giving birth is a feminine experience through which a woman becomes a mother, not a womb. Motherhood, to him, is a sacred role that is reminiscent of the Virgin's experience. What was the impetus of this paradigm shift? The answer is obvious: the biblical view of women.

Indeed, apart from the play's correspondence to the Virgin's story for its allusional framework that venerates the maternal, Shakespeare portrays the maternal as

sacred in many other ways. Hermione, as a maternal figure, throughout the play is associated with grace and described in a religious language that incorporates or retools biblical references and images. I have mentioned earlier the image of God as a mother bear defending His people in Hosea 13:7-9. The bear as a powerful biblical maternal figure also clearly figures in Shakespeare's play. It is a bear, and not any other animal, that chases Antigonus and devours him in revenge for his heinous act. In this same scene, the maternal figure's shadow appears to Antigonus "in pure white robes / Like very sanctity" (III.iii.5-6). This suggests the power and sanctity of the maternal. Hermione, though dead, overcomes death and haunts Antigonus, who has her baby, as a shadow "like very sanctity" probably to ensure her child's safety. At a further level, the image of Hermione as a holy saint dressed in a "white robe" allegorically echoes the image of the saints of God, the believers of Christ, dressed in "white robes" and surrounding God: "They [the saints of God, the believers in Christ] came from every nation and tribe and people and language, and they stood before the throne of the Lamb, dressed in white robes [...]. With a great voice they shouted these words: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne [...]" (Revelation 7:9-11). In this biblical image, the "white robe" symbolizes the eternal life in heaven that the body of believers in Christ will enjoy. The "white robe" is worn by those sanctified believers who win salvation and, as a result, qualify for eternal life in heaven. In a similar sense, Hermione's coming back to life dressed in "white robes" like "very sanctity" reflects this biblical image of the saints who come back to eternal afterlife dressed in "white robes." In this view, Hermione, the maternal figure of the play, is portrayed as a godly, sinless person already living in the afterlife.

Shakespeare, to venerate and elevate the maternal, depicts the maternal as so sacred and holy that he superimposes upon it the most reverent Christian imagery. He imbues the maternal with the ultimate Christian image that is characterized by high-level godliness and sanctity. Furthermore, the maternal is described as sacred especially in the final scene. Penitent Leontes announces that Hermione's "actions shall be holy" and that she has "holy looks" (V.iii.104, 149). Perdita, upon reunion with her mother, "kneel[s] [to] pray [her] mother's blessings" (V.iii.120-01) as if the maternal is a sacred shrine that blesses people. In fact, Paulina's chapel, which becomes Hermione's birthing chamber, is depicted by Shakespeare as a special place that has a holy nature; anyone who comes in must "awake [his] faith," especially disbelieving people like Leontes. There is even a sense in which the chapel suggests a heaven that is only accessed by "awake[ned]" "faith"—and acknowledging maternity is the license for entrance to this place. Recognizing Hermione's maternity, in this view, becomes a precondition for redemption from sin.

Polixenes, refusing his "name" to be "yoke[d] with his that did betray the Best," equates Leontes' sins against Hermione to Judas' sin of betraying Christ (I.ii.419). Wronging the maternal is so great a sin to Shakespeare that he apparently equates it to betraying "the Best." Leontes is redeemed from this sin only when he "ashamed[ly]" feels that "the stone rebukes [him]—For being more stone than't" (V.iii.37-8). Further, while Leontes in the inception of the play is strongly concerned for his culture's masculine ideal, of viewing women as hatching machines, towards the end he relinquishes it, as manifested in his new disbelief in the necessity of male heirs: when his subjects, except Paulina, press him to remarry so that he will have a male heir, he tells

them to “care not for issue,” for “the crown will find an heir” (V.i.46-7). What best suggests Leontes’ recognition of Hermione’s divine maternal rights is his final speech: “Good Paulina / Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely / Each our demand, and answer to his part / Perform’d in this wide gape of time” (V.iii.151-54).

Furthermore, the play contains abundant instances that show sovereign support of the maternal. These divine powers, I maintain, force the recognition of the maternal at the end of the play. Apart from the Oracle of Apollo which decisively announces Hermione innocent and Leontes a sinful tyrant, divine powers appear to those who wrong the maternal as threatening and punishing forces. Immediately after Mamillius’ death Leontes recognizes that “the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustices” (III.ii.144-45). After Hermione dies, a Mariner, Antigonus’ accomplice, while on an island intending to leave Perdita to die, announces that “the skies look grimly / And threaten present blusters” and that “the heavens with that, [Perdita], in hand are angry / And frown upon [them]” (III.iii.3-6). Upon leaving Perdita, Antigonus comments that he “never saw / The heavens so dim by day” (III.iii.54-5). Immediately after these comments, Antigonus “exits pursued by a bear,” a powerful maternal figure that punishes those who wrong maternity. Such systematic use of language and imagery forces one to consider the possibility that the Bible, in which ‘heaven’ advocates and supports the maternal, is Shakespeare’s undeniable source of inspiration, as though he wishes to annihilate ancient patriarchal views and lend credence to his enterprise by superimposing biblical sanction on it.

We see, thus, that the Bible presented new radical views of maternity and parturition, ones that diverted from the prevalent stereotypical assumptions that pervaded

medieval and early modern cultures. Shakespeare, the chief iconoclastic figure of his day, is Bible-oriented in his view of maternity, pregnancy, and childbirth. While his patriarchal culture viewed the woman as a reproductive machine to serve male interests and to perpetuate patriarchy, Shakespeare dismisses this irrationally constructed discourse by showing these female creative processes as dignifying and elevating to women. The biblical maternal images, tropes, and stories apparently become the grounds for his positive depiction of maternity and childbirth. His modeling the story of the maternal figure in *The Winter's Tale* on the story of the Virgin, who conceived of Christ without the physical sexual act, invites his audience to empathize with and pay more respect to maternity and childbirth and to view it differently. Inundated by the medical discourse, Shakespeare's male-dominated culture placed the male at the center of maternity and childbirth. Shakespeare, however, challenges these entrenched views by adopting the biblical view, manifest in his systemic use of biblical language, imagery, tropes, and, allegorically, narratives. Shakespeare's chief end is apparently to venerate and present childbirth as a female-centered experience. In this radically new view he challenges his culture which objectified women and viewed them as wombs functioning as receptacles to preserve male seed. Indeed, if Virginia Woolf declares that women need a "room of [their] own" in order to be creative, self-assertive writers, Shakespeare's implicit message would be that women need a 'womb of their own' in order to have an autonomous existence in a rigidly stratified culture that denied them an identity outside its pre-existing patriarchal discourse.

CHAPTER 3  
“WE WERE GOD’S SPIES”: THE BIBLICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF  
CORDELIA AS A TRUTH-TELLER IN *KING LEAR*

The medical discourse, a central part in the larger religious and patriarchal systems which pervaded the early modern culture, contributed much to the construction of myriad negative stereotypes toward women. Not only did it promulgate pejorative views toward parturition and childbirth, but also toward women’s minds and their capability of rational wisdom. Many mental afflictions, such as hysteria and madness, were attributed to normal female bodily processes, such as menstruation and childbirth. Mack asserts that “menstruating women [of the early modern period] were believed to be especially prone to hysteria or extremes of emotions, an ailment known to contemporaries as the mother” (27).

This prejudiced view of the female body was informed by and based on the medical theories of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Not only did the theories of Galen and Aristotle validate and reinforce the general discourse against women’s pre-assumed inferior role in reproduction—a woman contributed the base part, the matter, and the male sperm formed the soul, the superior element—but they also formed a connection between the alleged inferior female role and women’s minds and compromised aptitude for truth-telling. Saucy and TenElshof assert that “in Aristotle’s physiology, biology, and political and ethical theories [...], aside from his view of the male superiority in reproduction when the female supplies the matter or the material [the inferior part], the female was not only meant to be passive, but inferior intellectually and morally” (35). Mclaughlin also speaks to this duality: Aristotle viewed the male as “ordered to the more noble activity, intellectual knowledge, whereas the female was created solely with respect

to her sexuality, her body, as an aid in reproduction for the preservation of the species” (217). Plato even held that “a woman’s ability to learn was less than that of a man” (qtd. in Saucy and TenElshof 34).

Further, because women were believed to be constantly under the influence of their bodily processes, their mental and emotional stabilities were called into question. A female was thought to be mentally and emotionally unstable and, therefore, was vulnerable to mental disturbances due to her psychology:

contemporaries argued that the fluidity of women was a biological fact as well as a psychological and spiritual condition. A woman’s body was believed to be more wet and spongy than a man’s, making her more lustful, irrational, and emotional. Lustful, because women’s spongy bodies could not readily expel bad humors and needed regular sex in order to stay well ventilated and healthy. Irrational, because the brain required a hot, dry (i.e. masculine) medium in order to effectively carry on its work [...]. Emotional, because feelings were generated by heart and by the motion of bodily fluids (blood, bile, phlegm, tears), not the soul or the brain.

(Mack 25-6)

Because “women were generally more moist than men, [they] were therefore more moody, passionate, impulsive, and emotionally powerful” (Mack 26). Thomas Heywood, a well-known Renaissance writer, held that women are “sparse in their answers and preemptory in their demands and purposes, that their affections are still in the extremes; either so passionate, as by no counsel to be redressed; or so counterfeit, as to be by no man believed” (qtd. in Mack 26).



Therefore, the belief in these medical pre-assumptions led to a pejorative view toward women's capability of knowledge, intellectual insight, and wisdom. Women's knowledge and speech were deemed inferior to males' because the woman was viewed as an emotional and irrational being. A woman's perspective in general, far from being taken seriously, was invalidated, trivialized, and undervalued. Mack opines that the interference of women's bodily drives in her intellectual performance impedes women's rational faculties and corrupts her moral and religious ideas:

the sponginess and porosity of the female psychology not only made a woman more emotionally volatile and energetic; it also meant that she might experience difficulty in separating her powers of rational observation from her emotional or biological impulses. Since there was no strong inner scaffolding, no reliable central core or conscience, her mind was easily permeated not only by outside influences but by her own strong inner drives. Thus, a feeling of anger might seep involuntarily into the soul and pollute her religious ideals; heretical beliefs might seep into her bowels and engender lust." (27)

Hence, women's ideas back then were thought to have little merit because they were not produced by emotionally stable and reliable beings. Ian Maclean points out that rational speech was only associated with masculinity: "men are more rational, less subject to fluctuating emotions" than women who were believed to be driven mostly by their inner and emotional impulses (50).

Based on these biased cultural assumptions, women's perspectives were given minor attention, whereas males' were given much if not all. Because males' ideas depended mainly on and were connected to rational thinking and logic, the male view

was what mattered the most; female perspectives, however, were marginalized and discredited. Women's views of the world and their feminine ways of understanding the various aspects of human life—including politics, religion, morals, and ethics—were trivialized because, allegedly, the female lacked the most acclaimed faculties at the time—reason and logic. Since medieval and early modern cultures' modes of thinking were rooted in the theories of the Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle whose theories were mainly grounded in logic and reason, these methods of truth-knowing were mostly espoused.

These philosophical theories further reinforced the pre-established hegemonic discourse against women: “throughout history, beginning with the Greeks philosophers and especially since the Enlightenment of the Seventeenth century, analytic reason, which is more associated with males, has reigned as the supreme human trait. Women, who were viewed as more emotional, were therefore seen as inferior (Saucy and Tenelshof 34). Male's perspectives on the various issues, especially in politics and religion, were universalized and standardized, whereas women were banned from having a voice in these typically-designated male spheres. Women were not allowed to get involved in politics and religion because their ideas were thought to be of no value or merit. In fact, female perspectives were not even respected or appreciated; rather, what was respected in women was passive silence and full submission to and blind reception of male perspectives whether it be espoused by a father, a husband, a religious authority, or a political figure. Thomas Laqueur argues that women had to depend on male guidance in all aspects of their lives because they had weak minds and men had stronger ones (59).

Thus, this epoch witnessed the many difficulties which women faced in trying to find a voice of their own, for women were forced to equate male view with universal truth.

This reflected gender ideologies and the larger hegemonic patriarchal discourse in which males were assigned the intellectual, religious, and political spheres, whereas women were advised to stay at home and serve men in the domestic sphere. This view of women as incapable of worthwhile knowledge was part of the larger patriarchal hegemony that reinforced male superiority and denied female subjectivity.

Disempowered by these entrenched patriarchal agendas, women were forced to adopt male perspective, live in a state of dependency, and accept male ideas without questioning. Truth, then, was handed over to them, and they were mere passive receptors of perceived unarguable truths, because men were viewed as the reliable and dependable conveyors of truth.

If women's knowledge and wisdom were not appreciated based on this patriarchal reasoning, then, as a corollary, women were denied access to many areas, such as politics and religion. Deemed irrational, unwise, emotional, and mentally unstable, women were denied leadership roles in religion or politics. They were not, for instance, allowed to be judges, lawyers, politicians, or to have a role in the church, teaching and preaching God's message. In his attack against women's ascension to political roles, John Knox voices his total rejection of women working as political counselors due to their foolishness and mental blindness:

For who can denie but it is repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to leade and conduct such as do see? That the weake, the sicke, and impotent persons shall nourishe and kepe the hole and strong? And finally, that the follishe,

madde, and phrenetike shal governe the discrete, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind. And such be a woman, compared unto man in bearing of authoritie. For their sight in civile regiment is but blindness; their strength, weaknes; their counsel, foolishness; and judgment, phrensie. (qtd. in Walker 236)

In my discussion of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, I will show how Shakespeare challenges such entrenched cultural view by portraying a woman, Cordelia, as the one who leads Lear to the truth, for it is he who is blind to the truth due to his myopic vision and not, as Knox posits, Cordelia who is the blind counselor unfit to lead the allegedly superior male mind. Counter-culturally, Shakespeare depicts Cordelia as the ultimate, insightful truth-teller. My chief concern in this chapter is to discuss how women were denied religious roles as truth-tellers and to explore how Shakespeare challenges these pre-established beliefs by portraying Cordelia, Christ-like in her embodiment of truth and wisdom, as the ultimate prophetic and sagacious truth-teller. Cordelia, the consummate preacher who leads Lear to the higher biblical truth about love, wisdom, and God, is the one who both elucidates and models religious and biblical teachings. Contrary to the foolish and egotistical Lear, Cordelia demonstrates a better biblical-based understanding of the reality of the universe than her father, who represents the quintessence of foolish patriarchy in the play. My aim is to show how Shakespeare challenges his culture by showing Cordelia and not a male as the one who is capable of higher wisdom and who embodies Christ-like light and truth. Shakespeare, radically, chooses a female to emblemize the biblical truths and teachings that greatly impacted his religious culture's sensibility. By choosing a sensitive issue—namely, the biblical teachings about Christ's love, wisdom, truth, light, and spiritual motherhood—and making a woman model these

attributes, Shakespeare steers his audience's empathy and appreciation toward women's insight and wisdom. Even more shockingly, his embodiment of divine love, even to the point of being messianic, is here not represented by the quintessentially ideal male but by the female. This is Shakespearean iconoclasm taken to new heights.

Because the religious discourse of medieval and early modern religious authorities grounded and reinforced much of the patriarchal ideology, I find it necessary to discuss how these authorities buttressed their views. It is important to note that the religious discourse was highly informed by the theories of Aristotle whom central religious icons, including Thomas Aquinas, supported:

Rational faculties appear more strongly in the male than in the female, a proposition that Thomas Aquinas supports with Aristotelian notion that the inferior quality and finality of the female body inevitably works a deleterious effect on women's soul. Her sexuality, which is identified with her essence as a woman, involves a weaker and more imperfect body, which in turn affects the intelligence upon which moral discernment is based. The inequality between male and female relates thus to the moral as well as physical and intellectual realms, and it seems to be the woman's body that is the ultimate source of her inferiority and subordination to the male. (Maclaughlin 218)

Religious authorities, reinforcing and perpetuating patriarchy, emphasized and took as ontological givens much of the essentialist medical theories of the Greeks.

Further, as I point out above, these religious authorities twisted many, ostensibly negative biblical passages to buttress their patriarchal agendas and simultaneously neglected and misinterpreted those that support the cause of womankind. Again, the

Genesis story formed the crucial basis for their attitudes. In regard to the issue at hand, church fathers at that time negatively interpreted the Genesis story to show that women are foolish, unwise, irrational, and undiscerning. First, they took the fact that God chose Adam, not Eve, to carry His message—the prohibition of eating from the forbidden tree—as a solid evidence that God favored Adam because he was more reliable, responsible, and honest than Eve. Adam, to them, was given the authority to be the truth-teller, whereas Eve was the passive receptor and listener. Second, the fact that Satan chose Eve, not Adam, as his target in the Garden of Eden was perceived as evidence that Satan chose the one who could be deceived more easily, for Eve, to them, was irrational, emotional, mentally and morally unstable, and unwise; for this reason, Satan succeeded in his mission, whereas, by implication, he may well not have succeeded with the more mentally astute Adam. In addition, the fact that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, not head, was also perceived as a biblical demonstration and indictment of Eve’s intellectual inferiority.

Furthermore, religious authorities, to support their theories, de-contextualized and prejudicially interpreted many Pauline passages, especially those in 1 Timothy and the Corinthian letters. In 1 Timothy 2:11-12, the Apostle Paul urges women to be silent in the church and learn quietly: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” In I Corinthians 14:34-5, Paul preached that “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” Skewed, de-contextualized, and prejudicially

exegeted, such passages were exploited by medieval and early modern religious authorities to reinforce their theories about women's ineptitude for preaching, teaching, counseling, and even speaking, since in these arenas women demonstrated their intellectual and spiritual unworthiness. These passages were used as a justification for denying women the opportunity of expressing their independent thoughts, asserting their subjectivity, establishing autonomy, and enriching the body of local believers with their God-endowed gifts and talents.

However, biblical exegetes, particularly those who seek intellectually honest explication of the texts, present valid alternative and much more accurate interpretations that expose the obviously biased reasoning of church fathers in the medieval and early modern eras. In regard to the Paul's injunction for women in the Timothy passage, Robert Saucy posits that "quietly" and "quiet" both "translate the Greek phrase *en hesuchia* (in quietness)" (292). He maintains that although this Greek word could suggest absolute silence, its use in verse two of this same chapter and other New Testament passages "suggest[s] more the idea of quietness associated with peace, good order, or tranquility (e.g. I Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:12; 1 Peter 3:4)" (292). Saucy maintains that Paul is thus "not forbidding all speaking, but rather speaking that creates a disturbance" (292). Biblical scholar John MacArthur, in offering further elucidation into these controversial texts, points out that women were not only allowed to speak in the church but were also encouraged to do so, the only caveat being that they couldn't carry the biblical interpretation in a whole new direction that would upset the harmony and unity of the local body of believers (see MacArthur Study Bible, p. 1863 and 1753).

Commenting on the second verse of the Timothy passage, Saucy interprets “submission” as being “ordered under” (292). That is, “quietly receiving instruction involves subjection, probably as the context of learning suggests, to the one doing the teaching. Thus, while Paul encourages women to learn, he is concerned that their learning not take place in a way that violates proper order,” (292) or, in MacArthur’s view, that “usurps authority” (1863). Urging readers not to take the second verse of the Timothy passage, in which Paul does not “allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man,” out of proper context, Saucy suggests that women and biblical expositors must “understand the nature of this prohibited teaching and exercise of authority” (292). Saucy asserts that Paul is after teaching “false doctrine,” not all teaching, and the “authority” that Paul prohibits is not “legitimate authority,” but the “domineering” and “wrong kind of authority” (292). Taking the particular historical situation of this Pauline text into account, Saucy asserts that Paul meant “false teaching” because “women were either uneducated at the time or influenced by heretical teaching” (292). To buttress his argument, Saucy points to the Bible’s sanction of older women’s teaching of younger ones in Titus 2:3-5 as evidence that women are allowed to be truth-tellers.

Regarding the Corinthians passage, Saucy further suggests that Paul does not demand total silence from all women as a universal injunction, for Paul already allowed women not only to speak but also to prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14: 1-4:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and



comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

Paul also said that women can prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:31: “you can all prophecy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged,” which also rules out the idea that women only and passively learn from husbands. Further, Saucy contends that Paul prohibits a “particular kind of speaking by women, not all speech” (292). Paul most likely referred to speech that led to confusion and disturbance in the church. So, Paul urged women to keep silent temporarily and to postpone their questions till later, as the teaching environment and the need for order demanded this. Thus, contextualizing biblical passages is of paramount importance to a proper understanding as the Reformers came to see. This more accurate reading of Holy Writ—a primary agenda of the Reformers—occasioned a whole new view of women in the Renaissance, a view which, I contend, greatly influenced Shakespeare’s richly individuated and compelling portraits of female strength and sagacity.

Sharing a similar insight about the Corinthians passage and stressing the need for contextualizing this passage, Sakenfeld suggests that Paul’s “advice is peculiar to a disruptive situation in the church of Corinth” (57). He maintains that many of Paul’s teachings on women have been interpreted in ways that suited the stifling and claustrophobic hegemonic ideologies of the early modern era. Richard Hays follows a similar line of reasoning:

The [Corinthian] passage does not forbid women from exercising leadership or speaking in edifying ways to the community; rather, it forbids disruptive speech during the community’s worship. Perhaps the women at Corinth, moving into a

new position of freedom in the church, were interrupting worship with questions and creating disorder. Thus, the injunction is not a general rule but a pastoral directive aimed at a specific situation. (Paul 145)

Horton contends that Paul “is in no sense trying to hinder women from prophesying, speaking in tongues, singing, or otherwise contributing to the worship. He expected women to pray and prophesy if the Spirit gave them a ministry” (235). The Apostle Paul’s advocacy here is the same as that evident in Luke’s Gospel when Luke, Paul’s medical physician and fellow traveler, lists the women who accompanied Christ in His ministry (see Luke 8:3). This is remarkable since, apart from the twelve disciples, only women are mentioned here. The same foregrounding of women, which the Reformers emphasized in their new view of male/female interaction, occurs in Luke 24 when it is the women who saw the empty tomb of Jesus Christ first and whose names are individually listed. This bestowal of honor on women—this act of their observing such a signal act before men and sharing this knowledge with men—constituted a real reversal of information flow which the Reformers happily accentuated, and, I allege, Shakespeare further dramatized in his plays.

Thus, based on their biased interpretations of such biblical passages, Roman Church authorities in the Middle Ages and the early modern periods prohibited women from having active public roles in the Christian ministry, whether that be in preaching, teaching, or interpreting the Bible. They viewed women as having empty minds and lacking the rational wisdom that qualifies one to preach, teach, or interpret the Word of God and His truth. In fact, they presented and sanctioned their prejudiced interpretations as unarguable ontological givens by devising and inculcating wildly errant biblical

interpretations. To perpetuate patriarchy and reinforce the image of the woman as inferior, they denied women the opportunity to assert their subjectivity through sharing with men the mission of preaching and teaching the Scriptural message. To further empower men and reinforce the hegemonic discourse, these religious authorities assigned the mission of public preaching and spreading the divine message, including prophesying and interpreting the Scripture, only to men because men, according to them, were deemed the sole representatives of truth that led to common good—an assumption that they grounded in God's initial choice of Adam as His truth-teller. Hence, men were viewed as more suitable for this mission than women because they had mental stability, rational thinking, reasoning power, wisdom, and honesty, whereas women were perceived as dull, subject to hysterical and emotional disorders, and prone to deception and dishonesty. Therefore, because men were appointed as the wise, insightful, honest, knowledgeable, and reliable truth-tellers, women were coerced into the role of passive receptors of men's wisdom and knowledge. Thus, gendering both knowledge and wisdom further reinforced the lower status of women, bred a state of dependency on men, and perpetuated mind-numbing patriarchy.

Furthermore, highly influenced by Greek philosophical ideas, contemporary theologians held the rhetorical art of persuasion as inseparable from logic and reason. Because women were allegedly irrational and lacking sound judgment, they were regarded as unfit for public roles that demanded rhetoric, eloquence, and the art of persuasion. Due to their so-believed weak methods of persuasion and rhetorical skills, women and their public discourse were greatly undervalued and discouraged. Men only were thought to be the ones fit for such roles because they possessed the necessary

eloquence needed for efficacious communication. As a result, men's talk was viewed as wise and perspicacious whereas women's was scoffed as idle chatter and worthless loquacity. Patricia Parker points out that "women were viewed as talkative with empty words, while men's talk deemed eloquent and more efficacious" because it is characterized by wisdom and logical reasoning (458). Rhodes, maintaining that rhetorical persuasion was believed to be "a masculine virtue," asserts that talkativeness was viewed as a "peculiarly feminine perversion and subversion of the great power of language to produce both civil conversation and civil order" (173).

It is not surprising, then, that, given the close connection between power and knowledge, to find that men in medieval and early modern cultures were regarded as the ones who could preach scriptural verities and address theological nuances. Due to the theological presuppositions against women, which intensely dominated and influenced that culture, all power over knowledge, beliefs, ideas, concepts, and religion were held in the hands of men. In religious matters, male priests, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, controlled the production of religious beliefs and assumptions, among which, of course, were the man-constructed theological presuppositions which undervalued and prohibited women's involvement in this allegedly and peculiarly masculine sphere. Deciding what was wrong and right, then, was within the purview of male authority, for men were the reliable truth-tellers, not women. Women, who acted as passive receptors of men's thoughts, had to bow to the authority of the male preacher and accept his leadership in all religious matters.

It is important to point out, however, that notwithstanding that women in pre-Reformation period were allowed to go to religious convents and practice religion, they

were permitted to do so under the leadership of male priests. Incapacitated in a male-dominated culture, women were not permitted to dispute the legitimacy, plausibility, and authenticity of what males preached, for the males were the truth-tellers and women were, manacled by the twisted reading of Paul's injunction, supposed to receive instruction in silence. Even in the rare cases when a woman was permitted to preach, she was allowed to educate only women, particularly those younger in age, because an older woman was believed to be wiser and more authoritative than the younger ones, but not men whatsoever, for men were the ones favored by God to take the role of prophesying, elucidating texts, and expounding religious and moral truths. However, these pre-assumptions are far from what Christ preached and embodied, what the Apostle Paul taught and demonstrated, what the Bible clearly commands, and, what, thus, the Protestant Reformers called for.

In Christ's Jewish culture, like the larger dominant Roman world, women were not respected as truth-tellers; rather, they were deemed irrational, empty-minded, unwise, and therefore, unworthy to be listened to. Christ, as manifested in His revolutionary positive treatment of women, radically diverted from His culture's beliefs. In the example of the conversation between Him and the woman in the crowd in Luke 11, Christ, as I noted above, boldly voiced His dismissal of the woman's internalized convictions that women are simply important because they possess a womb and can bear children and asserted that women, like men, are rational human beings who can hear and absorb His message and act on His heady maxims. Swindler opines that "although Jesus knew that the woman's statement, "blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!," was meant as a compliment, He rejects this "baby machine" image of women

and insists on the personhood, the intellectual, and moral faculties, being primary for all” (193). In addition, instead of asking the woman to sit and listen to his teachings in silence, Jesus respects and attempts to gently reform her wrong, internalized thoughts about women’s worth, thereby subverting the generalized view of women as passive receptors. Rather than humiliating the woman for giving herself the permission to comment on His ministry, Christ respectfully responded to her in a way that empowers women, affirms their self-worth, and viciously denounces male patriarchy.

Further, Jesus did not hesitate to listen to women and engage in intellectual conversations with them in many instances in the New Testament. In Luke 11: 38-42, for instance, He accepts Mary, Martha’s sister, as an intellectual human being, thereby rejecting his culture’s prevalent belief that women’s proper place was in the domestic sphere:

As Jesus and His disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.

Mary’s choice, to Jesus, was better than her sister’s despite the fact that Martha cared more about serving the guests than her sister who favored sitting and listening to Christ’s teachings as an intellectual equal to his male disciples. Instead of following his culture’s

patriarchal conventions and asserting the masculine ideal by encouraging Mary to follow her sister's suit in serving the men, thereby relegating the woman to her prescribed sphere, Christ affirmed and reinforced Mary's choice of engaging in His ministry as an equal to His male disciples. Swindler comments that "Mary took the supposedly male role":

she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to His teaching. To sit at someone's feet is a rabbinic phrase indicating studying with that person. This shows that Mary was acting like a disciple of a teacher, a rabbi. Martha apparently thought Mary was acting out of place in choosing the role of the intellectual, for she complained to Jesus. But Jesus' response was a refusal to force all women into the stereotype; He treated Mary first of all as a person (whose highest faculty is the intellect, the spirit) who was allowed to set her own priorities, and who in this instance had "chosen the better part." (192)

Swindler maintains that the culture of Christ's time "restricted women's studying the Scriptures or studying with Rabbis, that is engaging in the intellectual life or acquiring any religious authority. [However, Jesus' commendation of Mary's choice reflects His insistence] that women had the right to engage in the intellectual and spiritual lives just like men" (192).

Further, the example of Christ's encounter and interaction with the Samaritan woman tells us much about His positive attitude to women. Although in His patriarchal culture it was extremely inappropriate for a male to engage in a conversation with a woman, especially if she was a Samaritan (the half-breed Samaritans were extremely hated by the Kosher Jews in Christ's culture), He did not hesitate to include this woman

in his ministry by revealing to her His Messiahship and entrusting her with the divine mission of carrying this news to her people. When Jesus came near the well in Samaria and asked the woman for a drink, the woman responded with disbelief and surprise at a male Jew speaking with a Samaritan woman: “What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a woman of Samaria, for a drink?” (John 4:9). Jesus’ response to her was revolutionary and radical: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (10). Not only was Christ’s response radical in His willingness to accept a drink from a woman—since women were, as discussed above, associated with uncleanness due to their mere physiology—but also in His willingness to be the woman’s spiritual nourisher. The image of Christ’s willingness to be a spiritual mother for this woman tells us much about His great regard and appreciation for women as spiritual beings—ones who, contrary to what was culturally pre-assumed, could hear the word of God, absorb it, and act upon it.

Christ, here, does not undervalue women’s role in ministry, hearing and preaching the word of God. When queried by the woman about the nature of the spiritual water Christ mentioned, He told her that “everyone who drinks this water [meaning the regular water from the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst” (13). Sensing in Christ’s words an obvious invitation for her to be spiritually nourished by Christ, the woman did not hesitate to demand this spiritual water from her allegorical mother, Christ: “Give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming to draw water” (15). After Christ had revealed His Messiahship to the woman, she carried the news to her people, who disbelieved her from the first, even though women’s testimony in this patriarchal culture was typically discredited because



they were believed to be irrational and unstable, especially in religious matters such as these. But she was later proved right, again showing that the women's position was credible. Upon finding Christ talking with a Samaritan woman, His disciples were so astounded that they wondered if Jesus "could be the Christ" (28) whom they knew and followed. Indeed, Christ's radical attitude to the woman was so astounding to His jealous disciples, for Christ's dependence on a woman was shockingly revolutionary in a culture that trammled women and viewed them as incredulous and good-for-nothing beings.

Through this woman, functioning as Christ's reliable messenger in a divine mission, the Samaritan people came to believe in Christ: "They [the Samaritans] said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (42). Swindler contends that "the Samaritans of that town believed in Him [Christ] on the strength of the woman's testimony," which we can notice in "John's language" when "he says the villagers 'believed ... because of the woman's words'" (189). This incident, of course, is characteristically empowering of women's role in legitimate Christian ministry throughout history. Such biblical incidents and myriad others, to be discussed below, inspired the Protestant Reformers to affirm women's role in teaching and preaching the Word of God. Acknowledging the role of his wife in his ministry—to take a 16<sup>th</sup> century example—John Calvin declares that "while she lived, she was the faithful helper of my ministry" (qtd. in Saucy and TenElshof 36). The Reformers followed Christ's suit in treating women as reliable truth-tellers, which we can see in their encouragement of women's education and approval of their role in ministry, an attitude which radically

diverged from the long-established Roman Catholic teachings in pre-Reformation Europe.

Furthermore, John 19:25 and 20:11-18 register the central role of women in spreading the most important event in Christianity, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Despite all the risks involved in their mission, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the other women accompanied Jesus in His ministry and, unlike His male disciples, remained faithful by staying to minister to His needs till the very end. The women, and not the male disciples, were the ones who witnessed the most foundational events to the Christian church—namely, Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Before the resurrection, Christ asked these women, particularly Mary Magdalene, the first person to whom Jesus appeared after the crucifixion, to report the news of His resurrection to His disciples, an incident that shook His male disciples because Jesus trusted a woman to report this signal incident. However, the testimony of these women was met with disbelief, nay, it was dismissed by the disciples and other people as mere womanly nonsense, for women were believed to be unreliable narrators. Wilkins points out that in Christ's Jewish culture, the rabbis disagreed on the "acceptability of a woman giving testimony in a court of law" (110). Josephus recorded a traditional convention that stated, "from women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex" (qtd. in Wilkins 111).

However, the centrality of this event to the Christian church is unmistakable, for had these women not witnessed the crucifixion and the resurrection, these events would not have been spread and reported accurately, and the foundation of the Christian church, unabashedly based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, would have been gutted. It is these

women who receive the most credit for the spreading of the news of the resurrection faithfully, an action which paved the way for millions of subsequent believers and spiritually blind people, including males, to come into the Christian faith. Indeed, these women played a major role in leading the congregations of lost people to the true path by reporting the most fundamental truth that formed the basis of the whole Christian faith—Christ’s sacrifice of Himself to save mankind. This fact is, of course, so illuminating and empowering to women throughout history. God’s choice of these women to witness Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection shows His “bestowing a special honor on these women. They are exemplary of a true discipleship to Jesus, and because of their faithfulness and courage, they were given the special honor of first witnesses to the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus” (Wilkins 111). Such luminous biblical passages about the role of women in spreading the Christian truth were conventionally ignored by medieval theologians. Women at the time were kept in ignorance about the majestic role their female antecedents had played in Christianity when they spread and strengthened the foundation of the Christian religion so dramatically.

Thus, in reporting the role women played in Christianity, the Bible undoubtedly operates as an empowering force for women against the various ideological pre-suppositions that worked to undervalue their achievements during the Apostolic era and to keep them marginalized and ignorant. The Bible, by reporting the role of such women as Mary Magdalene, works as a counter-cultural force against the predominant, constructed religious discourse that trivialized the role of women in aiding Christ and their male counterparts in preaching and teaching the Christian message. Contrary to how

later they were disrespected by medieval religious authorities, women had been positioned and entrusted by Christ to function as truth-tellers by carrying the instrumental news of His resurrection. It is hardly surprising that these women have historically been known as Christ's female disciples, an indication that Christ held women's and men's discipleship as equal and that Christ disregarded His culture's discriminatory, gender-based treatment of women. Wilkins asserts that "contrary to the way that some cultural groups of His day lowered the status of women, Christ restored women within His community of faith to their original status as equal with men" (111). Wilkins further maintains that "women are validated as worthy of the most privileged service in the community of faith, bearing witness to the reality of the risen Lord Jesus" (111). In fact, the message of the New Testament, then, is obvious: men and women are equal in the eyes of God, and gendering prophecy and truth-telling was not in Christ's agenda, nor was it part of the biblical message, a fact that is consistently reinforced by the Pauline Epistles too.

The Apostle Paul's attitude to women is consonant with Christ's, for Paul, like Christ, expected women to share in spreading and promoting Christianity—teaching and preaching the gospel. To Paul, not only men receive the Holy Spirit and prophesy, but women as well have the right to prophesy. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul proclaims that women are, like men, allowed to preach the Word of God and prophesy it: "each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation." The word "revelation" suggests prophesying religious truths and teaching them. Nothing here suggests that women were prohibited from preaching and interpreting the Word of God. Also, in 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul encourages believers in the acts of "teaching and

admonishing one another,” equating his view of men’s as well as women’s role in ministry.

Further, the Apostle Paul highly regards women’s role in promoting Christian faith by including them in his ministry. Priscilla, for instance, along with her husband Aquila, accompanied Paul in his ministry; indeed, Paul calls them his coworkers in Christ: “Greet my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them” (Romans 16:3). Paul’s mentioning of Priscilla’s name first suggests his high regard for her role. This is reinforced by Paul in his listing of her before the husband in his expression of his greetings for the two, which we again notice in 2 Timothy 4:19. In addition, Paul seems to exalt Priscilla over her husband for her excellence in teaching and preaching the gospel to the brilliant preacher Apollos because her name is again mentioned first:

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos [...] came to Ephesus, [the place where Paul left *Priscilla and Aquilla*]. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord [...] and taught about Jesus accurately [...]. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue When *Priscilla and Aquilla* heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” (Acts 18:24-6; my italics)

In fact, Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned six times in the Bible, four of which times Priscilla’s name is advanced to her husband’s, which suggests Paul’s very high regard for her role in the Christian ministry. The astute Reformer theologians, with their sharp eye for careful Bible scrutiny, readily observed this pattern and re-oriented their view and treatment of women because of it.

Furthermore, Paul refers to many other women who helped in preaching, spreading, and promoting the gospel. In Romans 16:6-7 and 12, Paul greets four women who “worked very hard” “in the Lord” to spread the gospel and lay a strong foundation for the church: Mary, Junias, Tryphena, and Tryphosa. In Romans 16:1-2, Paul exalts Phoebe’s role in serving the Lord and building up the church: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the Saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.” Also, Paul, in Philippians 4:2-3, applauds the role of Euodia and Syntyche for their help in spreading and promoting the gospel: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yoke-fellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” Also, in 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul mentions that Timothy was mentored by women and not men: “I have been reminded of your [Timothy’s] sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.”

The Bible in general does not gender truth-telling or receiving the Holy Spirit, which is evident in its emphasis on the equality between men and women in prophesying. Nor does it discriminate between men’s and women’s aptitude for missionary roles: in Acts 2:1-4, both men and women were filled with Holy Spirit at the day of Pentecost: “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit

and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” In Acts 2:17-18, Peter, quoting Prophet Joel, tells people at the Pentecost that “God says I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy [...]. Even on my servants, both *men and women* [emphasis mine], I will pour out my spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”

Reinforcing the role of women as truth-tellers, the Bible, both in the Hebraic and Christian traditions, contains many references to women prophets. It is important to note, in this context, that a prophet is a person through whom God spoke. A woman prophet, then, is one who does not speak nonsense, but rather one who is empowered by divine inspiration to speak the truth—one who should be believed, credited, and relied on in what s/he prophesies because s/he works as God’s minister and possesses divine insight. The widow Anna, referred to in Luke 2:36-8, is a notable wise prophet; she received the Holy Spirit and prophesied the coming of Christ to redeem Jerusalem. In Acts 21:9, Luke refers to St. Philip’s four daughters who had the gift of prophecy. In Luke 1:41-5, Elizabeth, Jesus’ aunt was prophetic because she received the Holy Spirit. In all of these instances, female superiority is strongly emphasized.

The Old Testament also contains many references to women who, in their unsurpassed wisdom, are described as prophetesses. Judges 4 and 5 records the story of Debora who, with her prophetic wisdom and courage, could save her nation from destruction, thereby becoming a national heroine. God-inspired, Debora served as a divine counselor to the people of Israel in their struggle against Canaanite oppression. She tells Barak, commander of the army of Israel, that “the Lord God of Israel commands you” and advises him not to fear the Canaanite chariots (4:6). In passing along this

divinely-inspired advice, Debora functions as God's authorized prophet who was sent on a divine mission to save the people of Israel. Further, 2 Kings 22:14-20 tells the story of Josiah, king of Judah, who sends his secretary Shaphan, once the Book of the Law was found in the temple, to go and find someone to explain what was written. Shaphan finds a wise prophetess, Huldah, who foretells the punishment that God will bring upon them for their idolatry practices. She also tells the secretary that God will relieve Josiah of seeing the destruction that God will inflict upon the people of Israel. In her spiritual insight as a seer who knows the mysteries of God, Huldah poses as a prophetess and a supreme truth-teller. Huldah, above everybody, including the king of Israel himself, is exalted as the one who was able to know whether the Book of the Law found in the temple was authentic or not. Indeed, she displays a deep understanding of God more than anyone in her nation. In their writings, the Reformers fairly reported this female supremacy of the Bible and adjusted their view of women accordingly.

All these examples manifest that the Bible, contrary to how it was prejudicially exploited to serve male ends in the Medieval and early modern eras, empowers women by portraying them, not as irrational, foolish, and emotionally unstable beings, but rather as wise and credible truth-tellers, a fact that clearly shines through Christ's and the Apostle Paul's inclusion of women in their ministries and assigning them significant roles. Christ did not undervalue women as authoritative, rational truth-tellers because He expected them to share in promoting and spreading the gospel. Had He not held this positive view of women, He would not have trusted them to witness His crucifixion and resurrection and reliably report these signal incidents which formed the pillars of the Christian church. Christ elevated women and put them on an equal level to His male



disciples, thereby disrupting His patriarchal culture's long-established belief system about the nature of womankind.

The Apostle Paul, many of whose verses were mistakenly skewed and twisted to suit the ideological and self-serving purposes of medieval theologians, upon a closer and objective lens on his ideas, proves an ardent advocate of women. His inclusion of women in his ministry and his treatment of them, as discussed above, reveal his great regard for women's contribution in spreading and promoting the gospel—coworkers and collaborators in this divine mission. The notion of women as passive receptors of men's knowledge is, then, alien to Paul's agenda, for he did not prohibit women from prophesying nor did he, in any occasion, trivialize women's role in interpreting the Word of God and preaching it as equally as their male counterparts. Indeed, Christ's and Paul's treatment of women harmonizes with the Bible which exalts women and elevates them to a higher status by portraying them as agents of God, prophetesses through whom God spoke, and wise counselors who knew God's ways. The charge that the Bible—which portrays women as Christ's disciples, agents in spreading and reinforcing the gospel, Paul's reliable coworkers, God's ambassadors and spokespersons, and prophetesses who spoke God's wisdom—views women as unreliable truth-tellers is patently false and ludicrous. Rather, women in the Bible are entrusted with divine missions that demand high-level wisdom and rational thinking. Biblical women succeeded in their missions, so they were equal to men in prophesying, telling the truth, and playing roles that demand rationality and plausible thinking.

Moreover, in Christianity, for one to qualify to be an enlightened truth-teller, s/he must have absolute faith in Christ, which is a necessary pre-condition for the Holy Spirit

to enter one's heart. A clear manifestation that one has received the Holy Spirit, moreover, is his/her demonstration and emulation of Christ's love. When the Holy Spirit finds its way in a believer's heart, s/he becomes more enlightened to the truth than disbelievers because s/he is endowed with divine and Spirit-based wisdom and transcendent insight that surpasses human standards which are severely limited to linear logic and potentially tainted reason. Thus, what qualifies one to be a wise and reliable truth-teller is not his/her intelligence, rhetorical skills, and logical and reasoning powers.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16 addresses this point clearly:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Paul tells the Corinthians that his "message and preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (4-5). In addition, as manifested in Christ's and the Apostle Paul's reliance on women in their ministry and the Bible's general view of women as reliable truth-tellers, gender considerations are invalid measures of one's eligibility to be God's minister because anyone—regardless of sex, ethnicity, intelligence level, or rhetorical skills—can receive the Holy Spirit and proclaim truth and wisdom. The Truth of God can be reached and prophesied by both males and females.

Self-love and megalomania, which contrast with Christ's sacrificial love and other-centeredness, are obvious signs that one still lives in darkness because the Holy Spirit has not found His way into the heart, which is what happens to Lear who at the beginning is blind to the truth due to his failure to understand true love. His tendency to understand love in logical terms, his adherence to errant ideologies, his self-pride, and his worldly purposes corrupt his judgment and lead him to the wrong path. In addition, Lear is blind and foolish because he values logic, eloquence, and reason above heart and spirit, the locus of true and Spirit-based wisdom and insight. It is not until he reaches a better understanding of Christian love that he breaks free from his cloying myopic vision. However, Cordelia, in the way she preaches and enacts love in Christ-like fashion, is portrayed as having Christ's mind and wisdom.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare's chooses a woman, Cordelia, as the most enlightened character to define, preach, and epitomize Christian love. Shakespeare shows that, unlike how early modern culture viewed women as ineligible for receiving the Holy Spirit, Cordelia is fully enlightened by the Holy Spirit; thus, she has wisdom, foresight, and vision that qualify her to prophecy the truth and lead others to the true path. In the way she preaches and defines love, Cordelia is depicted as the ultimate truth-teller who embodies Messianic truth, light, wisdom, and spiritual motherhood. In addition, Shakespeare exalts Cordelia as a reliable truth-teller by making her the representative and spokesperson of the Biblical discourse, which he reinforces by making her model Christ's love, truth, light, and spiritual motherhood. Cordelia acts as the loving person whose truth guides the lost and the blind out of darkness to the world of light and spiritual rebirth, just as Christ was the spiritual mentor to the people of Israel and a source of truth, light, and

insight to the lost. By depicting a woman in this fashion, Shakespeare challenges his culture's patriarchal ideologies, which condescendingly trivialized women's perspectives and viewed them as ineligible to prophesy the truth, and he invites his audience to rethink their negative ideas about women. Shakespeare conflates his feminist agenda with the biblical discourse in a way that enables him to agitate early modern sensibility and to elicit interest in and empathy for his feminist agenda. This is reinforced, not only by having Cordelia preach biblically-grounded teachings and depicting her as the one who models Christ, the ultimate preacher, educator, enlightener, and truth-teller, but also, as affirmed by Lear who is the quintessence of patriarchy—by having her serve as the divine minister and prophet. Hence, he challenges medieval biased exegetes who prejudicially interpreted the story of the Fall as evidence of God's favoring of Adam as His truth-teller, and not the woman Eve.

I contend that Shakespeare, echoing and reflecting the Bible's affirmation of women as reliable and credible truth-tellers, portrays Cordelia as the Christ-like prototype of truth, light, wisdom, insight, and spiritual maturation. He positions her as the ultimate exemplar and practitioner of the truth that sets her father free from his narrow-mindedness, bigotry, and spiritual blindness, for she is the light that guides Lear in his spiritual journey and lifts him out of darkness. By choosing a woman to define and preach Messianic love and embody truth, wisdom, light, and spiritual motherhood, Shakespeare depicts women as reliable truth-tellers who can receive the Holy Spirit and have Christ-like minds. Cordelia, whom Shakespeare elevates to the level of Christ's mind, acts as the divine agent who, with her inner light and Spirit-based wisdom, approximates the Christ, as God's minister and prophet whose mission is to lead blind

people out of darkness to the light. Cordelia, not only intelligent and insightful in the human sense, possesses an insightfulness and vision which are Spirit-based: she is, in short, illuminated by the Holy Spirit because of her faith in Christ.

Jesus Christ is, obviously, the epitome of Christian love, for His death at the Cross to save mankind embodied sacrificial and unconditional love that far transcends all human boundaries and efforts. It is definitely the highest kind of love, and many people, failing to understand, never reach that level of altruism and self-denial. Christ's sacrificial love cannot be understood by human standards which are based on logic and reason because Christ sacrificed Himself without expecting any rewards: Why would a man sacrifice his body for nothing? Because Christ's love lacked logical motivation, as perceived by human standards, it was thought of as foolishness by some of His contemporaries. In her Jesus the Holy Fool, Elizabeth-Anne Stewart contends that Jesus was viewed as a fool because of his challenge of all contemporary social, religious, and nationalistic values and conventions. Not caring for social norms and hierarchical or gender distinctions, Christ forgave adulterous women, kept company with sinners, cared for sick women, helped the outcasts, and fellowshiped with the untouchable dregs. Christ's eating with the tax-collectors, who were held in contempt at the time, was an obvious violation of social considerations; therefore, what He did was seen as foolishness (131-33). In addition, Christ did not demonstrate His love through rhetoric and eloquence, the logical methods of self-expression in human perception during the Roman Empire era when rhetoric was held in such high esteem; rather, He chose actions which were manifested in caring for the poor, healing the sick, empowering widows, and feeding the hungry. Hence, the love that involves total self-denial is illogical by human

standards and measures. Because He did not seek personal gain and self-aggrandizement, Christ was thought of as ignorant and unwise. However, it was His alleged foolishness that proved Him as the ultimate truth-teller, which is the case for Cordelia whose love also proves her as the ultimate truth-teller.

In the play, Lear is not enlightened by the Holy Spirit because he does not understand love in the Christian sense. He is blind from the true path by his egoism, excessive self-pride, self-centeredness, and devotion to the cultural masculine ideals. Lear is concerned with human standards of intelligence, logic, and reason—the facets that grounded much of masculine thinking at the time—and insists that love be defined from a logic-based perspective, thereby egotistically installing himself as the center and arbiter of truth. However, his views turn out to be wrong, which causes him to live in darkness and deviate from the true path.

In Shakespeare's patriarchal culture, males were viewed as rational, logical, and wise; therefore, their perspectives were deemed more meritorious than women's. Women, who were viewed as irrational, unstable, and prone to hysteria, were expected to be passive receptors of men's high-level wisdom and insight. In addition, men, it was thought, could receive the Holy Spirit, whereas women could not because they were not created in the image of God, further disqualifying them as reliable truth-tellers. However, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Lear, the quintessence of patriarchy, is the one who lacks insight and wisdom, whereas Cordelia is the one who, with her visionary and prophetic wisdom and insight, triumphs as the ultimate truth-teller who guides Lear through the cavernous darkness of his own tortured mind and soul.

In *King Lear*, there is a huge discrepancy between Lear's perspective on and definition of love and Cordelia's. Lear's perception of love is, in fact, inseparable from the predominant cultural ideologies and belief systems, which is basically what clouds his judgment, blurs his vision, and corrupts his mind. For instance, Lear, who represents the quintessence of patriarchal thinking, views love as a sign of a woman's submission to the male, for males, to increase their self-esteem and self-pride, believed that they were the ones who deserved to be loved. Therefore, there is a huge discrepancy between Cordelia's understanding of love in its Christian transcendent sense and Lear's cultural understanding of it as a sign of female submission to the male. When Cordelia says "Nothing" to verbally prove her love, Lear perceives this as a complete denial of his authority and as a bold refusal to bow and submit to his will. He views love as a due right that must be paid to higher authority as a sign of obedience and submission, which if properly expressed, pleases him: "Better [she] / Hadst not been born than not t' have pleased me better" (I.i.237-38).

Eloquent verbal expression of love, then, is the way through which the lower on the hierarchical scale shows his/her submission to the higher in rank. In other words, because Lear is a male and higher in rank, his daughters must show their love convincingly—in a way that publicly demonstrates their obedience and submission. They should acknowledge his superiority through an eloquent public speech in a way that strokes his egoism and self-pride. Hence, when Cordelia proclaims that she loves him "according to my bond, no more no less" (I.i.88), Lear is frustrated by and infuriated with Cordelia's response because he perceives it as a challenge to his patriarchal perspective and definition of love: he sees it as a sign of Cordelia's defiance of his authority and a

refusal to adopt the male view. When asked about how much she loves him or how much she submits to his authority and accepts his view, Cordelia says “nothing,” which Lear perceives as a refusal to submit to his will and as an insult to his manhood and kingly self-pride. Lear becomes even more enraged when Cordelia, insisting not “to love [her] father all,” (103) brings a male rival for Lear in his daughters’ love:

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:  
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all. (98-103)

In fact, Lear is so egocentric that he believes that his daughters were born just to devote themselves to please him and to constantly express their love submissively in his own terms and by his male standards; thus, he wishes that Cordelia “Better / Hadst not been born than not t’ have pleased me better” (237-38). In fact, Lear perceives Cordelia’s response as a public humiliation and betrayal to his authority. In contrast to the biblical view, he views love as one-sided, for he expects his daughters to love him while we never see him show love back to them—another evidence of his view of love as a source of self-pride and self-aggrandizement. His masculine self-pride, a patriarchal ideal, blinds him from understanding love in its true sense, which is what brings about his demise at the end.

Lear does not understand love in its biblical sense, as a sacrificial act that involves self-denial, servanthood, and forgiveness, which is embodied by Christ’s



sacrifice. Egomaniacally placing himself at the center by requesting that love be defined through his own logical perspective, Lear dismisses Cordelia's perspective as illogical: "Nothing will come of nothing" (I.i.89). Cordelia's definition of love as "Nothing [to be demonstrated in rhetoric]" transcends Lear's logical standards, for he seems to be an adherent of the logic-based Cartesian model, "I think I am." If Cordelia says "nothing," then, in Lear's warped way of thinking, she harbors no love for him; that is, verbal articulation of love is the only material, tangible proof of its existence to his mangled and culturally-engrained ways of thinking.

Further, Lear views love in logical commercial terms: love, to him, is an object, or a commodity that can be bought by land and riches: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge" (I.i.50-52). He views love through the lens of objectified logic: love is a commodity that can be acquired in return for money or land or even by threats. In fact, Lear views love in rational and logical terms and reduces it to something that can even be measured and weighed, which is manifested in the size of land he proportions to each of his daughters, based on their declaration of allegiance and submission; thus, each one of his daughters' allocation of land and riches will correlate to their supposed love for him. When Goneril proclaims that she loves him "more than words can wield the matter; / Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty; / Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare; / No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour," he rewards her with vast lands full of "shadowy forests," "plenteous rivers," and "wide-skirted meads" that "make [her] lady" (I.i.54-8, 62-5). Regan wants to be similarly "prize[d]" (69) for showing her love, as much as her sister; thus, she receives an "ample third of our kingdom, / No less in space,

validity, and pleasure” than her sister (80-81). Cordelia will “draw” “a third [share] more opulent than [her] sisters” only if, as Lear expects, “what she say[s]” excels her sisters’ flowery but false speeches (I.i.84-5). When Cordelia speaks “Nothing” because she “cannot heave / [her] heart into [her] mouth,” (90) Lear gets infuriated and asks her to “mend [her] speech a little, / Lest [she] mar [her] fortunes” (91-92). This reveals Lear’s use of “fortunes” as a coercive threat and a temptation to elicit words of love and allegiance. Also, measuring love in material terms, Lear, in response to Cordelia’s belief in true love, vows that “thy truth, then, be thy dower” (108); namely, Cordelia will receive no dower for her “Nothing.” Further, Lear tells Burgundy that Cordelia’s “price is fallen” (198) because she fails to express love in his terms. Thus, to Lear, not only is love a commodity that can be bought with money, but it is also manipulated and exploited by coercion and threats, which further reinforce his wrong perception of the meaning of true love as a voluntary act.

Lear’s view of love as a commodity is also manifested in his surprise at the sacrificial love Cordelia demonstrates toward the end of the play. He is surprised that Cordelia still loves him, since he had earlier given her no land and even exiled her from her country. Because he deprives her of material gains, which he and everybody cherishes and considers the chief motivation and measure for one’s love of others, Lear is astounded to experience a kind of love that is alien to this culturally-accepted logic and self-preserving rationale. Lear understands things in eye-for-an-eye logic, which is why Cordelia’s “No cause” (IV.vii.74) astounds him. He does not understand Cordelia’s display of divine love as an unconditional voluntary sacrifice given without expecting anything in return, which is why he wonders if there is “any cause in nature that makes

these [Regan's and Goneril's] hard hearts?" (III.iv.75-6). Because Lear gives his riches and lands to Regan and Goneril, he expects this to be a sufficient motivation for them to love him in proportion to the land he gave them. In fact, Lear views love in terms of cause-and-effect logic; when he meets Cordelia towards the end of the play, he expects her to hate him more than her sisters: "I know you do not love me; for your sisters / Have, as I do remember, done me wrong. / You have some cause, they have not" (IV.vii.71-3). Cordelia's "No cause, no cause," contrary to his expectations, presents a definition and enacts a messianic view of love that is alien to Lear's logical thinking according to which he harbors a pre-assumption that Cordelia has all the motivation to hate him.

Further, Lear's perception of love in terms of give-and-take rationale figures elsewhere in the play: when Kent humiliates Oswald, Lear is pleased with him and views this as a service for which Kent deserves to be paid back with Lear's love: "I thank thee fellow. Thou serv'st me, and I'll love thee" (I.iv.83-4). According to this rationale, Lear would love Kent only because he did him a service; thus, love is a way of returning favors and rewarding those who promote us. He even "gives money" in return for this service (I.iv.88-9). To Lear, voluntary love that is done without expectation of rewards simply does not exist. He cannot comprehend merciful generosity. However, Cordelia's love, reflecting the biblical discourse, echoes Paul's definition in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." In Luke 7:42, the one who loves the most is the one who forgives.

Moreover, eloquence and rhetoric in Shakespeare's culture were deemed natural manifestations of logical and reasoning powers, gifts which only men allegedly possessed. Therefore, men only were relied on to preach important truths because they were more skilled in the use of eloquence and rhetoric to persuade others. In other words, eloquence and rhetoric—the hallmark of love—were celebrated as patriarchal powers that only men possessed. But the Bible in many instances undermines the importance of rhetoric and eloquence in heavenly matters. Christian love is predicated on an extraordinary relationship which, not expressed in empty loquaciousness, can only be expressed in action through sacrifice, forgiveness, worship, and self-denial. Shakespeare, in fact, dismisses rhetoric and eloquence as means of deceit, which applies to many characters, such as Regan, Goneril, and Edmund who fraudulently use the power of their tongues to achieve their selfish goals. Because cunning Regan and Goneril are able to detect their father's egotistical weaknesses in his perception of eloquence and rhetoric as the valid means for one's expressing love, they succeed because Lear bases truth on the false power of the tongue. Lear is a man who can be persuaded through the art of rhetoric; that is why he dismisses Cordelia's discourse as not persuasive and asks her to "mend [her] speech." In fact, he is so shallow and undiscerning that he interprets the word "nothing" literally and superficially to mean that his younger daughter harbors no love for him, for the "nothing," later in the play, turns out to be the embodiment of true love. Since he measures one's feelings based on his/her rhetorical and rational skills in words, typical male standards, Lear condemns himself to spiritual and psychological darkness.

Further, Shakespeare's culture, which was influenced by Reformation thinking, celebrated the Bible as the source of higher truths. Even though it was a culture that espoused logic and reason due to the impact of the Greek philosophy, those who read and knew the Bible advanced its teachings as the key method of knowing truths. The Bible, as it was introduced by the Reformers, offered people new discoveries and truths about their world in a way that appealed to their sensibilities even more than Greek logic. Alan Sinfield, for instance, contends that "rational, humanistic objections are more than irrelevant to the Protestant; they actually illustrate the inadequacy of human reason. God's inscrutable will should be incomprehensible to the fallen intellect" (17). Bergvall points out that Martin Luther viewed reason as "the devil's whore" (117). Shakespeare, by foregrounding the Bible and its central truths in *King Lear*, aims to undervalue the early modern belief system, and by extension, the patriarchal mode of thinking which centered on logic and rationality and which were esteemed Roman values that had been resurrected by the humanist thrust of the educational curriculum in Renaissance England.

To achieve this end, he chooses central biblical issues that cannot be understood through logic and rationality, and nominates a woman, Cordelia, to be the spokesperson and representative of these supreme biblical truths. To exalt Cordelia as a truth-teller, Shakespeare chooses central biblical issues as the solid basis of her discourse, for what she "preaches" is endorsed by the Bible and, hence, irrefutable. Thus, to dismiss what Cordelia preaches and embodies is, to the audience, the equivalent of denying the most fundamental bases of the Christian religion—the Bible—and this of course would constitute rank heresy. Indeed, Shakespeare exalts Cordelia's mind by imbuing it with the biblical wisdom—the wisdom of Christ. She can see into the heart of higher truth, not the

worldly truths that grounded medieval reasoning and logic. Cordelia, empowered and armed with the biblical thinking, rather than being a passive receptor of male-filtered truth, is the one who must be listened to and appreciated. She resembles Christ in being a teacher, a spiritual nourisher, educator, and a wise enlightener. She is, in brief, the enlightened woman chosen by God to lead Lear and others to the true path. Shakespeare empowers Cordelia with the sanctity of biblical truth which enables her to assert her subjectivity, her power of speech, and her self-articulation in the face of entrenched patriarchy that denigrated contemporary women and trivialized their minds. Indeed, Cordelia is a veritable expression, even a personification, of the Holy Writ—a sanctified creature of God’s wisdom, a female version of Christ, so to speak.

In this context, Shakespeare discounts the importance of rhetoric since biblical truths are reached through the heart, not mouth. While Lear believes that the locus of truth lies in the power of the tongue, the Bible and its representative, Cordelia, view the heart and conscience as the locus of truth: “blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). Cordelia’s inability to “heave [her] heart into [her] mouth” is affirmed by the Bible: “The heart of fools is in their mouth; but the mouth of the wise is in their heart” (Ecclesiastics 21:26). Kent’s words to Regan and Goneril, “And your large speeches may your deeds approve” (I.i.187), echoes the sentiment of 1 John 3:18 and its rejection of loving through empty words: “Let us not love in words, neither in tongue only, but in deed and in truth.” Cordelia proclaims that her love cannot be expressed in empty words, but rather in action, like Christ and His Christian followers:

I yet beseech your majesty,--

If for I want that glib and oily art,

To speak and purpose not; since what I well intend,  
I'll do't before I speak,--that you make known  
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,  
No unchaste action, or dishonour'd step,  
That hath deprived me of your grace and favour;  
But even for want of that for which I am richer,  
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue  
As I am glad I have not, though not to have it  
Hath lost me in your liking. (I.i.224-34)

Cordelia despises “glib and oily art” and hates to “speak and purpose not” because she prefers to “do’t” instead of showing her verbal skills. Cordelia is “glad” that she does “not” have a honey “tongue.” Unable to recognize “that for which [Cordelia] is richer,” Lear “deprive[s] [her] of [his] grace and favour.” Lear does not recognize that the locus of true love is in the heart, not mouth. Defining true love to Burgundy, France says, “Love’s not love / When it is mingled with regards that stands / Aloof from th’ entire point” (I.i.238-40), a speech which pointedly echoes Paul’s words in 1Cor 13:1-3:

If I speak with the eloquence of men and of angels, but have no love, I become no more than blaring brass or crashing cymbal. If I have the gift of foretelling the future and hold in my mind not only all human knowledge but the very secrets of God, and if I also have that absolute faith which can move mountains, but have no love, I amount to nothing at all. If I dispose of all that I possess, yes, even if I give my own body to be burned, but have no love, I achieve precisely nothing.

Contrary to how Lear and his flattering ego manipulators commodify love, Paul preaches that love “is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage” (5-6).

Further, Cordelia’s choice not to “heave [her] heart into [her] mouth” and to “love” and “be silent” also affirms Holy Writ:

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen. For if there are prophecies they will be fulfilled and done with, if there are "tongues" the need for them will disappear, if there is knowledge it will be swallowed up in truth. For our knowledge is always incomplete and our prophecy is always incomplete, and when the complete comes, that is the end of the incomplete. (8-13)

Furthermore, Cordelia’s wisdom, manifest in her rejection of verbosity in favor of “Nothing,” echoes Christ’s wisdom and choice to say “Nothing” when arrested by the Jews, led by Judas, and interrogated by the chief priest: “Answerest thou nothing?” (Matthew 26:62). Rather than trying to prove his identity as the Messiah through rhetoric, Christ chooses to remain silent. Christ’s wisdom lies in His choice to say “Nothing,” an obvious dismissal of verbiage as a valid vehicle for expressing truth, for truth lies not in empty words, but in the heart and spirit, the locus of the divine; and in the sanctified acts and holy boldness that flow out of it. In the same way that Cordelia’s answer is unpalatable to Lear, so too Christ’s is perceived as “blasphemy.” Thus, Cordelia’s “Nothing” is actually quite biblical, whereas Lear’s “Nothing will come out of nothing”



echoes the logic of Plato and Aristotle, or the Cartesian model, as noted above. Although Cordelia, like Christ, speaks “nothing,” she turns out to be the most faithful, wise, and truthful person. Further, Christ, instead of voicing truth, demonstrated it through action: healing the sick, caring for the poor, empowering the weak, and spiritually nourishing the blind. Thus, Cordelia, in her silence, is divine and Spirit-filled, for she relates not through the mouth, but through the heart which is prompted by the Holy Spirit; that is why she can see what others can’t. This Christ-like wisdom of speaking one’s true feelings, not what one ought to say, is articulated and affirmed by Edgar at the close of the play: “The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (V.iii.334-35).

In light of the play’s polarization of wisdom versus foolishness, light versus darkness, and sight versus blindness, I find it profitable to draw attention to the play’s myriad allusions to Cordelia’s Messianic attributes, which further ground her as the ultimate truth-teller. In view of Christ’s redemptive function to save mankind, allusions to Cordelia’s Christ-likeness are unmistakable and undeniable and attain paramount importance: Peter Milward points out that France’s “Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised” (I.i.250-52), for instance, echoes the Apostle Paul’s words about Christ in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “He [Christ], being rich, for your sake became poor, that you thought his poverty might be made rich” (157). The reference to Cordelia as the one “Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to” (IV.iv.205-07) is an obvious association of Cordelia with Christ—the “redeem[er]” Who saved mankind from the “general curse”: in Galatians 4:5; 3:13, Titus 2:14, Luke 1:68, and Revelation 14:4, for instance, Christ is

referred to as the “redeem[er].” Further, France’s “Thou [Cordelia] lovest here, a better where to find” (I.i.264)— a comment on her disregard for worldly wealth and material gains—echoes Christ’s words in Matthew 16:25-6: “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” Also, Cordelia’s “O dear father! It is thy *business* that I go about” (IV.iv.24) bears reference to Christ’s speech to His parents in the temple: “Knew you not that I must go about my father’s *business* [my emphasis]?” (Luke 2:49). Cordelia’s sacrificial act is reinforced by Lear’s comment: “Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, / The gods themselves throw incense” (V.iii.20-1), which echoes Paul’s reference to Christ’s death at the cross: “with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Hebrews 13:16).

Moreover, when Lear and Cordelia are captured by Edmund’s forces, Cordelia is selflessly worried about her father instead of herself: “We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worst. / For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down. / Myself could else outfrown false fortune’s frown” (V.iii.4-6). Her speech here echoes the Apostle Peter’s reference to Christ in 1 Peter 1:20-1: “He [Christ] was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.” After Lear reunites with his long-exiled daughter and proclaims that he knows that “this lady / To be my child Cordelia” (IV.vii.67-8), Cordelia says “I am! I am,” which echoes Christ’s language in John 18:5-6 when he, after the Last Supper with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, was captured by the Roman cohorts and led to crucifixion: when asked if He is the Christ they were looking for, Jesus answered, “I am

[...] I am he,” and immediately after He said this “they drew back and fell to the ground.” Further, described by a Gentleman to Kent as “holy water from heavenly eyes,” Cordelia’s tears, shed upon learning about her father’s suffering, carry unmistakable Eucharistic overtones. Lear’s words, upon Cordelia’s death and his attempt to verify it, are reminiscent of Christ’s redemptive function on earth: holding a feather before Cordelia’s lips, Lear says, “This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (V.iii.274-75). The sorrows that Lear talks about echo Christians’ sorrows after Christ’s death, which is reinforced by Edgar at the close of the play: “The weight of this sad time we must obey” (V.iii.334).

Apart from the play’s allusions to Cordelia’s Messianic sacrificial acts, Shakespeare portrays her as the embodiment and exemplar of truth in a way that is reminiscent of Christ, the ultimate truth-teller in the Christian world. In John 18:23, Christ, after being disbelieved and mistrusted as a truth-teller by the Romans, tells Pilate, the chief priest, that He, Jesus, “spoke the truth” and that He “came into the world, to testify to the truth” (37). Also, in John 8:40, Christ told the Pharisees who doubted his truthfulness that He “told [them] the truth that [He had] heard from God.” In John 14:6-7, Christ told His disciples, “I myself am the road” and “the truth and the life.” In the same way that Christ represented the truth that spiritually lost people, such as the Pharisees, desperately needed, so too Cordelia represents the truth that Lear, who is Pharisaic in his rejection of Cordelia, also desperately needs. When Cordelia tells Lear that she is “true,” he tells her that her “truth will be [her] dower,” (I.i.107, 108) meaning that her truth is, to him, worth nothing, for he totally disinherits her and refuses to heed anything of what she professes. When Christ was told by the Pharisees that His “testimony is invalid,” He told

them that they “judge[d] by human standards” (John 8:13, 15). That is, the Pharisees tried to understand Christ’s truth through their logical minds and culturally-defined patriarchy, not through their hearts. In a similar sense, Lear dismisses Cordelia’s truth as illogic because he judges her by human standards.

In this context, it is important to note that Christ’s truth rests on and is defined by His unconditional and sacrificial love for humankind. The words “love” and “truth” can be found adjacent together in many instances in the New Testament in reference to Christ and His teachings. For instance, in 1 Peter 1:22, the Apostle Peter tells believers in Christ, “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart,” which is what Christ embodied: “love and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Similarly, in her embodiment of truth and love, Cordelia resembles Christ. We can deduce from this that love is a pre-condition for acceptance of a reliable truth. That is, what made Christ triumph as the ultimate truth-teller is His unconditional love for mankind. Thus, a loving person, then, can be a reliable truth-teller because altruism is a sign that one has received the Holy Spirit and been enlightened from the inside, which is what Cordelia, with her “truth” and “true” “love,” demonstrates. John MacArthur speaks to this very point:

truth must always guide the exercise of love. Love must stand the test of truth [...]. Truth determines the bounds of love [...]. Therefore, truth must exist before love can unite, for truth generates love. When someone compromises the truth, true Christian love and unity are destroyed. Only shallow sentimentalism exists when the truth is not the foundation of unity. (1975-76)

Describing the impact of Kent's letter, which details Lear's miserable state, the Gentleman tells Kent that Cordelia was moved deeply, not with "rage," but calmly: "patience and sorrow strove / Who should express her goodliness" (IV.iii.16-17). This controlled and peaceful striving suggests the fruits of the Holy Spirit as we see in Galatians 5:22-23: "the fruits of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," all of which apply to Cordelia. Her "self-control" shows in her calmness upon receiving this shocking news. A reference in the play even suggests a strong association between Cordelia and the Holy Spirit: when Lear comes out of his madness and meets Cordelia, immediately after delivering one of the most significant speeches in all of Shakespeare (IV.vii.43-6)—which I discuss in detail below—Lear refers to her as a spirit: "I know you are a spirit, I know" (48). That this line comes immediately after Lear recognizes Cordelia and that he describes her as the one who will "take me out o'th' grave"(43), and "a soul in bliss," (44) rule out the possibility that what Lear means by "spirit" simply "ghost." She is a living embodiment of the Holy Spirit and is, thus, able to act so sacrificially.

Obsessed with his ego and self-pride, Lear lacks insight into the truth about love, for he favors flattery and praise instead of the truth. This is what Christ condemned in the Jews: "I know you. I know that you do not have love of God in your hearts. I have come in my father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" (John 6:41-4). In a similar sense, Lear favors praise from his deceitful daughters to the true love of God which Cordelia preaches and embodies.

Further, in rejecting Cordelia's way of love and becoming a child to his Satanic daughters, Lear resembles the Pharisees who did not love Christ and became, as Jesus told them, children of the Devil:

If God were your Father," Christ told the Pharisees, "you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil. [...]. He [the devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!" (John 8:42-5)

Regan and Goneril, who operate on deceit and lies, represent Satan who caused the Fall of mankind. Cordelia, however, is the one "Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to" (IV.vi.205-07). Lear here refers to Regan and Goneril as the "twain" who caused the "general curse" that caused the Fall of mankind. Lear falls because he takes his daughter's lies as truths. Regan and Goneril impersonate the Devil who "has no truth in him." Albany, for instance, calls Goneril, who deceives and lies to her father, a "devil" and a "fiend." Lear calls Goneril a "marble-hearted fiend" because she "liest" (I.iv.244, 246). In light of the play's reference to Lear as a "child," Lear, in following Regan and Goneril, becomes a devil's child, notwithstanding later he becomes a "child changed man." The "child" who, as discussed below, changes Lear is, of course, the Messianic maternal figure, Cordelia. Thus, Shakespeare reinforces and affirms Cordelia as a truth-teller by alluding to Christ's truth and the rejection which He faced in His ministry: in the same way Christ was disbelieved and rejected at the beginning of His

ministry and later vindicated as the ultimate Truth-Teller, so too Cordelia is rejected as a truth-teller at the beginning, but later triumphs as the embodiment of the truth.

Furthermore, in the same way that Christ represented the “light” that shone through darkness and lighted the path of the believers, so too Cordelia, in a sense, acts as the light in the heart of darkness. Christ told His people, “I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark; he shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). Before the coming of Christ, the people of Israel were living in spiritual darkness and ignorance of the truth about themselves and God. But Christ, “the light,” shone through the hearts of the believers: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it” (John 1:3-5). Christ, “The true light that gives light to every man[,] was coming into the world” (9). The light of Christ is what guides people out of the darkness to the truth; it shines in the heart and conscience and disables the mind’s desires and alluring distractions: “the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:78-9). Only this light extracts believers from the darkness of their selfish desires and blind consciences—from the darkness to enlightenment.

Although the play contains many references that associate Cordelia with physical light, spiritual light is actually implied. In act four scene three, a Gentleman describes Cordelia to Kent in this fashion: “Patience and sorrow strove / Who should express her goodliest. You have seen / Sunshine and rain at once – her smile and tears / Were like a better way” (IV.iii.16-19). In fact, the combination of “sunshine” and “a better way” echoes the co-existence of “sun,” “shine,” and “the path of peace” in the Luke passage

mentioned above: the “rising sun” will “shine on those living in darkness” and guide[s] [their] feet into the path of peace” (1:78-9). Hence, the significance of the co-existence of “sunshine” and “better way” in Lear’s speech is unmistakable: for one to find a “better way,” s/he needs “sunshine,” for darkness does not lead to the desired path. The psalmist in Psalm 119:105, for instance, believes that God’s “word is a lamp to [his] feet and a light to [his] path.” Moreover, the significance of this image is apparently deeper than its physical sense. The “better way,” which echoes Paul’s “excellent way” in 1 Corinthians 13:1, is “love,” as noted above, which is embodied in the way of Christ. The Christian life, which is based on love, is called “the Way” in many instances in the New Testament: in Acts 24:14, for example, Paul “admit[s] that [he] worship[s] the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way.” The way of Christian love, then, is the illumined way, or the way that leads out of darkness.

Of course, Cordelia is the quintessence of love, and that is why she is associated with light. Further, when Lear wakes up in Cordelia’s tent and recovers from his madness, the first thing he sees is Cordelia and says, “Fair daylight?” (IV.VI.49). It is only at this juncture in the play that the inner light begins to sparkle in Lear’s heart, for his subsequent acknowledgment that he is “foolish” (IV.vii.58) and request not to be “mock[ed]” (57) is a manifestation of the working of this inner light: admitting sin, in short, is the first condition for receiving the “light.” Further, while Lear is asleep, Cordelia wishes that her father has “stood that night / Against my fire,” and as “he wakes,” she intends to “speak to him” (IV.vii.35-6, 40). The image of waking from “night” sleep to awareness and intelligible speech echoes Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:14: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Paul in this same



book tells the Ephesians that they “were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of Light” (8); no doubt, then, that Lear, who is “take[n] out o’the grave,” becomes Cordelia’s “changed” “child” (IV.vii.15). In the same way that Paul taught the Ephesians to be “children of Light,” so too here Shakespeare portrays Lear as the “child” of the “light.”

Lear, who obeys his Satanic daughters and refuses to see the truth by banishing its exemplar, Cordelia, sinks into darkness—both physical and spiritual. The play, thus, abounds with images of horrible darkness and night, especially in the storm scene. The Fool, critiquing Lear for believing his Satanic daughters, comments that “The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long, / That it’s had it head bit off by it young. / So out went the candle and we were left darkling” (I.iv.211-13). Lear, then, is “left darkling” because his “candle” “out went.” Lear laments that “Darkness and devils / Saddle [his] horses” (I.iv.236-37). When queried by Kent about the whereabouts of Lear, the Gentleman says that Lear suffers in a “night—wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch. / The lion and the belly-pinched wolf / Keep their fur dry” (III.i.12-14). That is, Lear suffers in so brutal a night that even fierce nocturnal animals cannot endure. Also, while Lear suffers the raging storm, the Fool comments that “Here’s a night that pities neither wise man / nor fool” (III.ii.12-13). While in company with Lear and the Fool, Kent comments that “Things that love night / Love not such nights as these. The wrathful skies / Gallow the very wanderers of the dark / And make them keep their caves” (III.ii.40-42). Lear responds that “the great gods” are the ones “that keep this dreadful pudder o’er our heads” (47-9). Lear laments that his Satanic daughters left him to suffer “in such a night as this!” (III.iv.19). When Cornwall and Regan query Gloucester about where he sent

Lear, Gloucester condemns them for causing Lear, “bare head,” to suffer “In hell-black night” (III.vii.57). Lear’s juxtaposition of reference to “hell,” “darkness,” and “sulphurous pit” echoes Christ’s description of Hell where there is “darkness,” “weeping,” and “gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30). Indeed, Lear’s torture in this hellish darkness is reminiscent of the torture sinners will experience in Hell. However, it is not until Christ-like Cordelia, “a soul in bliss,” returns and takes him “out o’th’ [darkness of the hellish] grave,” where he is “bound / upon a wheel of fire” full of “tears,” (IV.Vii.44-5) that the torture is lifted from him, and light is cast, physically, on his face, and spiritually, in his heart.

In fact, Cordelia is described in a language that suggests light, both inner and outer, and enlightenment, just as Christ is described by biblical writers as the embodiment of spiritual light for those living in darkness. In the same way Christ acted as the sole enlightener for those dark-hearted disbelievers, so too Cordelia acts as the enlightened individual who extracts the ignorant and damned from the heart of darkness to the world of light and vision. From the inception of the play, Cordelia possesses this inner light of Christ which makes her more visionary and wise in knowing the truth; she, unlike her blind father, sees into the heart of things. It is this inner light that enables Cordelia to see beyond the world of the dark court which is characterized by greed, self-pride, power-lust, and hatred. Cordelia has inner insight and vision to know the falseness of her sisters: she tells them, “*I know you what you are*” (I.i.272), which echoes Christ’s language in John 2:24-25: “While he [Christ] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus

would not entrust himself to them, for he *knew* all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he *knew* [my italics] what was in a man."

Cordelia senses her sisters' exploitation of their father's self-pride and egoism and the consequences that will ensue. Indeed, Cordelia is the confident, not arrogant, knower of the truth, and her disclosure of the truth stems from her pure heart which is enabled by the Holy Spirit. Through her inner light, Cordelia senses the impending doom waiting for her father: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides" (I.i.283). Cordelia's line echoes Christ's words to his disciples in Matthew 10:26-28, which show Him a confident knower of the truth that will prevail and see the light: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is widespread in your ear proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." It is important to note that Cordelia's knowledge, though she is intelligent and witty, does not stem from intelligence or intellectual powers per se, but rather from a divinely-operated and spirit-based astuteness in the same way Christ was empowered by "the spirit of God" or, as it is called elsewhere in the Bible, "the light of God." Shakespeare portrays Cordelia in this fashion in order to endow her with knowing powers which surpass regular cognitive intelligence that is based on logic, mind observation, and cerebral process. Cordelia knows because her heart is inhabited by the Holy Spirit. Shakespeare exalts Cordelia's heart and Spirit-based knowing over Lear's logic-based and flawed reasoning. While "the Greek philosophers generally understood wisdom as knowledge [data] needed for living toward life's highest good" (Jobes 228), Cordelia's wisdom is Spirit-based; therefore, her wisdom is exalted above the Greek ideal of knowledge and data-based wisdom.

In this context, I find it necessary to note that Cordelia's wisdom stems from her heart, not mind. Wisdom of the heart is fixed and reliable because it is enabled by the Holy Spirit and not vulnerable to egoistic desires and the carnal and shifting impulses of the mind. The mind is easily influenced by desires which corrupt wisdom and lead to the wrong path. Lear, whose mind is corrupted by self-centered purposes and led by fallible logic and reason, does not make wise decisions because he gives his mind the rein to create valid excuses for his purposes, which also applies to Regan and Goneril. They too put their hearts aside and work through the power of their minds to excuse their sinful acts. In act two scene four, for instance, Regan works with Edmund to create logical mind justifications for her ill treatment of her father.

Further, Shakespeare, to reinforce the supremacy of Cordelia as a reliable truth-teller, not only associates her with references to messianic "truth" and "light," but also with messianic spiritual motherhood; thus, Cordelia, who is, like Christ, filled with the "Light of God," functions as a spiritual mother to Lear, just as Christ was. In the beginning of the play, we see allusions to Cordelia's becoming a mother to Lear, had she been able to express love in a manner that would satisfy Lear's lack of motherly love. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it can be legitimately argued that the Oedipal workings do exist: Lear wishes to "set his rest" upon the "kind nursery" of Cordelia (I.i.123-24). Lear here wants to be taken care of by "her nursery" as if he is a child. In fact, this is exactly what happens towards the end of the play: Cordelia attends to Lear, nurses him in her tent, and calls a doctor to inspect him, just as a real mother would tend and nourish her child. This is confirmed by her perception of Lear as a "child changed father" (IV.vii.15); that is, Lear becomes a child again. In light of the purgatorial journey

that Lear goes through and how he is totally transformed into a new man, it is legitimate to see Cordelia as a mother to Lear, not in the Oedipal sense, but in the messianic spiritual sense; just as Christ was a spiritual mother to the people of Israel, as discussed in chapter two, so too is Cordelia.

Throughout Lear's journey of self-discovery, Cordelia remains on his mind all the way as a hidden force pushing Lear further and further into himself to try to discover the truth, not only about himself, but also about the world around him and about the extent of his pride. She functions as a divine force working inside Lear to improve his understanding of himself and the world around him and to lead him to higher levels of potentiation as he sloughs off the stultifying encrustations of carnality. Cordelia operates as the divine agent who guides Lear through self-discovery until he is born again. After a "heaviness of sleep" (IV.vii.19) in the "grave" (43), Lear wakes up at "fair daylight," (50) and "fresh garments" are "put" on him. Waking from a long sleep suggests, of course, rebirth, and the "fresh garments" (20) suggest casting off the old self and assuming a new one. In a more preferred reading, the "fresh garment" might suggest the "white robe," as discussed in chapter two, that believers must have in order to be admitted into God's Heaven.

The manifestations of Lear's transformation reflect Paul's discourse on the image of the "new man" in Colossians 3:8-14:

But now, put all these things behind you. No more evil temper or furious rage: no more evil thoughts or words about others, no more evil thoughts or words about God, and no more filthy conversation. Don't tell each other lies any more, for you have finished with the old man and all he did and have begun life as the new man,

who is out to learn what he ought to be, according to the plan of God. In this new man of God's design there is no distinction between Greek and Hebrew, Jew or Gentile, foreigner or savage, slave or free man. Christ is all that matters for Christ lives in them all. As, therefore, God's picked representatives of the new humanity, purified and beloved of God himself, be merciful in action, kindly in heart, humble in mind. Accept life, and be most patient and tolerant with one another, always ready to forgive if you have a difference with anyone. Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you. And, above everything else, be truly loving, for love is the golden chain of all the virtues.

Indeed, Lear "finishe[s] with the old man and all he did" and becomes a "new man," which is manifested in his new humility, selflessness, tolerance, patience, respect for others without discriminatory considerations, and, "above everything else," new "love" for others.

This rebirth that Paul talks about is reinforced by Christ's response to Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council at Christ's time: "I [Christ] tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." And when the Jew asked how a man could "be born when he is old," Christ said that a man "cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born," but a man who qualifies to enter the "kingdom of God" is the one who is "born of water and spirit" (John 3:1-5). Thus, Lear is born again, as manifested in his new Christ-like humility, mercy, altruism, forgiveness, love, and grace, which are signs that the Holy Spirit has regenerated his heart. Thus, in the same way that Christians were reborn again by having faith in Christ as the ultimate truth-teller, so too Lear is not reborn again until he has faith in what Cordelia exemplifies at the

start of the play; and Lear's kneeling before Cordelia towards the end is a further reinforcement and proof of this assumption. After all, Shakespeare's depiction of Cordelia as Lear's spiritual nourisher and mentor grounds her further as a truth-teller, for had she not been a prophetic and divine truth-teller, Lear would not have undergone this radical change.

Furthermore, Shakespeare not only exalts Cordelia as a reliable truth-teller by associating her with messianic references of "truth," "light," and spiritual motherhood, which put her on the level of Christ's mind in terms of wisdom and insight in truth-telling, but also he, towards the close of the play, portrays her, surprisingly through Lear's speeches, as a sacred, prophetic, and divine agent: she is "God's spie" who is eligible to form "packs and sects of great ones." This further grounding of Cordelia as an exalted truth-teller exists in Lear's speech in the final scene of the play when he "kneel[s] down" before her:

We two alone will sing like birds I' th' cage;  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too-  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out-  
And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,  
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones

That ebb and flow by th' moon. (V.iii.9-19)

In this speech, Lear, having come out of his purgatorial journey a new man and having, like Cordelia, a Christ-like mind in terms of wisdom and insight, finally attains the level of Cordelia's divine wisdom and sacrificial humility. In the first scene of the play, Lear is a part of this "court news," nay, he is obsessed with court news—a mere blind and ignorant fool who lacks the wisdom needed to understand himself, his daughters, or the world around him. The journey of suffering and self-discovery, which culminates in his becoming a "changed" man, is what enables him to be lifted to the level of Cordelia's wisdom. While Lear at the beginning is a foolish and undiscerning agent of corruption in his court, now he is out of that circle: he becomes a mere watcher of "poor rogues" and is free of their corruption, their jockeying for position and power, and their scurrying for prominence and favor. Now, Lear, no longer the blind man, reaches Cordelia's level of luminous perspective and sees into "the mystery of things / As if we were God's spies." Lear eventually attains Cordelia's godly wisdom. His doing so reminds the reader of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:7: "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hid wisdom which God had determined before the world, unto our glory."

Lear and Cordelia here become God's objective ambassadors or prophets on earth, watching the lost and trying to guide them to the true path. It is important to note here that a spy is one who has knowledge, insight, wisdom, objectivity, and faithfulness—one who is a reliable and honest narrator and teller of truth. A spy is also one who is usually appointed by some higher authority. While spying generally is viewed negatively, because it frequently involves violation of others' privacy, here Cordelia and Lear are not anybody's spies but "God's spies," which suggests that they are God's most



trusted prophets and ambassadorial agents of truth. Being “God’s spies,” Cordelia and Lear now have the eyes of God to see the truth that those living in the dark do not have access to because they do not possess the inner light. Lear, having acquired this inner light, becomes one who can see the truth and show it to others as God’s minister. What reinforces this reading is that Lear’s and Cordelia’s spying mission is divine: they want to form “packs and sects of great ones.” Christ’s mission on earth, similarly, was to take people out of the darkness and to form “sects” of believers. In a similar sense, Lear puts himself at Cordelia’s level of being a divine agent of truth-telling whose goal is to form “sects of great ones.” Further, the “pray[ing]” and “sing[ing]” that Cordelia and Lear will perform echo Paul’s words in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Lear no longer views Cordelia as one who speaks “nothing”; rather, he, acknowledging a woman as the spokesperson for the truth, accepts her as his equal co-partner in divine ministry to convey God’s message. He has morphed from the foolish man who is duped by verbiage and is blind to gold-hearted goodness to a man who appreciates and discerns both refined speech and divine action.

Thus, Shakespeare invites his audience to rethink their constructed stereotypical ideas about women. He challenges his culture’s patriarchal belief system which denigrated women and viewed them as unreliable truth-tellers based on 1) the medical writings that continued to pervade that culture, 2) the prejudiced readings of a handful of biblical passages that ostensibly debarred women from prophesying or sharing the mission of spreading God’s message, and 3) the teachings that were issuing from the

hallowed bastions of higher education—namely, Oxford, Cambridge, The Sorbonne, Bologna, Padua, and many others. To exalt Cordelia as a prophetic truth-teller, Shakespeare endows her with Christ-like attributes: she and she alone embodies God's truth, Spirit, and light. In the same way Christ, the ultimate truth-teller in Christian religion, embodied God's truth and light and functioned as Christians' spiritual mother, so too Cordelia, a spiritual mother, acts as God's light and truth which guides those living in darkness to the light. To Shakespeare, women, like men, can receive the Holy Spirit; therefore, they are as eligible as men to prophesy, teach, and preach God's message: women are no longer to be viewed as mere passive receptors of men's perspectives. Indeed, Lear's final recognition of Cordelia as "God's spie" who will share with him the divine ministry of forming "sects of great ones" is a compelling image that calls for a radically new view toward women as reliable truth-tellers and teachers. That Shakespeare's most riveting messianic figure is a woman and not a man speaks to the radicalness of his vision, the extent of his iconoclasm, and the intensity of his desire to overthrow patriarchy.

CHAPTER 4  
THE BIBLE AND SHAKESPEARE'S DEPICTION OF  
SEXUALITY/SPIRITUALITY DICHOTOMY IN *OTHELLO*

Medieval and early modern long-entrenched, pejorative views toward the female body, parturition, truth-telling, and rational thinking, relate to the general view of women's sexuality. These repugnant, culturally-constructed ideas, which grounded much of the religious discourse against women, were promulgated by the patriarchal system which dishonored the female body. Such ideas were highly informed by and were an extension of the predominant negative view of female sexuality. The general view of the womb as monstrous, unclean, and dangerous to male health generated a negative attitude toward female sexuality; as a result, sex was seen as impure, unhealthy, and self-polluting—a necessary, though pleasurable evil. Further, if the medical theories professed relatedness of these feminine bodily processes to women's alleged unreliable truth-telling and incapability of rational thinking, the religious discourse, which espoused contemporary medical theories, not only affirmed this same rationale, but also actually linked it with women's sexuality and spirituality. Buttressing their views by exploiting, accentuating, randomly selecting, and misinterpreting a handful of ostensibly negative biblical passages, religious authorities portrayed the sexual act as the first and foremost threat to males' spirituality, because women were cast as the daughters of Eve who allegedly seduced Adam and led him away from the divine path and mission which God had entrusted to him. Because women were viewed as evil enchantresses who compromised men's relationship to God, medieval and early modern Catholic theologians championed celibacy and professed that singleness constituted the ideal spiritual state; thus, to them, a person, especially a female, could not be sexual and

spiritual at the same time. They proclaimed that the sexual union between man and woman was sinful and, thus, devoid of any potential spiritual profits.

However, the view of sexuality as intrinsically sinful and antithetical to spirituality was mocked by the Protestant Reformers who dismissed the Roman Catholic view in favor of the biblical view which, upon a closer and a contextualized reading of the biblical passages, neither viewed women as evil seductresses, nor suggested any disharmony between sexuality and spirituality. On the contrary, the Bible affirms sex for pleasure and never sees it as detractive to spirituality: sex in the biblical view, not only undergirds spirituality but also is an all-important catalyst for it. This biblical view, highly espoused by the Reformers, resulted in, along with the biblical affirmation of parturition, childbirth, and credibility and meritoriousness of female truth-telling, further empowerment for women and another revolutionary diversion from the pre-existing, culturally-engrained notions. The biblical sanction of sex for pleasure occasioned subversive and countercultural ideas about women and sexuality. Because women were historically viewed as lascivious and sinful, they had to atone for their sins by upholding the celibate ideal. However, the Reformers, espousing the biblical view, departed from this illogic and viewed sexuality and spirituality as reconcilable, and even complementary. They viewed sexuality as undergirding to spirituality, for the sexual union between man and woman occasioned much spiritual fruits.

Because the religious discourse of the Middle Ages was intensely patriarchal and male-serving, it promoted the belief that engaging in the sexual act could lead to spiritual corruption and decline. Thus, the belief in the mutual exclusivity of sexuality and spirituality not only led to a generally negative view of marriage, but it also promulgated

the notion that women, due to their perceived lustfulness, were not spiritual, and could lead men away from God by undermining their spirituality as Eve had done in Eden:

Women were the daughters of Eve, temptresses who would lead men down the primrose path to fornication. Their women's bodies proclaimed that they were the living symbols of Man's First Disgrace. Everyone knew that, because it was not only in the Book of Genesis, but in the New Testament where St. Paul spoke of women as being inferior. (Pitt 15-16)

This view, in fact, in and of itself lowered the status of women. In addition, contemporary Catholic theologians skewed and twisted a handful of Pauline passages to reinforce their fallaciously-based assumptions. Grounded in the biblical thinking, the Reformers did not view women as seductive enchantresses, did not accept the celibate ideal, and did not view sexuality and spirituality as mutually exclusive spheres. Rather, they viewed sex as a wholesome act that undergirds and even enriches spirituality, as reflected in the biblical "one-flesh" ideal which portrays the sexual union as a spiritual union. In fact, the Reformers celebrated the biblical portrait of the holiness of the sexual act as reflected by the Apostle Paul's use of the sexual metaphor to describe the sacred union between Christ and His Church; thus, sex in the biblical view embodies both spirituality and the divine bride/bridegroom relationship.

The Bible's consistent sanction and affirmation of the union of sexuality and spirituality in males and females, its dismissal of the celibate ideal, its honorable treatment of the body, and its rejection of the body/spirit dichotomy echo in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Reflecting and articulating the biblical view, Shakespeare shows that sexuality does not hamper spirituality, thereby subverting the early modern

hegemonic discourse which cast women as evil enchantresses who led men away from the divine path and which viewed female sexuality as monstrous, aberrant, and dangerous. I argue that Shakespeare, the iconoclastic champion of womankind, affirms women's sexuality, and, to challenge the deep-seated pejorative views towards women, utilizes and assimilates the biblical language, ideas, and stances to subvert the medieval and early modern belief in the dissociation of sexuality and spirituality. To achieve this end, Shakespeare positions a female, Desdemona, to embody the harmony and reconcilability of sexuality and spirituality. Notwithstanding that she is sexually aggressive, Desdemona acts as a divine agent of salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation, and agapic love, and she models for Othello and others true spirituality and not, as viewed by Iago and the conflicted Othello, evil and sinful enchantress wives—the quintessential corruption of Othello's spirituality. Before delving into the biblical view of sex and spirituality and the biblical underpinnings of sexuality and spirituality in Shakespeare's *Othello*, I find it necessary to discuss pertinent medieval and early modern medical and religious discourses on sexuality and spirituality.

As discussed in chapters two and three of this dissertation, medieval and early modern medical discourses, as a way of perpetuating patriarchy and reinforcing the inferiority of women, presented pejorative ideas about the female body—and by extension parturition, childbirth, and female sexuality—and used them not only to promote negative assumptions about women's reliability as truth-tellers, but also to foreground women's spiritual depravity, moral impurity, and impiety. To suppress women and to denigrate their status, contemporary Roman Catholic religious authorities viewed

women's sexuality as monstrous and physically dangerous; as a result, sexually touching women was perceived as not only dangerous to one's health, but also to one's spirit.

Not only was the female womb associated with impurity and uncleanness, but it was also viewed as "an object of mystery and fear, a wandering organ which is the cause of hysteria, another uniquely female ailment" (Callaghan 144). Callaghan maintains that "the author of *A Woman's Doctor* says that the matrix [i.e., the womb] is the cause of all those diseases which happen to women. The moon and the imagination cause the womb to move about the body, giving rise to hysteria and irrationality" (144). This pejorative view of the female reproductive organs precipitated a negative attitude towards sexual intercourse; therefore, the sex act was viewed as a source of physical pollution, uncleanness, and impurity.

However, sex was not only an alleged cause of "self-pollution" physically, but also "it was universally viewed as an act that defiled the soul, weakened the body, and corrupted society" (Carroll 155). Thus, sexuality was viewed as a source of physical and spiritual corruption. While the negative view of sex as a source of physical contamination rested with and was based on contemporary medical theories, the religious discourse viewed coitus as an act that compromised spirituality. Because religious authorities were patriarchal in their agendas, they exploited a handful of biblical passages, especially the Genesis story and a few Pauline passages, to support their misogynist ideas about women's sexuality. As Hays rightly observes, "the fathers of the church carried on and intensified the misogynist tradition on sexual grounds" (Dangerous 142). Sex, as I discuss below, was seen as a necessary evil that should be performed solely to procreate; otherwise, it was a sinful act. Thus, not only did contemporary theologians promote

negative assumptions about marriage and advocated celibacy, but they also professed that sexuality and spirituality, especially for women, were mutually exclusive domains which could never be reconciled.

In the Middle Ages, based on the medical theories and the ostensibly negative Old Testament impurity regulations towards the female womb, sex was viewed as physically and spiritually detrimental to the expression of religious rituals. For instance, based on the “idea of impurity” and the pre-conceived taboo toward sex, “the priest [could] not indulge in intercourse because the ritual he carried out [would] be invalidated[,] and when the religious goal [was] personal, mystical experience, any stain of semen [was] thought to be an impediment to perfection” (Hays, *Dangerous* 104). In fact, a Catholic priest was not allowed to experience Holy Communion if he married because, as God’s representative on earth, he could not handle the Eucharist with impure hands which were contaminated with sex.

This contemporary view of sexuality as compromising to men’s spirituality directly relates to the general, constructed pre-conceptions about women being the source of this threat. Addressing the clergy, eleventh-century saint Peter Damian speaks to these constructed pre-assumptions:

I speak to you, O charmers of the clergy, appetizing flesh of the devil, that castaway from paradise, poison of minds, death of souls, companions of the very stuff of sin, the cause of our ruin. You, I say, I exhort you women of the ancient enemy, you bitches, sows, screech-owls, night-owls, blood-suckers, she-wolves,... Come now, hear me harlots, prostitutes, with you lascivious kisses, you wallowing places for fat pigs, couches for unclean spirits. (qtd. in Malone 18)



Stressing that women should cover their bodies which seduce men into sin, church father Tertullian “demands an abasement of woman and the covering of her shameful female nature as the consequence of her continuing imaging of this guilty nature of Eve”: “you are the Devil’s gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image man” (Ruether 157; qtd. in Ruether 157). Saucy and TenElshof point out that asceticism in the Middle Ages was emphasized because “women reminded the men of sex,” so they were seen as “temptresses and the source of evil, making it difficult for men to be holy” (35). The pre-dominant image about women’s sexuality was that “a woman is the devil’s noose, the death of the body and the soul, a stinking rose, a sweet poison” (Hays, *Dangerous* 122).

In this context, it is important to point out that the medieval idea that man, and not woman, was created in the image of God, and the negative view of women’s sexuality occasioned the resurrection and reinforcement of the body/spirit Greek dichotomy which viewed flesh as inferior to and a detriment to the spirit; thus, the more the spirit is divorced from the body, the purer it becomes. Because sex involved carnal and bodily drives and desires which allegedly corrupted the spirit, medieval theologians viewed sexual restraint as the first and foremost pre-condition for spiritual purity. Since women were associated with flesh and considered lustful, contact with them, especially in the sexual act, was deemed the sure cause of damnation, spiritual diminishment, and entrance into Hell. Peter Stallybrass contends that sexual women were viewed as “sinners and criminals to be purified or exterminated” (qtd. in Callaghan 143). Therefore, Catholic

Church authorities prescribed the celibate ideal, especially for women, as the primary requirement for spiritual height, God's favor, and eventual entrance into Heaven.

However, based on the divine decree in Genesis 1:28, "be fruitful and multiply," sex "was merely tolerated by God for the sake of procreation," and not for pleasure, because "God regards sex as intrinsically evil" and also because "sexual pleasure itself [was viewed by medieval church priests] as the consequence of sin": "before Adam and Eve ate from the fruit that God had forbidden, sex wasn't part of the scenario. Instead, the knowledge of good and evil gave them sexual awareness" (Gardner 13). Thus, sexual restraint and the ascetic ideal were "the only God-honoring alternative" (14), especially for women. Augustine believed that sex was the "vehicle for the transformation of original sin" (13). Therefore, he approved sex only for the purpose of procreation; pure sexual pleasure represented sinful indulgence because when a "man loses original justice and succumbs to the body, then sinful carnality, signifying the revolt of bodily against the intellectual principle, enters it" (Ruether 162). To him, "male erection was the essence of sin" and "woman its source [...], cause, object, and extension" (163). Hence, church fathers held that for the sex act to be totally sinless, it had to be done in a "totally dispassionate and instrumental way," and the "involuntary side-effect, the filthy carnal pleasure [...], is forgiven if it is totally involuntary, unintentional, and despised" and if the couple's "only conscious intent being procreation" (165-66). However, even if the sexual act is "good in its intent and end [...], it [remains] inherently sinful in its means" (166), and if sexual pleasure accompanies the act, then it was viewed as sinful, and the child would be born "tainted by original sin" (166).

This negative view of sex not only furthered the subjection and suppression of women, but, as Ruether rightly observes, it also “depersonalized sexual relations” and transformed the man-woman relationship into “essentially subject-object relationship” in which a woman is “used as a vessel to preserve male subjectivity (seed) and object of domination,” an “instrument of procreation” (164). The coldness of the sex act and the males’ stultification of emotions during it occasioned profound alienation in the female: not only was her body being exploited but also the sex act was lifeless, mechanical, and devoid of any emotional element on the part of the male. Thus, as discussed in chapter two, a woman was relegated to a baby-machine to perpetuate patriarchy and serve male ends. The view of sex in this fashion was merely a constructed patriarchal ideology that sought to denigrate women and inculcate patriarchy, and religious authorities played a major role in creating and reinforcing these assumptions.

Medieval and early modern Roman Catholic religious leaders buttressed their view of sexuality, especially women’s, as sinful and corrupting to spirituality by exploiting a handful of ostensibly asexual biblical passages that they, to reinforce their personal and self-serving agendas, warped and twisted. In the same way they cited passages that supported their pejorative hypotheses on parturition and call into question women’s wisdom and truth-telling, so too they utilized other biblical passages from the Old and New Testaments to portray sex as sinful and destructive to spirituality—mainly, to show that women, presumably lustful, sinful, and spiritually inferior, could cause men’s spiritual decline, and to foreground the celibate ideal as the sure vehicle for salvation and spiritual maturation and growth.

Among the few passages that these religious authorities exploited is the Genesis story of the Fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise in which they blamed Eve for the Fall because she, using her female charms, supposedly seduced Adam and led him away from God. Thus, the sexual union of Adam and Eve was allegedly seen as the major factor for corrupting their prelapsarian state and leading them to sin. Further, they used Genesis 1:28 “be fruitful and multiply” to buttress their assumptions that sex was meant by God only for procreation, and not for pleasure. Furthermore, a few Pauline passages, particularly 1 Corinthians 7, de-contextualized, skewed, and filtered through their biased exegetical perspectives, were exploited by them to support their advocacy of singleness and sexual abstinence. However, many biblical exegetes, especially feminist biblical scholars, objective and unbiased, presented alternative readings to illustrate that the Bible actually affirms sex and does not view it as antithetical to spirituality.

Regarding the Genesis story, many reformed biblical scholars present new insights that challenge and refute medieval exegetical assumptions. They interpret the Bible’s description of the relationship of Adam and Eve as a celebration of sexuality. For instance, Genesis 2:18 suggests God’s disfavor of singleness: “The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Also, Adam’s and Eve’s relation is described in the Old Testament with the use of the word “know”: “And Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain” (Genesis 4:1). John Piper suggests that the word “knew” refers to sexual intercourse and intimacy. Piper maintains that in Matthew 1:24-25, the use of the word “know” in reference to Joseph and Mary’s relation suggests sexual intercourse: “when Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had

given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” “*Knew* [emphasis mine] her not,” Piper suggests, “means he did not have sexual relations with her” (31). This same sexual metaphor, he contends, is used to describe our relationship with God: “sexual language in the Bible for our covenant relationship to God does lead us to think of knowing God on the analogy of sexual intimacy and ecstasy”; that is, “the intimacy and ecstasy of sexual relations points to what knowing God is meant to be” (31). In Hosea 2:14-16, 19-20, Piper explains, God’s relation to Israel is described in sexual language: “I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her” (31). Gardner argues that “in Hebrew, the word *Yada* is often used to describe sexual relations between a man and a woman. It means to know by observation, reflecting, and experiencing” (50). Put this way in the Bible, “sexual intercourse, by God’s description is the way of knowing and experiencing another human being in the most intimate way possible. This “knowing” is what “molds two strangers into one” (50). Furthermore, God’s relation to Israel is referred to in a sexual metaphor in Isaiah 62:4-5:

No longer will they call you deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the Lord will take delight in you, and your land will be married. As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

The use of sexual language in this fashion is also evident in the New Testament: in Matthew 9:15, Christ is portrayed as a bridegroom to His people: “How can the guest of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?” In John 3:30, Christ is described by John the Baptist as the “Bridegroom.” Further, in Matthew 25:1, the Kingdom of Heaven

is compared to waiting for a wedding: “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.” Thus, this positive biblical use of the word *know* metaphorically and the use of sexual language in reference to central issues document the Bible’s blending of sexuality and spirituality, because the relationship with God is a spiritual union referred to in a sexual language, thereby suggesting the harmony of both.

Furthermore, the Old Testament celebrates the sexual act between man and woman in many instances: Genesis 2:25 affirms the sexual union between man and woman—“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become *one flesh* [emphasis mine].” Thus, their sexual union before the Fall—namely, before Satan ruined it—is celebrated in the Bible, and the “one flesh” ideal is a luminous picture of the idyllic love-union between spouses. In fact, the “one flesh” ideal, which Christ Himself affirms, as I discuss in detail below, suggests that a sexual union is in itself a spiritual union and that sexuality in no way hampers or diminishes spirituality; rather, it enriches it. Moreover, the Old Testament does not favor celibacy; on the contrary, it describes it as shameful and disgraceful: “in that day seven women will take hold of one man and say, ‘We will eat our own food and provide our own clothes; only let us be called by your name. Take away our disgrace!’” (Isaiah 4:1). Here, the non-matrimonial state is viewed negatively.

Further, *The Song of Songs* represents an obvious celebration of sex-for-pleasure and its spiritual dimension; the union between the lovers is sexual and spiritual—spiritual because it is characterized by a complete communion characterized by joy, content, and holy purity. Indeed, *The Song of Songs* is one of the Bible’s best examples of the

celebration of sex-for-pleasure in which procreation is not mentioned at all. In *The Song of Songs*, we see a woman who is so sexually aroused and excited that she asks her husband not to “arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (2:7). In verse 1:2, she says to her lover, “kiss me again and again, for your love is sweeter than wine,” wine here symbolizing sexual ecstasy. In verse 1:9, “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.” In verse 2:3-7: “like an apple tree among I am faint with love.” The fact that love-making is portrayed as wholesome, joyful, and rapturous reflects the Bible’s affirmation of sex and its radical diversion from the early modern Catholic discourse which professed that sexuality undercut spirituality, that sex was sinful, that women compromised men’s spirituality, and that intercourse ruined their relation with God.

The New Testament, consistently affirming sex, does not view celibacy as a necessary state for spiritual height. Christ affirms marriage and sexuality. Celibacy is seen as a voluntary state, chosen by those who have the gift of singleness, to advance God’s kingdom. It is never a necessary condition for one’s spiritual growth. In response to a question asked by the Pharisees about whether it is “lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason,” Christ emphasizes that marriage and, by implication, the sexual union between man and woman, is a sacred and God-created bond: “Haven’t you read [...] that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:3-6). Kostenberger argues that Christ’s response “makes clear that Jesus considered marriage to be a sacred bond

between a man and a woman, established by and entered into before God” (62). And when the Pharisees proclaimed that “it is better not to marry” (10), Christ said that celibacy is a gift that not everybody has, and that it is a voluntary choice to advance the Kingdom of God: “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven” (11-12). This does not indicate that Christ renounced marriage, sexuality, and human sexual needs, but that He makes the love of God a priority over human needs; thus, sexuality, while subordinate to one’s dedication to divine mission, does not impede it.

The Apostle Paul also affirms the sexual act between man and woman and does not view sexual abstinence as a precondition for or an enhancement of one’s spiritual state. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, Paul encourages couples to have sex:

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Here Paul encourages couples *not* [emphasis mine] to abstain from sex unless by mutual consent to fulfill duty towards the Lord. This does not imply that having sex involves negligence to duty to the Lord, as has been misinterpreted by religious authorities in the Middle Ages; rather, it clearly states that having sex does not hamper one’s spirituality.



However, these verses in 1 Corinthians 7 have been taken as evidence of Paul's support of celibacy and sexual abstinence. But, upon a closer, objective scrutiny, one realizes that Paul does not, in any sense, condemn sexuality or view it as antithetical to spirituality. For instance, verse one, "Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry," has been interpreted by priests in medieval Europe as evidence of Paul's asexuality. However, such an interpretation is flawed because it has de-contextualized the text. Also, verse 28, "those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this," was errantly interpreted and taken as Paul's advocacy of celibacy. Ostensibly, this text, taken out of proper historical situation, would denote that those who marry will have trouble and distraction from fulfilling their spiritual duty toward God. Also, in verses eight and nine, Paul, as it was typically argued, seems to prefer celibacy to marriage and sexuality: "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Further, verses 32-35 boldly speak to this long-debated issue:

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

At first glance, these verses seem to indicate that a married person will have “divided” “interests”; therefore, performing one’s duty towards God requires celibacy and sexual abstinence. However, such interpretations of the text are based on a flawed exegesis because they do not take into account the historical context and situation in which Paul made these statements.

In fact, Paul’s letter should not be taken as a universal calling; rather, it applies to a particular situation where Paul spoke to a group of ascetic Corinthians who held sexual abstinence to be spiritually elevating and should not be construed as normative. Paul was responding to a particular situation, which can be discerned from his opening statement: “Now concerning the things that you asked, it is better for a man not to marry.” Robert Baumert presents valid insights about this key issue:

If Paul’s statements are taken as general counsels for everyone, this can lead to a serious misunderstanding. If someone is giving pastoral advice to a person which is tailor-made and specific to this person’s situation, one cannot simply shift and apply this advice to other people and circumstances. In the same way we will only correctly understand Paul if we respect the privacy and specificity of his dialogue with these petitioners. It is not everyone who feels him- or herself drawn by the Spirit toward celibacy. Whether or not one can extract from his statements basic principles that can be extended to other circumstances is a matter which must be further examined and justified on its own. (27-8)

Further, Neuer posits that “sexual abstinence within marriage is only spiritually justified if it is for a limited period and agreed upon between both partners. Sex, to [Paul] is a gift of God that must not be abjured” (104). Neuer maintains that “a life-long

renunciation of marriage and sex is not commanded by him, but is a gift of grace (verse 7) given to one, but not to another” (104). Paul “recommends celibacy as the better lifestyle for those who are still single. This is because of eschatological pressures and to enable them to be more available for God (verses 26-40)” (106).<sup>1</sup> Hence, selective reading of such Pauline passages cannot lead to an accurate understanding of his ideas. While reading the previous verses might reveal that marriage destabilizes or weakens spirituality, Paul, in subsequent lines, asserts that spouses have a role to play in enhancing each others’ spirituality: “How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” (1 Corinthians: 7:16). In addition, I Corinthians 7 should not be read in isolation from other Pauline texts that clearly affirm marriage and sexuality and never show them as polar opposites:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—or we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

The use of the sexual metaphor to describe Christ's relation with the Church clearly demonstrates that the sexual union is holy, sacred, blessed, and spiritual, because it pictures the sacred union between believers and their Savior. This passage implies that the sexual union of two bodies in marriage is in itself a spiritual union because it models Christ's union with the church. It also indicates that the body is dignified and does not corrupt the spirit. The union of two bodies in the sexual act does not undermine spirituality as the medieval body/spirit dichotomy professed; thus, the Bible subverts this dichotomy which served patriarchal agendas. While in the Middle Ages the sexual union was viewed as a sinful and corrupting to spirituality, the Bible views it as augmentation to spirituality.

The body, especially in sex, was viewed as corrupting to the soul, but the Bible dignifies the body and does not see a dissociation between body and spirit. This is not unrelated to the general affirmation of the body in the Bible. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 6:19, Paul describes the body of the believer, whether male or female, as the temple of the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." Thus, the body is honored because it is the locus of the divine. And this view, as Neuer rightly observes, "is opposite to the Platonic view, which sees the body as the prison of the soul. Thus, antipathy to the body is not higher spiritually because God, in Jesus, appeared in bodily form: Romans 1:3; 8:3; 9:5" (103-04). Thus, Paul's honor and sanctification of the body subverts the body/spirit dichotomy and the early modern hypothesis that sexuality undercuts spirituality, because, as Paul suggests, one can be spiritual simply by not

making of his/her bodily desires a priority to one's holy duties towards God. That is, by putting one's body in service of "The Kingdom of Heaven," one's body, then, can be his/her vehicle for salvation and grace, as Christ states in the verse above. In fact, the sexual act itself, notwithstanding that it was viewed as sinful at worst and a cause of distraction from spiritual duties at best, can be a form of worshipping God when performed in accordance with the biblical view—namely, not an arena for asserting the masculine ideal and objectifying one's spouse. The sexual act that emulates Christ's union with the church—loving one's spouse as one love's his/her body—is the sexual act that the Bible views as sacred and blessed by God. Needless to say, this view led in time to a deep and abiding love for women and transformed the sex act from the cold and mechanical to the warm and emotional domain.

Paul's injunction for husbands and wives to love each others' bodies reveals his affirmation of physicality, sexual union of two bodies, and the spiritual aspect of this love-union. It is a holy union because it pictures Christ's oneness with the church and the attainment of one holy entity. Husbands are to love their spouses and care for them as Christ loved the church and sacrificed His body for it. Thus, this oneness involves a spiritual aspect because it is a sacrificial act characterized by other-centeredness—namely, it is an arena for emulating the ultimate self-sacrifice of Christ and represents, thus, the ultimate spirituality. Love and sex in this fashion involve putting other's needs ahead of one's own. Thus, marital intimacy is a picture of Christ's intimacy with the Christian believers, which shows the biblical exaltation of sex, because the union and oneness of the two bodies are only achieved through the sexual act. Gardner speaks to this very issue:

Paul describes this holy aspect of sex as a great mystery, a mystery that, because of Christ, has now been revealed. That mystery is that the intimacy represented in the sexual union of a believing husband and wife is a representation—is, in fact, the representation—of the intimacy between our Savior and us [...]. Sex is holy because in the oneness of a human groom with the bride, the oneness of the groom, Jesus Christ, and His bride, the church, is represented. (18)

“Sex,” maintains Gardner, “was meant to exemplify the oneness of Jesus, the Bridegroom, with His bride, the Church”; therefore, “this oneness is spiritual” (32).

In this context, it is important to note that the Bible’s view of sex in this fashion is simultaneously liberating and empowering to women and subversive of the medieval and early modern patriarchal religious discourse which deemed sex as an act intended by God only for procreation. Reading the sex act according to the contemporary religious discourse objectified women because it rendered them a passive vessel—a mere womb to receive, preserve, and incubate male seed, as discussed in chapter two. Further, the biblical view of the sex act radically violated the masculine ideal that made the woman the object of man’s sexual subjectivity, prowess, and dominance. Moreover, this new view of the sex act brought with it new equality, veneration, and dignity for women: women’s bodies are not sinful and not inferior to men’s bodies. Above all, this biblical view of the sex act bolstered women’s desire and courage to express their sexuality more freely, creatively, and uninhibitedly.

Apart from Paul’s stance towards sex, sex is affirmed in the Bible in many instances. In Proverb 5: 15-19, to cite one example, sex is beautifully celebrated:

Drink water from your own cistern,  
running water from your own well.  
Should your springs overflow in the streets,  
your streams of water in the public squares?  
Let them be yours alone,  
never to be shared with strangers.  
May your fountain be blessed,  
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.  
A loving doe, a—graceful deer  
May her breasts satisfy you always,  
May you ever be captivated by her love.

This is obviously metaphoric language that describes the sacredness of the sex act, orgasm, and monogamy. After all, we can rightly conclude that the Bible affirms sexuality and does not view it as threatening to spirituality. In fact, as Patterson states, “the Bible is a book about marriage, and to say that the Bible is a book about marriage is to say that it is also a book about sex and the meaning of sex, for marriage is the only natural condition for the pleasure of sex” (49). In the beginning of the Bible there is a marriage: Genesis 2:23-5, and also at the very end there is marriage in Revelation 19:6-7, 21:2 (49).

Espousing the biblical view of women, the Protestant Reformers exploded the Roman Catholic tenuous premises on sex in general and women’s sexuality in particular. Radically diverging from the Roman Catholic polarization of sexuality and spirituality, they dismissed the idea that sex for pleasure is sinful and that celibacy, the alleged ideal

spiritual state, is a pre-condition for salvation. Instead, the Reformers took up the biblical view that women are not intrinsically evil, not spiritual, eternally sinful, and ineligible for salvation; on the contrary, they viewed women as spiritual as men, capable of receiving the Holy Spirit, and able to receive and use spiritual gifts as men. Hence, they included women in their ministry, allowed them access to public positions that required spiritual gifts, and even encouraged and valued women's interpretations of Holy Writ. Because the Reformers discerned the biblical message and made it their sole guiding light, they were dismissive of the patriarchal and religious discourses on the nature of womankind, so they knew that contemporary notions and stereotypical views against women were unwarranted and stemmed only from personal, self-serving agendas. Crawford contends that "the prevalent belief in women's inferior religiosity compared to men was a social construct" (Women and Religion 154). The Quaker leader, George Fox, preached that the spirit of Christ may "speak in the female as well as the male" (Eales 86).

Not only did the Reformers reject the celibate ideal and the Roman Catholic ungrounded belief in the sinfulness of the sexual act, but they also contravened the culturally-constructed idea that woman was necessary only for procreative purposes—namely, to serve male ends. John Cotton, a Puritan minister in the seventeenth century, wrote: "Women are Creatures without which there is no comfortable Living for man: it is true of them what is wont to be said of Governments, *That bad ones are better than none*: they are a sort of Blasphemers then who despise and decry them, and call them a *necessary Evil*, for they are *a necessary Good*" (qtd. in Morgan 591-92). Cotton also dismisses "Platonic love" and sexual abstinence because, to him, they are "blind zeal" and "the dictates of a blind mind," and not "of that Holy Spirit, which saith *It is not good*



*that man should be alone*” (592). Morgan asserts that “the Puritans were not ascetics [as they were often stigmatized, and] they never wished to prevent the enjoyment of earthly delights” (594). The Puritans were so aware of the demands of the flesh that they “dealt leniently with sexual offenses and took every precaution to prevent such offenses” (603). Sharing Cotton’s view, Luther condemns his culture’s negative view of marriage and women:

The estate of marriage has universally fallen into such awful disrepute. There are many pagan books which treat of nothing but the depravity of womankind and the unhappiness of the estate of marriage, such that some have thought that even if wisdom itself were a woman that one should not marry.... They [such authors] concluded that women is a necessary evil, and that no household can be without such an evil. (qtd. in Karant-Nunn 106)

Further, the Protestant Reformers revolutionarily challenged the Roman Catholic polarization of sexuality and spirituality. Instead, on biblical grounds, they did not see sexuality as an impediment to spirituality or morality; on the contrary, they deemed sexual contentment as enriching to spirituality. Besides, in direct violation of the culturally-engrained flesh/spirit dichotomy, they viewed spirituality as a private state in the person’s conscience that had nothing to do with one’s sexuality; therefore, they celebrated the sexual union between man and woman and did not view it as sinful or corrupting to the spirit. In fact, because they saw a great connection between flesh and spirit, they regarded sex as a delightful and self-contenting act that positively enhanced spirituality of both men and women. They also believed that if people were sexually

satisfied (and not frustrated), they would be positioned to be more spiritual and pure—their sexual needs no longer acting as an impediment.

Reinforcing the biblical view and the Reformers', modern science has dismissed the long-believed divergence of flesh and spirit:

A human person [...] is a unified organism that is of such a nature and function that we can see in it a mirror image, as it were, of the essential nature of God.

This means that we function as person in such a way that our bodies, psyches, and minds are acting together as one thing in everything we do. Our material and spiritual aspects act as one unified agent. (Ellen 6)

Ellen maintains that “psychological and biochemical studies have demonstrated conclusively that the chemistry of our bodies is directly related to the psychological state of our minds and spirit,” so, “changes in our biochemistry [...] directly affect our psychological state of mind,” and “our psychological states of tranquility or stress directly change our biochemistry” (6). These scientific findings reinforce and buttress the Reformers' belief in the reconcilability of bodily needs, including sexuality and spirituality. Since the Reformers embraced the positive biblical view of sex as good and delightful, they advocated and affirmed marriage and sex for pleasure. This radical view of sex not only shook the negative prevailing ideas about the nature of womankind, particularly the perceived sinfulness of their sexuality and its threat upon men's spirituality, but it also empowered women and elevated their status. Thus, the Reformers' dismissal of the Greek body/spirit dichotomy, which had caused and shaped the negative views towards women and sexuality and reinforced patriarchy, resulted in a whole new positive view of women and sexuality.

As the biblical view of sexuality was resurrected by the Reformers, it brought with it new freedoms for women, for a positive view of sexuality occasioned a radically positive treatment of women in the wider context. The Roman Catholic compartmentalization and instrumentalization of sexuality caused women to be cloistered and stifled in the convents, denied sexual self-assertiveness, dehumanized, and objectified—all of which measures reinforced patriarchy. But with the Reformers' favorable view of women and sexuality, women began to enjoy new freedoms, even in the public sphere because they became more accepted and respected. Indeed, the Reformers, in their radical view of sex, shook off the shackles of sexual guilt that overwhelmed not only women, but also men. Dusinger contends that "Puritanism [...] sought to liberate man and woman from the oppression of sexual guilt" (73).

This new view of sexuality, the celebration of the sexual union, and the disruption of the pre-existing belief in the sinfulness of the sexual act are reflected and articulated in many of the Reformers' sermons and writings. For instance, when Luther's correspondent got married, Luther sent him a note expressing his delight that his friend would be able to experience the joy of sex: "On the evening of the day on which, according to my calculations, you will receive this, I shall make love to my Catherine while you make love to yours" (qtd. in Taylor 234-35). In fact, Luther acknowledges that sexual drive is natural in men and women. When he was in his forties, not married yet, and queried why yet not married by a friend, Luther, acknowledging the presence and strength of sexual desires, said, "I feel now, and have felt thus far, I will not marry. It is not that I do not feel my flesh or sex, since I am neither wood nor stone, but my mind is far removed from marriage, since I daily expect death and the punishment due to a

heretic” (qtd. in Taylor 219). In one of his sermons Luther wrote that “nature is so constituted that it feels sexual desires at about the age of 20. To bear and to overcome these until the age of forty is truly a grievous and great burden” (qtd. in Taylor 219). Further, Luther dismissed the Roman Catholic injunction that sexual abstinence and cloistering in the convents, or monasteries, was the better way for spiritual attainment:

It is certain that all convents and monasteries, where supposedly devout people live and where their spiritual estate is to make them devout and blessed, are worse than common brothels, taverns, or dens of thieves [...]. It is obvious that such human commandments, such as forbidding marriage of priests, are nothing but dictates of mere humans and the devil. (qtd. in Taylor 220)

In many of his inflammatorily counter-cultural writings, Shakespeare, like these Reformers, celebrates sexuality, especially women’s sexuality. His plays abound with sexual language, themes, innuendoes, puns, and tropes that reflect his celebration of this human aspect. Though such language is used by both males and females, astoundingly, his most sexually-bold characters are arguably females: they are the ones who quite often express their sexuality and initiate sexual advances towards their lovers, especially in the comedies. Indeed, Shakespeare, as Barthelemy rightly observes, “did not keep his female characters from talking frankly and sometimes bawdily about sex” (Introduction 5). In *Much Ado about Nothing*, for instance, Beatrice is aggressive in expressing her passions while Benedick remains defensive and self-restrained till late in the play. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia makes the initial love advances with Cesario and later with Sebastian, and also Viola does not hesitate to express her compassion to her lover. Rosalind of *As You Like It* expresses her sexuality, woos her lover, and, in frowning at being idolized from

afar by her lover, dismisses the platonic love ideal, which implies that she prefers sexual contact. In the Romances, Hermione of *The Winter's Tale* and Helena of *All's Well that Ends Well* are among Shakespeare's other sexual female characters. In the tragedies, the pinnacle of his professional maturity, Shakespeare penned his most intensely and aggressively sexual women: Cleopatra, Desdemona, and Juliet. For instance, Juliet's intense and bold expression of her sexual desires and yearnings for physical, not platonic, union with her lover, scintillatingly and patently demonstrate Shakespeare's radicalness and blatant iconoclasm in depicting female sexuality:

Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,  
That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo  
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.  
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites  
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,  
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,  
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,  
And learn me how to lose a winning match,  
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods:  
Hood my unmann'd blood, bating in my cheeks,  
With thy black mantle; till strange love, grown bold,  
Think true love acted simple modesty. (*Romeo and Juliet*, III.ii.5-16)

Shakespeare, in direct violation of his culture's deep-seated belief system, did not shrink from making his most sexually-aggressive characters females. Despite his culture's negative pre-conceptions about female sexuality—that females are monstrous,

dangerous, evil, and sinful—he portrays female sexuality affirmatively. As previously discussed, owing to the prevalent derogatory ideas about women’s sexuality, women were viewed as sinful, and, hence, needed to confine themselves to the convents or at least the prayer closet to atone for their sins; thus, they could not be sexual and spiritual at the same time. Although the belief in the mutual exclusivity of sexuality and spirituality was applied to men and women, it was women who bore the brunt of this denigrating ideology, for they were deemed the source of sin and damnation—being the daughters of Eve. Thus, women, to contemporary Catholic theologians, were intrinsically and inherently sinful, not created in the image of God, and ineligible to receive the Holy Spirit. They embodied the dissociation of sexuality and spirituality: namely, woman, and especially woman, could not, by any means, be sexual and spiritual at the same time. Further, a sexual union between man and woman, even in marriage, was sinful and, hence, unexpected to yield any spiritual fruits for the couple, especially for the male, for men were thought to be vulnerable to spiritual corruption by women’s sexuality.

However, in *Othello*, Shakespeare discounts these culturally and ideologically-constructed ideas in favor of the biblical view which, as discussed above, sees no polarization between sexuality and spirituality and views the sexual union between man and woman as a source of joy, delight, contentment, and spiritual growth. I argue that Shakespeare, echoing and reflecting the biblical view, demonstrates that sexuality and spirituality are not antithetical; nay, they are complementary and harmonious. Shockingly, Shakespeare nominates a woman, Desdemona, to emblemize the wedding of sexuality and spirituality. Unlike Othello who, once steered by the misogynist marriage-hater and asceticism-advocating Iago, evinces aversion to body and sexuality

and espouses the body/spirit dichotomy, Desdemona embodies the fusion and harmony of sexuality and spirituality. Shakespeare's depicts her as an intensely sexual woman and at the same time the paragon of intense spirituality, as manifest in her religious language and her serving as the messianic exemplar of agapic love, grace, other-centeredness, and forgiveness. She, in short, is the divine agent of salvation and reconciliation, who reflects his rejection of the polarization of sexuality and spirituality. Notwithstanding that Desdemona is depicted as a sexual woman, she models for Othello, who becomes a proponent of body/spirit-dichotomy, messianic and myriad spiritual attributes, suggesting that sexuality does not compromise spirituality; rather, it undergirds and promotes it.

Shakespeare depicts Desdemona as an intensely sexual woman through her bold expression of her robust physicality and the sexual language and innuendoes used in reference to her by other characters in the play. In direct and bold violation of her culture's conventions, Desdemona marries the man she chooses. She disregards her father's and tribe's expectations and courageously voices her desires. Desdemona's speech before the Venetian senate, in which she insists on accompanying Othello in his mission in Cyprus, demonstrates her frank sexual self-assertiveness:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued  
Even to the very quality of my lord.  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
And to his honors and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,  
And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (I.iii.245-56)

Contrary to how she is referred to by her father as a “maid so tender, fair, and happy, / so opposite to marriage that she shunn’d / The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation”—suggesting Brabantio’s favor of celibacy or his xenophobic ethnocentrism—Desdemona in this speech adamantly expresses her sexual desire through her insistence on “lov[ing] the Moor to live with him,” which suggests her aversion to the Platonic love ideal. Refusing to remain single in Venice, Desdemona wants to enjoy full marital intercourse with her husband. Staying in Venice alone is not her idea of a honeymoon, for she desired to love the Moor physically, not just nominally—and anatomically, not platonically. Her “downright violence and storm of fortunes / that may trumpet the world” suggest her bold and aggressive sexuality. She possesses enough courage to express her physical attraction to the Moor’s “valiant parts.” Desdemona wants to be close to Othello to enjoy her sexual “rites,” which, if her husband “go[es] to the war” and she “be left behind,” “are bereft” her. Although many critics read “rites” as “rites of war,” I concur with Barthelemy who, noting a double signification, reads it as “rites of [sexual] love” (Ethiop 103). Further, Desdemona’s declaration that in the absence of Othello “I a heavy interim shall support” suggests her sexual yearnings; as Barthelemy rightly observes, “Shakespeare as well as other Renaissance playwrights, frequently uses the figure of women bearing weight as a metaphor for coitus” (103).



Further, in many instances in the play, sexual language, directly stated or implied, is used in conjunction with and in reference to Desdemona. Cassio, in reference to Desdemona, speaks in a language pregnant with sexual metaphors and phallic imagery:

She that I spake of, our great captain's captain,  
Left in the conduct of the bold Iago,  
Whose footing here anticipates our thoughts  
A se'nnight's speed. Great Jove, Othello guard,  
And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,  
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,  
Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms,  
Give renew'd fire to our extincted spirits,  
And bring all Cyprus comfort. (II.i.75-83)

Othello will “swell his sail with thine own powerful breath” and “bless this bay with his tall ship” and “Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms.” The phallic imagery in “swell” and “tall ship,” in conjunction with “Desdemona's arms” implies Desdemona's receptiveness to sexual intercourse. In addition, “bay” in Freudian psychoanalysis is a very definite reference to the female genitalia. Further, Desdemona's responses to [Othello's] tales as voracious—she “devours” his discourse with “greedy ear”—speaks to her sexual playfulness, which is implied in the conflation of oral with aural (Newman 133). In addition, Iago describes Desdemona to Cassio as “full of game” in bed (II.iii.19) and “sport for Jove” (17). Of notice here is that “sport[ing]” itself has sexual innuendo, echoing Genesis 26:8 when Isaac was “sporting with his wife Rebecca.” Iago and Cassio, moreover, concur that Desdemona is sexually “provocati[ve]” (II.iii.22) to men in her

body parts and even her speech: Iago exclaims “What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to / provocation” (21-22), and Cassio agrees that Desdemona has a sexually “inviting eye” (23). Cassio implies that even her voice is sexy: “when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?” (24). Indeed, Desdemona remains sexual even to the late moments of her life, as suggested in her request that her “wedding sheets” be put on her: “Lay on my bed my wedding sheets” (IV.ii.107), she demands from Emilia. The “wedding sheets” and the “bed” also suggest intimate sexuality, and her request that she be wrapped with them at her “wedding” “bed” suggests her continence, faithfulness to marriage, and, above all, her persistent expression of sexuality. Even moments before she is smothered, she calls Othello to their marriage bed: “will you come to bed, my lord?” (V.ii.25).

Destabilizing and challenging his culture’s ideologically-constructed belief system, Shakespeare’s Desdemona, in spite of her robust sexuality, embodies intense spirituality. Desdemona’s spirituality is evinced in her own biblically-adapted phraseology and a similarly-derived language which others use to describe her or to communicate with her—all indicating her intense spirituality, religiosity, holiness, and godliness. This serves to imbue her with divine, even messianic, powers. Moreover, Shakespeare depicts her as the exemplar of Christ-like attributes, including agape love, forgiveness, and other-centeredness—all of which constitute the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Further, she serves as a divine agent of reconciliation and peacemaking.

The religious language which Desdemona uses to communicate throughout the play evinces good spirituality and faith in God and foregrounds her as a saintly figure. Her appeal to the “Lord, [to] have mercy on [her]” (V.ii.56) suggests that she has a good relation with God and a solid faith that God will help her. This is reinforced by her

request that Othello “commend [her] to [her] kind Lord” (126), which echoes Christ’s words in Luke 23:46: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” Desdemona’s readiness to meet God is an indication of her spiritual purity and certitude of God’s favor of her, which is alluded to early in the play when Shakespeare’s aligns her with the Virgin, favored by God to be the mother of Christ, as discussed below. The fact that she is not afraid to be “commend[ed]” to her “kind Lord” demonstrates the height of her spirituality. She has faith that she is not guilty: “A guiltless death I die” (123), which echoes 1 Peter 1:19: “He [Christ] committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.” Desdemona swears “by heaven” and, being “a Christian,” believes that she “shall be saved.” Her language here is reminiscent of biblical verses like those in 1 John 5:13-15: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him.” Although Othello believes that she will go to Hell, she is certain that “heaven [will] forgive us” (86). When queried by Iago about Othello’s strange “abode” (IV.iii.224), Desdemona is sure that “heaven doth know” and has faith in the “general warranty of heaven,” a further evidence of her trust in God’s providence, justice, omniscience, and omnipotence. When Othello, intending to murder her, asks her whether she “have [...] prayed tonight” (V.ii.24), she says, “Aye, my lord” (25). When Othello, believing that Desdemona is sinful and at “the gate of hell” (IV.ii.91), requests that she “confess thee freely of thy sins” (V.ii.54), he tells her that she is “Unreconciled [...] to heaven and grace” (27), Desdemona astoundedly wondering, in response, “what may [he] mean by that” (29). As

a true, pure, pious, and spiritual person, Desdemona's last request from Othello before she dies is "one prayer" (V.ii.85). All of this language is super-saturated with biblical and Christian innuendo.

Further, the language used by other characters in reference to Desdemona suggests her spirituality, purity, goodness, and sainthood. Brabantio describes her before the Venetian Senate as having a "spirit so still and quiet" (I.iii.96) and a "perfection" (102) that is not expected to "err" (102). He also refers to her as a "gentle mistress" (178) and associates her with "grace" (190) and "jewel[s]" (195). Noteworthy here is that "gentle[ness]" and "grace" are among the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Roderigo states that she is "full of most blessed / Condition" (II.i.248-49). Cassio, associating Desdemona with grace—"the grace of heaven, / Before, behind thee, and on every hand, / Enwheel thee round!" (II.i.85-7)—calls her the "virtuous Desdemona" (II.iii.311). She is holy because she is surrounded by grace from heaven and able to extend it to others.

The most revealing speeches that foreground Desdemona's holiness are the ones that associate her with Christ and the Virgin Mary: when Desdemona arrives in Cyprus, Cassio enjoins "men of Cyprus" (II.i.83) to "let [Desdemona] have your knees" (83), which echoes Paul's injunction to kneel in celebration of Christ whose "name is above every name": "At the name of Jesus should every knee bow" (Philippians 2: 9, 10). Of course, this injunction from Paul is for Christian believers to worship Christ and to emulate His humanity: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (5), who "humbled Himself" (8) and took "the very nature of a servant" (7). As I discuss in detail below, Desdemona's serving as a model of these messianic attributes demonstrates her spiritual height, intense religiosity, and secure relation with God. Further, in this same

speech, Cassio's greeting of Desdemona, "Hail to thee, lady" (84), is reminiscent of Angel Gabriel's salutation of the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:28. Depicting Desdemona in this fashion shows how Shakespeare exalts her spiritually by subtly comparing her to the most spiritual woman on earth—the one woman whom God uplifted by choosing her as the mother of Christ.

Even Othello, before his faith in Desdemona is shaken and his vision corrupted, metaphorically describes her as a holy shrine that people visit to draw blessings: "[I] draw from her a prayer of earnest heart / That I would all my pilgrimage dilate" (I.iii.153-54). Prior to heeding Iago's insinuations, Othello views Desdemona as his "soul's joy" (II.i.182), declares that "Perdition catch[es] [his] soul," and opines that "Chaos will come again" in his life when he "love[s] thee not" (III.iii.98, 100, 99). This speech not only suggests that Desdemona is intensely spiritual but also that she is a source of spiritual contentment and inspiration to others, particularly her husband. In an alternative reading, Othello's words may imply that Desdemona is an agent of salvation, a saint, or a holy shrine, whom, if Othello were to stop loving, "Perdition [would] catch his soul," suggesting torture in hell.

This of course is exactly what happens to him at the close of the play when he declines spiritually once hatred engulfs his heart. Further, remorseful at killing Desdemona, Othello compares her to "another world / of entire and perfect chrysolite" (V.ii.149-50) and a "pearl" "richer than all his tribe" which he "threw [...] away" (356-57). Of notice here is that the holiness of "chrysolite" lies not only in being the seventh of the twelve stones used in building the holy Jerusalem, as mentioned in Revelation 21:20, but also in the fact that 7 itself is sacred since it is always associated with God, especially

in the Book of Revelation. Shakespeare, to exalt Desdemona's spirituality, portrays her, analogously, as a sacred pillar in the foundation of the Christian religion, an assumption that is reinforced by the myriad references to her messianic attributes. Othello refers to himself as the "base Indian" (343), "Judean" in another version of the play, who "threw" a "pearl" away. Echoing Matthew 13:46, the pearl represents Heaven; in throwing the jewel away, he threw away his heaven—Desdemona. Othello's throwing this "pearl" suggests his falling from grace into damnation and hell, for he denounces his "soul's joy" (II.i.178)—his paradise. Moreover, her inclusion of Othello in her appeal to "heaven [to] forgive us" (IV.ii.87) reinforces the notion that Desdemona is an agent of forgiveness and salvation just as Christ was; her words here echo Christ's in Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," and Luke 11:4: "Father, [...] Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." Even though Othello humiliates her, she implores "Heaven [to] keep the monster from [his] mind" (III.iv.156) and to "pardon him" (IV.ii.142).

It is not surprising that even Iago, the quintessence of evil and villainy who knows deep down that Desdemona is good and innocent, cannot help but refer to her in this favorable fashion, even in front of others who view her similarly: after referring to her "parts and graces" (II.iii.301), Iago, assuring Cassio that Desdemona is kind-hearted, helpful, and willing to plead for his cause with Othello, admits that "She is of / so free, so kind, so / apt, so blessed a disposition, that she holds it a vice in her / goodness not to do more than she is requested" (II.iii.310-12). In addition, Emilia's reference to Desdemona as "heavenly true" (V.ii.136) echoes the reference to Christ in 1 John 5:20: "we are in him that is true," and Revelation 3:7: "He that is holy and true." Just as Shakespeare

portrays Cordelia in *King Lear* as the exemplar of truth, so too he associates Desdemona with truthfulness and honesty—depictions of women that iconoclastically challenged contemporary patriarchal hegemony. That is, Shakespeare’s recurrent equating of women to Christ demonstrates how progressive and radical his view of women was, especially when we bear in mind that women at the time were often associated with deceit, evil, divination, and dishonesty—that is, the most counter-spiritual malice one can articulate.

Further, the meteorological imagery—I refer to the sudden and horrible changes in weather phenomena and solar elements—associated with Desdemona’s death are reminiscent of those at the death of Christ: Othello’s reference to the “ huge eclipse / Of sun and moon” (V.ii.100-01) echoes Luke 23:44-5: “ and there was a darkness over all the land, until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened.” Furthermore, his reference to “the affrighted globe” which “yawn[s] at alteration” (V.ii.101-02) echoes the description of the phenomena that occurred at Christ’s death in Matthew 27:51-2: “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and rocks split. The tombs broke open and bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.” In an alternative reading, the references to these sudden natural phenomena echo the description of those of the Judgment day: “The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great terrible day of the Lord comes” (Acts 2:20). Indeed, depicting Desdemona’s death as reminiscent of cataclysmic biblical incidents suggests Shakespeare’s exaltation and glorification of her.

Furthermore, Shakespeare’s investing Desdemona with divine powers echoes Christ’s control of storms and weather conditions. In act two scene one, Cassio says that her divine powers enable her to quell the storms and let others arrive safely in Cyprus:

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

This reference to Desdemona as “divine” and having supernatural powers to subdue storms and “howling winds” emphatically recalls Christ’s ability to suppress storms and save His disciples from the menacing storms: when Christ woke from sleep while at sea with the disciples, “He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging water; the storm subsided, and all was calm,” and the disciples, “In fear and amazement [...] asked one another, ‘Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him’” (Luke 8:24-5).

Even more than these meteorological parallels, Desdemona’s spirituality is demonstrated in her modeling myriad messianic attributes, including agape love, other-centeredness, and forgiveness and in her serving as an agent of reconciliation, peace, and salvation.

Of the messianic attributes that Desdemona emblemizes, her agapic, sacrificial, and forgiving love, characterized by tolerance of humiliation and endurance of pain, are perhaps the most important. In response to Othello’s frantic change of mood, Desdemona, out of love, innocence, gentleness, and kindness, tries to create a good excuse:

Men’s natures wrangle with inferior things,  
Though great ones are their object. ’Tis even so;



For let our finger ache, and it indues

Our other healthful members even to that sense

Of pain. Nay, we must think men are not gods. (III.iv.139-43)

She is so loving that she “do[es] not think” “there be any women [who] do abuse their / husbands” (IV.iii.82,59-60). In response to Emilia’s insistence on retaliating against abusive husbands, Desdemona, the messianic self-sacrificial figure, chooses to return good for evil: “Heaven me such uses send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend” (108-09)—which embodies Christian patience and love as articulated in Romans 12:17: “Don’t pay back a bad turn by a bad turn, to anyone.” Desdemona’s faith “That death’s unnatural that kills for loving” (V.ii.42) echoes Matthew 5:44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” In reaction to Othello’s “unkindness,” Desdemona holds that though Othello’s “unkindness may defeat my life,” it will “never taint my love” (IV.ii.159-60). Desdemona assures Emilia that her “love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns [...] have grace and favor” (IV.iii.18-20). In her “willow” song, she wants “nobody [to] blame him,” because “his scorn [she] approve[s]” (IV.iii.49). Desdemona’s taking the blame of her death on herself as she is dying is the ultimate expression of sacrificial love: when queried by Emilia about “who hath done this deed” (V.ii.124), Desdemona says, “Nobody; I myself” (125), and dies, as Christ, a “guiltless death” (123). Indeed, her taking the blame for Othello’s crime on herself represents the ultimate sacrificial, selfless act—Christ’s death on the cross. In fact, her messianic selflessness is seen earlier in the play in her promise to Othello not to deny him anything he requests from her: “what you would ask me, that I should deny” (III.i.69), a promise which echoes Christ’s in Matthew 7:7, “Ask, and it shall be given

you; seek, and you shall find,” and John 16:24, “Ask, and you shall receive, that your joy may be full.” Of course, Desdemona fulfills her promise through her final self-sacrifice.

In addition, Desdemona’s spirituality is demonstrated in her concern for others and her voluntary willingness to do charitable deeds out of the “general warranty of heaven” (V.ii.68). Desdemona declares that “if [she] vows a friendship, [she]’ll perform it” (III.i.21), which echoes Abraham’s belief about God: “what he had promised, he was able also to perform” (Romans 4:21). Comforting Cassio, Desdemona tells him to “be merry” (III.iii.27), “For thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away” (28-9). Desdemona is so sensitive to others’ needs and miseries that she feels they are her own: she tells Othello that Cassio “hath left part of his grief with me / To suffer with him” (III.iii.53-4). Her personal credo is that if “our finger ache, [...] it indues / Our other healthful members even to that sense / Of pain” (145-47). She even appeals to “every spirit sanctified” to “help” (III.iv.121) her meet others’ needs and relieve their sorrows. Desdemona even puts others’ needs before her own: she tells Cassio that “What [she] can do [she] will, and more [she] will / Than for myself I dare” (125-26). It is only through Desdemona’s “virtuous means” (107) that Cassio will “Exist, and be a member of [Othello’s] love” (108). Moreover, Desdemona’s reference to her “advocation” (III.iv.119) puts her in the context of Christ’s being mankind’s “advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1).

Desdemona’s spirituality shines forth in the way she serves as God’s ambassador of peacemaking and reconciliation, as demonstrated in her endearing appeal to Othello: “Good my lord, / If I have any grace or power to move you, / [Cassio’s] present

reconciliation take” (III.iii.45-7). Her words echo the Apostle Paul’s in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20:

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

This messianic role is further reinforced by her assurance to Lodovico that she “would do much / T’ atone them” (IV.i.244-45)—that is, to reconcile Othello to Cassio, a role that resembles Christ’s role as the One Who reconciled mankind to God: “when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom we have now received reconciliation” (Romans 5:10-11). However, as he is slowly blinded and views women as sinful, lascivious, and monstrous, Othello professes that Desdemona is “Unreconciled [...] to heaven and grace” (V.ii.28).

In having a woman serve as the embodiment of these myriad messianic attributes, Shakespeare, in direct challenge to the deep-seated discursive cultural constructs about women, portrays Desdemona as the ideal model for true spirituality—spirituality that is not diminished by sexuality—and demonstrates that sexual union with woman does not defile man’s spirituality. Desdemona does not lead Othello away from God; rather, she leads him closer by modeling for him these messianic attributes and absolving him from his crime—an act whose true meaning he finally recognizes when he confesses his sins:

“Twas I that killed her” (V.ii.128). He comes to realize that he “loved not wisely, but too well” (340), feels remorse that he, “Like the base Indian[,] threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe” (343-44), and commits suicide—all of which suggest his recognition and emulation of true self-sacrifice. Shakespeare hereby poignantly, yet subtly, critiques the hegemonic religious discourse which promulgated the notion that women’s sexuality is sinful and that sexual contact with them could ruin men’s spirituality. By depicting Desdemona as the embodiment of the union of spirituality and sexuality, Shakespeare not only demonstrates his anti-patriarchal agenda, but also disrupts the Roman Catholic insistence on the divergence and polarity of sexuality and spirituality and destabilizes the body/spirit dichotomy which was exploited to disparage and humiliate women and edify and exalt men.

The body/spirit dichotomy is not unrelated to the Roman Catholic discourse on the alleged danger of women’s sexuality: sex represented the body that defiled the spirit. Since they were equated and associated with body and matter, and because they were perceived to be monstrously sexual, women, as noted earlier, were viewed as threatening to men’s spirituality. Roman Catholic religious leaders, as a result, prescribed the celibate ideal as the sure gateway to spirituality and salvation. However, Shakespeare, informed and inspired by the Bible’s respect of the female body, affirmation of sexuality, and rejection of the unwarranted divergence of sexuality and spirituality, undercuts the body/spirit dichotomy and challenges the assumption that sexual-restraint is the gateway to spirituality. This 1601 masterpiece addresses this matter quite directly.

Othello is so conflicted a person about marriage and sexuality that many commentators have argued that he never consummated his marriage. His speech before the Venetian Senate is at the heart of this debate:

Let her have your voices.  
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—and proper satisfaction;  
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.  
And heaven defend your good souls, that you think  
I will your serious and great business scant  
For she is with me. No, when light-wing'd toys  
Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dullness  
My speculative and officed instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my estimation! (I.iii.257-71)

In this speech, Othello does not wish to “please the palate of [his] appetite / Nor to comply with heat [...] and proper satisfaction,” because his “young affects” are “defunct.” Traub argues that Othello has so much anxiety about sexual intercourse and orgasm that he “do[es] confess the vice of [his] blood” (I.iii.125), implying to the Venetian Senate that he is impotent (36). Further, Rackin argues that in the early modern

culture, passion and expression of sexuality “was dangerous to men because it made them effeminate” (46). She maintains that “despising lust as a mark of weakness and degradation, Renaissance thought it feminine, attributed more of it to women, and regarded excessive lust in men as a mark of effeminacy” (47). Coppelia Khan argues that “the sexually active woman [was viewed as] a castrating woman” (qtd. in Rackin 59). Confirming Khan’s theory, Edward Snow posits that Othello’s fear of castration is demonstrated in his anxiety and fear of “thralldom to the demands of an insatiable sexual appetite in women” (qtd. in Traub 35).

To interpret Othello’s speech above according to Rackin’s theory is not unwarranted: Othello is on a mission that is often associated with masculinity, so he views sexual union as effeminizing or manhood-diminishing: “when light-wing’d toys / Of feather’d Cupid seel with wanton dullness / My speculative and officed instruments, / That my disports corrupt and taint my business, / Let housewives make a skillet of my helm.” Othello’s anxiety about turning into an effeminate is suggested in his gendering “helm” and “skillet”: the former is masculine and the latter feminine. The “helm” suggests battles and wars, a typical masculine sphere; the “skillet,” however, suggests housewifery or a culinary appliance, allegedly a typical feminine sphere. To Othello, turning into an effeminate is conditioned by not fulfilling his masculine duty properly, which, by implication, is likely, to him, if he does not shun his sexual “appetite[s].” Further, Iago professes that sexual “passion [to Othello is] most unsuiting such a man” (IV.i.78)—that is, coitus compromises Othello’s manhood. Conflicted about his marital status and performance in professional duties, Othello discloses to Iago this anxiety: “But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into

circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth" (I.ii.26-9). Othello is anxious that his "love" for the "gentle Desdemona" compromises his "unhoused free condition," because union with a woman "put[s] it into circumscription and confine." Othello has anxiety that marital duties confine his freedom and threaten his profession—his main arena for asserting his manhood and promoting his military standing. His gesture to Desdemona that he has "but an hour / Of love, of worldly matters and direction, / To spend with thee. We must obey the time" (I.iii.295-97) demonstrates this dividedness. Othello's view of the marital union as a disempowering confinement totally contradicts the "one-flesh" biblical ideal. Othello is conflicted about his identity as a warrior and his identity as a husband, whereas the "one-flesh" ideal involves the merging of two souls and bodies, thereby blending two identities—the foundation and solid basis of the marital union in the biblical model.

While the argument that Othello's anxiety about his marital union stems from his fear of effeminacy or his anxiety about professional duties is plausible, I find it more legitimate to argue that his anxiety springs from his blind dedication to the prevalent contemporary Roman Catholic discourse on sexuality, because Othello's gender anxiety or fear of effeminacy is not as persistent and consistent as his anxiety that is informed by the pre-conceived polarity of sexuality and spirituality and body/spirit dichotomy. I base my conclusion on the fact that his speeches that evince gender anxiety or fear of effeminacy are very few and weak compared to those that reflect an anxiety that is informed by the body/spirit dichotomy and the Roman Catholic view of sexuality and spirituality as polar opposites.

Othello is conflicted about the relation of spirituality to sexuality as he is slowly programmed by Iago's Roman Catholic discourse that sexuality undermines spirituality. Othello begins to fear sexuality's threat to his spirituality in the third act when he starts to "curse" "marriage":

O curse of marriage,  
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,  
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,  
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon,  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love (III.iii.265-69)

As Othello begins to internalize and act upon Iago's misogynist discourse on women, he starts to view sexuality as a threat to spirituality. Under the influence of Iago, Othello begins to anxiously view Desdemona's body and sexuality as physically grotesque, repellent, and spiritually defiling. Before Iago's poison finds its way into Othello's ears, Othello's and Desdemona's union is happy, content, and characterized by sexual delight and spiritual growth.

Apparently the spokesperson of the Roman Catholic discourse on women's sexuality and its alleged threat to men's spirituality, Iago views sexuality as animalistic: he equates sexual passion with a "guinea-hen" and "chang[ing his] / humanity with a baboon" (I.iii.313-14). Educating Roderigo on the necessity of restraining one's sexual desires, Iago professes that "Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners" (317-18). He recommends the use of "reason" (323) to "peise" (323) our "sensuality" (323); otherwise "the blood and baseness / of our nature would conduct us to most / preposterous conclusions" (324-26)—that is, sexual unrestraint leads to spiritually



disastrous consequences. Since women were viewed as sexually insatiable, sinful, and monstrous, they were thought to be men's seducers and guides to hell and damnation. Therefore, Iago, who speaks "common sense" and repeats "the always already known" culturally (Stallybrass 139), proclaims that Othello would "renounce his baptism" because "[h]is soul in enfettered to [Desdemona's] love":

To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,  
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,  
His soul is so enfettered to her love,  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetite shall play the god  
With his weak function. (II.iii.333-38)

Iago here postulates that Othello's sexual "love" to Desdemona will remove him from the realm of Christian grace, cause him to lose "all seals and symbols of redeemed sin," and, eventually, lead him to hell and damnation, for, to Iago, Desdemona, with "her [sexual] appetite[,] shall play the god" who will "weak[en Othello's spiritual] function."

In fact, Iago associates Othello's and Desdemona's sexual union with hell: "It is engender'd. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light (I.iii.403-04). Moreover, he views women as seductive beings who use their female charms to exploit men: when Desdemona asks him "what wouldst thou write of me, if thou should'st / Praise me?" (II.i.126-27), Iago, generalizing on women, says, "If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit, / The one's for use, the other useth it" (139-40).

Similarly, Othello, whose "clear spirit" is "puddled" (III.iv.139) by Iago's allusions to sex as monstrous and grotesque, begins to speak about sex in a language that

suggests physical filth and uncleanness: he calls Desdemona a “cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in” (IV.ii.61-2). Influenced by Iago’s allusions, Othello associates Desdemona’s sexuality with “goats and monkeys” (IV.i.265) and compares her to “summer flies [which] are in the shambles, / That quicken even with blowing” (IV.ii.65-66) and to “weed, / Who art so lovely fair and smell’st so sweet / That the sense aches at thee” (66-68). Repeating Iago, Othello views sexuality as monstrous: “O monstrous, monstrous,” he cries (III.iii.427). Moreover, espousing Iago’s pejorative view of women’s sexuality as a potential danger to spirituality, Othello makes a “sacred vow” (III.iii.458) to exterminate Desdemona’s body—a vow whose eventual consequence is the disintegration of Othello’s and Desdemona’s happy union.

Othello associates Desdemona’s sexuality with spiritual poverty, evidenced in words like devil, hell, damnation...etc. After striking Desdemona, he shouts “Oh, devil, devil!” (IV.i.236). Othello’s reference to Desdemona as a “liar gone to burning hell” (V.ii.143) and his statement that “Heaven truly knows that [Desdemona] art false as hell” (IV.ii.41) echo Christ’s reference to Satan in John 8:44: “He [Satan has] no truth in him. [...] he is a liar and the father of lies.” Therefore, Othello plans a “swift means of death / For the fair devil” (III.iii.484-85). Further, he associates her with “Death and damnation” (III.iii.404): “Damn her, lewd minx! Oh, damn her, damn her!” (282). Othello’s combining of “death” and “damnation” with “lewd[ness]” plausibly suggests that, to him, women’s sexuality is the cause of spiritual “death” to men. Believing that she is a potential source of damnation and spiritual ruin, Othello feels that “God [...] tr[ies him] with affliction” and “rained / All kinds of sores and shames on [his] bare head, / Steeped [him] in [spiritual] poverty to the very lips, / Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes

[in salvation]" (IV.ii.51-4). The remainder of Othello's speech reinforces this assumption:

there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
Where either I must live or bear no life;  
The fountain from which my current runs,  
Or else dries up; to be discarded thence!  
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads  
To knot and gender in! (IV.ii.56-61)

In this speech, Othello associates his sexual desire for Desdemona with not only physical impotency but also spiritual "dry[ness]." "The fountain from which my current runs" echoes the reference to the "fountains of living water" in Revelation 7:17: Christian believers will win salvation and be eventually led to these "fountains." Othello's perception that his "fountain" is dry suggests fear of spiritual decline and subsequent exclusion from heaven. In an alternative reading, Desdemona, the place "where [he] garnered up his heart" spiritually, is, metaphorically, a "drie[d] up" "fountain" which is a rich soil for "foul toads"—spiritual contamination, so to speak. Further, Othello views Desdemona's body and sexual contact with it as threatening to his spiritual stability: "I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind" (IV.i.204-05). Desdemona's body and sexuality is, to Othello, not only a potential source of physical corruption, but also spiritual and mental confusion and instability.

Articulating and affirming the early modern ideological and religious discourses about women, Othello associates female sexual desire with monstrosity, spiritual decline,

and sinfulness; therefore, he prescribes to Desdemona several practices to atone for her presumed sinfulness:

Hot, hot, and moist. This hand of yours requires  
A sequester from liberty, fasting, and prayer,  
Much castigation, exercise devout;  
For there's a young and sweating devil here  
That commonly rebels. (III.iv.39-43)

Othello's reference to the "hot[ness]" of Desdemona's "hand" is synecdochically a reference to her sexually "hot" body. Othello, indoctrinated by the Roman Catholic ideology about the sinfulness of women and the divergence of sexuality and spirituality, especially in women, prescribes to Desdemona how to "exercise devout": "sequester from [sexual] liberty," "Much castigation [of her body]," and "fasting and prayer."

According to the Roman Catholic ideal of celibacy, as discussed above, a person cannot be sexual and spiritual at the same time, so here Othello, who seems to have absorbed and internalized this ideology, polarizes sexuality and spirituality. Accordingly, then, Desdemona, in order for her to rise spiritually, needs "a sequester from liberty" and "much castigation." Then, and only then, will she be able to "fast," "pray," and be spiritually "devout." Further, in an alternative reading of the above speech, Othello recommends for Desdemona "prayer" and "fasting" as the means by which her sexuality might be repressed. Furthermore, convinced of the sinfulness of the woman's body and informed by the body/spirit dichotomy, Othello believes that Desdemona's "sweating [body] / [...] commonly rebels" against the spirit and defiles it. The word "commonly" suggests that what he proclaims is a "commonly-[held]" cultural idea. Moreover,

confident that women are lascivious and, hence, spiritually fallen, Othello proclaims that, because Desdemona is a “simple bawd” (IV.ii.21), her “kneel[ing] and pray[ing]” are false (25). Therefore, Othello determines to exterminate Desdemona’s body because he perceives it as a threat to his and her spiritual purity.

Inculcated by medieval Catholic view of sexuality as antithetical to spirituality and the body as inferior to spirit, Othello intends to separate Desdemona’s body from her spirit. Othello condemns Desdemona’s body because he associates it with sexuality—allegedly, a chief and primary threat to spirituality; therefore, expunging it is the sure gateway to heaven and spiritual growth. In fact, Othello believes in the inferiority of the body and assumes that “heaven” does too: he tells Desdemona, “I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. / No, heaven forfend, I would not kill thy soul! (V.ii.33-4). The fact that he will not “kill thy [...] spirit” implies that he will not spare her body. Believing that Desdemona is a “perjured women” (V.ii.63) who “stone[s his] heart” (63), Othello, to be purer spiritually, makes a “sacred vow” (III.iii.458) to commit a “murder, which [he] thought a sacrifice” (V.ii.65). In other words, he should “sacrifice” her body in order to rise spiritually, for he believes she “stone[s his] heart”; that is, he views her sexual body as a threat to his spirituality, for she transformed his heart, the locus of spiritual devoutness, into stone. He believes he “did proceed upon just grounds / To this extremity” (139-40) so that he would not be “damn’d beneath all depth in hell” (138). He intends to commit this crime because “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul” (V.ii.1).

In this context, I find it profitable to elaborate on Othello’s informative and illuminating opening speech in act five scene two:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul:

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!

It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow

And smooth as monumental alabaster:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

Put out the light, and then put out the light. (1-7)

In this complicated speech, Othello addresses his soul; his soul is the center here—that is, he cares first and foremost about his soul. Moreover, his positioning his soul as the mirror of his personhood suggests dissociation between body and spirit—namely, he marginalizes his body at best and negates it at worst. Further, because Othello views Desdemona's body as "hot" (III.iv.39) and sinful, he fantasizes it as "snow" (V.ii.4), suggesting frozenness and lifelessness, and "monumental alabaster" (5), suggesting inanimateness and death—hence, certain guarantees of sexual abstinence. Further, Othello associates "hot[ness]" with body and sexual heat, as noted above; thus, "light," in this speech, is also associated with heat because light usually generates heat or vice versa. Othello, wants to "put out the light" (7) lest Desdemona "betray more men" (6). He wants to "quench" her body before she uses it to corrupt other men's spirituality. Of import here is that Othello means by the first "light" the light of the candle in the room, but the second "light" alludes to Desdemona's body; thus, he wants to quench two lights, not one. Othello knows already that he will murder Desdemona by choking her, the usual way one "put[s] out the light"; that is, by choking it—by cutting off oxygen to it. Thus, he ponders quenching the candle and then exterminating Desdemona's "light[ed]," "hot" body. Sensing that the sexual heat and light of Desdemona's body are a potential threat to

his spiritual stability, Othello fantasizes her as a lifeless, unlit, and frozen object—a sure guarantee of sexual death. Thus, as a conflicted ascetic who believes that sexuality defiles and ruins spirituality, Othello kills Desdemona, the sexual element in his life, in order to satisfy the celibate ideal and return to his pure singleness—ideologically, the ideal spiritual state.

However, after Othello murders Desdemona, he declines spiritually: “this look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven / And fiends will snatch at it” (V.ii.273-74). This line echoes Satan’s punishment in Revelation 20:2-3: “Satan [...] [will be] bound and thr[own] into the Abyss.” Othello’s punishment, to be “roast[d] [...] in sulphur” (278), echoes the devil’s punishment in Revelation 20:10: “the devil [...] was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur.” Othello “hast kill’d the sweetest innocent” (197), just as Judas “sinned betraying the innocent blood” (Matthew 27:4). Othello murders Desdemona to rise spiritually, but his “deed [...] was no more worthy heaven” (V.ii.158). Othello “threw a pearl,” his “soul’s joy,” away in order to satisfy his commitment to unwarranted dogmas. Shakespeare, thus, shows that sexual restraint, adherence to the body/spirit dichotomy, and belief in the polarity of sexuality and spirituality are not the gateway to spiritual transcendence.

By positioning a woman as the exemplar of the union and harmony of intense sexuality and intense spirituality, Shakespeare disrupts and destabilizes the Roman Catholic discourse on sexuality. Owing to the contemporary belief in the sinfulness and monstrosity of women’s sexuality, women were viewed as dangerous to men’s spirituality because they could seduce men and lead them away from God. This view lowered the status of women, humiliated them, and simultaneously inculcated patriarchy.

However, in *Othello*, Shakespeare, in a direct challenge to the deeply engrained religious polarization of sexuality and spirituality and the body/spirit dichotomy, creates a female character who is boldly sexual and at the same time impressively spiritual. Enamored, apparently, by the biblical view of sexuality, Shakespeare demonstrates that sexuality does not diminish spirituality. Although Desdemona is a sexual woman, as seen in her frontal expression of her sexuality and the sexual references to her, she demonstrates intense spirituality, which is reflected in her language, the language used in reference to her, her myriad messianic attributes— especially agapic love, forgiveness, and altruism— and her serving as an agent of salvation and reconciliation. Informed and inspired by the biblical view of women and sexuality, Shakespeare forthrightly critiques the celibate ideal and the body/spirit dichotomy which were exploited by contemporary theologians to portray sexuality as antithetical to spirituality and to inculcate the notion that women's sexuality was monstrous, sinful, and dangerous to men's spirituality. Shakespeare's espousal of the biblical view of sexuality is, indeed, a further evidence that the Bible was a primary source of inspiration for Shakespeare's radical feminist agenda.



## Note

<sup>1</sup> For further reinterpretations of these texts, see Neuer 103-109; Baumert 25-86; James B. Hurley, Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective (Leicester: Zondervan, 1981) 95-8, 108, 129-38; John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 87-9.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

To learn that Shakespeare assiduously championed the cause of womankind in a patriarchal world that denigrated women, relegated them to a second-tier status, and viewed them as physically and spiritually inferior is, indeed, interesting, but to find out that the Bible, which has historically been perceived as the source and basis for women's oppression, informed and inspired Shakespeare's iconoclastic image of women is shocking. This dissertation, thus, constructs new bridges between the feminist critical tradition and the religious approaches to Shakespeare's plays with a view toward enriching and augmenting both these traditions, widening their horizons, and opening up new insights into Shakespeare's radical feminist vision by uncovering the biblical underpinnings of the image of women in his oeuvre. In light of the recently resurrected female-friendly biblical language, images, themes, episodes, and stances, I argue that the Bible, which has been established to be of paramount importance for the study of Shakespeare's plays generally, constitutes the philosophic foundations for Shakespeare's view of women specifically. To achieve this end, I have chosen three major feminist areas wherein the Bible liberates and empowers women and radically subverts extant medical and religious discourses of the day.

Parturition and childbirth, wisdom and truth-telling, and sexuality and spirituality are central areas in which women suffered the most oppression, humiliation, marginalization, and powerlessness in medieval and early modern England. But, Shakespeare, who seems to have assimilated the biblical thinking and message, as has been convincingly established by numerous Shakespearean biblical scholars in recent years, echoes and articulates the biblical view of women by reworking and utilizing its

language, episodes, tropes, narratives, themes, doctrines, and stances to produce a radically counterdiscursive image of women. In utilizing the Bible, which was central to his contemporary, predominantly-Protestant culture, Shakespeare, I argue, aims to subtly echo the biblical view of women in order to, directly or indirectly, agitate his culture's sensibility, enhance his audience's identification with and appreciation of his feminist agenda, to steer them towards an alternative, positive view of women. Shakespeare couches his veneration of maternity and childbirth, acclamation of women's wisdom and truth-telling, and celebration of women's sexuality and spirituality in biblical resonances in order to reinforce his progressive feminist agenda and achieve the desired effects on his audience. I argue that Shakespeare, to inculcate his feminist radical vision more effectively, appropriates and retools the biblical language, images, themes, episodes, and stances and make them his influential, audience-respected means and code of communication. Because his contemporary culture was intensely patriarchal, for Shakespeare to have directly and overtly disclosed his radical image of women could have compromised his popularity and minimized the effectiveness of his intent. Rather, he chooses to express his radical vision by utilizing the Bible as a vehicle that allusively carries his agenda safely and influentially to the early modern ear which was quite familiar with the Bible. Therefore, apart from Shakespeare's long-argued interest in the biblical doctrine, which is unmistakable and undeniable, I maintained that the study of Shakespeare's view of women is inseparable from the study of the biblical presence, resonances, phraseology, and echoes in his oeuvre.

Notwithstanding that the study of Shakespeare's radical and iconoclastic feminist vision spans centuries, the biblical dimension of his feminist agenda has surprisingly not

been attempted because the Bible has generally been marginalized in the Western world, especially after the two World Wars and the resulting, unfortunate disappointment with religion. Thus, Shakespeare's feminist agenda was studied generally with a blind eye on the Bible. Therefore, I believe that this critical trend should be widened and explored in light of the biblical presence in Shakespeare's drama because the Bible constituted a major element and force in his Protestant culture. Thus, studying Shakespeare's view of women in conjunction with his biblical knowledge opens up new insights that were hitherto unexplored. In this context, it is important to note that most, if not all, feminist Shakespearean aficionados approached his drama with a secular lens, since the feminist movement itself was not in any sense informed by any biblical spirit or grounded in any Bible-based vision, because the Bible had historically not been viewed as female-friendly. However, in light of the new findings of feminist biblical hermeneutics which uncovered the meliorative biblical view of women, Shakespeare has to be re-evaluated and re-read with a fresh eye. Hence, I believe that the horizons of feminist Shakespearean criticism could be widened, and Shakespeare's iconoclasm would be taken to new heights if approached in the context of the biblical presence in his oeuvre.

Because Shakespeare and his audience drank deeply from the well of the Bible, I insist that Scripture is indispensable for a thorough illumination of his agendas, be they feminist, political, social, postcolonial, or even Marxist. Given the fact that Western culture has been secularized and overwhelmed with science, especially after World War II, it is not surprising that Shakespeare's agendas have been studied in isolation from the biblical dominance in early modern English culture. That is, the biblical discourse and thinking have ceased to have much impact on the Western critical mind because of

secularization; therefore, most critics, especially over the past century, approached Shakespeare without taking into account the great impact the Bible had on his mind and his audience.

If Virginia Woolf fantasized Shakespeare's sister, one might fantasize Shakespeare's feminist critics of the past century to have existed in his culture. I think that if they were to exist in that culture, they would have approached his agendas differently. In other words, the reality that Shakespeare's culture was greatly different from our modern culture with respect to exposure to and impact of the Bible has to be given much attention. It is very possible, for instance, to read playwrights like Edward Albee or Marsha Norman through a secular lens since both existed in a capitalist culture where the Bible had minimal impact compared to the situation during the Reformation or early modern England. But to approach Shakespeare without an eye on the biblical impact on his mind and culture is, I believe, a shortcoming. In fact, to divorce Shakespeare's agendas from their proper biblical context, especially the feminist agenda, is to miss the elephant in the room, because the Bible, as I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, played a considerable role in shaping Renaissance people's intellectual constructs and directing their visions and aspirations. Thus, reconciling the Bible with Shakespeare's feminist agenda and, indeed, other agendas yields profitable fruits. Shakespeare's assimilation of the biblical thinking, then, goes beyond mere doctrinal interest—as most, if not all, researchers claimed—to further dimensions.

I believe that this study opens doors for further reevaluation and assessment of Shakespeare's iconoclastic feminist vision. This dissertation examines only three plays out of Shakespeare's rich canon and only three female characters; hence, many other

plays and female characters need to be re-examined with an eye on the biblical echoes, language, and resonances. Many strong, autonomous, self-articulate, and self-assertive women abound in Shakespeare. His depiction of these women should, I believe, be reassessed and studied from a different perspective. Portia's messianic role in *The Merchant of Venice* and Helena's maternal role in *All's Well that Ends Well* may well be framed against the biblical backdrop—not just doctrinal dimension—in a way that has not been explored before. Portia, for instance, has long been viewed as a Christ figure emblemizing forgiveness and mercy, but the important, never-attempted, question is, Why did Shakespeare choose a female, and not a male, to embody this messianic attribute?

Further, in Shakespeare's drama, I can hardly think of a male character who experiences resurrection, but the females are the ones who often do—one thinks of Hero of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Cleopatra of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Helena of *All's Well*, and, of course, Hermione of *The Winter's Tale*. The question is, what feminist agenda—not merely doctrinal interests—did Shakespeare hope to propagate through such resurrection scenes? Furthermore, this dissertation examined only three feminist areas; hence, the door is open for further discussion of other feminist areas in light of the strident biblical presence in Shakespeare's plays and the biblical affirmation, empowerment, and veneration of women. The Bible, indeed, empowers and liberates women in many other areas, not just maternity and childbirth, female wisdom and truth-telling, and sexuality and spirituality.

Above all, if, as Hamlin observes, "the Bible [for Shakespeare] was a peculiarly rich source for complex and fascinating characters and stories not just of faith, but of

love, heroism, battle, and betrayal—even incest, fratricide, and genocide” (see introduction), then, I believe, other critical approaches could be re-evaluated in light of the biblical presence in his plays. Shakespeare’s Marxist agenda in *King Lear*, for instance, has not been approached in light of the biblical view and treatment of the poor and the exploited. If the biblical view of women informed and impacted Shakespeare’s mind, as I maintain here, then I believe it is not illegitimate to argue that the biblical treatment of the oppressed and poor classes, especially Christ’s treatment, might have had an impact on his mind as well. Leviticus 19:15, for instance, prohibits class distinction: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great.” In James 2:1-4, the Bible stringently warns against class discrimination and elevates the poor:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here is a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Further, Ephesians 6:9 calls masters to treat slaves humanely and respectfully: “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”

Lear’s changed treatment of the poor and the oppressed—after he is enlightened by Cordelia and rejuvenated—like poor Tom and the Fool, is reminiscent of biblical commands and also Christ’s caring and respectful treatment of the poor, the sick, the

needy, and the oppressed. In modeling Christ's treatment of the poor, Lear, arguably, becomes a Christ figure. Thus, Shakespeare's Marxist agenda can be studied in conjunction with the biblical view of the oppressed and the marginalized.

Moreover, Shakespeare's anti-racial and postcolonial agendas might be re-examined in light of the biblical echoes and references in the plays. Christ's affirmative treatment of the Samaritan woman—Samaritans were highly discriminated against in Christ's culture—, for instance, and Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," clearly reflect the Bible's affirmation and respect of the Other. Shakespeare's view of the Other, then, can be studied in light of this meliorative biblical view and the biblical resonances in his oeuvre. Of import here is that recent post-colonial biblical studies, with such scholars as R. S. Sugirtharajah in The Post-colonial Biblical Reader, Fernando Segovia in Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings, and Stephen Moore, Fernando F Segovia, and Ann Loades—editors—in Postcolonial Biblical Criticism, all of which have opened new postcolonial insights into the Bible. Of relevance here is that the Bible does not encourage war between nations; on the contrary, it always calls for peace: "Nations will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more" (Micah 4:3).

Furthermore, in many instances, the Bible condemns materialism: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven"; "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'what shall we wear?'" (Matthew 6:19-20, 31). Love of money, in the Bible, is "a root of all evil," because



“people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunges men into ruin and destruction” (1 Timothy 6: 10, 9). Thus, materialist criticism in Shakespeare could also be studied in conjunction with the Bible’s condemnation of money and materialism and the biblical echoes and resonances in plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

Thus, for a deeper understanding of Shakespeare’s iconoclastic mind and radical vision, the Bible could, indeed, be an indispensable aid. Since one of the major purposes for the study of ancient literature is reconstructing past cultures and studying their ways of life and concerns, I believe that when it comes to early modern English culture, excluding the Bible from the scene is, indeed, akin to taking a word out of the sentence where it belongs. And when it comes to the study of Shakespeare’s mind and iconoclastic vision, marginalizing the Bible would be like reading a book in a dark room. Readings and interpretations that take the Bible into account, I contend, may well yield the luminous insights that equal or surpass those found here—namely, that the Bible consistently provides the philosophic base for Shakespeare’s marvelous female characters.

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