William Shakespeare, Playwright, Poet, Actor

23 April 1616

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 (baptized 26 April and therefore probably born 23 April) in Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Stratford was fortunate in having an endowed grammar school, and since young Shakespeare was the son of the town bailiff, it can safely be assumed that he attended it, and there learned to read and write both English and Latin.
When he was 18, he married a Stratford girl, Anne Hathaway, who bore him a son and two daughters. The son died aged eleven, but the two daughters married and survived their father. Shakespeare moved to London and by the time he was 20 was beginning to be known as a successful playwright. He achieved fame and prosperity as a member of London's leading theatrical company. He wrote a book of 154 Sonnets, two long narrative poems, and upwards of three dozen plays. In about 1611, he retired to his native Stratford, died 23 April 1616, and was buried in his parish church.

Some writers have argued that the works attributed to Shakespeare were really written by someone else and published under his name, with his consent. I am going to ignore their arguments here, since they are nothing to our present purpose. We have (1) the actor from Stratford, and (2) the writer. Today we commemorate the writer. If the two are not the same, then in commemorating the writer we have his name and most of the details of his life wrong, but that does not affect our response to his writings.

In what follows, I shall rely heavily on lectures by and conversations with the late Professor Nevill K. Coghill, of Exeter and Merton Colleges, Oxford, and on his published work, especially three articles: (1) "The Basis of Shakespearian Comedy," found in the 1950 volume of Essays And Studies; (2) "Comic Form in 'Measure for Measure'", found in the 1955 volume of the Shakespeare Survey; and (3) "In Retrospect", found in the 1962 volume of the Stratford Papers on Shakespeare. (That's Stratford, Ontario.) Whatever of merit is found in what follows is due to Professor Coghill's work. Anything silly is probably the result of my having misunderstood him.

I hope to show that in his plays Shakespeare had some Christian things to say, and that our understanding of the plays will be significantly impoverished if their Christian component is overlooked. This is not to say that the plays are really sermons with a thin sugar-coating of narrative. One reader has complained that I take a story rich in ambiguities and a multitude of meanings, and reduce it to a thin, bare moral tale. But I don't. I think that a good story typically has a wealth of meaning and will reward more than one approach. If someone wants the pleasure provided by a completely different interpretation, I do not try to discourage him. I say, "Why not have both?"

In what follows, I restrict myself to discussing Shakespeare's comedies. Some readers will ask whether Shakespeare offers a Christian perspective in his other plays. I mention two books that may help to answer this.

Peter J Leithart, Brightest Heaven of Invention: A Christian Guide to Six Shakespeare Plays. (Canon Press, Moscow, Idaho, 1996) 288pp $15.50 pb. Publisher canon@moscow.com, Tel 1-800-488-2034. The plays are Henry V, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth, The Taming of the Shrew, and Much Ado About Nothing. The book is intended for a high-school course. The publishing house is Calvinist. I have not seen the book.

Roy W Battenhouse,Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises. (Indiana UP, 1969) 466pp $15 hc. I have briefly looked through the book in someone else's library. It looks a bit technical, but worth reading, and definitely worth reading if one is going to be teaching English courses that include Shakespeare.

I shall confine myself to discussing three plays, all comedies, written at seven-year intervals, in about 1597, 1604, and 1611 respectively. They are:

- The Merchant of Venice
- Measure for Measure
- The Tempest

Prayer (traditional language)
Almighty God, who by thy Holy Spirit hast given diverse gifts to thy servants: We praise thee for the gift that thou didst give to thy servant William Shakespeare of proclaiming truths through poetry and drama, for our instruction and delight, and for thy glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Prayer (contemporary language)
Almighty God, who by your Holy Spirit have given varying gifts to your servants: We praise you for the gift that you gave to your servant William Shakespeare of proclaiming truths through poetry and drama, for our instruction and delight, and for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

1. The Merchant Of Venice

Antonio, a wealthy merchant and a generous man, has a friend, Bassanio, likeable but reckless, and now penniless. Bassanio loves a beautiful lady, Portia, who lives at a distance. He wishes to woo and win her, but lacks travel money, and proposes to borrow from Antonio.
Unfortunately, all of Antonio's money is invested in merchandise now on ships at sea. When the ships return in two months with the profits from the voyage, then Antonio will have an abundance of money, but in the meantime he cannot help Bassanio, who does not feel that he can afford to wait two months. Antonio therefore proposes to go to Shylock the Jew and borrow the money from him.

[It should be explained that the common view among Christians in Shakespeare's time was that it was immoral to charge interest on a loan. Jews are allowed by the Law of Moses to charge interest when lending to Gentiles (see Deuteronomy 23:19f), and in many countries found that this was almost the only way of making a living that was open to them.]
Shylock says (I paraphrase): Why should I lend you money? You are no friend of mine. I know that you do not like Jews. You spat at me yesterday.
Antonio replies: I am not asking for a favor. This is strictly a business proposition. Three thousand ducats for three months, at your usual rate of interest.
Shylock says: Forget the interest. Instead, agree that if you fail to repay me in full by the deadline, I am entitled to one pound of your flesh, said pound to be selected by me. Why? Call it a whim. Take it or leave it!
Antonio takes the loan, and soon Bassanio is off to Belmont, the country estate of his lady. She loves him, and readily agrees to marry him. Her maid Nerissa likewise agrees to marry his servant Gratiano. Each woman gives her suitor a ring as a token of her love.
Meanwhile, back in Venice, Shylock's daughter Jessica, his only living relative (her mother is dead), falls in love with a Christian youth called Lorenzo, and he with her. She becomes a Christian, and the two of them elope together, with Antonio's assistance. Shylock is furious, and when he hears that Antonio's ships have been wrecked and that Antonio is bankrupt, he determines to exact vengeance.
Antonio sends a letter to Bassanio at Belmont, telling him what has happened. Portia gives her new husband money and sends him back to Venice in haste to rescue his friend, telling him to spare no expense. Bassanio dashes off, and Portia determines on further action. She and her maid Nerissa disguise themselves as men, and travel to Venice to take a direct hand in the proceedings.
In Venice, the court assembles, with the Duke of Venice on the bench. Shylock presents his claim. Portia and Nerissa enter, disguised as a learned Doctor of Laws and his clerk, and offer their services on behalf of Antonio.
Portia says: Here is the money, three times the money, ten times the money. Take it and tell me to tear up the contract.
Shylock says: The deadline is past. I am entitled to one pound of flesh. I want what the contract entitles me to, neither more nor less nor other.
Bassanio says: What is the problem? No one here (with the one obvious exception) wants to see Antonio hurt. So, let us just throw Shylock out of court, and all go home and forget the whole thing.
Portia says: Impossible. You cannot simply ignore the law when its strict application is to your disadvantage. That is the same as having no law at all.
Shylock says: Well spoken. You are a wise and upright judge.
Portia says: It is for you to be merciful.
Shylock says: I do not find anything in the contract obliging me to be merciful.
Portia says: Mercy is not something you show because a contract requires it. It is an act of generosity, done when you do not have to do it. (Shakespeare's words follow:)

"The quality of mercy is not strained.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed.
It blesseth him who gives, and him who takes...
It is an attribute to God Himself;
and earthly power doth then show likest God's
when mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
though justice be thy plea, consider this,
that, in the course of justice, none of us
should see salvation. We do pray for mercy;
and that same prayer doth teach us all to render
the deeds of mercy." (IV,i,184-202)

Shylock says: You are wasting your time. I want what my contract entitles me to.
Portia says: Very well. Your contract entitles you to one pound of flesh, but not to a single drop of blood. So start cutting, but if you shed any blood, your life is forfeit. There is more. You have conspired against the life of a citizen. Your wealth is forfeit to Antonio and to the state, and your life lies at the mercy of the Duke.
The Duke and Antonio agree to spare Antonio's life, and to let him keep half his goods, with the other half going to Jessica and her new husband, on condition that Shylock put his daughter back into his will, and that he become a Christian. The Duke agrees, and Shylock is led off to be baptized.
Bassanio is profuse in his thanks to the "Doctor of Laws," and promises to pay whatever he is asked.
Portia asks for the ring that Bassanio is wearing. Bassanio is dismayed, but trapped. Nerissa similarly acquires Gratiano's ring. They depart.
The scene shifts to Belmont, where Lorenzo and Jessica have sought refuge. We see them in the garden, where Lorenzo says (Shakespeare's words here):

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night
become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
but in his motion like an angel sings,
still choiring to the young-eyed cherubim.
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
but while this muddy vesture of decay
doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it." (V,i,54-65)

Soon Portia and Nerissa join them, having rushed back from Venice ahead of their husbands. The husbands duly arrive, and their wives first give them a hard time for losing the rings, and then produce the rings and reveal their part in saving Antonio's life.

Bassanio and Portia embrace. Gratiano and Nerissa embrace. Lorenzo and Jessica embrace. Antonio smiles and nods. Everyone is happy. The End.

Now, how are we to interpret this play? If we are going to direct a production of it, how do we approach it?
One way is to treat it straightforwardly as an anti-Jewish play. There is precedent for this. We know that some early productions had Shylock as a red-haired hunchback, which is the way that Judas Iscariot usually appeared on stage. Villain plots to kill hero, villain is foiled. Happy ending. Where is the problem? The problem is that Shakespeare does not treat Shylock as simply evil for evil's sake. He makes him human. He has good reason to resent Antonio. He says:

"You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog,
and spit upon my Jewish gabardine,
and all for use of that which is mine own." (I,iii,112ff)

"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,
senses, affections, passions?
fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons,
subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer,
as a Christian is?
If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (III,i,50ff)

Another wrong is suddenly added to the list. His daughter is all he has in the world, and she is talked into running off. He hears a report that, while traveling through a distant city, she has spied a monkey that she fancied, and used a ring to purchase it. His comment: "That ring--I had it of Leah (his wife) when I was a bachelor. I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys!" To him, the ring stands for the bonds of affection and loyalty that ought to unite a family. It stands for what he has received from the past. But thanks to Antonio and his friends, his only daughter (like Esau trading his birthright for a mess of pottage--Genesis 25:29-34) has learned to despise her heritage and to throw it away for a trifle. And he is cut to the heart.
These scenes simply do not fit comfortably into an anti-Jewish play. It might be well to omit them. But the need to ignore part of your data to save your theory is always a danger sign.
Approach Number Two is to treat this as an anti-Christian play. Shylock is despised and persecuted for being a money-lender. But the Christians are happy to have him around when they need to borrow money. It is when the time comes to repay that they complain. When the law appears to be on the side of the Jew, Portia is eloquent in speaking of the beauties of Mercy, but when the shoe is on the other foot, it is cold mercy indeed that she and the other Christians have to offer Shylock. The play is full of passing references to the hypocrisy of Christians. Bassanio says in court, that he would gladly sacrifice his own life to save Antonio's. So? He has a dagger in his belt, and he is only a few feet away from Shylock. He has only to draw his blade, stab Shylock, and hang for murder. Again, as Shylock points out, the Christians of Venice have slaves. If they are so enamored of mercy, why do they not free their slaves? Again, we may contrast Portia's courtesy to her unsuccessful suitors with her ridicule of them behind their backs. And so on. Yes, it would be a pleasure to do this as an anti-Christian play.
But with this interpretation, the whole final scene at Belmont is a problem. It is full of moonlight and roses, and lovers reunited. Everything about it moves us to rejoice with the newly-wedded. If we are full of indignation at the cruel way that the Christians treated Shylock in the preceding scene, how do we react to the final scene? Do we simply wipe our memories clean and rejoice in the happiness of the oppressors? Or are we supposed to boo at them throughout the garden scene, and take the whole thing as ironical? Once again, the scene simply does not fit. Perhaps we should cut it altogether....
But there is a Third Approach. Throughout the play, but particularly in the trial scene, we are told that the issue is one of Justice and Mercy.
Shylock, the Jew, is the spokesman for Justice. He will have what is his by right, under the law, under the terms of the contract that Antonio freely negotiated with him, under the terms of the natural right of a wronged man to seek a just retribution for his wrongs. Portia, the Christian, is the spokesman for Mercy, freely given, not because of the worthiness of the receiver, but because of the generosity of the giver.
Now, every educated Christian in Shakespeare's day knew that Justice and Mercy are both attributes of God, and every educated Christian had been taught to associate the Old Testament with Justice and the New with Mercy. The word of God to His people through Moses was: "Keep my laws and you will live. Break them and you will die." (See Deuteronomy 30:15-20) The problem was that no one kept the Law perfectly. (See Psalm 19:12) But the word of God in Christ is: "Be of good cheer--your sins are forgiven." (See M 9:2 = P 2:5 = L 5:20) The epistles of Paul are full of passages that contrast Law and Grace, and that associate Law with the Synagogue and Grace with the Church.
But Justice and Mercy are not simply contrasted--they are reconciled. In the poem Piers Plowman, written in the late 1300's, the issue of God's pardoning the sinner while still satisfying the demands of Justice is argued out (Passus B XVIII) by four characters known as the four Daughters of God: Mercy and Peace on the one side, and Truth and Righteousness on the other. They get their names from Psalm 85:10. "Mercy and truth will meet; peace and righteousness will kiss." The same four characters appear in The Castle of Perseverance, a play written in the early 1400's. In the play, Man has died, and his soul is on trial. Righteousness and Truth demand his damnation as the only just verdict. Mercy and Peace plead the Incarnation, and Man is accordingly saved.
Thus, an audience in Shakespeare's day would be familiar with the idea that Justice and Mercy are both good things, both attributes of God, and that the apparent conflict between them finds its resolution in the Incarnation, in the perfect obedience of the Son which satisfies the demands of Justice, in the blood of Christ which cleanses us from sin. They would be open to the idea that Shylock's insistence on Justice is a commitment to a good thing, and is to be honored as far as it goes, but that it is defective in that it fails to take one thing into account--the blood of Christ. And they would be familiar with the presentation of these ideas in the form of a trial, with prosecution and defense. And in the end, Justice is not simply put out of court. It is reconciled with Mercy. Shylock is to be baptized. The Law itself is to be made Christian. Thus, the final scene in the garden at Belmont is simply

the triumphant conclusion of the trial scene. Here we see Jessica and Lorenzo, Jew and Christian, united in love and marriage, and talking about music, Shakespeare's customary symbol of harmony.
Some readers may object that they do not see any reconciliation in the Trial Scene. Shylock is not brought into harmony with the Christians. He is simply converted at sword-point. Back of this objection, in most cases, is the notion that any religion is acceptable to God if sincerely held. The Elizabethans did not, for the most part, think in those terms. They interpreted quite straightforwardly the words of Christ: "No one comes to the Father except through Me." (J 14:5) Some theologians of the period may argue for an implicit acceptance of the Gospel, but the popular view is that Shylock baptized has some sort of chance of salvation, while Shylock unbaptized has none at all. We may be uncomfortable at the idea of Shylock's distress at being forced to give up his unfamiliar way of life, but what an Elizabethan playgoer would see is that Shylock has endeavored to take away Antonio's earthly life, and that Antonio has responded by doing all in his power to bestow on Shylock life and joy unending.
At this point the reader may be restless and want to ask: "Are you saying that the characters in the play are not to be thought of as real persons at all, but only as symbols, as stand-ins for various theological concepts? Ought Antonio helpy the audience out by wearing a placard reading, Mankind, while Shylock is labelled Justice, and Portia Mercy, and the Duke God? If so, then what is on Nerissa's placard, or on Bassanio's, or Jessica's, or Lorenzo's?"
Rest assured that I am not arguing for the play as an allegory in that sense. It is not that Justice and Mercy are acting out their functions on stage unded the aliases of Shylock and Portia, but that Shylock and Portia, considered as actual humans, by being what they are, exemplify the themes of Justice and Mercy and their respective claims.

2. Measure For Measure

The Duke of Vienna has long neglected to punish lawbreakers as they deserve. He decides that the laws must be enforced, lest they fall into contempt. However, his wrath and judgement, visited directly upon his erring subjects, would be too terrible for them to bear. He accordingly announces his intention of making a journey to a far country, and appoints Angelo, a man of good reputation, to serve as his deputy in his absence. In fact, having left, he immediately returns disguised as a friar (with a hood or cowl conveniently covering his face throughout), so that he can see how his orders are carried out.
One of the laws of the city prescribes the death penalty for any man who has sex with a woman not his wife, and Angelo promptly passes sentence of death on Claudio, a young man who has gotten his betrothed, Juliet, with child. Claudio's only hope is that his sister, Isabella, might plead for his life and persuade Angelo to relent. Isabella has just entered a convent, but has not yet taken vows. Lucio, a bystander, goes to the convent with Angelo's message, and Isabella, though she disaproves of her brother's sin, agrees to make the effort to save his life. She goes to Angelo and, hesitantly at first, then with increasing warmth, urges him to pardon Claudio. In words remniscent of Portia's speech to Shylock in the Merchant Of Venice, she says:

No ceremony that to great ones 'longs,
not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
the marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
become them with one half so good a grace
as mercy does. (II, ii, 59-63)

Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once;
and He that might the vantage best have took
found out the remedy. How would you be,
if He, which is the top of judgement, should
but judge you as you are? O, think on that;
and mercy then will breathe within your lips
like man new made. (II,ii,73-79)

Go to your bosom;
knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
that's like my brother's fault; if it confess
a natural guiltiness such as is his,
let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
against my brother's life. (II,ii,136-41)

(cf. John 8:7; Matthew 7:1; Romans 3:23; 5:8; Psalm 130:3)

Angelo says that he will think it over, and tells Isabella to return the next morning. Left alone, he reveals that he has been smitten with Isabella's charms, and is obsessed by the desire to possess her. The next morning, he tells her that he will spare her brother's life in exchange for her sexual favors. She replies, "I would not buy my own life at that price, and I will not buy my brother's." She then goes to report to her brother. She might have told him simply that Angelo refused, but she tells him the whole truth, that she could have saved him only by yielding her virginity. Claudio is at first horrified, and says firmly, "Thou shalt not do it!" However, after a bit he loses his courage, and hysterically begs her to save him, at whatever cost. She responds by denouncing him as a shameful coward, an unnatural brother. (This has been thought by some readers to be heartless and hideous cruelty to a man condemned to death. Such readers need to remember the numerous movies in which several men are trapped in a situation where they are likely to be killed. One of them breaks down and starts shrieking and babbling. Another man slaps his face and says, "Snap out of it!" The first man, suddenly calm, says, "Thanks! I needed that." This, in effect, is what Isabella does for her brother. He had momentarily fallen apart, but her firmness brings him back to the moral principles which he shares with her. His moment of panic is over, and he apologizes and prepares to face death like a man. However, at this point, the Friar (that is, the Duke), who is present to give spiritual counsel to the prisoners, intervenes. He tells Isabella that Angelo was betrothed to a woman named Mariana, but repudiated her when the ship carrying her dowry sank and left her penniless. Mariana still loves Angelo and wishes to marry him. The Duke tells Isabella to agree to Angelo's offer, and to a night meeting. Mariana will take her place, and Angelo will be tricked into marrying the woman he is morally bound to marry.
We next see the "Friar" on the street with Lucio, who repeats to the Friar various bits of slanderous gossip about the Duke. However, from certain of Lucio's remarks, too often overlooked (III,ii,91-101,161), we see that he knows that the Duke, instead of

going abroad as he had announced, has disguised himself as a beggar, and it seems likely that he realizes that the Friar and the Duke are one and the same.
Angelo has sex with Mariana, thinking her to be Isabella. But now he sinks lower. Fearing for his own safety, he breaks his promise and orders Claudio's death. He is aware of his own progressive moral deterioration, and expresses it in the lines,

Alack, when once our grace we have forgot,
nothing goes right: we would, and we would not. (IV,iv,36)

(cf. Romans 7:15,19; Galatians 5:17)

The Friar persuades the prison warden to fake the execution, deceiving both Angelo and Isabella. However, it is announced that the Duke is about to return and is approaching the city. The Friar tells Isabella and Mariana to accuse Angelo before the Duke.
The final scene is at the gate of the city. The Duke enters in state, and offers a hearing to all who seek justice. Isabella and Mariana step forward, but the Duke replies that Angelo is above suspicion, and retires, leaving Angelo to deal with the matter. Angelo learns that a Friar has been stirring up trouble, and orders that the Friar be arrested and produced. The Friar is produced, and is slandered by Lucio. who pulls back his cowl. All are stunned to see that the Friar is really the Duke. Angelo repents, confesses his sin, and acknowledges that he deserves death. The Duke orders that he first be married to Mariana, and this is done. He then orders Angelo to be beheaded on the same block where Claudio lost his head. Mariana, who loves him, begs the Duke for his life. The Duke refuses. Isabella after a moment of hesitation, kneels beside Mariana and asks mercy for Angelo, even though he has killed her brother. The Duke pardons Angelo, and produces Claudio alive. Lucio, who has had a child with a prostitute, Kate Keepdown, and has promised her marriage, is compelled to keep his promise. Finally, the Duke asks Isabella to marry him. So we have Lucio married to Kate Keepdown, Angelo married to Mariana, Claudio married to Juliet, and the Duke married to Isabella. Four marriages, and with that the play ends.

What are we to make of this play? Some critics take it to mean simply that sexual morality is a sham, and that those who preach it are of all mankind the least likely to practice it. On their view, Angelo (obviously), the Duke (sneaking around scheming and rearranging people's lives behind their backs), Isabella (who claims to love her brother, but will not do a little thing like having sex with Angelo to save his life), Mariana (who helps to deceive the man she claims to love), are all a pack of disgusting hypocrites. Lucio, who professes no morality at all, is the only likeable one in the lot.
This interpretation runs into difficulties. Would we really approve of a Claudio who let his sister save his life by giving her body to a man she rightly despised? And if we would not, can we blame her for agreeing that she ought not to do it? Again, there is a scene (II, iii) in the prison, where the Friar counsels Juliet, the pregnant betrothed of Claudio. She loves Claudio. She acknowledges that it was wrong of them both not to wait until they were married. She repents her sin and is ready to bear the shame that she views as the just consequence of her actions. The scene overflows with charity and humility. To read it cynically, one would have to be very resolute in ignoring the beauty of spirit and the holiness that shine from Juliet.
For an alternative approach, let us try to imagine ourselves in the position of an audience accustomed to seeing Christian themes portrayed on stage, and accustomed to stories with multiple levels of meaning. What might they see as significant in the major characters of this drama?
We begin with the Duke of Vienna (who would also have been, although Shakespeare does not mention this, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire), a great ruler and lawgiver who chooses to hide himself. He tells us that his unveiled wrath visited directly upon miscreants would be too terrible for them to endure, and so he entrusts the task of administering justice, and correcting wickedness and vice, to a lesser authority. He works indirectly and behind the scenes, as it were, to accomplish his purposes. To a Christian observer, this suggests God in two ways. First, although we believe that God makes the lilies of the field, we do not see him at work making them in the same way that we may stop by a potter's shop and see him making a pot. Second, when God is made visible in this world, it is not as an emperor, but as one who is born in a manger because there is no room in the inn, as the Son of Man who has nowhere to lay his head, as the executed outlaw laid in a borrowed sepulchre. So it is that the Duke in this play retires from public view and is seen only as a wandering friar, bound to a life of poverty and of service to others.

Some of his lines suggest an association with Christ. For example, he begins by telling Angelo that he has a reputation for virtue, but that virtue must be put into practice. He says,

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
as if we had them not. (I,i,33-36)

This echoes the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount:

Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to the whole house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Mt. 5:15f)

In a later scene, the Duke/Friar says:

I come to visit the afflicted spirits
here in the prison. (II,iii,4f)

Again, this line echoes the passage (1 Peter 3:19) in which we are told that Christ, put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit, "preached to the spirits in prison." Most Christians in Shakespeare's audience would have understood this to mean that Christ, after dying on the Cross, descended into the realm of the dead and there delivered Abraham, David, Isaiah, and a great multitude of Old Testament saints, from the power of death--what is called the Harrowing of Hell. Whether the modern reader accepts this interpretation is not the point. The Friar has come to preach to "the spirits in prison." Christ is said to preach to the spirits in prison. The use of the word "spirits" here is sufficiently unusual to rule out co-incidence.
So the play suggests that the Duke is a symbol of God or of Christ. He entrusts the task of administering justice, and correcting wickedness and vice, to human authority. Thus Angelo appears to be a symbol, or perhaps simply an example, of the State. Alas, kings and princes are sinners like the rest of us, and power corrupts.
Isabella represents the Church, the Bride of Christ. We first meet her with one foot in the convent, so to speak. She desires a life of contemplation, but is summoned to action in the world, to reclaim and restore fallen sinners, such as Claudio. She begins by showing charity, in pleading for Claudio's life. Next, she is tested as to her chastity, tempted to cut corners with the state in the hope of accomplishing good thereby. She passes the test. She passes another test in her conversation with Claudio. She could

have simplified matters by telling him simply that Angelo had refused to pardon him, and that there was no hope, period. (We all find ourselves, from time to time, having to explain something to someone and thinking: "No need to mention that matter--it would only confuse him!" Perhaps the temptation is especially acute for the Church, or those speaking on behalf of the Church in one context or another; but it is a temptation that everyone faces occasionally, even perhaps when explaining something to himself. "Let's not go into that aspect of the matter. It will only confuse the issue.") But Isabella does not shrink. She trusts Claudio with the whole truth. Thus, she passes the test of honesty. In the final scene, she brings herself to intercede for Angelo, to seek mercy for one who has injured her and hers. Thus we see the grace of Christ at work in her, preparing her for heavenly glory and union with himself.

The one character who seems to have penetrated the Duke's disguise is Lucio, who in many ways seems to be simply a spirit of mischief. The name "Lucio" suggests "Lucifer." However, it would be a stretch to see Lucio as Satan, as ultimate evil. He is at most a demon, a devil, a rebel, a cynical prankster, a spirit of mischief.

We may pause to note one line of Lucio's, in which he tells Isabella that if the Duke had been present, her brother would not have died (IV,iii,163ff). In the story of the raising of Lazarus, Mary and Martha each say to Jesus: "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (J 11:21,32) Thus, this line suggests in passing an identity between the Duke and Christ.

So, how do we sum up the play? It is a play about mercy and forgiveness, about love and marriage. Angelo begins by appealing to Justice, and denying that he needs mercy. He finds himself as guilty as Claudio, and in need of the same mercy that he had denied to Claudio. And he is given mercy. Isabella forgives him his injuries to her and her brother, and asks that his life be spared. It ends with marriages, four of them. At the top of the ladder, so to speak, we have the marriage of the Duke with Isabella, in which we may see a type of the marriage of Christ with His Church. Next, we have Claudio and Juliet, who had intended marriage all along, but postponed it to negotiate a dowry settlement. Next, Angelo and Mariana, where the bridegroom had jilted the bride when her dowry was lost, but where a penitent groom and a loving bride arguably have a reasonable chance of working toward a sound relationship. Last of all, we have Lucio and Kate Keepdown, a marriage that Lucio has called "worse than hanging." Even here, however, there is hope. We already know that he is given to comic exaggeration, and may suspect that his protests are partly intended simply to raise a laugh. Having been told firmly that he must ace his responsibilities, he may actually end up a devoted husband and father.

3. The Tempest

This is probably the last complete play written by Shakespeare.

The plot is as follows. Prospero, Duke of Milan, devoted himself to the study of magical arts (not to be confused with Satanism) and so neglected the affairs of Milan. His wicked brother Antonio took advantage of his preoccupation and, conspiring with the King of Naples, seized the dukedom, and had Prospero and his infant daughter Miranda set adrift in a small boat. They eventually landed on an island, where they found two beings, Ariel and Caliban, whom Prospero first benefited, and thereafter commanded, by the aid of his magical powers. Time passed and Miranda became of marriageable age. As the play opens, a ship is wrecked on the island, carrying Prospero's wicked brother Antonio, and the King of Naples and his son Ferdinand, with others. Prospero separates Ferdinand from the others, and arranges for him and Miranda to meet. They fall in love. Meanwhile, Prospero directs Ariel to cast spells on the others, making them see illusions and run after phantoms until they are worn out. He finally reveals himself to them, forgives the wrongs they have done or intended against him (one is reminded of the story (Genesis 37-45) of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt), betroths Miranda to Ferdinand, and prepares to sail with them for Naples (where Miranda will be married and eventually become Queen of Naples), and for Milan (where Prospero will again rule as Duke). Ariel and Caliban are free, all the villains are punished, repentant, and forgiven, and all ends well.

Now, this play is puzzling, in that one would not expect it to be successful. Prospero, the chief character, does not have anything like the vivid, fleshed-out personality of a typical Shakespearian character, and the same may be said for the others. The plot contains no ingenious surprises. One would expect the play to be dull, or to be regarded by most viewers as not one of Shakespeare's better efforts. But, on the contrary, most viewers find it deeply moving. Clearly they are responding to something deeper than the literal story. It is pretty much agreed that the play has a significance above and beyond its literal meaning. Following Coghill's lead, I offer an interpretation.

The theme of this play is Man seen in two aspects. On the one hand, he is made in the image of God, given dominion over this world. On the other hand, he is fallen, and an exile from his true home. The action of the play takes place on an island with two human inhabitants, a man and a woman, thrust forth from their native country because the man has given himself to the pursuit of forbidden knowledge. On the literal level, they are Prospero, Duke of Milan, and his daughter Miranda, thrust out to sea in a boat and landed on this island. On another level, they are the Human Intellect and the Human Heart respectively. Prospero by his knowledge makes himself master of the island, just as Man, even fallen Man, subdues nature. Prospero has two principal servants on the island, Ariel and Caliban. He addresses Ariel as "thou air" (V,i,21), and Caliban as "thou earth" (I,ii,314). One may take these as the elements of which Man is composed (see Genesis 2:7). Alternatively, Ariel can be taken to be a creature of air and fire (I,ii,189ff), and Caliban to be a creature of water as well as earth, so that Prospero's two servants, taken together, represent the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water) believed to constitute the material world. It is the proper office of Man, as a rational being, to organize and govern nature. It is also the proper function of the human soul (that is, of the life principle in a man) to organize matter into a human body. When a man eats a sandwich, his body, because it is a living body, takes the atoms of the sandwich and reorganizes them into human tissue--nerves, muscles, and the like--and fuel to supply that tissue. At Man's death, the soul, or organizing agent, departs from the body, whose constituents are thus freed from its control, free to relapse into their natural state, as the body decomposes. Thus, when Prospero leaves the island, his servants Ariel and Caliban are set free to go their separate ways.

[Remark: Some Shakespeare scholars, following a different line of interpretation, think it likely that Prospero does not free Caliban and leave him on the island, but takes him back to Milan, leaving Ariel in sole possession of the island. I acknowledge that I find nothing in the text to contradict this, and that I am here presenting what I feel is the natural thing for Prospero to do, rather than what I can prove he did. I cannot comment informedly on the alternate interpretation.]

As Prospero's departure draws near, there are repeated suggestions that we are really being shown his death. He shows the lovers a pageant, and then tells them that it was only an illusion. He goes on to say (IV,i,151):

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
the solemn temples, the great globe itself,
yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
and, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
as dreams are made on, and our little life
is rounded with a sleep.

He later says (V,i,310):

And thence retire me to my Milan, where
every third thought shall be my grave.

Preparing to go home, he bids farewell to his magical arts, saying (V,i,54ff),

I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound,
I'll drown my book.

Finally, when he has completed his purposes, and the ship is about to carry him and the others back to Naples and Milan, Prospero makes the speech that ends the play. Remember that the play opened with a scene on board ship. The stage was then arranged to look like a ship's deck, with masts and rigging and bits of sail and the like. (It is sometimes said that plays in Shakespeare's time were performed without and scenery on a bare stage, but this is now known to be a mistake--we have Henslowe's diary, with a list of stage properties bought and paid for.) We may reasonably suppose that the masts and rigging and other scenery suggesting the deck of a ship are brought out again for the final scene, and that Prospero stands on the poop deck, addressing the audience over the rear rail, as the ship prepares to sail away from them, carrying him home.

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
and what strength I have's mine own,
which is most faint: now, 'tis true,
I must be here confined by you,
or sent to Naples. Let me not,
since I have my dukedom got
and pardoned the deceiver, dwell
in this bare island by your spell:
but release me from my bands
with the help of your good hands.
Gentle breath of yours my sails
must fill, or else my project fails,
which was to please. Now I want
spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
and my ending is despair,
unless I be relieved by prayer,
which pierces so that it assaults
mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
let your indulgence set me free.

This speech has a double meaning throughout.

On one level, it is the speech of an actor saying to the audience: "This is the end of the play. Please clap ("with the help of your good hands") and cheer ("gentle breath of yours"). We have done our best to entertain you, and we should appreciate a good send-off."

On another level, it is the speech of a man about to depart from this world, asking for the prayers of his fellow Christians to uphold and support him--desiring to approach the throne of grace surrounded by the intercessions of those who are one with him in Christ.

So, then, Shakespeare's Tempest is a play largely devoted to the theme of Man's life on earth and his departure from it. On the one hand, it reminds us that Man was put on the earth to exercise dominion over this corner of the material universe. On, the other hand it reminds us that we are pilgrims on earth and that our true home is elsewhere. We see Prospero ready to go home precisely when he has forgiven those who have wronged him. The play, by showing Prospero releasing his servants and renouncing his magical arts, shows Man relinquishing his control over nature as his life draws to its close and his body is about to return to the dust from which it came, while the man, drawn by the love of Christ, expressed in part through the love of his fellow Christians, enters into the joy of endless life.

And that concludes my set of examples intended to display Shakespeare not only as a great writer, but as a great Christian writer.

Shakespeare, William

The English dramatist and poet William Shakespeare was the author of the most widely admired and influential body of literature by any individual in the history of Western civilization. His work comprises 36 plays, 154 sonnets, and 2 narrative poems. Knowledge of Shakespeare is derived from two sources: his works and those remains of legal and church records and contemporary allusions through which scholars can trace the external facts of his life.

Life

Shakespeare was baptized in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, on Apr. 26, 1564. He is buried in the same church, where a memorial records his death on Apr. 23, 1616. In 1623 his colleagues John Heminge and Henry Condell

created another memorial by publishing Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, the collection of his plays now known as the First Folio. His mother, Mary, was the daughter of Robert Arden of Wilmcote, near Stratford. His father, John, was a glover and leather merchant whose increasing financial success was marked by his appointment to a series of municipal posts during the first 10 years of William's life. In the mid-1570s, John Shakespeare's fortunes declined, and he no longer took a visible part in Stratford affairs. The family fortunes lost by John would later be repaired by his son.
Shakespeare probably attended Stratford's excellent free grammar school, although no record of the fact exists. On Nov. 28, 1582, church authorities gave permission for him to marry Anne Hathaway of the neighboring village of Shottery. He was 18 years old, and she was 26; probably she was pregnant. On May 26, 1583, their daughter Susanna was baptized in Holy Trinity. Twins, named Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on Feb. 2, 1585.
Shakespeare wrote his plays for performance, not publication, and apparently took no part in their printing. Nineteen plays appeared in individual quarto volumes before appearing in the First Folio. Some were printed from texts reconstructed from memory by an actor or actors, whereas others were supplied to the printer by the company. Shakespeare's indifference to publication creates problems in dating and establishing accurate texts for the plays.
Shakespeare's earliest plays, performed between 1588 and 1593, already show the range of his formal dramatic interests. They foreshadow his mature accomplishments and reveal some of the sources on which he drew for inspiration. His first tragedy, Titus Andronicus (c.1592-1594), was influenced by the emphasis on extreme psychological states and the rhetorically ornate manner of the Roman playwright Lucius Annaeus Seneca; the influence of Ovid is also felt. Popular in its own day, Titus is now often denigrated; its treatment of physical and moral outrage, however, is recalled even in the mature King Lear. For the three parts of Henry VI (c.1588) and for Richard III (c.1593) he drew on histories of England by Edward Hall (1548) and Raphael HOLINSHED (1587). Shakespeare returned to this material between 1595 and 1600 to write four plays--Richard II (1595), Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 (1597 and 1598), and HENRY V (1599)--that tell an earlier part of the history. Shakespeare's English history plays reflect the age's horror at the idea of civil war and explore the responsibilities of divinely authorized kingship, pointing forward by implication to the reign of Elizabeth I.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

A Man of Varied Respect
How his community viewed him through two very different perspectives

William Shakespeare was born in Warwikshir, England. His father was considered a well-to-do man.
William Shakespeare became well known in London by 1592 because of his play writing. Today he is considered the greatest play writer in the English language. But in his community there were mixed feelings. He was respected by some while loathed by others.

Shakespeare's plays broke the unspoken rules of play's content and structure. Some people thought his plays were vulgar. For example in Act Three of the play Comedy of Errors there is a scene in which two men arrive at one of their houses only to find someone else is in it who won't let them in. They bicker for a little while and this leads up to where Dromio of Ephesus, who is the one outside of the house, tells Dromio of Syracuse, who is in the house,

"A man may break a word with you, sir and words are but wind,
Ay, and break it in your face, so he break it not behind."

He had just said he would fart in Dromio of Syracuse face! Many people found this offensive because it suggests putting ghastly fumes in some one's face. We had selected this example for middle school audience because most of the fact that many of his other examples of his use of vulgarity are inappropriate for young eyes to read. Shakespeare didn't follow the writing rules, what ever they may have been. People thought his plays should be studied not performed. Some people didn't like his plays because they were hard to understand while other people found them offensive because of the vulgarity that was mentioned above. He first lived in a simple proviciat town where his plays weren't treated seriously.
William Shakespeare not only got in trouble with the theater but also got in trouble outside the theater. From 1577 to William's death in 1601, he had many financial troubles. That is why he sold his wife's insurance. William Shakespeare didn't pay his poor taxes due to these financial problems. He didn't attend important meetings he had promised to attend. In addition to that he rarely went to church. Back in his days people were required to go to church once a month. He didn't even go to church once every two months.
Shakespeare's contemporaries held two opposing views of his character and abilities. He held the respect from some people while others found him socially inappropriate. For an example the King and Queen enjoyed his plays and supported him in his writing. People must have liked his ideas for he became Prime Minister of the town and also was elected Chamberlain of the Stratford Corporation.
Shakespeare didn't truly get his respect until after his death. There are examples of other people who had the same problem. Elvis Presly is one of them. Elvis's music and the way he danced was thought vulgar, just like William Shakespeare's play writings were to be thought vulgar. They both became the best at what they did and are well known. I only wish Shakespeare could see how much he has inspired plays and people today.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

was born on April 23, 1564 in the town of
Stratford-upon-Avon, England to Mary Arden and John Shakespeare. His dad made some money in the glove business, eventually opened a general store and over the years bought some property.
Historical evidence strongly suggests John Shakespeare could not read or write.
Will was the third of eight children and received a free boyhood education because of his father's position as alderman. Indications in his later writing suggest that as a kid Shakespeare enjoyed football, fleld sports and arguing with the referees. The Shakespeare's were comfortable, but not aristocrats by any means. By the time William was fifteen the family's fortunes were in decline. Business was bad. This just meant that when Will came of age. he had to work for a living.

Obviously, there were not a lot of entertainment options at the time. Books were not in wide circulation and anyone with half a brain could only take so much of that crappy reeorder music and those inane puppet shows - so Shakespeare had the brilliant idea of becoming an actor.

Theatrical troupes of Elizabethan England were kind of like the garage bands of their time. Actors would often write thcir own plays improvise lines and dress up in drag. It wasn't unusual for them to rave for hours, or to bore their friends into oblivion. Incontrovertlble historical evidence strongly suggests actors of Shakespeares times wouid regularly trash inns, drink heavily, chase locals and generally wreak havoc.

When Will was eighteen he fell in love with Anne Hathaway. After the requisite amount of headbanging they were married.

Aside from the birth of his children, little is known about Shakespeare between 1582 and 1592, except that he built a career as an actor and eventually became an established and popular member of the London theatre circuit.

Shakespeare's play writing success began with historical works. Between 1590 and 1593 he wrote "Henry Vl, Parts 1, 2, and 3," "Richard III" and "A Comedy of Errors." "Romeo and Juliet" was written around 1594-1595.

As an actor, he was a member of a theatrical company known as the LORD CHAMBERLAIN'S MEN. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth and later King James, they had great success in two famous theatres, THE GLOBE and THE BLACKFRIARS.

King James was cool and actually became a sponsor of Shakespeare's reformed outfit THE KINGS MEN -- lending the group money and hanging out with the lads backstage and on tour.

Theatre of the time was enjoyed by commoners as well as the privileged. Often thee audiences were completely illiterate. Public theatres like THE HOPE, THE FORTUNE, THE RED BULL and THE SWAN were "open air" so the players had to compete with livestock sales, screaming street hawkers, and the ubiquitous drunks.

To reach this crowd Shakespeare could not rely on a large stack of amplifiers. He needed the most electrifying words and images ever created in the English language. Concepts that would galvanize common people and make them stop, lose themselves, rise above the muck for an hour or two.

It was crass. It was business. It was art. And it was genius.

Shakespeare had the rhymes. Everyone knew it. In fact, he used cadences we're still hearing today to reinforce some of this most important concepts and lines.

The Bard's group was bad. They kicked ass so bad his competitors used to send out speed writers, shorthand artists and bribe other actors in his plays to try to make their own bootlegged copies of his plays. The unauthorized "boots" were known as "The Bad Quartos." (Weird but true.)

Shakespeare was pissed off by this of course, so he hired hls own publishers and came out with "The Good Quartos" which are pretty much the way he intended his work to sound.

Over the years theatre companies and scholars pieced together so called "original texts" of the plays from various notes and good and bad Quartos. There are many differences from text to text. And Shakespeare probably would have kicked all their asses.

While none of his plays are set in Florida, it's interesting to note that The Pilgrims who settled in America spoke Elizabethan English and that Shakespeare's language and culture were transplanted to the "new continent" in his lifetime.

As his fame and success grew Shakespeare was able to buy the second-largest house in Stratford, called New Place, a cottage and garden nearby, and 107 acres of soccer field.

In about 1611, Shakespeare retired permanently to Stratford, having earned the status of "gentleman." After writing many successful tragedies and comedies, he finished as he started, with a historical play, "Henry VIII."

In early 1616, he wrote his will, leaving his property to his daughter Susanna, who had married a prominent doctor, 300 English pounds to his other daughter, Judith, who was married scandalously at age 32 to a wine maker, and his second-best bed to Anne, because it was her favorite.

He died young -- on his 52nd birthday. William Shakespeare was buried at Trinity Church in Stratford as an honored citizen. On his tombstone is carved a rather wry inscription:

Good Friend, for Jesu's sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he who moves my bones.