

“Try what repentance can”: *Hamlet*, Confession, and the Extraction of Interiority

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IN HIS FILM ADAPTATION of *Hamlet* (1996), Kenneth Branagh underscores the confessional themes present in the play by setting two scenes in a Roman Catholic confessional box. In the first scene, Polonius interrogates Ophelia about her relationship with Hamlet—an interaction that reinforces the common association of the confessional with an obsession over female sexuality. In the second scene, Hamlet listens to Claudius’s penitential prayer and becomes, as Mark Thornton Burnett notes, “an unpunctual but unconsoling father confessor.”¹ By depicting Hamlet and Claudius in the confessional box, Branagh introduces a conspicuous anachronism since the device was never used in early modern England and did not experience widespread use in Catholic countries on the Continent until the seventeenth century.²

Yet Branagh’s inclusion of the confessional makes visually explicit a long-standing critical association of Hamlet with a father confessor that began as early as A. C. Bradley. Discussing Hamlet’s exhortations to Gertrude to repent her sins, Bradley concludes, “No father-confessor could be more selflessly set upon his end of redeeming a fellow-creature from degradation, more stern or pitiless in denouncing the sin, or more eager to welcome the first token of repentance.”³ Subsequent literary critics have expanded Bradley’s position by positing that Hamlet takes on the role of a “Black Priest,” “priest/king,” and “priest manqué.”⁴ When viewed in the context of Branagh’s inclusion of the anachronistic confessional box, the critical interpretation of Hamlet as a father confessor calls attention to another more conspicuous and charged religious anachronism present in Shakespeare’s play. More specifically, the

rite of private or auricular confession to a priest permeates *Hamlet* even though the rite was no longer considered by the Church of England to be a sacrament after the promulgation of the Thirty-nine Articles and, while retained in an altered form in the *Book of Common Prayer*, it effectively ceased to be administered in early modern England. Like the connection of the Ghost with the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, Shakespeare's concentration on private confession signals a type of doctrinal simultaneity in which vestiges of the traditional religion coexist, trouble, and even threaten to undermine the current belief system.

Recent critics have observed the importance of confessional rites in *Hamlet* and early modern drama, but they have generally followed Foucault's connection of the rite to the establishment of a power relationship between the individual and authority figure and the development of individual subjectivity.⁵ Foucault's interpretation of confession is nevertheless historically tendentious because it neither attends to pre-Lateran confessional practices nor acknowledges the reality that most medieval and early modern Christians made poor confessants.⁶ Given pastoral constraints, such as the annual Lenten rush for confession leading up to Easter, traditional confessional practices offered little opportunity for a sustained imposition of ecclesiastical control over private life or an extended exploration of interiority, except for a small minority of the faithful.⁷ Furthermore, Foucault's argument regarding confession points to the practice's capacity for social discipline and control, but his grafting of the consolatory potential of confession onto a power relationship forecloses the capacity for the penitent's genuine belief in the assurance of forgiveness.⁸

Against the Foucauldian emphasis on the connection between confession and social control, in this essay I posit that confessional rituals and language point to the diffuse tension between traditional rituals and inwardness that persisted throughout the early modern period and continued to be enacted on the English stage. In what follows, I demonstrate that *Hamlet* engages the changes in confessional practices by presenting both Catholic and Protestant confessional rites as offering the promise of consolation and reconciliation and indicating that these promises cannot be realized in the theological world of the play. I first examine the shifts in penitential practices during the period and the ways in which Hamlet's adoption of the role of confessor engages the ongoing theological and theatrical problem of determining the authenticity of another's

confession. I then turn to consider how Hamlet's role as confessor complements his role as avenger and guides his attempts to negotiate the inherent tensions between inward thoughts and outward actions. Hamlet adopts and maintains the role of father confessor as part of an effort to validate his obligation to avenge the crimes against his father and himself.

Ritual Confession and the Problem of Assurance in Early Modern England

The presence of private or auricular confession and confessional language in *Hamlet* in many ways reflects the general trend on the early modern stage. The traditional rite appeared with noticeable regularity in almost every dramatic genre, ranging from early modern history plays (Peele's *Edward I* and Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*) to comedies and tragedies set in Catholic countries (*Measure for Measure*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*) to anti-Catholic polemical dramas (Bale's *King Johan*, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Middleton's *A Game at Chess*). Either in terms of England's religious past or contemporary examples on the Continent, the connection between ritual confession and Roman Catholicism constitutes the common theme in the majority of early modern dramatic representations of the rite. The presence of the sacrament of confession in these plays often signals religious, historical, and social differences between Protestant England and Catholic countries. In *Hamlet*, however, Shakespeare depicts remnants of traditional confessional rites in a Protestant context by evoking Lutheran Wittenberg.⁹ The representation of confession in the play thus corresponds to developments in penitential practices that occurred during the English Reformation: on the one hand, a general shift away from sacramental auricular confession toward an unmediated, faith-centered confession to God, but, on the other, a retention of remnants of traditional confessional practices.

Early modern editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* retained a form of auricular, private confession and absolution in "The Order for the visitacion of the Sycke," which directed the priest to evoke the power to absolve sins granted to the Church by Christ and state: "I absolue the from al thy sinnes, in the name of the father, and of the sonne, and of the holy gost. Ame[n]."¹⁰ Furthermore, in "The

order for the administration of the Lordes Supper, or holy Communion" the Prayer Book instructs ministers to exhort those who cannot "quiet [their] own conscience, but requireth further comfort of counsel" to "come to me, or some other discrete and learned Minister of Gods woorde, and open his grieve, that he may receiue suche ghostly counsaile, aduice, and comfort, as his conscience may be relieued."¹¹ In contrast with the medieval church's requirement of annual auricular confession, the rite functioned as an exceptional means for achieving consolation and assurance in the early modern Church of England. Further, the Established Church rejected the medieval understanding of the priestly absolution as effecting forgiveness "from the actual performance of the sacrament itself."¹² It instructed instead, as Richard Hooker explains, that "private ministeriall absolution butt declare remission of sins."¹³ Except for a few notable examples, after the institution of the Prayer Book, the practice consequently all but disappeared in the life of the Established Church and was commonly associated with post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism.¹⁴

The figure of the father confessor, too, became a vestigial reminder of the traditional religion. English Protestants frequently associated the office with historical and contemporary Roman Catholic intrusions into individual consciences and impingements on Christian liberty. Traditionally, the Church grounded its authority over penitents in the power of keys that Christ grants to Peter: "And I wil giue vnto thee the keyes of the kingdome of heauen, and whatsoever thou shalt binde vpon earth shall be bound in heauen: and whatsoever thou shalt lose on earth, shal be losed in heauen" (Matthew 16:19, Geneva Version). During the Reformation, however, the power of the keys came to symbolize the abuses of the medieval church. Calvin's description of Roman Catholic confession as a "ruinous procedure . . . [by which] the souls of those who were affected with some sense of God have been most cruelly racked" reflects many early modern English theological and theatrical treatments of the rite.¹⁵ Yet after the Reformation the position of confessor to the royal household and several penitentiary offices were retained, such as one held by Lancelot Andrewes at St. Paul's.¹⁶ The underlying shifts in the penitential system nevertheless separated such offices from their sacramental beginnings and, like the diminution of the rite of private confession in the Prayer Book, they functioned as confessional institutions only in an attenuated sense.

This transformation of penitential practices reoriented the ways in which Christians achieved assurance of the forgiveness of their sins and reconciliation with God. With the English Church's move away from private confession, self-examination became the usual method for discovering and confessing sins and achieving reconciliation. This transformation protected the liberty of the individual conscience against perceived priestly intrusions and excessive anxiety in the penitential process. Alan Sinfield argues that the change from ritual confession to interior self-examination increased, rather than diminished, the anxiety of the faithful: "Protestant self-examination is in a way confession, but it shifts the whole business inside the consciousness. . . . This made the whole process more manipulable, for since there was no external resistance there could also be no external reassurance."¹⁷ This description creates the impression that Luther's famous, though atypical, anxieties surrounding the sacrament of penance extended into and increased in the practice of private introspection.¹⁸ Yet Sinfield's observation regarding the transformation of confession rightfully advances the degree to which the practice became internalized and situated within individual consciences. William Perkins's development of a form of English Protestant casuistry, which emphasized the laity's self-application of cases of conscience rather than priestly administration, provides further evidence for this confessional shift.¹⁹

The Protestant internalization of confession reflects the Christian tradition's privileging of interiority rather than exteriority in matters of faith because of the potential for outward dissimulation that originates as early as Christ's warning against the "hypocrisie and iniquitie" of the Scribes and Pharisees whose virtues exist only in outward appearance (Matthew 23:28, Geneva Version). "An Homilie of Repentaunce and of true reconciliation vnto God," the last sermon contained in the *Second Book of Homilies* (1562), continues this tradition by connecting exterior devotion to the corruption of the Roman Catholic sacrament of confession:

Therefore they that teache repentunce without a liuely faythe in our Sauour Jesu Christ, doo teache none other, but Judas repentance, as all the scholemen do, whiche do onely allowe these three partes of Repentaunce: the contrition of the hart, the confession of the mouth, and the satisfaction of the worke. But all of these things we fynde in Judas repentance, whiche in outward appearaunce, did farre excede and passe the repentance of Peter.²⁰

The homily instructs that the exteriors should be distrusted, that "liuely faythe" is the true measure for gauging repentance, and that anyone who teaches "repentaunce without Christ . . . doe onlye teache Cains or Judas repentaunce."²¹ In so doing, the homily cautions against what St. Augustine calls the "deceptive resemblance" between a virtuous appearance and inward vice.²² To overcome the limitations of exteriors, the homily instructs that, like Peter, true penitents "must be cleane altered and chaunged, they must become newe creatures, they must be no more the same that they were before."²³ True repentance or *metanoia* consists solely of an interior change that depends on faith rather than exteriors.

This conception of interiority, particularly in terms of conscience and repentance, follows the orthodox interpretation regarding the inscrutability of the divine will. To presume the salvation or damnation of another would impinge on God's special providence and mercy. Nathaniel Woodes's *Conflict of Conscience* (1581), a dramatic rendering of the spiritual struggle and mysterious death of the Italian lawyer Francis Spira (Francesco Spiera) in 1548, contains variant conclusions that advance the uncertainty surrounding Spira's famous renunciation of Protestantism: one in which the protagonist is damned, the other in which he is granted forgiveness. In the case of the controversial death of Spira, however, early modern writers argued for and against his damnation, despite the accepted theological teaching regarding the impossibility of knowing the mind of God.²⁴ These attempts to interpret Spira's death point to early modern assumptions regarding the connection between interiority and exteriority.²⁵ Indeed, although John Foxe admits in the case of Sir James Hale, a Protestant who committed suicide, that "certain divines" doubted "whether he were reprobate or saved," Foxe nevertheless readily attributes signs of grace to the martyrdoms of Thomas Cranmer and other Protestants and reprobation to the deaths of Roman Catholics in *Acts and Monuments*.²⁶ In the search for self-assurance and assurance of another's spiritual state, the orthodox reservation of determining inward faith became secondary to practical theological, social, and political concerns.

The emphasis during the early modern period on confessions and recantations during public executions further signals the functional importance of repentance and confession.²⁷ Ecclesiastical and magisterial recourse to torture in order to secure confessions offers one example of the putative authority granted to confes-

sion.²⁸ Cranmer's initial recantation to the Marian authorities and his subsequent disavowal of it on the day of his execution stand as a prominent example for demonstrating not only the imputed and expected veracity of confession, but also the contested nature of its reception.²⁹ The stakes for both Catholics and Protestants were high: the Marian authorities celebrated Cranmer's rejection of Protestantism and return to Catholicism as a blow against the Protestant cause in England; Protestants trumpeted his actions during his final day as evidence of his adherence to the true faith. However, when confronted by Fray Juan de Villagarcia, Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford and the official who succeeded in obtaining Cranmer's recantation, that he received the sacrament of penance before his execution, Cranmer asks, "What if the confession is no good?"³⁰ In so doing, Cranmer questions the ability of the authorities to access his interiority and depends instead on his actions during his death as the *finis coronat opus*.³¹ Catholic and Protestant accounts of his death, *Bishop Cranmer's Recantacyons* (attributed to Nicholas Harpsfield, ca. 1556) and John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563, reprinted in 1570, 1576, 1583), are surprisingly similar in describing the events of his death, but they differ widely in their interpretations.³² For Catholics, Cranmer relapsed into Protestant heresy; for Protestants, he died a martyr of the true faith. Undergirding each position is the conviction that Cranmer's true beliefs and, by extension, the true Christian faith can be adduced from his final confession.³³ The staging and representation of scaffold confessions in turn signals a more generalized confessional phenomenon in early modern England: the semiotic incompleteness of confession necessitates some form of a public account or, in Hamlet's terms, "story" to situate and interpret interior beliefs and motivations (5.2.354).³⁴

Instead of remaining hidden in the conscience, confession in early modern England functioned as an inward spiritual change that invited a social component to evince its authenticity in order to satisfy both the individual and the community of his or her spiritual state. The assurance of an effective confession thus contains two performances: an inward spiritual performance accessible only to the individual and God, and an outward social performance intended to reassure both the individual and others in order to facilitate a reintegration of the penitent into the community.³⁵ The scriptural account of Christ's healing of the leper advances the social performance of confession by concluding with Christ's command: "Go, sayeth he, and shew thy selfe to the Priest, and offer for

thy clensing, as Moses hath commanded, for a witnes vnto them" (Luke 5:14, Geneva Version). In the medieval administration of confession, penitents could ideally find inward assurance of the effectiveness of their spiritual performance of confession in its ritual form, especially through the priest's speaking of the rite of absolution and laying on of hands, and then demonstrate their repentance through the social performance of penance or satisfaction.³⁶ The English Reformation's reorientation of traditional penitential practice resulted in a shift from private to public ritual. As such, in the early modern Church of England, assurance of sins came to be situated in the general absolution given during the liturgy, except in special cases of scrupulosity or doubt.

Confession thus became an intensely personal spiritual performance because, under ordinary circumstances, only the individual rather than a confessor needed to determine whether or not his or her inward penitence was authentic.³⁷ Hence Perkins's claim that "it is a grace peculiar to the man Elect, to trie himselfe whether he be in the estate of grace or not" indicates that self-assurance begins and concludes in the individual conscience.³⁸ However, confession continued to have a socially performative dimension because it depended on an individual's participation in common worship and reception of the Eucharist.³⁹ The required ritual and social performance of confession in the Church of England reveals continuity between traditional and reformed penitential practices. Private confession and the office of father confessor were anachronisms that became more diffused and "internalised fully" by the middle of the seventeenth century.⁴⁰ At the turn of the seventeenth century, however, the reemergence of debates surrounding their place in the Established Church and their ongoing presence on the stage indicates that they remained in transition.⁴¹ In the muddled theological world of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare offers a sustained engagement of these shifts in penitential practices.⁴²

Hamlet as Avenger and Father Confessor

Shakespeare represents the transitional state of ritual confession through the Ghost of King Hamlet's contradictory positions on the rite. At the opening of the play, the Ghost avers that he would not suffer supernatural torments in his "prison-house" if his last rites,

including final confession (i.e., "disappointed"), could have been completed satisfactorily:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.⁴³

(1.5.76–79)

These remarks signal the Ghost's faith in the efficacy of the traditional sacramental system.⁴⁴ Yet in *Hamlet* only vestiges of it remain, and they are always relegated to the background, to a state of unrealized possibility. In act 5, the Doctor of Divinity similarly implies the efficacy of ritual through his prohibition of singing a "requiem" at Ophelia's funeral lest "[w]e should profane the service of the dead," but the results of the ritual are left to speculation (5.1.229–30). In addition, the Ghost intimates that a transformation of confession has occurred when he commands Hamlet to "[l]eave her [Gertrude] to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.86–88). Instead of emphasizing penitential rituals, the Ghost elevates unmediated, interior repentance and implicitly repudiates the rituals that he considered necessary for his salvation. The Ghost holds these contradictory positions in tension without ever reconciling them. This suspension indicates that Shakespeare's Denmark experiences a type of doctrinal simultaneity in which competing theological beliefs co-exist.

Like his father, Hamlet reveals a striking degree of doctrinal heterogeneity. As a student at the University of Wittenberg, he is closely connected with the Lutheran rejection of the dominical status of the sacrament of penance.⁴⁵ For Roland Mushat Frye, "The Prince 'smites' his mother in the ways that might be expected of one who was educated at Wittenberg," that is, as part of the Protestant understanding of the "priesthood of all believers."⁴⁶ Yet Hamlet's emphasis on auricular confession contradicts the Reformation context of the play. Even though Hamlet reveals a general Christian desire to bring his mother to repentance, I would argue that he assumes the role of father confessor intent on extracting the consciences of others in order to assure himself not only of their guilt or innocence, but also to achieve support in his role as avenger. Hamlet's adoption of the role of father confessor becomes a subver-

sive action that realizes all of the Protestant concerns about Roman Catholic intrusions of confessors into individual consciences and the *arcana imperii* of royal authority, demonstrated with striking effect in Hamlet's eavesdropping on Claudius's private confession to God. At the same time, this role establishes a means to negotiate the prison of Denmark. Father confessor and avenger merge into mutually constitutive roles that allow Hamlet to penetrate through the network of secrets, lies, and half-truths that circulate in Claudius's court. And cross-fertilization occurs between these roles, for the avenger's aim to fulfill the Ghost's "dread command" collapses into the confessor's exercise of binding and loosing of sins (3.4.109). For Hamlet, the scriptural validation of priestly authority over the spiritual states of others to which he lays claim throughout the play becomes radically literalized and, in the process, destabilized when yoked into the service of revenge.

Hamlet's fulfillment of his dual role as father confessor and avenger depends on the occlusion of his own interiority until he can successfully extract the conscience of others. When discussing his mournful appearance and behavior with Gertrude, he states:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not "seems."
 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
 Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
 That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play,
 But I have that within which passes show,
 These but the trappings and suits of woe.

(1.2.76–86)

Hamlet's distinction between outward seeming ("trappings and suits of woe") and inward being ("within which passes show") signals the limitations of external appearances to convey interior thoughts and thereby injects suspicion into the direct correspondence between the visible signs and interior disposition. The "inky cloak" reflects Hamlet's internal state and suggests a form of inexpressible sadness over his father's death, but the limitations of these outward appearances to "denote me truly" evinces the existence of a disjunction between them. Put differently, Hamlet inti-

mates that only he possesses access to the fullness of his interiority within, and suggests that it, though remaining "unspeakable" in its entirety, can be willfully revealed or concealed.⁴⁷ The language of the theater accordingly indicates the artificiality and limitations of that which can be shown and Hamlet's presumption of the capacity to manipulate those "actions that a man might play." His revelation to Horatio and Marcellus that he intends to "put an antic disposition on" manifests his confidence in being able to manipulate exteriors and mask his true motives (1.5.180). Hamlet's insistence that his companions do not reveal "aught of me" implies that he considers the only possibility for revealing the inauthentic nature of his madness comes from without (1.5.187). For Hamlet, his "mind's eye" functions as an interior space over which he believes that he exercises dominion and controls access (1.2.185). Nevertheless, at the conclusion of his first soliloquy, "But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue," Hamlet reveals that inward and outward exist in a tension in which the heart desires to be revealed, but must be held in check by the tongue (1.2.159).⁴⁸ Significantly, Hamlet most frequently identifies this resistant, sometimes volatile interiority with conscience and employs the term not only to refer to a set of divine moral imperatives (as in the case with the prohibition against suicide), but also to function as a semiotic passkey to that within which passes show.

Through speech as well as voluntary and involuntary actions, Hamlet affirms that the consciences of others can be accessible if properly interpreted, extracted, or triggered. In his initial encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he declares his suspicions about friendship being the purpose of their visit: "Anything but to th' purpose. You were sent for, and there is a kind of confession in your looks, which your modesties have not craft enough to colour. I know the good King and Queen have sent for you" (2.2.278–81). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's "guileless revelation of some occulted guilt" contrasts them with Hamlet's theatricality, but it also reveals Hamlet's assurance in his abilities to bridge the divide between nonverbal confession and internal motivations.⁴⁹ He further displays this assurance by supplying the reason for which his childhood companions were summoned, once Guildenstern confesses, "My lord, we were sent for" (2.2.292). Hamlet's behavior during this encounter implies that he distinguishes his own inwardness from nontheatrical individuals who cannot hide their consciences. Indeed, he confronts Guildenstern with attempting to

"pluck out the heart of my mystery" and then stymies any efforts to gain access into his interiority: "Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me" (3.2.356–63). Hamlet is aware of Claudius and others' capacity for dissimulation, explaining "one may smile, and smile, and be a villain—/ At least I am sure that it may be so in Denmark," but he identifies himself as the only one capable of preventing an unwanted revelation of his true state (1.5.108–9). Hamlet remains confident that even Claudius's interiority can be extracted once the appropriate external device triggers a verbal or nonverbal confession. He accordingly designs *The Mousetrap* to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.601) and declares that his uncle's conscience will be outwardly detectable: "I'll observe his looks; / I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench, / I know my course" (2.2.592–94).

Hamlet does not act alone in this conviction, for Claudius, Rosencrantz, Polonius, and Guildenstern attempt to determine the motives for Hamlet's antic disposition. Claudius may initially gesture toward the direct correspondence between inward and outward by declaring that "Hamlet's transformation" indicates that "nor th' exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was" (2.2.5–7). But his employment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to discover "aught to us unknown" about Hamlet's antic behavior and belief that it may be "open'd" displays his suspicions regarding the potential for separating inward motives and outward appearance (2.2.17–18). In response to Claudius's frustration over their failure to determine the reason for Hamlet's aberrant behavior, moreover, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern similarly reply:

Ros. He does confess he feels himself distracted,
But from what cause a will by no means speak.
Guil. Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
But with a crafty madness keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

(3.1.5–10)

The description of Hamlet's disposition as "crafty madness" suggests Guildenstern's perception of what Hamlet later reveals to Gertrude in the closet scene, that is, "I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft" (3.4.189–90). By developing Rosencrantz's language of confession, Guildenstern indicates his awareness that present beneath Hamlet's initial confession of being distracted is a

"true state" that could be uncovered if he could penetrate through external posturing. Even though Hamlet claims that his interiority cannot be expressed or accessed beneath its seeming exterior, his reference to its very existence in the opening act presupposes the potential for discovery and propels attempts to uncover the secrets that continually circulate throughout Claudius's Denmark.⁵⁰

Hamlet, however, stands apart in the play because he alone desires to uncover and judge the conscience of others. Claudius may obsess over discovering the cause of Hamlet's antic disposition, but his concerns are grounded in self-interested, political pragmatism and contain no concern over the prince's spiritual state. Hamlet adopts the role of father confessor because his obligation to revenge his father's murder depends on verifying the truth of the Ghost's story. Moreover, Claudius provides Hamlet with a predetermined role for enacting revenge by assuming the part of a perverse father confessor.⁵¹ Claudius's penetration of the orchard and poisoning of the king through "the porches of [his] ears" functions as an inverted image of auricular confession that evokes Reformation anti-Catholic polemic against the malign effects of "confession in the eare" (1.5.63).⁵² While Claudius may have bound King Hamlet to a purgatorial existence "[t]ill the foul crimes done in [his] days of nature / Are burnt and purg'd away" (1.5.12–13), political and romantic motivations fueled the murder. For Hamlet, however, the confessional resonances of Claudius's poisoning of the king initiate a role to be emulated and imitated.⁵³ Consequently, Hamlet seeks to overgo Claudius by transposing the confessorial role from the secular to the spiritual, securing his uncle's damnation. Hence Hamlet spares Claudius's life in the prayer scene not because of the tension between Christian and vengeful impulses, but rather because of the spiritual imperative governing his conception of revenge. Unlike Laertes, who declares his willingness "[t]o cut his [Hamlet's] throat i'th' church" (4.7.125) and thereby implies that satisfaction can be accomplished in natural actions, Hamlet considers damnation necessary for satisfying the Ghost's dread command, for to slay his uncle in penitential prayer would be "hire and salary, not revenge" (3.3.79). Consequently, he aims to catch the conscience of the king in the sense not only of extracting his interior conscience, but also of trapping it in a state of sin.

In so doing, Hamlet rightly perceives Claudius's reaction to *The Mousetrap* as evidence of guilt, but wrongly interprets the sincerity of his uncle's repentance in the famous failed prayer scene. In

many ways, the private setting of the scene gestures toward the relationship between Claudius's interior and exterior state. Claudius believes himself to be alone during his penitential prayer, and Hamlet assumes that his uncle remains unaware of his presence. For Hamlet, private penitential prayer would thus avoid the necessary cautions regarding the equivocations and dissimulations present in public speech. Yet Shakespeare manifests the limitations of Hamlet's faith in the relationship between interior and exterior through the dramatic timing of the scene: Hamlet does not overhear Claudius's mental wrangling over his inability to repent, but only him "a-praying"; and Claudius remains unaware of Hamlet's presence and unknowingly saves his own life by attempting to repent sincerely (3.3.73). Given Claudius's remark that "[m]y words fly up," he presumably prays audibly rather than silently (3.3.97). Hamlet therefore bases his judgment that his uncle is "in the purging of his soul" (3.3.85) and "is fit and season'd for his passage" (3.3.86) on, as Claudius reveals after Hamlet exits, "[w]ords without thoughts" (3.3.98). Hamlet thus demonstrates a hermeneutic naïveté by accepting Claudius's penitential prayer as satisfactory because of his awareness of his uncle's characteristic adeptness at concealment and manipulation. Hamlet may suspect Claudius's insincerity elsewhere, but identifies private penitential prayer as a privileged discourse in which words and intentions exist in direct correspondence. If the absence of the content of the prayer in printed editions of the play corresponds to its formulaic nature or its ambiguity (Claudius's prayer was meant to be spoken aloud but unintelligible to the audience) on-stage, it reinforces the rashness of Hamlet's willingness to overlook the possibility of Claudius's inability to repent.

Claudius's prayer thus becomes a lacuna into which Hamlet reads his uncle's successful repentance in terms of Protestant penitential practices.⁵⁴ In accepting Claudius's prayer as authentic, he demonstrates his assumptions regarding the efficacy of unmediated penitence, an attitude germane to his studies at Wittenberg. He believes that Claudius is able to and does receive forgiveness for the murder of King Hamlet and Gertrude through *metanoia*. According to Anthony Low, Hamlet's perspective on repentance differs from that of Claudius, who identifies penitence with the traditional confessional rite: "Because he belongs to the older generation of King Hamlet, Claudius understands that if only he were to consent to give up his ill-gotten gains—his queen and his kingdom—he could repent, confess his sins, and receive absolution. . . . In contrast,

Hamlet and Horatio, although their spiritual state is not depraved like Claudius's, have forgotten what Claudius knows but cannot put to use."⁵⁵ Yet Claudius never refers to ritual in the prayer scene; on the contrary, when Claudius debates, "Try what repentance can. What can it not? / Yet what can it, when one can not repent?" the language of ritual present in the Ghost of King Hamlet's speech is absent (3.3.65–66). Claudius may display a remnant of traditional beliefs in beseeching angels for help ("Help, angels!"), but he attempts to offer a satisfactory penitential prayer rather than seek a priestly mediator (3.3.69). By refraining from killing Claudius, Hamlet simultaneously reveals a Protestant belief in the sufficiency of private repentance and a traditional conception of the spiritual powers conferred on priests in the sacrament of confession through his evocation of the priestly role of binding sins.

Under the burden of the Ghost's dread command, however, Hamlet departs from the role of a conventional Christian father confessor because the revenge narrative leads him to base his determination of the moral state of others not on divine law, but on his conscience's judgment of their involvement in King Hamlet's murder.⁵⁶ Once he discovers Claudius's intent to kill him, he argues that his revenge against Claudius is supported by "perfect conscience" (5.2.67).⁵⁷ Furthermore, Hamlet condemns those whom he deems supporters of Claudius because they would prevent him from enacting vengeance. Hence, without compunction, Hamlet dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death "[n]ot shriving time allow'd" because he judges them as Claudius's agents and thus implicated in his uncle's crimes (5.2.47): "They are not near my conscience, their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow" (5.2.58–59). Conscience functions for Hamlet as the central point of reference for determining the sinfulness or virtue of others through the position as father confessor that in turn justifies his actions as an avenger.

The most explicit association of Hamlet with a father confessor occurs in the closet scene with Gertrude. His determination to confront his mother with her sins in many ways corresponds to the traditional instilling of shame in an unrepentant sinner. Further, the Ghost commands Hamlet to "step between her and her fighting soul . . . Speak to her," and thereby take on the part of a spiritual mediator (3.4.113–15). The similarities between Hamlet's treatment of Gertrude and the sacrament of confession lead Harry Morris to conclude that Hamlet "uses directly the terms of the

sacrament: 'Confess yourself to heaven [confession], / Repent what's past [contrition], avoid what is to come [satisfaction]'" (3.4.151–52).⁵⁸ Yet Hamlet's remark, "And when you are desirous to be blest, / I'll blessing beg of you," suggests not only a deferral of the rite of absolution, but also an indeterminacy regarding the agency of who will bless (that is, absolve) Gertrude (3.4.173–74). The question of whether he means himself, God, or even a minister remains unclear, and thus registers the theological uncertainties that govern the world of the play. In this sense, Hamlet's role as avenger supports his role as father confessor insofar as it confirms his ability to bind his victims to damnation. However, this same conviction does not transfer to securing the forgiveness of others. Like the Ghost, then, Hamlet holds competing doctrines regarding repentance in a suspension that renders them already deferred and lacking resolution. Yet despite the incompleteness of Gertrude's repentance, Hamlet accepts her exclamation of contrition, "thou has cleft my heart in twain" (3.4.158), and the fact that he never again mentions Gertrude's incestuous relationship with Claudius—even at her death—suggests his confidence that she has "[a]ssume[d] a virtue" and avoided further sexual relations (3.4.162).⁵⁹ Hamlet's faith in the success of Gertrude's repentance therefore reinforces his role as an avenger because it redresses Claudius's usurpation of the royal marriage by fulfilling the Ghost's command to "[l]et not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.82–83).

By framing the closet scene with the death of Polonius and the removal of his body offstage, though, Shakespeare points to the tensions caused by Hamlet's roles as father confessor and avenger. After mistakenly killing Polonius, Hamlet initially calls him a "wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. / I took thee for thy better" and treats his death as completely justifiable (3.4.31–32). But Hamlet then takes responsibility for the killing, "I do repent," only to abandon this position and again attempt to exculpate himself by imputing responsibility to his role as a revenger: "but heaven hath pleas'd it so / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.175–77).⁶⁰ By further shifting from assuming of culpability (cf. 3.4.178–79) to mistreating Polonius's corpse (cf. 3.4.214) to jocularly referring to Polonius's spiritual fate (cf. 4.3.19–25), Hamlet manifests his ongoing conflict of conscience. These shifts reflect the tensions inherent in his theatrical roles as avenger and father confessor, for the impulse to re-

venge his father's murder overrides his Christian concern for repentance. The killing of Polonius in fact unwittingly condemns Hamlet to the spiritual irresolution that marked his father's death. In response, Hamlet capitulates to ignorance and the indecipherability of Polonius's spiritual status by declaring him "now most still, most secret, and most grave" (3.4.216)—language that parallels his description of his father: "And how his [King Hamlet's] audit stands who knows save heaven?" (3.3.82). For Hamlet, then, death forecloses access to interiority. This confrontation with the uncertainties surrounding Polonius's death pressures Hamlet to recognize that in the roles as both father confessor and avenger his conscience must couple oppositional impulses that cannot be reconciled, except through "answer[ing] well / The death I gave him" with a type of atonement through death (3.4.178–79).

Instead of withdrawing from his earlier confidence regarding his capacity to exact vengeance on those he considers damnable, however, Hamlet responds to Polonius's death in the final act of the play by reinforcing his role as an avenger and father confessor. In the final act, Hamlet may accept the orthodox Christian position on the inscrutability of the "special providence" of God; but, like his early modern contemporaries, he acts with assurance regarding the damnation and salvation of those around him based on external evidence (5.2.215–16). Indeed, once Laertes declares, "The King—the King's to blame" (5.2.326), Hamlet wounds Claudius and proclaims with certainty his uncle to be a "damned Dane" at the moment of death (5.2.330). Laertes' revelation of Claudius's involvement in poisoning Gertrude and Hamlet provides the prince with the opportunity for confirming his uncle's damnable state—the very opportunity frustrated by his misreading of Claudius's penitential prayer. Hamlet momentarily experiences self-assurance in his role as an avenger through the outward assurance of Laertes and, moreover, fulfills his role as father confessor by "exchang[ing] forgiveness" with Laertes through a type of mutual absolution:

Laer. Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,
Nor mine on me!

Ham. Heaven make thee free of it! I follow thee.

(5.2.334–37)

This interchange places Hamlet in the role of father confessor loosening Laertes' sins through a deathbed absolution. Yet Hamlet's

statement, "I follow thee," indicates that he still does not consider himself free from the tension inherent in these roles and his crimes because he uses the imperative form of "follow" at the moment of Claudius's death, exclaiming, "Follow my mother!" (5.2.332). In this context, the term most likely refers to death rather than a spiritual state. In contrast with Laertes' apparent acceptance of Hamlet's absolution, moreover, Hamlet does not apply Laertes' absolution to himself, but only requests that "Heaven make thee free of it!" By denying the adequacy of his satisfaction for Polonius's death and maintaining the inexpressibility of his interiority, Hamlet reconciles himself to the incompleteness of his confession and the impossibility of resolution: "Had I but the time—as this fell sergeant Death, / Is strict in his arrest—O, I could tell you / But let it be" (5.2.341–43). In this transition from confessor to confessant, Hamlet gestures at the possibility of explaining his part in "this chance" and "this act," but this revelation remains deferred and unresolved (5.2.339–40). Hamlet's "true story," as Michael Neill observes, is "tantalizingly glimpsed only as Hamlet himself is about to enter the domain of the inexpressible."⁶¹ The disjunction between Hamlet's presentation of the inscrutability of his interiority and his attempts to extract the interiority of others signals the underlying tension between Christian repentance and revenge tragedy.

By excluding others from his true inward state, Hamlet succeeds in exacting his revenge and satisfying the Ghost's command, but his retreat into silence leaves his own spiritual state uncertain. His final confessional speech offers the promise of complete revelation, but remains beyond reach, finding resolution only in the substitution of his "wounded name" (5.2.349) for his impenetrable identity and the circulation of Horatio's posthumous presentation of Hamlet's "story" (5.2.354). Hamlet's "dying voice" (5.2.361), which concentrates on Fortinbras's election to the throne, withdraws his interiority behind the veil of death, concluding his final speech with "the rest is silence" (5.2.363). This turn toward posthumous fame and the political future of Denmark evinces Hamlet's conviction regarding the impossibility of fully expressing his own story through a deathbed confession. Moreover, for Hamlet, the problem of his confession is identical to the problem of his inwardness: he professes the belief that neither can be expressed in its entirety. At the same time, this turn demonstrates Hamlet's deathbed attempt to overwrite the silence of interiority and death through the translation of his story into public narrative. Horatio's prayer that "flights

of angels sing thee to thy rest," drawn from the Catholic prayer for the dead *In paradisum de deducant te angeli*, begins this process by joining Hamlet's spiritual state to the traditional ritual system espoused by his father's ghost (5.2.365). And Fortinbras's declaration of Hamlet's fortitude as a soldier and proclamation to let the "rite of war / Speak loudly for him" further indicates the transformation of Hamlet's inexpressible interiority to a comprehensible public figure (5.2.404-5).

Yet given the ineffective coexistence of conflicting theological rituals and doctrines in the world of the play, this announced presentation of Hamlet leaves the audience doubtful if not "unsatisfied" (5.2.345). Between Hamlet's inwardness and Horatio and Fortinbras's public narrative exists a breach that cannot be filled through a return to the traditional rites of, to use Catherine Belsey's terminology, "a much older cosmos."⁶² Indeed, the different doctrines coexisting in the play effectually cancel each other out, for the only rituals presented in the action of the play are, in the words of Laertes, "maimed," either through insincerity (Claudius's penitential prayer), deferral (Gertrude's repentance), doubt (Ophelia's death), or parodic inversion (Eucharistic themes in the final act) (5.1.212).⁶³ The frequent recourse to these traditional rituals manifests the vestigial traces of their former function in society. Nevertheless, the ambiguity, failure, or deferral of resolution promised in both the traditional sacrament of confession and the Protestant confessional forms indicate that they have become ineffectual in the larger social, political, and theological upheavals affecting Hamlet's Denmark. As Steven Mullaney observes, "Whether sacred or secular, ritual relies upon and produces a certain consensus of belief; although highly dramaturgical, it functions effectively only in a relatively stable hierarchical society."⁶⁴ However, the only stability present in *Hamlet* exists in its ritual past, the world of sacraments and confessors, or its martial future, a world of the avenger-warrior Fortinbras—two worlds in which Hamlet can participate, but cannot inhabit fully.

By situating *Hamlet* in the context of Reformation Wittenberg, Shakespeare deploys the space of the theater to signal the spiritual and emotional repercussions resulting from the Church of England's reorientation of the traditional means for achieving assurance and consolation. Theatrical space intensifies rather than resolves the difficulties of determining inward and outward sincerity, for it accentuates the limited points of access into the con-

science through a fundamental reliance on visual and auditory externals. Even the audience, who occupies a privileged perspective by witnessing the performance in its entirety, remains dependent upon what is revealed and concealed on- and offstage. Shakespeare's presentation in the play of the hazards of misinterpretation thus advance the inherent risks of determining another's conscience and suggest the possibility of misreading signs of one's own salvation or damnation. Consequently, Shakespeare withholds the anticipated resolution promised by traditional and Protestant confessional acts to illustrate that they could not guarantee assurance and consolation in Wittenberg, in England's Catholic past, or in the seventeenth-century Established Church.

Notes

I wish to thank Patrick Cheney, David Scott Kastan, Garrett Sullivan, and Jonathan Gil Harris for their generous suggestions on various revisions of this essay.

1. Mark Thornton Burnett, "'We are the makers of manners': The Branagh Phenomenon," in *Shakespeare after Mass Media*, ed. Richard Burt, 88 (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

2. Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, 3 vols. (London, 1896), 1:395–96.

3. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 138.

4. Roy Battenhouse, "Hamlet's Evasions and Inversions," in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary*, ed. Roy Battenhouse, 400 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Harry Morris, *Last Things in Shakespeare* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985), 54; and John Freeman, "This Side of Purgatory: Ghostly Fathers and the Recusant Legacy in *Hamlet*," in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, ed. Dennis Taylor and David Beauregard, 248 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

5. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), esp. 59–63. Foucault revisits the subject in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–82*, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Picador, 2005), 363–66. Important recent interpretations that concentrate on the relationship between confession and power include Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), esp. 85–86, 117–19, and 245–47; Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 88–115; Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 2–10 and 73–81; and Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 163–64. For a response to Mullaney, see Huston Diehl, "'Infinite Space': Repre-

sentation and Reformation in *Measure for Measure*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998), esp. 408–9. Of course, the association of confession to the use and abuse of power precedes Foucault, but his influential analysis of it continues to set the terms for many critics.

6. For a critique of Foucault's treatment of the history of confession, see Pierre Payer, "Foucault on Penance and the Shaping of Sexuality," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 14 (1985): 313–20.

7. Even in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, regular confession was relegated to the elite; see R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770*, New Approaches to European History 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 199. On pre-Reformation confessional practices in England, see Ann Eljenholm Nichols, "The Etiquette of Pre-Reformation Confession in East Anglia," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 17 (1986): 145–63; and Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 60.

8. I am here drawing on the interpretation advanced by Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450–1750* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 24–27.

9. In many respects, Shakespeare's problematic representation of ritual confession in a Protestant context resembles Marlowe's depiction of the rite in *Doctor Faustus*. For discussions of Lutheranism in England, see Basil Hall, "The Early Rise and Gradual Decline of Lutheranism in England (1520–1600)," in *Reform and Reformation: England and the Continent, c. 1500–c.1750*, ed. Derek Baker, 103–47 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979). On late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English attitudes toward Lutheranism, see Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 384–95.

10. *The booke of common praier, and administration of the Sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies in the Church of Englande* (London, 1559), Pir.

11. *The booke of common praier Mvir*. For a similar instruction, see Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Books VI, VII, VIII*, ed. P. G. Stanwood, in *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, gen. ed. W. Speed Hill, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977–98), 3:101–3.

12. Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 25.

13. Hooker, 3:97.

14. Richard Greenham, for instance, used a Protestant form of private confession in his ministry; see Kenneth L. Parker, "Richard Greenham's 'spiritual physicke': The Comfort of Afflicted Consciences in Elizabethan Pastoral Care," in *Penitence in the Age of Reformations*, ed. Katharine Luialdi and Anne Thayer, 73 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

15. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 1: 548.

16. The office of confessor to the royal household is discussed in an unsigned editorial reply in *Notes and Queries*, 1st ser. 10 (1854): 9–10; and J.K., "Confessor to the Royal Household," *Notes and Queries*, 2nd ser. 7 (1859): 252. Andrewes held the prebendary of Pancratius (St. Pancras) at St. Paul's, which had been used in the Middle Ages for administering the sacrament of confession, from 1589 until 1609 and, in this position, he attempted to revive the custom of Lenten confession

during this period. For a discussion of Andrewes's role as a confessor, see Peter McCullough, "Donne and Andrewes," *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 168, and McCullough's entry for Andrewes in the *New Dictionary of National Biography*.

17. Sinfield, 163.

18. On the exceptional nature of Luther's anxieties in confession, see Thomas Tentler, "The Summa for Confessors as an Instrument of Social Control," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus with Heiko A. Oberman, 124 (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

19. Catherine Belsey notes the popular application of English Protestant casuistry in "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience," *Studies in Philology* 76 (1979): 132–33.

20. "An Homilie of Repentaunce and of true reconciliation vnto God," in *The seconde Tome of Homilies* (London, 1563), fols. 281v–82r. For a similar English Protestant interpretation, see Richard Stock, *The doctrine and vse of repentance* (London, 1610), 7–9; and John Coxe's translation of Bullinger's *Questions of religion cast abroad in Helvetia by the aduersaries same: and aunswered by M. H. Bullinger of Zvrick* (London, 1572), 53r–54v.

21. "An Homilie of Repentaunce," fol. 282v.

22. St. Augustine, "Letter 167," in *Letters: 165–203*, trans. Wilfred Parson, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 30 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955).

23. "An Homilie of Repentaunce," fol. 282v.

24. Many early modern writers, including Calvin, Foxe, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Edwin Sandys, and Arminius, nevertheless interpreted Spira's death as a sign of his damnation; see Lily B. Campbell, "Doctor Faustus: A Case of Conscience," *PMLA* 67 (1952): 19–39, and M. A. Overell, "Recantation and Retribution: 'Remembering Francis Spira,' 1548–1638," in *Retribution, Repentance, and Reconciliation: Papers Read at the 2002 Summer Meeting and 2003 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, 159–68 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005).

25. For a discussion of this connection in the context of common worship and the theater, see Ramie Targoff, "The Performance of Prayer: Sincerity and Theatricality in Early Modern England," *Representations* 60 (1997): 49–69.

26. Cited in Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce, "The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 20 (1989): 271–72.

27. For a discussion of the relationship between authority and scaffold confessions in relation to the trial, confession, and execution of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Oxford, see Karin S. Coddon, "'Such Strange Desygns': Madness, Subjectivity, and Treason in *Hamlet* and Elizabethan Culture," *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 20 (1989): 56–57.

28. On the connection between confession and torture, see Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 59. On the early modern awareness of the limitations of confession under torture, see Donne's Fourteenth Meditation in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.

29. The most detailed account of Cranmer's final days appears in Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 554–605.

30. Cited in MacCulloch, 603. On the problem of determining intentionality in public confession, see Janet E. Halley, "Heresy, Orthodoxy, and the Politics of

Religious Discourse: The Case of the English Family of Love," in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 316–19 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

31. On the disjunction between outward behavior and internal beliefs in scaffold confessions, see Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 6–7. And for a discussion of the problematic relationship of external authority and individual faith, see also Claire McEachern, *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590–1612* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 67–72.

32. On confession in Foxe as a "privileged kind of discourse" that reveals the conscience, see Marsha S. Robinson, *Writing the Reformation: Actes and Monuments and the Jacobean History Play* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 62.

33. For a discussion of the difficulty of identifying true martyrs in theological polemic, see Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 339–41.

34. Unless otherwise noted, citations of *Hamlet* are taken from Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet*, Arden Shakespeare, 2nd ser. (London: Methuen, 1982). Citations from passages not included in the 2nd Arden are taken from Paul Bertram and Bernice W. Kliman, eds., *The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio* (New York: AMS Press, 1991). For a discussion of interiority and exteriority and scaffold confessions, see Maus, 11; and Peter Lake and Michael Questier, "Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric Under the Gallows: Puritans, Romanists and the State in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 153 (1996): 64–107.

35. On amendment of life being a requirement of a good confession in the late medieval period, see Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 120–23, and 132.

36. As part of the rite of confession, satisfaction underwent a dramatic reorientation during the English Reformation. For an analysis of the relationship between these changes and early modern revenge tragedy, see Heather Hirschfeld, "Compulsions of the Renaissance," in *Shakespeare Studies* 33 (2005): 112–13.

37. On Calvinist pressure to determine election or reprobation, see Baird Tipson, "A Dark Side of Seventeenth-Century English Protestantism: The Sin against the Holy Spirit," *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984): 301–30.

38. William Perkins, *A treatise tending vnto a declaration whether a man be in the estate of damnation or in the estate of grace* (London, 1590), A3v; the original is printed in italics.

39. The Prayer Book instructs ministers to exhort the congregation to receive communion and thereby reinforces the ecclesiastical expectation of receiving communion; see *The booke of common praier*, Mviir.

40. Tambling, 92.

41. At the turn of the seventeenth century, private confession became the subject of debate in Cambridge and London, primarily as a result of avant-garde conformists like Andrewes; see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), esp. 110–11 and 221–22.

42. I explore the implications of this debate in the context of Shakespeare in "A Reconciled Maid: A Lover's Complaint and Confessional Practices in Early Modern England," in *Critical Essays on A Lover's Complaint: Suffering Ecstasy*, ed. Shirley Sharon-Zisser, 79–90 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

43. On the connection between "disappointed" and sacramental confession, see Jenkins, 220.

44. For a discussion of the Ghost's faith in the Catholic sacrament of Extreme Unction, a traditional rite that contains sacramental absolution, see Andrew Gurr, *Hamlet and the Distracted Globe* (Sussex: Sussex University Press, 1978), 71.

45. Shakespeare's knowledge of the retention of a reformed model of private confession and confessors in evangelical Protestantism remains unclear. On the subject of ritual confession in Lutheran theology, see Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), and his subsequent article, "Private Confession and the Lutherization of Sixteenth-Century Nördlingen," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 36 (2005): 1063–86.

46. Roland Mushat Frye, "Prince Hamlet and the Protestant Confessional," *Theology Today* 39 (1982): 35 and 32. This argument is incorporated in "Gertrude's Mirror of Confession," in his *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 151–66.

47. Maus, 1.

48. This tension between Hamlet's inward feelings and speech is not registered in the First Folio's version of Hamlet's first speech to his mother which Jenkins adopts in his conflated text. Instead of the Folio's reading of "good mother," the Second Quarto reads "coold mother," and thereby suggests that Hamlet struggles to contain his true feelings regarding her marriage to Claudius (1.2.76).

49. Paul A. Kottman, "The Limits of *Mimesis*: Risking Confession in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Studies* (Japan) 42 (2004): 57.

50. The prominence of secrets in the theatrical space has been the subject of numerous critical studies; see Coddon, 51–71; Mark Thornton Burnett, "The 'Heart of My Mystery': *Hamlet* and Secrets," in *New Essays on Hamlet*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett, 35 (New York: AMS Press, 1994); Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 229–72; and Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion, and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 26–28.

51. On the confessional aspects of King Hamlet's murder, see Tambling, 73–76, and Freeman, 253.

52. John Bale, *The seconde part of the image of both churches after the most wonderfull and heavenly revelacyon of Saynt Johan the Evangelyst* (Antwerp, 1545), 135v.

53. John Kerrigan observes that emulation and imitation represent common themes in early classical and early modern revenge tragedy; see John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 16–17.

54. On the connections between Claudius's penitential prayer and the Church of England's conception of private repentance, see Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 185–86.

55. Anthony Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), 126. On another interpretation of the Catholic undertones of Claudius's prayer, see Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan Hamlet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 124–25.

56. On medieval and early modern understandings of conscience, see John S. Wilks, "The Discourse of Reason and the Erroneous Conscience in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Studies* 18 (1986): 117–44.

57. Hamlet's judgment of others is more forceful in the First Folio: he justifies his treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by remarking, "Why man, they did make loue to this imployment" (5.2.57); and he explicitly connects his "perfect conscience" to the killing of Claudius by rhetorically asking, "is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arme?" (5.2.67–68).

58. Morris, 56, brackets in original. For a precursor of this interpretation, see J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 256.

59. The meaning of "assume" in this line has been the subject of critical debate. Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* uses it to illustrate the meaning of "assume" as "To take to oneself in appearance only, to pretend to possess; to pretend, simulate, feign" (def. 8). For a reading of "assume" as a reference to the practice of virtue, see Jenkins, 329.

60. For a discussion of the significance of Hamlet's roles as scourge and God's minister, see Fredson Bowers, *Hamlet as Minister and Scourge and Other Studies in Shakespeare and Milton* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 98.

61. Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 242.

62. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), 42.

63. In his recent literary biography of Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt imagines a situation somewhat analogous to the doctrinal tension present in *Hamlet*, hypothesizing that John Shakespeare may have been simultaneously both a Catholic and Protestant; see *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 102. If Greenblatt's theory is correct, the collapse of the effectiveness of ritual in *Hamlet* suggests that Shakespeare considered such a position to be ultimately untenable, a realization that John Shakespeare, if his so-called "spiritual testament" is to be held as authentic, had arrived at before his death.

64. Mullaney, 91. Social anthropologists have challenged this interpretation of ritual; see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 182–96. Yet in representations of ritual in early modern English drama, ritual and authority are frequently connected.

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