Shakespearean renunciation: asceticism and the early modern stage

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Dissertation

SHAKESPEAREAN RENUNCIATION:
ASCETICISM AND THE EARLY MODERN STAGE

by

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DEDICATION

To Carey Salerno, who somehow kept the whole ship afloat with love and patience, and
to the memory of my dear father, Joseph Salerno, whose poetry taught me to treasure
the “sacrament, each day/of our feet touching the floor.”
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the representation of ascetic renunciation in early modern drama, focusing in particular on the way asceticism functions as a tool of political agency. This study argues that the act of renunciation is essentially performative and public, directed outward to an audience whose responses the performer hopes to shape or direct. The specific political significance of ascetic acts varies according to the status and social position of those who perform and receive them, potentially functioning as a discourse both of resistance and of control. In early modern England, traditional asceticism’s association with heterodox catholicism lent it an extra-normative and subversive quality that found utility in acts of resistance. However, ascetic or renunciatory discourse could also be utilized in the exercise of power by monarchs, both as a discourse of legitimation and as an act of public image construction. To help explain this flexibility, this study utilizes the sociolinguistic theories of M.M. Bakhtin, V.N. Voloshinov, and Pierre Bourdieu, all of whom offer models for interpreting language in shifting contexts and across discursive fields.
The introduction defines asceticism as performative and potentially political, before tracing some of the relevant historical developments of asceticism from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century. Chapter One analyzes the representation of asceticism in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, focusing in particular on the character of Isabella, whose celibate vows place her in conflict with mechanisms of power. Chapter Two examines the literary representation of asceticism in both medieval and early modern contexts by reading Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in relation to its Chaucerian source material, *The Knight’s Tale*. Chapter Three shifts to an examination of ascetic postures and discourse by monarchs, considering first The Escorial, Philip II’s monastic palace, and then moving to a reading of Elizabeth I’s translation of the renunciatory *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. Chapter Four further pursues this intersection of kingship and asceticism with an analysis of ascetic discourse in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. The conclusion considers areas for further analysis of asceticism in early modern literature, including revenge tragedy and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. 
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INTRODUCTION

Renunciation takes many guises and serves many purposes. The impulse to turn away from the material or the worldly is not limited to a particular culture or geographic region nor to a particular moment in history. And though renunciation does not belong alone to the sphere of either the religious or the secular, ascetic acts are recognized as powerful by most of the world’s major religions, past and present. Because self-denial is invariably at odds with our fundamental biological impulses towards self-fulfillment, ascetic or renunciatory acts have always been most easily understood through the lens of the spiritual rather than the material. The appeal of ascetic behavior despite its antagonistic relationship to the genetic programming of self-preservation is universal enough that understanding its origins is a project for anthropologists as much as historians or theologians. The Lakota inipi ceremony, in which an individual withdraws into darkness to endure extremes of heat for the purposes of spiritual purification, is of a kind with the legendary fasting of the Buddha; they both speak to a shared belief that extremes of physical discomfort or pain presage spiritual exaltation. However, the symbolic power of asceticism need not be limited to purely religious contexts, for it can, and very often does, find utility as political action.

This dissertation will examine the nature of ascetic renunciation in the religious discourse of early modern England. As a literature thesis, its primary focus is literary: particularly, the way ascetic acts and attitudes are dramatized on the Shakespearean stage. However, toward this end I will also examine how ascetic acts, attitudes,
language, or renunciation found expression in the world beyond the theater, especially in political or subversive contexts. My aim, ultimately, is to dislodge asceticism from the sphere of the purely religious, and in doing so my study gradually moves away from the depictions of monastic clergy to the appropriation of ascetic language and attitudes in the secular contexts of kingship.

Before proceeding to the analysis of asceticism in early modern drama, however, it is necessary to define more specifically how the terms asceticism and renunciation will be used in this study.

**Asceticism in Theory and Practice**

On June 11, 1963, Thích Quảng Đức, a Malaysian Buddhist Monk, set himself on fire in the middle of a busy Saigon street to protest the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. A photograph depicting Đức stoically meditating as the flames consumed his flesh circulated around the world, drawing commentary from world leaders and the international media. To this day, it remains one of the most famous acts of political protest in modern history. Self-immolation, without question the most extreme and spectacular act on the ascetic spectrum, was in this case carried out as an act of political resistance rather than (or as well as) spiritual transcendence. These political ends explain the public context of the act. As Gavin Flood writes, asceticism at a fundamental level is always an act of performance, looking outward towards culture and tradition as much as inward to the soul:
Asceticism is always performed, which is to say always in the public domain (even when performed in privacy). One of the key features of performance is that it is public and can be observed. Asceticism is therefore performance because the reversal of the flow of the body is enacted within a community and tradition. Ascetic performance only makes sense in [that] context. Through performing asceticism the ascetic is performing tradition, and the performance of tradition is a public affair. But not only is ascetic performance public, it is also subjective or the subjective appropriation of tradition. (7)

Self-immolation draws power not only from its intersection with (in this case Buddhist) tradition, but through a transgressive radicalization of that tradition. Đúc’s act was also public and performative not merely in Flood’s sense of responding to tradition and culture, but in its exploitation of a new and limitless audience; material reality limits self-immolation to a single performance, but the reproductive and regenerative power of mass media allows for perpetual encores. And while we might recoil from this horrific act, judged against what Đúc himself hoped to achieve it can be judged as effective political speech: it brought the plight of Buddhists in Vietnam to global attention and directly led to international pressure on the Vietnamese government to institute reforms (Fierke 173).

One of the most common Chinese euphemisms for self-immolation, sheshen (“abandon the body”), is particularly telling, as it frames self-immolation not only as an
extreme example of mortification in which the body is made to suffer for the benefit of
the spirit, but also as an act of renunciation in which the flesh is turned away from or
rejected (Ben 9). The word sheshen is also used as an equivalent for the word chuijan,
“to leave one’s household”: that is, to become a monk or nun (Ben 10). This terminology
links self-immolation not only with an extreme ascetic ethos, but also with
institutionalized monasticism. Renouncing the world and renouncing the flesh form two
pillars of a larger ascetic framework, one that can be bent towards political as well as
religious ends.

Self-immolation is merely the most dramatic and violent example of the denial
of the needs of the flesh; still, even less conflagratory expressions of asceticism can have
political or social utility beyond spiritual self-fulfillment. Western ascetic traditions,
while they are historically pervasive, tend to be less extreme than Buddhism and other
eastern religions, at least in the realm of self-mortification. Christianity, despite its
powerful injunctions against suicide, has since its earliest days harbored a potent ascetic
strain, though not one that always embraced mortification of the flesh as orthodox.
While self-mortification did often find expression in early and medieval Christianity, it
never took the most radical forms such as the example of Buddhist self-immolation
above. Hair shirts were common enough in some monastic communities, and various
kinds of self-flagellation were practiced throughout the middle ages (Newman 96).
However, extreme forms of self-torment were as likely to be criticized as admired, and
there was never perfect agreement among various ascetic orders over the role of self-
inflicted pain in the pursuit of spiritual grace. Enthusiastic self-mortifiers such as the eleventh century Italian hermit Peter Damian stressed the need for spiritual atonement to be recorded on the flesh both in memory of Christ’s suffering and as a mimetic performance of divine judgment (Fulton 91-92). However, other medieval ascetics minimized the importance of or even rejected outright this kind of self-imposed bodily suffering. The Cistercians of the twelfth century, for example, rarely practiced or even wrote about self-flagellation, celebrating instead “patient endurance of sickness and pain” (Newman 96). Self-imposed suffering risked the sin of singularity: trusting in oneself to achieve salvation. As Martha Newman writes, Cistercian asceticism looked inward to the ordering of the will, especially in response to hardship and want:

[T]he Cistercians were certainly ascetics: they limited their bodies’ needs for essentials such as food and sleep as a way of turning their will toward their God, and they emphasized the importance of physical labor as a penitential practice. But once they had made the decision to enter a monastery, their asceticism was no longer self-imposed [on the body]. In fact, they viewed...self-flagellation and extreme fasting as risking the sin of singularity and as demonstrating pride and willfulness. In their effort to transform prideful and aggressive aristocratic men into humble and obedient monks, the Cistercians emphasized discipline and humility and insisted that this transformation was more a matter for the will than for the body. (97)
These contrary examples point to two related but distinct strains of ascetic practice in early and medieval Christianity. On the one hand, a thread of Christian asceticism from late antiquity through the middle ages endorsed, with limits, voluntary mortification of the flesh as essential to the renunciant vocation. On the other hand, many monastic communities of the high and later middle ages came to see their ascetic discipline as an inward matter. Manual labor, fasting, celibacy, and the patient endurance of all manner of want remained central to the ascetic life. Limited forms of mortification such as hair shirts, sleeping on bare floors, stress positions, and even some self-flagellation might supplement the disciplining of the will, but typically remained secondary to the inward ordering of the soul in such communities.

An active example of this debate in action can be seen in a thirteenth century biography of the Cistercian lay brother Arnulf, who broke with the common Rule of the Cistercian monastery through the vigorous practice of various mortifications. As recorded by his biographer, the Cistercian monk Goswin, Arnulf explains his self-flagellation with everything from thorny branches to hedgehog pelts by demonizing his own flesh:

My flesh is my enemy, and the closer it is to me, the more formidable an enemy it is. For my flesh is a beast of burden which needs to be pricked with goads and constrained, lest it frolic wantonly and drag me into the whirlpool of death; thus I promise to keep inciting wars against it (qtd. in Newman 92).
This declaration typifies the most radically pain-seeking type of Christian asceticism. However, the commentary of Goswin shows how resistant even fellow renunciants could be to such self-mortification. As he describes his subject’s self-flagellation, he cannot help interrupting his admiration with criticism and calls for restraint:

What a wonder! Who will not be struck with amazement! We beg you, for Christ’s sake, take pity on your flesh, that poor, frail flesh without which you cannot live. If you truly wish to afflict it, at least have regard for discretion, that mother of the virtues, for from her you can be taught how much of a burden you can impose on the beast that is your flesh.

(qtd. in Newman 91-92)

Goswin’s fruitless, unheard plea to Arnulf offers a rare instance of critique encroaching upon on what is ostensibly hagiography; that Goswin’s wonder could momentarily give way to horror demonstrates the hesitance many ascetics felt toward more extreme manifestations of self-mortification.

I raise this conflict here because, for the most part, this study will not deal with examples of active self-harm, or what Giles Constable terms “positive mortifications” (7). Rather, my subject is, primarily, ascetic renunciation, those “negative” mortifications that mainly involve the mastery of certain bodily and psychological impulses. Giles lists among examples of “negative mortifications” celibacy, poverty, obedience, and fasting: the renunciation of sex, material wealth, self-will, and food respectively (10). Other renunciations include silence, the renunciation of discourse; humility, the renunciation
of self-worth and authority; and solitude, the renunciation of companionship (10). These
specific examples might broadly be categorized as ascetic in that they all require
subordinating the body’s needs and desires to a project of spiritual exaltation, but they
do not typically involve the self-violence from which the modern imagination shrinks.¹
Shakespeare’s plays are not without radical self-harm, mostly in the form of suicide as a
response to misfortune; however, suicide would not fall under the category of
asceticism in the Christian tradition, and therefore must be and has been analyzed in
other contexts.² Beyond suicide, there are few, if any, representations of positive
mortifications in Shakespeare; where asceticism is located, it invariably takes the
negative form, as the denial of impulse or the renunciation of worldly enjoyments.
While this study will occasionally raise examples of active self-mortification in its
analyses of the ascetic mindset generally, the examples from literature will mostly
exemplify what Michel Foucault describes as the ascetic’s “mastery...over himself, his
body, and his own sufferings”; that is, as a question of self-mastery rather than active
self-harm (Security 206).

While the place and nature of asceticism in Christian spiritual life has changed
over time with the rise and fall of churches, denominations, splinter groups, offshoots,
factions, and reformers, it has never been extinguished, nor has it ever failed to find
expression in some form. The discipline of the medieval monk and the draconian social

¹ Constable describes the “positive mortifications” of whipping, immersion, stress positions, and the like as
the forms of religious practice “which are most incomprehensible to us” (10).
² See, for instance, Langley; Cantor, 38-41.
laws of the Puritan protectorate are but two very different examples of an ancient Christian gravitation towards the renunciatory in practice. The late sixteenth/early seventeenth century is a particularly fruitful historical moment to consider the nature of asceticism in both religious and secular life, especially in England where the furnace of Reformation still burned hot. Much of the unrest I identify in depictions of ascetic acts and attitudes on the early modern stage is derived from their primary association not with the mainstream episcopal Calvinism of the day, but with the Roman Catholicism mostly purged over the course of a calamitous sixteenth century.\(^3\) Historical studies of the period have evolved in their thinking on the scope and nature of catholic survivalism in England in the Tudor and Stuart period. In the 1940s, A.G. Dickens could write confidently that Elizabethan individuals’ attachment to the faith of their forefathers declined quickly; what recusant sentiment flourished was a consequence not of the residue of old traditions but the aggressiveness of the counter-reformers’ “arduous proselytism” (“Romanist Recusancy” 181).\(^4\) In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, historians have offered a reconsideration of the endurance of medieval catholicism, most famously in Christopher Haigh’s direct rebuttal to Dickens, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors*. Haigh argues convincingly that the course of the Reformation was the result of political maneuvering rather than any sea change in popular faith, and that even well into the sixteenth century, the

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\(^3\) I use the term episcopal in this study to refer broadly to the state religion and religious authority in England after the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559.  
\(^4\)See also Dickens, *The English Reformation*. 
church-going but unlettered parishioner was not fully protestant, but simply “de-catholicized” (43). Eamon Duffy is more thorough than his predecessor in his use of documentary and artistic evidence, as he argues that catholicism, far from having reached a nadir of superstitious vacuity and venal corruption, was a thriving and popular faith on the eve of the Reformation. In Duffy’s view, the success of the Reformation had less to do with the degeneracy of catholicism or the triumph of protestant ideas and theology than with its sponsorship by those in position of power, most notably Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. Duffy narrates the English Reformation as a top down development, imposed upon rather championed by the people: a fact attested to by the survival of so many aspects of traditional religion in popular practice for decades after the First Act of Supremacy. The Reformation was, to Duffy, more about eliminating dissent and consolidating power in an increasingly autocratic political system than addressing the degeneracy of the Church. Duffy even goes so far as to view the Marian Counter-Reformation as a correction, easily accepted by the people, rather than an interruption in an inevitable historical course (526). These studies are useful to me not for their “defense” of medieval catholicism, but for their placement of the Reformation within a larger narrative of the centripetal consolidation of state power under the Tudors. One need not accept the arguments of these studies uncritically to recognize that they offered and continue to offer a much needed counterweight to early twentieth century scholarship and its faith in an uncomplicated protestant orthodoxy. When considering asceticism in its new, broadly protestant context, it does the reader well to be open
minded to popular and organic, rather than external and reactionary, catholic survivalism and continuity.5

Some three and half centuries before Đúc, victims of religious persecution imagined similar ways in which their suffering could engender resistance. The stout-hearted Roman might face torture with grim fortitude, but in Christian martyrrology the prospect of pain and suffering for religious truth can produce genuine enthusiasm. This is particularly true of descriptions of martyrdom in catholic martyrologies. While radical protestants had, going back to Foxe’s Actes and Monuments, published accounts of protestant martyrdom that borrowed heavily from catholic models, Susana Monta argues that protestant martyrrology as a whole seems devoted to an idea of “godly passive resistance” that downplays any sense of willed suffering (276). The works-based theology of catholicism, meanwhile, leaves more room for the positive valuation of Christ-like mortifications. In truth, martyrdom itself can take the form of ascetic practice, for an active embrace of suffering undergirds both categories; the ascetic mindset, in fact, enables martyrdom precisely because it offers a system of praxis in which pain can be turned to the exaltation of the self. Martyrdom is, I would argue, the most extreme form of negative mortification possible: it is not the ascetic acting against

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5 A study that is open minded to catholic survivalism does not necessarily endorse the view that Shakespeare himself was a crypto-catholic. This study takes no position on Shakespeare’s personal faith. As a personal matter, I side with Beatrice Groves and others in finding such a view intriguing though ultimately unconvicing.
his or her own flesh, but transforming an external punishment into a type of ascetic penance, one which ennobles rather debases the victim. Martyrdom offers the Christian ascetic an avenue to carry mortification beyond the liminal space between life and death that serves as an impermeable boundary in the voluntary suffering of traditional *askesis*. If the goal of asceticism is *imitatio Christi*—that is, to model oneself on Christ—then only in martyrdom can it achieve its full realization.

This connection helps explain the zeal for suffering can be found in the writings of William Alabaster, a poet, scholar, and clergyman who converted to catholicism in 1596, before eventually converting back to protestantism after being imprisoned by the Inquisition in Rome (Sutton). Alabaster is something of a singular figure in the history of the period, vacillating not only between catholicism and protestantism but also dabbling in study of Kabbalah and various Christian mysticisms; therefore, his discourse cannot necessarily be taken as representative of catholic recusancy as a whole. He nevertheless offers an example of how the discourses of martyrdom and asceticism come into alignment. In an account of his own conversion, Alabaster concocts a breathless fantasy about the protestant trial and the accompanying bodily torments he might face with an eagerness that far exceeds the mere patient endurance of suffering more typical of catholic asceticism:

> Neither was ther any cogitation so pleasant and sweet unto me as to imagin myself to be called before the commission of the Councell, or the Queene herself, or to be arrayned for denying of the supremacy; and
many a sweet hower I spent both then and after on Imageninge my selfe
to holde upp my hand at the barre, and to be tried for my life or to be
thrust into some darke dungeon with as many chaines as I could beare. I
fedd my self with the comfortes which I conseaved I should find there,
and I devised what sonnetts and love devises I would make to Christ
about my chaines and irons, and what woordes I would speake when I
should be carying to the racke, and how I would carye my countenanc
uppon the racke, and what I woulde speake all the way that I should be
dragged uppon the hurdell. But amonge all one thing which I thought of
oftenes and found exceeding ioye thinking theron, was that I purposed
with myself when I should stand iupon the ladder with the halter abowt
my neck and see the fyer burninge to receave my bowels, and the
hangman redye to open my breast and pull forth my heart, that then I
would make an earnest suite to Toplife the preest (whom I conceaved as
present) to grante me one suite before my death. Which should be this,
That because I had suffered so little for Christes sake, whoe suffered so
much for myne, and was now to dye and make an end of all sufferinges,
that he wold shew me so much favor as not to lett me hange any tyme at
all, which some tymes they use to do, but to cutt me downe as soone as
might bee that I might have suffitient vigor of cense both to feele first the
paine of the rope and much more afterwarde the smarte of the knyfe that should unlace me. (5.1)

The language here is not that of stoic resistance, but of active, almost erotic, enjoyment, culminating in the bravado of the final dramatic request: that he be cut down from the gallows while still conscious enough to fully experience his disemboweling. Alabaster demonstrates an awareness of the threat this ascetic reversal poses to authority when he imagines that Richard Topcliffe, one of Elizabeth’s most notorious torturers, is present to witness the inefficacy of his arts. In fact, by asking Topcliffe to amplify his suffering, he adumbrates Foucault’s theorization that the suffering of the condemned can illuminate the “error of judges” and the misapplied cruelty of state power, rather than the sinful nature of the criminal (Discipline 46).

Alabaster’s imagined martyrdom, although extreme even for the genre, helps demonstrate the close link between the traditional tropes of Catholic martyrology and asceticism. While in deed Alabaster does not rise to the level of Đúc self-immolation, he imagines an active pain-seeking that is unmistakably ascetic, his language evincing a radicalized works-based catholic theology born of the violent external pressures of reformist oppression in the sixteenth century. It should not necessarily be taken as an expression of catholic orthodoxy per se, but rather as a response to a state that sought to minimize religious dissent through corporal domination. The full effect of such radically ascetic discourse, after all, is the cancellation of the very sovereign power normally reinforced by the theatrical forum of state punishment. Instead, the torture
becomes a dramatic representation of the opposite: the triumph of individual agency
and the impotence of the sovereign (particularly as a figure of religious authority).

Using martyrology as anti-authoritarian political discourse is not unique to
catholics, as works such as *Actes and Monuments* or later Puritan examples
demonstrate. But the works-based theology that underlies catholicism’s ascetic
discourse and religious orders makes it particularly amenable to this kind of rhetorical
table-turning. Elsewhere in his account, Alabaster attacks protestant theology itself as
excessively “light” and “easy,” setting it against the ascetic exempla of the early Church:

Moreover the fastings of the Apostles, and of those who were the first to
profess the faith of Christ, together with their whippings, sorrows,
groans, tears, punishment of the body, kneelings and similar severe
and voluntary mortification of their flesh, these are abundantly displayed
in their epistles and works, in so much as one of them durst
say *adimpleo ea quae desunt passionum Christi in carne*, I do fill up in my
flesh that which awaited of Christ’s sufferings....And after this again, all
they that from that time to this were recounted by Ecclesiastical
histories in all ages have been saints and friends of God and to have
wrought miracles...had a far different course of life and spirit than the
spirit whereby our protestants are led today; so either we must
conclude that spirit was erroneous and false (but if so, how did they work
so many miracles?), or that God had two spirits, one austere which he
communicated to the old saints, the other easy and light, poured out on our new Protestants. (2.8)

Protestantism, a corruption of the true and original spirit of God’s revelation, lacks the masculine vigor of catholicism which is based not merely on a state of spiritual salvation but on deeds and accomplishments. It is notable that the examples of good works that move Alabaster are almost exclusively ascetic self-mortification or renunciations, which provide the most visceral and obvious examples of the heroic austerity of the catholic faith in comparison to the vicariousness of sola fides protestantism.

But a strict critical formula that interprets everything ascetic as catholic or quasi-catholic is far too simplistic. While the Reformation in England dismantled the ceremonial, formalized, and institutional aspects of ascetic practice, it did not destroy the ascetic impulse in Christianity or in the culture at large. It did, however, redirect it from the exalted category of vocational specialization toward something more generalized and diffuse. This is part of Max Weber’s famous thesis about the protestant ethic, and Charles Taylor, in commenting on Weber, offers a summation of this diffusion of religious life into all vocations:

To put it in the Reformed variant: if we reject the Catholic idea that there are some higher vocations (i.e. the monastic life) and claim that all Christians must be 100 percent Christian, regardless of vocation, then one must claim that ordinary life, the life of the vast majority, the life of production and the family, work, and sex is as hallowed as any other.
Indeed it is more sanctified than monastic celibacy, which is based on the vain and prideful claim to have found a higher way. (103)

Taylor, following Weber, connects this rejection of monasticism in favor of the holiness of all worldly vocations with the development of capitalism, but also to a kind of flattening of the hierarchies natural to a religion that privileges certain degrees of holiness. Norman Davies, in a similar register, argues for the egalitarianism of this evolution in religious thought:

Protestantism nevertheless embodied a single religious idea: the direct bestowal of divine grace without the mediation of priests, sacraments, ecclesiastical systems and institutions. . . .The consequence of this conception was both a spiritual egalitarianism, since Christians of all ranks found themselves on the same footing vis-à-vis God, and the abolition of the two story ethics of the Middle Ages (nature and supernature), since love in its New Testament sense (agape) cannot exist on two levels and be love. The further consequence was the abolition of the monastic system and the release of the monastic spirit into the world...with monumental results for western society. (“Tradition” 23).

This “every day” or intramundane asceticism found its most radical embodiment in Puritanism, which in certain situations came to be regarded by the episcopal power in England as near to heresy. An examination of ascetic discourse thus provides an
opportunity to investigate fractious behavior at both ends of the religious spectrum: from recusant catholics to the radically protestant.

Treating the entire question of Renaissance attitudes toward asceticism is a massive scholarly undertaking, and I make no claims to cover the entirety of this subject. Rather, I will examine the question of how asceticism and renunciation are dramatized on the Renaissance stage with, hopefully, the aim of coming to a greater understanding of how such acts resonated in both the orthodox and popular consciousness of the day. This dissertation is divided into two sections, the first of which considers ascetic renunciation, particularly religious renunciation of sexuality and marriage, as an act of resistance, the second of which examines the political utility of asceticism for kings and rulers. In the first half, I explore the representation of nuns in Shakespearean comedy and romance, with particular emphasis on Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Emilia in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Both works have their “medievalist” elements: *Measure for Measure* is set in what we might charitably describe as a generic medieval catholic court: called Vienna in the play, but strangely peopled by characters with Italian names. *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, despite its nominally ancient Greek setting, clearly evokes the world of medieval chivalric romance and self-consciously calls attention to its indebtedness to Chaucer, the most famous of all medieval English poets in Shakespeare’s age (lauded by Sidney as one of the few “ancient” English poets who could rival the old masters of antiquity).
More importantly, both plays dramatize institutional asceticism, with Emilia’s position as a votaress of Diana only slightly less explicitly catholic than Isabella’s life in the Convent of St. Clair. Both nuns are faced with challenges to their vows of chastity, and both attempt to use their asceticism to resist the forces patriarchal domination seeking to claim them for the world. In their struggle to remain renunciant, both Isabella and Emilia demonstrate the subversive potential of asceticism in worlds that demand obedience to the state and that assert male familial prerogative and female subservience. Ultimately, however, both women are “liberated” from the restraint of the convent and assimilated into a correct protestant conjugal unit that will allow them to dispense with their presumptions of female autonomy and bodily perfection and to fulfill their Biblical responsibility to marry and of propagate. To borrow a formulation from Stephen Greenblatt, the power of ascetic renunciation is exploited for its dramatic potential at the same time that it is exposed as a kind of fraud (Negotiations 10). In this way, I will argue, both plays can be read partly as assertions of mainstream protestant social and religious orthodoxy of the period (this is particularly significant in the case of Measure for Measure, given that the play’s composition and staging coincided with the Jacobean succession, when the shape of “orthodoxy” itself was in doubt ), for in the pursuit of their comic resolutions, both plays must break down ascetic impediments to the political and familial harmony demanded by generic convention. Measure for Measure and The Two Noble Kinsmen present asceticism as something with intriguingly resistant power, capable of frustrating mechanisms of domination; however, the
assimilation of both nuns back into the world from which they sought refuge dramatizes the standard protestant antipathy toward traditional catholic postures of renunciation. Still, the endings of both plays leave in doubt the seriousness of any dogmatic gesture beholden to rigid orthodoxy. Ultimately, the opaque treatment of renunciation in both plays—which contain both the power of catholic asceticism and its negation—speaks to the fragmented religious consciousness of the early seventeenth century itself.

The second part of this study looks at the relationship between asceticism and kingship. Chapter Three explores examples of two historical rulers and their (quite different) ascetic projects: Philip II’s monastery-palace The Escorial, and Elizabeth I’s translation of Boethius. Both Philip and Elizabeth will be considered as examples of the (somewhat counterintuitive) legitimizing power of ascetic or renunciatory acts. This legitimizing power is drawn only partly from the tendency of orthodoxies, especially those seen to be under threat, to form part of a nexus of centrifugal propaganda (this is particularly true of Philip); secondarily, however, an association with ascetic or renunciatory acts can rebut charges of tyranny or illegitimacy by presenting for public consumption a constructed image of a monarch pointed away from the world, and therefore heedless of power’s most enticing temptations. I identify such a motive in Elizabeth’s Consolation of Philosophy. From the examples of Philip and Elizabeth I will return to the stage to consider the examples of legitimizing ascetical discourse in the plays Richard III, Richard II, and Henry VI Part 3.
The final chapter considers the example of *Henry V*, whose renunciation of Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 2* is laced with ascetic language, as the new king publicly divests himself of the sensual excesses that Falstaff embodies. Continuing into *Henry V*, I will demonstrate that the king’s piety is purposefully ascetic, particularly in his claims to discipline over his passions and his disdain for the material and ceremonial. In addition, I will consider the play, particularly its ending, as an act of renunciation by Shakespeare, who in the epilogue demolishes Henry’s fortress of providential rhetoric. In doing so, Shakespeare renounces not only providence but, in effect, Henry himself.

**Asceticism and the Reformation**

Whether practiced individually or as part of a monastic community, the ascetic life was an accepted, even exalted, part of Christian orthodoxy for close to a thousand years. How this came to be invites questions, for the Bible itself is not a particularly ascetic document. Beyond the commandment in *Genesis* for human beings to be fruitful and multiply, scripture repeatedly reinforces the centrality of the human body and sexual intercourse. From the polygamy of the patriarchs and the Israelite kings, to the eroticism of the Song of Solomon, supporting an ascetic program through scripture is a process that requires exegetical as well as rhetorical skill. As Elizabeth A. Clark has demonstrated, the foundations of Christian asceticism rest not so much in scripture, but in how scripture was read by early church fathers: how early readers of the Bible “made meaning” through the act of interpretation (3). For example, Clark shows, Tertullian
argues that St. Paul’s allowance of remarriage for widows in 1 Corinthians should be
categorized as “a concession,” rather than a “counsel” or “command,” and that this did
not make it inherently good (143). The word “concession,” in fact, connotes something
implicitly negative or transgressive about the act being allowed. Tertullian’s careful
rhetorical agility in shifting between the three terms—counsel, command, and
concession—allows him to rank permissible acts in a hierarchy of desirability. Ascetic
renunciation, as it is recommended and not demanded of Christians, belongs to the
highest category of religious practice. As Clark writes, “since exhortations to virginity
and widowhood in Paul’s writings are ‘counsels,’ not commands, they receive a higher
blessing because of their greater difficulty” (144).

The interpretive ingenuity of Tertullian, Jerome, and other early church fathers is
a fundamental part of the rich literary tradition of early Christianity, and their
hermeneutical strategies helped shaped the way scripture would be read in the
medieval catholic west. The fact that an ascetic version of Christianity was “created”
through scriptural exegesis and non-scriptural commentaries, rather than something
obvious from a literal reading of the Bible, does help to explain how renunciation fell
out of favor after the Reformation. The break centered on a dispute over the salvational
efficacy of good works. Sacramental catholicism is a works-based theology in which acts
external to personal faith can affect spiritual status, a concept rejected by protestants.
Thomas More complains bitterly in the Dialogue of Comforts Against Tribulation of the
poverty of Lutheran sola fides and its rejection of ascetic works. He begins by putting
into the mouth of one his speakers a catalogue of protestant arguments against penitential acts:

Forsooth, uncle, in this pointmethinketh you say very well. But then are there some again who say on the other hand that we shall need no heaviness for our sins at all, but need only change our intent and purpose to do better, and for all that is passed take no thought at all. And as for fasting and other affliction of the body, they say we should not do it save only to tame the flesh when we feel it wax wanton and begin to rebel. For fasting, they say, serveth to keep the body in temperance, but to fast for penance or to do any other good work, almsdeed or other, toward satisfaction for our own sins—this thing they call plain injury to the passion of Christ, by which alone our sins are forgiven freely without any recompense of our own. And they say that those who would do penance for their own sins look to be their own Christs, and pay their own ransoms, and save their souls themselves. And with these reasons in Saxony many cast fasting off, and all other bodily affliction, save only where need requireth to bring the body to temperance. For no other good, they say, can it do to ourselves, and then to our neighbour can it do none at all. And therefore they condemn it for superstitious folly. (2.6)

The plaintive nephew in More’s dialogue delineates several protestant affronts to theology, including their rejection of penance, their lax attitude toward personal
atonement, and their scorn for any bodily mortifications. The wise uncle replies by demolishing these protestant ideas:

They carry the minds of the people from perceiving their craft by the continual naming of the name of Christ, and crying his passion so shrill into their ears that they forget that the Church hath ever taught them that all our penance without Christ's passion would not be worth a pea. And they make the people think that we wish to be saved by our own deeds, without Christ's death; whereas we confess that his passion alone meriteth incomparably more for us than all our own deeds do, but that it is his pleasure that we shall also take pain ourselves with him. And therefore he biddeth all who will be his disciples to take their crosses on their backs as he did, and with their crosses follow him...The scripture is full of places that prove fasting to be not the invention of man but the institution of God, and to have many more profits than one. And that the fasting of one man may do good unto another, our Saviour showeth himself where he saith that some kind of devils cannot be cast out of one man by another "without prayer and fasting." And therefore I marvel that they take this way against fasting and other bodily penance. (2.7)

Christ, writes More, wants each of us to carry our own crosses, and thereby approach his grace by experiencing in a small way his suffering. This expresses the very heart of *imitatio Christi*, the concept foundational to works-based theology and catholic ascetic
ritual. It is, ultimately, an aspirational theology, though to protestants it was a presumptuous one.

Thomas Cranmer, in his *Homily on Good Works Annexed to Faith*, rebuts More’s parable of the little crosses through a rigorous justification of *sola fides*:

> Faith giveth life to the soul; and they be as much dead to God that lack faith, as they be to the world whose bodies lack souls. Without faith all that is done of us is but dead before God, although the work seem never so gay and glorious before man. Even as a picture graven or painted is but a dead representation of the thing itself, and is without life, or any manner of moving; so be the works of all unfaithful persons before God. They do appear to be lively works, and indeed they be but dead, not availing to the eternal life. They be but shadows and shews of lively and good things, and not good and lively things indeed; for true faith doth give life to the works, and out of such faith come good works, that be very good works indeed; and without it no work is good before God.

(140)

Cranmer’s contention that good works emerge naturally out of faith speaks directly to the catholic charge that *sola fides* is heedless of morality. By rendering unnecessary and misguided rigorous or extraordinary acts of penance or bodily restraint, such a theology offered sufficient justification, if any was needed beyond Henry’s absolutist prerogative, for the dissolution of the monasteries.
In the sixteenth century, the most evocative symbols of Rome’s long arm in Western Europe were the monasteries that dotted the landscape from England to the southern coast of Sicily. The great religious houses and those ensconced within, dedicated to a life of serving Christ by approaching his grace, could in many cases not be reconciled with the emerging statism of those nations that adopted the reformist religious agenda, particularly in England where the monasteries often became centers of opposition to specific royal policies emerging out of the break from Rome (Bernard 395). As G.W. Bernard argues, “[m]onastic houses belonged to international orders, potential fifth columns all,” and Henry was thus “determined that monasteries should recognize his authority” (396). Monasteries thus offered a worthy target for reformists: institutions closely associated with Rome and therefore of dubious loyalty that also promoted a form of Christianity increasingly under theological scrutiny.

The tenuous connection between asceticism and scripture left ascetic practice, both in its institutional and personal forms, open to attack from the sola scriptura literalists of the protestant Reformation, supported in England by a monarch who saw practical as well as theological value in bringing an end to institutional asceticism. Although the issue is complicated by the usual considerations of anti-papal sentiment and economic pragmatism, Henry VIII’s decision to dissolve the monasteries in the

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6 Bernard explains the visitation and then dissolution of religious houses in England as a process driven by Henry’s own growing paranoia over their impudence. The Pilgrimage of Grace, a popular rebellion carried out in part as a response to the dissolution of smaller houses, pushed the king from distrust of the religious orders to “outright hostility” (402).
1530s invites questions about the reconcilability of Tudor absolutist tendencies and entrenched ascetic communities. While many aspects of the secular catholic clerical hierarchy survived the transition from catholicism to protestantism, monastic life was all but completely wiped out in the span of just a few years. The zeal with which Cromwell and his agents pursued the destruction of monastic institutions and the monastic life was, on the one hand, a symptom of an authentic religious impulse; Henry’s readiness to go along with the surveying and dissolution, however, may have been born from other considerations, for the monasteries were, in effect, societies unto themselves, free from royal prerogative in a way that even secular clergy were not. Henry’s desire to absorb monastic funds and property into the royal treasury speaks not only to his desire for land and capital, but his need to assimilate elements of religious society beyond the scope of his power. As long as monks and nuns operated at a remove from the secular world, they would not be subjects; the need to reappropriate ascetics into the fold of the subjected explains the frequent instances in which members of religious orders were challenged to swear oaths of loyalty to the king or to endorse his supremacy (Knowles 177-178). Sometimes even an oath of loyalty was not enough. For example, Abbot Richard Green of Bittlesden Abbey in Buckinghamshire signed a confession in 1538 admitting outright to the errors of monastic ritual and the justice of the King’s dissolution:

the manner and trade of lyving which we and others of owre pretensyde relygyon haue practysyde and vsyd many dayes, dothe most princypally
consyst yn certayne dome [dumb] ceremonyes and yn certayne constytutuyons of the bysshoppes off Rome and other forynsycall potentates as the abbot off Cystuus [Citeaux] . . . and nott towght in the trew knowlege off Gods lawe by procuryng allwayes exampletions off the byssshoppes off Rome from owr ordynaries and dyocyesans submyttyng owrselffes princypally to forynsycall potentattes and powers which neuer came here to reforme suche dysorder of lyvyng and abuses as now haue be fownde to haue raynyde amonge vsse And therefore now assuredlye knowyng that the most perfytt way of lyving is moste princypally and suffycyentlye declaryde vnto vsse by owre master Criste his evangelistes and apostles and that yt is most expedyentt for vsse to be gouernyde and orderyde by our supreme hedd vnder godd the kynges moste noble grace. (qtd. in Bernard 406-407)

The letter’s focus not only on the religious error of “dome ceremonyes,” but on the deference of the monks to “forynsycall potentattes” gives some evidence of the political concerns at the heart of the dissolution. Bernard notes that such letters as survive have a formulaic character, suggesting they were drawn up by the surveyors rather than written by the monks themselves (406). This explains in part why the letter ends by invoking Henry’s “noble grace” as the supreme head of the church under God.

However, some orders, like the Carthusians, refused to comply with royal demands. In 1535, during the early days of the monastic surveying, Cromwell and his
agents demanded their sworn acquiescence to the Act of Succession, nullifying the
king’s marriage to Katherine of Aragon (Knowles 112). The monks, who had been
seeking either an exemption or a wording of the oath that they could reconcile with
conscience, ultimately refused, and three prominent members of the order were
arrested, tried, and sentenced to gruesome deaths (112). Thomas More, watching from
the window of his own tower cell as the monks were led away, noted the sensible
enthusiasm with which they walked to the gallows. Having languished in his own cell for
over a year, the former Chancellor told his visiting daughter that he envied the celerity
of their liberation:

Lo, dost thou not see (Meg) that these blessed fathers be now as cheerful
going to their deaths, as bridegrooms to their marriages? Whereby
mayest thou see, mine own good daughter, what a difference there is
between such as have in effect spent all their days in a strait, hard,
penitential, and painful life religiously, and such as have in the world, like
worldly wretches, as thy poor father hath done, consumed all the time in
pleasure and ease licentiously. For God, considering their long-continued
life in most sore and grievous penance, will not longer suffer them to
remain here in this vale of misery and iniquity, but speedily hence take
them to the fruition of his everlasting deity: whereas thy silly father
(Meg) that, like a most wicked caitiff, hath passed forth the whole course
of his miserable life most pitifully, God, thinking him not worthy so soon
to come to that eternal felicity, leaveth him here yet, still in the world
further to be plunged and turmoiled with misery. (Roper 54)

More’s words, as related by Roper, touch on several ascetic tropes, all of which will be
revisited in the chapters to come. The “cheerful” disposition of the condemned monks
evinces the paradoxical embrace of suffering, both self-inflicted and external,
characteristic of ascetical teachings and familiar to members of an order already
devoted to a “hard,” “penitential,” and “painful” life. In More’s envy of their imminent
demise while he is left behind “in this vale of misery and iniquity,” meanwhile, we find
the conventional contempt for the world that undergirds all acts of ascetic renunciation.
Finally, More’s belief that the swiftness of the Carthusian’s sentence is a divine reward
for their lifelong devotion to penitential acts offers an elegant example of the doctrine
of works in practice. The ascetic life has prepared the souls of the monks for the divine
embrace, while More himself must suffer yet longer in his mundane Purgatory.

Roper’s account does not describe the execution itself, which was carried out at
Tyburn, but More perhaps was lucky to have been spared so grisly a scene. The three
monks were hanged, disemboweled while still alive, and quartered. In a theatrical
gesture, Henry ordered them executed while wearing their monastic habits, though
under those habits all three wore the hair shirts common to their order (Knowles 113).
Both choices—Henry’s to execute them in their habits, the monks to exacerbate their
own suffering by wearing the cilice to the gallows—exemplify the complex, multivalent,
and powerful symbolic potential of ascetic signs in the theater of state power and
resistance. By dressing the condemned in their habits, Henry, in essence, reenacts their crimes of religious error and treason, offering a visual reminder that, to paraphrase Foucault, both declares the truth of their guilt and annuls the efficacy of their resistance (Discipline 45). By wearing their hair shirts, meanwhile, the monks conflate the pains of punishment with those of mortification, blunting in part the propagandistic utility of Henry’s bloody pageant. Put another way, the walk to the gallows signals the monks’ transition from ascetics to martyrs, from a life of penitential suffering to a violent death that will bring to full fruition the imitatio Christi in a way that mere askesis cannot. John Houghton, prior of the London Carthusian monastery and the first monk to be executed that day, seems particularly to have understood the performative nature of his suffering. Like Đúc four centuries later, Houghton remained conscious throughout his ordeal, showing an almost extra-human patience in the face of his agony and demonstrating to the large crowd of onlookers the power of his Carthusian discipline (Knowles 113). This small act of resistance, though it did not stem the tide of the Reformation in England, did, if only briefly, offer a riposte to the king’s violent exploitation of the monastic body.

While Henry’s supremacy proved lasting, the dissolution of monasteries and the end of the material reality of monastic life in England did not bring an end to asceticism, merely a certain, long standing manifestation of the ascetic impulse. However, the triumph of the Reformation in England did alter irrevocably the literary and imaginative response to the renunciant life. The resurrection of catholic asceticism on the
Renaissance stage provided an opportunity to enunciate meaning in ways both culturally normative and potentially transgressive, both polemical and surprisingly nostalgic. In addition, the written word itself became one of many new and enduring loci for the perpetuation of ascetic attitudes. In this study, I hope to begin to unpack the complex relationship between literary production and the rhetorical power of renunciation.
CHAPTER ONE: ISABELLA’S SILENCE: ASCETICISM AND ORTHODOXY IN MEASURE FOR MEASURE

*Measure for Measure* ends with one of Shakespeare’s most notorious performative challenges. The final scene presents to the audience a strange version of the comic happy ending required by formula; members of four soon to be married couples occupy the stage, yet only one, Juliet and Claudio, is the product of mutual desire. Two others—the forced marriages of Lucio to Kate Keep-down and Angelo to Mariana—function as what one critic calls “punishments woven into the penitential investigations of the play,” the logical outcome of a plot that began with the Duke’s program of general moral correction (Beckwith, *Grammar* 57). And while these two unions do not augur connubial bliss, they may at least be offered up to the audience as acts of justice, comeuppance, though strangely guised, for the bawdy slanderer and the cruel hypocrite. The exact nature of the fourth couple, however, remains opaque.

When the Duke proposes to Isabella, a novice nun who has expressed no desire to renounce the ascetic life and, in fact, who has struggled fiercely through the play to preserve her virginity, the strangeness of the moment is only heightened by her response: a silence that, as Sarah Beckwith writes, many modern actors render as “shock or horror” (*Grammar* 57). One of the more famous examples of such an interpretation came in a Jonathan Miller directed production in the early 1970s in which Isabella, thoroughly disgusted, retched off stage (Ioppolo xviii). Almost as striking was a 1994 RSC production that saw Isabella, played by Stella Gonet, meet the Duke’s
proposal with a smack to the face (a thoroughly anachronistic bit of insubordination that nevertheless succeeded in establishing an equivalency between the Duke’s proposition and Angelo’s) (Aebischer 19). There is room for other interpretations. Barbara Baines points out that many productions opt for Isabella’s “happy compliance” with the Duke’s proposal (298). Of these, the most well documented example is a 1983 RSC production starring Daniel Massey as the Duke and Juliet Stevenson as Isabella. This production not only featured a “little miracle of acceptance” by Stevenson, but prepared the audience for the moment by working in numerous flirtatious and potentially romantic non-verbal exchanges between the Duke and Isabella throughout (Massey 19). Ultimately, the interpretive variety seen in such stagings reinforces Philip McGuire’s observation that Isabella’s silence offers directors and actors a stark choice between “mute, accepting wonder,” and “a resistance that wordlessly but effectively drives home" the Duke’s wholly unerotic autocracy (69).

The ambiguity is a challenge for scholars as well as actors. Many critics, including Charles Lyons and Amy Lechter-Siegel, have understood Isabella’s silence as a necessary part of the play’s reestablishment of patriarchal order with the Duke’s return: in other words, a necessary prerequisite for a Jacobean happy ending. Carol Neely sees the Duke’s proposal as an instrument of shame necessitated by the play’s gender politics (100). Closely related is a strain of feminist criticism that finds Isabella in the play’s final moments as a subdued female victim, finally ground down to inarticulate silence by the forces of patriarchal domination (Riefer 168). Other critics, however, do not weigh
Isabella so lightly. Barbara Baines, for example, sees in Isabella’s silence a resistance analogous to Iago’s in the final scene of *Othello*; Isabella, Baines writes, “is not silenced but, instead, chooses silence as a form of resistance to the patriarchal authority” (288). More recently, Kimberly Reigle reads Isabella’s silence as the culmination of a pattern of passive resistance seen throughout the play, one that potentially augurs a return to the convent (513).

I share Baines’s and Reigle’s position that Isabella’s ascetic choices function as resistance in the play. However, any understanding of Isabella’s silence that views her potential marriage as uniquely significant to the play’s conclusion is incomplete, for the Duke’s proposal is merely one part of an array of normalizing moves that make up the play’s superficially traditional comic conclusion. Isabella’s potential engagement to the Duke can be understood as carrying a social purpose analogous to the play’s other three marriages, as each allows sexually counter-normative characters to reenter the world of lawful social interrelation through marriage. The lecherous Lucio, Kate the whore, Claudio and Juliet the violators of social law, Angelo the would-be rapist, and Mariana the despairing and jilted maid each leave behind a previously worn mantle of socially unharmonious or unlawful sexuality to take a place in the symmetrical construct of state sanctioned marriage.7 Isabella, I assert, is yet another sexual rebel whose instincts must

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7 My reading of the end of the play follows in part the work of Leo Salinger and Carol Neely on Shakespearean comedy. Neely, in particular, demonstrates how early modern comedy is unable to conceive of female social functions unrelated to marriage. Following Salinger’s terminology, she describes *Measure for Measure’s* necessary but “painfully negative” marriages as less evocative of comedy than the nuptials “broken by social obstacles, sexual anxieties, and, ultimately, by death in the tragedies” (102).
be tamed by matrimony, for as surely as Lucio’s philandering subverts social propriety, so too does the votaress’s celibacy function as a threat to patriarchal authority.

Such an assertion perhaps seems strange given the familiar Renaissance reverence for female chastity; as one critic argues, Isabella’s values are “representative, not eccentric,” and reinforce the fetishization of chastity both in the play’s Vienna and Jacobean England (Baines 284). But such a claim ignores the fact that, unlike catholic celibacy, protestant chastity is meant to function cooperatively with, rather than as a substitution for, marriage. On stage, Isabella’s habit marks her for Shakespeare’s audience as a character to be reformed rather than revered, and this interpretation is consistent with the general place of nuns in literary and popular consciousness of seventeenth century England.

Darryl Gless, in his lengthy study of Measure for Measure, explains the play’s implicit criticism of Isabella’s virginity as a consequence of both protestant theology and an inherited tradition of anti-monic satire. Isabella’s virginity, hardly a virtue, is, in Gless’s contextualized reading, a “deviant relationship” to Biblical law as it was understood in a sola fides protestant theology (98). The strict ceremonialism of monastic life is reminiscent, as Luther himself first commented, of “Jewish legalism” and betrays a conflation of Old and New Testament law (80). In addition, the “fugitive and cloistered virtue” of the convent and monastery stood at odds with the humanistic calls for engagement and the betterment of the nation common to Shakespeare’s time, as
reflected in writers as varied as Spenser and James I (82). To over value one’s ascetic continence is to practice a kind of self-idolatry that inevitably conflicts with a universal responsibility to engage, to practice an “active virtue” (83). Theology, however, is only part of the equation, as both Shakespeare and his audience would have been quite familiar with a medieval legacy of anti-monastic satire that focused on the hypocrisy of conventual ascetics who flaunted their vows (66-72). Gless traces a long line of anti-monastic and anti-fraternal satire from Chaucer to Erasmus, in which time and again monasticism is revealed to be a cover for sloth, lust, gluttony, and any number of bodily sins. These two avenues of attack against monasticism—theological and satirical—also underpin my own reading of the play. But while Gless’s contextualizing is invaluable and extensive, his focus on monastic and fraternal orders generally leaves room for a closer examination of the specific contexts surrounding nuns in particular.

The nun has a long and varied history as a literary and dramatic figure. To some extent, the way the nun has been depicted in literature has reflected the larger religious and social context of its production. Depictions of the nun in the Middle Ages range from the hagiographic to the scandalous, but they tend to take seriously the office and its attendant vows. Satirization of monastic and fraternal figures hinges on criticism of hypocrisy or laxity, not a theological critique of monastic orders themselves. Graciela Daichman traces the evolution of conventual satire from its origins in the twelfth

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8 I draw on several studies of nuns in both medieval literature and history, most directly Graciela S. Daichman and Eileen Power.
century to its most enduring (and opaque) manifestation in the Prioress of Chaucer’s *General Prologue*. Medieval moralists singled out dishonest or profligate nuns as targets of approbation in defense of the sanctity of ascetic vows (Daichman 32). These “faulx religieux” wear the habit but fail to subdue the heart; in doing so, they profane the exalted purity of monastic life (33). Unsurprisingly, moral excoriation of nuns usually centers on sexual transgression. St. Catherine of Siena, for example, expresses her disgust with the frequent incidences of nuns giving birth to children:

> It does not long maintain this color of devotion; therefore it is not long before their devotions bear fruit. First appear the stinking flowers of unhonest thoughts, with the rotten leaves of words; and in miserable fashion they fulfill their lusts; and the fruits which appear of such I know well you have seen, children to wit. (qtd. in Daichman 33)

Such lust is often precipitated by a rejection of claustrophobia. The high walls of the convent are meant to protect the nun from her own libidinal urges. Should she leave, she would quickly find herself defenseless when brought into close proximity with sin, as fifteenth century Flemish theologian Dionysus the Carthusian explains: “How many sins and scandals have arisen and do constantly arise from the fact that nuns go forth from their cloister and visit secular folk, and that they permit men to enter the cloister and converse with them?” (qtd. in Daichman 33). The focus on claustrophobia as a necessary weapon in the defense of the nun’s continence is emblematic of the broader context of the medieval antifeminist tradition. Just as Eve was tempted to transgress by
the serpent, bringing about the ruin of mankind, so too were nuns, by the mere fact of their sex, helpless beyond the walls of their protected space, or when that space was left open to intruders.⁹

While the trope of ascetic failure lies at the heart of such moralistic and misogynistic polemic, other medieval voices, particularly in song, seem conscious of the practical difficulties of ascetic vows. The eleventh century Latin song *Plangit Nonna Fletibus* provides a particularly grim example of what life is like for a nun who lacks the vocation for the life:

Plangit nonna fletibus

Inenarrabilibus,

Condolens gemitibus

Dicens consocialibus

Heu misella!

Nihil est deterius

Tali vita,

Cum enim sim petulans

Et lasciva.

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⁹ This antifeminist reading of the necessity of claustration is not irrelevant to Isabella, as we shall see.
Pernoctando vigilo
Cum non vellem
Invenem aplecterer
Quam libenter!

(The nun is weeping indescribable tears. She is crying with groans and saying to her sisters: woe is me! “Nothing is worse than such a life, when I am wanton and amorous.”) (Power 504-505, translation mine)

Songs such as these demonstrate that, between exalted hagiography and moralistic exposé, there was also a space to acknowledge the challenge asceticism presents to our most fundamental urges. This attitude is noted by Eileen Power to be particularly common in the medieval vernacular folk song tradition, which approaches the lovesick nun’s dilemma with a certain lighthearted sympathy. In such songs nuns are often depicted as tormented by a desire for love and sexual fulfillment, but with the smirking “common sense” of “those who lived close to nature” rather than the harsh voice of clerical criticism (504). For example, a thirteenth century French song describes a suggestive encounter between a friar and a fed-up nun:

L’autrier un lundi matin
m’an aloie ambaniant;
s’antrai an un biau jardin,
trovai nonette seant.
ceste chansonette
dixoit la nonette
“longue demoree
faites, frans moinnes loialz
Se plus suis nonette,
ains ke soit li vespres,
je morai des jolis malz.

(“Lately on a Monday morn as I went wandering, I entered into a fair garden and there I found a nun sitting. This was the song that the nun sang: ‘Long dost thou tarry, frank, faithful monk. If I have to be a nun longer I shall die of the pains of love before vespers.”) (Power 506-507)

Here, the idea that the nun could actually die because of the “pains” of lust exemplifies the earthy humor of these vernacular folk examples. Countless poems and songs in which the nun is depicted as gay, lovelorn, and seemingly bound to her vows against her will, place their sympathies with the realities of human nature, rather than the exalted ideals of Christian asceticism and hagiography.\(^{(10)}\) According to Power, the singers of such songs knew that nuns had sexual feelings, and this did not automatically make them evil or targets for moralization. Power describes this material as representative of “the eternal revolt of common sense against asceticism” (504); however, as the convents and

\(^{(10)}\) Several other examples of this theme in popular song can be found in Power, 502-508.
monasteries were predominantly open only to members of the aristocracy or other privileged classes, at least until the fifteenth century, the distinct attitudes of high and low voices might also have a social origin: why hold in reverence a vocation to which one could not be called? Whatever the explanation, the cloister is often envisioned in popular song not as the protected space described in theological writings, but “as a prison and a grave” (Power 504).\footnote{Power quotes the following medieval French lyric: Mariez-vous, les filles Avec ces bons drilles, Et n’allez ja, les filles Pourrir derrière les grilles. (Get married, girls, with good men, and don’t go, girls, to rot behind bars). (502, translation mine)}

Chaucer represents in part a more aristocratic and dogmatic literary strain that encompasses both moralistic and satirical perspectives on asceticism. Although one might think first of the Wife of Bath’s comment that not every vessel in a great lord’s house is made of gold (in other words, though virginity is superior to marriage, it is not and cannot be expected of all), and her old testament exempla of righteous polygamy, Chaucer maintains a degree of religious appreciation for female (particularly female) asceticism (III.99-100). The ambiguous example of Madame Eglantyne is perhaps Chaucer’s most satirical engagement with nuns, and it is relatively minor compared to other material in the Tales.\footnote{For an overview of competing analyses of the satirical nature of the Prioress, see Alexander, 109-120.} Griselda too provokes ambivalent feelings; while she is no nun, she is sufficiently devoted to obedience and patience to evoke ascetic discipline, and the giving up of her own children can be read as a quite radical, though reluctant,
renunciation of the living evidence of sex that troubled Catherine of Siena. However, it is
difficult to reconcile *The Clerk’s Tale’s* contradictions, paradoxes, and opacities:
somehow, Chaucer wants the reader to both admire and shrink away from Griselda’s
asceticism, both stand in awe of her renunciations and cheer their reversal.  
Elsewhere in the *Tales* Chaucer is more direct. *The Second Nun’s Tale*, a story about a female
ascetic—St. Cecilia—told by a female ascetic (although one never described in the
General Prologue), is one of two hagiographies in the work, and the one that carries the
strongest, most uncritical reverence for asceticism. Its prologue begins with an
invocation of the Virgin Mary, who is so pure—the nun calls her “virgin wemmeless”
(47), “mayden pure” (48), and “flour of holy virgines alle” (29)—that her body itself is a
“cloistre” (43).  
The nun goes on to excoriate the sin of idleness and praise the
doctrine of works (“feith is deed withouten werkis”) by way of entreating Mary to aid
her in her tale-telling (64). The doctrine of works is the fundamental justification for
ascetic practice itself, so in highlighting it, the nun is not simply asking Mary to endorse
her industriousness, but paving the theological way for the proper appreciation of
Cecilia’s renunciations. As for Cecilia herself, the tale goes on to say that she wore a hair
shirt, renounced sexuality on the night of her wedding, and faced execution with such
stout-hearted patience that she was able to preach for three days with her head half-
way cut off (the strokes of the axe are called a “penaunce” by the nun, though one that

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13 A fuller treatment of *The Clerk’s Tale’s* contradictions can be found in Normandin, 127-128.
14 All excerpts from Chaucer taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd Edition and cited by fragment and line number.
no man should have to endure). The ending of the tale betrays no skepticism or ambiguity.¹⁵

Seynt Urban, with his dekenes privily
The body took and buried it by nighte
Among his other seyntes honestly.
Her hous the chirch of seynt Cecily yet highte;
Seynt Urban hallowed it, as he wel mighte;
In which into this day in noble wyse
Men do to Crist and to his seint servise. (VIII.547-553)

Like *The Parson’s Tale*, the *Second Nun’s Tale* demonstrates the moral and didactic side of Chaucer, and lends credence to critics such as D.W. Robertson who believe Chaucer’s literary art invariably adheres itself to doctrinal orthodoxy.¹⁶ It also supports the notion that in a work as heterogeneous and generically complex as the *Canterbury Tales*, there is room for both religious satire (*The Friar’s Tale, The Summoner’s Tale*) and serious moral instruction.

¹⁵ Sherry Reames explains the tale’s moral coherence by tracing Chaucer’s likely sources. She postulates that *The Second Nun’s Tale* is an early, all but unrevised work added to *The Canterbury Tales* as something of an afterthought (55-56).

¹⁶ Taking a position in the debate over Chaucer’s moral orthodoxy is beyond the scope of this study. In addition to Robertson, Judson Allen and Theresa Moritz take up the moralist cause, as does Victor Haines, especially in regard to the unironic nature of the *Retractions*. A subversive or heterodox Chaucer is argued for, through various avenues and to different extents, by Stephen H. Rigby, Roger Ellis, David Ramsey and many others.
The multivalent, sometimes contradictory treatment of asceticism both in Chaucer and in the various literary traditions of the middle ages offers a model for reading Measure for Measure as a play that treats asceticism with similar opacity. In Isabella there are vestiges of both Cecilia’s sainthood and Griselda’s excesses, as well as Madame Eglantyne’s potential hypocrisy. Just as works emerging from a homogenously catholic context could swing between moralizing critique, titillating satire, patient sympathy, and hagiography, so too was Shakespeare’s protestant world prepared to accept some negotiation between beatifying and proscribing Isabella’s asceticism.

In turning to the post-Reformation period, the doctrine of works emerges as one of the principal points of divergence that helps to explain shifting attitudes towards monastic celibacy. Ironically, the second nun’s claims of industriousness highlight the very thing that Lutherans and Calvinists found lacking in religious orders. The sloth of nuns and monks was a traditional part of anti-monastic complaint, as were, in something close to a contradiction, their heretical reliance on good works to achieve salvation. In 1519, Luther had written a tract against asceticism—“On Monastic Vows”—in which he compared monks, with their adherence to a highly ceremonial life, to Jews, and in which he implored nuns and monks to abandon the ascetic life and reenter the world (Luther’s own wife was a former nun whom he had convinced to abandon the convent). In Lutheran or Calvinist theology, asceticism is seen as a form of idolatry even more presumptuous than the veneration of icons, relics, and saints that typically bore the brunt of protestant disdain, for the renunciant’s self-imposed
suffering turns the human body itself into an object of religious wonder. In the catholic Middle Ages, such self-mortification was embraced as *imitatio Christi*—achieving spiritual fulfillment by imitating the sufferings of Christ—and was codified as such in a popular fifteenth-century manual for ascetic living by Thomas a Kempis.\(^\text{17}\) Carolyn Walker Bynum describes the *imitatio Christi* in the context of female asceticism in particular:

> No religious woman failed to experience Christ as wounded, bleeding, and dying. Women’s efforts to imitate the Christ involved becoming the crucified, not just pattering themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but fusing with the body on the cross. (...) Horrible pain, twisting of the body, bleeding—whether inflicted by God or by oneself—were not an effort to destroy the body, not a punishment of physicality, nor primarily an effort to shear away a source of lust, not even primarily an identification with the martyrs (although this was a subsidiary theme). ... asceticism [is] rather *imitatio Christi*, an effort to plumb the depths of Christ’s humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness—the moment of his dying. (131)

In both Calvinist and Lutheran theology, such presumptions about the possibility of attaining Christ-like grace through ascetic works are rejected in favor of an exclusive

\(^{17}\) See Marchand, 31-50
focus on scripture and on a belief in the uncontestable sufficiency of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice: i.e., He suffered so that we need not. In a 1523 letter exhorting his sister, a nun in the Katherine Convent of Augsburg, to abandon the monastic life, Lutheran nobleman Bernhart Rem employs this very argument:

I would rather be counted as carnal with the open sinners in the temple than be religious with you and those like you. Nevertheless, I wish you for once the correct knowledge of Jesus Christ, that the spirit that brings life would write in your hearts the overflowing good works of Christ, so that you know why he in human nature was fastened to the cross. When you know that, your little human discoveries and trust in your own works, habits, convent, fasting, and such things will soon fall away. It will be looked upon as very serious, for one does not presume to buy God’s grace with spiritual simony. Who has ears to hear, let them hear…Such presumption, that always presumes one is more facile than God and can achieve God’s grace through one’s own work….but I will say nothing about the convents, where many different types of work—all of it self

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18 Attitudes toward *imitatio Christi* varied among different stripes of protestant, with later, more conservative (Anglican) protestants more likely to be optimistic about man’s Christ-like potential. This ambivalence is illustrated by the 1580 English edition of Kempis’ manual by Thomas Rogers, a protestant reworking more than a translation, which acknowledges the value in seeing Christ as a model of behavior, but which in two introductory epistles sternly cautions the reader against too rigorous and presumptuous an imitation of Christ’s physical suffering. See Hudson.
chosen—are practiced with the fine glitter of holiness. And it is worthless straw, whatever one makes of it. (Wiesner-Hanks, Convents 36-37)

This patriarchal voice of anti-convential polemic provides an early example of the social forces that would eventually destroy the practice of female claustration, both in Lutheran and Calvinist societies. Rem’s focus on the presumptuousness and quasi-idolatry of ascetic practice is drawn directly from standard anti-catholic theological arguments about the inefficacy of works and the Judaizing ritualism of catholic religious traditions. It is an objection based in scripture—particularly Ephesians 2:8,9—and one that follows closely Luther’s own writings about monasticism as a form of self-worship (“Monastic Vows” 44:263). Calvin is somewhat less radical than Luther in his treatment of asceticism: he allows, for instance, that strict renunciation may be of practical use to those who are “prone to a certain vice,” but he insists that such actions are a matter of personal choice and circumstance, not an “invariable law” or even in and of themselves “holy” (Institutes 4.13.5-6). He offers dire warnings about excessive fasting and self-denial, calling the belief that such activities can affect salvation “contempt of [Christ’s] gifts” of suffering and sacrifice (4.13.12). About institutional monasticism, Calvin is as harsh as Luther, dismissing pretensions towards monastic perfection as “vain arrogance,” “intolerable trifling,” and “fictitious worship” (4.1.11).

Beyond the theological issues, the post-Reformation consciousness retained, and amplified, the old medieval capacity to imagine the nun’s concupiscence. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, printed accounts of nuns tended to focus on their sexual
debauchery, usually in consort with priests, monks, or other male renunciant clergy.

However, while the moralistic and satirical voices of the Middle Ages used such exempla to critique ascetic failure and to preach by way of contrast the conventual life as a feminine ideal, protestant voices used similar scenarios to expose monasticism itself as fraudulent and heretical. Such scandalous material relies not on complex theological arguments, but on the ancient conflict between self-denial and self-indulgence. Some protestant authors clearly took pleasure in deconstructing the nun’s ascetic mystique by subjecting her to sexual debasement.\textsuperscript{19}

Frances Dolan’s examination of such material provides valuable insight into the early modern horizon of expectations for how nuns should or might behave, and thus the immediate context in which \textit{Measure for Measure}’s treatment of Isabella can be read. Nuns, Dolan writes, are often ridiculed or scandalized in seventeenth-century polemical depictions, shown succumbing to seductions by priests, engaging in homoerotic dalliances with other nuns, or otherwise being led by “Nature” rather than unnatural vows (Dolan 510-511). For instance, in the 1590 pamphlet \textit{A Subtil Practise} (not mentioned specifically by Dolan), a sexually willing and “sweet skind” nineteen year old nun—“as goode a lasse as euer hearde Masse at highe mydnyghte”—becomes an object of competitive discord between two lusty Friars, eventually resulting in

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\textsuperscript{19} The scandalous pamphlets of the protestant world build upon a robust tradition of anti-monastic and anti-fraternal satire already common in the late middle ages. In addition to what is discussed above, Darryl Gless surveys some of this material in contextualizing his reading of \textit{Measure for Measure}. While the medieval estates satire distinguishes between the hypocritical and the genuine religious life, protestant voices tend to be universally critical of monasticism. See Gless, 66-72.
catastrophe (3). In an even more antagonistic work, an exposé of a monastery for English nuns in Portugal reveals presumably shocking sexual transgressions (Dolan 517). This trope reached beyond the polemical tract to the stage, as one can see in Ithimore’s needling of Abigall in The Jew of Malta:

ITHIMORE. I pray mistris, will you answer me to one question.

ABIGALL. Well, sirrah, what is’t.

ITHIMORE. A very feeling one. Have not the nuns fine sport with the fryars now and then? (Marlowe, Jew 3.3.34-36)

Titillating depictions of nuns were reassuring, Dolan argues, for they exposed to ridicule the extremes of catholic asceticism that protestants viewed as self-indulgent and slothful (518). Valerie Traub argues that the need for such debasement of nuns had a socio-economic basis: marriage and reproduction were at the center of the protestant social fabric, and biological propagation went hand in hand with financial enrichment and security (181). Thus, for early moderns, Dolan argues, “[a]s a woman who withholds herself from sexual circulation, the nun reinforces the imperative that women surrender to their own exchange” (511).

While Dolan does not consider Shakespeare at length, she does briefly give attention to Twelfth Night, particularly Valentine’s description of the love-stricken Olivia as walking “veiled” like a “cloistress” (1.5.27). This figuring of Olivia, along with Viola’s insistence that she not leave “her graces to the grave” (1.5.226), reflect a belief that a beautiful nun is a waste of a gift bestowed by god. But what about plays that deal
specifically with the question of female resistance to sexuality? *Measure for Measure* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* are two plays that prominently feature female ascetics. In both plays, these renunciant figures face challenges to their celibacy, but these challenges do not result in debauchment or scandal of the type found in the polemical tradition examined by Dolan. Rather, both plays present a rather ambivalent picture of life as a votaress. In approaching Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, it is worth considering that a protestant audience, while they would not necessarily have thought of female ascetics as villains, may have found something distasteful in the wasteful spending of female beauty in the confines of the cloister. In this, they were similar to their predecessors of the popular medieval tradition; however, early modern criticism of asceticism was more deeply intertwined with the conforming pressures of orthodoxy, which adds urgency to the need for conventual liberation. Both Shakespeare and his audience, I argue, would have found a comic resolution that did not include the reappropriation of female renunciants back into the worldly social fold to be incomplete. In gesturing towards such an assimilation, the play is thus socially conventional. However, in the process of achieving the resolution, such as it is, of the final act, *Measure for Measure* takes time to consider how female subjectivity may be empowered by an ascetic posture. Ultimately, I will argue that *Measure for Measure* in some sense connects back to the old folk tradition of the convent as a prison for the nun, who is at heart a social and sexual being. It is no coincidence that the play links prisons with convents, or that, like *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, it ends with a soon to be
former nun sharing the stage with a freed prisoner. However, I do not mean to suggest that the *Measure for Measure* is in any direct way polemical, for the play itself makes no coherent moral argument. The normalizing discourse of the final scene remains famously incomplete. Isabella, as a character capable of provoking both sympathy and scorn, stands at the heart of the play’s opaque treatment of the ascetic, and her final act—silence—stands as the most memorable manifestation of this opacity. Like Chaucer, *Measure for Measure*’s various, often contradictory voices provide no clear path to doctrinal truth. Instead, its various, competing voices reflect the roiling, unsettled state early modern religious discourse.

**Vincenzo’s Anxious Renunciation**

The comic plot of *Measure for Measure* is set in motion by an act of renunciation. By trading in his political authority for a Friar’s robe, the Duke ironically fulfills a fantasy entertained by Shakespeare’s Richard II in the waning moments of his reign:

The king shall be contented: must he lose

The name of king? a' God's name let it go.

I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,

My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,

My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,

My figured goblets for a dish of wood,
My sceptre for a palmer's walking staff,
My subjects for a pair of carved saints. (3.3.145-152)²⁰

For Richard, the language of ascetic renunciation is penitential, as in the tradition of Boethius and his medieval imitators, or the humanist examples of Erasmus and even Thomas More.²¹ In the Boethian model, renunciation can function in a moment of extreme suffering as a salve against the cruelties of the world, devaluing the physical, accepting the inscrutability of fortune and the divine plan, and preparing the renunciant for the true significance of the ghostly life that is to come. There is, I believe, something of Boethius in Richard’s turn away from his own kingship: faced with an intolerable political situation, the king wrests agency away from his usurper and, in a moment that reestablishes his own self-determination, deposes himself. Both his willing acceptance of his fall and his active participation in it echo the ascetic philosophy of Boethius: “if then you are master of yourself, you will be in possession of that which you will never wish to lose” (29).

On its face, the Duke’s “renunciation” in Measure for Measure seems to have little to do with Boethius or Richard’s self-deposition. While Richard is genuinely facing his own destruction, the Duke adopts the friar’s robe as an act of subterfuge with an explicit political purpose. Moving to the periphery of this quasi-medieval quasi-Vienna,

²⁰ All excerpts from Shakespeare taken from The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd Edition and cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.
²¹ Boethius’s The Consolation of Philosophy is, in many respects, the foundational credo of Christian asceticism, and has been modeled or drawn from by many later writers, including More in his writings from prison such as the Dialogue of Comforts Against Tribulation.
he becomes, as more than one critic has noted, a manipulator of events on par with Prospero (Bawcutt 53). His “renunciation” is thus an embrace and a strengthening of his political authority, rather than a rejection of it. But the Duke’s actual motives for doing this have always troubled critics. N.W. Bawcutt writes in his critical introduction to the play that none of the motives offered by the Duke himself are particularly convincing, even the principal one, “the restoration of firm rule to Vienna after a period of laxity,” which “gradually slips from sight as the play progresses, and does not figure at all in the play’s resolution” (53).

But looking more closely at what the Duke actually says to Friar Thomas helps not only to explain his motives, but why an act of ascetic renunciation becomes the perfect vehicle for achieving his goals.

I have noted already above the subversive qualities of ascetic renunciation. Consider again Boethius, who wrote the *Consolation* while languishing in a traitor’s cell on the judgment of the tyrant Theodoric. The same strains of defiance are found, I will demonstrate, in Thomas More’s ascetic prison writings as he faced the ill-favor of a king no less severe. Peter Lake has detailed how catholic prisoners in Elizabethan and early Stuart England used ascetic vows and ceremonies to turn their prisons into makeshift monasteries, from which they not only endured state oppression with a stern and religious resolution, but actually were empowered to engage in polemical warfare with protestant authority (Lake and Questier, *Antichrist’s* 208-210). Asceticism demands the

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22 Scholarly perspectives on the Duke’s renunciation and taking up of the habit are limitless, but recent work tends to focus on the related ideas of justice and surveillance. See Dollimore, “Surveillance”; Kamaralli; and Spencer.
kind of rigorous mental and physical self-ordering that empowers the individual in the face of external pressures, a quality noted by Michel Foucault. Foucault categorizes asceticism (along with the classical stoicism) as a “technology of self,” which he defines as those that permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. (Technologies 18)

The technology of self is distinct from other technologies that govern the way humans interact, including technologies of production, which drive economies, technologies of sign symbols, which allow interpersonal communication, and, most significant for my purposes, technologies of power, “which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (18). Foucault himself uses the historical examples of ancient Greek stoics and medieval monks in explaining the function of technologies of self. Monasticism, though it requires absolute subservience to the hierarchy of the monastery that at first blush could be thought of as a technology of power, is built upon technologies of self precisely because the end-result of this subservience is not the disappearance of self-will, but a complete hermeneutical mastering of it. For the monk, every action must be considered for its propriety within the system of the cloister, and every thought must likewise be examined in the moment
of its conception to ensure that it is bent properly towards its religious purpose. The hierarchy of the monastery thus recedes into the background, a mechanism of enforcement no longer necessary. In theory, no aspect of the monk’s behavior goes unobserved or unrecognized, but the observation comes not from some carceral panopticon, but from within: the ideal result is an individual perfectly disciplined not by external authority, but through the contradictory act of will that is the denial of self-agency.

The Duke’s renunciation can be read as similarly, if counterintuitively, empowering. While this renunciation is strategic, it nevertheless answers a gnawing unrest in Vincento’s heart that mimics the vocational yearning of traditional monasticism. The Duke’s own words suggest this. In the play’s first scene, in which he delegates power to his subordinates, The Duke’s explanation to Angelo and Escalus is more revealing than Bawcutt claims. Just before his departure, the Duke confesses his anxieties about his relationship with his subjects:

I love the people,

But do not like to stage me to their eyes;

Though it do well, I do not relish well

Their loud applause and aves vehement;

Nor do I think the man of safe discretion

That does affect it. (1.1.67-72)
The Duke finds distasteful his place in the public gaze, which he metaphorically renders as the position of an actor before a theater audience.\textsuperscript{23} Like the player, the Duke’s actions are by definition public and visible, and therefore subject to judgment. Ducal fiats share with stage-play an openness to an audience of reactors: everyone is aware of just who is doing what, and whether they find it good or not. The Duke’s distaste stems from the recognition that in exercising such judgment, the “people” maintain a certain level of authority over him. The audible signals of their pleasure—“applause and aves vehement”—communicate approval, and the act of approval itself implies a power dynamic in which, ironically, the people are sovereign and the Duke subject, as the need for approval suggests a kind of subservience.

Unsaid but vividly present in the reference to hails and applause is the potential for the opposite reaction: disapproval, scorn, ridicule, and contempt. The Duke’s sensitivity to the judgment of the people, particularly the possibility of negative judgment, is at the heart of his anxiety while in the public gaze.\textsuperscript{24} This same anxiety is behind the typical case of stage fright: the actor’s furious pacing in the wings before his entrance is born of the understanding that he is the audience’s subject, that though his words and actions command their rapt attention, it is they who have the final say over

\textsuperscript{23}Daniel Massey, a veteran actor who himself was a subject of the public gaze, claims that in performing this scene he was able to “identify very strongly” with the Duke’s problems, including his sense of being “imprisoned...by pageantry”\textsuperscript{(17)}.

\textsuperscript{24}Jonathan Dollimore describes the Duke’s renunciation as a symptom of his “anxiety about the ungovernability of his subjects,” which amounts to much the same thing as a fear of their disapproval (“Surveillance” 81). Effective governance and a certain immunity to critical judgment go hand in hand.
his success or failure. This dynamic occurs repeatedly in Shakespeare’s frequently
derential prologues, epilogues, and choral addresses, in which audience approval or
forgiveness is directly solicited.25 Nor is the Duke the only Shakespearean ruler to feel
thus subjected: Henry V laments that the kingship is a “hard condition,” for the king is
“subject to the breath of every fool” (4.1.233-235), and thus consigned to a life of
constant anxiety. Henry is building on a sentiment first expressed by his father in Henry
IV Part 2, where beggars in fly-ridden hovels sleep soundly while “uneasy lies the head
that wears a crown” (3.1.31).

That the Duke feels constricted by his need for approval is made explicit in 1.3,
when he further elaborates on his motives with Friar Thomas. The Duke confesses that
the discipline that Vienna requires will not be popular given the license he has granted
throughout his reign. Delegating the task to Angelo while pulling the strings unseen is a
way of displacing negative judgment onto his subordinate:

Sith ‘twas my fault to give the people scope,

‘Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them

For what I bid them do; for we bid this be done,

When evil deeds have their permissive pass,

And not the punishment. Therefore indeed, my father,

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25 See, for example, the prologue of The Two Noble Kinsmen, which begs the audience’s pardon in the
fashion of the captatio benevolentiae of classical rhetoric, or Henry V, which asks the audience to overlook
the shortcomings of a limited medium. Troilus and Cressida is a less deferent exception, charging the
audience “to like or find fault” as they will (Prologue 30).
I have on Angelo imposed the office,
Who may in th’ambush of my name strike home,
And yet my nature never in the fight
To do in slander. (1.3.35-42)

The Duke sees the precise Angelo not only as the right man to put to the task of
Vienna’s moral correction, but as a convenient lightning rod for the wrath of the
people.\textsuperscript{26} Again, what the Duke fears is the collective opinion of his own subjects; some
powerful men are venal or sadistic enough not to care what the people think
(Tamburlaine, Herod, Caligula, and Nero), but the Duke seems to have much invested in
a certain idea of himself as a popular and enlightened ruler, or what Martha Widmayer
describes as an “obsessive concern with [his] reputation” (157). The pressure he feels to
maintain that image is relieved in his act of renunciation. Donning the friar’s robe, he is
freed from the subjecting gaze of the populace, and unburdened by the weight of his
office he can enact his social program with complete impunity.

The friar’s robe itself is a guise pre-suffused with meaning, and the anti-
fraternalism that was popular even during the height of catholic hegemony in England
had long before Shakespeare been adapted for protestant apologetics.\textsuperscript{27} In Bale’s \textit{King
John}, for instance, friars are shown to be comical sneaks who hoard gold and keep nuns
as whores, while professing holiness. They are also enemies of the state, conspiring

\textsuperscript{26} Zdravko Planinc observes a similarity between the Duke’s use of Angelo and Cesare Borgia’s similar use
of a deputy, Ramiro D’Orca, as described by Machiavelli in chapter seven of \textit{The Prince} (147).

\textsuperscript{27} For more on anti-fraternalism in medieval literature, see Szittya, particularly 231-246.
against the crown in the name of Rome (Beckwith, *Signifying God* 121-157). Such a representation adds the danger of political conspiracy and insurrection to the well-established medieval complaints about fraternal greed, sloth, and lechery. Beckwith sees Shakespeare’s flirtation with this tradition in *Measure for Measure* as an ironic inversion of anti-catholic tropes, for in this instance it is not the actual friar who poses a threat to political power, but the figure of authority himself acting as confessor while conspiring to disguise ducal power as divine grace (*Grammar* 76). I agree with Beckwith that Shakespeare’s Duke cannot be viewed as part of the same tradition as the anti-fraternalism of Bale, but her claim that the fusing of Duke and friar can be read as a “thorough-going critique of the inseparability of church and state invested in the person of the monarch” overstates the subversiveness of the characterization. The Duke’s temporary disguise as a fraternal ascetic, and with it his cooption of the sacraments of confession and the less formal clerical duty of paternalistic dispenser of advice (a familiar role for Shakespeare’s friars, whether in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Much Ado About Nothing*), actually does allow him to construct an outcome designed to please. What the play seems to suggest through the figure of the friar/Duke is that fraternal duties work best not as a lifelong commitment, but as one of many functions that fall under the purview of the post-Reformation ruler. Religious wisdom, clerical leadership, and political authority need not be divided amongst different estates, but can find a synthesized identity in the head of state. That he only temporarily plays the friar reinforces his flexibility to move between the religious and the secular, a flexibility taken
advantage of by all Tudor and Stuart kings. The Duke dons the friar’s habit with the implicit promise that it will be taken off again, a promise that signals a similar destiny for Isabella.

Isabella’s Resistant Celibacy

The Duke’s renunciation demonstrates how an ascetic posture—even one adopted by a ruler for political purposes—can act as a check against forces of domination or subjugation. I contend that the resistant force of asceticism is even more starkly apparent when examining a true renunciant, in this case one who as both a woman and a political subject is doubly vulnerable to domination. Isabella’s vows imbue her with a kind of stature—and power—not typically open to women in Jacobean society. They also allow her, as one editor of the play has noted, to sidestep the prescribed gender roles of wife, widow, mother, and whore repeatedly offered by the play (Kamps and Raber 196). 28

As a nun, Isabella would have engendered contradictory feelings in members of Shakespeare’s audience. Institutional asceticism was a form of Christian worship long since exploded, done in not only by Cromwell’s visitations and Henry VIII’s edicts, but by

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28 Flood believes that female asceticism is particularly oriented toward resistance: “Gender has become an important analytical tool for looking at the histories of asceticism, especially the relationship of the ascetic self to power in terms of conformity and resistance. Indeed, we might claim that resistance to power enacted through ascetic performance...is mainly female, in contrast to conformity to power, which is mainly male” (Flood 7). Flood supports this somewhat reductive formula with the case of Simone Weil (37-63).
theological changes discussed above. The early modern audience had been trained, in fact, to respond negatively to catholic clergymen of all stripes on the stage by a long parade of scheming bishops, treacherous cardinals, greedy, bumbling friars, and hypocritical monks. However, the characterization of Isabella does not precisely align with such satirical depictions. Measure for Measure is a play that resists easy classifications, and Isabella is no exception. While a typical protestant might not have found admirable her vows of celibacy (and even that claim assumes an audience member with a fairly developed understanding of theology—hardly a certainty), her resistance to Angelo is a defense of her chastity: a distinction that makes all the difference in the world in a protestant worldview. Thus, in the immediate situation of resisting Angelo’s coercive assault, she is not torn between her brother’s life and Romish monasticism, but between filial love and a cardinal protestant virtue. Isabella is also not representative of the polemical tradition of sexualization discussed above and analyzed by Dolan. While she may be misguided from a protestant perspective, she is not lax in regards to her vows, nor is she held up as an object of ridicule, nor subjected to pornographic debasement. While Angelo’s attempted judicial rape recalls similar seductions of nuns by priests in polemical depictions, there is no sense in the play that the audience should be amused or aroused by the proceedings, nor is the audience given the protestant satisfaction of the nun’s eventual acquiescence. David Stevenson is perhaps correct that “a partial not-liking of Isabella is written into the play” (83); her conduct is not perfect, especially in her willingness to go along with the Duke’s effective
prostitution of Mariana, a hypocritical turn after her harsh judgment of Claudio and Juliet’s unlawful intercourse. However, the dislike is partial, I would argue along with Stevenson: the full brunt of audience outrage seems meant to fall upon Angelo, whose draconian moral regulation and outrageous hypocrisy overwhelm equally harsh judgments of Isabella. In the contradictory feelings she engenders, she recalls some of the similarly opaque or ambivalently drawn female ascetics in Chaucer. The ambiguity of her moral position—and the ambivalence she has inspired in audiences and critics—evinces the binary significance of the nun herself in the early modern, post-Reformation imagination. On the one hand, the most polemical protestant voices going back to Thomas Cromwell, John Bale, and even Calvin, took great pleasure in excoriating the nun for her hypocrisy, her presumption, and her slothfulness. On the other hand, a society that policed and controlled female sexuality as rigorously as early modern England, that placed high value on female chastity, and that saw sexuality as almost exclusively a matter of male agency, would doubtless have responded sympathetically to the sexual “purity” of a figure like Isabella. In some ways, the nun—obedient, chaste, and pious—possesses the qualities of an ideal Renaissance wife. What an early modern comedy demands is not humiliation or debasement of such a figure, but her gentle submission at last to male sovereignty in marriage.

Thus, the play seems determined from its outset to bring Isabella back into the light, even as it demonstrates the power and stature of her position. This ambivalence is present from her introduction in the first act. Having just seen her brother hauled off to
prison on the imperative of the state, the audience finds Isabella pronouncing the holy wonder of her own imminent self-imposed enclosure:

*Isab.* And have you nuns no farther privileges?  
*Fran.* Are these not large enough?  
*Isab.* Yes, truly; I speak not as desiring more,  
Bur rather wishing a more strict restraint  
Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare. (1.4.1-5)

These lines make two things clear about Isabella’s relationship to the convent of St. Claire: first, that she has not yet formally taken the monastic vows that will sever her permanently from the world (she addresses the nuns using the second person, not the first person plural); and second, that her ascetic zeal exceeds even what is required by the rules of the convent. She demonstrates the characteristics of what Patrick Olivelle terms “elite asceticism,” practicing (or desiring to practice, in this case) “extraordinary” or “unusual” feats of self-control in relation not only to the worldly, but to more culturally normative ascetic traditions (31-32). Isabella’s desire is especially noteworthy given the reputation enjoyed by the rule of St. Clare for adherence to the strictest of vows. Francisca’s question—“Are these not enough?”—likely signals genuine

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29 Olivelle defines three levels of ascetic practice, each of which is overlaid upon the other. Root asceticism, the broadest category, is “not an observable phenomenon, but, like a linguistic root...is a mere postulate as a cultural imperative” (29). Overlaid upon root asceticism is cultural asceticism, the observable manifestations of the root ascetic impulse in cultural traditions and institutions. Elite asceticism, finally, is overlaid upon (and surpasses) both more general categories, encompassing individuals who practice extraordinary forms of ascetic renunciation in relation to cultural asceticism (30-31).
surprise, given what was known of the order at the turn of the seventeenth century.

While no practicing communities of the Order of St. Clare existed in England in the first decade of the seventeenth century, accounts from continental sources document the nuns’ strict regimes of fasting, labor, and mortification.\(^{30}\) One potential votaress of the Ave-Maria convent in Paris, which had adopted the rule, changed her mind when exposed to the reality of life as a “Poor Clare”:

To her mind, their high walls formed a narrow prison. Their terrible fasting...made her go pale, but especially the manner of their sleeping without being entirely recumbent at night and the obligation to go about entirely barefoot even in winter and on ice astounded her, such that she indeed believed that the day she entered this would soon be followed by that of her death, and what she considered only a prison for others would in a short time become her tomb. (Diefendorf, *Penitence* 56-57)

This young prospective votaress, driven away in terror by the harsh reality of the rule, strikes a marked contrast with her dramatic counterpart who is disappointed by the laxity of that same rule. That the Poor Clares were themselves known to be extraordinarily ascetic, even for a religious order, further marginalizes Isabella’s religious orientation—“spiritual overreach,” as Gless describes it (97).\(^{31}\) Returning to Olivelle’s

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\(^{30}\) English catholic refugees did practice the Rule of St. Clare at a convent founded at Gravelines by Mary Ward in 1608. The Rule provided an excellent organizational framework not only for piety but for scholarship and political activism. See Goodrich, 85-86.

\(^{31}\) Natasha Korda offers a valuable overview of the Poor Clare’s vows of poverty, which had to be reconciled with the order’s wealth-generating properties in pre-dissolution England. See Korda, 168-170.
categories, Isabella embodies the virtuosic nature of elite asceticism, which tends to be practiced by extraordinary individuals operating at the limits of social normativity, rather than large communities (31).

Elite asceticism is the subject matter of both hagiography and martyrology, and Isabella approaches this status not only through the extra-normative qualities of her bodily continence, but her capacity to imagine, even encourage, non-sexual violence against her physical being. Several times she expresses a willingness to die for Claudio, once to Claudio himself:

O, were it but my life,
I’d throw it down for your deliverance
As frankly as a pin. (3.1.103-105)

Such a sacrifice, mimicking Christ’s substitutionary atonement for mankind, does not give Isabella the slightest pause, so perfectly does it adhere to the orthodoxy of elite ascetic martyrology. Even more evocative, however, is the hypothetical possibility of the suffering she would endure before yielding to Angelo’s bargain:

Ang. Admit no other way to save his life,--
(As I subscribe not that, nor any other,
But in the loss of question),--that you, his sister,
Finding yourself desir’d of such a person,
Whose credit with the judge, or own great place,
Could fetch your brother from the manacles
Of the all-binding law; and that there were
No earthly mean to save him, but that either
You must lay down the treasures of your body
To this supposed, or else to let him suffer—
What would you do?

*Isab.* As much for my poor brother as myself:
That is, were I under the terms of death,
The impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death, as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame. (2.4.88-104)

She would look upon such bodily torments with *longing* if they would preserve either
Claudio’s life or her own virtue. The stripping of flesh from bones is a common
punishment in martyrrology and hagiography, but Isabella’s resistant claim that the very
scores of the whip would adorn her flesh as rubies powerfully transforms punishment
into a kind of holy vestment, a marker of her sainthood. Even the agency of the
flagellation is somewhat obscure: she speaks of being “under the terms of death,”
subject to external punishment, but the phrase “strip myself” suggests the self-agency

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32 Flood, in theorizing about Simone Weil in the twentieth century, offers a surprisingly helpful
formulation for considering Isabella’s words here: “The body and the encoding of tradition and culture
upon it become, for her, a means of transcending the body...Pain, willingly accepted, becomes the
method for the body’s transcendence” (6).
of positive mortification. Martyrdom and asceticism come into alignment as Isabella imagines wearing her wounds as proudly as one might wear jewelry, language reminiscent of a phenomenon of hagiography wherein wounds acquire symbolic or metaphorical meaning. In one example of such symbolization, Prudentius writes of the virgin martyr Eulalia, “mutilated by her torturers,” who claims that “God writes on her body” through her wounds (Taylor 36). According to Anna Taylor, Eulalia’s body, “written upon in her own blood become[s] in suffering and death a book for the faithful to read” (36). As with Isabella, the wounds of the virgin become symbols of her godliness, as external punishment is appropriated into the larger framework of askesis.

Ultimately, Isabella’s willingness to endure suffering exemplifies the paradoxical nature of all asceticism; ascetic adherents shun pleasure and embrace agony, whether self-inflicted or enthusiastically accepted (Tinsley 24). The benefits of such ascetic reversal, David Tinsley explains, are often figured as therapeutic in ascetical discourse. Just as pre-modern medicine touted the restorative power of bleeding and other counter-productive measures, so too do ascetic writers preach the spiritually palliative value of pain: Tinsley, in paraphrasing one such tract, explains that “one should let God the physician prescribe the proper dosage. Superfluous blood corrupts the heart just as sin…corrupts the soul” (27). Isabella’s description of her prospective suffering and execution as a bed of comforts for sickness evokes this traditional therapeutic
Her somewhat dissonant unwillingness to include rape in the catalogue of palliative suffering, and thereby find a solution to her fraternal dilemma, can be explained in part by the aforementioned phenomenon of ascetic reversal. Sex, after all, comes under the category of pleasures to be fled. Appropriating sexual assault for ascetic martyrlogy—allowing something explicitly proscribed by religious vows to be welcomed as *imitatio Christi*—creates a cognitive dissonance too great to overcome. No wonder that Kathleen Coyne Kelly, a scholar of both hagiography and medieval asceticism, confesses that, despite the frequent specter of rape in saint’s lives, “I have never read a narrative which describes rape, or says that rape was committed, or even creates a before and after scenario” such as that found in *Clarissa* (43). Deferring to the breadth of Kelly’s reading in such material, I would argue that *Measure for Measure* demonstrates an instinctive understanding that the discourse of martyrrological suffering cannot contain sexual assault, beyond its mere prospect, amongst its litany of punishments be ascetically appropriated.34

Despite this one scruple, Isabella nevertheless stands at a double remove from the other nuns: she is less bound by the demands of renunciation than the rest of the Poor Clares, but she is also desirous of an even more thorough spiritual cleansing than they have undergone. This excess partially explains the long train of critics going back to

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33 Tinsley draws from the late medieval ascetical tract *De duodecim utilitatis tribulationum*, which provides a total of five “metaphors of purgation” that liken suffering to medicine (23-29).
34 This formula should be limited to literal horrors, for Kelly muses that the punishment of female martyrs can symbolize or evoke sexual assault through a rhetoric of substitution or silence (43).
G. Wilson Knight who have understood Isabella as excessively cold and therefore unsympathetic (93).\(^{35}\) Critics such as Knight and Stevenson balk at the severity of Isabella’s asceticism, and while such a response is common enough, and consistent with the protestant context of the play’s production, it also perpetuates a specifically modern antipathy towards female asceticism that can itself register as dismissively patriarchal.\(^{36}\) Such an attitude ignores what Jessica Slights and Michael Morgan identify as the resistant potential that “solidarity among women in an all-female community” and the volitional restraint of monastic life offers to the “conventional sex/gender identities and the play's heteronormative telos” (265).

But in *Measure for Measure*’s complex, almost opaque treatment of asceticism, the polemical voice of protestant hegemony is never long silent. The play also seems intentionally, though subtly, to invoke a traditional protestant anti-monastic line of attack by having Isabella refer to her religious vows as “restraint” (1.4.4). Restrstraint can be exercised upon oneself or imposed on an individual by external forces. As Natasha Korda explains, the nature of this desired restraint remains unspecified, but in any case it is volitional (Korda 159). The Foucauldian treatment of asceticism discussed above is built upon considering ascetic restraint as self-imposed: the monk or nun polices his or

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\(^{35}\) Gless, in a similar register, cites Isabella’s “deviant relationship to law” (98).

\(^{36}\) Tinsley identifies a similar dismissiveness in the misogynistic attitudes of many twentieth century medievalists and scholars of religion: “Scholars [have] responded to scenes of [female asceticism] with indifference, condescension, or scorn….In general, the presence of asceticism was seen as just another indication of the debased and degenerate forms of spirituality that occupied the lives of medieval religious women. For almost a century, religious writing by women came to be ignored, dismissed, or marginalized” (Tinsley 4-5).
her own behavior—exercises restraint—and thereby is subjectively empowered.

However, in Isabella’s wish “for a more strict restraint/Upon the sisterhood,” the preposition “upon” hints of restraint in the sense of a means of control wielded by an external actor (4-5): the type of discipline Foucault associates not with monasteries but with prisons. The convent or monastery does depend on a “rule” (Franciscan, Benedictine, etc.) that is external to the self, but adherence to this rule must be willingly accepted by the self (save for the obvious cases where the taking of the habit is forced or coerced). This distinction between self-restraint as a means of empowerment and external restraint as a mechanism of domination is crucial to unpacking the protestant orthodoxy behind what Shakespeare here depicts. The difference between the monastery and the prison hinges on this distinction. Yet not only the pronoun “upon,” but the word “restraint” itself demands that a connection, rather than a distinction, be drawn between the two institutions. Isabella’s desire for “restraint” is voiced just two scenes after Lucio, watching Claudio hauled off to his cell on Angelo’s orders, asks: “Why, how now, Claudio? whence comes this restraint?” (1.2.124, emphasis mine).

Claudio answers:

From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty:

As surfeit is the father of much fast,

So every scope by the immoderate use

Turns to restraint. (1.2.125-128)
Here Shakespeare plays with the two meanings of “restraint.” To borrow loosely from V.N. Voloshinov, the flexibility of this sign in its signal manifestations creates telling juxtapositions. Lucio’s question is about external, forcible restraint. Claudio’s answer is clever precisely because it invokes both meanings of the word: feasting, self-indulgence, leads to fasting, a form of self-restraint, just as transgressive immorality—an excess of liberty—leads to forcible restraint by the law. The asceticism of fasting melds seamlessly into the subjugation of imprisonment.

The careful reader or the closely attuned auditor may thus, upon Isabella’s utterance of the word “restraint” in 1.4, be immediately thrown back to the scene of Claudio’s arrest and imprisonment. The word “restraint” becomes a kind of verbal heteroptia: a word through which the contrary but related institutions of monastery and prison are not only juxtaposed, but essentially amalgamated. The word ties Isabella’s monastic renunciation to her brother’s imprisonment, and signals to an early modern audience that this comedy dramatizes not only one, but two liberations.

At the same time that the play positions Isabella as a prisoner-nun waiting for the gift of liberty-marriage, it cannot avoid demonstrating how profoundly empowering Isabella’s position is. That, historically, many European nuns clung to their lives in the convent long after the tide of reformation swept over them attests not only to the fact that they possessed a sincere devotion to the ascetic life, but that they saw in their post monastic fates an intolerable diminution in status. Unlike former priests and even monks, who could, if so inclined, easily adapt to lives as protestant ministers or Anglican
priests, two decidedly unattractive fates typically awaited the “liberated” nun: in the best case, marriage to a former member of the secular clergy now freed from his vows of celibacy; in the worst case, the weakness and dependency of old maidhood (Wiesner-Hanks, Convents 115-116). Either situation—barring marriage to an extremely powerful member of the clergy or, in rare cases, a gentleman of the nobility—represented potential subjugation to a nun who had become accustomed to answering to no man, and who was “free” within the confines of the conventual laws from the patriarchal domination that characterized every other facet of post-Reformation society. This was particularly true for the sisters of rank who had enjoyed positions of authority (16-17). But regardless of rank, the habit conveyed a kind of status: it elevated a woman above her secular peers by marking her as an extraordinary practitioner of her faith, one who had chosen the celibate ideal over the “concession” of mere chastity.

Isabella is merely a novitiate, not by any means a mother, and yet, even within the monastery she seems to be marked by qualities that distinguish her from her fellow nuns, expressing, as discussed above, a desire for renunciation beyond what is expected. She is also beautiful, and it is the convergence of her physical beauty and her ascetic firmness that makes her so extraordinary to those who look upon her. This sentiment is first expressed by Lucio the bawd, who finds his typical irreverence silenced by the presence of such a striking figure:

I would not—though ’tis my familiar sin
With maids to seem the lapwing and to jest,
Tongue far from heart—play with all virgins so.

I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted

By your renouncement, an immortal spirit

And to be talked with in sincerity

As with a saint. (1.4.31-37)

Performance matters here: the lines can be played as sarcasm or hyperbole, as Isabella herself interprets them. But Lucio’s brief but strong insistence in response to Isabella’s rebuke suggests a non-ironic interpretation: Lucio is genuinely impressed by the spiritual gravitas of Isabella’s presence. His description of her as a thing divorced from the material—“enskied” is Shakespeare’s very apt neologism—fits the austerity of her manner and stands out particularly through contrast with the “teeming foison” of Juliet and Claudio’s sexual reproduction (43).

This same power that silences the irrepressible Lucio also heats the “snow broth” that flows in Angelo’s veins. The precisian, who fills his days with “profits of the mind, study, and fast,” certainly sees in Isabella, as many critics have noted, a reflection of his own cherished moral severity, but there is more at work here than mere narcissism. To say that Angelo is merely falling in love with himself, or an image of himself, is to simplify a very complex set of reactions. I agree with Widmayer that Angelo’s attraction to Isabella is first and foremost of a sexual nature (Widmayer 67). However, it is a lust kindled ironically by rhetorical, rather than physical, touch, through an appeal to the same theological register that supports his own precise nature. Angelo himself remarks
on this in a brief aside: “She speaks, and 'tis/Such sense, that my sense breeds with it” (2.2141-142). Here, as William Empson notes, two meanings of sense—Angelo’s as sensual feeling and Isabella’s as logical wisdom—combine in a sexually charged image of “breeding” that surprises even Angelo (274). Angelo’s lust triggers in his own mind, and to his own disgust, an image of a defiled holy space: “Having waste ground enough/Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary/And pitch our evils there?” (2.2.169-171).

Given that England in the seventeenth century was still pockmarked by the ruins of the great religious houses shuttered by Henry VIII, the image of a razed sanctuary cannot be dismissed as a generalized metaphor of the sacred defiled. Rather, it suggests that Isabella’s specific identity as a nun is an essential component of the sexual desire she raises in Angelo. By figuring his lust for Isabella as a need to defile the grounds of a former convent or monastery, Angelo expresses the same urge to debase and demystify the sacred found in the more scurrilous material discussed by Dolan. For all the doubling language in the play—“O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint, with saints dost bait thy hook!” (2.2179-180)—a religiously sensitive reading of Angelo’s attempted rape of Isabella reveals not a meeting of mirror images, or the deluded self-righteous Angelo

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37 That Angelo is “genuinely astonished by his desires” is one of his few sympathetic qualities, according to Empson, who traces the ambiguities created by the doubling language throughout this scene (274).
38 Shakespeare also exploits the resonance of ruined monasteries with the late autumnal trees likened to “bare ruined choirs” in Sonnet 73 (4).
39 The “evils” that Angelo talks of dumping on the sanctuary possibly signify either the building of privies or the voiding of waste itself (2.2.171n.)
identifying with the righteous Isabella, but a contest between two marginal figures in Jacobean society: a godly Puritan and a catholic nun.

Isabella’s fate in Measure for Measure, however, is not to be exposed as ascetic fraud, any more than it is Angelo’s fate to be severely punished; while other extra-normative or problematic figures such as Malvolio in Twelfth Night or Jacques in As You Like It are excluded from comedic unification, Measure for Measure calls for a rehabilitation of social schismatics. Like Angelo, Isabella is reappropriated in a way that is consistent not only with comedic harmony, but with official Elizabethan and Jacobean policies of inclusiveness. Many readers are bothered by the Duke’s leniency in dealing with Angelo; Samuel Taylor Coleridge lambasted the play’s lapse of justice in allowing him to go unpunished (Geckle 71). Such dissatisfaction is certainly justified by the heinousness of his offenses. However, placing the pardon in the context of early seventeenth-century religious conflict can permit a different understanding of the play’s ending. The Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, and later the Hampton Court Conference called by James I, promoted a view of English protestantism that was nominally, if not always in practice, inclusive, expressing general tolerance towards protestant sectarians, including at least moderate Puritans. The 1604 settlement at Hampton Court reflects particularly the inclusive religious atmosphere in England during the period of Measure for Measure’s first performance, for it resulted in negotiated agreements between the Puritan representatives and James, who found the “radical” protestant element more reasonable to deal with than he’d imagined (Newton 41-43). This context of religious
inclusiveness and negotiation might help to explain why Angelo earns a place in the happy ending denied to Malvolio, another “kind of puritan,” in *Twelfth Night* (2.3.139). Though Angelo’s uncompromisingly rigid coldness is shown to mask a hypocritical libidinousness, the solution is not to expel him from Viennese society, but to reform him by firmly and properly affixing him to a connubial partner: to, in essence, bring him into the fold of correct familio-social interrelations. “Look that you love your wife,” the Duke orders Angelo, for “her worth” is worth his life (5.1.497): what is required for pardon is for Angelo to dispense with his presumptions toward unbending perfection (which, ironically, is redolent of a works-based morality), and embrace the protestant ideal of procreative marriage through submission to the Duke’s carefully orchestrated settlement.

For Isabella, the play rushes to perform a similar reappropriation. The Duke’s proposal beckons the votaress back into the world of familial and sexual responsibility that she had renounced by entering the convent. Without giving her a chance to respond, the play ends with the Duke reaching for, and perhaps taking, if so staged, her hand. As her rhetorical “touch” once inflamed the gross passions of Angelo, so now does the Duke’s touch signal a re-subjugation of this female ascetic by the correctness of protestant patriarchy. “I have a motion much imports your good,” says the Duke (5.1.535), and the orthodox reading would support such a claim. This coupling of Duke/“friar” and nun, hearkening back as it does to the tropes of anti-catholic satire, serves here a grander purpose as part of a staged tableau of the Jacobean absolutist
social order, incorporating the political magistrate as the final architect of harmony.

Isabella’s silence, engendering uncertainty in readers and directors for centuries, is, in such a performance, the strongest assertion of her assent possible. The convent and the habit have no place in the Elizabethan happy ending, built as the genre is upon marital bliss.

However, without voiced assent, the socially and generically normalizing insistence on marriage remains unfinished, or at least unconfirmed. Silence, after all, is itself a form of renunciation, an extreme but not uncommon monastic vow. The Poor Clares practice a form of it, as Francisca tells Isabella in her first scene: “When you have vowed, you must not speak with men/but in the presence of the prioress;/then, if you speak, you must not show your face/or if you show your face you must not speak”(2.1.10-13). Isabella has not yet sworn her vows, therefore in falling silent she acts purely from the self-restraint of the elite ascetic. Her silence is total, not conditional as in the letter of the rule. Characteristically, she does not follow the rule so much as she exceeds it, adopting a more strict restraint. She retreats, in a limited way, into the same protected space that would have shielded her from the subjugation of marriage in the first place, had only she not twice flaunted her clausturation. Now vulnerable, exposed to the rapacity of social order, she invokes the one weapon left at her disposal by wrapping herself in monastic silence.

So Measure for Measure ends, perpetually balanced in the liminal space between the orthodox and the subversive, with no hint from Isabella as to which way
the play inclines. As attested to by the numerous critics, myself included, who have leapt to fill her silence with commentary, this moment itself performs its own kind of resistance, one that has yet to be satisfactorily overcome: to paraphrase Wallace Stevens, it resists the intelligence, almost completely.
Like *Measure for Measure*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare’s Chaucerian collaboration with John Fletcher, derives much of its dramatic tension from the subversive nature of female celibacy. The play’s very first scene hints at the threat that perpetual virginity presents to sovereign patriarchal power. Joining the three Queens and Hippolyta in entreating Theseus to make war on Creon before his wedding night, Emilia, the votaress of Diana, offers the following contribution to their rhetoric of persuasion:

If you grant not

My sister her petition, in that force,

With that celerity and nature, which

She makes it in, from henceforth I’ll not dare

To ask you any thing, nor be so hardy

Ever to take a husband. (1.1.200-205)

The conditional grammar itself reinforces the sense that this is not an entreaty so much as a threat. An unmarried votaress of Diana bends the will of her sovereign Duke by threatening both to cease her submissive devotion (“I’ll not dare ask you any thing”) and to withhold from him the principal source of her value. By vowing to never “take a husband” should Theseus refuse to make war on Creon, Emilia reminds the Duke of her
ability to frustrate his will by removing herself from the marketplace of matrimonial exchange.

Walter Cohen sees this scene and others in which Emilia claims to “prefer virginity and the company of females to the prospect of marriage” to be representative of the play’s unappealing portrayal of heterosexual desire (432-433). Whether through the pitiful fate of the Jailer’s daughter, driven mad by the coarseness of Arcite’s rejection, the kinsmen whose brotherhood is rent by sexual jealousy, or Emilia herself, helplessly tossed in the tempest of their feud, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is relentless in the doubt it seeds about amorous entanglement. At the same time, the play suggests that alternatives to such entanglement, including homosocial bonds and perpetual celibacy, offer a potential reprieve from the chaos of romantic love.

As much as such alternatives are hinted at, however, they are ultimately put aside. The play centers not only on the conflict between feuding cousins over the love of a courtly amazon (an anachronistic conceit that Shakespeare and Fletcher inherited from Chaucer), but also the normalizing pressures of sexual union exerted upon a resistant female ascetic. At the same time, the deadly rivalry of Palamon and Arcite itself serves as the rejection of another quasi-ascetic alternative: the homosocial perfection of associative male friendship. These horizontal alternatives to hierarchy (both sexual and political) are, in a familiar pattern, ultimately rejected in favor of social and political normativity, but, unlike *Measure for Measure*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*’s generic hybridity and its loose identification with comedy free it from the restrictive bonds of a
comic ending. The result is a play that leaves its skepticism of sexual union explicitly intact through its conclusion, including a Chaucerian epilogue that acknowledges the tears of its audience. What I hope to demonstrate in this chapter is that *The Two Noble Kinsmen*’s preoccupation with overcoming the impediment that sexual abstinence presents to marital happiness is an artistic decision that reinforces, reluctantly, Jacobean socio-religious priorities. It is not a rejection of Chaucer, who presents a rather neutral stance on Emelye’s asceticism in *The Knight’s Tale*, but it does resolve the social tension brought about by introducing such a strong ascetic figure into a play destined for a nuptial resolution. However, in doing so, it also acknowledges that resolving that tension does not come without cost.

**Sign, Signal, and Periodization**

Interrogating the stance of Shakespeare and Fletcher’s play toward its Chaucerian source material is a necessary antecedent to serious engagement with the play’s treatment of asceticism. It is intuitive that two works of such similarity in action and subject matter as *The Knight’s Tale* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* can yield different interpretations when social and historical context is taken into consideration; however, articulating how and why this is so is a task aided greatly by sociolinguistic theory, particularly V.N. Voloshinov’s categories of sign and signal in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. According to Voloshinov, signals, the formal and abstract raw material of utterance, possess an unchanging, normatively identical character, but such
“incontestable” forms do not in any meaningful way constitute language in its social existence (66). Voloshinov breaks with abstract objectivism in assigning meaning rather to signs, which are signals employed in the concrete situation of meaningful discourse. Signs are changeable and adaptable, where signals are fixed and immutable. Signals can be recognized, but only signs can be understood, as it is only in becoming a sign in a social and discursive context that forms acquire meaning:

[T]he understander, belonging to the same linguistic community...is attuned to the linguistic form not as a fixed, self-identical signal, but as changeable and adaptable sign.... Only a sign can be understood; what is recognized is a signal. A signal is an internally fixed, singular thing that does not in fact stand for anything else, or reflect or refract anything, but is simply a technical means for indicating this or that object or this or that action. (68-6)

The sign/signal dialectic is superficially similar to other binary systems of language (structuralism’s langue and parole, or the type and token of pragmatic philosophy). However, for Voloshinov the linguistic form acquires meaning only in specific acts of discourse, and therefore is inseparable from ideology:

In actuality we never hear or say words, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology.* That is the way we understand words, and we
can respond only to words that engage us behaviorally or ideologically.

(70)

Discourse of any kind cannot be isolated from behavioral or ideological impetion, and thus, according to Voloshinov, attempting to interpret utterances based on fixed and unchanging meanings is impossible. Voloshinov’s insistence on the intersection of meaning and ideology in discourse will help to explain how the discursive gestures of ascetic renunciation can acquire multiple and seemingly contradictory meanings, and how such gestures can be oriented toward vastly different sociopolitical (or literary) goals depending on their context and the ideological identities of those who produce and receive them. For the critical agenda of this chapter, Voloshinov’s categories provide a vocabulary for explaining the new social meaning acquired by Chaucer’s subject matter in its reproduction by Shakespeare and Fletcher. As signals—discursive raw material stripped from their context—Chaucer’s Emelye and Shakespeare/Fletcher’s Emilia, along with the identically named goddess Diana that each prays to, are remarkably similar. Understanding these figures as signs, however, requires fully accounting for their ideological function in historical and generic context. Ann Thompson acknowledges this very fact when she remarks that the difference between The Knight’s Tale and The Two Noble Kinsmen is primarily a difference of “attitude” rather than “situations,” “ideas,” or “verbal details” (166). In other words, the greatest difference between the medieval poem and the early modern play is the ideological position that each adopts toward its subject matter.
Shakespeare’s play, like Chaucer’s fragment, came into existence as part of a
discursive field, in dialogue with other types of literary and verbal utterance. Most
immediately, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is responding to *The Knight’s Tale*, but it is also
responding to the expectations of a Jacobean audience, the demands of
commodification that required turning Chaucer’s ornate symmetries into moneymaking
dramatic action, and the social and religious issues of its own historical moment.
Chaucer’s poem was interoriented within a different discursive field: one that included
his Italian sources, the aesthetics of continental romance that he both evoked and
flaunted, the tastes of a courtly readership, Roman catholic theology, etc. While these
points are perhaps obvious, they reinforce the Bakhtinian notion that all signifying
action—verbal or literate—takes meaning only through its dialogic orientation. Within
any discursive gesture exists the ghosts and shadows of previous utterance and the
range of potential counter-utterance:

The word is not a tangible object, but an always shifting, always changing
means of social communication. It never rests with one consciousness,
one voice. Its dynamism consists in movement from speaker to speaker,
from one context to another, from one generation to another. Through it
all, the word does not forget its path of transfer and cannot completely
free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has
entered. By no means does each member of the community apprehend
the word as a neutral medium of the language system, free from
intentions and untenanted by the voices of its previous users. Instead, he receives the word from another voice, a word full of that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the intentions of other speakers. (Bakhtin, Poetics 95)

Such a framework offers a useful way for thinking about the transmission of literature across continents or centuries. One can imagine the story of Palamon and Arcite, and its signal components, performing a journey such as the one described above, in which its signifying elements move through a shifting “apperceptive background of understanding” that fundamentally alters what Bakhtin might label its actual meaning (rather than its more abstract neutral signification)”(Bakhtin, Dialogic 281). At the same time, the seventeenth century literary product that is The Two Noble Kinsmen carries with it, backgrounded but present, the ideological and rhetorical impletions of its earlier sources, particularly Chaucer. Even if unconsciously, the latter work negotiates the rhetorical contours of its source in such a way that the component signals of The Knight’s Tale can be recast in an ideologically distinct signifying action; even elements left largely unchanged (such as the basic structures of plot and the broad outlines of characterization) acquire distinct socio-political significance in the new discursive field of seventeenth century protestant drama.
Chaucer’s Emelye

Making large interpretive claims about The Two Noble Kinsmen often begins with considering one or both of the following two issues: the play’s complex and unsettled authorship, and its relationship to its Chaucerian source material. As I am less interested in personalities than in texts, I will let rest in this chapter the former controversy, accepting as probable the most recent analysis of Shakespearean and Fletcherian scenes provided by Lois Potter in the critical introduction to the Arden third edition of the play. The second issue, however, provides an excellent starting point for an exploration of one of The Two Noble Kinsmen’s major themes: the benefits of worldly renunciation in general, and the particular moral potential of sexual abstinence. Both the titular kinsmen and the love-object Emilia speak repeatedly throughout the play of the desirability of the celibate life, the dangers of sexual licentiousness, and their skepticism of marriage. Beyond these direct proclamations, the play seems inherently skeptical of marital bliss, promoting—seemingly in its stead—the associative ideal of same-sex friendship, both male and female. Ultimately the play embraces marriage in its conclusion, adhering to generic convention while glossing over the radical potential of some of its characters’ earlier conceits. In doing so, the play reaches the same

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40 See Potter, 16-34. Potter proposes that an earlier collaboration was eventually completely worked over by Fletcher alone. A less nuanced essay on the subject can also be found in Eugene Waith’s critical introduction to his edition of the play. See, Waith, 7-23. The fact that there still is not total consensus on which scenes belong to whom reminds us of the role that subjectivity must play in such a process. In earlier analyses, critics tended to assign scenes they like to Shakespeare. See Mincoff, 97-115; Muir, 98-147; and Proudfoot.
conclusion as Chaucer’s tale, and in much the same way. But far more interesting than
the play’s closeness to its source in terms of plot and general subject matter is the great
distance in social meaning carried by these seemingly similar elements. To paraphrase
Bakhtin, the skeletal outline of the Palamon and Arcite story changes rhetorical shape as
it moves from author to author, from one historical context to another, from one
generation to another (Dialogic 195). Shakespeare and Fletcher speak to a different
audience and anticipate a different field of responses, and the result is a work similar in
facts, but quite distinct in meaning.

Understanding the divergence requires starting with play’s source and
interrogating its attitude towards asceticism. In the third part of Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale,
the virgin devotee of Diana, Emelye, prays to her patron goddess to protect her from
the amorous pursuits of the knights Palamon and Arcite:

O chaste goddesse of the wodes grene,
To whom bothe hevene and erthe and see is sene,
Queene of the regne of pluto derk and lowe,
Goddesse of maydens, that myn herte hast knowe
Ful many a yeer, and woost what I desire,
As keepe me fro thy vengeaunce and thyn ire,
That attheon aboughte cruelly.
Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.
I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe. (I.1439-1452)

This prayer—part of one of the best known episodes in all of Chaucer’s work—is destined to go unanswered in part because the will of even so estimable a figure as Diana cannot take precedence over the wishes of her male Olympian counterparts. From a literary perspective, Emelye’s desire to remain chaste is a sole and rather impotent impediment to what Emelye Jensen sees as her one dramatic function: to serve as a “means for the two lovers to advance their claims” (321). As such, her virginity must also ultimately yield—as surely as Diana herself does—to male will. Jensen and other critics have seen Emelye’s prayer, along with her entire function in the tale, to be wholly inert and passive, existing merely “to intensify” the conflict between the knights rather than “suggest she has any say in the matter” (322). Emelye’s impact on the plot of the tale is far less active than many of Chaucer’s other female figures, but the significance of her prayer at least from a critical perspective is something I wish to reevaluate. William F. Woods argues persuasively that Emelye’s prayer and the figure of

41 Jensen’s reading hearkens back in part to older interpretations of Emelye as a more or less static figure. Robertson considers Emelye an allegorical symbol of virtue (266), while Muscatine dismisses the naturalism of all three characters, promoting a reading of the tale as a highly patterned “poetic pageant” (“Form” 69).
Diana herself are central to a critical understanding of the tale. Woods sees the prayer as a “crucial act of will,” one that decides the play’s outcome (276). Emelye, meanwhile, serves a balancing function between the rival lovers analogous to Diana’s role as a mediatrix between mankind and nature (277). But Diana is not simply a goddess of nature and the hunt, and by focusing exclusively on this aspect of her identity, Woods’s argument leaves room for expansion. In the Middle Ages, Diana was also strongly identified with female virginity. Emelye makes note of this in her prayer as she ties her own celibacy to Diana’s, referring to her twice as chaste and once as the Goddess of “maydens,” before professing her own desire to be a “mayden” all her “lyf” and to eschew the path of wifedom and motherhood in exchange for a life of vestal service. In a fourteenth century medieval catholic context a life of such celibate devotion is hardly unorthodox: rather, an entire segment of women lived, and were generally admired for, just such a life in the convents and cloisters throughout the western world. Such institutions merely codified what had been a way of life exalted by early church fathers since the days of Augustine and Jerome. Choosing the habit allowed a woman to ascend the ladder of spiritual achievement, leaving the rank necessities of sex and childbearing to lesser women of the world. A woman holy enough to reject her natural concupiscence could, according to Jerome, rise to the very level of the higher sex: “As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is as different from man as body is from

42 See, for example, Augustine’s Of Holy Virginity, which accords a higher status to virginity than marriage (72).
soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man” (qtd. in Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality* 30).

So can we, or should we, infer that a fourteenth century reader would have sympathized with Emelye’s wishes? Is Chaucer, in effect, ripping the habit off a nun when he delivers Emelye into the hands of Arcite at the tale’s conclusion? The following extenuating circumstances argue against any direct criticism of asceticism. First, Emelye does not “serve Christ more than the world,” as Jerome implores women to do. Rather, she serves Diana. Writers of the Renaissance might have considered themselves possessed of a new historical awareness, as Peter Burke and A.C. Spearing argue, but Chaucer creates a clear distinction here between the classical past and his own present.43 While the tale is undoubtedly laden with both material and religious anachronism, Chaucer never can be said to conflate Emelye’s virginity with Christian asceticism. Rather, the language of the prayer deliberately distances Emelye’s brand of vestal virginity from catholic monasticism. Emelye does not seek to avoid marriage in the name of a life of quiet religious contemplation and conventual enclosure, for her life is anything but. She is, rather, a huntress and forest-stalker of Diana, devoted to “venerye”—a word which might be confused with one meaning sexual activity (often spelled identically in Middle English), but which actually refers to the killing and

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43 “Renaissance writers and thinkers,” writes A.C. Spearing in articulating, though not necessarily endorsing, this viewpoint, “felt themselves to be bringing back to life cultural achievements that had died or slept” (11).
butchering of game animals. Interestingly, Chaucer uses the word again in the

*Canterbury Tales* when describing the pilgrim Monk in the General Prologue:

> A monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie,
> An outridere, that lovede venerie, (I.165-166)

Chaucer goes on to describe the Monk’s rather un-monk-like predilection for wild game, horses, and greyhounds, while satirizing his disdain for the rules of ascetic conduct that should theoretically govern his behavior:

> What shoulde he studie or make hymselven wood,
> Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
> Or swynken with his handes, and loboure,
> As Austin bit? (184-187)

The “outryder” monk adopts instead a more progressive and worldly view of his religious duties, one that allows for indulgence in “huntyge for the hare” and delectable roasted swans (191, 206). Commentary on the monk’s unascetic nature is not confined to the General Prologue. Just before the Monk delivers his tale, the Host praises him in particularly provocative language:

> I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
> That first thee broghte unto religioun!
> Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.
> Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast might
> To parfoure al thy lust in engendrure,
Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature...

Religioun hath take up al the corn

Of tredyng, and we borel men been shrympes.

Of fieble trees ther comen wrecched ympes.

This maketh that oure heires been so sklendre

And feble that they may nat wel engendre.

This maketh that oure wyves wole assaye

Religious folk, for ye mowe bettre paye

Of Venus paiementz than mowe we. (VII.1943—61)

The Host’s recognition of the Monk’s virility and fitness for sexual intercourse and reproduction continues the satire of the General Prologue, drawing a connection between the Monk’s enthusiasm for extraconventual exploits and his eligibility for other transgressions of the ascetic code: essentially, that venerye might go hand in hand with venery.

If a passion for venerye could be the launching point for the estates satire of Monk’s description in the General Prologue, it is worth considering what a similar trait in Emelye says about that character’s moral positioning in the sexual commerce of The Knight’s Tale. The tale does not treat Emelye as a cloistered ascetic in the medieval catholic sense. Nor does it seem likely that she is a satirical figure—meant to poke fun at the elasticity of ascetic vows—at least not directly, since Chaucer demonstrates repeatedly that he needs no allegorical screen to engage in estates satire.
While her interest in hunting might, like the Monk, point to her sexual eligibility, such an easy correlation ignores problems of gender identification. Hunting evinces *male* virility, but stands beyond the typical idolatrous tropes of courtly *effictio*. Nor is Emelye’s love of hunting connected in any way to the bawdier portrayals of female sexuality in medieval fabliaux or its off-shoots. Rather, Emelye’s love of hunting is one aspect of her orthodoxy within the mytho-historical context of the tale itself, an aspect of her character that defines her not as religiously deficient (like the Monk) but as unquestionably devoted to the behavioral ideals of a follower of Diana. Contra the Renaissance belief in the ahistorical medieval writer, Chaucer’s Emelye neither satirizes nor is analogous to her closest Christian counterparts precisely because Chaucer’s historical consciousness, however incomplete, allows him to purposefully differentiate between two kinds of religious devotion. Whatever one might say about dangling anachronisms in *The Knight’s Tale* (such as a mention of Sunday matins) or its more systematic affronts to historical realism (medieval knights in mythic Greece), Chaucer, more or less, allows his pagans to be pagans.

However, transplanting this episode in particular, and the matter of *The Knight’s Tale* more generally, into Jacobean drama, as Shakespeare and John Fletcher do in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, complicates distinctions between past and present, Christian and pagan. Chaucer, writing from the perspective of a medieval catholic, clearly differentiates between vestal virginity and conventual celibacy. The former is alien and pagan, historical and exotic, easily treated with literary or intellectual detachment and
firmly dissociated from Christian analogues. The latter is orthodox and—at least officially—commendable, treated with reverence or respect when sincere, but fair game for satire or critique when vows are flaunted. For Shakespeare, meanwhile, and for a seventeenth century audience, the catholic conventual asceticism that had been a part of fourteenth century orthodoxy was itself viewed with a kind of otherness. In other words, a shift to an early seventeenth century historical context drastically changes the social significance of not only ascetic renunciation in general, but the specific figure of Diana as a rhetorical or literary symbol. When compared to its Chaucerian ancestor, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* permits and invites a stronger association between the Greco-Mythic and the newly heterodox catholic.

**The Virgin Goddess**

As in Chaucer’s time, the figure of Diana in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was strongly associated with both virginity and the natural world; however, in both the Middle Ages and Renaissance, this benign symbolic life existed simultaneously with far more negative associations. From the early Middle Ages, Diana was linked with female fertility cults: an association that goes back at least to the conflation of Diana with pre-Hellenic fertility goddesses at the Temple of Artemis in the near eastern city of Ephesus (Hunt 347). Known alternately as Lucina, or occasionally by her older Greek appellation Artemis, *this* vision of Diana—one representing female sexuality, fertility ritual, childbirth, and redolent of the active paganism challenged by
scripture and early church writers—was a reviled one (McMullen 18). The conversion of Diana worshippers at Ephesus by John the Apostle depicted in the Book of Acts powerfully connected the image of Diana with pagan religious practice in medieval Christian thought, and Diana also retained into the Middle Ages an association with witchcraft and sorcery (Alfoldi 141).

However, the Diana found in The Knight’s Tale—“Dyane of chastitee”—is much closer in character to the Diana of classical myth: a chaste huntress who serves as a counterweight, or sometimes as an active opponent, to Venus. That Chaucer employs her in this fashion, freed from any antithetical relationship to Christianity and the symbolic weight of her medieval associations, supports Spearing’s contention that The Knight’s Tale exhibits a historical sophistication the belies surface critiques about Greeks in medieval tourneys (40). Chaucer is interested in recreating, to the best of his ability, the sense of a historically distinct and quite alien religion, and in this regard he far outpaces Shakespeare and Fletcher, going so far as to describe in detail Emelye’s ritualistic sacrifice in Diana’s temple:

Up roos the sonne, and up roos Emelye,

And to the temple of Dyane gan hye.

Hir maydens, that she thider with hir ladde,

Ful redily with hem the fyr they ladde,

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44 See Acts 19:8-41
Th'encens, the clothes, and the remenant al
That to the sacrifice longen shal.
The hornes fulle of meeth, as was the gyse,
Ther lakked noght to doon hir sacrifise,
Smokynge the temple, ful of clothes faire.
This Emelye, with herte debonaire,
Hir body wessh with water of a welle-
But how she dide hir ryte I dar nat telle,
But it be any thing in general;
And yet it were a game to heeren al,
To hym that meneth wel it were no charge,
But it is good a man been at his large.-
Hir brighte heer was kembd, untressed al,
A coroune of a grene ook ceriale
Upon hir heed was set, ful fair and meete.
Two fyres on the auter gan she beete,
And dide hir thynges as men may biholde
In Stace of Thebes, and thise bookes olde.
Whan kyndled was the fyre, with pitous cheere
Unto Dyane she spak as ye may here. (I 2273-96)
This level of ritualistic detail is presented without any overt or implied Christian denunciation, as often found in more clerical authors like Lydgate, or even medieval editors and reworkers of classical texts, such as Pierre Bersuire. The only editorial comment deals with the narrator’s decision to skip over some perhaps too-scandalous female nudity, but even in this brief interjection the narrator remains generous: “to hem that meneth well it wer no charge” (2287). Ultimately, Chaucer shows little interest in how the Pagan gods or ancient religion stand in relation to Christianity, either as barbaric antecedent or as allegorical raw material. As Spearing writes, “his wish was to evoke Pagan antiquity as he supposed it to have been, not to reprocess it as material for Christian teaching” (43). Emelye’s unapologetic pagan-ness, and the distance Chaucer is careful to establish between her own asceticism and that found in catholic orthodoxy, makes her placement in marriage against her own wishes an easily palatable conclusion for the tale, particularly given its generic link with medieval romance. Emelye’s chastity is a marker not of her holiness, but of her Amazonian harshness, a restraint out of balance with the “Athens-like life of order” (McCall 65). Just like Theseus’s marriage to Hippolyta, Emelye’s “subjugation” by Palamon or Arcite is crucial to maintaining that carefully crafted order and a necessary part of what Muscatine considered the poem’s deliberate symmetry (French Tradition 181).

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45 Bersuire is the author of the Ovidius Moralizatus, a moralized adaptation of Ovid’s Metamorphoses that uses allegory to Christianize the classical work. Similarly, the anonymous Old French Ovide Moralise undertook “the assimilation of the Ovidian metamorphosis into Christian salvation history” (Akbari 87). Lydgate, in his Fall of Princes and other works, uses a digressive moralizing voice to criticize the worldly ambition of his historical subjects. See Scanlon, 322-350.
By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Diana’s symbolic meaning is further complicated by an association between the goddess’s cult and Roman Catholicism. For protestant apologists, John’s challenge to the Temple at Ephesus lent allegorical scriptural support to the iconoclastic project of the Reformation’s radical wing. A version of the story printed by Caxton in 1483 and still popular well into the sixteenth century may have appealed especially to the architects of the dissolution: Paul’s preaching literally destroys the temple of Diana, “so that the foundament turned up so down, and the image of Diana was all-to dashed and destroyed” (Bicks 182). A Biblical episode that had come to stand for the triumph of Christianity over paganism could conveniently sustain an entirely new symbolic life: austere protestantism’s triumph over ritualistic Popery. For example, in a 1614 sermon, Exeter College rector John Prideaux warned protestants not to backslide into catholicism the way the Ephesians in the Book of Acts had rioted for Diana in response to Paul’s teaching of doctrinal truth (5). Just as the apostle had challenged the paganism of the Ephesians, Prideaux praises King James for his ability and resolution “to withstand Popery” (36). Ancient paganism becomes indistinguishable from catholicism, and the reformist zeal of John among the Ephesians provides a relevant model for resisting the “abominations of Poperie” (37). Later in the century, John Vicars explicitly connected the goddess Diana to catholicism by referring to her as the “Romish-catholick’s Sweet-Heart” (Bicks 167). Such sentiments speak to the anti-Marianism of Protestantism in England, where rood screens bearing the image of the Virgin were often replaced by those bearing the royal
arms of the sovereign (Marotti, “Preface” 2). However, they also evince a sensitivity to the residual temptation to “worship” a virginal female goddess: a practice so deeply ingrained in western Christianity up to (and well beyond) the eve of the Reformation that it was difficult to extinguish. F. Elizabeth Hart notes this conflation of Mary and Diana in a “complex of Pagan and Christian figures,” though she fails to differentiate the somewhat tepid protestant respect for Mary as a vessel of God’s work from the catholic veneration that troubled reformists (359). For Hart, the problematic nature of Diana stems from her sexually charged, fertility-goddess alter ego Lucina. However, I would argue that the chaste classical Diana of The Knight’s Tale and The Two Noble Kinsmen, presents her own set of theological problems as the embodiment of the ascetic female life.

The Two Noble Kinsmen is not the only Shakespeare play to make use of Diana either as a character or as a rhetorical symbol. She does play an important role as a character in Pericles, a play set in Ephesus. She is also commonly employed as a stock symbol of female chastity, particularly in comedies. Quite particularly, in fact: the name Diana in reference to the Roman goddess appears dozens of times in Shakespeare’s comedies or romances, but much less frequently in those plays commonly classified as tragedies or history plays.46 Why such a stark division? While such a small data set leaves “coincidence” as a reasonable answer to this question, I believe the explanation

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46 Information about the frequency of the word Diana comes from The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare. Bernard Spevack identifies 57 uses of Diana and its variants, of which only seven occur in tragedies or history plays.
is to be found in the most basic of generic issues. The action of all Shakespearean comedy—even those labeled “problem plays” or Romances—hurts without exception toward a resolution based on marriage(s). While Diana is sometimes employed as a general symbol of female purity or beauty (as when Count Orsino compliments the disguised Viola on the porcelain quality of her Diana-like lip in *Twelfth Night*), she is most commonly invoked in such plays to hint at the (mostly negative) possibility of a female life without marriage entirely. For example, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (a play which springs from similar subject matter as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) Theseus wields Diana’s name as part of his threat to consign Hermia to a life of celibacy if she refuses to marry Demetrius:

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Take time to pause, and by the nest new moon--
The sealing-day betwixt my love and me
For everlasting bond of fellowship--
Upon that day either prepare to die
For disobedience to your father's will,
Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would,
Or on Diana's altar to protest
For aye austerity and single life. (1.1.83-90)
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The implication that life as a virginal votaress to Diana is a fate on par with death is a conceit born of a genre that makes the right marriage central to all happiness. Service to Diana seems not only a dreadful fate to a young woman in love, it is also an obstacle to
the literary goals of comedy, in which the harmonies of marriage symbolize the reestablishment of social order from temporary chaos (Leggatt 216). The marriages that end comedies also augur continuity and the perpetuation of society through procreation: a sharp contrast to the finality of the tragic hero’s death (Hopkins 17).

Diana is thus a convenient rhetorical token for the comedic playwright, a symbolic shorthand for the dead end of frustrated nuptials or willful celibacy. Thus, Portia’s plaint that she will “die as chaste as Diana” thanks to the restrictions set in place by her father’s will in *The Merchant of Venice* establishes the stakes of Bassanio’s suit (1.2.106). The scheming Iachimo in *Cymbeline* even makes Marvellesque use of the trope in his unsuccessful seduction of Imogen:

Should he make me

Live, like Diana’s priest, betwixt cold sheets,

While he is vaulting variable ramps,

In your despite, upon your purse—revenge it. (1.6.132-135)

Each of these examples share the attitude that what Diana represents is a life lacking something, whether it be sexual fulfillment, marital bliss, or both. Diana is not only chaste, she is “cold,” she is austere, she is a symbol of frigidity rather than ennobled purity. Even in *Pericles*, the play in which Diana has her largest and most literal role, in which she is affixed with such luminous terms as “argentine,” “silvery,” and “bright,” a happy ending necessitates Marina abandoning of the Temple of Ephesus and marrying Lysimachus.
One of the most telling mentions of Diana in Shakespeare, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is found in *As You Like It*. The smitten Rosalind’s banter with Celia about Orlando’s qualities and faults as a lover leads to a discussion of his kissing:

*Ros.* And his kissing is as full of sanctity as the touch of holy bread.

*Cel.* He hath bought a pair of cast lips of Diana: a nun of winter’s sisterhood kisses not more religiously; the very ice of chastity is in them.

(3.4.13-17)

Rosalind begins with a favorable comparison of Orlando’s kissing to the “sanctity” of the Eucharist. That kissing could be as holy as the ritualistic trappings of sacrament sets up the irony of Celia’s continuation of the conceit: that Orlando’s “icy” lips are those of both the ancient Goddess of chastity *and* a catholic nun.\(^47\) The two symbols are juxtaposed as images of cold chastity, as the virtues of Orlando’s sanctity in Rosalind’s lines become the familiar and problematic frigidity of Celia’s. More importantly, Celia’s remarks demonstrate a clear rhetorical connection in the early modern imagination between the goddess Diana and catholic asceticism. The allusions are analogous, each representing an unnatural impediment to the socially harmonious resolution of marriage.

\(^{47}\) Whether the reference to “holy bread” is catholic or not is a question made difficult by the enormous complexity of Reformation Eucharistic theology. The best treatment of this topic is to be found in Lee Wandel’s *The Eucharist in the Reformation*. The appellation “holy bread” would have been controversial in some protestant circles, since the bread itself, lacking the real presence, is itself not holy, but only a “sign,” as Calvin said, whose adoration is strictly forbidden (Wandel 163).
These examples both from polemical writings and literature demonstrate that Diana was often associated with catholicism, either as a figure of cultic superstition or as a negative symbol of nun-like ascetic zeal. I will read Emilia’s role in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in light of this connection, and also consider how the tension between sexual renunciation and social order is explored through the play’s other characters and dramatic situations.

**Female Friendship and the Marian Diana of *The Two Noble Kinsmen***

Emilia, similar to the Christian Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, is a renunciant formally sworn to holy orders, and thus evaluations of her asceticism must take into account contemporary attitudes toward female monasticism. But, unlike Isabella, Emilia’s resistance to sexuality appears at least potentially qualified by a valorization of female-female friendship that comes very near to homoerotic desire. This attitude toward friendship echoes common early modern valorizations of male-male homosocial bonds, including those made by Palamon and Arcite in the same play, but also has roots in a literary tradition that predates both Shakespeare and Chaucer. ⁴⁸

Of the recent critical work on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* not focused on authorship, a great deal has dealt with the play’s interest in same-sex relations. Alan Sinfield looks at the frankness of declarations of same-sex passion in the play and concludes that “either

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⁴⁸ Early Modern ideas of male-male friendship typically follow Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, but are also highly influenced by Montaigne’s “Of Friendship.” See Shannon, *Amity* 12-30.
same-sex practices are so remote from the minds of these people as to be off the map of potential human experience, or they are so commonplace as to be unremarkable” (73). Laurie Shannon examines the play using a methodology that sees associational forms of social engagement as checks on absolutist authority. Shannon explores Renaissance friendship in terms of its liberal potential: the associative bond between equals in same sex friendship exists as an antithesis to the vertical hierarchies (king and subject, husband and wife, lord and household, etc.) that predominate in early modern societies. Such friendships are “utopian,” based upon homosocial sameness, voluntary cooperation, and mutual counsel, and offer “a thoroughgoing antidote to hierarchies and tyrannies now (seemingly) obsolete; the likeness between friends radically cancels vertical difference” (Amity 11). Shannon applies this formulation to a reading of The Two Noble Kinsmen that focuses on same sex female friendship; Emilia’s position as a votaress of Diana offers her a protected space within which such friendships may exist, but, more importantly, the life of vestal virginity recruits women into a community of “plural chastity” that “carries political meanings analogous to the autonomy valorized in ideal male friendship” (121). Emilia also admits sexuality into this female version of idealized friendship, according to Shannon, revising traditional paradigms of ideal male-male friendship that stretch back to Cicero’s De Amicitia (96).

As Shannon has shown, at the heart of The Two Noble Kinsmen is the sharp contrast between the horizontal equality of same-sex friendship and the complex
vertical hierarchies of heterosexual eroticism (98). The egalitarian nature of the homosocial bond is based upon the equality and sameness of those who enter into it (Shannon invokes Cicero’s term *alter idem*—another the same—from *De Amicitia*); the subordination necessitated by marriage is both a consequence of difference and a social relationship that reinforces it (40). The analogous relationship between marriage and political hierarchies is an early modern commonplace: families were understood to be nations in miniature in which husbands were sovereign (Wall 7). Shannon’s argument that the play is as fiercely skeptical of marriage as it is of political absolutism is correct, but she is, I believe, too quick to dismiss the social orthodoxy of the play’s conclusion.

She departs from critics such as Philip Edwards, Barry Weller, and Mary Beth Rose who see the play as a process of normalizing or expunging distorted attitudes toward love, but her own claim that the play projects a “stunningly negative conception of marriage” is true only up to the point where the force of genre takes over in the final act (101). Like *Measure for Measure*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* ultimately sees sovereign authority asserted and renunciants paired off; whether the ending is too rushed and absurd to take seriously artistically does not change the fact that it represents the fulfillment of generic expectation, which itself is built upon prevailing social mores. For a gloss of the play’s attitude toward marriage, I favor over Shannon’s a formulation by Weller: “*The Two Noble Kinsmen* is, at least in part, about the means by which society disciplines and

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49 Shannon argues that the play “genders” same-sex association as female to “extraordinary effect, linking marriage and tyranny and intensifying the otherwise familiar disapprobation the play registers toward absolute power” (*Amity*, 101).
corrects such mutual self-sufficiency by seizing hold of such energies and incorporating them, often quite unerotically, for its own uses through the institution of marriage” (97).

My argument in this chapter is predicated on the conceit that the play attempts to establish social order out of chaos, in part by having marriage triumph over celibacy. Like other female characters in Shakespeare who express hostility toward marriage, Emilia practices a kind of civil disobedience. To resist marriage is to resist authority, not only inasmuch as such decisions in early modern society were the exclusive domain of the *paterfamilias*, but also because the institution of marriage was a bedrock foundation of both episcopal protestantism and Jacobean social order. Just as the kinsmen themselves must move beyond the confines of their prison cell in their contest over connubial happiness, so too must Emilia submit to one of them in order to arrive at a socially palatable conclusion.

Part of Emilia’s antipathy to marriage is her wholly positive attitude toward same sex friendship. Although Shannon locates Emilia’s resistance more strongly in her homoerotic impulses than in her ascetic vows, the two cannot be seen as anything but inextricably linked. For homoeroticism and ascetic celibacy, concepts that feel oppositional on the surface, share a resistant orientation toward socially normative ideas of sex and sexuality (Burrs 147). Following David Halperin’s definition of queerness as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant...not a positivity but a positionality vis a vis the normative” (65), asceticism is a category of queerness, particularly in Jacobean England, and even more particularly within the imaginative
bounds of a Renaissance marriage plot. Emilia’s sense of attachment to other women complements the dramatic function of her ascetic determination: it is a literary obstacle to generic fulfillment and a social obstacle to normative expectation. Her inclinations are most evident in her passionate nostalgia for Flavina, a friend of her early adolescence:

   but I

   And she (I sigh and spoke of) were things innocent,

   Lov’d for we did, and like the elements,

   That know not what nor why, yet do effect

   Rare issues by their operance, our souls

   Did so to one another. What she lik’d

   Was then of me approv’d; what not, condemn’d,

   No more arraignment. The flow’r that I would pluck

   And put between my breasts (O then but beginning

   To swell about the blossom) she would long

   Till she had such another, and commit it

   To the like innocent cradle, where phoenix-like

   They died in perfume. On my head no toy

   But was her pattern, her affections (pretty,

   Though happily her careless wear) I followed

   For my most serious decking. Had mine ear
Stol'n some new air, or at adventure humm'd one,
From musical coinage, why, it was a note
Whereon her spirits would sojourn (rather dwell on)
And sing it in her slumbers. This rehearsal
(Which, ev'ry innocence wots well, comes in
Like old importment's bastard) has this end,
That the true love 'tween maid and maid may be
More than in sex dividual. (1.3.59-82)

Emilia’s words are resonant, even sensual, but whether they rise to the level of sexual is open to question. The speech’s erotic potential is mainly confined to one suggestive image: the placing of like flowers between their breasts, there to remain in such an “innocent cradle” until they die “in perfume.” But even such an image, with its emphasis on newly budding breasts, can be read non-erotically. Sinfield notes that the relationship seems to lack “the tensions that evidently characterize heterosexual union,” but he does not go beyond praising the “intimation” of a same-sex (not homosexual) relationship (Sinfield 70). Weller, too, stops at calling the speech a praise of “single-sex friendship,” and actually focuses on Emilia’s insistence on the friendship’s “innocence” as a non-hierarchical and non-sexual alternative to marriage (99, 107).

Shannon calls the lines “rapturous,” but only “delicately erotic,” and even that might overstate the case (“Argument” 671). Walter Cohen also finds it difficult to see the relationship as anything more than the innocent bonding of friends, whose “same-sex
innocence” stands in opposition to heterosexual “experience” and “the absolute monarch’s commitment to enforced marriage” (433). Biological reality may lend credence to such claims of innocence: Flavina was already dead by the age of 11, before reaching sexual maturity.

Any faint hints of pre-adolescent eroticism are easily overwhelmed in Emilia’s speech by its direct concerns with innocence and the interconnectedness of souls, rather than bodies. “What she lik’d/was then of me approv’d,” says Emilia (63-64), and in such an exchange we see an alignment of tastes and perspective similar to the conventual ideal, where members of same-sex communities adhere to identical rules and life patterns. In fact, the rituals of Emilia’s and Flavina’s friendship seem designed, as Shannon says, to bring about sameness, or to achieve an indistinguishable doubling. Same-sex friendship is “more” than “sex dividual” for Emilia because, again echoing Shannon, it is based on “choice” and “conviction” rather than subjugation or hierarchy (“Argument” 672).

But ultimately, whether the speech is erotic or not is not nearly as important as the fact that its attitude is extra-normative. The rarified space occupied by ideal male-male friendship—such as that seen between Theseus and Pirithous—excludes its female counterpart. Emilia’s resistance to marriage, her determination not “to love any that’s called man”(86), is derided by Hippolyta, who finds her impulses childlike and immature. But the play is not nearly so dismissive, putting on full display the violent passions and cruel subjections that go hand-in-hand with sexual asymmetry and social hierarchy.
When compared to the ridiculous jealousies of Palamon and Arcite, the anxieties of Emilia in the face of coercive marriage, or the psychological destruction of the sexually enraptured Jailer’s daughter, the harmony of this innocent prepubescent friendship implicitly calls into question the primacy of heteronormative and connubial standards.

But this questioning never amounts to a rejection, for despite its suggestively combative and stressful progress, the play ultimately does normalize its sexual relations. Emilia’s queerness—in the broadest sense of the term—is whitewashed in her increasingly amorous responses to thoughts of each cousin in 5.3 (41-54); the Palamon/Arcite equation that had been imbalanced by the inclusion of Emilia is balanced out, though only through Arcite’s death and the compulsions of Theseus. Emilia’s final, desperate prayer to Diana, though moving, is rejected. It is framed as a prayer for intervention and protection:

O sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen,
Abandoner of revels, mute, contemplative,
Sweet, solitary, white as chaste, and pure
As wind-fanned snow, who to thy female knights
Allow’st no more blood than will make a blush,
Which is their order’s robe: I here, thy priest,
Am humbled fore thine altar. O, vouchsafe
With that thy rare green eye, which never yet
Beheld thing maculate, look on thy virgin;
And, sacred silver mistress, lend thine ear
(which never heard scurrile term, into whose port
Ne’er en’red wanton sound) to my petition,
Season’d with holy fear. (5.1, 137-149)

The invocative epithets—sacred, shadowy, cold, constant, mute contemplative—stress
the ascetic aspects of Diana’s divine nature in a caricature of similar Marian prayers of
the Middle Ages.⁵⁰ Diana is as pure as “wind fann’d snow,” and Mary had been
venerated under the title of “Our Lady of the Snows” since at least the fourteenth
century (Bartlett 78). That Diana shuns all things “maculate” is even more dramatically
evocative, triggering instantly thoughts of the word’s common negation, immaculate,
and its association with Mary.⁵¹ For literary analogues, we might go back to the second
nun’s prayer to “wemmelees” (spotless) Mary that introduces her tale of St. Cecilia in
The Canterbury Tales (VII.47). Emilia’s prayer to a sacred, chaste, and holy lady—a
queen, a glorious virgin—for intercession and protection would almost certainly have
sounded “catholic” to Shakespeare’s audience, particularly as anti-Marian complaint
was such an important part of Reformation apologetics and polemic. Compare Emilia’s
prayer, for instance, to the Salve Regina:

⁵⁰ The Marian “Obscero Te” builds an anaphora upon the word virgin—“Virgoante partum, Virgo in partu, et Virgo post partum,”—as a means of highlighting Mary’s sexual purity, such that even a parishioner with poor Latin could grasp the most important theme of the hymn (Philips 80). The belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary, rather than merely the virgin birth of Jesus, was an accepted part of catholic doctrine, though an open question in Calvinist and Lutheran theology (Waller 116).

⁵¹ The Immaculate Conception, the belief that Mary herself was born sinless, while a part of traditional catholic orthodoxy even before its adoption as official doctrine, was controversial in protestantism. Luther professed a belief in it, but later theologians were more equivocal. See Kreitzer, 135-136.
Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiae,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
ad te clamamus
exsules filii Hevae,
ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum Valle.

(Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope, hail. To you we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to you we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, your eyes of mercy toward us.) (Collins 220, translation mine)

The sense of the Virgin Mary as an advocate for her aggrieved subjects matches the sentiment of Emilia’s prayer, and it would be difficult for a member of Shakespeare’s audience to see a member of a female religious order praying at the altar of a divine lady and not think of a catholic nun before a statue of Mary. Diana of Greek Myth momentarily dissolves into the Virgin Queen who epitomized catholic heterodoxy. However, the scene is neither polemically critical nor heretically resistant; tonally, it is resigned to reality. The scene fits a pattern identified by Richard Wilson in *The Winter’s Tale, Pericles, and All’s Well That Ends Well* of women attending to other powerful women in protected female spaces “unseen by patriarchal power” that function as pilgrimage sites of divine revelation (248-249). However, while Wilson sees this
evocation of female pilgrimage to be evidence of catholic and Marian attachment in Shakespeare himself, Gary Waller proposes a more nuanced reading of such traces:

They enact less a traditional religion, let alone a defiant return to it, and more a transformation of some aspects of it which Shakespeare finds tantalizing as explorations of the human condition and its utopian possibilities, especially as embodied in women and women’s experience, but all too rarely able to be realized. (166)

Waller is not writing specifically of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, but his description of suggestive but frustrated utopian potential fits the tenor both of Emilia’s prayer to Diana and the play as a whole. Emilia’s ascetic excess and misplaced obedience prepare the audience for her appropriation into marital relations by bringing her zeal to extremes that cannot be tolerated by either generic or social expectations. Her hope to be allowed to “continue in [Diana’s] band” represents a permanent extension of her problematic social nature, which must, in the play’s conclusion, be smoothed out and normalized if the happy part of the tragi-comic ending is to be achieved. The process of normalization that is made final when the dying Arcite presents Emilia’s hand to Palamon begins at the conclusion of this faux-Marian hymn, where the rose that might have symbolized Diana’s intercession withers and falls the ground:

The flow’r is fall’n, the tree descends. O mistress
Thou here dischargest me; I shall be gather’d. (5.1.169-170)
To be discharged and “gathered” here means not only to be expelled from her holy orders, but to be appropriated as a token into the economy of sexual and connubial exchange: to be stripped of her status as an both an unattainable object of courtly love and a sympathetic sexual rebel, and to be bound by the force of political hierarchy to a second sovereign in marriage. While such a turn matches the dictates of reality, the gloomy tone of the play’s ending suggests that the associate form of celibate female friendship retains its utopian potential.

**Prisoners, Monks, and Knights: Rejecting Ascetic Withdrawal**

While Emilia is the most explicitly ascetic figure in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the play’s language of renunciation is not limited to her. The titular kinsmen, Palamon and Arcite, employ the rhetoric of renunciation from the moment of their introduction on stage. As Arcite enters in 1.2, he bemoans the depravity of the city:

Dear Palamon, dearer in love than blood,

And our prime cousin, yet unhard’n ed in

The crimes of nature—let us leave the city

Thebes, and the temptings in’t, before we further

Sully our gloss of youth:

And here to keep in abstinence we shame

As in incontinence; for not to swim

I’th’aid o’th’current were almost to sink,
At least to frustrate striving. (1.1.1-9)

This is strangely monkish language for the introduction of two chivalric knights. While knights were expected to follow a strict code of behavior, rigorous adherence to sexual abstinence is not a major part of the tradition of the knight as a literary character. Chaucer never puts language like this into Arcite’s mouth, nor is there really any sense in the *Knight’s Tale* of the cousins’ unhappiness with the social and moral environment of Thebes. But in the play this opening speech establishes a conflict central to the work as a whole: the stress that political environment can place on personal conviction. The moral degeneracy that the cousins lament ultimately has a political source: the “most unbounded tyrant Creon,” as Palamon calls him, whose rule makes “villainy assured” and who fails to understand the worth of any act that does not directly benefit him (64-69). This friction between subject and ruler will reoccur later in the prison scene, and in Emilia’s dilemma as a vestal virgin ordered to marry. Arcite’s desire to renounce his Theban citizenship is thus born out of an irreconcilable clash between political absolutism and the moral prerogatives of the individual. The fealty demanded of any subject, but most particularly of a knight, becomes an impediment to rather than an inextricable part of moral continence, as Arcite makes clear:

> Clear spirited cousin,
>
> Let’s leave his court, that we may nothing share

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52 More typical is the idea of the knight as a courtly wooer, even one willing to transgress social codes or marital impediments, such as Lancelot.
of his loud infamy; for our milk

Will relish of the pasture, and we must

Be vile, or disobedient—not his kinsmen

In blood unless quality. (1.2.74-79)

I began my discussion of *Measure for Measure* by noting that it starts with an act of renunciation, though a feigned one. Here, the renunciant language is sincere: for Palamon and Arcite, renouncing their Theban citizenship, their Theban aristocracy, and even their blood ties to Creon becomes a potential means of not just avoiding carnality and dishonor but of regaining personal liberty, or their right to be, in Palamon’s language, “masters” of their own “manners” (44).

Early modern England was quite familiar with potential conflicts between personal morality and civic duty, having endured nearly a century of religious unrest in which negotiating the two could be perilous. The kinsmen’s dilemma is not wholly different from the dilemma faced by many during and after the Reformation who found their religious beliefs an impediment to their political loyalty; and, in fact, many religious dissidents in the sixteenth century fled the country rather than augment or suppress

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53 Francis Bacon’s famous quote that Queen Elizabeth ”not liking to make windows into men’s hearts and secret thoughts, except the abundance of them did overflow into overt express acts and affirmations, tempered her law so as it restraineth only manifest disobedience,” indicates Elizabeth’s own sensitivity to potential conflicts between personal conviction and obedience (Solt 108). While the quote is generally taken as an example of the queen’s relative liberality on the question of religious freedom, it also reinforces a certain intolerance for outward manifestations of heterodoxy.
their beliefs. Ultimately, Palamon and Arcite do not renounce Thebes, because the imminent conflict with Athens compels them to take up arms in her defense. The cousins draw a distinction between loyalty to king and loyalty to country, by necessity leaving “unreason’d” the fact that they fight for the side that is morally in the wrong (98). The abortive nature of their renunciation evinces a powerful tie to country that transcends the quality of its king, but the halfhearted words that usher them off the stage—they will fight with “hands advanced before...hearts,” i.e., physically but not emotionally invested in the combat—testify to the authenticity of their earlier renunciant impulses (112).

Separation from Thebes becomes a matter of necessity rather than choice when a triumphant Theseus, struck by Palamon and Arcite’s heroism on the battlefield, decides to spare the lives of the kinsmen and imprison them in Athens. The play’s prison scene (2.2), perhaps more than any other, draws a connection between ascetic renunciation and the harmony of associative friendship. In prison, the initially despondent Palamon and Arcite lament the end of their chivalric adventuring, but soon the prison becomes something similar to a monastery, a holy sanctuary in which the two can live out a fantasy of equal friendship and community free from the corrupting pressures of tyranny.

54 A notable artifact of English expatriation is the English college at Douai in what is now northern France, which became a seminary for English catholics who fled the country after the accession of Elizabeth. See Chadwick, 571-585
Nine lines into the prison scene, Palamon, noted by one critic as the more martial, less intellectually curious of the two kinsmen, embarks on a highly stylized and traditional *ubi sunt* lamentation (Herman 1-2):

Where is Thebes now? Where is our noble country?

Where are our friends and kindreds? Never more

Must we behold these comforts, never see

The hardy youths strive for the games of honour,

Hung with the painted favours of their ladies,

Like tall ships under sail.55 (2.2.7-12)

This is not the only instance of *ubi sunt* poetry in the Shakespeare canon: there are notable echoes of it in both *Richard III* (4.4.93-97) and *Richard II* (3.2.122-125), and the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, most famously, is built around the medieval formula (Morris 1035-1040). However, Palamon’s lament is perhaps the most traditional example, as it employs not only the verbal pattern of the *ubi sunt* but also its traditional subject matter: the loss of worldly pleasures. In the typical *ubi sunt*, a speaker will present an anaphoric list asking rhetorically after the whereabouts of pleasurable activities or objects of wealth and beauty, followed by the stark assertion that such things are lost, never to be regained. A representative example in English that either Shakespeare or

55 Eugene Waith points out the artistic inconsistency of Palamon’s lament: it neither matches the kinsmen’s earlier sentiments about the moral degeneracy of Thebes, nor the stoic patience of the scene’s opening lines (*Two Noble Kinsmen*, 1998 2.2.6-55n.)
Fletcher might have been familiar with is found in the last book of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* when the hero grieves the departure of his beloved in an amalgamation of two medieval formulas, the *ubi sunt* and the *effictio*:

Where is myn owene lady, liefe and deere?

Wher is hire white brest? Wher is it, where?

Wher ben hire armes and hire eyen cleere

That yesternyght this tyme with me were?

Now may I wepe alone many a teere,

And graspe aboute I may, but in this place,

Save a pilowe, I fynde naught t’embrace. (V.218-224)

Although typically associated with secular poetry, the *ubi sunt* formula can also function religiously. In its focus on material transience, it is related to the *memento mori* tradition, which stresses the need to be mindful of the judgment at life’s inescapable end. Even in secular works such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, the formula evokes the generally ascetic commonplaces central to medieval religious life, or what Eamon Duffy calls the ascetic ethos at the heart of medieval catholicism (305).

The *ubi sunt* formula does have life beyond Christian eschatological poetry, but the use of the topos at this particular moment in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*—immediately preceding what I would describe as the two knights’ monastic epiphany—calls attention to its theological associations. Palamon’s lament focuses in particular on chivalric exploits, both in tournaments and in battle: the former occasion for winning “praise”
and “garlands,” the latter for routing “whole armies” with swords of “lightning.”

Similarly, in traditional medieval *ubi sunt* material, the manly activities of court life—hunting, tilting, riding—are a favorite example of transient physical glories. Also common to the *ubi sunt*, as in the Chaucerian example quoted above, is the withering of female beauty or the loss of romantic love. This thread of the tradition is taken up by Arcite (in a clear example of the character differentiation noted by Herman and other critics) in his response:

Here age must find us,

And which is heaviest, Palamon, unmarried.

The sweet embraces of a loving wife,

Laden with kisses, arm’d with thousand cupids,

Shall never clasp our necks; no issue know us;

No figures of ourselves shall we ev’r see

To glad our age

The fair-eye’d maids shall weep our banishments,

And in their songs curse ever-blinded Fortune

Till she for shame see what a wrong she has done

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56 Rooney gives as an example the Middle English lyric “Ubi Sunt Qui Ante Nos Fuerunt”: “Uuere beþ þey biforen vs weren/Houndes ladden and hauekes beren,/ And hadden feld and wode?” (305)
Arcite’s focus on the loss of any possibility of marriage—and with it sexual fulfillment and procreation—perpetuates the faint hints of religious solemnity in the scene. In this instance, ironically, the forced celibacy of imprisonment is bemoaned by a character who had championed his own “continence” in the play’s opening act. Having complained about the difficulty of keeping “in abstinence” while surrounded by the “temptings” of the Theban court, Arcite now finds himself forcibly separated from any such temptation. Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that once the pathos of lamentation is exhausted, it is Arcite who first proclaims their new prison’s monastic potential:

Yet, cousin,

Even from the bottom of these miseries,

From all that fortune can inflict upon us,

I see two comforts rising, two mere blessings,

If the gods please—to hold to a brave patience,

And the enjoying of our griefs together.

Whilst Palamon is with me, let me perish

If I think this our prison. (2.2.55-62)

One could see the reference to the inflictions of fortune here as an echo of the Boethian ascetic tradition if fortune herself did not appear so commonly in Renaissance drama; but Arcite’s belief that prison offers the opportunity “to hold a brave patience” does sound an explicitly ascetic note. Patience, particularly patience in the face of
persecution or poverty, is a cardinal example of negative ascetic mortification, contained not only in monastic vows, but hagiography. In equating the exercise of patience with bravery, Arcite adapts his well-established chivalric courage to the religious fortitude of an ascetic martyr.⁵⁷

The other succor is the presence of Palamon, and the opportunity that imprisonment affords the two kinsmen for “enjoying” “grievances together.” The paradox of the central conceit—that griefs can be enjoyed rather than merely endured—evokes not mere stoic resilience, but the classic ascetic reversal of sought after pain. These shared griefs, in Arcite’s figuring, represent a spiritually ennobling gift: “blessings” rather than a curse.

Arcite’s rhetorical reversal reestablishes his sense of personal agency; he asserts that imprisonment is not a matter of the body, but of the mind, and therefore beyond the prerogative of Theseus, who can only exercise power over the former. This resistant formula also found practical expression in late Elizabethan and Jacobean society, a time when prisons contained many catholic clergy whose religious activities marked them as threats to the state. Records indicate that, during Elizabeth’s reign, at least 130 priests were incarcerated between Marshalsea, the Clink, and Newgate at any one time, a situation which was only partially ameliorated during the reign of James I (Lake and Questier, Antichrist’s 195). Peter Lake quotes Richard Broughton, who in a 1619 letter

⁵⁷ Such “brave patience” also evokes the neostoicism that returned to fashion in the seventeenth century. See below for a discussion of the neostoical resonance of dispassion in Henry V.
wrote that because of refusals to take the Jacobean oath of allegiance necessitated by the Hampton Court conference, “threescore and more there are in prison at York, eighteen priests in the Clink besides Wisbech, Gatehouse, Newgate, Durham, Winchester and almost no jail of any shire where there are not some cath[olic] prisoners” (Antichrist’s 199).

But, as Lake goes on to show, prison represented opportunity as much as oppression for some catholic resistors. Leaving aside the grislier fates that potentially awaited captured recusants, an examination of the use that catholics made of their prison sentences may help demonstrate the political utility of certain types of ascetic acts and gestures beyond the discursive. The superficial similarities between prison and monastery—insti-

tutions of enclosure, restraint, and order—in fact granted incarcerated catholics an opportunity to practice a radically politicized form of their religion: politicized not only because its exercise was a designed act of resistance to state punishment, but because it provided a visual supplement to the written polemic of the period.

While Christopher Haigh has questioned the literal veracity of some catholic accounts of persecution—and certainly catholics had a polemical motivation for exaggerating the torments they endured--the horrid squalor suffered by the early

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58 Executions, while not a daily occurrence, were nonetheless a potential reality. Edmund Campion, on a clandestine Jesuit mission with Robert Persons, was captured, imprisoned, and gorily executed for treason in 1581. Estimates place the total number of those executed for reasons stemming from religious dissent in the last three decades of the sixteenth century alone at 183 (McCoog 900).
modern prisoner is difficult to deny ("Monopoly" 147). However, prisoners who took the time to write accounts or essays about prison life did so for a political and rhetorical purpose, and catholics eager to frame their imprisonment in martyrological terms could draw connections between the physical agonies of prison and the exculpatory punishments of catholic eschatology and ascetic self-mortification. For example, one anonymous prisoner (G.M.) wrote of the penitential quality of the King’s Bench prison in the Essayes and Characters of a Prisons and Prisoners:

It is a Purgatory which afflict a man with more miseries then euer he reaped pleasures. It is a Pilgrimage to extenuate sinnes, and absolue offenses: for here be seminaries and Masse-Priests, which doe take down the pride of their flesh more, then a voyage to the Holy Land or a hayre shirt in Lent. (3)

Here the torments of the prison are compared both to the sin-cleansing fires of Purgatory and to one of its mundane ascetic approximations, the hair shirt; both metaphors link imprisonment with catholic forms of religious practice and belief, particularly the doctrine of works. An explicitly catholic afterlife and catholic asceticism are mined for the purposes of metaphor.

If, then, the self-imposed suffering of mortification, the self-chosen poverty and claustration of monasticism, and the penitential torments of Purgatory are all elements

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59 For details on prison life for catholic recusants, see McGrath and Rowe.
of catholic orthodoxy that can be imaginatively linked with prison life, catholic prisoners had an opportunity to exploit prison’s potential as, ironically, a tool in their polemical and political struggle with the Elizabethan/Jacobean state. And this is precisely what occurred at the Wisbech Castle prison, where imprisoned catholic clergymen, under the direction of Jesuit William Weston, regulated their daily lives with a quasi-monastic order (McGrath and Rowe 423). So too did the catholic inmates of Beaumaris Castle monasticize their imprisonment under the direction of William Davies after 1592, as Lake and Questier, who assembled many of these accounts, describe:

Davies himself and four other priests were able to establish a spiritual regime within the prison of an almost monastic severity.... Davies instituted a thorough and intense liturgical round, focused on confession to him twice a week and the mass. The community in the prison fasted and practiced various mortifications. (Antichrist’s 200)

The transformation of the prison community into a monastic one, and the appropriation of prison torments into a self-imposed regime of mortification and fasting, was an act of symbolic resistance, turning a state imposed punishment into an extension of the very religious practice that occasioned the punishment in the first place. In The Life of Father Bennett, Englishman, Jacque Brousse writes of the particular grace of those who cloister themselves in monasteries, forsaking the world, as some saints did. Brousse writes that for Father Bennett of Cafield, a Capuchin friar sentenced to the Tower and then Wisbech by Elizabeth’s council, prison itself became such a “[c]loistre for the austeritie of his
profession” (115). In prison, Father Bennett proudly wore his habit and set about “preaching all the austerities of his rule, as fastings, discipline, and other mortifications” (108). Through such actions, Bennett was able not only to comfort fellow Catholic prisoners, but even to convert some “heretiques” who had the opportunity to witness his imaginative transformation of prison into monastery (115). In an ironic turn of events, prison had become in some instances the safest places in England to practice not simply catholicism, but the most outwardly visible type of radical catholicism.

Decades after the dissolution of the monasteries, it was the Tudor prison that gave birth to a momentary and highly political new version of the ascetic community that was built upon precepts of resistance to the same Supremacy that had brought down the old religious houses a generation before.

Such accounts ironically figure the prison as a site of particular grace, of an exalted moral continence. Such a formula is similarly advanced by Arcite in The Two Noble Kinsmen:

> Let’s think this prison holy sanctuary

> To keep us from corruption of worse men.

> We are young and yet desire the ways of honor,

> That liberty and common conversation,

> The poison of pure spirits, might, like women,

> Woo us to wander from. (2.2.71-76)
Arcite’s “holy sanctuary” had but a few lines earlier occasioned the *ubi sunt* lamentations that opened the prison scene. Now, Arcite has connected the forced restraint of imprisonment with the morally ideal kingdom he had longed for in the play’s first act. Free of the temptations of women, liberty, and common conversation, the kinsmen are protected from the “corruption” of the world and its worse men. This imaginative rebranding of their prison as a kind of utopian monastic retreat where they can practice ideals of brotherhood and moral continence performs the same cancellation of tyrannical oppression that we see in the historical examples above. All of the griefs and miseries of prison can be enjoyed as occasions for stoic fortitude and moral purification, in this instance a kind of partially secularized version of the ascetic ideal.

Along with the moral safety of their imagined cloister, the kinsmen have the comfort of their own friendship. This, too, is not unconnected from the monastic ideal, which, unlike the eremitic asceticism of the early church, is founded upon a belief in the moral and spiritual edification enabled by the support of a likeminded homosocial community. For whatever else they were, monastic orders were always “brotherhoods” that extolled the virtues of communal (and sexually homogenous)

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60 Martha Newman offers a useful historical example of this cooperative spirit in her account of the evolution of the Cistercian order. According to Newman, “A monk learned humility and obedience not only through his response to the abbot’s care and authority but also through his interactions with his brothers. Such community interactions could be coercive, as when the monks assembled in daily chapter to accuse one another of faults, but more often Cistercians portrayed the community as a positive force that provided each monk with examples and support: the desire to be admired and loved by one’s brothers, they suggested, should serve as an impetus for each monk’s spiritual development” (94).
interdependence in opposition to the intrusive influence of female sexuality and other worldly complications. As a substitute for actual marriage and procreation, monasteries promoted a type of “sexless, spiritual (same-sex) generation” built on religious and intellectual exchange amongst monastic members (D. Clark 154). According to Brousse, the potential comfort (and perhaps, to the state, danger) to be found in cooperative monastic experience extended to imprisonment as well. After their arrest, Brousse relates, Father Bennett and his traveling companion John Christostome, a Scottish priest, were questioned by Walsingham about the nature of their relationship:

Among other things which the Secretarie [of State] asked him was this one, why they came two together, & one in the companie of the other?
To whom this good Father answered, that this was more comfortable to the life of Our Blessed Saviour and his Apostles to putt in practice his commandements to his Disciples, whom he sent *binos & binos*, two by two to preache the Gospell. That this was likewise the practice of the primitiue Church, and the particular institution of their order, to the ende that they might comforte one another in the waie, and that one might partake of the necessities of the other. (106)

Brousse contends that this speech and subsequent sermonizing moved even Walsingham, “one of the greatest enemies of the Catholique Religioun” (108). However, in the end the council acted prudently (and to Brousse, callously) by imprisoning the two
men separately, “that so they might bee deprivued of theyre mutuall consolation, and rather to show their hate to the constitutions of theyr religion” (109).

Palamon and Arcite are not so unfortunate in The Two Noble Kinsmen in that they have available to them this “mutuall consolation.” The friendship of the kinsmen, at least as it is described in the prison scene, shares with monasticism a sense of both moral support and generative homosocial exchange. From Arcite, the procreative (and resistant) language is explicit:

And here being thus together,

We are an endless mine to one another;

We are one another’s wife, ever begetting

New births of love; we are father, friends, acquaintance;

We are, in one another, families:

I am your heir, and you are mine; this place

Is our inheritance; no hard oppressor

Dare take this from us. (2.2.80-85)

Here we see, consciously or not, the monastic ideal spelled out: men in cloister being a “mine” of spiritual, moral, and intellectual riches to each other. In Arcite’s fantasy, as in the monastery, same-sex companionship fulfills all of the social roles normally fulfilled by marriage and fatherhood, and it does so without the danger that naturally comes from triangulating such friendship with the demands of heterosexual, political, familial, or financial responsibility:
Were we at liberty

A wife might part us lawfully, or business,

Quarrels consume us; envy of ill men

Crave our acquaintance. (87-91)

Liberty, here, is the presumed danger: liberty and its concentric circles of difference and distinction, its inequalities of rank (tyrant), gender (wife), and morality (ill men) that strain the resolution of egalitarian companionship. Palamon accepts Arcite’s formulation enthusiastically: “You have made me/(I thank you, cousin Arcite) almost wanton with my captivity” (95-97). The word “wanton” here is suggestive, not because it necessarily implies sexual ardor, but because it signifies how the passions of male friendship can approach the former in intensity.

Most crucially, the play posits that such friendship can only exist as an exclusive alternative to erotic heterosexual exchange—or marriage—and not as a complement to it. This, too, is fundamental to the monastic ideal. Sexual difference undermines and ultimately eradicates the spiritually and intellectually generative potential of the homosocial cloister. The desire for sexual fulfillment can even have the effect of turning voluntary renunciation into imprisonment, for it admits into the sphere of potential experience an act which a monastic order specifically proscribes; when the rigors of ascetic renunciation are resented for what the renunciant lacks, the monastic ideal is destroyed.
This is precisely what happens to Palamon and Arcite when Emilia enters their field of vision. Following Palamon’s initial stunned silence, the reactions of the kinsmen to an object of heterosexual desire explicitly reaffirm the state of incarceration that their earlier monastic idealization had attempted to cancel. Palamon, the initial viewer, intones: “Never till now I was in prison” (132), while Arcite, who had boasted of the moral liberty they might enjoy as prisoners, feels again his “shackles” (156). Their reactions owe something to the courtly love tradition (through Chaucer), where men are often figured as slaves, prisoners, or subjects to an all-powerful and despotic female love object.\(^\text{61}\) The process of the scene also permits a moral reading, where Emilia, a second Eve, admits discord and violence into a world that was momentarily marked by the harmony of equality. As Eve, in the antifeminist tradition, is the vessel of original sin, so too does the sight of Emilia rekindle in the prisoners the burdens of social and sexual entanglement. The sudden reversal of the kinsmen’s renunciation results in the violent discord between them that drives the action of the play.

But not all friendships are equal in this play. While Emilia’s passion for Flavina is treated as an unrealistic conceit of adolescence, better replaced by marriage, Palamon’s loss of Arcite in Act 5 is couched in the language of tragedy, a loss not worth what is gained:

\(^{61}\) This kind of language, associating love with imprisonment and chains, can be found as far back as Andreas Capellanus’s *Art of Courtly Love* (ca. 1184), which contains the following satirical etymology: “Love (amor) is derived from the word hook (amar), which signifies ‘capture’ or ‘be captured.’ For he who loves is caught in the chains of desire and wishes to catch another with his hook” (Capellanus 32). Older analogues can be found in Ovid (See *Amores*, 1.3).
O miserable end of our alliance!

The gods are mighty, Arcite. If thy heart,

Thy worthy, manly heart, be yet unbroken,

Give me thy last words; I am Palamon,

One that yet loves thee dying. (5.4.86-90)

The “miserable end” of one associative pair (an “alliance”) augurs the sealing of another pact that is hierarchical. David Wallace, in remarking upon the play at the end of his long study of hierarchies and associations in Chaucer, notes that Emilia’s function as mere possession outpaces even the passivity of Emelye the courtly love object in Chaucer (386). Emilia is “seen,” but there is no real sense that she is loved, even in the highly stylized courtly sense in which Chaucer’s knights love Emelye: “The female body,” Wallace writes, “divorced from time honored tradition as rhetorical power incarnate, is remarked chiefly as the object of masculine sight and discovery” (386). Not only is Emilia seen, she is also bought. She is a “prize” (5.3.135), as Theseus says to the still living Arcite one scene earlier, not an ally or a friend, one that Arcite admits he has had to “buy” at the cost of what is “dearest” to him (113-114). In his final speech, Theseus labels her a “stol’n jewel” now restored to a rightful owner who established ownership of her through the prerogative of his gaze (5.4.119). In wrangling over ownership of this gem, the kinsmen have forgotten Arcite’s claim that, as cloistered equals, they could

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62 In making this point, Wallace notes the small but significant change from Palamon’s claim to have “loved” Emelye first (I.1146) in The Knight’s Tale, to his Shakespearean analogue’s assertion that he “saw her first” (2.2.160) (Wallace 386).
function as an inexhaustible mine of precious objects; to each other, they would not be embodied commodities of exchange, but the collective *source* of endless value.

The destruction of friendship eclipses any satisfaction over Emilia’s subjugation, and the gloom that overhangs the play’s final scene is a consequence of this reality. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* offers the premise that passionate, celibate same-sex friendship and marital happiness are mutually exclusive, and that, ultimately, the latter takes precedence over the former. “Is this winning?” Emilia asks, a question that speaks to the tonal confusion of the play’s ending (5.3.138). No, it is not winning, but it is “due justice,” as Theseus claims, and paves the way for an uncontested wedding (109). Yet, for all that the play insists on a conclusion built on marriage, Arcite’s death serves as a reminder of the potential alternative that has been abrogated: a relationship that is spiritually but not biologically generative. Palamon, in bidding farewell to his cousin’s corpse, remarks on this reversal, in which it seems that the true love has been sacrificed for the dutiful one:

> O Cousin,

> That we should things desire which do cost us

> The loss of our desire! That nought could buy

> Dear love but loss of dear love! (5.4.109-112)

Emilia and Arcite are figured as precise equivalents—desire and desire, dear love and dear love—but the two are hardly interchangeable for Palamon. Rather, such a formulation seems a pale echo of the perfect homosocial mirroring seen earlier in the
friendship pairs of both Emilia and Lavina and the kinsmen themselves. The tragi-comic mode perfectly suits the ambivalence of this prospective marriage, with triumph and defeat, love and grief, gain and loss, wedding and funeral relentlessly juxtaposed. On this last score, Theseus sounds a particularly discordant note:

A day or two
Let us look sadly, and give grace unto
The funeral of Arcite, in whose end
The visages of bridegrooms we’ll put on
And smile with Palamon; for whom an hour,
But one hour since, I was as dearly sorry
As glad of Arcite. (124-130)

In The Knight’s Tale, Chaucer has the decency to allow Emelye and Palamon “certeyn yeres” to recover from the ordeal of Arcite’s death (I 2967). In an absurd telescoping, Theseus declares that the wedding shall proceed after “a day or two,” literalizing Hamlet’s caustic joke that “the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” at Claudius and Gertrude’s wedding (1.2.179-180). This truncation of mourning underscores the final irony of The Two Noble Kinsmen that despite the normative order of its resolution—with Palamon and Emilia paired off as man and wife, ascetic vows renounced, and the purgation through violence of destabilizing male rivalry—there is little harmony to be found. In the end, the Emilia-Palamon pair-bond comes off as an act of literary and social duty, one that fails as a consolation for what has been lost. The
speaker of the Epilogue indicates some literary self-consciousness of this fact. Looking out into the audience, he expresses his disappointment: “No man smile? Then it goes hard I see” (Epilogue 4-5).
CHAPTER THREE: ASCETIC PERFORMANCE AND THE ANXIETY OF KINGSHIP

The first part of this study was built upon a central conceit that ascetic or renunciatory gestures, in their potential to frustrate traditional top-down, patriarchal social structures, could take on a transgressive, even rebellious quality. Thus, Isabella’s vows of celibacy function as a partial check on Angelo’s exploitation of state sanctioned power. Emilia’s service to Diana in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* must be overcome to successfully meet the demands of aristocratic and courtly marriage. Even for the men of the play, an embrace of contemplative celibacy rhetorically transforms imprisonment by an enemy state into an enlightened clastration. This resistant or transgressive potential is also seen in historical examples, such as the “monastic” prisoners of Wisbech and Beaumaris.

But asceticism, in all of its guises, was a highly flexible kind of political vocabulary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While their broad association with catholic heterodoxy in England made ascetic gestures in certain forms and situations particularly anti-normative, in truth such gestures, like all discursive forms, acquired political meaning from their source and context, rather than as what Voloshinov would call signals in the absolute sense. It is useful then to consider ascetic acts and utterances which emerge from higher positions in what Pierre Bourdieu might term the “power relationships” of the early modern political field. The *habitus*—that is, the entrenched
cultural expectations—of the early modern court allowed *askesis* to register and be received in various ways, dependent on the orientation of its actors within said field. Because “forces are only manifested in their relationship with certain dispositions,” that is, because meaning with a field is ultimately dependent on power structures, “the same practices may receive opposite meanings and values...in different configurations or in opposing sectors of the same field” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 87). Thus, the inverse relationship of subject and ruler also allows the resistant potential of asceticism explored in earlier chapters to become a force that legitimizes rather than subverts power. This somewhat counterintuitive relationship between renunciation and legitimation will be the subject of my next two chapters.

In this particular chapter, I will interrogate the use of ascetic and renunciatory language and acts by both historical and literary kings. I will begin with the historical example of Philip II of Spain’s palace-monastery, which I argue is an example of ascetic image construction particularly suited to a king who saw himself as the warden of the catholic faith. From there I will move to the historical and literary case of Queen Elizabeth’s translation of Boethius, a text which I read as simultaneously ascetic and propagandistic. Examples from early modern drama will round out the chapter, demonstrating how Shakespeare’s kings utilize ascetic or renunciatory discourse for conciliatory or political effect. However much renunciation might seem at cross purposes with the mechanisms of power, early modern rulers—both catholic and protestant—did not hesitate to take advantage of the flexible social energy of ascetic
gestures. So too do Shakespeare’s kings and potential kings find politically useful—in several different, often contradictory ways—both public and private renunciations of the bodily and the worldly: an irony made possible in part by the public and performative nature of kingship itself.

The Escorial

In July 1584, King Philip II of Spain entered for the first time the newly completed palace, monastery, and reliquary of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. The massive edifice, begun some two decades earlier, was envisioned as both a monument to Habsburg political glory and a grandiose symbol of Spain’s role as the center of the catholic world (Parker 31). Its completion marked the apotheosis of Philip’s counter-reformation project. Twenty years earlier, Philip, like all catholic monarchs, had looked with some dread upon the rising tide of protestantism across western Europe. His successes, solid but not overwhelming, against Henri II and his German protestant Allies in the Italian War of 1551-1559, culminating with a smashing victory at San Quentin in 1557, provided the Spanish King with both the political capital and the religious surety to proceed with the construction of such an ostentatious monument (Lazure 31). By the 1580s, developments in European religious and political affairs could not have been exactly what Philip hoped for when he chose to proceed with the Escorial in the early 1560s. England, temporarily saved from heresy by the counter reforms of Philip’s wife Mary I, slipped out of the fold again with the rise of Elizabeth. France, meanwhile, was riven in
two as Huguenots and the Catholic League vied for the Crown of Charlemagne in the bloody Wars of Religion. Nevertheless, this fortress of gray limestone (possessing what one art historian calls an “an aura of a prison”), encompassing, side by side, both a royal residence and a Hieronymite monastery, indelibly and unmistakably linked Spanish Hapsburg power to the preservation of catholic orthodoxy (Kamen 116). It succeeded in doing nothing less than Philip envisioned by marking Spain as the de facto capital of catholic Europe.

In the history of early modern Europe, religious iconography and rhetoric formed part of the constructed image of every European sovereign. The uniqueness of the Escorial, however, comes from its particular juxtaposition of functionalities. As a grand palace and burial site for Hapsburg rulers, it reified dynastic, earthly power; however, as a reliquary and a monastery, it also looked to the otherworldly and eternal. Guy Lazure has written of Philip’s deep and authentic piety, a piety particularly manifest in his obsession with and devotion to catholic relics. Relics have a long history as tokens of political and military power in medieval Europe (The Crusaders, notably, carried at various times both the true cross and holy lance before their armies in the Levant), but the monastic life, at least in theory since the late middles ages, had been idealized as mutually exclusive with earthly authority. These relics, according to Lazure, functioned for Philip as a fulcrum between piety and authority, between palace and monastery:

63 The architecture may even have been mean to evoke the supreme imitatio Christi of martyrdom. One theory posits that the layout of the Escorial was patterned on the grill on which St. Lawrence was cooked alive, as represented by Titian in a painting ca. 1559 (Kamen 43).
Philip II, sensing that a solely temporal power remained all too terrestrial — and therefore incomplete — aspired to capture the sacred energy emanating from his relics to consolidate his own personal power. Within the Escorial itself, relics were placed right at the symbolic junction of the religious and the monarchal, the devotional and the ceremonial, the private and the public. Indeed, a great number of them were embedded in a giant two-sided reliquary altarpiece that faced both a passageway leading to the royal apartments and the basilica choir. Even in the discursive architecture of José de Sigüenza’s history of the Escorial, the description of relics marks the high point of a spiritual itinerary within the walls of the palace-monastery, a physical and spiritual journey that encouraged the visitor-reader to purify his soul as he was progressively lead towards more and more private, sanctified, and inaccessible places.

(Lazure 67)

Lazure’s analysis of the function of relics in the architectural and symbolic vocabulary of the Escorial implies an attempt by Philip to bridge the distance between monastery and palace. Something about sharing his home with monks was important for Philip’s image of himself as a king, and the image he wished to project to his subjects. Partly, as Lazure explains, creating a palace that could also function as a site of pilgrimage served a legitimizing function for Philip’s kingship: it drew from the connection between divinity and monarchy upon which Renaissance kingship, catholic or protestant, depended. But
even in his own time, the palace/monastery helped to project a public image of the king as not simply pious, but ascetic himself. Numerous accounts, both contemporary and modern, reinforce the idea of a withdrawn, secluded king who increasingly renounced worldly things. In 1584, a Venetian diplomat described Philip as one who was known to “love retreats and solitude, and flee from nearly every kind of pleasure” (Kamen 123). Another ambassador claims Philip sought out “deserted spaces” and preferred to be alone (123). Scholars of our own time echo these sentiments. One popular historian, for example, has described Philip as “austere, penitential... ensconced in a secluded study,” a kind of half-king/half-monk (Davies 534). Art historian Henry Kamen, who has collected many of these accounts, actually disputes the historical veracity of Philip’s monkishness, but his revisionism is evidence enough that the palace continues to conjure up the image of an ascetic king (123). I cite these contemporary sources not as the best evidence of fact, but because they speak to the long endurance of a constructed image explicitly meant for public consumption.

Whether Kamen is right that this ascetic image of Philip is “invented” or not is not as important to this chapter as the question of who was doing the inventing (122). Both early modern and contemporary accounts of Philip’s renunciatory attitude indicate that the Escorial did and does position Philip as a certain kind of king. Kamen’s argument that such descriptions of Philip boil down to nothing more than an “ideological fiction” is intriguing, but he does not consider the possibility that the original fashioner of this fiction might have been Philip himself, and that rather than an attempt to make Philip
look “timid,” “nervous,” “a physical coward,” or even “insane,” the monarch’s close association with the Escorial may have served an explicitly political purpose (140).

Aligning himself with the ascetic life linked Philip indelibly with catholic orthodoxy precisely because asceticism and the larger issue of a theology of works provided the most anti-protestant type of religious image construction possible. The monks, the relics, and the imposing monastic architecture itself all functioned together as an artistic and discursive rebuttal to the new sola fides heresy that, in its most radical forms, rejected all such ceremonial trappings and traditional forms of practice. The Escorial, and along with it the image of a king half cloistered, offers an example of how the ascetic gesture might serve the mechanisms of power.

In protestant England, there was also room for ascetic discourse to function as a discourse of legitimation, though in a somewhat different register. This, I will argue, can be seen in Elizabeth I’s translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*.

**Boethius and Elizabeth: Asceticism and Legitimation**

In 1593, Queen Elizabeth chose to translate Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. No explicit record is left of the reason—political or personal—that lay behind this impulse, but it demonstrates both the enduring relevancy of Boethian philosophy in the late sixteenth century, and that Elizabeth had a personal interest in the work (Benkert 1). Even more curious is the timing of the translation, which came during a period of both foreign embroilment (a costly and ultimately ineffectual war to defend protestantism in
France) and court instability (6). The 1590s saw rapid turnover in the makeup of court as the deaths of several well established (and for Elizabeth, well handled) nobles died, making room for new court appointments. This turnover made this period the most fractious of Elizabeth’s reign, as remaining prominent members of court—chiefly Essex and Cecil—squabbled over the rebalancing of court power; in the estimation of one historian, the period from 1593 to 1596 was the worst “faction fight,” contested in both court and council, that Elizabeth ever had to negotiate (Adams 31-32).

The failed military intervention in the brutal religious wars of France also must have weighed on Elizabeth, as it was a move she had strongly resisted at the outset. In 1589, the Huguenot Henri IV of France inherited a kingdom that was his only nominally. Paris (and great swaths of the rest of the country) was under the control of the Catholic League, and any semblance of monarchical control had by then “dissolved into anarchy” (Diefendorf, Beneath 174). Parliament urged Elizabeth to intervene, suggesting that this conflict went beyond mere politics and had instead the character of a holy crusade. Elizabeth eventually acquiesced at great cost to the treasury, but the aid did not help Henri retake the capital; the Catholic League—supported by most of the general Parisian populace—endured and eventually broke the king’s siege, partly by appropriating their hunger and want into morale lifting rituals of penance and fasting (Diefendorf, Penitence 34-25). Henri’s eventual conversion to catholicism proved the final humiliation for Elizabeth and the end for radical protestant dreams of bringing a Huguenot to power across the English Channel.
Given the stress at court in the period, then, why did Elizabeth elect to embark on such a bookish endeavor? Did a political motive go hand in hand with an intellectual one? Lsybeth Benkert asserts in her study that the act grew out of Elizabeth’s active and ongoing campaign of public image construction (20). Since early in her reign, Elizabeth had been careful to construct a public image that would at once project power while maintaining femininity. Susan Frye’s landmark study of Elizabeth’s image construction identifies this careful balancing of identities as early as her entry into London continuing throughout the 1590s. According to Frye, early representation and iconography of Elizabeth combined an active presence with the language of domesticity; in something of a contradiction, such representations projected a comforting image of feminine normativity while also resisting the “gendered assumptions of her passivity” (42). Part of the mythos of Elizabeth as simultaneously active and passive (and the juxtaposition of those two terms already recalls ideas about ascetic behavior discussed in above chapters) was drawn from her brief period of imprisonment during the reign of Mary I. Elizabeth herself used the incident of her imprisonment as evidence of the divine endorsement of her accession. As Frye writes:

By the 1570s and 1580s, as the queen and all those who competed with her for representation produced a complex iconographic system, Elizabeth I’s perfections and limitations were increasingly defined through the motif of imprisonment and delivery...Like all of Elizabeth’s preferred representations, however, the allegory of her imprisonment
cut two ways: it recalled her own sanctity and courage at the same time that it participated in one of the most prevalent paradigms for the containment and subordination of women. (77)

Elizabeth’s imprisonment provided her with a background of personal martyrology that was rhetorically and propagandistically useful both for the sympathy it could generate and the normative gender-typing it allowed. However, the power of the prison narrative as propaganda depended a great deal on the specific way in which it was understood. While in historical fact Elizabeth’s imprisonment and release had more to do with the political opportunity seen by the Marians in marrying Elizabeth off, Elizabeth herself pointed to the resistant and mystical power of her celibacy, which marriage necessarily would abrogate, as the cause of her delivery (Frye 72). That the nature of Elizabeth’s imprisonment and release was politically relevant can aptly be demonstrated by a passage from George Gascoigne’s 1575 work *The Princely Pleasures at the Courte of Kenelworth*. Gascoigne, whose piece includes a masque that was to be presented to Elizabeth during the festivities of her well known visit to Dudley at Kenilworth, represents Elizabeth through the figure of the nymph Zabeta. Mythically dramatizing an endless debate of Elizabeth’s reign, Gascoigne has Zabeta consider advice on marriage and celibacy from Juno (advocating the former) and Diana, who as usual stands in the way of patriarchal family (and in this case, state) harmony. While much of the masque features Diana’s arguments in favor of indefinite virginity, the final point made by Iris—
Juno’s messenger—draws directly from Elizabeth’s personal history of imprisonment and delivery:

Remember all your life,

before you were a Queen:

And then compare it with the days

which you since then have seen.

Were you not captive caught?

were you not kept in walls?

Were you not forc’d to lead a life

like other wretched thralls?

Where was Diana then?

why did she you not aid?

Why did she not defend your state

which were and are her maid?

Who brought you out of briers?

who gave you rule of realms?

Who crowned first your comely head

with princely diadems?

Even Juno, she which mean'd,

and yet doth mean likewise,

To give you more than will can wish,
or wit can well devise.

Wherefore, good Queen, forget

Diana's 'ticing tale:

Let never needless dread presume

to bring your bliss to bale. (51)

The scene above, though eventually published by Gascoigne, was never performed, a fact Gascoigne blames mundanely in a supplementary note on a time squeeze and bad weather (53). However, the masque was in fact deliberately suppressed by Elizabeth, who doubtless chafed at not only its verdict in favor of Juno, but its cooption of her imprisonment for the hymeneal cause (McCoy 130). Note, for example, how Iris mocks Diana's silent impotence in the face of Elizabeth's suffering. As a “thrall” trapped “behind walls,” Elizabeth's imprisonment as described even vaguely calls to mind a kind of conventual claustration, though a coerced one. Why, the poem implicitly asks, would Diana intercede to rescue Elizabeth from what so effectively enforces the celibate ideal? As the poem states, then, Elizabeth should thank Juno for her deliverance, a line which directly alludes to the fact that the queen-to-be found succor not as an inviolable virgin but as a marriageable woman. The exhortation for Elizabeth to marry becomes explicit later in the poem:

Then give consent, O Queen
to Juno's just desire,

Who for your wealth would have you wed,
And for your farther hire

Some Empress would you make. (52)

The language Gascoigne uses is transactional: Juno would have Elizabeth wed for “wealth” and the elevation of her political power as an “Empress.” However, Elizabeth’s own representation of her imprisonment and liberation explains why such worldly vanities, and Gascoigne’s call for her to serve Juno, might have been met with displeasure. For Elizabeth, the prison narrative demonstrated what Frye terms an “active virginity” that countered political subjugation with stoic patience (72). In the iconography and propaganda of the period, Elizabeth’s imprisonment was linked to her accession precisely because the entire episode could be couched in the terminology of holy martyrdom. Elizabeth, in speaking of her imprisonment years later, spoke of the fact that she did “dyffere from [Mary] in relygeon” and thus her imprisonment was a form of religious persecution (74). A frontispiece to the 1631 edition of Thomas Heywood’s *Englands Elizabeth, Her Life and Troubles*, shows Elizabeth being crowned by cherubim while *overlooking* Woodstock, the most notorious of several sights of imprisonment (75). Most significantly, Elizabeth’s early trials earned her a place in the foundational martyrology of Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*. Foxe emphasizes Elizabeth’s physical suffering, and adds the threat of sexual peril to her miseries:

In which story we first have to consider in what extreme misery, sickness, fear, and peril her Highness was; into what care, what trouble of mind, and what danger of death she was brought: first, with great routs and
bands of armed men, (and happy was he that might have the carrying of her,) being fetched up as the greatest traitor in the world, clapped in the Tower, and again tossed from thence, and from house to house, from prison to prison, from post to pillar, at length also prisoner in her own house, and guarded with a sort of cut-throats, which ever gaped for the spoil, whereby they might be fingering of somewhat. (Foxe 265)

The leering specter of the gaping cut-throats is not mere titillation; it also amplifies the sense of danger by imperiling that which, even in Foxe’s time, had become a crucial part of Elizabeth’s self-fashioning: her virginity. As Stephen Hamrick points out, such a narrative also further connects Elizabeth’s accession with divine favor, ascribing her deliverance not to the calculations of her captors, but (as Elizabeth herself did) to providence (119). Frye explains that Foxe is silent on the question of perpetual celibacy, as endorsing such a “virtue” would run counter to Foxe’s radical protestantism (77). However, his narrative does draw a telling connection between divine protection and Elizabeth’s inviolate body that contributed to the mythology of her virginity. God not only delivered Elizabeth, he kept her free of sexual despoilment. Should such a miracle be thrown away on a mere husband?

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64 To my knowledge, Elizabeth herself never directly proclaimed perpetual virginity, a catholic virtue, as her goal (I invite correction on this score). With typical caution, she allowed marriage to remain at least a tacit possibility for as long as possible. Nevertheless, making her celibacy-in-all-but name a part of the mythology of her image construction doubtless played upon an enduring if technically unorthodox reverence for both perpetual virginity in general and the Virgin Mary in particular.
Thus, I would go further than Frye in pointing out that this paradigm of “heroic” imprisonment is also deeply connected to Elizabeth’s constructed chastity in that both draw power ultimately from the ascetic tradition, which time and again shows ascetic temperance to be both spiritually and politically potent. Furthermore, the prison narrative may be considered foundational to Christian asceticism in that it can be traced back to the very work which concerns this chapter immediately: The Consolation of Philosophy.

The Consolation owes a deal of its literary power, as well as its enduring popularity in post-classical Europe, to the dramatic circumstances (supposed circumstances, one must qualify) of its composition. Written while its author was imprisoned by the tyrant Theodoric for crimes of political dissidence, The Consolation offered subsequent generations a sturdy model for a kind of passive, literary resistance to such circumstances (Donato 597). It is written as a dialogue between Boethius and Dame Philosophy, in which the former receives instruction for the purgation of his grief over the loss of what he terms “externa bona,” material pleasures, by turning inward and embracing philosophical detachment (Boethius 2.5). While the text itself is not explicitly Christian, its attitude of patient sufferance in the face of misfortune, as well as its stoic appreciation for bodily continence and its skepticism of worldly satisfaction, made it generally appealing to a Christian audience in subsequent centuries.65 In effect,

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65 Scholars disagree over how “Christian” the Consolation is. Most accept the personal Christianity of Boethius himself, though the text is silent on explicitly Christian theological themes. For Boethius’
Boethius established an enduring bridge between an abstemious but irreligious Classical Stoicism and the almost mystical exaltation of continence in early and medieval Christian asceticism. Thomas Aquinas, for example, cites and offers commentary on the *Consolation* in defense of an ascetic life in the *Summa Theologica*, noting particularly Boethius on the value of external goods (*Summa* 1, Question 4) and worldly fame and glory (*Summa* 1, Question 2).

But, as mentioned above, the *Consolation*’s power lies not in its philosophical conclusions alone, but in the way these ideas are developed within a context of political persecution and unwarranted punishment. Boethius was not simply a philosopher, but a martyr as well, and in this dual guise he offered an early and foundational example of renunciation as political act. Such a model served well Thomas More, for example, who adopts a remarkably similar posture in the *Dialogue of Comforts Against Tribulation*, composed during the period of More’s imprisonment prior to his execution by Henry VIII. Although More never mentions Boethius explicitly, the indebtedness seems clear, particularly in the overall structure of the work, as well as More’s rigorous explanation of the nature of misfortune, which strikingly mirrors the *Consolation* (Miles 97). More’s titular comfort evokes the trope of *de contemptu mundi*, taking as a given that his imprisonment merely offers a literal manifestation of the suffering that accompanies all human life. The trope naturally leads to the unfolding of ascetic discourse in the

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personal religious beliefs and analyses of the *Consolation* as essentially Christian, see Lewis, 76-79; Chadwick, especially 1-65 and 219-222; and Lu, 214-215.
Dialogue, as the renunciation of worldly things dulls the threat of earthly punishment.

All pleasures and all pains experienced by the corporal form are insignificant next to the glories that await beyond:

For surely, for this state of the world, the joys of heaven are by man’s mouth unspeakable, to man’s ear not audible, to men’s hearts uncogitable. So far forth excel they all that ever men have heard of, all that ever men can speak of, and all that ever man can by natural possibility think on. And yet, where the joys of heaven be such prepared for every saved soul, our Lord saith yet by the mouth of Saint John that He will give his holy martyrs that suffer for His sake many a special kind of joy. For He saith: “To him that overcometh I shall give him to eat of the tree of life. And also he that overcometh shall be clothed in white clothes. And I shall confess his name before My Father and before his Angels.” And also He saith: “Fear none of those things that thou shalt suffer, but be faithful unto the death. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.” (More 3.28)

Here is the familiar theme of ascetic martyrrology that suffering, at least the right kind of suffering, presages reward. The reminder that the suffering of the holy merits a “special kind of joy” is indelibly linked to the ascetical precept that penitential works create hierarchical degrees of salvational piety. But such renunciatory declarations can shift
nimbly into a more politically relevant kind of discourse. Particularly poignant, given More’s circumstance, is his criticism of royal power:

But when that whole kingdoms and mighty great empires are of so little surety to stand, but be so soon translated from one man unto another, what great thing can you or I, yea or any lord the greatest in this last, reckon himself to have by the possession of an heap of silver or gold? For white and yellow metal[s] are not so profitable of their own nature, save for a little glittering. (3.5)

In the Dialogue, this discourse on the fleeting nature of empire occurs within the context of an allegorical setting (Hungary under threat of Turkish invasion). This “allegorical smokescreen,” as Leland Miles terms it, provides More with an opportunity to safely attack Henry VIII while offering comfort to England’s catholics under threat of persecution (“Introduction” xliii). Kings, More writes, should not be judged on their wealth and power, but on their willingness to abject themselves and admit their impotence before God, as David did, and King Achab “when he when he fasted and went clothed in sackcloth and all besprent with ashes” (2.7). When More invokes the stubborn hard heartedness of Pharaoh in the face of God’s truth, it is easy to picture Henry’s own bull-headed rush into the folly of Lutheran heresy (1.4).

For Elizabeth, the consolation of the persecuted is a strange literary register to take up. In both More and Boethius, renunciatory contemplation is employed to eclipse, not endorse, royal power. If we are to locate a political meaning in her Consolation,
therefore, that must point toward some other end than rhetorical resistance to power.

The first possibility, supported by the contemporary reports of William Camden, is that Elizabeth turned to Boethius for her own consolation after the failure of her intervention on behalf of the protestant cause in France. Camden provides an account of the Queen receiving the news of Henry IV’s conversion:

> But whilst the Queen only for Religions Sake, aydes the French King, distrusting his owne strength, at so great charges, and so great troubles of mind, as if she esteemed his losse, her owne, behold a most certaine report flies over to England, spreading out, that the French King, either had embrassed, or would shortly embrace the profession of the Romish Religion. (qtd. in Ha 17)

According to Camden, the Queen was all but overcome by this news, so far had she stretched beyond her comfort in aiding the French king, and then only to defend protestantism. She wasted no time in venting both her fury and her grief at its source by means of a letter to her former ally Henri:

> Alas, what great sorrow, what inward griefe, what sighs have I felt at my heart for these things which Morlante hath told me! Alas, is the world come to this passe? Could it bee that any worldly matter should make you forsake the feare of God? Can we expect any happy event of such a fact? Or can you thinke that hee which hath hitherto with his owne right hand upholden and kept you, would now forsake you? It is a matter full of
danger to doe evill that good may come of it. Yet I hope a sounder Spirit will inspire into you a better minde. In the meane time, I will not cease in the first place of my prayers, to commend you to God, and beseech him that the hands of Esau may not spill Jacobs blessing. Whereas you doe religiously offer me your friendship, to my great cost I know I have deserved it; neither should I repent it, had you not changed your father. Certainly, from henceforth I cannot be your sister by the father; but the truth is, I shall ever more dearely love mine owne father then a false father; which God knoweth very well, who bring you back againe to a better mind. (Camden 1593.15)66

Here, as Ha writes, emerges Elizabeth’s “distress at Henry having foresworn protestantism”(16).67 Camden, in fact, lists Boethius as one of several authors that Elizabeth turned to in times of sorrow for “comfort,” and that he was particularly in her thoughts in 1593 (1593.16). Several sections of Elizabeth’s translation evoke the general sentiment of inward grief in the letter. The very first words, for instance, take up the register of lament: 68

Righmes that my groing studie ons p[e]rformed

66 Citations from Camden taken from the Hypertext Critical Edition of Dana F. Sutton, cited by the year of Elizabeth’s reign and section number of the English translation.
67 For another perspective on the translation as an act of consolation in response to the news from France, see Mueller and Scodel, 8.
68 The Kaylor/Philips text is faithful to Elizabeth’s manuscript in ways that are occasionally confusing. I have attempted to clarify spelling and punctuation without obscuring meaning, with my changes in brackets. I cite by page number.
In teares alas crumpeld woful staves begin[.]

My muses torne behold what write I shold indites

Wher tru woful verse my face w[i]t[h] dole bedews. (43)

That Elizabeth found something cathartic in such expressions of Boethian grief is probable, and the Boethian formula of rejecting the vanity of worldly success could provide comfort in the face of failure. Expressing contempt for the material world becomes a means of mitigating worldly defeat. Elizabeth’s own fruitlessly taxed treasury comes to mind in her rendering of the Boethian rejection of the hoarding of wealth:

Go to, yf now the giftes of fortune be not fleeting & changeable, what is ther that eyth[e]r thou canst make thyne, or if thous seest & p[er]cevist, wilt not dispise? Are riches eyth[e]r thyne or by their nature pretious? What is the gold th[ere]of, but heap of gathered pence? And such as shynes more w[ith] their spending than w[ith] their heap....And if it can not byde by a man that is given to an oth[er], Than money is most pretious when turnd to others by liberall use. (69)

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69 Elizabeth’s wording here suggests the influence of another Boethian translator, Chaucer, who opens the *Troilus* with similar diction:

   The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
   That was the king Priamus sone of Troye,
   In lovinge, how his aventures fallen
   Fro wo to wele, and after out of loye,
   My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye.
   Thesiphone, thou help me for t’endyte
   Thise woful vers, that wepen as I wryte! (1.1-7)
The note of consolation for Elizabeth comes from the text’s reminder that her royal treasury had been nothing more than a “heap of gathered pence.” In spending the money for the sake of others, that is, by being charitable, Elizabeth has turned that gold into its “most pre[t]ious” form by divesting herself of it; an empty treasury is thus a thing to be wished for, a disentanglement from “skant & needy riches” (69).

Such a discourse of renunciation from humbled monarchs recurs on multiple occasions in Shakespeare, whose kings attempt to resist the pains of loss. For instance, Henry VI, Shakespeare’s most conspicuously monkish king, sees the world as irrevocably bleak before he renounces any desire to remain enthroned:

Would I were dead, if God's good will were so;
For what is in this world but grief and woe?
O God! methinks it were a happy life
To be no better than a homely swain

....................................................

Ah! What a life were this! how sweet! How lovely!
Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade
To shepherds looking on their silly sheep
Than doth a rich embroider’d canopy
To kings that fear their subjects’ treachery?
O yes, it doth; a thousandfold it doth.
And to conclude, the shepherd’s homely curds,
His cold thin drink out of his leather bottle,
His wonted sleep under a fresh tree’s shade,
All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
Is far beyond a prince’s delicates—
His viands sparkling in a golden cup,
His body couched in a curious bed,
When care, mistrust, and treason waits on him.

(3H6 2.5.19-23, 41-54)

This renunciation of the vanity of kingly luxury is explicitly predicated on the reality of political failure: the “subjects’ treachery” that will ultimately rob him of his crown.

Henry, in envying the shepherd, understands that he can “conquer fortune’s spite/By living low where Fortune cannot hurt” him (4.6.19-20). In Richard II, the king, faced with inevitability of his deposition, reduces all possession to “that small model of the barren earth/Which serves as paste and cover to our bones” (RII, 3.2.153-154), before renouncing the crown and all the material trappings of rule. The artifice of kingly authority and material possession is exposed:

Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence, throw away respect,
Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while.
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus

How can you say to me I am a king? (3.2.171-177)

Partly, the strategic nature of such renunciation ("throw away respect, tradition," etc.) is a matter of personal agency, an emotional self-defense against catastrophe. But, as Katherine Maus argues, it also serves an external, political function, as part of an "enthusiastic self-dramatization" that seeds doubt about the legitimacy of Bolingbroke’s usurpation ("Richard II" 462).

For Elizabeth, renunciatory rhetoric in the Consolation can also be both self-directed and political. For instance, in Elizabeth’s words, Dame Philosophy’s exhortation to renounce Fortune’s gifts sounds a note of self-admonishment:

What is it th[ere]for O man that hath thrown down to wo & wayle? Thou hast seene I believe some new unwonted thing. Thou yf thou thinkest that toward the[e] fortune be changed, art deceived. This was ever her manner, this was her nature. She hath ev[e]r kept toward the[e], rath[e]r her own constancy in her mutabilite. Such one was she whan she beguild thee, & did deceave w[i]t[h] alluremtes of false felicitie. Thou hast understode now, the doutfull face of the blynde Goddesse, w[hi]ch though she hyde herself to others, hath made her self to the[e] manifest. Yf thou allow her use her fashon, complayne not thereof; Yf thou hatest her treason, skorne her & cast her of[f], that so falsely beguylde the[e],
for she that now is cause of thy woe the self same ought be of thy quyett.

(61-62)

Dame Philosophy’s warning against being beguiled by Fortune perhaps spoke to

Elizabeth’s own sense of being misled in the matter of France. Military glory, in

Boethius, represents a particularly fleeting form of material success, as More notes in

the *Dialogue of Comforts*.\(^7\) But self-criticism might also function as criticism of the

masculine war-making voices that surrounded her. In the case of Elizabeth, the

beguilement on behalf of Fortune came from some of her own councilors (including

Walsingham and Leicester) and the militant protestants in Parliament, who pressed the

issue of the intervention despite her reservations (Doran 41-43). The hawkish faction of

Parliament proved particularly disappointing to Elizabeth, promising to fully fund the

endeavor, then balking at the queen’s request for money during the 1593 session

(Benkert 6). However, before this disappointment, the queen became swept up in her

role as the defender of the faith, living and dying with the news from France as if it were

her own throne at stake, as Camden writes, and fully committing crown wealth to the

cause (Camden 1593.15). The *Consolation* thus might be more than Elizabeth’s self-

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\(^7\) “What should a man greatly rejoice in that, that he daily seeth most abound in the hands of many that be naught? Do not now this great Turk and his bashaws, in all these advancements of fortune, surmount very far above any Christian estate, and any lords living under him? And was there not yet hence upon twenty years the great sultan of Syria, which many a year together bare as great a port as the great Turk? And after in one summer unto the great Turk that whole empire was lost. And so may all his empire now (and shall hereafter by God’s grace) be lost into Christian men’s hands likewise, when Christian people shall be mended and grow in God’s favor again.” (More 3.5)
admonishment, offering as well a critique of the factional voices that continually sought to impose their will upon her.

The criticism also might be pointed toward Henri IV himself, whose betrayal the Queen never forgave. Jamie Goodrich, for instance, argues that expressions of grief in the consolation were “a careful bit of political staging by Elizabeth” to limit criticism of her relationship with Henri by strongly and publicly asserting the personal nature of the betrayal (263-266). The argument she constructs against Henry, however, is built upon the Boethian conceit of the worthlessness of kingly power. To Elizabeth, Henri had chosen such power and the security of his earthly crown over God. Such a motive does explain the political utility for Elizabeth of Book 3 of the Consolation, which offers a lengthy discourse upon the worthlessness of high office. Ultimately, the crown Navarre bought with his soul is unlikely to bring him happiness:

But kingdoms & kings familiarities, can they not make a man happy, what els? Yf their felicity ev[e]r last. But full be old examples & of pre[s]ent age that kings have changed w[it]h misery their lott. Yf this Raigne of kings be auror of felicitie, shall it not bring misery in part that lackes, and so diminish luck? For tho mens Dominions stretch furr, yet more people ther must needs be, never unacquayened w[it]h kings Raigne. For where the making felicitie endith, there skanted is the force, & so wretched makes. Thus must it needs follow that greatest portion of mysery of kings have. (85)
Power, in other words, can only bring grief to the powerful, who must feel aware of its very limits. A king whose happiness relies on authority is always doomed to suffer misery due to what he lacks. Elizabeth echoes this very argument in her letter to Henri, in which she chides him for prizing the “worldly matter” of the crown over a “feare of God,” who is the source of a peaceful mind (Camden 1593.15).

However, despite such veiled polemic directed at rivals and enemies, the *Consolation* translation should be read principally as an act of public image construction, for references to Henri or Walsingham remain oblique, while Elizabeth as the text’s source is certain. What strategic value to Elizabeth’s public image can be found in a text that is so radically anti-monarchical? A clue may lie in another translation of the *Consolation* produced in Tudor England.

Some thirty-seven years before Elizabeth’s translation, George Colvile published his own rendering of the *Consolation of Philosophy* during the reign of Mary I. Despite its anti-monarchic bent, the work was dedicated to the queen herself. Colvile’s dedicatory epistle to Mary in the 1556 publication includes some potentially subversive didactic commentary. Colvile asks that the Queen consider the “tyrannical rayne of Theodoryke,” the Visigoth King of the sixth century (3). He goes on to relate to the queen how Theodoric, an Arian by faith, had his once trusted advisor Boethius imprisoned and then executed for a number of perceived slights, among them suspected complicity with the Christian Emperor of Byzantium. “Upon these two causes falsely surmysed by the kyng,” writes Colvile, “Boecius was accused by vyle and
slaughterous persons for money, and beyng never put to aunswer, found guilty” (3).

Colville’s decision to stress to Mary the fate of Boethius—execution at the hands of a sitting monarch because of religious factionalism without just due process, on the suborned testimony of paid informants—could be read as a rather courageous attempt at counsel, considering that Mary herself was accused of similar tyranny by protestants. Whether Colville was truly cautioning his queen about tyrannical impulses through the rhetorical mirror of Theodoric is impossible to say with certainty, but it does point toward an answer on the question of Elizabeth’s use of the *Consolation* in her ongoing program of image construction.

If tyranny finds its source in a desire for material gain, then the ascetic worldview endorsed by the *Consolation* stands at cross purposes with such impulses. Elizabeth had good reason to consider the nature of tyranny. As Mary Villepontieaux explains, accusations that Elizabeth was herself a tyrant were a constant source of consternation for her (28). This anxiety flared up often, but particularly in the period surrounding the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587. The weeks leading up to and following Mary’s death saw the publication of numerous poems and pamphlets that denounced the queen as tyrannical (28). One in particular that circulated on the day of Mary’s funeral, directed to restive catholic subjects, labeled Elizabeth a latter day Jezebel who had acted with arbitrary cruelty in the matter of the Scottish queen (29). That such

71 See Duncan, 111-129
charges affected the queen can be seen in a speech she made to Parliament in 1586 as the polemical voices surrounding Mary’s imprisonment were reaching a crescendo.

Anticipating, as Villeponteaux notes, the clamor that will come with the execution, Elizabeth takes care to rebut claims not only that she acts tyrannically, but that she is by nature a “tyrant,” a title that Elizabeth “above all things has most abhorred” (29).

Instead, Elizabeth proclaims her merciful nature:

> But to clear myself of this fault, this I may justly say: I have pardoned many traitors and rebels, and besides I well remember half a score treasons, which have been either covered or slightly examined or let slip and passed over, so that mine actions have not been such as would procure me the name of tyrant. (29)

Elizabeth stresses her non-tyrannical nature by admitting her occasional laxity in enforcing justice; she not only eschews unjust persecution, she also often lets actual treasons go unpunished, so hesitant is she to wield the reins of retributive or punitive power.

> Her abhorrence for tyranny is such that she will put her own life in danger rather than model herself on the tyrannical example of kings who used torture as a first resort.\(^72\) Whether accurate or not, her public image of temperance depended in part on distancing herself from the very charges of capricious punishment thrown at her during

\(^72\) Villeponteaux gives several other examples in her first chapter, 1-33.
the period of Mary’s imprisonment and execution. Elizabeth’s demonstrated sensitivity to charges of tyranny lends biographical resonance to her *Consolation*, in which the tyrant who would exert royal prerogative through cruelty deludes himself, for the power to cause pain can be resisted by stoic fortitude. Elizabeth renders into English one of those most famous Boethian examples of stoic resistance to torture, one that likely resonated in the 1590s when the threat of conspiracy was always present:

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Whan a tyrant thought to afflicte a poore man w[i]t[h]s tormentes to confesse the knowers of a conspiracy against him, his tongue he byt & threw away, throwing it to the face of the wicked tyrant. So the torture that he supposed to make stuff for his cruelty, a wise man made for his v[i]rtue. (72)
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While a positive mortification as radical as biting one’s own tongue out goes beyond Christian *askesis*, such a passage evokes ascetic resistance in the theater of state punishment so common to the genre of martyrrology with which Elizabeth would have been familiar. Adding to its resonance, this particular Boethian exemplum would have been familiar to Elizabeth in 1593, and to many others, for its enactment in what was undoubtedly the most famous play of the day:

*Hieronimo*

What lesser liberty can kings afford

Than harmless silence? Then affrod it me.
Sufficeth, I may not, nor I will not tell thee.

King

Fetch forth the torturers: traitor as thou art,
I'll make thee tell.

Hieronimo

Indeed,

Thou may'st torment me, as his wretched son
Hath done in murd'ring my Horatio:
But never shalt thou force me to reveal
The thing which I have vow'd inviolate.
And therefore, in despite of all thy threats,
Pleas'd with their deaths, and eas'd with their revenge,
First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart.

[He bites out his tongue]

King

O monstrous resolution of a wretch!
See, Viceroy, he hath bitten forth his tongue,
Rather than to reveal what we requir'd.

(The Spanish Tragedy, 4.4.180-191)

When Kyd’s tyrant calls forth the torturers, he is summoning those instruments of kingly power that Elizabeth in her speech to Parliament claimed to use only sparingly.
Hieronimo’s response that torture cannot force him to reveal that which he has “vow’d inviolate” recalls, consciously or not, Boethius’s maxim that, as Elizabeth renders it, “the rule of any man stretche [as far] as the body alone” (Consolation 72). In her Consolation, as in The Spanish Tragedy, tyrannical means ultimately fail in the face of a heroic resistance that is heedless of bodily torment.

Elizabeth’s translation places its sympathies with subjects rather than kings because Elizabeth is harnessing the rhetorical power of the Boethian renunciation of the tyrannical. Her translation gives new voice to the Consolation’s dismissal of the reckless exercise of power, which to Boethius is doomed to end in misery:

The tyrant that proved the danger of his Lot, dissembled his Raigness feare by sword hanging on his head. What then is powre that can not chace bittes of Care nor then the stinges of feare? Will thye have to lyve secure, but may not, yet boast of their force? Dost thou suppose him mighty, who[m] thou seest can not what he wold, performe: dost thou think him strong that fills his sydes w[it]h garde[s], that whom he affrightes, himself doth feare? Who that he may seeme mighty, throwes himself to the hands of slaves? (85)

The mind of the tyrant is never at rest. In the Boethian formula, the king who rules by fear, must in turn be ruled by fear, as he puts his life in the hands of the very slaves over

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73 Rebecca Howard provides a fuller accounting of Kyd’s engagement with Boethius, particularly the idea of ghostly consolation. See Howard, 9-15.
whom he holds sway. All kings labor under the mistaken notion that their power has meaning, but the tyrant suffers most of all from the anxieties born of hatred. For Elizabeth, rendering this material in her own voice becomes an act of ascetic performance, an excellent example of Gavin Flood’s theoretical formulation that “the ascetic self shapes the narrative of her life to the narrative of tradition” (2). Not just this passage, but the Consolation as a whole and the very act of translating and disseminating it inoculate Elizabeth against the label of tyrant and distance her from the very Theodorics, Neros, and Caligulas who serve as its tyrannical examples. For a queen plagued by the specter of factional insurrection spurred on by the propaganda of rivals foreign and domestic, this rhetorical abrogation of tyranny is unmistakably political. Like her mask of virginity, it dissociates her from the worldly sphere where all appetites, bodily and political, take root.

Thus, somewhat counterintuitively, ascetic performance by kings can actually reify the very power it seems to renounce. Elizabeth and Philip both offer historical models of ascetic performance in action, but the Shakespearean stage presents similar examples of this paradox. In Richard III, for instance, Richard uses rumors of his ascetic nature to forestall the anxiety over his fitness to rule:

Cat. He doth entreat your Grace, my noble lord,

To visit him to-morrow or next day.

He is within, with two right reverend fathers,

Divinely bent to meditation;
And no worldly suit would he be mov’d,
To draw him from his holy exercise.

.......................................................

*Buck.* Ah, ha, my lord, this prince is not an Edward!
He is not lolling on a lewd day-bed,
But on his knees at meditation;
Not dallying with a brace of courtesans,
But meditating with two deep divines;
Not sleeping, to engross his idle body,
But praying, to enrich his watchful soul:
Happy were England, would this gracious prince
Take on himself the sovereignty thereof:

But, sure, I fear, we shall ne'er win him to it. (3.7.59-64, 71-80)

The image of Richard bent in “holy exercise” recalls the etymological root of the word asceticism: the ancient Greek word *askein* (to exercise or train). Buckingham’s claim that Richard turns away from sexual pleasure and sloth in pursuit of an almost monastic devotion to meditation legitimizes his fitness for the throne by distancing him from his sensual predecessor Edward IV. Murmurs of fratricidal violence are preemptively silenced by this constructed ascetical image, an image which Richard reinforces by initially renouncing the crown when first offered (3.7.144-162).
Shakespeare demonstrates an understanding of the versatile energy of ascetic and renunciatory postures for those in power. In the next chapter, I will interrogate the multifaceted ways in which renunciation registers, somewhat unexpectedly, in Shakespeare’s most triumphant history play.
CHAPTER FOUR: PASSIONS FETTERED: RENUNCiant KINGSHIP AND LITERARY

RETRACTION IN HENRY V

The act of literary retraction has long been an object of struggle for Chaucerians: how is one to interpret a final gesture, such as is found in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, that renders inert if not worthless all that has come before?

Looking back on the sum of his artistic creation, Chaucer feels impelled to renounce it, along with much of his other work that deals with the vanities of the material world:

> For oure book seith, “al that is writen is writen for our doctrine, and that is myn entente. Wherfore I biseke you mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my translacions and edytinges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns: as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddles; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne; the book of the Leoun; and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherus lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne. (X.1082-86)

The challenge presented by the *Retractions* (and the entirety of the didactic *Parson’s Tale* which precedes it) has resulted in a multitude of critical explanations and apologies,
mainly split between those who, like David Aers and Melissa Furrow, find the renunciation sincere and those, such as Olive Sayce, Judson Boyce, and Theresa Moritz who find it ironic, forced, or a mere dramatic conceit. However, whether viewed as sincere or not, the *Retractions* are nevertheless rooted in the ascetic ethos of medieval catholicism in their renunciation of “lecherus” subject matter and “worldly vanitees” (1084).

Although Shakespeare did not write retractions in a purely ascetic/Chaucerian fashion, the fact that his plays often conclude with a character or a choral figure uttering lines of moral crystallization or thematic summation can similarly frustrate or complicate a response to the text as a whole. In particular, the final lines of the Chorus in *Henry V* read as noticeably out of register with the play itself. Norman Rabkin has recognized that the speech mitigates the optimism of the play’s military victories, noting that “the Epilogue wrenches us out of the paradise of comedy” by reminding us of the tragic fate that awaits England’s next generation (289). However, these final lines also directly refute Henry’s assertions of providential authority and appear to situate the dramatized historical events within a universe that is arbitrary and patternless. This literary act of renunciation, like its religious counterparts, projects meaning across multiple fields, not only political but aesthetic. In renouncing Henry’s providential authority, the epilogue also comes dangerously close to being, in effect, a renunciation of the play itself, akin to the regretful impulse which John Tatlock sees at the heart of Chaucer’s *Retractions* (Tatlock 528).
At the same time, the play’s titular character, not a monkish figure at all, also speaks and acts in renunciatory ways throughout the play. Having inherited the crown from a usurper, Henry V employs ascetic language and attitudes for the purpose of strengthening his own rule; such language allows him to forestall charges of tyranny and sidestep questions about his culpability in waging war. Sitting upon a throne scarred by two generations of rebellion, Henry’s various renunciations function as a legitimization of his succession and as a performative justification of his war-making.

**The Renunciation of Providence**

With his enemies brought to heel, France and England united under a single crown, and the daughter of his enemy on his arm, King Henry V prepares to exit the stage to words of Christian connubial bliss and providential peace, spoken by Queen Isabel. It is God, “the best maker of all marriages,” who has sealed these pacts both domestic (Henry and Katherine) and political (England and France) (5.2.359). The extended matrimonial analogy does invite a note of darkness, with motherly warnings about “fell jealousy,” which can trouble the marriage bed as well as an alliance, and even lead to “divorce”: a word of some significance in Tudor England (5.2.331-339). However, the warning passes quickly, giving way to a utopian vision of a world where English and French are almost indistinguishable. Henry has his Kingdom, his betrothed, and, even in the eyes of his former enemies, the endorsement of God in these conquests. It is, as Lance Wilcox notes, a kind of whitewashing of the complex, blood
spattered warrior we have followed through four acts, though one whose optimism it is tempting to accept (74).\textsuperscript{74} However, before the sense of triumph can settle irrevocably, the Chorus reappears to recite a sonnet:

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our bending author hath pursu’d the story,
In little room confining mighty men,
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.
Small time; but in that small most greatly lived
This star of England. Fortune made his sword;
By which the world's best garden he achieved,
And of it left his son imperial lord.
Henry the Sixt, in infant bands crown'd King
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France and made his England bleed;
Which oft our stage hath shown; and, for their sake,
In your fair minds let this acceptance take. (Epilogue 1-14)

That the Chorus speaks a sonnet is relevant to the rhetoric. Superimposed upon the classic Shakespearean 4/4/4/2 structure is the more ancient, balanced, and binary echo

\textsuperscript{74}Henry’s wooing of Katherine in 5.1 has more than its share of critics, who fault it for its abuses of genre, its insipidness, its gender politics, etc. See Hedrick, 471-472; Rabkin, 292.
of the Petrarchan octave and sestet. The octave, along with a final round of apologetics for the limitations of stagecraft, offers a retrospective on Henry V himself. Its sentiments repeat much of the rhetoric of the prologue and elsewhere, though the reference to “fortune” is, as Andrew Gurr notes, “particularly pointed” (Henry V, 2005 Epilogue 7n.). Fortune is the blind goddess of arbitrary fate, a medieval inheritance still omnipresent in the Renaissance. As a trope, she is anti-providential, for she “by indiscriminate strokes” overthrows kingdoms, as Dame Philosophy tells Boethius (2.1). A more local reminder of her blindness is offered in the play by Pistol, distraught over the coming execution of Bardolph, who discourses upon Fortune with Fluellen:

_Pis._ Bardolph, a soldier, firm and sound of heart,
And of buxom valour, hath, by cruel fate,
And giddy Fortune's furious fickle wheel,
That goddess blind,
That stands upon the rolling restless stone--

_Flu._ By your patience, Aunchient Pistol. Fortune is painted blind, with a muffler afore her eyes, to signify to you that Fortune is blind; and she is painted also with a wheel, to signify to you, which is the moral of it, that she is turning, and inconstant, and mutability, and variation: and her foot, look you, is fixed upon a spherical stone, which rolls, and rolls, and rolls.

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75 The reference to fortune can be traced back to Holinshed, who describes Henry as “a captaine against whom fortune never frowned nor mischance once spurned, whose people him so severe a justice both loved and obeyed” (583).
In good truth, the poet makes a most excellent description of it. Fortune is an excellent moral.

_Pist._ Fortune is Bardolph’s foe, and frowns on him;

For he hath stol’n a pax, and hanged must a be. (3.6.27-40)

It would be possible to interpret the Chorus’s use of Fortune as a generalized personification of military triumph, if it were not for the fact that Shakespeare reminds the audience of her allegorical nature two acts earlier. Leslie Thompson has written of “the hope and the resignation that characterize the Renaissance attitude to Fortune,” and in the exchange above we see both Pistol’s resignation and Fluellen’s oblique reminder that a reversal of the wheel is never out of the question (L. Thompson n.p.).

That this blind huswife should be the force behind Henry’s sword amounts to a direct refutation of providence. It is a statement that complicates Henry’s claim that “God fought for us” (4.8.120).

Things get even worse in the _sestet_. The _volta_, occupying its Italian position between lines 8 and 9, turns the sonnet from Henry V to Henry VI, the tragic figure at the center of Shakespeare’s First Tetralogy. If the purpose of Henry and Katherine’s marriage is, like the ending of any comedy, to “guarantee the future” and to promise happiness to “the generations to come,” as Rabkin writes, what to make of this glimpse at coming calamity? (288). By turning toward the generation to come in the _sestet_,

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76 A great deal has been written on the subject of fortune, its use in medieval literature, and its relevance to Shakespeare. See Farnham, 78 and _passim_; Knight, 221; and Strohm, _Politique_ 120-130.
Shakespeare also pulls back the curtain of comedy’s deceit that marriages form the perfect vehicle of social reinvigoration.\textsuperscript{77} Our first and only King of France and England, the boy who would change everything, is dispensed with, almost matter of factly, in six lines. Henry VI’s loss of everything his father gained is well established historical and literary fact already, and that fact cannot be completely abrogated by mere silence; however, by raising his specter here in these final lines, Shakespeare effectively destroys any lingering providential euphoria; it is, in effect, a retraction.

The sonnet is similar to the contradictory voices that Joel Altman identifies in the choruses of Senecan tragedy influential to the development of early modern drama (\textit{Play of Mind} 246). In its capacity of offering moral commentary on the play, the Senecan chorus “frequently disengages itself from the plot to adduce theses that offer new perspectives on the action,” which can often “run counter to the events of the play” (246). Such is the case here, where the chorus speaks as if he is not willing to accept the triumphant pageant just staged.\textsuperscript{78} The disconcerting wrench that Rabkin describes readers and audiences feeling as the epilogue registers is about more than a simple darkening of an otherwise (potentially) happy ending. It is the result of a complete rupture of the play’s narrative momentum. In its effect, the final sonnet

\textsuperscript{77} For a study of the play’s comic elements and its relationship to comedy as a genre, see Barton. Anecdotally, based on my experience no line in any Shakespeare play—comedy, tragedy, or history—produces a bigger laugh in an undergraduate literature class than Henry’s “Here comes your father” as delivered by Kenneth Branagh (5.2.279).

\textsuperscript{78} Altman gives as an example the chorus in \textit{Theyestes}, which treats the prospect of a feigned reconciliation between Atreus and his brother as if it were real (246).
approaches parabasis, defined by Paul de Man as both “the interruption of a discourse by a shift in rhetorical register” and, more thoroughly, as “a sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes” (de Man 300). The term is doubly applicable, for the sonnet is parabasis in the first, more classical sense as a choral aside addressed to the audience, but de Man’s later definition more aptly captures the epilogue’s supreme narrative irony. The sonnet disturbs the illusion of the dramatic construct of the play in the way that all choral speeches and asides do, projecting discourse across the fourth wall that divides actor and audience, but it also, more significantly, reveals the illusory nature of all the Chorus’s previous declamations, and the play’s dramatizations, of Henry’s triumphs. In rejecting Henry’s providential authority and undermining the value of his victory, the epilogue lays bare the discontinuity between Henry’s religious propaganda and historical truth, between the neatness of a providential narrative and the more complex reality of opportunistic and impermanent conquest.

In performance, the ironic disillusionment of the final parabasis can disappoint or confound in the same way as Chaucer’s Retractions; or, to use an early modern example, it mimics the experience of reading one of Shakespeare’s more asymmetrical, top loaded sonnets, in which the turn does not occur until the first word of the final couplet. When two lines ironically (re)solve fourteen lines of problematic tension, the suddenness of the resolution can be as disconcerting as satisfying. As Paul Fussell writes of such sonnets, “the gross imbalance” of build up and resolution “has about it
something vaguely risible” in which one is reminded of pins popping balloons (Fussell 122). But, also like the non-dramatic example of Chaucer, for readers of the play the final sonnet invites a rereading of the text that considers Shakespeare’s rejection of providence from the outset. Just as some Chaucerians have used the retraction as a starting point for returning to the tales proper and locating textual evidence of Chaucer’s moral orthodoxy, so too can a deductive reexamination of Henry V (that is, one that takes the renunciation of providence as a logical premise) reveal the cracks in the play’s providential veneer. 79

A play that seems on its face to embrace a providential vision of history, Henry V is in some sense the least problematic of Shakespeare’s English histories: the complex triads and blurred boundaries of the Henry IV plays give way in Henry V to the clear oppositions of French and English, domestic and foreign, noble and common, and heroes and villains. One early critic who embraced a providential reading of the play saw Henry’s victory as evidence of a pattern of divine retribution in which justice is delayed until the third generation, sparing Henry any backlash for his father’s deposition of Richard (Campbell 122). E.M.W. Tillyard, in his foundational study, constructs an elaborate providential framework in which Henry’s victories emerge as a momentary reversal in a process of national purgation culminating with Richmond’s victory at Bosworth in Richard III (Tillyard 234-314). Such providential readings have now mostly

79 For a moral reading of Chaucer’s Retractions, see Robertson, 369
fallen out of favor, in large part due to a reevaluation of Henry’s own character. The decades after Rabkin’s influential and thorough problematization of the play have brought a host of critical perspectives that have probed the fissures in the play’s providential veneer. Herschel Baker makes note of Henry’s “hardness” of character in the exercise of war, particularly his “dreadful talk” before Harfleur and his killing of the French prisoners, though admits that he is “at his best” when indulging in patriotic rhetoric (976-977). Katharine Maus finds the play “not only deeply equivocal” about Henry’s heroism, but “self-consciously so” (“Henry V” 760). Joel Altman, in situating the play historically, explains the ambivalent portrayal of Henry’s adventure as a reflection of the “complexity of response” that the campaign to subdue Ireland in the 1590s engendered in Shakespeare’s audience (“Vile” 8). Richard Van Oort sees even in the rousingly communal “We few, we happy few” a dangerous gesture towards elite factionalism that undermines the play’s patriotism (330). Such critical perspectives have, in fact, come to dominate the scholarly response to Henry V, seeing the play not as patriotic triumph but something potentially far darker.

The source for the play’s providentialism is Henry’s own professed and publicly displayed Christian zeal, which stands in contrast to the profligacy of youthful Hal. At the play’s outset he solicits both political and religious justification from the Archbishop of Canterbury for his invasion of France. Henry would make his claim “with right and conscience,” as legitimacy is a necessary prerequisite for the providential backing he will appropriate. The worldly motives for his conquest—following his father’s advice to vent
aristocratic restlessness at an external and alien foe, outrunning the persistent legends of his truant youth, along with the more mundane and constant reasons for pursuing England’s interests on the continent—are all publicly subsumed by Henry himself beneath an outward show of legal and religious endorsement. In the play’s first scene, the King acknowledges that the war must be undertaken “by God’s help” (1.2.222), God being the only figure capable of arbitrating the legitimacy of kingships, and Exeter, as the King’s herald, begins his ultimatum by insisting that Henry is himself God’s herald, and that the titles in question are ultimately a numinous loan:

He wills you, in the name of God Almighty,
That you divest yourself, and lay apart
The borrowed glories that by gift of heaven,
By law of nature and of nations, ‘longs
To him and to his heirs, namely, the crown
And all wide-stretched honours that pertain
By custom, and the ordinance of times,
Unto the crown of France. (2.4.77-84)

In making what is, in effect, an exhortation to renunciation (divestment), Exeter draws distinctions here between several different levels of authority. Henry’s claim to the throne stems from a threefold legitimacy: divine law, natural law (as his is the blood closest to the legitimate line), and the law of “nations,” by which is meant formal laws fixed by documentation. To reinforce this third branch of Henry’s legitimacy, Exeter then
produces a genealogical document, a codified representation of Henry’s link to King Philip IV through Queen Isabella. The French claim, meanwhile, rests on the inferior foundation of common law and historical accident—“custom and the ordinance of times”—which must yield to codified precedent.

The French, prior to the play’s opening, had attempted to counter Henry’s legal legitimacy with documented legal precedent of their own: the “Salic law” that forms the subject of the play’s opening debate. Having heard the Archbishop’s demolition of the Salic argument, however, Exeter preemptively distinguishes Henry’s straightforward claim from the French legal argument, which is based on an obscure Carolingian edict of uncertain jurisdiction, an “awkward claim/picked from the wormholes of long-vanish’d days” and “from the dust of old oblivion rak’d” (2.4.85-87). The ultimate purpose of this legal wrangling is to establish that Henry’s invasion has the backing of divine providence as a cause of “right” and “conscience,” and that the shape of divine providence can be determined by the authority of earthly laws. This begs the question of how Henry’s public assertions of providential authority reflect the play’s own sense of reality: in other words, whether all this talk of providence is merely a political tactic meant to shore up domestic support, a self-delusion born of kingly pride, or whether Shakespeare truly is writing a providential play.

The theological basis for a providential reading of history has its own uncertain history. From patristic times, Church fathers had sought to reconcile material suffering with providential possibility. The question, which predates Christianity itself, is how
God’s hand may be witnessed on Earth. The earliest Church fathers, despite suffering under the yoke of persecution, were optimistic. Tertullian, for instance, saw God’s providence as unquestionable, and saw all suffering of the righteous as a justifiable symptom of God’s guidance: “It is the winnowing fan whereby God cleanses the Church, separating the martyrs from the deniers” (Roberts 141).

Augustine complicated the issue by establishing two levels of providence: general and particular, but he remained insistent about the supremacy of God’s will. Augustine rejected arbitrary chance and fortune, explaining the suffering of the good and the happiness of the wicked as part of a fundamentally providential worldview:

For if every sin were now visited with manifest punishment, nothing would seem to be reserved for the final judgment; on the other hand, if no sin received now a plainly divine punishment, it would be concluded that there is no divine providence at all. And so of the good things of this life: if God did not by a very visible liberality confer these on some of those persons who ask for them, we should say that these good things were not at His disposal; and if He gave them to all who sought them, we should suppose that such were the only rewards of His service; and such a service would make us not godly, but greedy rather, and covetous. (City of God 8.6)

The “problem” with the Augustinian view, obviously, is that it acknowledges the difficulty in distinguishing between providential shape and arbitrary shapelessness. In
other words, while Augustine asserts that there is value in occasional manifestations of special providence, its practical distinction from a world governed by Fortune—where good and evil may triumph and suffer according to arbitrary rather than divine patterns—is not readily apparent.

Theological questions about providence stand separate from questions about its political utility. Aligning political and military motives with the will of God, particularly in public oratory, is a challenge faced by Henry in justifying his invasion. Providential language allows princes and executives to frame political action within a narrative of moral binaries: good vs. evil, God vs. the Devil, etc., and to mitigate if not disguise entirely practical causes and motives. To use a familiar example, Queen Elizabeth, in one version of her speech to the troops at Tillbury, labels the Spanish not simply the enemies of England, but “the enemies of my God” (Levin 144). The asserted righteousness of the combat, a rhetorical device meant to inspire, does not, however, stand on its own, but rather is paired with secular and material incentives: honor and financial reward (Elizabeth speaks of “virtues in the field,” an ends with a promise that “rewards and crowns...shall be duly paid”) (144). Providential justice, honor, and material gain form a network of incentives that all contribute to rallying support for Elizabeth’s military cause.

These same three incentives are at work in Henry V. Material gain is at the forefront of Pistol’s thoughts when he implores his compatriots of Eastcheap to descend “like horse-leeches” on France “to suck, to suck, the very blood to suck” (2.3.55-56).
Such rapacity finds a more understated articulation in Henry’s longing to rule over France’s “ample empery” (1.2.226). Honor forms the theme of Henry’s St. Crispin’s Day Speech (just as avoidance of its opposite, shame, in the exhortation before the walls of Harfleur). However, it is providence that is most central, at least in the play’s first four acts. Henry’s repeated invocation of God’s endorsement has struck some critics as self-conscious, if not nakedly Machiavellian. Peter Parolin, for instance, finds Henry’s “godly self-presentation” to be “untrustworthy,” noting a “disjunctive gap” between the King’s providential rhetoric and his campaign’s mundane reality (49). Matthew J. Smith, meanwhile, views Henry’s providential language as part of an embrace of the theatrical in kingship, allowing him to evade difficult questions about cause by appealing to the reifying forces of the ceremonial (417).\(^\text{80}\) The providential claims themselves are numerous. Henry’s first scene does not end before he invokes providence three times: by “God’s help” they will bend France or break it (1.2.224); by “God’s grace” they will play a victory set of tennis in Paris (1.2.262); and all their hopes for conquest lie “within the will of God” (1.2.289). Parolin finds this to be an unconvincing performance, and claims of divine sanction are undercut by the first scene, conventional anti-catholic boilerplate that reveals Henry to be a useful dupe of scheming bishops. Maurice Hunt writes that the plotting bishops “accentuate...the [anachronistic] protestantism” of Henry’s godliness (187). However, they also deal a crippling blow to an uncritical

\(^{80}\) For more on Henry’s use of the ceremonial, see Zeeveld, 1–173; Hardin, 124–63; and Knapp, 115–40
acceptance of either divine or legal justification. Knowing that the Archbishop urges Henry on merely to distract him from a bill put forth by the House of Commons that would strip the church of “temporal lands” bequeathed it by “men devout” (1.1.9), it is hard to take seriously his over the top genealogizing in 1.2. Canterbury’s Salic Law speech, taken almost verbatim from Holinshed, climaxes with an assertion that Henry’s claim to the crown is “clear as is the summer’s sun” (1.2.86), a line that I would argue is written to get a laugh, and is frequently played as such in modern performances. But whether the line is funny or not, Henry’s response, “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” (1.2.96), indicates that he, at least, failed to follow the twists and turns, and thus needs to prompt Canterbury for a more direct endorsement.

Canterbury’s response to this question is perhaps even more confounding:

The sin upon my head, dread sovereign!

For in the book of Numbers is it writ,

When the man dies, let the inheritance

Descend unto the daughter. Gracious lord,

Stand for your own, unwind your bloody flag,

Look back into your mighty ancestors:

Go, my dread lord, to your great-grandsire’s tomb,

From whom you claim; invoke his warlike spirit,

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81 See, for instance, the 1989 film directed by Kenneth Branagh, in which this line is greeted by chuckles throughout the council.
And your great-uncle's, Edward the Black Prince,

Who on the French ground play'd a tragedy,

Making defeat on the full power of France,

While his most mighty father on a hill

Stood smiling to behold his lion's whelp

Forage in blood of French nobility. (1.2.97-110)

John Mattox sees the Archbishop’s willing acceptance of the sin upon his head (evoking the response of the Jews to Pilate in Matthew 27:25) as evidence of the sincerity of his argument, and therefore antecedent to a classification of Henry as a “just warrior” (Mattox 33). However, whether Henry is justified in his own mind or not, the Archbishop is rather silent on divine will. The tortuous legalese of his Salic Law arguments are more evocative of the courtroom than the cathedral, and lawyerly behavior in Shakespeare is generally *prima facie* evidence of dishonesty.82 And in this final exhortation, the Archbishop turns to the secular motivations of honor, ancestry, and filial pride (motivators that Henry himself will use both at Harfleur and Agincourt). Even the Biblical justification, on its face a hint of providential potential, lacks binding force, being drawn from the cultural law of the Old Testament, which both catholics and protestants alike in

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82 Shakespeare’s disparagement of lawyers approaches ubiquity. O. Hood Phillips tersely opens his chapter on Shakespeare’s representation of lawyers with the claim that “[t]here are no complimentary references to lawyers...in any of the plays” (Phillips 62). From a historical perspective, Rosemary O’Day, in considering the reputation of lawyers in the seventeenth century, notes that people generally accepted as a given that lawyers were “partial and corrupt” in the cause of their clients and that charges of “avarice, manipulation, and downright corruption were legion” (O’Day 14). Henry himself seems conscious of the potential for lawyerly manipulation of the truth by the Archbishop (1.2.12-16).
the seventeenth century would have considered theologically non-binding, valuable only as raw material for allegorical exegesis (Killeen 494).

Henry’s own doubts about his providential authority emerge in the play’s fourth act. In the play’s only soliloquy, the king, who moments before defended his cause and its justice to his men in disguise, offers a prayer to the “God of Battles” to give courage to his soldiers and, perhaps more importantly, to spare him from any punishment for his father’s deposition of Richard II:

O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!
I Richard's body have interred new;
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears,
Than from it issued forced drops of blood:
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a-day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do
Though all that I can do is nothing worth;
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon. (4.1.292-303)
This prayer, with its catalogue of good works, demonstrates just how much of Henry’s providential bravado is actually little more than public image construction. The desperate prayer of act four shows not a king confident in God’s help, but one who is terrified of his wrath. Tillyard, Campbell, and other early proponents of a providential reading offer explanations for why Henry is allowed to triumph despite the uncertainty of his claim to the English throne, but they do not account for Henry’s own self-consciousness about this fact. The transferring of Richard’s body to a new burial ground, the construction of chantries and the employment of the poor to ease his soul’s passage through Purgatory, even the king’s own “contrite tears” speak to his doubts about the justice of his own cause. If his father gained the crown by a “fault,” a rather startling admission, then it not only calls into question Henry’s own legitimacy but the justification of his entire invasion. “No King of England if not King of France,” Henry declares at the outset of the war (2.2.194), and logically the inverse must be true as well. The distance between the self-doubt of this moment and the certainty with which he carries himself before his army reveal Henry’s providential claims to be little more than a strategy of public performance, to set at ease every mind but his own.

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83 Paul Strohm explains the political utility of the historical Henry’s treatment of Richard II’s corpse (which Shakespeare took from Holinshed) as an act that helped to legitimize his rule by appropriating Richard as a kind of spiritual father in place of Henry IV: “Richard’s reburial may thus be seen as Henry’s exceptionally imaginative and adroit attempt to encourage and effect a form of transference—in this case, a transference of emotional affiliations from Richard’s residual aura to his own” (Strohm, Usurpation 117). For the entire analysis, see Strohm, Usurpation 101-127.
The Ascetic Hero

My argument that the renunciation of kingly providence in the Epilogue serves as an effective starting point for reading Henry’s providential rhetoric throughout the play as strategic, helps as well in an interrogation of Henry’s own renunciatory rhetoric. When the Archbishop takes upon his head any sin for the invasion in 1.2, he is nothing if not calculating; he is, in fact, working upon the king’s public image. Henry has already evinced a sensitivity to the question of guilt in an illegal war, warning Canterbury:

For God doth know how many now in health
Shall drop their blood in approbation
Of what your reverence shall incite us to.
Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword of war--
We charge you, in the name of God, take heed;
For never two such kingdoms did content
Without much fall of blood, whose guiltless drops
Are every one a woe, a sore complaint,
‘Gainst him whose wrongs gives edge unto the swords
That makes such waste in brief mortality. (1.2.18-23)

This is but one of several instances in which Henry seemingly renounces his own will. What he does, whether it is just or not, he will only do because he is incited to, not because he chooses to. The “wrongs” that give edge to those swords that will shed the
blood of innocents will belong, therefore, not to him. It is a rather extraordinary comment for a king to make, especially one as daring and courageous as Henry. However, as Bradley Greenburg notes, it fits a pattern of “self-exculpation” wherein the king repeatedly shelters himself from blame (Greenburg 184). Moments later in the scene, Henry will shift to the moral ledger of the Dauphin the “thousands” who will suffer in the coming war, who will die not as a result of Henry’s invasion but because of the Dauphin’s irreverent stubbornness. Henry’s stated belief that any victims of the sack of Harfleur will be “guilty in defense” (3.1.124), responsible for their own suffering (including rape and infanticide) if they choose go on fighting, may be justifiable by certain standards of medieval war, but his gory rhetoric lacks “a certain moral force” when uttered at the head of invading army (Greenblatt, “Bullets” 42).84

Such renunciation of agency should not be taken as emblematic of the king’s passivity, but rather, as Greenburg writes, as “a proactive, confrontational response to the exigencies of kingship” (184). Greenburg sees Henry (more or less as the king sees himself) as embodying two natures: a hero king with a catalogue of gesta (deeds, in medieval Latin, often but not always military in nature), and a saint, clothed in the trappings of divine will (186). Henry himself describes this bifurcated vision of his own humanity, albeit in generalized terms, in his speech at Harfleur:

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84 E.A. Rauchut provides the relevant legal context for Henry’s charge of guilt by defense (55-57).
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage. (3.1.2-8)

“Stillness and humility,” resonate as essentially ascetic affectations, at least in the broadest sense of the term ascetic.\(^8\) Even in a narrower, more particularly religious sense, both stillness and humility register ascetically, being often cited by monastic and eremitic writers as \textit{sine qua non} virtues of an exalted life.\(^6\) Other points in the play likewise point to the king’s emotional temperance and restraint. When the Dauphin’s ambassador timidly asks if he is safe to speak freely should his words provoke anger, Henry reassures him:

\begin{quote}
We are no tyrant, but a Christian king,
Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
As are our wretches fet’d in our prisons;
Therefore with frank and with uncurbed plainness
\end{quote}

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\(^8\) As discussed in the introduction, Patrick Olivelle defines asceticism both broadly and narrowly. Of his broad definition, he writes: “[a]s control and discipline inflicted on individual bodies and appetites, asceticism (large and loose) is perhaps the most essential ingredient of culture and social living—it is the operating system of the cultural computer” (Olivelle 28).

\(^6\) Stillness, humility, and dispassion--another proclaimed Henrician virtue--were all singled out as essential components of the eremitic system of the Patristic ascetic John Climacus, as well as other desert monks of the earliest Christian times. See Ryrie, 139-40; and 205-206; .
Tell us the Dolphin’s mind. (1.2.240-244)

Both the sentiment and the imagery are redolent of the monastic. Henry’s passions are fettered by his grace like prisoners; the word grace signals that his even-headedness is explicitly religious in origin, while the metaphorical chains and prisoners evoke bodily enclosure itself. In fact, what Henry describes here is a version of what in ascetic theology is termed dispassion, the restraint of emotions, particularly the emotions of personal involvement. According to John Climacus, dispassion, *apatheia*, is part of the ladder of divine ascent, a discipline to be ranked alongside celibacy and silence toward the exaltation of the soul (Ware 32). Like stillness and humility, dispassion exemplifies religious will suppressing bodily and psychological instinct. Dispassion, though perhaps not termed such, was also one of the branches of ascetic action that remained highly thought of well into the post-Reformation period. While Calvinist theology would not permit the idea of pure self-sufficiency or the presumptuous notion of the complete mastering of passions, protestants of the late sixteenth century did nevertheless praise the effort to bring the passions under control after the stoic model of Seneca (Aggeler 223-224). An example of late sixteenth century writing on dispassion is the Neostoical treatise *The French Academie*, penned by Huguenot Pierre de La Primauday and translated into English in 1594. De La Primauday singles out mastering of the passions as a natural outgrowth of Christian grace (careful to avoid the implication that such continence amounts to an example of salvation through works):
Our passions, properly called perturbations according to the philosophers whence all the miseries and evils of mankinde prouceed, and whereof we minde chiefly to speake...come from our will, corrupted by the provocations and allurements of the flesh, and which wholly resiste the divine nature of the reasonauble parte of the soule, fastening it to the bodie with the naile of pleasure...and although passion be contrarie to reason...yet reason, by the meanes of Godes grace, can both easily constraine, master, and compel all passions in such sort, that they shall take no effect. (La Primauday 31-32).

Henry, after Primauday’s model, asserts that his passions are “subject” to Grace; that is, subsumed beneath the salutatory faith of a “Christian king.” That Henry shortly loses his temper after the revelation of the Dauphin’s tennis balls casts doubt on the completeness of his dispassion; though such doubts as to veracity do not abrogate the role of dispassion in his constructed public image. These ascetic virtues, however, serve an explicitly political purpose, in much the same way as has been already discussed above. Henry is not dispassionate in seclusion as part of a program of imitatio Christi; rather, he proclaims his dispassion in audience with his council and the delegate of his enemy. His purpose in doing so is as he himself says: to demonstrate that he is no tyrant, that the cool and temperate winds of grace keep the temptations to exploit power in check. In other words, to shield himself from the type of charges that terrorized and ultimately destroyed the last two kings. It is
useful to recall here Gavin Flood’s thesis that asceticism is always essentially performative, “enacted within a community and tradition,” but with the purpose of appropriating that tradition toward subjective ends (7). Henry, in performing both the suppression of his own will and the restraint of his passions, is exploiting tradition as part of his project of legitimization. Hal learned this strategy early on, as demonstrated in his most famous act of renunciation in 2 Henry IV:

I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dream'd of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swell'd, so old and so profane;
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace;
Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men.
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest:
Presume not that I am the thing I was;
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turned away my former self;
So will I those that kept me company.
When thou dost hear I am as I have been,
Approach me, and thou shalt be as thou wast,
The tutor and the feeder of my riots:
Till then, I banish thee, on pain of death,
As I have done the rest of my misleaders,
Not to come near our person by ten mile. (5.5.45-63)

The most important aspect of this renunciation is its context. Hal waits for the moment of maximal political benefit to renounce Falstaff and the bodily excesses for which he is a walking allegory. The coronation procession is not simply a public event, it is the supreme theater of royal ceremony, the moment during which Hal’s position in the public consciousness cannot be more prominent. Hal has already performed various rehearsals of this renunciation over the course of two plays (the play within the play, the flinging away of the sack at Shrewsbury, the farewell to Falstaff’s “corps” after his fight with Douglas), but only in this final, theatrical gesture does he reap the political rewards of renunciation. The general renunciatory speech-act of Falstaff’s banishment contains within it specifically ascetic commands and declarations: most obviously that Falstaff “leave gormandizing” and make his swollen body less.87 But Hal’s claim that he has “turned away” from his youthful errancy also evokes, intentionally or not, ascetic tradition and the refashioning of the self “away from old habits and defilements” (Flood 161).88 Hal is no longer the thing he was, a sentiment that speaks to the fulfillment of

87 Kristin Poole argues that Falstaff’s obesity is characteristic of anti-Puritan satire, particularly that found in the Anti-Marpilate pamphlets and plays (16-44).
88 Richard Valantasis provides a general definition of asceticism as the refashioning of the self: “Asceticism may be defined as performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, enable different social relations, and to create a new identity” (548).
ascetic aspiration. The new king adopts the mantle of the born again or, perhaps, the convert; as D.J. Palmer notes, the renunciation of Falstaff fits St. Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians to put aside the old man and embrace the new (Palmer 12). However, the turn away in this instance is nakedly political, an act of public self-legitimation. That this renunciatory performance has its desired effect is attested to by the conversation between Fluellen and Gower in *Henry V*:

Fluellen: If you mark Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well; for there is figures in all things. Alexander, God knows, and you know, in his rages, and his furies, and his wraths, and his cholers, and his moods, and his displeasures, and his indignations, and also being a little intoxicates in his prains, did, in his ales and his angers, look you, kill his best friend, Cleitus.

Gower: Our king is not like him in that: he never killed any of his friends.

Fluellen: It is not well done, mark you now take the tales out of my mouth, ere it is made and finished. I speak but in the figures and comparisons of it: as Alexander killed his friend Cleitus, being in his ales and his cups; so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turned away the fat knight with the great belly-doublet: he was full of jests, and gipes, and knaveries, and mocks; I have forgot his name.

Gower: Sir John Falstaff. (4.7.31-51)
Not only is Henry’s renunciation of Falstaff remembered by Fluellen and Gower, but it has become, in effect, part of the king’s legend, one that in Fluellen’s somewhat dizzying inverse logic connects him to that most legendary of monarchs, Alexander the Great. The act has secured Henry’s place in history, while Falstaff’s name is tellingly forgotten by Fluellen. In *1 Henry IV*, Hal promised that his reputational resurrection would be activated by the killing of Hotspur in battle (“I will redeem all this on Percy’s head”) (3.2.132); however, it is not valor but restraint, silence, dispassion, humility and the nexus of ascetic virtues that liberate Henry V from the shadow of Eastcheap. The renunciation of Falstaff and the refashioning of his self become the great *gesta* of Hal’s personal history, providing the reputational and political capital to pursue the foreign adventure that perpetually eluded his embattled father.

But unlike a monastic, Henry confines these virtues of stillness, humility, and dispassion to their proper sphere: peace. Temperance must be laid aside to “imitate the action of the tiger” (3.1.6). War allows, even necessitates, the purposeful embrace of anger and violence: thus his ability before the gates of Harfleur not only to exhort his men to violence, but to threaten its residents with the most horrific atrocities. Again, at Agincourt, Henry finds opportunity to vent the ruthlessness he is so proud to contain by ordering the execution of all his French prisoners. The battlefield is its own kind of stage, with its own active and verbal lexicon of authority and legitimation. Henry is adept at playing both monk and soldier, and each guise forms an essential part of his kingly
identity. Still, even before the battle of Agincourt, in his most famous performance of all, Henry sounds a quasi-ascetic note:

God’s will, I pray thee wish not one man more.

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,

Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;

It yearns me not if men my garments wear;

Such outward things dwell not in my desires. (4.3.23-27)

By renouncing attachment to gold, food, clothing, and any “outward things,” (a fairly precise translation of the Boethian externa bona) Henry employs ascetical discourse; however, it is a strikingly secular version of asceticism, for in this instance the immaterial thing that is sought in place of the material is not religious exaltation, but militaristic honor. The immaterial nature of honor has already been discoursed upon in the Tetralogy by Falstaff in 1H4: honor cannot heal the sick, nor be seen, nor felt. It is “air, a trim reckoning” (1H4 5.1.135). In Shakespeare’s most dramatic theater of war on the field of Agincourt, honor, rather than religion, becomes the antithesis to the tyrant’s greed. In thus privileging it, Henry positions himself as doubly removed from tyranny, not only Christian but honorable, following two indices of conduct that reject

89 The idea that the pursuit of immaterial honor can dampen the need for the necessities of the flesh can be identified elsewhere in Shakespeare. In Antony and Cleopatra, Antony is said to have been able to survive famine conditions after a disastrous military defeat by drinking horse urine—“the stale of horses”—and “with patience more than savages could suffer” eating “the roughest berry and the rudest hedge” (1.4.60-64). Sexual desire can also wane in the single-minded soldier. Lady Percy complains in 1 Henry IV that Hotspur has made her “a banish’d woman” from his bed, and given away her sexual rights to thoughts of the battlefield (2.3.39-50). Henry might even sound a note of this Hotspurian celibacy when he tells Katherine that he is merely a “plain soldier” with no gift for wooing (Henry V 5.1.131-165).
materiality. Honor may be mundane, and its pursuit may even be antithetical to the grace that holds sway over Henry’s passions—Henry himself admits the possibility that it is a “sin” to covet it (4.3.28)—but as an abstraction it functions well enough as a stand-in for the spiritual in the typical oppositional dialectic that defines asceticism. The message, believable or not, is that no such king could possibly pursue war out of self-interest. No rhetorical moment in Shakespeare demonstrates more effectively the flexibility of ascetic language across fields and power systems. That the play casts doubts on Henry’s authenticity only reinforces the fact that such discourse from a king is almost invariably political: not a protestation of faith or scruples, but a strategy whose explicit purpose is the exercise of the very power it seems to negate.
CONCLUSION

Whether as embodied on the stage, as seen in history, or as imagined in the mind, ascetic acts had the power to affect more than the spiritual state of their practitioners in Tudor and Stuart culture; such acts very often (invariably, as theorists such as Flood argue) were directed outwards, to an audience whose responses the practitioner hoped to shape or direct. A persecuted catholic, either in prison or in the theater of the gallows, could embrace some of the most extreme manifestations of asceticism as a means of resistance. So too could women, caught in the machinery of patriarchal culture, wield renunciant vows as a shield against encroachments on their subjectivity. Even monarchs, speaking from the apex of vertical hierarchy, could manipulate ascetic discourse for various ends. Ultimately, asceticism, like any type of discourse, has the flexibility granted to it by the shifting social positions of its actors and audience.

The Limitations of the Study

It is common in the social sciences to conclude a dissertation with a confession of the study’s limitations. While such apologia is not customary in the humanities, I wish nevertheless to discuss some areas for further inquiry which the exigencies of circumstance kept out of the current work.
The most obvious omission is a chapter on revenge tragedy, a genre long recognized for its utilization of *memento mori* imagery and *de contemptu mundi* philosophical conceits. Such vestiges of cultural asceticism provide a rhetorical and ideological framework for revengers to strike at tyrannical authority. Both *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* utilize the subversive potential of ascetic utterances. Hamlet, for example, is not actually able to kill Claudius until after his apotheosis in the graveyard. This scene dramatizes the moment in which the revenger grasps the rationalization that will allow him to act against a sitting king. The highly traditional *ubi sunt* poem elicited by the sight of Yorick’s skull very quickly shifts to a more directly relevant subject: the transience of royal power itself. Yorick’s skull becomes Caesar’s and Alexander’s, and Hamlet’s realization that “[i]mperious Cæsar, dead and turn’d to clay/ Might stop a hole to keep the wind away,” is followed immediately by the entrance of Claudius, whose political authority, in that moment, has been stripped of all significance through its juxtaposition with the image of ancient kings stopping beer barrels (5.1.213-214).

Meanwhile, the action of *The Spanish Tragedy*, as only gestured toward in the third chapter of this study, is driven by a central figure who is empowered by an ascetic posture that combines Boethian *contemptus mundi* with the self-mutilation of pagan Stoicism.

Another Shakespearean figure worth considering through the lens of my argument is the civil renunciant: he who renounces his civic or national identity as a means of freeing himself from forms of restraint or domination demanded by law or
custom. For instance, in *Timon of Athens*, Timon’s renunciation of Athenian society (and his descent into misanthropy) severs his ties with the debt-based economy in which he finds himself ensnared. Debt functions in the play as materialistic proxy for the Boethian wheel of fortune that the poet and painter discuss in the play’s opening. In the wilderness beyond the walls of the city, Timon—“no idle votarist”—is empowered to resist and strike back at fortune, using his serendipitous gold not to reenter the Athenian economy, but to help Alcibiades raze the city and massacre his bondholders (4.3.27). Coriolanus, like Timon, plots the destruction of his native city after he is shamed by the demands of his countrymen. Unwilling to subject his body to the gaze of the plebeians, his renunciation of Rome (which follows the pronunciation of his banishment) liberates him from the necessities of political compromise and allows him to pursue an existence of purely personal agency. His renunciant fantasy of becoming a “lonely dragon” in his fen, cut off from all social connections, ultimately goes unfulfilled. Like Timon, his final fate reifies the political authority of Rome, mirroring Elizabethan orthodoxy about the dangers of antisocial behavior and misanthropy, as well as evoking actual historical exiles such as Edmund Campion, whose death at the hands of the Elizabethan state similarly confirmed the structural and authoritative integrity of the regime.

Shakespearean comedy has been discussed in this study with a particular emphasis on celibacy, but the discourse of renunciation registers in other ways in the genre. *Love’s Labours Lost* presents one of the most concrete examples of ascetic
renunciation in Shakespeare, and the King of Navarre’s belief that renouncing sex and marriage offers a vehicle to fame through knowledge presents an interesting case of the secular rewards of renunciation. As You Like It, meanwhile, presents renunciation of court life as politically empowering for Duke Senior and his loyal men in the forest of Arden. The woods to which they have been banished are “more free” than the court with its litany of worldly vanities and its poisonous currents of flattery (2.1.1-18). The pastoral mode offers an effective framework to engage in such communal renunciation, building on a tradition of anti-court satire found in works such as John Skelton’s Bowge of Court and Spenser’s Colin Clout’s Come Home Againe.

King Lear, with its recurring references to divestment and nothingness, would likewise seem potentially relevant to a discussion of ascetic renunciation in Shakespeare. On the heath, stripped of all his earthly authority and material possessions, Lear embraces fully the buffeting winds of fortune’s storm through literal divestment. His exhortation—“Pour on, I will endure”—sounds a note of ascetic patience in the face of suffering. Finally, his imaginative transformation of imprisonment with Cordelia to an ideal life of communal claustration, in which father and daughter are protected from worldly vanities and supported by their mutual comfort, evokes similar responses to imprisonment discussed above in Chapter 2:

Come, let’s away to prison:

We two alone will sing like birds I’th’cage;

When thou dost ask my blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we’ll talk with them too—
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out—
And take upon us the mystery of things
As if we were God’s spies; and we’ll wear out
In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by th’moon. (5.3.8-18)

Lear and Cordelia will “live, and pray, and sing,” and in doing so embrace the “mystery of things,” while forsaking the vain intrigues of public life. As with Palamon and Arcite, the echo of the monastic ideal is readily apparent.

The topic of asceticism in early modern literature need not be limited to Shakespeare or the stage. No one has yet, to my knowledge, undertaken a study of asceticism in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, always fertile ground for theologically centered criticism. *The Faerie Queene* shares with the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 (its most immediate doctrinal context) a statist agenda in which devotion to nation and devotion to the church are harmoniously aligned, and in which service to the state is extolled as divine “vocation” in the Calvinist sense. Calvin rejected the notion that monasticism represented a higher Christian calling, averring that true holiness lay in men fulfilling the worldly and productive vocation to which God had assigned them in life. Calvin’s holy
vocation takes the form of heroic action in Spenser’s epic. In Book VI, for instance, the ransacking of the cloister by the Blatant Beast not only evokes England’s ruined monasteries that still stood as striking symbols of catholic presumption, but demonstrates the failure of ascetic renunciation to act as a true shield against worldly corruption. In Book I, meanwhile, Despair, a figure whose impoverished appearance exaggerates monkish penury, tempts The Redcrosse Knight to succumb to the easy answer of ascetic renunciation and *contemptus mundi*. The figure of Despair demonstrates the obvious danger of an ascetic theology being followed out to its logical extreme, for those too ready to accept the meaninglessness of the material world and too eager to reject the efficacy of human action would have no reason to shun suicide, which becomes the ultimate gesture of cleansing self-flagellation. The victories of Redcrosse and Sir Calidore, it could be argued, establish a new Christian paradigm in which service to the state and the protection of established political hierarchies are cardinal religious virtues

Despite this volume’s limitations, I believe that I have demonstrated how early modern representations of ascetic renunciation almost invariably intersect with the sphere of the political and the dynamics of power and subjugation. That there is room to expand the scope of this inquiry cannot be doubted, and is unsurprising given the complexity and variety of the early modern canon. Pushing toward the liminal edge of the period, I will give to *Paradise Lost* the final, prospective word on the representation of asceticism in early modern literature. Eve, though she lives in Paradise, is also a
cloistered figure, for the space in which she is given license to roam is supervised both by God and Adam. When Adam grants her leave to venture out alone, her close claustration is violated by an encounter with Satan, who tempts her to disobey the ascetic vow to which she is sworn: abstention from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. When she finally falls, Milton describes her as lost in the sensual enjoyment of her transgression:

  Greedily she engorged without restraint
  And knew not eating death. (9.791-792, emphasis mine)

For Milton, the idea of restraint distinguishes the sinless human being of the prelapsarian moment from the fallen creature she would become. It is not that Adam and Eve remain sinless by exercising restraint, but that restraint itself is unnecessary until the moment the fruit touches Eve’s lips. Adam and Eve’s failure, it could be said, creates the need for an ascetic impulse to begin with, putting humankind at war with the instinctive, bodily urges that Christianity, whether catholic or protestant, cautions us to control.

The breadth and temporal scope of these potential avenues of inquiry provide evidence for the enduring imaginative and rhetorical power of ascetic discourse. In all likelihood, asceticism, whether labeled as such or not, will never cease to be a topic of inquiry and controversy precisely because culture, which is to say any kind of social living, ultimately is not possible without at least some degree of renunciation. In
Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud offers a formulation that speaks to this universality:

Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life....[I]t is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression, or some other means?) of powerful instinct. (84)

This universal renunciation of instinct, which to Freud enables civilization itself, makes ascetics of us all.
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