The topic of Shakespeare and religion has been a perennial one, though since the recent “turn to religion” in historical and literary scholarship it has come to the foreground. In every era, the treatment of this subject has used the available critical and scholarly discourses to make sense of the dramatist’s awareness of, relation to, and use of religious beliefs, religious culture, and religious conflicts from both historically specific and transhistorical points of view. In an era in which history-of-ideas scholarship was prominent, investigations of theological and philosophical elements in the plays could be pursued independent of social, political, or economic history. During and after the heyday of cultural materialist and new historicist criticism, it was impossible to ignore the affiliations of religious traditions, beliefs, and ideas with specific social, political, and economic realities. Now, in the wake of postmodern philosophy and theology, it is inevitable that scholar-critics consider, within a variety of historical frames, the deep religious and philosophical issues surfacing in early modern religious culture at a time of religiocultural conflict many find relevant to contemporary religious struggles and awareness.

In 2004 we published “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies,” an essay that gave significant attention to the ways in
which recent Shakespearean scholarship had readdressed the topic of religion and the dramatist’s relationship to the religious culture(s) of his time. This essay has evidently helped to stimulate subsequent conversations in the field, including three sessions at the 2007 convention of the Renaissance Society of America and a seminar at the 2007 Shakespeare Association of America. The individual essays in this collection were first presented in shorter form in either of these two venues. All are by specialists in the field, and the collection combines historical and theological/philosophical perspectives as well as early modern and postmodern contexts to interpret the place of religion and religious issues in Shakespearean drama.

We have chosen to arrange the essays in this collection not by the rough chronological order of the Shakespeare canon but rather in two sections corresponding to their emphases—the first on historical analyses of the religious material in the plays, the second on postmodern theological, ethical, and philosophical interpretation of the dramas. Those scholars who attempt to situate Shakespeare’s plays within their immediate historical contexts usually attempt to use the religious and philosophical vocabularies of the time, even as they bring modern critical methods to bear in their interpretations. Those who use modern philosophy and postmodern theology to interpret Shakespeare attempt to use Shakespearean texts to think through issues that have contemporary urgency, thus, in a sense, assuming that it is possible to see Shakespeare as addressing perennial theological and philosophical problems that unite his time with ours. Those who concentrate on the early modern contexts of the dramas emphasize the distance of that historical moment, even as they assume the importance and value for modern (and postmodern) readers of understanding it. Contributors to this collection gravitate toward the early modern or postmodern historical polarities, though all of them share the belief that the Shakespearean texts and what can be said about them or through a discussion of them have both general and specific relevance to our world. The more theoretically charged discussions of the plays are not innocent of history, and the more historically grounded ones are influenced by literary and cultural theory—in some cases, by postmodern philosophy and theology.
In examining the intellectual work done by the individual essays in this collection, we come up against the distinctness of two basic approaches to the religious: the first, most clearly embodied in those analyses that focus upon the relationship of Shakespearean texts to their immediate local or general cultural contexts, sees religion and sectarian religious differences and conflicts as part of cultural, social, and sociopolitical history; the second treats the religious as a transhistorical reality that enables us to think thoughts we otherwise would not be able to formulate or to treat a writer such as Shakespeare as a religious thinker whose insights could transcend their own cultural matrix. One of the contributors to this collection, Julia Lupton, has elsewhere argued that the current “turn to religion” in literary study has made clear that “religion is not identical with culture” and that “it is a testing ground for struggles between the universal and the particular,” that it is “a form of thinking.” She argues that “religion names one strand of those forms of human interaction that resist localization and identification with a specific time, place, nation, or language, installing elements of thought that stand out from the very rituals and practices designed to transmit but also to neutralize them.” This is a timely reminder of some of the limits, and shortcomings, of new historicist and cultural materialist analyses. Fortunately, however, even when their interpretations are most historically specific, the scholars in this collection offer ways of thinking about Shakespeare and religion that open out onto the broader field of experience and understanding toward which Lupton points.

The two methodological orientations actually lead to some common conclusions. That is, both theory-centered interpretation and historical scholarship rather consistently point to the multiple ways in which the playwright dismantles religious practices only to end in a position, paradoxically, that still can be termed “religious.” Both theory-centered interpretation and more distinctly historical scholarship are on the cusp, as it were, of developing a new and surprisingly compatible understanding of this simultaneous binding and unbinding of religion in the plays, an understanding that challenges the still standard Enlightenment divisions between the religious and the secular, faith and reason, the transcendent and the immanent.
The notable difference in methodological orientation might be in how these distinct forms of scholarship began to arrive at these similar conclusions. For the historically oriented critic, the results can be traced back to assaults on the Whig interpretation of English history. Historians writing about early modern England have reexamined the religious dynamics of the period, questioned the bottom-up theory of religious change, and emphasized the ways that residual, dominant, and emergent religious cultures coexisted in unstable hybrid forms. This hybridity long has posed a challenge for scholars, but again, in addition to this collection of essays there seems to be a recent trend toward developing new language and paradigms to understand this. Jean-Christophe Mayer states that Shakespeare’s plays “have the power to pose pressing questions but also to allow potential contradictions to remain. This is a logic which is largely alien to us.” Beatrice Groves argues: “Only once we have come to recognize the influence of the competing strands of Christianity on theatrical presentation in this period will we understand how religion was assimilated into the ostensibly secular drama of early-modern England.”

 Literary scholars have been particularly influenced by the historical reexamination of the often marginalized history of early modern English Catholicism, and Shakespeareans have been unusually preoccupied with the question of Shakespeare’s religious identity: whether he remained committed to a familial Catholicism, retained only an attachment to some of its enduring cultural forms, was a “church papist,” was a Protestant, or became a skeptic or agnostic about things religious. The first group of essays in this collection try to treat Shakespearean plays in this immediate and newly complex historical and religious context. They take a long view of the religious inheritance of early modern secular drama, highlighting both residual Catholic and newer reformist elements of the culture. All the essays are scrupulously cautious about embracing calls for “Catholic” Shakespeare. In that, they are aligned with Groves when she suggests that some calls for a Catholic Shakespeare are infused by a now common desire to find some identifiable “exciting marginality” in Shakespeare. Perhaps the central “theoretical” point of our 2004 essay was to warn against the overuse of the term and concept of “otherness” or “alterity” without an awareness of how complexly that term is bound to the religious. Correspondingly, the essays here all portray the
dramatist as a religious skeptic who was critical of his own religiously conflicted society and also both intellectually and emotionally attached to some of the features of the “old religion” as he sought ways to translate some of them into psychologically and ethically powerful theater. As suggested, Shakespeare’s critique of or skepticism about religion, again, never breaks completely from what can be understood as religious impulses, but those religious impulses are not easily described by traditional markers such as “Catholic” or “Protestant” or even “skepticism,” as John D. Cox recently has shown.\(^7\)

The more theoretically oriented critics in this collection arrive at similar conclusions, primarily, but not exclusively, from an engagement with Continental philosophy and, in particular, with the later work of Jacques Derrida. In a collection intended primarily for early modernists and Shakespeareans, this engagement with Derrida still requires some explication. Derrida’s deconstruction is mainly (and provocatively) concerned with ontology, the philosophical study of what is or what exists. Deconstruction focuses on the ancient ontological tension between Being and non-Being, a tension that for many should not even be a tension. Western thought always has tried to purge the very notion of non-Being or the notion that there is something other than or outside of Being. For there to be non-Being, the pre-Socratic Parmenides first suggested in his poem “On Nature,” implies some minimal participation in Being. To talk of the being of non-Being, then, is to talk nonsense; correspondingly, to talk of something “other” is also nonsense because that other will always be some version of what we already know and therefore not other in any thoroughgoing way. Nonetheless, the notion of the other or an otherwise than Being continues to exert an incredible pull on human thought and activity. Any serious talk of justice, to take the critical example, always involves a “justice” that cannot be fully realized, one that can be only gestured toward rather than achieved. Any talk of justice always involves a justice yet to come, something absolutely other that haunts us but cannot be reached.

One of the forms in which the call of something other than Being has always manifested its (non)presence is religion. Derrida came to recognize the connection between his philosophy and a whole set of religious discourses, including those in the wide-ranging tradition of
negative theology. Negative theology works vigorously to think of and pray to “God” without imposing any anthropomorphic or other distortion on this divine other. The task is not easy. Negative theology requires extraordinary rigor and patience in dealing with contradiction and paradox. This rigor is best expressed, perhaps, in Meister Eckhart’s short prayer: “I pray God to rid me of God.” But Derrida also always made it quite clear that a distinction was absolutely necessary between deconstruction and negative theologies. Any negative theology, he argued, no matter how rigorous and exacting, always has a specifically divine other in mind, whereas deconstruction dreams of an “absolute heterogeneity that unsettles all the assurances of the same.”8 Like Shakespeare, Derrida is interested in religion stripped of religion, a “religion without religion,” that presses for a sustained attention to otherness, to non-Being, to that which cannot be thought—in short, the impossible.

What the contributors in the second part of this collection assume, then, is that the analogous relationship between Derrida’s deconstruction and any number of religious practices provides a useful calculus to understand the “mystery” of Shakespeare’s religion: the playwright’s seemingly systematic and fastidious refusal to identify with certainty and clarity his relationship (if any) to a divine other. Derrida himself used Shakespeare’s spiritual dimensions to explicate his own positions. As we wrote in 2004, Derrida turned “to Hamlet and Hamlet’s ghost, and he relies on Shakespeare to create a word, ‘hauntology,’ that helps describe the irreducible space between religion as anthropological residue and as something absolutely other. Although, from one point of view, this might be an example of savvy nescience, it is a space that some scholars and critics are beginning to occupy as they readdress religion, religious traditions, religious culture, and religious agents in their studies of the early modern era—a period that is and is not like our own.”9 Derrida was drawn to Hamlet because the play is able to address the “spirit” of King Hamlet’s ghost without seizing possession of the spirit in a violent gesture that renders “it” either this or that, something of this world that our reason can manage effectively. Importantly, this spirit of King Hamlet is not an inconsequential, ephemeral distraction in the world of the play but a driving force, blurring the lines, again, between material and immaterial, transcendent and immanent.10
Derrida and Shakespeare both press religiously against religion, so hard in fact that “religion” seems to collapse into an immanent materialism, prompting Michael Whitmore, following Spinoza, to argue recently for a Shakespeare who is a “dramaturgical monist.” Indeed, one could ask if religion as a category is still even useful. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida was not addressing what might be called the religious or the religiously minded. On the contrary, he was writing specifically for Marxist thinkers who deplored his repeated attempts to raise the specter of non-Being. From a Marxist perspective, to think of something “other” than or outside Being is to engage in potentially dangerous idealism that distracts our attention from the material conditions of existence.

Derrida was trying to remind Marxist thinkers that Marxism/materialism has its own ghosts and a sort of spiritualism (“A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism” is the first line of the *Manifesto*), that the tension between Being and non-Being persists in all Western metaphysics, including Marxism. Despite its best efforts to exorcise ghosts and purge the nonsense of non-Being, a nonpresence of an unrealizable better and more just world animates Marxism, and this “spirit” of Marxism is what can be retained—in a somewhat ghostly fashion—after the events of 1989. This attention to non-Being is not a kind of dangerous idealism but a more accurate ontological take on Marxism, *what it in fact is*, a take that includes its animating but impossible-to-grasp spirit. Derrida insists that this attention to non-Being is still an ontology (*haftology* is a pun on the French pronunciation of *ontologie*):

This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the “to be,” assuming that it is a matter of Being in the “to be or not to be,” but nothing is less certain). It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. . . . Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between “to be” and “not to be”? *Hamlet* already began with the expected return of the dead King. . . . Oh, Marx’s love for Shakespeare!12
Derrida thus located in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its animating spirit—King Hamlet’s ghost—a way to articulate a new ontological understanding, one he hoped would be conducive to a spirit of Marxism if not exactly in line with the strict materialist ontology sought after by Marxist thinkers.

Not long after the publication of our 2004 essay, Ewan Fernie edited an inspired collection of essays, *Spiritual Shakespeares*, including an elegant introduction that realized in part the paradoxical potential for Derrida’s “spiritualism” to reinvigorate Shakespearean materialist criticism. He rightly cautioned, though, that if one is going to draw attention to the analogies between Shakespearean spirituality and Derridean deconstruction, the Derridean tendency to hint at infinite deferral needs to be balanced by the Marxist/materialist critique of that tendency. Like Derrida, Shakespeare is driven by “the impossible,” but in Shakespeare “the impossible assumes specific form and invades the reality of the poems and the plays time and again.”13 In short, Shakespeare very often “contravenes the French thinker’s fastidious deferral of the absolute into a region beyond the real world of history.”14 Shakespeare is capacious enough to stage the Derridean gesture and its Marxist critique.

There is much truth to this claim, and it is elegantly expressed in Fernie’s introduction. But it is difficult for us to see how Fernie’s stance does not ultimately point us back in the direction we started—that is, toward a position that translates the strangeness of religion into something else entirely: spirituality, for example. Is Shakespearean drama really spiritual but not religious? Fernie writes: “Though it is religion’s heart and inspiration, spirituality precedes religion and may well take place outside it. Spirituality is an experience of truth, and of living in accordance with truth, but it is concerned with the truth not of this world but of a world that has not yet and perhaps never will come to be. Spirituality is a mode of opposition to what is.”15

It is not clear to us that the term *religion* can be dispensed with so readily in dealing either with the early modern past or with the present. As already suggested, many of the essays in this collection seek to address the “heart and inspiration” of religion, but none deems it necessary to detach the heart and inspiration of religion from religion itself—whatever historical and institutional forms it may take.
While it may now be a common habit to decry “institutional” religion to get at the heart and inspiration of religion, it simply seems a critical and scholarly mistake to turn our attention away from the history of established religions and religious institutions to get at this “heart and inspiration.” The dialectic between the two is the thing. For Derrida, the relationship between religion in terms of the history of revelation and its “heart” is an aporia that should be respected, not somehow solved. Shakespeare is both a living thinker accessible for “presentist” concerns, as Fernie suggests, and a critical interlocutor between the ancient past, the medieval and early modern world, our current times, and the future. And he does most of his dramatic thinking in religious terms that cannot be disconnected from the long and rich history of religious practices and set of interpretations that were available to him.

All the essays in this collection show that at its most profound, Shakespeare’s dramatic religious questioning presses against what we normally tend to think of as constituting religion—its dogmas, institutions, beliefs, and practices—to the point where one is asked to question what, if anything, “religion” can mean. The lines between secular and sacred, transcendent and immanent blur so continuously that we begin to doubt our own vocabulary and historical paradigms in our attempts to describe the strange otherness of Shakespeare’s religion, the way in which he can, again, deliberately and systematically strip away the layers of religion until nothing is left—nothing except the desire for something more or better that cannot be fully disentangled from religion.

Perhaps the figure that emerges most distinctly to clarify this religious unbinding of religion is Job. As Lupton writes here, the Jobean text illuminates a “force beyond human sociality that is drawn into the framework of civility not by trauma itself (the loss of wealth, health, and offspring), but by the failure of neighbor love, understood locally and globally, to effect its own rebindings.” This force is at the very heart of religious experience, and it is this religious experience—a religious experience tied “to the event of its own disarticulation”—that fascinates Shakespeare and produces some of his most compelling and often disturbing work. We find it particularly useful, then, to link our two sets of essays here with two different essays on Job, one more distinctly “historical” by Hannibal Hamlin, and one more distinctly “theoretical” by
Lupton. This ancient narrative reveals religion pushed to its extremes, to its own destruction. But of course one would be hard pressed to describe the Jobean text as nonreligious.

Part One

In the first essay of the collection’s first part, Robert Miola re-explores two familiar scholarly topics in a new way: the allusions, by way of Samuel Harsnett’s polemical distortions, to William Weston’s exorcisms in King Lear and the shadow presence of Henry Garnet as an evil Jesuit “equivocator” in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. With regard to the first case, he uses Weston’s biography to illustrate that priest’s use of the situation of exorcism to effect a psychotherapeutic pastoral cure of a suffering sinner. Instead of being a malicious trickster, William Weston is depicted as a caring minister whose concern for his suffering fellow human being is analogous to Edgar’s care of the blinded and despairing Gloucester in Shakespeare’s tragedy. In the second case, Miola deals more directly not only with the distorted critical presentation of Jesuit equivocation’s relationship to Macbeth but also with the ways in which the myth of the evil Jesuit has permeated both English historiography and critical interpretations of that play. He broadens our understanding of Garnet’s thinking and of the carefully limited uses of equivocation and mental reservation by embattled Catholics in late Elizabethan and Jacobean England, tracing some of the historical and intellectual roots of this thinking and freeing it from its simplistic portrayal in the language of the prosecutors in Gunpowder Treason trials and in subsequent and long-lived anti-Jesuit polemic.

In writing against the grain not only of mainstream historiography but also of Shakespearean criticism, which often reflects the anti-Catholic and anti-Jesuit prejudices hardwired into English culture, Miola rehabilitates the images of Weston and Garnet, whose social and religious functioning was decidedly more benign and pastorally sensitive than their polemical caricatures would lead us to believe. His essay allows us to see the persecuted Catholic figure from the inside, as it were, committed to a universally understandable pursuit of human sociality rather
than a religious war. His nuanced approach to Weston’s missionary behavior creates an interesting friction with Harsnett’s depiction of the priest-exorcist and complicates our understanding of *King Lear*. Miola examines sympathetically Garnet’s carefully circumscribed endorsement of equivocation for reasons of protecting one’s life or the life of another as well as the Jesuit’s anguish over the conflict between confessional secrecy and the need to avoid misprision of treason. A politically loyal Shakespeare may have responded imaginatively to the demonizing of Garnet in the Gunpowder Treason trials and in the subsequent government propaganda, but Shakespeare need not be used to validate anti-Catholic myths that have had brutal consequences in his time and later.

Gary Kuchar’s essay on the politics of ceremony in *Titus Andronicus* focuses on the broken and interrupted ceremonies in the first and fifth acts of the play to show how the play breaks the classical association of decorum and morality as it points to the instabilities and contradictions within the Elizabethan religious settlement. Using as touchstones Cranmer’s “Of Ceremonies” and “precisian” or Puritan critiques of Anglican ceremonialism, he demonstrates how the play’s Roman features are used, not primarily to associate Catholicism with paganism, but rather to expose the ways official Elizabethan culture was politically and religiously self-divided and incoherent: “Titus’s Rome mirrors, albeit in a distortedly hyperbolic form, how Elizabethan liturgical policies threatened to reiterate the social antagonisms they were designed to mitigate.” The 1549 and 1559 Prayer Books and the Elizabethan religious settlement were incoherent attempts to cover over cultural self-division. In identifying the “politics of ceremony” as central to Shakespeare’s play, Kuchar discusses the problematic relationship of the sacred and profane, the civilized and the barbaric, in both the fictional Rome of the drama and the all-too-immediate world of late Elizabethan England, making a disturbing and disorienting connection between both ancient and contemporary Roman violence and that of Elizabethan culture.

Kuchar argues that Shakespeare dramatically, and counterintuitively, associates indecorum with the ethical, here and in many of his later plays. Rather than accepting the traditional Ciceronian association of decorum with justice or the religious use of decorous ceremonialism as the basis for a kind of social order, Shakespeare dismantles these constructs to
uncover the violence and barbarity they precipitate—those religious state murders, for example, that were justified as punishments for treason. Kuchar argues that the formal operations of indecorum encourage genuine political thought, leading the audience to recognize not only the conflicts between individuals and society but the conflicts within both individuals and society. The dramatist emerges as one who is neither recusant nor conformist, but rather religiously, ethically, and politically critical. Kuchar gives the dramatist’s stance a final religious quality when he states: “For Shakespeare, genuine ethical action seems more in sympathy with St. Paul’s conception of Christian life as a form of divine foolishness than with the ostensibly Ciceronian values of order and decency seen by Tudor authorities to be voiced in 1 Corinthians.”

Kuchar’s essay shows how intensely self-conscious Shakespeare and Elizabethan culture were about the competing strands of Christianity, the ways in which the playwright and his audience could meditate on rather than simply engage in religious war and polemics. The “orgy of indecorum” in Titus Andronicus that demystifies almost all religious ritual, Kuchar suggests, stems from a deep awareness on the part of Elizabethans that Tudor authorities could engage in torture and barbaric rituals even as they condemned Catholics for such practices—all the while remaining within a certain broader religious framework. The play is decidedly unwilling to pit one religious stance against the other because the playwright seems acutely aware that doing so would nullify the underlying purpose of religion itself—although what that underlying force of religion is is decidedly unclear.

Richard McCoy’s reading of Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors concentrates on the play in the context of its performance as part of the Gray’s Inn Revels in 1594, in which the festive atmosphere of misrule encouraged a debunking of magic and enchantment. The first recorded review of a Shakespeare play, then, found in the Gesta Grayorum, was not good. A highly stylized “Masque of Amity” quickly followed at the Gray’s Inn to help calm the audience reaction to this “Night of Errors.” McCoy deftly shows that Comedy of Errors had the “last laugh” in this short-lived artistic competition because the play’s creation of feelings of goodwill and harmony reproduce the feeling of communion associated with a “Eucharistic miracle.” The essay moves, by way of Coleridge’s notion of the
“willing suspension of disbelief,” Reformation debates about the Eucharist, Keats’s idea of “negative capability,” and a reconsideration of the play’s Pauline Ephesian resonances, to a double vision of its religious elements: on the one hand conjuration and exorcism are mocked, but on the other the play, like a medieval miracle play such as the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, reaffirms the miraculous even as it effortlessly restores amity. After all, Shakespeare’s original audiences were religiously heterogeneous, and many Elizabethans and early Jacobean practiced a hybridized religion with elements of the old and the new faiths. As we can see in the essays by Miola and Kuchar, Shakespeare opts not to exploit some of the possibilities for anti-Catholic satire in the situation and action of the play; instead, he recuperates, as he does in later dramas, some of the aura of the miraculous implicit in the “old religion.” McCoy implicitly argues, then, for Shakespeare’s continuing attachment to residual Catholic culture even as he portrays him as a skeptic escaping religious dogmatism. But what McCoy identifies as at work in the play’s long-term success is its ability to inspire affections at the core of any understanding of the “religious.”

Working with Stanley Cavell’s notion that, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, “acknowledgment” is central to the particular relation of characters to others, Sarah Beckwith in her essay turns to that dramatist’s post-tragic dramas or romances to explore the presence in them of the languages of penance as a vital component of Shakespeare’s theater of recognition. Focusing on *Cymbeline*, she reexamines the familiar critical perception of “the comedy of forgiveness” in the late romances, relating elements of the traditional sacrament of penance to the dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation dramatized in these plays. Not unlike McCoy, she argues that the final social reconciliations result in a “Eucharistic community” in which personal renewal and societal recreation are related. She reveals the richness and importance of Shakespeare’s sacramental language and its dramatic uses, specifically of the playwright’s transformation of the inherited languages of forgiveness.

Taking the long view of penance and confession by going back to the medieval understandings of the sacrament, Beckwith also looks at the work of important Protestant reformers to highlight the social dimension of both confession and communion. At the same time, she argues that the change from auricular confession (addressed to another
person, the priest) to a general confession or to private confessional prayer to God left a kind of social void in the dynamics of reconciliation that became “an opportunity for Shakespearean theater” to fill and dramatize. In the late plays human bonds need to be renewed. Beckwith uses speech-act theory to deal with the phenomenon of passionate utterance, which she sees as crucial to the romances. In the last scene of *Cymbeline*, she discerns five confessions through which community is restored: “the deathbed confession of the queen; the long, cluttered, self-interrupting confession of Giacomo; the confession of Pisanio, completed by the outburst of Guiderius; and the confession of Belarius.” She sees these confessions as “part of a shared story” and confessional speech, as Augustine defined it, as a gift of language that returns to an original giver, God. In her account, Shakespeare’s sacramentalist dramaturgy kept him in touch with a religious and cultural past that many of his contemporaries found it necessary to reject.

Beckwith’s sacramentalist reading, oriented toward the medieval world, recasts and reenergizes religion—and social relations—in a historical moment when religious institutions are violently shifting. In her essay we can see the link between a specific religious practice, confession, and the heart and inspiration of that religious practice, the desire to renew always fragile human bonds. Part of Shakespeare’s enduring appeal is his ability to stage this difficult-to-grasp and ever-shifting process as acutely experienced in his world, a process that, in turn, cannot be completely disentangled from an ancient past or our contemporary world. It is possible, in our post-post-Enlightenment world, relatively free from a widespread insistence that religion can be clearly identified and walled off in its strangeness, that we are just now learning to see and hear what Shakespeare can reveal to us about this transhistorical process of binding and unbinding.

In reexamining the much-discussed relationship of *King Lear* to the book of Job, which centers on questions of human suffering and providential justice, Hannibal Hamlin introduces more intertexts for an understanding of the play than one usually finds in critical discussions of this drama as he illuminates the crucial religious and ethical issues at stake in the play. Referring to the common practice of connecting biblical texts with one another, he brings into the discussion the Epistle of James,
which discusses the Job story. He also makes use of John Calvin’s *Sermons on Job*, along with the dedicatory epistle written by the work’s English translator, Arthur Golding; John Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s “An Apologie of Raymond Sebonde”; and Robert Parsons’s *A Booke of Christian Exercise*, in the popular expurgated Protestant edition produced by Edmund Bunny. Using convincing verbal evidence, he demonstrates Shakespeare’s employment of the important themes as well as the specific language found in these works.

Hamlin’s explorations of Shakespeare’s “reading practice and the gestation process of his plays” result in a deeper understanding of the interpretive cruxes of this drama. He shows how Shakespeare responds to the theological and moral problems of the Job story—particularly those of unmerited suffering and of a tyrannical and/or absent God. Although Hamlin also cites some of Luther’s thoughts on Job, he argues that Calvin’s extensive interpretations of the Job story influenced the playwright more. By the end of the essay, however, the Protestant reading of *Lear* is undermined as Shakespeare emerges as a religious skeptic addressing a religiously heterogeneous audience on whom the final burden of interpretation rested. Shakespeare insists, as Hamlin puts it, on “probing the anxieties about Job that the reformer was not quite able to argue away.” The play, in other words, pushes us closer to the Job text rather than to one side or another of religious polemic.

**Part Two**

In the first essay in the second part of this collection, Lupton (like Hamlin) turns to Shakespeare’s use of the figure of Job to explore Shakespeare’s religion, and her more distinctly theoretical findings corroborate much of Hamlin’s historicism. Lupton argues that Shakespeare turns to the book of Job, not for a “positive religious program,” but for a figure of “commutativity” whose cries of suffering and protest point toward a universality older than even Paul’s promise, a universality disturbingly marked by its open wounds and scars in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Timon of Athens*. According to Lupton, it is not simply our ability to empathize with Job’s pain that suggests this universality.
Rather, the Jobean text recalls minimal claims of obligation, care, and respect that are due a sufferer when more elaborated institutional forms of addressing his misfortunes have been destroyed or disabled. That is, the Jobean text illuminates a “force beyond human sociality that is drawn into the framework of civility not by trauma itself (the loss of wealth, health, and offspring) but by the failure of neighbor love to effect its own rebindings.” This force is at the very heart of religious experience, and it is this religious experience—a religious experience tied “to the event of its own disarticulation”—that fascinates Shakespeare and produces some of his most compelling and often disturbing work. As suggested earlier in our introduction, Job is perhaps the figure in its various Shakespearean renditions that, as Lupton says, “challenges the norms” of both the religious and the secular not to land on one side or the other but to call us “to the work of rebuilding such norms anew.”

Abraham is, in many respects, a figure comparable to Job. In “Richard II, Abraham, and the Abrahamic,” Ken Jackson suggests that Shakespeare’s political theology, the extent to which theological concepts underwrite and determine political understandings, can be understood not in terms preferred by the critical tradition that distances itself from religion—the “King’s two bodies” or the “law-in-parliament”—but in terms of a narrative that points to the very heart and origins of the “Abrahamic” religions: Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Jackson takes seriously both Gaunt’s and Richard’s expressed commitment to a divine other that cannot be approached or fully comprehended. Both are shocked, however, when that expressed commitment asks them to give everything, absolutely, all at once. Gaunt is asked to give up his son, Bolingbroke, and the sonless “sun king” Richard II is asked to give up his divinely sanctioned rule. In these scenes, Shakespeare conjures a form of sovereignty that is based on absolute selflessness of the sort that exceeds our conception of self-sacrifice. Shakespeare’s sophisticated return to the still relevant narrative of Genesis 22, pitting a commitment to an absolute, unknowable other against a commitment to a loved one, also explains the strange and seemingly comic figure of York, on whom the play’s politics pivot. York’s attempted “sacrifice” of his own son, Aumerle, in the fifth act for defying the new king Henry IV is drawn straight from the cycle play renditions of Abraham and Isaac.
Lisa Freinkel addresses *Timon of Athens*, a critical text for us in that Shakespeare uses the word *religion* three times in that work, more than in any other play. Freinkel, too, reveals the strange way in which Shakespearean drama unsettles the line between transcendent and immanent, material and immaterial. She does so, however, in a rather idiosyncratic and brilliant fashion that manages, remarkably, to connect with other essays in the collection. Freinkel uses Buddhist thought and the work of William Empson, including that critic’s own Buddhist explorations. She suggests that what we find in *Timon of Athens* is nothing less than the problem or paradox “of [Christian] dualism laid bare,” a problem that prompted Empson’s interest in Buddhism. In brief, the Christian God is utterly independent from his own creation, but for that creation to have meaning “he” must enter into it in some form. When God does enter his creation, though, he negates his own independence and thus disappears or empties himself into the impermanence of this world. This “embodiment” of God in the world is expressed, of course, in the mystery of the cross, but Empson is repulsed by a religion that relies on such sacrificial logic and is instead drawn to Buddhism because it eschews such “dualism.” Buddhism is religiously “indifferent” to the difference between Being (God) and outside or other than Being that is so often expressed in Christian thought.

Empson never published his manuscript on Buddhism, but Freinkel tracks his “Buddhist” thought in his reading of *Timon of Athens*, specifically of *Timon*’s dog. Empson notes that there are two contradictory uses of the word *dog* in the play: one suggests a flatterer and the other a snarling cynic. Freinkel points out there are also “two *gods* in *Timon*, just as there are two *dogs* in *Timon*.” This is no coincidence: the two senses of *dog* “precisely articulate the discontinuity central to the play’s vision of divinity.” The first god of the play is *Timon*’s god of giving. This god is forced to reveal his mortality, as his “divinity” is bound up in the temporal arc of the promise, one that is necessarily broken in the material world. The second god is money. This god is capable of leveling and exchanging everything, and it is visible. It is also indestructible, since money, in some sense, embodies the eternal. But this visible and eternal god can be known only through the eyes of a cynic—that is, etymologically speaking, the dog (as opposed to the flattering dog linked to the first god of *Timon*). It can
only be known cynically, as it were, in the world of material things that is, paradoxically, impermanent. As Freinkel writes, “There is no eternal life that isn’t also life that dies. There is no divinity—no buddha nature—apart from the frail appearance of all things.” Timon’s dog, then, is “not a symbol at all, but a cipher: a placeholder for a division—what Derrida might call a difference that cannot, by definition, be embodied.”

In what is in many respects a comparable critical gesture, Joan Linton employs the work of Walter Benjamin and Eric Santner to argue that the “absent presence” of Falstaff in Henry V constitutes something of a miracle of the everyday. Falstaff is resurrected throughout the play as various figures tell and retell his story, one that counters the official Tudor myth of Henry and reveals in Falstaff the abandoned “creaturely” life that sovereignty excludes. In Falstaff the audience discovers a “differently imagined redemptive future” than is available in Tudor mythology. Falstaff’s continued (non)presence is not that of a ghost but, in Santner’s terms, “part of a past” that, because it is unrecorded, “never achieved ontological consistency” and thus “in some sense has not yet been but remains stuck in a spectral, protocosmic dimension.” Falstaff’s continued return throughout the play, then, can be read as something of a counter-miracle. Linton, too, shows how Shakespeare completely blurs the lines between the material and the immaterial, the secular and the sacred, to the point that our standard use of those terms is practically useless: “In staging the passing of Falstaff, Shakespearean theater discovers the extraordinary amid the ordinary, the sacred in the everyday, the miracle that never appears, yet to which one can bear witness, embedded as it is in the fabric of lived historical experience.”

The way in which Shakespeare thinks through rather than around religion is suggested as well in James A. Knapp’s “Penitential Ethics in Measure for Measure.” Knapp argues that, despite the title, Shakespeare’s play resists settling for a prescriptive ethics, a system where a particular sin must be compensated for by a particular action. “Rather than parrot Christian views on repentance, ethics, justice, and mercy,” Shakespeare “reserves judgment on every system that would proscribe, or prescribe, a particular course of action” and rejects the “most obvious correctives to Vienna’s morally depraved state—the Puritan Angelo’s law, the ascetic Isabella’s withdrawal, and ducal responsibility.” These correctives
determined by state law and religion are revealed to be life-denying delusions. Yet the corruption of a life guided by desire is shown to be equally untenable. Shakespeare deconstructs the systems on which both Angelo and Isabella rely, leaving them to face their experiences without the armor of a specific religious piety or state law. This reading resolves some of the tension in the play’s problematic ending by suggesting that the play takes seriously the transformations that Angelo and Isabella undergo. This interpretation, we note, does not negate religion but, as we have seen so many times so far, dismantles religion to press toward its inspiration and heart. This essay implies how deeply and seriously Shakespeare read the call in the Sermon on the Mount to “judge not that ye be not judged.” For Shakespeare, the “judgment of any course of action must be deferred to an inaccessible future.” Judgment is always retrospective, while ethical action is always looking forward to an unknown future. As Knapp shows, Shakespeare again points to the heart of scripture, but in a way that unsettles preconceived or predetermined interpretations of scripture. There is none of the political quietism here feared by Fernie and others, but a rapt attention to lived experience and the process of judgment.

In the early twentieth-first century, most European and American Shakespeare scholars are probably agnostic, atheistic, or religiously indifferent—hostile to confessional apologetics, as well as resistant to criticism that mystifies real-world economic, political, and social relations by accepting early modern religious languages and religious points of view as intellectual frameworks adequate to understanding the culture and the literature of a time distant from our own. Living in religiously pluralist or secular societies with intellectual elites that are rightly antagonistic to any manifestation of religious fundamentalism, but also uncomfortable with religion in general, they find it hard to take a fresh look at manifestations of the religious in the work of a dramatist whose openness to interpretation has facilitated modern secular understandings of his plays. If they deal with religious subject matter, they prefer to analyze it historically as just one feature of the cultural context of Shakespearean drama. The problem with this approach is that it does not allow us to take seriously the religious thought, beliefs, or crises that both energized and disturbed
Shakespeare when he wrote and that, in transformed shapes, still manifest themselves in our own world. In the wake of the current “turn to religion” in literary studies, however, and in response to the writings of postmodern theologians and philosophers, including Jacques Derrida in the final phase of his career, Shakespeare scholars have been more sympathetically responsive to the presence of the religious in that author’s work, if they have not also used it to think through perennial philosophical and religious issues of which we have become more aware. As the essays in this collection demonstrate, there are serious religious stakes for Shakespeare in his plays and for us in our scholarship.

Notes

The following are abbreviations used in chapter notes:

CRS Catholic Record Society  
EETS Early English Text Society


3. Ibid., 146.


5. Groves, *Texts and Traditions*, 188.

6. Ibid., 5.

7. For instance, Cox suggests we are not yet in a position to distinguish between a historically determined skeptical materialism and a hidden God in Shakespeare’s writing. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge*, 250.


15. Ibid., 9.

16. “Is revealability (Offenbarkheit) more originary than revelation (Offenbarung), and hence independent of all religion? Independent in the structures of its experience and in the analytics relating to them? Is this not the place in which ‘reflecting faith’ at least originates, if not this faith itself? Or, rather, inversely, would the event of revelation have consisted in revealability itself, and the origin of light, the originary light, the very invisibility of visibility?” Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 55.

17. For another version of this line of argument, see Arthur F. Marotti, “Shakespeare and Catholicism,” in Dutton, Findlay, and Wilson, *Theatre and Religion*, 218–41.