Shakespeare's Ontology

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PhD Thesis

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

From Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be', Viola and Iago's 'I am not what I am', Macbeth's 'Nothing is / But what is not', to Richard II's 'I must nothing be', Shakespeare's plays display a pervasive preoccupation with being. This thesis contends that these moments demand a specifically philosophical analysis from the perspective of ontology, the study of being. The aim is to illuminate the significance of being in Shakespeare's works by examining the plays and poetry through the notions of being available to Shakespeare in his time, as well as in terms of the philosophical theories he prefigures in the more complex ontological moments in his plays.

The introductory chapter of this thesis provides an outline of the issue of being in Shakespeare's plays, clarifying the need for a concerted study of this topic. The second chapter offers a synoptic overview of the developments in ontology after Shakespeare's time, up to and including the present, in order to lay the foundations for concepts relevant to this study. Having established the philosophical complexities of ontology, the third chapter reviews previous literature in the field, summarising the ways in which other critics have engaged with wider philosophical concern, and with the concept of being or ontology, in their analysis of Shakespeare's works. The historical fourth chapter investigates ontological ideas present in the works of Shakespeare's contemporaries – particularly other poets and playwrights as well as theologians and philosophers – in order to identify the key respects in which his conceptions of ontological issues resonate with or diverge from theirs. The subsequent three chapters explore a range of Shakespeare's plays in terms of three key ontological ideas: absolute being (*King Lear*, *Richard II*, *Othello*); the absolute self (*King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Coriolanus*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*); and the space of being (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*).

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Acknowledgements

A Note on References

Unless otherwise stated, quotations from the following plays are from these editions: *Hamlet: Revised Edition*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury, 1997); *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, ed. by Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Richard II*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Methuen, 1997); *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Methuen, 1995); *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David Bevington, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Cengage Learning, 1998); *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Jill L. Levenson, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and *Richard III*, ed. by John Jowett, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). All other quotations from Shakespeare's plays and poetry are referenced in footnotes. All emphases and punctuation in quotations are as in the edition cited unless otherwise indicated.

Chapter 1

Introduction:

'To be or not to be' – What is the Question?

This thesis is the first extended study of existence in Shakespeare's plays that makes use of ontology, the philosophical study of being. The aim of this study is to examine the complex ontological ideas in Shakespeare's writings to see what they can tell us about being in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare does not have ontological theories any more than he has existential theories or epistemological theories in any philosophical sense, but 'a poet's work may embody significant philosophical substance without being an original philosophical statement'.[1] From the way that he touches on the matter again and again throughout his works, it is clear that Shakespeare is fascinated with being. It can be no coincidence that the most famous line in Shakespeare's work is 'To be, or not to be' (*Hamlet* III.i.55): the issue of being occupies a significant place in the playwright's imagination.

Shakespeare presents not one inclusive theory, but multiple understandings of what it is to *be*, as the characters in his plays repeatedly question what and who they are and what it means to be. In the process, Shakespeare not only employs the concept of being and uses the verb in ordinary grammatical constructions, but also draws attention to the idea by weaving it into the fabric of his poetic phrasing. For instance, Hamlet's most celebrated soliloquy demonstrates both the way the character poses the question of being, and the way

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[1] Stanley Stewart, *Shakespeare and Philosophy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 5. Some critics have argued that Shakespeare is a philosopher in his own right. For instance, Allan Bloom writes that 'Shakespeare was the first philosopher of history' in *Shakespeare On Love and Friendship* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 29, and Leon Craig claims that Shakespeare is 'as great a philosopher as he is a poet' in *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's* Macbeth *and* King Lear (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 4. See also Agnes Heller, *The Time is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 18. However, I do not see the need to subsume what Shakespeare does under philosophy, not least because literature is valuable in its own right for what it can do that philosophy cannot. A playwright need not be a philosopher to be philosophical.

the playwright foregrounds the use of the verb 'to be' by using it in an unconventional way: 'to be or not to be'. The meaning of this speech is by no means immediately apparent. Its enigma may be precisely what draws people to it, for it seems to say something deep and fundamental, something about being itself, something that touches the truth of human existence. To treat it as just a debate on suicide is hardly satisfactory, even if it seems to be the most obvious explanation. For example, Philip Edwards' explanatory note in the New Cambridge edition says: 'I assume that Hamlet is debating whether to take his own life or not'.[2] However, Hamlet consistently avoids using the first person pronoun in this monologue, so that it is unclear to what extent he is the subject of his musings. Even if one ignores this important point, it is not clear why a debate on suicide should become such a well-known speech. This is perhaps why Edwards qualifies his remark with 'I assume'.

Douglas Bruster, who has written an entire book on this soliloquy, acknowledges that the speech could be about death, but takes another stance on the matter by rephrasing the speech in various ways. He says, for instance, that '**to be** could mean something like "to act" and **not to be**, not to act'.[3] But there is no reason why one should replace the existing verb 'to be' with a more convenient and easily comprehensible idea. What is profound or interesting about the phrase 'to act or not to act, that is the question'? The proposed paraphrase has transmuted Shakespeare's words into something else altogether, something that no longer possesses the mystery and resonance of the original. One could argue that rewording simply clears away the illusion that there was anything complicated about the speech to begin with. But there is no such thing as an exact synonym, and especially not for 'to be', the verb that lies at the heart of the line. The fact that being is made manifest as an issue is what makes the line intriguing and enigmatic. In other words, the mystery is an ontological matter. The amount of attention the soliloquy has received demonstrates the importance of ontological issues in Shakespeare, as well as the central role that ontological questions have played in establishing Shakespeare's literary and cultural importance. 'It is precisely that most abstract and universal of verbs, "to be", that frets Hamlet in his most

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[2] *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 158.
[3] Douglas Bruster, *To Be Or Not To* Be (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 18.

famous soliloquy',[4] and Shakespeare draws attention to it through his arresting use of the verb in the opening line, where he makes it the main subject of the sentence.

'To be' is seldom the focal point in everyday life and speech, because it is hidden in the fabric of conversation and in what we are. But Shakespeare's works are filled with moments where being itself becomes an overt issue in the poetry, and these are the moments that a study of being must comprehend. Time and time again, Shakespeare's characters utter ontologically complex lines such as 'I am not what I am' (*Othello* I.i.64, *Twelfth Night* III.i.139), instead of more immediately intelligible declarations such as 'I am not what I seem'. The emphasis in such lines is once again on the verb 'to be': Shakespeare opts for a statement that seems self-contradictory in order to destabilise the notion of 'being', inviting interpretation and further thought. The fact that the statement is made by two entirely different characters in a tragedy and a comedy respectively is also revealing, for it demonstrates that the relevance of the issue is not limited to a particular situation or genre. Another notable example is Macbeth's 'nothing is/ But what is not' (I.iii.143-4), which highlights the subtle distinction between existence and non-existence, raising questions about what it means for something to be. What Macbeth appears to propose in saying that being for him is 'what is not', is that 'what is' for him differs from the way others understand being. Macbeth inhabits an ontological space that has been opened up by the prospect of Duncan's murder. So what is being for Macbeth, and how is being is presented by the play? Lines such as these, that haunt the liminal space between being and not being, are prevalent in the plays that explore the idea of nothingness. In the abdication scene of *Richard II*, for instance, Richard says, 'Ay, no; no ay, for I must nothing be' (*Richard II*, IV.i.201), pointing to the difference between not being and being nothing. The homophonic play on the words 'Aye' and 'I' suggests that in order to be 'nothing' one must have no 'I', no constitution as a meaningful existence that can be distinguished from nothing.

But not having an 'I' is different from having no existence, for lacking a way of expressing one's existence does not mean one ceases to exist. 'I' designates consciousness of oneself as existing, and not existence itself. The lack of an 'I' is one way of being 'nothing', as opposed to 'not-being', where 'nothing' is a sort of temporary state of meaninglessness.

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[4] James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 19.

Other characters also find themselves becoming nothing – existing without purpose or recognition, unable to apperceive one's present existence as existing within meaningful relations. In *King Lear*, for instance, Edgar says, 'Edgar I nothing am' (II.ii.192), nullifying his name, but not destroying his existence, as the positive assertion 'I … am' makes plain. Edgar recognises that he can sustain his bare existence to find a new identity as Poor Tom. To not be Edgar is to give his existence a different meaning. In *Titus Andronicus* Marcus brings in the mutilated Lavinia, stating, 'This was thy daughter', to which Titus replies, 'Why, Marcus, so she is' (III.i.63-4). For Marcus, once Lavinia's capacity to communicate and physical wholeness are gone, she is no longer the same person. But Titus looks past all the contingent factors to the fact that, even in her horrifically mutilated state, the being he brought into the world still *exists*. Lavinia's meaningful existence as his daughter is not negated by the fact that she does not possess her tongue, hands, or former potential.

Even a semi-comic character such as Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* testifies to this dimension of existence when he says, 'simply the thing I am/ Shall make me live' (IV.iii.337-8) following the utter debasement of his name and his loss of rank.[5] Parolles retains some form of being, even if this being is not the same as it used to be. His being will 'make him live' and this implies something about the nature of the being that he is: a being that propels itself towards future being. Parolles is not changing what he is, he is not actively controlling it in the form of an identity, but letting it be and seeing what becomes of him. The same recognition that one's being can cease to mean what it did is implied in Othello's reply to Lodovico's question, 'Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?': 'That's he that was Othello, here I am' (*Othello* V.ii.280-81, my punctuation). Both 'he that *was* Othello' and the present 'I *am*' are beings, but the consciousness that recognised that existence *as* 'Othello' and inhabited the world that allowed Othello to *be* Othello no longer exists, despite the fact that the being itself has not ceased. Shakespeare's interest in being is ubiquitous: even in one of his earliest comedies, Shakespeare has Dromio of Syracuse say, 'Am I Dromio? Am I your man? Am I myself?' (*Comedy of Errors* III.ii.72-3).[6] Dromio knows that he is, as is apparent from the repetition of the first-person present verb 'am', but has trouble knowing

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[5] *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by Susan Snyder, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). All references to this play are to this edition.
[6] *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. by T. S. Dorsch, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). All references to this play are to this edition.

for certain whether his 'I' – the first-person pronoun that stands for what he experiences as his being – is connected to his name 'Dromio', and his social status as 'your man'. Many more lines can be cited to show that being itself becomes a fundamental issue for characters at certain points in Shakespeare's plays: in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Hermia asks, 'Am I not Hermia? Are you not Lysander?' (III.ii.273);[7] Oliver in *As You Like It* expresses his contrition in terms of being and time: 'I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion / So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am' (IV.iii.136-8);[8] King Richard in *Richard II* is driven to conclude that 'Nor I nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing' (V.v.39-40); Prince Hal dismisses Falstaff, saying, 'Presume not that I am the thing I was' (*II Henry IV* V.v.55);[9] Angelo experiences an existential crisis and asks himself, 'what art thou, Angelo?' (II.ii.177) in *Measure for Measure*;[10] King Lear demands: 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (I.iv.221); and in *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles, Thersites and Patroclus ask, 'What's Agamemnon? … what's Achilles? … what's thyself?' (II.iii.40-5). What belongs to being appears to be dependent on time and circumstance; as Edmund says, 'Men are / As the time is' (*King Lear* V.iii.31-2). All these lines present moments when being, which was previously an unquestioned state of things, becomes a manifest issue.

This preoccupation with ontological problems is not limited to the world of the plays. The most obvious example in Shakespeare' poetry is the notoriously cryptic 'Let the bird of loudest lay' (more commonly known as 'The Phoenix and the Turtle') which contains such ontologically complex quatrains as the following:

> So they loved as love in twain,
> Had the essence but in one,
> Two distincts, division none:
> Number there in love was slain.
> (ll. 25-8)

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[7] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Peter Holland, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). All references to this play are to this edition.

[8] *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dusinberre, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury, 2006). All references to this play are to this edition.

[9] *Henry IV Part Two*, ed. by René Weis, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). All references to this play are to this edition.

[10] *Measure for Measure*, ed. by Brian Gibbons, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). All references to this play are to this edition.

And,

> Property was thus appalled
> That the self was not the same:
> Single natures, double name,
> Neither two nor one was called.
> (ll. 37-40)[11]

The poem raises questions about what can properly be said to pertain to being, about individuation, about the essence of a being – what makes something what it is – and about the difference between the corporeal entity and existence. Another example is Sonnet 81, where Shakespeare skillfully plays with time and states of being: being in the present, not being, coming to be and having been, drawing attention both to the ontological nature of the poetic form and the essential ontic factors that delimit our existence:[12]

> Your monument shall be my gentle verse
> Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
> And tongues-to-be your being shall rehearse,
> When all the breathers of this world are dead.
> (ll. 9-12)[13]

Every line here is concerned with existence. The argument of the sonnet is that the person it addresses exists now and one day will have existed, and that as long as human life continues and there is being, the being-who-was will continue to have being in the being of the verse. From his earliest play to his last, and throughout his poetry, Shakespeare repeatedly returns to the fundamental fact that existence, whether of a metaphysical idea or of the physical body, matters to human beings.

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[11] 'Let the bird of loudest lay', in *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[12] 'Ontic' describes a characteristic that pertains to a particular being, whereas 'ontology' is the understanding of something's mode of being. Hubert L. Dreyfus defines 'ontic' as that which 'concerns being', where 'ontological' is that which 'concerns ways of being'. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's* Being and Time, *Division 1* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 20.

[13] 'Sonnet 81', in *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Given Shakespeare's ubiquitous concern with being, or, more precisely, ontological issues, a concerted analysis of this topic is clearly required. Ontology is often defined as a question of what can be said to exist, but it is also about the nature of beings. Thus, while there are plenty of ontological questions that could be asked about the being of certain concepts, objects, and ideas, this study will focus on human ontology; first, because it is impossible to deal with the being of everything; secondly, because there is something exceptional about a human being's capacity to be aware of itself as existing; and thirdly, because many of Shakespeare's ontologically significant lines pertain specifically to human ontology.

The meaning of the word 'being' itself poses a number of preliminary questions: what does it mean to study 'being'? In what ways has 'being' been defined, philosophically and otherwise? How have literary critics tackled the subject of being in Shakespeare? Is it acceptable to treat being as a self-evident concept? Does Shakespeare treat being as a self-evident concept? In what specific ways does Shakespeare express his understanding of what being is? And finally, what does being *mean* in Shakespeare's works? To answer some of these questions, it is first necessary to consider the difficulties involved in examining a philosophical issue that could be seen as vulnerable to the charge of anachronism.

In order to address the question of being in Shakespeare's works, this study will adopt continental and particularly German approaches to ontology. Even though ontology is studied in some analytic traditions, most of the key studies of ontology have been undertaken by continental philosophers such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein. This is because analytic philosophy can be characterised as chiefly interested in formal logic, language analysis and the epistemological foundation of modern science, as opposed to the continental approach, which rejects the 'scientism' of much analytical thinking on the grounds that there is more to understanding experience than a strictly scientific explanation of the world. Not only is continental philosophy therefore less removed from the 'pre-scientific' world of Shakespeare's England, but its broad interest in the *Lebenswelt* or 'lifeworld' of human experience – our everyday sense of what matters and means something to us in our lives – is also more relevant to the study of aesthetic subjects such as literature. Indeed, the connection between philosophy and literature is a recognised part of the continental philosophical tradition; as John Joughin points out:

Amidst the various intellectual traditions which constitute Continental philosophy, a theoretical interest in the importance of literature to modern thought is taken as read. Indeed, literary and artistic works are fully embedded within an intellectual inheritance which regards an appreciation of literature and an understanding of the 'nature of art' as reciprocally entwined with philosophy, or, at the very least, encourages a dialogue between the two.[14]

This is reflected in the fact that the arts are more central to continental philosophy, as is evident from the way philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Levinas, Derrida, and Benjamin all quote Shakespeare in their philosophical works. A glance at books on the subject of Shakespeare in philosophy, such as Stanley Stewart's *Shakespeare and Philosophy,* Jennifer Bates and Richard Wilson's *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, and Paul A. Kottman's *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, attests to the centrality of Continental philosophers' interest in Shakespeare. Stanley Cavell describes the difference between the two philosophical traditions as follows:

> English philosophy is characterized, in distinction from, say, that of France and Germany, by its relative distance from the major literature of its culture. Compared with Kant's or Hegel's or Schelling's awareness of Goethe or Hölderlin (or Rousseau or Shakespeare) or with Descartes's and Pascal's awareness of Montaigne, Locke's or Hume's or Mill's relation to Shakespeare and Milton or Coleridge (or Montaigne) amounts to hardly more than more or less serious hobbies, not to the recognition of intellectual competitors, fellow challengers of intellectual conscience.[15]

Much of the analytic interest in ontology has been a result of the recent attempt by philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Cavell to blur the lines between these two philosophical traditions. Thus, this move away from purely logical analysis is largely a result of the recent rise in interest in continental philosophers such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein in the analytic tradition, where continental ideas, and especially what is referred to as the 'linguistic turn', have been incorporated as a 'therapeutic' way of solving certain analytic problems posed by the external world, by looking at these problems from the perspective of everyday life.[16]

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[14] John J. Joughin, 'Introduction', in *Philosophical Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.

[15] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

[16] See, for instance, J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), a Wittgenstein-influenced study of the ways language can be used legitimately; Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of*

Rather than impose philosophy on Shakespeare, this thesis will attempt to bring out the ontological questions that are implicit in his works, using theories which found explicit theoretical expression in philosophers of subsequent centuries. As Hegel points out in his famous dictum in *The Philosophy of Right*, 'the owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering'.[17] Whereas philosophy often makes sense of things retrospectively, drama and literature can prefigure later thought, because they give voice to matters that subsequently come to be examined philosophically. This is the first reason why this project cannot be accomplished solely by using contemporary texts (such as Sidney's *A Defence of Poetry*), because texts from Shakespeare's era often address the concerns of an earlier era, and cannot fully encompass the concerns of the world that Shakespeare and his contemporaries created, and that later philosophers came to theorise.

This thesis contends that Shakespeare shows that existence can be understood in various ways, and that his plays accommodate characters with diverse understandings of being. In the complex universe of Shakespeare's plays, different conceptions of being exist side-by-side, and even shift in the course of the plays. To examine the ontological issues in Shakespeare's plays, it will be necessary to use a broad conception of ontology, not as a single theory, but as a range of not necessarily compatible ideas, which find expression in the various characters and situations of Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, the different understandings of being that feature in Shakespeare's works are so heterogeneous that the development of the various theories required to explain their import took centuries, from the chain of being that defined the medieval world order, to Descartes' objectification of being, Hegel's rethinking of the conception of being and the whole, Schelling's critique of rational conceptualisation, Nietzsche's denial of transcendence, Heidegger's ontology, and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. Nor does ontological philosophy start suddenly with Descartes, for Michel de Montaigne, who had a direct influence on Shakespeare's thinking,[18] was the precursor of

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Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), especially book 2, 'Skepticism and the Existence of the World', which challenges the traditional relationship of the subject to the world as a relationship of knowing; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), which attempts to reorient the human being's connection to the world as one not of knowledge, but of historical contingency; or Chapter 6 of Neil Gascoigne's *Scepticism* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002) for an overview of 'therapeutic' approaches to scepticism.

[17] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by S. W. Dyde (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896), p. xxi.

[18] For more detailed studies of the connection between Shakespeare and Montaigne, see Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *Shakespeare's Montaigne* (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2014); Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), which examines the similarities and

Descartes in his doubts about human knowledge, which he formulated in response to the rediscovery of Ancient sceptical philosophy. Montaigne also paved the way for later methods of self-examination through the means he used to explore the significance of existence.

Any attempt to understand Shakespeare's thinking about ontological matters in terms of his age alone is limited by our knowledge of his time as well as by the way we have always already interpreted Shakespeare's age through our modern consciousness. As Hugh Grady puts it, 'all our knowledge of works from the past is conditioned by and dependent upon the culture, language, and ideologies of the present, and this means that historicism itself necessarily produces an implicit allegory of the present in its configuration of the past'.[19] There is no doubt that Shakespeare's works are embedded in the world and time in which he wrote. However, they are not fully explicable in terms of that world and time, because they are not completely determined and constrained by them. A purely retrospective historicist reading cannot do justice to the meaning these plays also have for us as modern readers and audiences. For a critical study to bring out the ideas that were being developed in Shakespeare's works (and the works of his contemporaries), it is essential to employ a way of reading them that can accommodate both their past significance and their changing present meaning. As Grady again observes:

> What Shakespeare (and others of his contemporaries) saw in the incipient process of modernization, and which they passionately denounced … may still have relevance in the late twentieth century, without doing violence to our best understandings of the historical context in which Shakespeare and others wrote.[20]

In a way that recalls Nietzsche's aphorism in *Twilight of the Idols*, 'only the day after tomorrow belongs to me. Some are born posthumously', [21] Shakespeare seems to simultaneously inhabit his own time and reach out to a time that is yet to come.

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differences between the way Shakespeare and Montaigne use the same sources; and William M. Hamlin, *Montaigne's English Journey: Reading the Essays in Shakespeare's Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), which details the reception and spread of Montaigne's *Essais* in Jacobean England. See also Graham Bradshaw, T. G. Bishop and Peter Holbrook (eds), *The Shakespeare International Handbook: Special Section, Shakespeare and Montaigne Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) and John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), pp. 228-38.

[19] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli & Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 2.

[20] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 22.

[21] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 125.

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Before examining the question of being in Shakespeare's plays, it is important to clarify what can be meant by 'being'. The next chapter therefore lays the foundations for concepts relevant to this study by providing a brief overview of the history of philosophical ontology. The third chapter will then survey the ways in which previous literary critics have treated philosophical and ontological matters in Shakespeare studies. With reservations about the validity of a purely retrospective historicist approach in mind, the fourth chapter will examine ontological ideas in the works of Shakespeare's contemporaries – particularly other poets and playwrights, as well as theologians and philosophers – in order to ascertain the key respects in which Shakespeare's conceptions of ontological issues resonate with or diverge from theirs. Having established the historical and philosophical foundations of this thesis, the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters will undertake a reading of Shakespeare's plays in terms of the various ontological issues expressed in them. These chapters will be grouped under three key ontological concepts: absolute being (*King Lear, Richard II, Othello*); the absolute self (*King Lear, Coriolanus, Troilus and Cressida, Richard III, Macbeth, Othello*); and the space of being (*Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Titus Andronicus*).

Chapter 2

'*On kai me on*'

A Brief History of Ontology

An ontology that does justice to Shakespeare's conception of being must account for the different ways that the characters in his plays understand their being, and the way that the play allows for different modes of being in its very structure. If the characters' understanding of being were identical to the way that the play presents being, it might be possible to come up with a unified theory of 'Shakespeare's Ontology'. But if they all shared the same understanding of being, there would be few fundamental differences between them and no basis for the astonishingly diverse range of personalites for which Shakespeare's drama is celebrated. In order to understand fully the multiple meanings of being that can be present in one play, it is necessary to examine the various ways in which being can be understood. This chapter will provide the frame of reference for the ontological readings of the plays in this thesis by providing a basic overview of ontology.

What does it mean 'to be'? How is it used? Variants of the verb 'to be' can be used in the sense of 'existence', as when someone says, 'there is a cat', or 'the cat exists'; or it can be used as a predication, as in 'John is innocent'; it can also be used as an expression of identity, as in 'Viola is Cesario'. Additionally, there is the 'veritative' sense, which can apply to all the previous forms of the verb, since one can say 'it is true that there is a cat, that John is innocent, and that Viola is Cesario', using the veritative sense of 'to be'. Ernst Tugendhat argues that these different senses of 'to be' cannot be contained in a single notion of 'being', and therefore that there is no simple way that one can understand what it is for things to be.[1] However, except for when it is used to indicate identity, the word clearly has a connection with the

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[1] Ernst Tugendhat, *Philosophische Aufsätze zur WIssenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

notion of existence, and all of the instances cited above appear to be linked to truth. Every use of the concept of being has something to do with the way in which we understand and interact with things in the world. A study of being is connected to the existence of things, and the truth of their existence.

Traditionally, 'ontology' describes the study of being, whatever the philosopher in question may mean by 'being'. In the metaphysical tradition, where the aim of philosophy is often the search for the meaning of being, the term 'ontology' can be used interchangeably with 'metaphysics'. As with many philosophical terms, however, confusion arises because different philosophers have used the term to mean different things. Levinas, for instance, uses the word 'ontology' to mean conceptual knowledge of others, a 'general term for any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding'.[2] This particular definition is anomalous, inasmuch as it bears no relation to the etymological roots of the word. Levinas's decision to use the term in this sense appears to be based on an interpretation of Heideggerian ontology as conceptual metaphysics – a reading that misses much of what is interesting about Heideggerian philosophy. Because Heidegger was responsible for the increased use of the term 'ontology' in the twentieth century, many understandings and misunderstandings of the word stem from responses to his work. Adorno, for instance, takes ontology to mean something like the absolute, which, because it is preconscious and unquestionable, is politically suspect: 'Tacitly, ontology is understood as readiness to sanction a heteronomous order that need not be consciously justified'.[3] In fact, this view of ontology as systemised and unchanging classes it with the metaphysical tradition that Heidegger challenged.

Etymologically, ontology is an Anglicisation of the post-classical Latin *ontologia*, which combines the Greek, *onto-* – 'of or relating to being or existence'[4] – with –*logy*, denoting an area of study. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ontology as 'The science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence'.[5] The key point in this definition is that ontology is a *branch* of metaphysics, not a school of thought such as existentialism. Philosophers can engage with ontological issues in

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[2] Simon Critchley, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 11.
[3] Theodore W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1973), p. 61.
[4] 'ONTO- comb. form', *OED*.
[5] 'Ontology, n.', *OED*, definition 1a.

their philosophy without calling it ontology. Any kind of speculation about being is ontological by definition, and even when being is not mentioned, a philosophy can have an implicit ontology without which the theory cannot be articulated. Lee Braver points out, for instance, that Descartes

> argues that we must prove our own faculties before we can rely on them to know anything else, such as ontology, [but] Heidegger responds that this very strategy presupposes a particular ontological structure, namely one that posits us as subjects, the world as objects, and knowledge as the primary relationship between them.[6]

Although philosophers may have different definitions of ontology, or not define it at all, many philosophers share ontological assumptions. In light of this, I will group the positions of various philosophers under a number of broad ontological theories instead of outlining the definitions of particular philosophers such as those cited above. This process is necessarily reductive, since summaries cannot do justice to the intricacies of each philosopher's thought, but the basic ontological positions can be divided into three rough categories: being as the absolute, a true and unchanging order that everything else partakes of; being as the absolute self, the individual who bases the existence of the world on his own existence; and preconceptual being, which is the question of what allows one to experience being to begin with. The first two of these categories presuppose that being is something which can be theorised, and is the sort of being that metaphysics tries to explain. In these theories, philosophy is the search for truth, and truth is what *is*, therefore being is truth. This is complicated slightly when absolute being is theological – also known as ontotheology – where being is God, and the ways of God may not be fathomable to men. Nevertheless, ontotheology retains the model of a rational order existing in a complete and perfect form beyond our understanding, for instance in the mind of God. The basic assumption is that being would be knowable if only we had the capacity to understand it. The last form of ontology differs from the first two in that it subverts the assumption that being is intelligible, and concentrates instead on what it is that allows us to experience being at all. The best way to examine these categories is to survey briefly the history of ontology in western philosophy, starting with mediaeval philosophy.

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[6] Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 66.

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The most prevalent mediaeval ontological theory is the great chain of being, which will be explained in greater detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis. In this metaphysical theory, all entities, earthly and divine, are connected in a chain reaching from God at its highest point to inanimate minerals and rocks at the bottom. Existence is created by God and part of God, making up a divine order in which every being has a place in the grand scheme of existence. This is a quintessential example of being conceived of as absolute, where God is being itself: everything receives its being from, and can be comprehended as parts of, one Supreme Being. Nor does this form of ontology die with medievalism. In different forms, similar conceptions of absolute being continue to be maintained for many centuries, especially by continental rationalists. Spinoza, for instance, posits an unconditioned 'God, or nature' as the prime mover: 'Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God'.[7] God is the *potentia* (power) that causes all other things; entities are thus connected in a long chain of unceasing causation: 'in nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way'.[8] Knowledge of 'God, or nature' is thus knowledge of the nature of being itself. The key notion is that there is a necessary reason for being.

Spinoza's theory is later criticised by Kant, who claims that such an absolute cannot be thought:

> In all ages one has talked about the **absolutely necessary** being, but has taken trouble not so much to understand whether and how one could so much as think of a thing of this kind as rather to prove its existence ... For by means of the word **unconditional** to reject all the conditions that the understanding always needs in order to regard something as necessary, is far from enough to make intelligible to myself whether through a concept of an unconditionally necessary being I am still thinking something or perhaps nothing at all.[9]

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[7] Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. by Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 10.
[8] *Ibia.*, p. 20.
[9] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 564.

Kant raises the question of whether it is necessary or even possible to theorise an external cause of being; our understanding must be prior to our grasp of an ontological absolute. Saying that everything is caused by an absolute being ignores the faculties we need in order even to conceive of such a being. It is because Kant considers philosophy to be the search for what makes knowledge possible that he objects to being as the absolute. In other words, Kant bases his argument on the fundamental assumption that unless something is knowable, one cannot make any positive assumptions about its existence. This upsets the chain of causality, making it unclear whether it is the absolutely necessary being or the human being's conceptual capacity to understand necessity that comes first. Schelling takes issue with Spinoza's absolute being for a different reason, arguing that if everything is caused by the prime mover, then there is no reason why free will, self-understanding, or reason should arise. There would be no change, and no need to explain the universe:

> The doctrine of Spinoza is, in general, a system of necessity. But even within this limit it is an undeveloped system. In particular, because substance is completely immobile in it: dead, immobile, *just* being (*seyena*), lost in its being (*Seyn*), not possessing itself and heightening itself, also not, therefore, being able to behave freely towards this being (*Seyn*)'[10]

If everything is determined by the way the prime mover has caused them to be, then there is no spontaneity, no freedom, and no choice. There is no room for self-consciousness in such a world. It is therefore questionable, first whether there is such a thing as the absolute and, if there is, whether it can be thought; and second, if such an absolute causes everything in the world in a perfect mechanical structure, how we can even begin to reflect on it or be the sort of beings we are.

The notion of being as absolute is not the only ontology current in Spinoza's time. Descartes, the very philosopher Spinoza is responding to, was one of the thinkers who gave rise to a completely different ontological theory: that of the absolute self. In this model, instead of an absolute being which causes all other being, the self is the ground of being. Descartes finds existential certainty in the idea that the one irrefutable truth which confirms itself even in the act of doubting is 'I am, I exist', the foundation on which all other forms of

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[10] F. W. J. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 75.

knowledge must rest. Certainty is achieved when it is grounded by the foundational self. Objectivity, which is based on irrefutable facts such as mathematical truths, comes to depend on *a priori* knowledge, that which is intrinsically known by the subject. Thus, in the ontological model of the absolute self, the objective becomes dependent on the subject. Even the proof of God rests on the fact that the self cannot have a notion of such a perfect being unless God necessarily exists: 'it is impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have, that is, having in myself the idea of God, if God did not truly exist'.[11] As Heidegger points out, 'man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its being and its truth. Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such'.[12] While it does not necessarily result in solipsism, certainty becomes a human problem.

As is evident from his reliance on what can be known by human beings, Kant's ontology also leans towards absolute selfhood. However, it is Fichte who advances the concept of an absolute self in a more explicit way in response to the perceived problem of the things-in-themselves of Kant's philosophy – the noumena that are supposed to cause the phenomena perceived by subjects, but which cannot themselves be experienced. Because the existence of noumena was meant to open Kant's epistemology to scepticism, allegedly meaning that an unknowable external world causes experience, Fichte responds by getting rid of the objective world that remains separate from the individual, embracing transcendental idealism by basing the existence of the world on an absolute self. Because there is meant to be more immediate certainty in one's experience of oneself, the location of the absolute is moved from the objective, external world to the subjective realm. What has not changed between the two forms of the absolute is that they both regard being as coterminous with knowledge.

Hegel objects to the potential solipsism of absolute selfhood, and attempts to bridge the gap between subject and object. He argues that, for a subject to recognise itself as a subject, it must have some other being to which it can oppose itself: 'for it to be an absolute *I* it must entail consciousness. However, if the absolute I contained all reality, it could not have anything opposed to it as an object and therefore could not be conscious'.[13] In other words,

[11] René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 43.
[12] Martin Heidegger, *The Question concerning Technology and other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York, NY: Garland, 1977), p. 128.
[13] Andrew Bowie, 'Introduction', in *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 7.

the subject is not self-sufficient, 'it *is* only by being acknowledged or "recognised"'.[14] Hegel implicitly criticises the ontological model of the absolute self in the 'Lordship and Bondage' section of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, claiming that each self-consciousness must 'set itself to sublate the other independent being, in order thereby to become certain of itself as true being'.[15] For it to be able to think of itself as being itself, the absolute self has already subjugated the other, denying the other the assurance of its own certainty. This attempt to make oneself absolute is potentially dangerous, for the subject can end up subsuming the other, sacrificing the other for ontological assurance. For Hegel, Descartes' foundational and self-enclosed consciousness does not make sense, because self-consciousness requires an independent world in order to be conscious of itself. Schelling makes the same point, concerned by the fact that there would be no reason for the self to interact with others if it were absolute:

> The Cartesian primacy of self-consciousness is clearly undermined by the I's dependence for its existence upon the prior ground of absolute identity. Schelling insists that 'The *I* think, *I* am, is, since Descartes, the basic mistake of all knowledge; thinking is not my thinking, and being is not my being, for everything is only of God or the totality' … In trying to make my conscious I absolute, I realise that it can only *be* in relation to the not-I, the rest of the world. This means … that the conscious I inherently involves a relation to the other and cannot be absolute.[16]

Schelling claims that Descartes presupposes 'absolute identity' – the unity of the 'I' with its being. The Cartesian model cannot be right, because awareness of one's being as 'I' can only arise out of the experience of what does not belong to me, the 'not-I'. But if being is neither subjective nor objective, what is the alternative?

The Hegelian model of the interconnectedness of beings is a holistic theory that depends on determinate negation. Entities are characterised as what they are through opposition: something is what it is because of what it is not. Just as self-consciousness can develop only in opposition to an other, one can know something only when it is mediated by what it is not. According to Hegel, the concept of being appears to be an anomaly, something that can be understood intuitively without mediation, and that cannot be broken

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[14] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by J. B. Baillie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), p. 175.
[15] *Ibia.*, p. 176.
[16] Bowie, 'Introduction', *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 16.

down into constitutive elements. However, this anomaly is illusory; Hegel goes on to claim that being is in fact only meaningful in relation to the concept of nothing. Indeed, attempting to think of being in itself makes it indeterminate, 'which is the same as "nothing" because there is no articulated content in the notion of "being"'.[17] The very attempt to think of being in isolation makes it lose meaning, effectively turning it into nothing. This is where determinate negation comes in again. By mediating being through nothing, Hegel claims, we are led to the idea of '"becoming", which seems to save thinking from paralysis because it accommodates both concepts: '"becoming" contains "being" and "nothing" since when something "becomes" it passes, as it were, from nothingness to being'.[18] This movement is essentially that of the Hegelian dialectic, in which two contradictory concepts are sublated (*aufgehoben*) in order that a third, more distinct idea may be comprehended.

For Hegel, being is not something complete in and of itself that makes everything what it is; nor is being contained within the absolute self. Because being must always be mediated to be understood, it is always *becoming*. Being is becoming, 'which combines being and non-being as something ceases to be in one sense, and comes into being in another',[19] a constant process of dialectical negation that overcomes contradictions. According to the traditional view of Hegel, this will lead to a final state of being in which all contradictions have been overcome: the absolute. There is much more space for a fluid and changing ontology in Hegel's philosophy because of the dialectical progression, which marks a move from the static and timeless ontologies described so far. However, as can be seen from the way that he takes issue with the idea of a being we cannot conceptually grasp, being remains within the realm of knowledge for Hegel too. Hence 'what is rational is real'[20] – being is encompassed by that which we can comprehend. In criticising the Cartesian absolute self, Hegel ends up with a variation of absolute being, albeit one in which the world has not yet achieved a final, unchanging state of being.

Schelling takes issue with Hegel's ontology, arguing that one cannot turn something conceptually incomprehensible into knowledge through negation. In the same way he

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[17] Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 66.
[18] Paul Redding, 'Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/hegel/> [accessed 16/10/2014]
[19] Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*, p. 66.
[20] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by S. W. Dyde (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896), p. xix.

criticises Descartes for conflating being with thinking about being, Schelling condemns 'Hegel's philosophy as flawed because it relies on the identity of thought and being in a manner which allows thought to dominate its other'.[21] For Schelling, Hegel invalidly turns the unknowable into knowledge. The error in Hegel's reasoning is that, having first claimed that being cannot be thought without turning into nothing, he nonetheless uses it to create becoming as if being were a graspable entity. The only way one can make something unknowable into something knowable is to change its nature, but if one changes the nature of being into something that can be comprehended, it is no longer being. Schelling expresses this distinction in terms of being and self-consciousness:

> The subject cannot grasp itself *as* what it is, for precisely in attracting itself it *becomes* an other, this is the basic contradiction, we can say misfortune, in all being, for it either *leaves* itself, then it is as nothing, or it attracts itself, then it is an other and not identical with itself.[22]

For Schelling, the knowable, conceivable being of Hegel's philosophy is an abstraction of being and not being itself. Thus Schelling distinguishes between the subject as that which thinks, and being as what the subject is. His contention is that Hegel has presupposed that the idea of being is identical with being, whereas thought comes from the contemplation of being, in much the same way as self-consciousness arises as a result of consciousness reflecting on its being. Self-consciousness could not exist if it were identical with its essential being: 'All along Schelling is insisting, against Hegel, that one cannot articulate the identity of thought and being *within* thought, because this must always *presuppose* that they are identical in a manner which thought, as one side of a relation, cannot encompass'.[23] In Schelling's own words:

> The 'I am' is precisely only the expression of the coming-to-itself itself – therefore this coming-to-itself which is stated in the 'I am' presupposes a having-been-outside and having-been-away from itself. For only what has previously been *outside* itself can come to *itself*. The first state of the I is, then, a being-outside-itself. In this connection it only remains to note (and this is a very essential point), that the I, to the extent to which it is thought beyond consciousness, is precisely not the individual I, for it determines itself as individual I only in coming-to-itself, thus the I which is thought

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[21] Bowie, 'Introduction', *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 31.
[22] Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 115.
[23] Bowie, 'Introduction', *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 31.

beyond consciousness, or the stated 'I am', is for all human individuals the very same, it only *becomes* in everyone *his* I, his individual I, precisely by coming *to* itself in him.[24]

Thought is always thought *about* something, and not a grasping of itself. The 'I am' is never identical to the 'am', to being. There can only be an 'I' once there is consciousness of being – self-consciousness – and consciousness is not the same as being.

It appears from this that Hegel does not deal adequately with the question of being, and assumes an ontological position that he does not clarify: that being can be known. Indeed, Schelling claims that Hegel presupposes a certain understanding of being before even arguing about being and nothingness:

> Hegel must, by setting up the Logic in that sublime sense as the first philosophical science, use the common logical forms to do so, without having justified them, i.e. he must presuppose them, when he says, e.g.: 'Pure being *is* nothing', without in the least having proved anything about the meaning of this *is*.[25]

Despite his claim that being must become becoming before it can be understood, Hegel relies on a general understanding of being which his theory cannot ultimately explain. What Schelling challenges is the idea that being can be comprehended within a rational metaphysical system, since rationality cannot make sense of itself. A complete systematisation of being would suggest that everything can be understood within the realm of knowledge, but Schelling points out that thought is incapable of comprehending itself. Metaphysics tries to make sense of what there is, but it cannot be used to explain why there is something rather than nothing at all. Part of the fundamental flaw in the ontology at the beginning of *The Science of Logic* is that Hegel assumes the primacy of being over nothing; that when being is mediated by nothing, being, in the form of becoming, will necessarily triumph over nothing.[26] The absolute, even reached at the end of a grand system, cannot contain everything; indeed, it does not manage to contain being even at the beginning of the metaphysical theory:

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[24] Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 109.
[25] *Ibia.*, p. 148.
[26] See also Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?', trans. By David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), which makes the same argument and goes on to argue that nothingness must in fact be the prior concept if there is to be any negation at all.

That supposed necessity of thinking *being in general* and thinking *all* being in being – this necessity is itself merely pretence, since it is an impossibility to think *being in general* because there is no being *in general*, there is no being without a subject, being is rather necessarily and at all times something determinate, *either* essential (*wesena*) being, which returns to the essence (*Wesen*) and is identical with it, *or* objective (*gegenständlich)* being – a distinction Hegel completely ignores.[27]

Schelling's ontology consists of the insistence that objective being can never be identical with essential being, because there must be a difference in identity before identity can know itself. He describes this metaphorically by pointing out that the world is simultaneously one thing and made up of innumerable things which do not disappear when the designation 'world' is applied. In this, Schelling appears to have been influenced by Hölderlin, who claimed that 'one has to understand the structure of the relationship of subject to object in consciousness as grounded in "a whole of which subject and object are the parts", which he, in the manner of Jacobi, termed "being"'.[28] In acknowledging the irrational, Schelling lays the groundwork for the model of ontology in which being is the ground that makes knowledge possible.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The notion that knowledge is dependent on a non-rational background influences post-Hegelian anti-metaphysical thinkers such as Marx, for whom knowledge and existence in the world depend on historical modes of production, so that the material conditions of our lives ultimately control what we are. For Nietzsche also, the stasis inherent in timeless absolute being constitutes a denial of the world, the creation of a realm which overshadows and rejects the 'apparent' world as false, but which relies on the very structures it denies. He claims that philosophers

> think they are doing a thing honour when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni* – when they make a mummy out of it. All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive.[29]

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[27] Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 139.
[28] Bowie, 'Introduction', *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 7.
[29] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 45.

This eternal being, this conceptual mummy which does not allow for changes, Nietzsche terms 'being', after the way metaphysical philosophers termed absolute being. Thus Nietzsche avoids talking about ontology and being in those terms, although he must presuppose a certain contingency of being in order to criticise absolute being. While it would be possible to uncover the underlying ontological assumptions of Nietzsche's philosophy, because Nietzsche's critique of conceptual thinking often makes use of literary devices to avoid schematising his thoughts, it would run counter to his style of thinking to do so. Since there are later philosophers who articulate similar matters less ambiguously, it suffices that Nietzsche's philosophy provides a better standpoint for critiquing earlier forms of conceptual ontology than for articulating a new, postmodern ontology.

Nietzsche's point is that the long tradition of metaphysical thinking has ignored a fundamental part of our existence in its concentration on the 'truer' world of knowledge. He aims at the abolition of knowledge as a different realm. On closer inspection this reprises Hölderlin's idea of a 'whole of which subject and object are the parts': if there is no distinction between the 'true' and the 'apparent world', knowledge is as much a part of the world as everything else. Only instead of 'the world' Hölderlin calls it 'being'. To repeat an earlier point, being makes knowledge possible, but not because it is separate from knowledge: knowledge requires being in order to be thought.

Nietzsche is an important link in the chain, but it is not until the twentieth century that a non-conceptual ontology based on the move away from metaphysics begins to be formulated fully. A key figure is Husserl, whose phenomenology seeks to put into perspective how we actually see the world as embodied human beings, as opposed to the scientific view of the world where things are seen in terms of properties and as entire objects. For instance, expressed as a molecular value, water is H^2O, but we experience it in our lives differently: as something which is wet, which we drink, which makes us feel a certain way when it falls from the sky in the form of rain. What this points to is the fact that science, mathematics, and metaphysics are abstractions. What scientists encounter is not the abstract theory they are attempting to find, but the equipment they use to test their theories; they have no direct

contact with their abstractions in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*).[30] Human beings live primarily within the world of experiences, the life-world, and everything else is derived from this:

> Mathematics and mathematical science, as a garb of ideas, or the garb of symbols of the symbolic mathematical theories, encompasses everything which, for scientists and the educated generally, *represents* the life-world, *dresses it up* as 'objectively actual and true' nature. It is through the garb of ideas that we take for *true being* what is actually a *method*—a method which is designed for the purpose of progressively improving, *in infinitum,* through 'scientific' predictions.[31]

In the same vein as Nietzsche, Husserl claims that the world of metaphysics and science is not the 'truer' world, it is just another part of our life-world, but one we cannot permanently inhabit: 'this actually intuited, actually experienced and experienceable world, in which practically our whole life takes place, remains unchanged as what it is, in its own essential structure and its own concrete causal style, whatever we may do with or without techniques'.[32] Although Husserl himself does not delve into the matter, this analysis establishes a new horizon of thinking for philosophy: not to study the hitherto philosophically significant metaphysical meanings, but the life-world from which metaphysics is derived. Our being is tied to the world in which it exists.

Heidegger takes this new horizon as a starting point for his postmodern ontology, protesting that the ontology of science and metaphysics is acquired in stasis, when an object is taken out of context and viewed purely in terms of its properties. He therefore claims that 'the only "being" that metaphysics knows is being as stability and presencing'.[33] Metaphysics deals with objects as if they were unchanging, and as if they only exist when they are being examined: 'classical metaphysics usually deals with things apart from and independent of their relation to human beings'.[34] This is clearly true for both the models of absolute ontology mentioned above – the aim has been to create a metaphysical framework in which being is contained and can be understood. Following Husserl, Heidegger claims that this is not the

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[30] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 125.
[31] *Ibia.*, p. 54.
[32] *Ibia.*, p. 51.
[33] Quoted in Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 144, n. 17.
[34] Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 189.

default way in which we encounter the world. To view the world in any way it is necessary to have a preconceptual awareness of the world to begin with.

To distinguish between the two different ways we experience the world, Heidegger terms the conceptual, 'objective' view of the world 'present-at-hand', and our average typical everyday view 'ready-to-hand'. When we use objects in our everyday experience, we do not think about the objects we are using. I do not think about the keyboard I am typing on when I type, I am simply typing. Only when the keyboard breaks do I become aware of it as an object. The former is a ready-to-hand way of relating to the world, and in the latter the keyboard has become present-at-hand for me. By concentrating on only one of these interactions, we end up neglecting the main part of our experience:

> Heidegger considers the tunnel-vision focus on being as constant presence and thus beings as enduring, stable objects to be the greatest obstacle to understanding the world the way we actually experience it. Traditional philosophy is almost entirely organized around 'the unexpressed but ontologically dogmatic guiding thesis that what *is* ... must be *present-at-hand*, and that what does not let itself be objectively demonstrated as *present-at-hand*, just *is not* at all'.[35]

Heidegger points out that many things cannot be demonstrated as present-at-hand. Even the fact that we can use the verb 'to be' without any problem in our everyday language evinces an everyday conception of being:

> We do not know what 'Being' means. But even if we ask, 'What is "Being"?', we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that 'is' signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. *But this vague average understanding of Being is still a fact.*[36]

Although we may not have a stable, present-at-hand knowledge of being, being is meaningful to us, and without this meaningful understanding of existence we would not be able to articulate what we *can* know. As Thomas Sheehan explains:

> Meaningfulness is already self-evident to me prior to all thematic understanding and speech. And this pertains not only to things in my external environment but also to

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[35] Braver, *Groundless Grounds*, p. 54.
[36] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 25.

myself. Without this preconceptual familiarity with meaning, I could not understand myself, much less anything else. Without it, I could not say 'I', 'you', or 'it'.[37]

We have an ontical understanding of the world we are part of – being-in-the-world, in Heideggerian terminology – rather than an *ontological* understanding, which would denote a studied present-at-hand comprehension. As Braver points out,

> We possess a pre-ontological (that is, unthematic or noncognitive) understanding of the being of these entities (as attested by our ability to interact appropriately with them), so we just need to focus our attention on what we already know but 'forget' during intellectual examination.[38]

A postmodern ontology is not concerned with building systems but with the fundamental basis that makes such systems possible. It is 'the inquiry into the *intelligibility* of things, that is, the inquiry into *being*',[39] an examination of our preconceptual understanding of existence.

This preconceptual element of existence that makes beings meaningfully intelligible to us is what Heidegger calls 'being' (as opposed to 'beings' or 'entities'), 'the world', or 'the clearing' (*Lichtung*), and what I will call 'the space of being' in Chapter 7 of this thesis. Instead of cutting off everything else and starting with self-certainty the way Descartes does, Heidegger believes that it is vital to examine what we already are as beings-in-the-world. He considers the kind of beings we are – Dasein (literally a being-there) – the fundamental subject for ontology, first because Dasein is able to experience itself *as* a being: 'Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it';[40] and secondly because Dasein uniquely understands itself in an inextricable relation with the world: 'The kind of Being which belongs to Dasein is … such that, in understanding its own Being, it has a tendency to do so in terms of that entity towards which it comports itself proximally and in a way which is essentially constant – in terms of the "world"'.[41] An examination of Dasein involves

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[37] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 111.
[38] Braver, *Groundless Grounds*, p. 128.
[39] Quoted in Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 122. This is Sheehan's translation of Heidegger's '*die Frage nach dem Sinn des Seienden, nach dem Sein*' (Martin Heidegger, *Platon: Sophistes* [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992], p. 205).
[40] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 32.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 36

an examination of the world, because the two are inextricably entwined. In other words, human being involves not just the being of the entity, but the space of being within which that being can be meaningfully understood as existing. Ontology is no longer a matter of looking at entities or subjects independently of the world they live in. Abstraction cannot give us the truth of being, because the world is part of the essential constitution of entities.

Part of the problem is that any attempt to grasp our ready-to-hand view of the world conceptually makes it present-at-hand, and our very attempt to conceptualise relies on what we are trying to grasp. Thus the clearing, the space of being, is 'Ontically … not only close to us – even that which is closest: we are it, each of us, we ourselves. In spite of this, or rather for just this reason, it is ontologically that which is farthest'.[42] Another way of putting this is that the clearing is hidden from us: 'although I am a priori defined by – and indeed am – the clearing, I cannot grasp and conceptualize it, much less say why it is necessary for being human. In that sense the clearing is intrinsically "hidden": always present-and-operative but unknowable in its why and wherefore'.[43] The clearing allows us to experience being, while itself remaining unknowable: 'it *remains hidden* while *disclosing things as meaningful*'.[44] The clearing is what allows the meaningful disclosure of things, 'bringing things to awareness, but also creating the context within which things can be what they are'.[45] The revelatory nature of the clearing is also known as 'unconcealment'. This reprises again Hölderlin's 'whole of which subject and object are the parts', because human beings are the individual entities that the clearing makes intelligible, as well as the clearing which reveals entities as meaningful.

For Heidegger, it is our being within such an unconcealed world that makes us what we are: 'it belongs to being human … to stand in the unhidden, or as we say, in the true, in the truth. Being human means … to comport oneself to the unhidden'.[46] But the way things are unconcealed by the clearing is not an eternal, timeless state of things. As the term *un*concealment suggests, there is also concealment. Unlike absolute theories of ontology, the whole is never knowable in its totality, for every unconcealment conceals a different unconcealment of the clearing. The meaning of being can change: 'Heidegger understands *Sein* in all its historical incarnations as the meaningful presence (*Anwesen*) of things to human

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[43] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 116.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 226

[45] Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment*, p. 2.

[46] Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, trans. by Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 20.

beings – that is, the changing *significance* of things with various contexts of human interests and concerns'.[47] Unconcealment is not a conscious decision, or a belief; we do not *choose* to see the world in one way or another. Whatever way the world happens to be unconcealed for us is the default way being is manifested to us: 'the way that we understand ourselves is grounded in the way that the world discloses itself'.[48] But how the world is unconcealed is beyond the individual's power, because the clearing is what gives us the ways we think about the world, the rules of the game, and we cannot use the rules to change the game itself. Thus it establishes the ground of existence:

> On the one hand, these understandings of Being do … ground an age. They constitute the deepest level of intelligibility we can access, and they determine and support the thought and action of an epoch. These ways of understanding constitute a ground by allowing us to experience anything, and by shaping how we experience almost everything. On the other hand, these grounds are themselves groundless. They cannot be justified or legitimated because they are the source of our ways of justification and legitimation.[49]

This ontological theory may seem historically contingent, but that is the point. Unlike metaphysical ontology, postmodern ontology does not seek to ground things in a timeless way. It does not forget that 'we are finite creatures and that everything about us must reflect this fact', whereas a philosophy that seeks final answers is 'fundamentally inappropriate for creatures like ourselves'.[50] Rather than constituting an absolute picture of the world, being is that which allows one to conceptualise such models. Indeed, the very fact that we conceptualise being is a defining feature of the sort of beings we are.

The preconceptual nature of the clearing begs the question of how we can know how our world is unconcealed, an issue that drives Adorno's concern that an unquestionable being beyond our power to change is totalising and politically suspect. The first thing to note, however, is that if the space of being is historically contingent, then it is not totalising as such. Heidegger points out that we can see the different ways being is unconcealed through history because our own unconcealment of being can be contrasted with the way things were understood in the world views of previous epochs:

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[47] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. xiv.
[48] Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment*, p. 79.
[49] Braver, *Groundless Grounds*, p. 211.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

> … historical thought … can loosen the grasp that our metaphysical understanding of being has on us. If we immerse ourselves in an historical reflection on the understanding of a past age, our current presuppositions and practices may come to seem strange and ungrounded. And if that happens, we will be prepared to confront the fact that we ourselves are thoroughly shaped by an understanding of the being of beings – an understanding that, while once revolutionary, is now so commonplace as to go unnoticed.[51]

We can recognise the way our being-in-the-world differs from earlier manifestations of being through comparison, and we can know that what happens to be is not all there can be or has to be. As will be seen in more detail in the next chapter, this is highly relevant to Shakespeare's works, because the early modern period was a time when the understanding of being was clearly unsettled. But history is not the only way that the clearing can be revealed to us. Art, and particularly the poetic arts, can expose the clearing for the same reason that history can. This is because art can destabilise our sense of what things are by making them appear strange or fresh, and poetry uses familiar and therefore invisible words in ways that are unusual or alienating, bringing out meanings which are not apparent in everyday speech. In just the way Shakespeare uses poetry to foreground the question of being, poetic language 'speaks by pointing, reaching out to every region of presencing, letting what is present in each case appear in such regions or vanish from them'.[52] Another way the space of being is revealed to us is through anxiety, angst, astonishment, or even extreme boredom – anything that alienates us from our ordinary meaningful understanding of the world. Normally one simply exists; it is only when this way of being becomes alien or ceases to make sense that the space of being is revealed.

The postmodern ontology championed by Schelling, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger finds many adherents in the twentieth century. Among the philosophers influenced by this school of thought is Sartre. Sartre's distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, for instance, equates to the difference between human being and the human being's consciousness of its being, the distinction that drives Schelling's quarrel with Hegel. Sartre's idea of freedom in the face of death is influenced by Heidegger's early thought,

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[51] Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment*, p. 184.
[52] Martin Heidegger, 'The Way to Language', in *Basic Writings*, trans. by David Farrell Krell (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 411.

especially the concept of being-towards-death. However, Sartre differs from Heidegger in that he does not have a conception of anything like a space of being, something that allows us to understand being meaningfully. This is why Sartre can make a case for radical individual freedom, unconstrained by the way the world happens to be. The influence of the same philosophical tradition is apparent in the work of Gadamer, whose philosophical hermeneutics and concept of 'horizons' in the study of human understanding owes more than a little to phenomenology and the idea of a clearing that conditions the way we understand being. Hence Gadamer understands consciousness as historically determined by a horizon that allows us to experience things the way we do.

Derrida is another heir to this postmodern tradition. Like Sartre's being-in-itself and being-for-itself, one of the meanings of Derrida's *différance* indicates the gap between the active existence, the being of something, and its passive contemplation of itself. This is in keeping with Schelling's idea that being can never be unitary, that 'the subject is not present, nor above all present to itself before *différance*, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral'.[53] Although there is not enough space to discuss his philosophy more fully here, Derrida's distrust of the way the tradition of metaphysics privileges presence and beings – what he calls 'logocentrism' – has much in common with the postmodern tradition of ontology and Heidegger, a debt he acknowledges directly: 'what I have attempted to do would not have been possible without the opening of Heidegger's questions'.[54] Derrida's project is a continuation of Heidegger's insofar as he is interested in what makes presence possible, rather than in presence itself: 'it is the determination of Being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of *différance*'.[55] Indeed, in one of its senses, *différance* is itself something like the clearing, the originary difference between being and that which allows being to be experienced as present, even as it is constantly deferred, either because it has not yet arrived, or because it has already happened and can only be a recollection. Thus, like the clearing, *différance* is what grounds metaphysics while itself resisting presence and phenomenological manifestation: '*Différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation,

[53] Jacques Derrida, 'Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva', in *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 29.
[54] Jacques Derrida, 'Implications: Interview with Henri Ronse', in *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 9.
[55] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), pp. 21-2.

but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return'.[56] It is also what determines what we are in a historical sense, like the unconcealment of the clearing: 'it is only on the basis of *différance* and its "history" that we can allegedly know who and where "we" are, and what the limits of an "era" might be'.[57] At the heart of Derrida's deconstruction of being and presence lies the postmodern nonconceptual sense of being, inherited from Heidegger and Husserl.

<div align="center">✳✳✳</div>

This short summary is plainly not offered as an exhaustive account of ontology. What it does show, however, is a general historical shift from totalising metaphysical notions of being as a transcendent and rational absolute order, to an anthropocentric understanding of existence, to recognition of the contingent, the chaotic, and the unconscious: a notion of being that is historically contingent. It should also be clear why I propose to employ three basic models of ontology: whatever the reasoning behind a philosopher's ontology, and whatever the subtle differences between different ontologies, the basic ontological assumption underlying a philosophical theory is generally a form of absolute being, the absolute self, or the space of being. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Shakespeare's ontology will display similarities with one or more of these three theories. Having established the different ontological theories and what they entail, it should be easier to examine being in Shakespeare's plays in a way that does justice to their philosophical depth without reducing their ontological complexity.

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[56] *Ibia.*, p. 6.
[57] *Ibia.*, p. 7.

Chapter 3

'That that is, is'

Ontology in Recent Shakespeare Studies

The question of being is clearly important to philosophers and philosophical theories even when it is implicit, but how are ontology and being treated in Shakespeare studies? Recent critics of Shakespeare who draw heavily on philosophical concepts, including David Hillman, Hugh Grady, Alan Sinfield, Catherine Belsey, Cynthia Marshall, and Jonathan Dollimore, have tended to concentrate on 'subjectivity' as the key term, and not on 'being'. But being differs from subjectivity not least because subjectivity relies on being. As should be clear from the discussion of Schelling in the previous chapter, subjectivity is the awareness of one's being; thus being makes subjectivity possible. It is extremely difficult to conceptualise being, because it conditions experience but is not actively experienced in the same way that subjectivity is. Partly because being is such a complex issue, and partly because of the concentration on the more obviously political problem of subjectivity, ontological questions are often eclipsed by or conflated with subjectivity. As Catherine Belsey points out, 'epistemology subsumes or occludes ontology' in recent theoretical criticism.[1] Thus, despite the fact that being is such a prominent issue in Shakespeare's plays, no book-length study has been published on the subject to date. Nevertheless, there have been some critics who have engaged peripherally with the question of being in their works. It is therefore worth surveying the critical work on Shakespeare that has been carried out in closely related fields in order to assess how being has been handled in previous criticism, the merits of their approaches, and the ways in which they differ from this study.

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[1] Catherine Belsey, *The Culture and the Real: Theorizing Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 4.

Although none of them have focused specifically on ontology, there have been many publications within the wider field of Shakespeare and philosophy. For instance, Colin McGinn's book, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*, attempts 'a systematic treatment of the underlying philosophical themes of the plays', which include 'skepticism and the possibility of human knowledge; the nature of the self and personal identity; the understanding of causation; the existence and nature of evil; the formative power of language'.[2] While there is very little in the way of literary analysis in McGinn's book (as he says himself, he is 'not professionally a Shakespeare scholar or any other kind of literary expert'),[3] he demarcates some of the philosophical issues in Shakespeare's works by treating the plays as if they were examples of philosophical theories. The themes McGinn covers follow the basic subjects and fields of mainstream philosophy and, as he examines each play in relation to these themes, he identifies a broad spectrum of philosophical matters in Shakespeare's plays.

McGinn classes ontological matters largely under the topic of causation, which concerns the 'becoming', or 'coming-into-being' of objects: a subject of great interest to many of Shakespeare's contemporaries apropos of God's creation of the world *ex nihilo*. In his analysis of *King Lear*, where McGinn deals with causation at length, he observes that 'there are … references to nothingness scattered about the play, as if to remind us constantly of the abyss of nonbeing. In these invocations we have the impression of life reduced to the barest of oppositions, between being and nothingness'.[4] When it is not related to causation, McGinn's treatment of ontology is specifically existentialist, and the only book cited on the subject is Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. McGinn's conclusions on subjectivity reflect this notion of being:

> We are nothing apart from the parts we play, to put it crudely. There is no antecedent substantial self that we can encounter in introspection; there is only the self that we creatively construct, as an actor creates a role. The self is not something *given*, as the

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[2] Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), p. vi.
[3] *Ibia.*, p. vi.
[4] *Ibia.*, p. 115.

body is—just a piece of ontological furniture, so to speak; it is something that has to be created, adopted, chosen.[5]

For Sartre's existentialism, how one lives in this world is a matter of choice, a free decision acted out by each individual, and not something that is determined at the level of being.[6] Unfortunately this philosophical stance does not satisfactorily explain the way Shakespeare presents those who are trapped within their societies, those whose being is constantly reinscribed into society by the social identities and names that are imposed on them but are beyond their control. However, ontology is not the main interest of McGinn's study, which is intended as a general reorientation of our understanding of Shakespeare from a philosophical perspective. It is understandable, therefore, that the book does not go into the issue of being in as much depth as the subject requires. Regarding his approach, McGinn claims that his aim 'is to work out exactly what [Shakespeare's] view was, insofar as it is represented in the plays',[7] whereas I will not attempt to ascribe any particular view to Shakespeare, but will deal with the diversity of his ideas, using an equally diverse range of concepts.

Another important publication in the field of Shakespeare and philosophy is Stanley Cavell's *Disowning Knowledge*, which follows Cavell's main interest in its concentration on scepticism, or rather on the critique of scepticism. When McGinn deals with scepticism in his analysis of the plays, he points out that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is full of 'dream scepticism', because 'the play is all about the difficulty of distinguishing dreaming from wakefulness, illusion from reality, what is merely imagined from what is veridically perceived'.[8] In contrast, Cavell is not interested in simply stating that the study of scepticism is relevant to the study of Shakespeare; his concern is the mechanisms of scepticism in the plays, and what the plays can tell us *about* scepticism. Instead of using philosophy as a tool with which to analyse Shakespeare's drama, Cavell sees the drama and the philosophy on the same plane, partly analysing Shakespeare's plays in term of scepticism, partly analysing

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[5] *Ibia.*, p. 46.
[6] See, for instance, Sartre's famous example of the waiter in *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 82.
[7] McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy*, p. 15.
[8] *Ibia.*, p. 19.

scepticism in terms of Shakespeare's plays, which he uses to illustrate the problems with scepticism itself:

> Tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism … tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism itself is an interpretation of; that, for example, Lear's 'avoidance' of Cordelia is an instance of the annihilation inherent in the skeptical problematic, that skepticism's 'doubt' is motivated not by … a (misguided) intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge[9]

Cavell's pioneering interest is in the effects of denying one's knowledge of the world, an analytical philosophical approach which critiques the analytic obsession with scepticism about the external world. Cavell's study thus connects the disciplines of analytical and continental philosophy in a meaningful and productive way, but it is principally interested in general Shakespearian themes and is disinclined to anchor its argument in close verbal analysis. Cavell's approach to handling the dynamic between philosophy and literature is, however, admirable.[10] My study has no specific concern with scepticism since, as Cavell points out, scepticism 'inhabits the void of comprehension between continental ontology and Anglo-American analysis as a whole',[11] which is to say that there is an explicit connection between scepticism and ontology, but that neither is reducible to the other. However, since Cavell is a philosopher who bridges the gap between the analytic tradition and the continental tradition with his application of Wittgensteinian philosophy to problems in the study of scepticism, he remains relevant to the philosophical stance of this study. There will be many points at which this thesis will intersect with Cavell's analysis, owing to the similarity of the fundamental questions that drive our studies, such as the relationship between individual existence and the world.

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[9] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 6.

[10] This is not the unanimous consensus on Cavell's work, however. For more critical views of Cavell's readings of Shakespeare, see Richard Wilson's introduction to his essay collection *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Wilson and Jennifer Ann Bates (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), and Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 308-20. Vickers says, amongst other things, that 'the philosophical model can simply blot out the literary work it is intended to illuminate' (p. 310), although his own critique is less about the application of philosophy to Shakespeare than Cavell's psychoanalytic tendencies and what he sees as Cavell's misreadings of the text.

[11] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 94.

Peter Kishore Saval's *Reading Shakespeare through Philosophy* is another consciously philosophical study of identity and individuation. Saval describes his approach thus: 'My book attempts to read Shakespeare as if he were doing philosophy and as a way of doing philosophy … I am not studying the influence of philosophy upon Shakespeare but instead attempting the task of reading Shakespeare as philosophy, and philosophy as Shakespeare'.[12] Although the polemical wording of this statement stands in danger of transmuting drama into a form of philosophy instead of another way of tackling the same problems as philosophy, Saval echoes Cavell's belief that art addresses a dimension of problems that philosophy cannot compass:

> The confrontation of Shakespeare and philosophy is not simply an attempt to use philosophical vocabulary to explain a human drama. It is rather an attempt to restore human pertinence to the concepts of philosophy by showing how skepticism has reduced human dilemmas into intellectual puzzles.[13]

Nevertheless, Saval deals with these broader connections between Shakespeare and philosophy only in his introduction, and a significant portion of *Reading Shakespeare through Philosophy* is in fact devoted to explaining different concepts of identity in Shakespeare's plays, using philosophical vocabulary. One of the main reasons Saval uses philosophical concepts to read Shakespeare's plays is to explain how it is possible for cosmic events to reflect the events of an individual's life (as in the night before Caesar's assassination in *Julius Caesar*) in rational terms. His main argument employs Leibniz's metaphysical theory that identity can be understood either synthetically – which would be our ordinary conception of subjects – or analytically, a theory that allows for a conception of subjects who are infinite; in other words, the individual's identity includes every contingent occurrence which has and will happen to a person in his lifetime. Saval's project requires philosophical reasoning partly because of his overt aversion to historical interpretation: 'The question of reception or historical influence interests me less'.[14] What is not clear is why the perceived reaction of the cosmos to human events requires a rational explanation, or why 'analytic identity' is the most relevant way of explaining these tropes. For instance, the notion that cosmic occurrences

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[12] Peter Kishore Saval, *Reading Shakespeare through Philosophy* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p. 1.
[13] *Ibia.*, p. 3.
[14] *Ibia.*, p. 7.

reflect human life was, and indeed remains to this day, a widely held belief that can be found reflected in literature from Ancient Greece to the present, and Shakespeare could have chosen to create characters who believe in this model of the world without having necessarily held these views himself.

Saval's justification of his philosophical approach is that 'Shakespeare's passionate and sensuous plays … convey to us a cognitive difficulty that requires more than linguistic attention or historical empathy to unravel: it requires thinking, and the concepts of philosophy can provide us with tools, however imperfect, to aid us in that thinking'.[15] However, it seems odd to suggest that historical readings and linguistic analysis somehow do not involve thinking, or that the concepts of philosophy cannot be combined with these methods of analysis. Saval's third chapter is a reading of *Love's Labour's Lost* through the lens of the historical Navarre massacre, in which he interprets 'the characters in the play as referring … to the Navarre of history, and his [King Ferdinand's] marriage to the Princess as recalling … the marriage of Henry of Navarre to Queen Margot',[16] and his fourth chapter draws on the anthropologist David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Though the latter is both philosophically relevant and interesting, neither of these chapters is, strictly speaking, a reading 'through philosophy'.

One chapter of *Reading Shakespeare through Philosophy*, 'The Being of the Future in *Twelfth Night*', focuses on ontological issues by reading the play 'as a philosophical riddle or a puzzle about the relationship between being and identity'.[17] Drawing on Aristotle's and Peter Abelard's idea that future 'possible things', are '"those things that exist when they do not exist and do not exist when they exist, and that are thus naturally capable of turning over into either of the two by the ease of their nature"',[18] Saval argues that being in *Twelfth Night* is inseparable from the possibilities of what will be in the future. This is because Viola's identity as Viola is inextricable from what she will be once she is no longer Cesario, and therefore beyond what she can be said to be in the present: 'because of the many ways in which the characters say "I am," Viola's "that I am Viola" seems to lie not only at the limit of the future of the play, but at the limit of what can be unequivocally said'.[19] Saval thus

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[15] *Ibia.*, p. 125.
[16] *Ibia.* p. 51.
[17] *Ibia.*, p. 125.
[18] *Ibia.*, p. 127.
[19] *Ibia.*, p. 141.

draws the conclusion that 'Comedy is the openness to the limit of what can be said in categorical speech. The comedy presents the openness to a principle of unity neither as the one, nor the all, but singularity as an unaccountable difference'.[20] Although it discusses only one dimension of being, this is a fine analysis of one of the ontological problems present in Shakespeare's plays, one that I will return to later in this thesis. However, Saval's method differs from my own in that, as with McGinn, ontology is just one of several philosophical concepts he treats in his book, and in that he uses mostly metaphysical rationalist philosophy. The title *Reading Shakespeare through Philosophy* inevitably promises more than the book itself can deliver, since it is impossible to cover the whole field of 'philosophy'; nor does Saval provide a rationale for the philosophers or spheres of philosophy he does choose to employ.

Another philosophical reading of Shakespeare is Michael Witmore's *Shakespearean Metaphysics*, which uses a carefully chosen set of later philosophers to bring out the metaphysics of Shakespeare's works. Witmore argues that Shakespeare is a metaphysician in his own right, that playwrights have as much to say about metaphysical notions as philosophers, 'but that they do so in their staging of theatrical reality, through the collective set of techniques that we refer to as dramaturgy'.[21] For Witmore, Shakespeare's metaphysics is inseparable from the real world: it is 'a new and different kind of materialism, one that is grounded in bodies but emphatic in asserting the reality of their dynamic interrelations'.[22] Immanence is the key, and Witmore locates the metaphysical voice of Shakespeare in the actor and action, 'for if it is true that Shakespeare valued immanence as a way of thinking about the very nature of being – locating the actor in the action, the player in play – then we should not expect him to "voice" his metaphysics in a series of dramatic monologues'.[23] The actors on the stage are essential to the study of drama, but it does not seem strictly necessary to distinguish the text from the action of the play, since they are part of an inseparable whole. Witmore's approach narrows the topic to a productive effect, but my own approach will concentrate on textual analysis. However, since metaphysics is one way of studying being, at points Witmore's project comes quite close to my own. The major difference is that metaphysics is 'the study of the different kinds of things that exist in the world, the nature of

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[20] *Ibia.*, p. 142.
[21] Michael Witmore, *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 1.
[22] *Ibia.*, p. 2.
[23] *Ibia.*, p. 1.

their interaction and being, and the principles that allow such basic entities to fit together into some larger whole',[24] whereas broader ontological theories do not necessarily presume that all beings need to fit together into a coherent whole. Indeed, although Witmore asserts that Shakespeare's 'almost ridiculous ability to conserve radically different ideas in a single verbal pattern did not prevent him from thinking powerfully and explicitly about what unites the vast phenomena of the theatrical world on some deeper, holistic level',[25] and that 'Shakespeare … is fascinated by the problem of how individual beings are related both to one another and to some larger whole',[26] he gives no reason why it is so obvious to think of Shakespeare as creating a unified vision. Other critics such as A. D. Nuttall have claimed the exact opposite of Witmore's position, that 'Shakespeare, pretty consistently, avoids metaphysical theses beginning with the thrasonical word "All" … he recoils from the presumptuousness of the unitary system'.[27]

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

There are also a number of collections of critical essays on Shakespeare and philosophy, including ones which focus on particular philosophies such as *Marxist Shakespeares*.[28] One of the most significant collections is *Philosophical Shakespeares*, which contains several notable essays by critics who have a strong interest in Shakespeare and philosophy, such as Hugh Grady, Howard Caygill, and Stanley Cavell, who supplies a foreword. Although many of the essays touch on ontological questions in passing, the one that focuses on being in this collection is Caygill's 'Shakespeare's Monster of Nothing'. Caygill's essay examines Shakespeare's interest in 'nothing' as a concept, pursuing the idea that those who are robbed of their identity 'do not return to their previous identities, but inhabit a limbo which is neither being nor nothing'.[29] However, perhaps because of his central concern with the concept of 'nothing', Caygill does not give an explanation of what he means by 'being'. It remains unclear exactly how he differentiates being from nothing, and his brief and somewhat

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[24] *Ibia.*, p. 4.
[25] *Ibia.*, p. 10.
[26] *Ibia.*, p. 27.
[27] A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 326.
[28] Jean E. Howard and Scott Cutler Shershow (eds), *Marxist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[29] Howard Caygill, 'Shakespeare's Monster of Nothing', in *Philosophical Shakespeares*, ed. by John Joughin (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 114.

reductive explanation of Hegel and Heidegger's theory of nothingness does not help. Nor am I persuaded by Caygill's contention that 'Shakespeare's monster of nothing pits equivocation against the unequivocal categories of philosophical ontology'.[30] The very existence of diverse schools of philosophical ontology proves that it does not *have* unequivocal categories; it is a subject that is difficult to conceptualise, and indeed, one that thrives on the difficulty of conceptualising it. Insofar as Caygill's essay addresses ontological matters, it remains one of the few publications in the field of Shakespeare and ontology, but it is peripheral to the concerns of the present thesis, where the focus is on being rather than nothingness.

Another important essay collection is Richard Wilson and Jennifer Ann Bates' *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, which aims to put Shakespeare studies into dialogue with continental philosophy.[31] The collection includes the application of continental philosophical theories to Shakespeare (Paul Kottman, Julia Reinhard Lupton, Catherine Belsey, James A. Knapp); readings that use continental philosophical concepts to read Shakespeare (Bernard Freydberg, Andrew Cutrofello, Edward S. Casey, Andrew Cutrofello); essays on the way Shakespeare influences the work of particular philosophers (Tom Stern, Peter Holbrook, Howard Caygill, Richard Wilson); and readings of philosophers in light of Shakespeare (Christopher Pye, Christopher Norris, Jennifer Ann Bates). Of these essays, only Edward S. Casey's, 'Hamlet on the Edge (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty)', touches on ontological matters. Equating being and not being with life and death, Casey explores the idea of death as a border by analysing Hamlet's soliloquies, dreaming, madness, mirrors and ghosts. However, perhaps because the topic of Casey's essay is partly about the supernatural, there is little philosophical discussion of being. Casey mentions Heidegger only briefly once, and Merleau-Ponty twice: once on mirrors, and once on sleep, neither of which explains what Casey means by 'being'. Casey discusses questions of being and not being in a book on philosophy and Shakespeare, but he does not handle ontological matters in a philosophically rigorous way.

Since ontology is largely a subject within continental philosophy, and this study will draw primarily on the German tradition, it must address Bates' Hegelian reading of

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[30] *Ibia.*, p. 115.
[31] Jennifer Ann Bates and Richard Wilson (eds), *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2014).

Shakespeare, even though her subject matter, morality, is not a primary concern of this thesis. Bates' study is especially valuable for the way she rethinks the polarities of what can be considered evil. Her insistence on the 'evil' of Henry V is particularly provocative, based as it is on the idea that 'The truth of subjectivity is its universality as free and rational multiplicity. So in being evil, the person has in fact chosen against his own true subjective nature'.[32] However, Bates never explains her reason for choosing Hegel solely and specifically as the most appropriate philosopher to bring to bear on Shakespeare. Furthermore, as the phrase 'Moral Imagination' in her title suggests, she takes it as given that Shakespeare's concerns are moral, basing most of her interpretations on the question of good and evil in Shakespeare's plays. Ontological issues surface only as brief interpretations of Hegel's ontological position, such as 'Consciousness (and identity) relies on not being in order to be'.[33] Bates' study is philosophical at root in the sense that each chapter starts by explaining a Hegelian theory and then attempts to demonstrate its application to Shakespeare's plays, rather than finding issues in Shakespeare's plays that can be explained through the application of Hegelian or other philosophical theories. As Bates explains, in her book 'Shakespeare's characters and plots are used to shed light on Hegelian dialectic and Hegel's *Aesthetics* and *Phenomenology of Spirit* … to shed light on Shakespeare's dramas'.[34] While it is important that she gives both philosophy and Shakespeare equal significance as Cavell does, Bates' approach differs from the way I intend to approach the connection between Shakespeare and philosophy. It strikes me as more constructive to see how the problems raised by Shakespeare in his texts can be elucidated through later philosophy, rather than using Shakespeare to explain philosophical concepts.

Other notable studies include Stanley Stewart's *Shakespeare and Philosophy*, Paul A. Kottman's *Philosophers on Shakespeare*,[35] and Andrew Cutrofello's *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity*. Stewart's *Shakespeare and Philosophy* is 'about Shakespeare in philosophy',[36] meaning, in other words, that he considers the ways Shakespeare has been treated by philosophers, rather than the way Shakespeare presents philosophical problems. Stewart's

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[32] Jennifer Ann Bates, *Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 193.
[33] *Ibia.*, pp. 259-60.
[34] *Ibia.*, p. xi.
[35] Paul A. Kottman, *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
[36] Stewart, *Shakespeare and Philosophy*, p. 21.

book thus follows an entirely different agenda from that of the studies of philosophy in Shakespeare's works already discussed. Stewart's objective is partly to trace the history of how and when Shakespeare came to be significant to philosophers. He notes that it is a hundred years after Shakespeare's death before any philosopher mentions the playwright, and therefore that 'it would not overstate the case to say that seventeenth-century philosophy would remain as it is had Shakespeare never written a line'.[37] A similar project is undertaken in Kottman's *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, which is not a monograph like Stewart's book, but a collection of essays by, and extracts from, some of the philosophers who make mention of Shakespeare.

Cutrofello's *All for Nothing* also gives space to how philosophers have engaged with Shakespeare, but concentrates on the philosophical questions raised by *Hamlet*, specifically 'Hamlet's negativity', which he contends is the 'power that Hamlet personifies'.[38] Cutrofello's method is to divide the philosophical matters *Hamlet* raises into the psychological, the epistemological, the existential, the moral, and the metaphysical, and to give accounts of the philosophical theories surrounding each of these subjects. In his chapter on nihilism, for instance, he highlights the nihilistic elements in *Hamlet*, gives a brief history of nihilism, and connects it now and again with Shakespeare, mostly at points where philosophers themselves have cited his work. This book therefore lies somewhere between Stewart's and Kottman's accounts of how philosophers employ Shakespeare, and McGinn's explanation of philosophical concepts using Shakespeare, although Cutrofello differs from McGinn in that he concentrates on continental philosophy. All of these books contribute materially to the field of Shakespeare and philosophy by revealing what Shakespeare brings to philosophy. However, as far as this thesis is concerned, there is no reason why the theories of philosophers who mention Shakespeare should have any more validity for an interpretation of Shakespeare's work than any other approach. The chief criteria for my choice of philosophical theory are appropriateness and what the text requires, not what a philosopher happens to have said about Shakespeare. This thesis will not privilege the works of philosophers who specifically discuss Shakespeare in their philosophy over philosophers whose theories are more suitable to the subject.

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[37] *Ibia.*, p. 30.

[38] Andrew Cutrofello, *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), p. 2.

Related to philosophical readings of Shakespeare are books such as Nuttall's *Shakespeare the Thinker*, which argues that, 'although knowledge of the historical genesis can on occasion illuminate a given work, the greater part of the artistic achievement of our best playwright is *internally* generated. It is a product, not of his time, but of his own, unresting, creative intelligence'.[39] Nuttall's study is philosophical and philosophically interested, but it adopts no specific theoretical position. Indeed, in contrast to McGinn, who aspires 'to work out exactly what [Shakespeare's] view was', Nuttall claims that there is no viable way of ascribing a definable view to Shakespeare: 'No sooner has one identified a philosophical "position" than one is forced, by the succeeding play, to modify or extend one's account',[40] an argument with which this study concurs. Although Nuttall occasionally mentions philosophy and philosophers, his approach differs from Saval's attempt 'to read Shakespeare as if he were doing philosophy', because it adopts a wider view of 'thinking' and therefore does not consider itself a strictly philosophical reading of Shakespeare. However, it is significant that the philosophers whom he mentions in *Shakespeare the Thinker* tend to be English empiricists, and particularly philosophers such as Locke and Hume. This tendency is consistent with Nuttall's opposition to New Historicism and French theory; as he writes himself, 'I stand squarely with the British party'.[41] Naturally this means, amongst other things, that Nuttall does not deal directly with the issue of ontology. Nevertheless, his work remains an impressive examination of the idea that Shakespeare is not only a man whose work reflects the world he lived in, but a thinker in his own right: 'we do not know what he thought – finally – about anything', Nuttall concludes, but 'We know *that* he thought'.[42] In support of this argument, *Shakespeare the Thinker* provides good grounds for believing that philosophical studies of Shakespeare (in the broadest sense) are both valid and important.

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There are fewer studies devoted specifically to ontology and being in Shakespeare, but before examining them, it is worth noting how literary critics who do not explicitly interpret

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[39] Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, pp. 23-4.
[40] *Ibia.*, p. 24.
[41] *Ibia.*, p. 380.
[42] *Ibia.*, p. 380.

Shakespeare philosophically use these terms. For instance, when A. P. Rossiter writes that 'the focus of the sensibility of Hamlet perpetually forces on us the half-unreal conflict between "mind-sense" (the sense of our being, *in* the mind) and the "self-sense" of ourselves as agents in a world of things outside the mind',[43] where he draws attention to what philosophers would call the mind-world gap. Rossiter uses the word 'being' for what is essentially self-consciousness – our awareness of our existence as ourselves; the point is philosophically astute, if not philosophically worded. In such instances the idea of being is merely referred to in passing but not pursued; nor does the idea require explication, for it is not the focus of the study, and in context the meaning seems plain.

However, the use of the words 'being' and 'ontology' in Shakespeare studies is unphilosophical in many cases. There are innumerable examples of critics treating 'being' as if its meaning were self-evident, chiefly by using it interchangeably with concepts such as selfhood and subjectivity. James L. Calderwood writes, for instance, 'what [Hamlet] loses in the process is a wealth of "being", the vast inventory of personal features discrete from the act that defines the actor for what he uniquely is …',[44] which, strictly speaking, sounds more like a definition of 'self'; Roland Knowles speaks of 'Hamlet's mind or being'[45] as if the two clearly signify the same thing; John Hunt makes the baffling claim that 'The nonbeing lurking at the material center of being announces itself everywhere in [*Hamlet*'s] corporeal imagery';[46] and Christopher R. Wilson says that 'The music of Richard's inner being is discordant with his present state',[47] but it is not clear what he means.

Imprecise use stretches to 'ontology'. Thus Bruce R. Smith uses the word 'ontology' to mean 'metaphysics' and calls for a rejection of '*ontology*, which assumes a detached, objective spectator who can see the whole, and consider early modern subjects from the point of view of *phenomenology*, which assumes a subject who is immersed in the experience she is trying to describe'.[48] Coppélia Kahn uses 'ontology' to refer more generally to existence than

[43] A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. by Graham Storey (London: Longman, 1989), p. 175.

[44] James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not to Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 20.

[45] Roland Knowles, 'Hamlet and Counter-Humanism', in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 52 (1999), p. 1059.

[46] John Hunt, 'A Thing of Nothing: The Catastrophic Body in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), p. 27.

[47] Christopher R. Wilson, *Shakespeare's Musical Imagery* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), p. 24.

[48] Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 10.

to the study of being, saying, for instance, that 'the twin and the sibling, for Viola and Olivia, are versions of a need for primary ontological reassurance in *Twelfth Night*'.[49] Kahn's meaning appears to be that the presence of the other reassures one of one's existence. But because ontology is, strictly speaking, the *study* of being, it is inappropriate to use the word to mean something like 'pertaining to existence', as Wilson uses the term when he claims that 'the timeless music of Richard's life becomes ontological time, real time'.[50] Taken literally, 'ontological time' must mean 'time that is related to the study of being', which is certainly not synonymous with 'real time'. When James Kuzner writes that 'Lucrece's difficulty stems not from misunderstanding her own ontology – from failing to grasp whether she is split or unified in structure',[51] he appears to use 'ontology' to mean something like 'selfhood' rather than 'the study of being', unless Lucrece has a philosophical theory of being. The same problem is evident in Harold Bloom's chapter on *Othello* in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Bloom says 'Othello was everything to Iago, because war was everything; passed over, Iago is nothing, and in warring against Othello, his war is against ontology';[52] but unless Othello is a metaphysical philosopher, and Iago has something against the study of being, this makes little sense. The argument appears to be that, for Iago, being *is* Othello, so that the destruction of Othello is the destruction of being (crucially not the study of being). The definition of ontology in this context could be being as the absolute, where Othello is the absolute being that gives things meaning; an ontological structure that then changes for Iago. However, as Bloom does not clarify what he intends by the use of the word 'ontology', any ascription of meaning must remain speculative. As an explanation of Iago's motivation, Bloom's argument is convincing enough; however, the quotation above is not substantiated by any lines from the play and seems to ascribe Othello's being arbitrarily to Iago's being. That there is no precise ontological position or definition buttressing Bloom's use of the term does not mean that his argument does not make sense. Nevertheless, it does lead to problems, as is evident in Bloom's remark that 'Shakespeare implicitly celebrates Othello as a giant of mere being, an ontological splendour, and so a natural man self-raised

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[49] Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press), p. 207.
[50] Christopher Wilson, *Shakespeare's Musical Imagery*, p. 24.
[51] James Kuzner, *Shakespeare as a Way of Life: Skeptical Practice and the Politics of Weakness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 40.
[52] Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 435.

to an authentic if precarious eminence',[53] where Bloom's use of 'ontology' seems to have no discernible definite meaning.

The term 'ontology' is also frequently used to denote the existential status of specific things, the field of ontology that this study has chosen not to focus on. Discussing ghosts in the early modern period, Stephen Greenblatt talks about the 'ontological argument about spectrality and remembrance';[54] David Scott Kastan calls the ghost of Hamlet's father 'an ontologically ambiguous apparition';[55] and Alison Shell suggests that 'the providentialist significance of the occasion, and the sheer theatrical potency of the ghosts' presence on stage, is perhaps striking enough to make their ontological status unimportant'.[56] In these usages, 'ontology' is used in the epistemological sense of what does and does not exist, rather than as a question of the nature of 'being'. In a similar use of 'ontology', Jonathan Dollimore, John D. Cox and Harry Berger Jr. all discuss the 'ontological' status of the plays, that is, to what extent the being of the play corresponds to being in the actual world. Thus Cox, who devotes an entire chapter of his book, *Seeming Knowledge*, to Renaissance 'Esthetics, Epistemology, Ontology', treats ontology as a question of 'whether, and if so how, what we are watching participates in being'.[57] Presumably, Cox is not doubting that the play exists; he is using 'being' to signify day to day reality. The question is to what extent the actors are the characters they play, and how seriously drama affects the world. Cox's question is influenced partly by the fact that the reality of plays was a commonly debated matter in Shakespeare's day, most notably by Sir Philip Sidney in *A Defence of Poetry*,[58] and its principal aim was to determine,

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[53] *Ibia.*, p. 446.

[54] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 249.

[55] David Scott Kastan, *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 118.

[56] Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 17.

[57] John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 207.

[58] Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. by Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973). For Sidney, the fact that poetry is fictional is part of its virtue, since 'a feigned example hath as much force to teach as a true example' (p. 93), and its examples can be more moral, since it is not restrained by the facts of history. See also Francesco Patrizi's *Della Poetica* (1586), where he contests Aristotle's conception of poetry as a form of imitation: 'the poet … can either paint a likeness, or express fantasies of his own devising, which have no counterpart in the world of at or nature, nor in God's universe' (p. 91). This subject is related to the wider question of whether mimetic art can have a didactic moral purpose. For Stephen Gosson, poets are 'the fathers of lyes, Pipes of vanitie, & Schooles of Abuse' (p. 3); he takes issue with the ontological status of the entire medium, claiming that since it is fictive it is necessarily a lie (Stephen Gosson, *The schoole of abuse conteining a plesaunt [sic] inuectiue against poets, pipers, plaiers, iesters, and such like caterpillers of a co[m]monwelth; setting vp the hagge of defiance to their mischieuous exercise, [and] ouerthrowing their bulwarkes, by prophane writers, naturall reason, and common experience: a discourse as pleasant for gentlemen that fauour learning, as profitable for all that wyll follow virtue* [London: Thomas Dawson, 1579], *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation

in Dollimore's phrase, 'the ontological status of that which is imitated'.[59] Berger shares Dollimore's interest in this question, but mainly insofar as it concerns the poetry in the plays: 'the premise that the poetic elements have at least the same degree of "reality" as the dramatic elements, and that they have the same ontological status as character, setting or locale, and action, strikes me as the strength of the poetic-drama position'.[60] The problems these critics discuss may be important for an understanding of early modern debates about the ontological status of drama in particular and art in general, but they have little to do with human ontology, which is the subject of the present thesis.

'Being' is most commonly used in Shakespeare criticism in the opposition between 'being' and 'seeming' problematized in lines such as Iago's 'Men should be what they seem' (III.iii.129), the Ghost's lament about his 'seeming virtuous queen' (I.v.46) in *Hamlet*, and the Duke's interest in discovering 'what our seemers be' (I.iii.32) in *Measure for Measure*.[61] Rossiter, for instance, claims that 'All the problem plays are profoundly concerned with seeming and being';[62] McGinn observes that *Othello* 'is manifestly obsessed with the distinction between seeming and being, and with the elusiveness of truth';[63] and Shell writes that 'both the epic and the comedy ask questions about being and seeming'.[64] The idea also appears in studies on inwardness and subjectivity such as Katharine Eisaman Maus' *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*: 'For Hamlet, the internal experience …

Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99841410> [accessed 11/06/2016]). Not a logical or systematic thinker, Gosson does make exceptions, finding 'Some Playes tollerable at sometyme', mostly when they show moral virtue (p. 22). The problem with Gosson's reasoning is that he simultaneously claims that fiction is a lie, but that it can be virtuous and didactic, without explaining how something inherently deceitful can retain its moral force. Francis Bacon does away with this dilemma by arguing that poetry is 'nothing else but Feigned History', without defending the potential moral benefits of poetry (Francis Bacon, 'The Proficience and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Human', in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. by John M. Robertson [Abingdon: Routledge, 2013]). For a modern discussion of the ontological status of theatre, see Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987). On the debates about literature in early modern England, see Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[59] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 74.

[60] Harry Berger Jr., *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 106.

[61] *Measure for Measure*, ed. by Brian Gibbons, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

[62] Rossiter, *Angels with Horns*, p. 127.

[63] McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy*, p. 69.

[64] Alison Shell, 'Delusion in *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 88.

surpasses the visible – its validity is unimpeachable. The exterior, by contrast, is partial, misleading, falsifiable, unsubstantial'.[65] The point is made even more explicitly by Anne Ferry, who claims that Hamlet's inability to 'seem' creates an '"organizing distinction" between "is" and "seems", and reflects the existence of an "inner life" or "real self"'.[66] The basic distinction is between appearance and reality, which motivates discussions about 'inner life' – that is, whether characters can be said to have an internal experience they do not outwardly show. Elizabeth Hanson treats this distinction between being and seeming as a specifically ontological problem in her discussion of *Measure for Measure*, claiming that the Duke 'construes the relation between the deputy and his office in terms that suggest two rather different ontologies':[67] one in which Angelo is to *be* the Duke by becoming his substitute, and the other in which the Duke merely *lends* his power to Angelo.

> When the Duke explains to Friar Thomas the reason for his scheme – his desire to try the precise Lord Angelo, to 'see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be' it is this second ontology he insists on. He is, moreover, at this moment casting *himself* in terms of seeming and being, seeking instruction on how he may 'formally in person bear, / Like a true friar', thereby calling attention to the 'being' he is about to mask.[68]

However, Hanson's use of 'ontology' is problematic. Of her two 'ontologies' only the first is actually an ontological matter, and then only if what one can be is determined by social position and role. As for lending power, it is not clear how that can be construed as an ontological issue by any standard. Part of the problem is that the distinction between being and seeming is not a true ontological problem, despite what the wording may suggest. This is because seeming one way does not change what one is: seeming is merely a layer that obscures reality, and not a separate state of being. Thus Paul Cefalu points out that Hamlet 'believes not that "being" is set rigidly against seeming, but that the two states supplement each other. He does not say that being is more true or valid than seeming; he says only that

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[65] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 1.

[66] Anne Ferry, *The "Inward" Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 6.

[67] Elizabeth Hanson, *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 61.

[68] *Ibia.*, p. 61.

a person can be a certain way in addition to seeming a certain way':[69] one must be in order to seem. Because it does not deal with the nature of being as such, the problem of 'being' and 'seeming' is not a proper ontological problem. Consequently, while it remains a significant matter for studies of identity, perception, deception and the analysis of Shakespeare's drama in general, the distinction between being and seeming is largely irrelevant to the present thesis.

The other situation in which 'being' is often used in Shakespeare studies is to refer to the concept of 'human nature'. In *Shakespeare's Humanism*, for example, Robin Headlam Wells repeatedly uses phrases such as 'essential inner being'[70] interchangeably with 'human nature'. Taking issue with Cultural Materialists who claim that essentialist humanism is an anachronistic imposition on Shakespeare's plays,[71] Wells argues that 'the belief that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were radical antiessentialists is not supported by historical evidence',[72] and therefore that it is both valid and relevant to study 'the centrality of human nature in Shakespeare's mental universe'.[73] Wells' central contention is that humanism makes sense in terms of Shakespeare's own time: 'for Shakespeare, as for every other humanist writer in this period, the key to all wise action was "the knowledge of our selves and our human condition"'.[74] According to Wells, the fundamental nature of mankind is a key area of study for Renaissance humanists. But having established that human nature

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[69] Paul A. Cefalu, '*Hamlet*, Anti-Dualism, and the Early Modern Philosophy of Mind', *ELH*, 67 (2000), p. 404. See also Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), where he argues that, in order for appearances even to come into question, we must have a basic understanding of what something ought to look like. A different appearance is not a different being, but a different perception of the same being. Heidegger discusses a similar problem in *Logic: The Question of Truth*, trans. by Thomas Sheehan (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), where he points out that even a mistaken judgement requires that things already be meaningfully disclosed to us: 'say I am walking in a dark wood and see something coming toward me through the fir trees. "It's a deer," I say. The statement need not be explicit. As I get nearer to it, I see it's just a bush that I'm approaching. In understanding, addressing, and being concerned with this thing, I have acted as one who covers-over: the unexpressed statement shows the being as something other than it is' (p. 158).

[70] Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 10.

[71] See Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 155: 'the incorrect procedure is that which insists on reading the early seventeenth century through the grid of an essentialist humanism', and Antony Easthope, 'Poetry and the Politics of Reading', in *Re-Reading English*, ed. Peter Widdowson (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 142: 'The notion of the transcendent subject is a relatively recent innovation. It is well known that it did not exist in the ancient world, nor in any developed form in the feudal period'. See also Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays in Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 52, and Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, p. 14.

[72] Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism*, p. 4. Wells' point does not necessarily undermine the New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critique of essentialist humanism. Even if Wells were correct, it would still be possible to argue that the essentialist humanism of Shakespeare and his contemporaries (assuming there is such a unified concept) is a reflection of the dominant ideologies of the time. The condemnation of essentialist humanism does not depend on whether or not Shakespeare's contemporaries believed in an essential human nature.

[73] Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism*, p. 5.

[74] *Ibia.*, blurb.

is an important part of Renaissance discourse, Wells takes a leap and brings cognitive science to his defence to argue that essentialist humanism should also be taken seriously in the present: 'we come into the world with a pre-installed operating system specifically 'designed' to enable us to assimilate and interact with the culture that surrounds us from birth'.[75] It is not clear that this semi-Kantian, biological model is the essentialist humanism that Cultural Materialists and New Historicists argue against, or what most people would consider to be 'human nature'. But instead of clarifying the exact sense in which he intends to use the term, Wells employs its diverse meanings interchangeably, to the point where it becomes hard to pinpoint what he is arguing about. At one moment, 'human nature' is what Renaissance humanists studied, and the next moment it is the mechanisms of epistemological understanding related to our biology. It is hard to imagine anyone seriously arguing that one's biological constitution depends on one's cultural context. Cultural Materialists generally use 'essentialist humanism' to mean the reactionary attribution to 'human nature' of supposedly unchanging inclinations, such as greed or jealousy or a propensity for violence,[76] which is what Wells means some of the time, but not always.

Whether or not Wells' argument is valid, his treatment of terms such as 'being', 'inner self', 'human nature' and 'essence' as synonymous is problematic. For instance, Wells writes: 'modern neuroscience appears to confirm what common sense has always told us about the inner self. Though we may play many roles over a lifetime, it's the sense of a constant inner core of our being that gives meaning and coherence to our lives'.[77] Although the phrases are used synonymously, it must be clear that 'inner self' is not the same thing as 'inner core of being'. Self-consciousness, the recognition of ourselves as existing, is essential to our self-understanding, but it is not the same thing as being. Being does not *give* meaning and coherence to our lives, it *is* life, it is what allows there to be meaning and coherence. However,

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[75] *Ibia.*, p. 194.

[76] Hence Alan Sinfield states, 'as a cultural materialist I don't believe in common humanity' (*Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992], p. 10), and Dollimore asserts that 'the materialist critique resolutely rejects ... universal humanism, [and] essentialist individualism' *Radical Tragedy*, p. xxv, on similar grounds to the one Belsey outlines in *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), where she claims that modern literary critics have 'called in question not only the specific assumptions of common sense, some of the beliefs which appear most obvious and natural, but the authority of common sense itself, the collective and timeless wisdom whose unquestioned presence seems to be the source and guarantee of everything we take for granted' (p. 2). The argument is for multiple potential readings, an attempt not to privilege the assumptions of one particular group over any others. None of these critics are arguing about the basic biological and cognitive capacity of human beings to comprehend the world.

[77] Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism*, p. 194.

it is important to note that Wells is not alone in conflating intrinsically distinct concepts. When Jean Howard, for example, contends that postmodern historicism is 'the attack on the notion that man possesses a transhistorical core of being',[78] the word 'being' is used without clarification in a context that makes it sound a lot like the more bloated concept, 'human nature'.

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One study which seems to have being as a central motif is Maus's *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, a study of property in Shakespeare's plays.[79] Against the view of critics such as Margreta de Grazia, who argue that being is entirely made up of the properties one possesses – that 'removing what a person *has* simultaneously takes away what a person *is* … having is tantamount to being, *not* having is tantamount to *non*-being'[80] – Maus advances the argument that the notions of subject and object are mutually constitutive: 'the study of

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[78] Jean Howard, 'The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies', *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), pp. 20–1.

[79] For studies of the meaning of 'property' in Shakespeare's time, see David Armitage, 'Shakespeare's Properties', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Thought*, ed. by David Armitage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 25-43, and John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), which contains one essay on the concept of literary ownership in Shakespeare. More common in the study of property are books on stage properties or 'props', including Lina Perkins Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), which concentrates on the effect of staged objects on recollection and imagination; Jonathan Gil Korda and Natasha Korda (eds), *Staged Properties In Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), which contains several essays on props in Shakespeare's plays; and Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 1991), a book devoted to the analysis of named props in Shakespeare's plays. Publications on specific props – especially letters and written materials – are also abundant, including books such as Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), a historically grounded examination of letters in Shakespeare's plays and how his use of epistolary communication reflects early modern letter-writing practices; David M. Bergeron (ed.), *Reading and Writing in Shakespeare* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), a collection of essays on the representation of reading, writing and epistolary communication in Shakespeare; and David M. Bergeron, 'Deadly Letters in *King Lear*', *Philological Quarterly*, 72 (1993), pp. 157-76, which analyses the significance of indirect discourse in *King Lear*. However, it is notable that most of these publications do not examine the connection between being and property, as Maus and de Grazia do. Exceptions to this include Natasha Korda's feminist study of property, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), which studies the relation between early modern women's ownership of property and their subjectivity, and Eve R. Sanders, 'Interiority and the Letter in *Cymbeline*', in *Critical Survey*, 12 (2000), pp. 49-70, which examines the letter as a privileged stage property, which reflects the early modern concept of reading and writing as a representation of inwardness.

[80] Margreta de Grazia, 'The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece', in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 22.

property in Shakespeare plays turns out to be a study less of things than of relationships mediated by things'.[81] Maus is more anthropocentric than de Grazia in her approach to property: one can learn much about others through the things they have, but things are just things without the existence of people. They have significance only insofar as they mediate existence, but they do not constitute existence itself. However, like the earlier examples, Maus' account tends to mix subjectivity and being. As she explains through the example of *Richard II*, sometimes subjectivity can only develop once one no longer has objects, or it can develop in *relation* to those things one had: '"Ay, no, no, ay": the conditions for self-realization are also the conditions in which the self cannot, apparently, exist'.[82] Maus' outlook is very Hegelian, although the study has no direct philosophical references. It would be possible to argue, based on Maus' observations, that being needs to be filled with having in order for any form of subjectivity to arise, but it is not an idea which is actually addressed in her book. Indeed, despite the title, there is very little discussion of 'being', which is largely equated with subjectivity, though not to the detriment of the author's readings.

A more philosophically-oriented study of being in Shakespeare is Margherita Pascucci's *Philosophical Readings of Shakespeare: 'Thou Art the Thing Itself*. The first half of this book, which is strongly influenced by the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri, is a densely-worded study of creation and becoming in Shakespeare's plays, while the second half is concerned with the same connection between being and property as Maus' book. Just as Maus does not consider property as that which makes being meaningful, but something that acquires meaning in conjunction with being, Pascucci uses the example of *Timon of Athens* to argue that 'what Shakespeare reveals to us is that money is not a store of value, but rather people are',[83] that 'being is more than possessing'.[84] This is because, according to her, 'being itself is humanity, what we all share, the essence that expresses itself in our existence'.[85] It is a transhistorical element expressed through the characters in Shakespeare's plays: 'Shakespeare's characters are elementary: in them nature is deprived of any historical gravity. Their nature is essentially the elementary feature inherent to all creatures; it is the expression

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[81] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Being and Having in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 16.
[82] *Ibia.*, p. 32.
[83] Margherita Pascucci, *Philosophical Readings of Shakespeare: "Thou Art the Thing Itself"* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 113.
[84] *Ibid.*, p. 147.
[85] *Ibia.*, p. 235.

of being – an ontology'.[86] For Pascucci, poverty, the absolute lack of property embodied by Edgar as Poor Tom in *King Lear* is what reveals being, and thereby man cut off from all the social forces of production, 'the thing itself':

> The thing itself, in Lear's words, indicates the ultimate element that forms the human being, that core without which there is no being. So if, on the one hand, poverty is common humanity, a state of being in which man's only possessions are his body and his mind, then on the other, it is the basic, yet supreme, state of being as such, a man as a being without superstructure, without other possessions than himself, a man 'unaccommodated'[87]

Pascucci thus distinguishes between being (the 'thing itself'), and subjectivity, which is the power of causality in human beings. Just as McGinn's discussion of ontology is centred on causality, Pascucci's interest, in a more political context than McGinn's, is in subjectivity as ontological creation and the capacity for self-production:

> The creation that Shakespeare illuminates for us is the intrinsic knowledge of the essence of the production of life. It is an ontological, therefore political, concept: it is the liberation of that space of causality inherent to any principle of production from its detention on the part of power, of a superior order, of an unknown force, that is alien to us. It is the liberation of this space of causality of each being – what we could call subjectivity – from the mechanism of possession (of this same causality) that is at once the inner secret of capital (its self-production is in fact the theft of the subjectivity of its components) and the space of property.[88]

This quasi-Marxist reading sees being as a politicised arena at the centre of the forces of production. Without confusing being and subjectivity, Pascucci sees subjectivity as the human being's ability to create and own property, a capacity that capitalism exploits, but which can be emancipated from the political powers of production when being itself is revealed. The naked Edgar as Poor Tom reveals this core power of production through poverty and therefore emancipation from that order. In doing so, Pascucci claims, Shakespeare dramatizes other possibilities of becoming, the potential to use one's powers of production for self-production instead of capitalist production.

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[86] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[88] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Pascucci's interest is very specifically ontological and Shakespearean; however, as she says at the outset, her book is 'not … a text of literary criticism', and therefore 'will not engage with the immense and fundamental scholarship of Shakespeare as I will do with philosophy'.[89] Pascucci thus shares the same approach as Bates, insofar as she starts with philosophical explanations before showing how they relate to the texts, although Pascucci's choice of philosophers is better explained and based on what she finds most relevant to Shakespeare's plays. *Philosophical Readings of Shakespeare* comes closest to my own topic among the books concerned with similar themes, but adopts a different method from the one I will employ. Where Pascucci uses her interpretations of Spinoza's theories for her discussion of ontology, I enlist a range of ontological theories, because it does not seem clear to me that any single theory can do justice to the ontological dimension of Shakespearean drama, and because I am wary of transhistorical notions of being which sound much like 'human nature'.

Although it is not specifically a study of being, Julián Jimanéz Heffernan's *Shakespeare's Extremes* is another work that treats ontology in a philosophically noteworthy manner. Heffernan studies the extremes of existence – the wild men, monsters, and beasts in Shakespeare's work – in his analysis of '*human propriety* in Shakespeare'.[90] In the process, he draws on the work of many philosophers, including Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Foucault, and especially Badiou. Heffernan raises the ontological question of what it means to be human in his attempt to delineate the boundary between the human and the inhuman. Based on Badiou's concept of a non-human and coextensive ontology, Heffernan claims that the boundary between human and inhuman is flexible. It is a changing definition that is formalised in relation to others at particular moments, and the definition of what it means to be human arises from the distinction between human beings and boundary-figures such as monsters and beasts. Heffernan's book has similarities to the present thesis because it is philosophically informed, and because human ontology is a fundamental element in his argument. However, even though he draws on many ontological theories, Heffernan does not dwell on them, and they are mainly there as a means of demarcating the limits of humanity. For Heffernan, ontology is a means to an end, not an

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[89] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[90] Julián Jimanéz Heffernan, *Shakespeare's Extremes: Wild Man, Monster, Beast* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 18.

end in itself; it is part of the premise of his argument about extremity, rather than the main subject of his enquiry.

H. W. Fawkner's *Deconstructing Macbeth: The Hyperontological View*, and *Shakespeare's Hyperontology: Anthony and Cleopatra* cannot be ignored given their titles. However, Fawkner's books are deconstructionist readings, theoretically grounded in the works of philosophers such as Hegel, Derrida and Bataille, rather than ontological studies. As he outlines his project in his book on *Macbeth*, 'this current study situates itself in a somewhat indefinite borderland between deconstruction and hyperontology. It is a territory where deconstructionist issues are primary'.[91] He explains ontology as follows:

> The word 'ontology' has fallen into disrepute in modern critical theory: it suggests a humanist centredness and a logical self-presence that poststructuralists view as a totalist threat to literary and intellectual freeplay. Yet, the harmfulness of ontology, its capacity to prematurely appropriate meaning and furnish interpretative closure, is a function of how narrowly or generously 'ontology' is defined from the outset. In this work, insofar as what I call the 'hyperontological' is a logical extension of the ontological, the ontological reserve is used in an experimental, undecided fashion.[92]

The understanding of ontology Fawkner attributes to modern critical theory is more accurately a definition of metaphysics, the definition accorded to ontology by philosophers such as Adorno. This is not a use I have encountered elsewhere in Shakespeare criticism. I am sympathetic to the idea of an 'undecided' or flexible way of dealing with ontology, however, given the various ways I intend to examine ontological issues in Shakespeare. The more pressing question about Fawkner's work is: what is 'hyperontology'? Along with the term 'ontodramatic', the word appears to be Fawkner's coinage, and he explains what he means by it:

> The word 'ontodramatic' is used throughout as the rough equivalent of 'hyperontological'. As with the latter term, there is no flirtation with what is properly speaking, ontological: the 'ontodramatic' is not drama of (an) ontology, but, on the contrary, the drama of various subversions of ontology. These subversions, while remaining *ontologically suggestive*, are not per se ontological.[93]

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[91] H. W. Fawkner, *Deconstructing Macbeth: The Hyperontological View* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 21.
[92] H. W. Fawkner, *Shakespeare's Hyperontology: Anthony and Cleopatra* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 15.
[93] *Ibia.*, p. 180.

'Hyperontology', in other words, is a critique of, or a challenge to, ontology. The problem is that, while there is nothing wrong with subverting ontology as such, it is not clear how it is possible to subvert an unfixed ontology. Indeed, in spite of what he says above about the relation of ontology to 'hyperontology', Fawkner does not sustain the generous treatment of ontology he advocates. The closest he comes to defining what he means by ontology is when he uses it as an example of 'the imaginary conceptual durability of metaphysical universals',[94] and in his criticism of critics who have what he calls an 'ontologizing' tendency.[95] In both these situations, he treats 'ontology' as a totalising conceptual framework or a bias towards 'logical self-presence': the very definition he ascribes to other critics of ontology.

For Fawkner, ontology is something that tries to organize experience into a knowable system, and 'hyperontology' is the word he uses to describe those unthinkable elements of experience that cannot be contained within a totalising framework. Thus he argues that Macbeth wishes to be fully present to himself, grounded like a Cartesian subject, but that every time he tries to gain self-presence – whether through regicide or the murder of those who are a threat to him – he finds that presence is elusive and constantly vanishing: he can never be fully present to himself. In this reading, the Porter offers ontological relief, because his common-sense world of everyday problems such as drink and virility reaffirms a normative sense of presence and existence that Macbeth has lost. Fawkner's analysis of *Antony and Cleopatra* is similar, but instead of a vanishing self-presence, he argues that the constant leaving dramatized in the plays – Anthony's attempts to leave Cleopatra, Egypt, Rome, and Fulvia, Cleopatra's repeated abandonment of Anthony, and their attempts to escape life through suicide – creates a world of persistent absence that resists the possibility of full presence. The influence of Derridean *différance* is evident: presence and existence are continually deferred. What Fawkner calls 'hyperontology' is the element that causes this deferral – vanishing in Macbeth's case, and leaving in Anthony and Cleopatra's. Fawkner's analysis of *Macbeth* and mine share some common ground, but his approach differs from mine in that, while ontology is important to his thesis, it is not the sole subject, and even though he deals with questions about negation and absence, he does not analyse being,

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[94] Fawkner, *Deconstructing Macbeth*, p. 15.
[95] Fawkner, *Shakespeare's Hyperontology*, p. 188.

presence, or ontology in much detail. Fawkner also deals with one play at a time in order to find the unique hyperontological element of each play, whereas I will be examining a range of plays to gain a broader understanding of the ways in which Shakespeare treats being. I hope to show by the end of this thesis that only a very narrow definition of ontology can treat the subject as a totalising endeavour.

Another recent critical study of Shakespeare related to being – although it does not specifically use that word or the term 'ontology' – is Daniel Juan Gil's *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics: Sovereign Power and the Life of the Flesh*. The main theoretical source of Gil's study is Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, which, much like Pascucci's *Philosophical Readings of Shakespeare*, is a study of being and existence from a political standpoint. Gil's contention is that 'Shakespeare anticipates the Schmitt/Agamben vision and uses it to launch a nihilistic critique of state power and a sustained exploration of a countervailing life of the flesh'.[96] Gil's main argument is that exposure to sovereign power makes individuals feel themselves reduced to bare physical existence, as beings that can be put to death, but that it also gives them the possibility of interacting with others at this level of bare physicality: 'when it appears in Shakespeare's plays, sovereign power strips characters of their conventional social roles and identities and transforms them into a new and generative category of the flesh, capable of entering into new kinds of relationship with other flesh'.[97] Because theatre is a medium not merely of words but also of moving, living bodies, it is the perfect medium for embodying this idea, for connecting the actor and spectator directly through bodily movement and not just through speech: 'part of the way in which [Shakespeare] brings the life of the flesh onto the stage is by drawing on the essentially theatrical and bodily nature of his medium, and its ability to put bodies into gestural interaction with other bodies'.[98] Gil's is not exactly a study of being in Shakespeare's plays, but many of the references to 'bare life' in *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics* could be replaced with 'being' and still be comprehensible. However, Gil's understanding of Agamben's concept of 'bare life' differs from my own, because he takes it to mean pure physicality rather than

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[96] Daniel Juan Gil, *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics: Sovereign Power and the Life of the Flesh* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[98] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

existence. His book therefore has affinities with studies of the body in Shakespeare's plays.[99] Being and physicality – what Gil calls the life of the flesh – are related in some ways, however, because they occupy the same existential time-frame of a human being. Physicality is simultaneous with being in that they come into existence at the same time; physicality seems to be the form which existence takes, but without existence the physical body is just matter. Body and being are qualitatively different only in the respect that the body is a tangible part of existence, whereas the latter is not. This study and studies of physicality such as Gil's are therefore closely related in that they examine different facets of the same question at a similar ontological level.

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It is clear that, while being has been identified as an issue in Shakespeare's plays by many critics, no study has dealt with the question centrally, and many have failed to define the meaning or meanings of being in both Shakespeare's plays and their own critical work. The biggest problem, especially in non-philosophical studies of Shakespeare, is that being is mentioned, but not explained, and is therefore treated as if its meaning were self-evident. Although in many contexts it is understandable why and how 'being' or 'ontology' are being used, given that it is not clear what being means or what pertains to it, it is mistaken to use these terms as if their meaning were singular. Indeed, to treat the terms as if they were self-evident, and even for the words to make sense in these contexts is problematic, for it unconsciously masks the fact that their meaning is so disputable. Most importantly, Shakespeare himself does not treat being as a self-evident matter, as is plain from the existence of multiple philosophical readings, all of which use different ontological ideas to determine the meaning of being in Shakespeare. Just as in real life, where there are many conflicting ideas about the nature and significance of being, Shakespeare presents multiple possibilities of what it means to be. The main issue with many of the previous studies which examine

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[99] See, for instance, David Hillman, *Shakespeare's Entrails: Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Barker, The *Tremulous Private Body*; David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (eds), *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997); Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Hunt, 'A Thing of Nothing', pp. 27-44.

being in Shakespeare's work is that they tend to bring out only one of the many possible meanings of being.

It is clear from the first chapter, and from some of the critical studies cited above, that Shakespeare articulates different understandings of being in various ways: through characterisation, through equivocal language, and even by foregrounding the ontological status of the play itself. However, since no study has dealt with the significance of the ways being finds expression in the works of Shakespeare, it is essential to undertake an intensive exploration of the diverse aspects of ontology they dramatise. Of course, the conclusion of such a study cannot be that the diversity of the ideas of being animating the plays and poetry simply confirms their author's ability to reflect the rich tapestry of life. Nevertheless, it is important that the multifarious nature of being in Shakespeare be kept in sight and not obscured by the imposition of a single ontological theory. I hope by the end of this thesis to make clear why Shakespeare does not presuppose a single theory of being, and what this says about Shakespeare's understanding of existence.

Chapter 4

'Every man alone thinks he hath got / To be a phoenix'
Renaissance Ontology

What ontological theories were available to Shakespeare in his own time? How much is his ontological thinking indebted to Renaissance philosophy? There are certain lines, such as the celebrated speech on degree by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, which clearly employ traditional ontological theories – in this case the great chain of being – but are these theories able to explain all the ontological problems in Shakespeare's works, such as those touched upon in the first chapter? By examining popular ontological theories from the early modern period, and how other poets, playwrights, philosophers and theologians tackle ontological issues, it will become clear that, while the era opened up new ways of thinking about being, Shakespeare's approach to being cannot be explained in purely historical terms.

Most modern university courses in philosophy do not cover the period between the end of ancient philosophy and Descartes, the so-called 'father of modern philosophy'. While Michel de Montaigne may receive an honorary mention in the study of scepticism, the philosophy of Shakespeare's day goes all but unmentioned. There are several reasons for this omission. One is no doubt because philosophy in this period is strongly tied up with theology. This makes it unsuitable for the methods of modern philosophy, which, from Kant onwards, tend to separate the realm of the divine from the province of logic. Of course, this cannot be said of Descartes or of English philosophers such as Locke and Berkeley. But the premise of philosophical works such as Descartes' *Meditations* is not theological, even if his repudiation of doubt relies on divine intervention. As Charles Taylor points out, the crucial difference is that God becomes part of the proof of the proposition instead of the foundation:

> The thesis is not that I gain knowledge when turned towards God in faith. Rather the certainty of clear and distinct perception is unconditional and self-generated.

What has happened is rather that God's existence has become a stage in *my* progress towards science through the methodical ordering of evident insight. God's existence is a theorem in *my* system of perfect science.[1]

In contrast, many Renaissance investigations into the nature of humanity and existence are fundamentally theological from the outset, or lead teleologically to the knowledge of God. For instance, in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (which was still current in Shakespeare's day), 'theology, or "sacred doctrine", is unlike philosophy in that it assumes the existence of God and other articles of faith as premises; philosophy, by contrast, begins with the objects of sense-perception'.[2] Studying individual objects leads to the study of objects as a kind, that is, what makes the individual object the kind of object it is. An investigation of effects then leads to the search for a cause and therefore to the realm of metaphysics, and the teleology of metaphysics is theological as it leads to the idea of a first cause, an idea I will return to later.

Another reason why Renaissance philosophy is seldom studied as philosophy is because the term 'philosophy' included more meanings then than it does today. Philosophy had the general meaning of 'learning' – which it retains in degree titles such as 'Doctor of Philosophy' – and was divided into three subcategories: moral (or divine), natural, and metaphysical philosophy. As Francis Bacon writes in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), 'Out of ... seuerall inquiries, there doe arise three knowledges, divine philosophy, natvral philosophy, and hvmane philosophy, or hvmanitie'.[3] Moral and metaphysical philosophy are the areas that are still associated with philosophy today, but the fact that moral philosophy was coterminous with divine philosophy explains why it is hard to separate theology from logic in the Renaissance.

In Shakespeare's use of the word, 'philosophy' tends to mean 'natural philosophy', or what we would refer to now as science. This is why the mad Lear asks Poor Tom, whom he refers to as a 'philosopher', 'what is the cause of thunder?' (III.v.150-51), which is a scientific rather than a philosophical enquiry. Although Hamlet's lines to Horatio, 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I.v.165-6),

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[1] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 157.

[2] Nicholas Jolley, 'The Relation Between Theology and Philosophy', in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. 1, p. 364.

[3] Quoted in 'Philosophy *n.*', *OED,* definition 1.

may seem to offer textual support for distrusting philosophical interpretations, it is clear from the dramatic context that Hamlet has in mind the demystification of the world by the nascent natural sciences of Shakespeare's day, rather than what we would now call philosophy.[4]

A further complicating factor is that many thinkers *known* as philosophers in the Renaissance (rather than private thinkers such as Montaigne) followed in the footsteps of early medieval philosophers such as Augustine, Boethius and Aquinas in their preoccupation with the major task of reconciling Plato and Aristotle with Christianity. This led to centuries of scholarship fixated on the relevance of pagan philosophy to Christianity, minor quibbles about translations from the Greek as well as disputes over neologisms and the correct use of Latin, and hundreds of commentaries on both the Greek philosophers and early Christian neo-Platonists such as Augustine. Philosophy had the reputation of being 'a sterile, derivative, and monolithic system obsessed with logic-chopping and leading its abstracted victims on a bookish hunt for the irrelevant'.[5] Whether academic philosophers of the Renaissance, many of whom were prolific scholars, deserved this reputation is debatable, but the combination of theological issues and commentary rather than original thought did not contribute significantly to the development of new approaches in academic philosophy. Nevertheless, the concentration on the compatibility of philosophy with theology is understandable, not necessarily because everyone in the Renaissance was an unquestioning Christian, but because it was a time when free thinkers such as Giordano Bruno were still liable to be burnt at the stake for not being theologically orthodox enough.

The fact that the philosophy of the time is not often studied as philosophy today does not mean that the things that concern philosophers today were not of interest to Shakespeare's contemporaries, even if the ideas that were to become crucial in later ages were not necessarily being voiced by the academic philosophers. I have already indicated how relevant ontology is to Shakespeare's works, and Montaigne is exemplary in his concern with scepticism, which continues in the study of epistemology to this day. The idea expressed in his observation that 'touching the error and uncertaintie of the senses operation, a man may store himselfe with as many examples as he pleaseth, so ordinary are the faults and deceits

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[4] In the New Cambridge Edition of *Hamlet*, Philip Edwards glosses 'philosophy' in this line 'meaning intellectual investigation, science'.
[5] Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 59. See chapters 2 and 3 of the same study for detailed accounts of Renaissance Aristotelians and Platonists.

they use towards us'[6] could have come from any number of latter-day epistemological theories of sensory doubt. More and Machiavelli tackle important considerations in political philosophy such as the legitimacy of the state, considerations that are still of the utmost importance. Humanists such as Erasmus and Vives, who 'saw logic as barbaric, inelegant, hypertechnical, and ultimately devoid of any truly human purpose',[7] objected to the academic logical philosophy of the day, advocating instead a more human-oriented study of the world, bearing similarities to some of the ways continental philosophy has differed from certain analytic schools of thought.

As far as ontological issues are concerned, it is apparent that being was a central concern in the Renaissance. For instance, the general consensus was that the goal of metaphysics was 'being or being in general'.[8] Hence, when Faustus abjures logic and Aristotle at the start of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, he says, 'Bid *on kai me on* [being and not being] farewell' (I.i.12).[9] The debate about being and non-being functions as a synecdoche for philosophical enquiry in general. In theology also, the being and nature of God were of paramount importance, since on this matter rested the definition of everything He created. This ontotheological absolute being is reflected in many books of the time. For instance, Thomas Wilson's *A Christian Dictionary*, published in 1612, defines 'Jehovah' as 'An eternall selfe-being, one that hath his essence of himselfe, from euerlasting; and is the cause of existance or being to all things & creatures, which are of him, by him, and for him',[10] and 'Am' as 'Existence or selfe-being, *Exod.* 3, 14. *I am that I am;* that is, I haue my being from my selfe, and from no other, and am the cause of beeing to all things that be'.[11] In Shakespeare's works this common sentiment is echoed in phrases such as 'I am helping you

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[6] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. by John Florio (London: Routledge, 1898), p. 304.

[7] Copenhaver and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 29.

[8] John W. Wippel, 'Essence and Existence', in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100-1600*, ed. by Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 390.

[9] Christopher Marlowe, 'The Tragicall History of Doctor Faustus (A-Text)', in *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II, Doctor Faustus, A- and B- Texts, The Jew of Malta, Edward II*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[10] Thomas Wilson, *A Christian dictionarie Opening the signification of the chiefe words aispersed generally through Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, tending to increase Christian knowledge* (London: W. Iaggard, 1612), p. 243, *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:21799:141> [accessed 26/05/2014].

[11] *Ibia.*, p. 9-10, <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:21799:21> [accessed 26/05/2014].

to mar that which God made' (*As You Like It* I.i.32-4),[12] 'God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man' (*The Merchant of Venice*, I.ii.54),[13] 'One, gentlewoman, that God hath made, himself to mar' (*Romeo and Juliet* II.ii.109-10). The being of God is both important in itself and essential for everything else, as it is the foundation of all other forms of being.

In a predominantly Christian world view, God is the primary mover that causes all things to have being. This is a reflection of an older theory – propounded by both Boethius and Aquinas – that the being of God differed from all other forms of being. Most forms of being are contingent, a single instance of their form of existence: *diversam est esse at id quod est*, as Aquinas phrases it. In contrast, what God is, and his existing, are one and the same; in Aquinas' terms, *ipsum esse subsistens*. This means that most forms of being are a type of existence, rather than existence itself; the form, whether a dog, a horse or a human, limits existence, and only God is unrestricted existence itself.[14] This idea can be found in many other writings such as a translation of a work by Théodore de Bèze (a disciple of John Calvin), published in 1591: 'Deity, is not a thing that onely may be conceaued in thought, hauing no other being or existence, as are the generall kinds and sorts of things created, but is in deede a most single, and a most pure infinite self-being'.[15] De Bèze thus distinguishes between the existence of most ideas and the idea of God, which does not have its foundation in the thoughts of humanity, but in its own self-existence. In the same vein, Thomas Morton considers the eternal nature of God's self-being:

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[12] *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dusinberre, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Cengage Learning, 2006).
[13] *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Drakakis, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Arden, 2010).
[14] For the scholastic philosophers, this raised questions as to whether the essence of beings is part of God, or something else that is more intelligible. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola claimed that 'God is not being, but is above being' ('One Being and the One', in *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. by Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998). Marsilio Ficino and Francesco Patrizi argue that God is complete unity and therefore above all beings, and Henry of Ghent that essences, or possible existence, have an essential being insofar as they exist in God's knowledge. Ockham denied that there was any real difference between essence and existence, since something that does not exist has no essence and is therefore nothing. The debate in scholastic philosophy was thus whether God is *a* being, being itself, or beyond being. For more on this debate see Stephen Menn, 'The Intellectual Setting', in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100-1600*, ed. by Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 58-63, and Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Random House, 1955), pp. 420-7.
[15] Théodore de Bèze, *Propositions and principles of diuinitie propounded and disputed in the vniuersitie of Geneua, by certaine students of diuinitie there, vnder M. Theod. Beza, and M. Anthonie Faius* (Edinburgh: Robert Walde-Grave, 1591), p. 6, *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:1885:10> [accessed 26/05/2014].

This eternitie of God is to bee defined, the euerlasting existence of his essence without eyther beginning or end. For if it had beginning, then it did not alwaies exist, for it could not exist before it hadde a beginning: And if it did not always exist, then sometime there was nothing, but that cannot bee, for if there were time, there was distinction of motion which made that time, but where there is nothing, there is no motion, for nothing cannot mooue.[16]

The significance of God's being is nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of atheism, which registers the impact of the existence of God on the everyday lives of men. The same treatise by Morton, which is written in the form of a dialogue between a scholar and a gentleman, contains a section concerning those 'that denie not onely the prouidence, but euen the very nature and existence of God'.[17] In this dialogue, the being of God is considered to be so significant that those who do not believe in His existence 'are not men, but beasts in the likenesse of men'.[18] The being of God not only defines the being of mankind, but their entitlement to social existence and treatment as fellow men. The denial of God is thus unnatural, tantamount to denying that one's being is human. As the scholar says, 'when I think of such monsters [the atheists] as you speake of, I feele my heart to rise against them so, that I could more willingly teare them in peeces with my teeth, then teach them with my toong'.[19] The being of God is connected with the being of man in more than theoretical and ontological ways: it affects the relationships between men in society.

If the nature of God's being is a significant matter, so is the nature of his creation, the things that gain their being from God. One major dispute in this category is the existence of sin and evil in the world, a fact seemingly in contradiction to the idea of God as goodness. For if God is goodness, and God is being, then being is necessarily good. As Aquinas had reasoned on this premise, 'the being of anything, as such, is good, and its not being is evil'.[20] The issue was with the ontological status of sin and evil; that is, whether they have any being and therefore partake of God, who is being itself. One late sixteenth-century preacher writes:

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[16] Thomas Morton, *A treatise of the nature of God* (London: Tho. Creede, 1599), p. 216, *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:1440:118> [accessed 26/05/2014].

[17] *Ibia.*, p. 30 <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:1440:24> [accessed 26/05/2014].

[18] *Ibia.*, p. 30.

[19] *Ibia.*, p. 30-1.

[20] Quoted in Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 74.

Hugo de S. Vict. saith: *There is no cause of the will of God, which is the cause of all things.* And this very thing common reason will teach vs, because there must first some certaine ground be laid, from whence euery thing should haue or take the being and existence thereof; and this ground is euen the very will of God. For a thing is not first, and then afterward God willeth it to come to passe; but, because God hath decreed that a thing should come to passe, or be done, therefore it is; And yet shall not God therefore bee the cause of sinne: because sinne is not properly a thing, action, or being, but a defect only: and yet neuerthelesse it is not therefore nothing. For whatsoeuer hath a being, is either Really and positiuely, or else in Reason onely. And vnder those things which are in Reason, are contained not only notions and relations, but also priuations: because they haue not a reall matter and forme out of the vnderstanding. But sinne hath not a positiue and reall being, & yet it hath a being in Reason (as they terre it.) For so farre forth it is in the nature of things being, as it may cause a true composition in the mind: and although it does not exist positiuely, that is, by matter, or forme created; yet it is priuatiuely: because that by the remoue or taking away of originall righteousnesse, that doth immediatly and truly follow and exist. Neither doth it follow, as some other naturall habit, or as a pure negation, but as a certaine thing betweene both, that is, a want and absence of the contrarie good.[21]

This is textbook Augustinian privation theory. Sin is given a liminal existence as not-nothing and not-good; it is defined in relation to those things that exist and are in the domain of God's creations, and those things that do not exist at all.[22] Sin and evil are therefore negations rather than proper existences, a falling away rather than a free choice.

As can be seen from these early modern works, it is not just the attributes of God, creation, and moral factors such as sin that matter. It is their very *being* – the being of God as pure being, His *creation* of the world, the possibility and nature of the *existence* of sin – that is of consequence. Nor is it only in theological and philosophical tracts that such thoughts are found. John Donne is one notable contemporary of Shakespeare who repeatedly deals with many forms of the question of being in his poetry. In his *Obsequies to the Lord Harrington*, for example, he refers to the idea of God as pure being:

> God is the glass; as thou, when thou dost see
> Him who sees all, seest all concerning thee,

[21] William Perkins, *A C[hristian] and [plain]e treatise of the manner and order of predestination and of the largenes of Gods grace*, trans. By Francis Cacot and Thomas Turke (London: F. Kingston, 1606), p. 58-9, *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:3741:75> [accessed 26/05/2014].
[22] For more on this debate on the nature of God and Creation see Chapter 3 of Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.

> So, yet unglorified, I comprehend
> All, in these mirrors of thy ways and end.
> Though God be truly our glass through which we see
> All, since the being of all things is he
>   (l. 31-36)[23]

The poem not only posits the nature of God's being, but expands on the being of man in relation to God, in whose essence man's being is included. This is an exemplary expression of mystical thought: God is being, and all being is God.[24] This oft-repeated notion of being itself as God means that introspection into the nature of one's own being will lead to knowledge of God; that the most intimate aspect of existence is tied up with the most universal, so that true knowledge of oneself is also knowledge of God.

Although this thesis deals primarily with the ontology of man rather than the existence of God, metaphysical ideas and the rest of physical creation, there is a strong correlation between all forms of being in much Renaissance ontology, and the significance of being in the educated circles of early modern Europe cannot be underestimated. What sort of being God was said to have given man will need examining, as well as other Renaissance ideas about what pertains to man's being. Although the first recorded use of the term 'ontology' in the English language is 1663, it is the coinage of a word to describe a study that

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[23] 'To the Countess of Bedford', in *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. by Robin Robbins (Harlow: Pearson, 2010), p. 780.

[24] Briefly, mysticism is the idea that one can achieve union with the absolute, or God, through meditation. Mystics claim that they have knowledge of the absolute, not through reason, but through the non-verbal spiritual experience of becoming one with the divine. The core of mysticism is therefore a form of dogmatic absolute being, based not on reason but on faith and conviction. Of those mentioned in this chapter, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Pseudo-Dionysius and Plotinus are counted among the mystics. Around Shakespeare's time, the idea finds expression in the writings of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross in Spain, and John Donne and Robert Southwell in England. For more on this subject, see Rudolf Steiner, *Mystics of the Renaissance, and Their Relation to Modern Thought, Including Meister Eckhart, Tauler, Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme, Giordano Bruno, and Others*, trans. by Bertram Keightley (London and New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1930), and Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Mysticism in English Literature* (1913; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), which claims that, as regards mysticism, 'Shakespeare must be left on one side, first, because the dramatic form does not lend itself to the expression of mystical feeling, and secondly, because even in the poems there is little real mysticism, though there is much of the fashionable Platonism' (p. 13). As the rest of this chapter will show, this is a fair assessment. Unlike Donne, Shakespeare makes use of the image of the great chain and the language of absolute being but never implies that it is a factual description of the world or existence. Because mysticism is one of the formative influences of the great chain of being and is not so much an ontological theory in itself as a method of gaining knowledge of this order, for the sake of this chapter I will not differentiate between mysticism and the theory more generally.

had already been a major part of metaphysics.[25] The rest of this chapter will elucidate the ontological theories that existed in Shakespeare's lifetime, starting with the predominant concept: the great chain of being.

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The great chain of being is an idea based on the concept of God as the prime mover. It is a metaphysical theory according to which all things in the universe are ordered on a vertical scale that stretches from God at the top to angels, to celestial bodies, to humans, to animals, to plants and finally to stones at the very bottom. Each of these beings embodies aspects of God in its own way, but the further they are from God, the more imperfect they become. In the words of a contemporary author, John Salkeld,

> diuers things doe diuersly represent Almighty God: some doe participate of vertue and wisdome, others only of life, others of existence and being, insomuch that those things which only haue existence, and neither liue, nor breathe, are counted an imperfect similitude of God, because they are good according to their kinde, and flow from that infinite Ocean of goodnesse, from whence all other goodnesse doth proceed. Againe, those things which doe liue, and yet doe not vnderstand, doe more perfectly participate the likenesse of God: but those things lastly which doe vnderstand, doe come so neere vnto the likenesse of God, that nothing created can come more neere. Wherefore seeing that man may participate of the wisdome of the diuine nature, yea euen according to his owne nature, hence it is, that hee is so framed to the image of God, that nothing can be more like in his being and nature vnto God: he liueth, he breatheth, he vnderstandeth, he hath existence and being, and is in all these, as a perfect patterne of his Creator and God.[26]

Thus stones and minerals, at the very bottom, have the attribute of mere existence; plants have life in addition to existence; animals have desires and the added ability to move, and

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[25] 'Ontology *n.*', *OED*, etymology and definition 1. There is also one recorded use in Greek characters in 1613. The word 'ontology' is thought to have been coined by Shakespeare's German contemporary Jacob Lorhard who uses the word interchangeably with 'metaphysics' in *Ogdoas Scholastica* (Sangalli: Georgium Straub, 1606).

[26] John Salkeld, *A treatise of Paradise. And the principall contents thereof especially of the greatnesse, situation, beautie, and other properties of that place: of the trees of life, good and euill; of the serpent, cherubin, fiery sword, mans creation, immortalitie, propagation, stature, age, knowledge, temptation, fall, and exclusion out of Paradise; and consequently of his and our originall sin: with many other difficulties touching these points. Collected out of the holy Scriptures, ancient fathers, and other both ancient and moderne writers*, trans. By Francis Cacot and Thomas Turke (London: Edward Griffin, 1617), p. 95-6, *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:17022:57> [accessed 27/05/2014].

angels, being closest to God, dispense with flesh and animalistic desires, existing only in the pure and immutable form of spirits, with the additional attribute of rationality. These diverse levels of existence were not thought of as completely separated from one another, but rather, consistent with the image of the chain, as linked to each other, with minute differences distinguishing the highest being in one grade from the lowest being of the one above it. Only man, placed in the middle of all other forms of existence above and below him, possesses an element of every being.

But despite Salkeld's optimistic view of mankind as a pattern of God, it was also true that, unlike angels and God, man possessed physical desires like animals, which constrained his rational capabilities. At the same time, precisely because of the way the corporeal and spiritual came together in him, man was the only kind of creature who possessed free will: the ability to lower himself in pursuit of sensual pleasures, or to elevate himself in search of rationality and divinity. The idea is powerfully expressed in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*:

> He [God] therefore took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: 'Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have We given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgement thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgement, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine'.[27]

Because mankind was said to partake of all things in existence, he was considered to be a smaller version of the whole scheme: the microcosm that reflected the macrocosm. In the words of Raymond Sebond:

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[27] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 'Oration on the Dignity of Man', in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall Jr., trans. by Elizabeth Livermore Forbes (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 224-5.

> First there is mere existence, the inanimate class: the elements, liquids, metals … Next there is existence and life, the vegetative class … next there is existence life and feeling, the sensitive class … the three classes lead up to man, who has not only existence life and feeling, but understanding: he sums himself up in the total faculties of earthly phenomena. (For this reason he was called the little world or microcosm)[28]

The being of mankind reflects the rest of creation. Thus stars were meant to influence the fate of mankind, for any disturbance in the heavenly spheres entailed a disturbance in man, whose being was interconnected with all other things in the great chain of being. In addition, each of these divisions of being had hierarchical subdivisions, with cherubim as the highest form of angel, the sun as the greatest of the celestial bodies, the king at the top of mankind, the lion as the king of animals (and the eagle in yet another subdivision as the king of the birds), gold as the greatest of the minerals and so on. The system was so interconnected that one could evoke the image of the king through his symbolic counterparts in the other grades of being, such as the lion, or gold, or the sun.

The idea of an order of being is at least as old as ancient Greek philosophy. Plato, for example, posits the good as the highest form in the world of the forms. The form of the good defines the rank of everything else that exists according to how much it possesses or lacks goodness, although Plato's is not as fully schematised a theory as the great chain of being. Closer to the latter is the hierarchical scale of zoological being set out by Aristotle in *De Anima*, where the place of a creature in the hierarchy is dictated by whether it possesses more of a nutritive soul than a rational soul.[29] These ideas were revived in the fifth and sixth centuries by Neoplatonist philosophers such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Macrobius and Augustine, who, influenced by the mystic and later Greek philosopher Plotinus, reconciled Greek concepts with Christian ideas, replacing the good with God to make a more organised scheme of things. As Taylor notes, 'For Augustine as for Plato, the vision of cosmic order is the vision of reason, and for both the good for humans involves their seeing and loving this order'.[30] Augustine writes:

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[28] Raymond Sebond, *Natural Theology*, quoted in E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 39.
[29] For a more detailed study of the origins of the theory, see Chapter 2 of Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.
[30] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 128.

> GOD sayd vnto *Moyses* by his *Angells,* when hee sent him to the children of *Israel̃: I am that I am.* For *God* beeing the highest essence, that is eternall and vnchangeable: gaue essence to his creatures, but not such as his owne: *(d)* to some more and to some lesse: ordering natures existence by degrees; for as wisedome is deriued from being wise, so is essence *ab ipso esse,* of hauing being ... Wherefore vnto that especiall, high essence, that created all the rest, there's no nature contrary, but that which hath no essence: *(f)* For that which hath beeing is not contrary vnto that which hath also beeing. Therefore no essence at all is contrary to *GOD* the cheefe essence, and cause of essence in all.[31]

Here, the idea of a divinely ordered scheme of being is fully present in a form that hardly differs from the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts quoted earlier in this chapter. That this particular quotation is from a copy of Augustine's *City of God* printed in 1610 shows that such ideas continued to have currency a millennium after Augustine's death.

So prevalent was the image of the *scala naturae* in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that it makes an appearance not only in philosophical and theological texts, but also in officially sanctioned propagandist homilies such as 'An Exhortation Concerning Good Order, and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates' of 1569:

> Almighty God hath appointed and Created all things in Heaven, Earth, and Waters, in a most excellent and perfect Order. In Heaven he hath appointed distinct and several Orders and States of Archangels and Angels. In Earth he hath assigned and appointed Kings, Princes, with other Governors under them, in all good and necessary Order. The Water above is kept, and raineth down in due time and season. The Sun, Moon, Stars, Rainbow, Thunder, Lightning, Clouds, and all Birds of the Air, do keep their order ... Every degree of People in their Vocation, Calling, and Office, hath appointed to them their Duty and Order: Some are in high degree, some in low, some Kings and Princes, some Inferiours and Subjects, Priests, and Lay-men, Masters and Servants, Fathers and Children, Husbands and Wives, Rich and Poor, and every one have need of other, so that in all things is to be lauded and praised the goodly order of God, without the which, no House, no City, no Common-wealth, can continue and endure, or last.[32]

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[31] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *St. Augustine, Of the citie of God vvith the learned comments of Io. Lod. Viues. Englished by I.H.* (George Eld., 1610), p. 442, *Early English Books Online,* Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:7273:231> [accessed 27/05/2014].

[32] Anonymous, 'An Exhortation Concerning Good Order, and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates', in *Certain sermons or homilies appointed to be read in churches in the time of Queen Elizabeth of famous memory and now reprinted for the use of private families, in two parts* (London: George Wells, Abel Swall and George Pawlett, 1687), p. 105, *Early English Books Online,* Text Creation Partnership digital edition, <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:12129208> [accessed 26/08/2016].

According to this exhortation, heaven, earth, planets, seasons, animals, trees, the soul, the anatomy of man, and the social hierarchy are all part of the divine order, and chaos will ensue if the order is broken. Only obedience to God, the nobility and the magistrates can prevent the destruction of life, family and possessions; it is therefore the duty of the people to uphold this order. Sermons such as these were expounded from the pulpit to disseminate the idea widely, encouraging obedience, subordination and patriotism. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the language found its way into the literary works of the time.

In Shakespeare's work, the great chain of being appears most famously in Ulysses' speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida*:

> The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
> Observe degree, priority and place,
> Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
> Office and custom, in all line of order.
> And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
> In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
> Amidst the other
> <div align="right">(I.iii.85-91)</div>

This could easily be a paraphrase of the Exhortation, and the context is similarly political. Ulysses is talking on the assumption that political order itself is ontologically predetermined, so that, as the rest of the speech goes on to argue, actions that undermine the universal order jeopardise the existence of all things. The same basic conception of creation underpins Hamlet's eulogy of mankind: 'How noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals' (II.ii.270-73). Here he is echoing the idea that man is placed between the animals and the angels as physically the noblest of the animals, yet mentally free to think like angels and apprehend the world like a god. When the mad Lear is out in the storm and says that there is a 'tempest in [his] mind' (III.iv.13-4), he invokes the idea that the microcosm of man mirrors the macrocosm of the world: that man is mad in a world gone mad. The same world of correlative meaning is implicitly present in *Hamlet* when the mad Ophelia hands out flowers. Not only does she explicitly refer to the meanings of flowers corresponding to other things in the rational universe – 'there is pansies:

that's for thoughts' (IV.v.170) – she also claims that the flowers have reacted in sympathy to the events in the court of Elsinore, for the 'violets … withered all when my father died' (IV.v.177-8).

Helen in *All's Well that Ends Well* also enlists this notion when she metaphorically construes her love for Bertram in terms of hierarchy in the animal kingdom: 'The ambition in my love thus plagues itself: / The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love' (I.i.92-4),[33] creating an absurd sexual image to express the incongruity of her position in such a hierarchically determined world. The repeated figurative parallels drawn between the sun and Richard in *Richard II* presuppose the same system of correspondences. Richard views himself as the sun and his absence from his country as causing night:

> When this thief, this traitor Bolingbroke,
> Who all this while hath revelled in the night
> Whilst we were wandering with th'antipodes
> Shall see us rising in our throne, the east,
> His treasons will sit blushing in his face
> (III.ii.47-51)

Other characters in the play employ the same metaphorical analogy. Salisbury, for instance, says that Richard's 'sun sets weeping in the lowly west' (II.iv.21), and even Bolingbroke, who ultimately deposes the king, uses the image: 'see, see, King Richard doth himself appear, / As doth the blushing discontented sun' (III.iii.61-2). The image derives partly from the historical Richard's personal badge of the 'sun emerging from a cloud', which rests in turn on the correlation between the king of men and the king of the planets.

Many other writers contemporary with Shakespeare also refer to this order in a way that tacitly takes it for granted. For instance, in John Marston's *The Malcontent*, Malevole is described as 'a man, or rather a monster, more discontent than Lucifer when he was thrust out of the presence. His appetite is unsatiable as the grave; as far from any content as from heaven' (I.i.26-29).[34] Malevole is more monster than man because, like Lucifer in comparison to the rest of the angels, he has sunk so inordinately low in the category of man. His

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[33] *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by Susan Snyder, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). All references to this play are to this edition.
[34] *The Malcontent and Other Plays*, ed. by Keith Sturgess (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). All references to this play are to this edition.

enslavement to appetite, the attribute of animals, shows that he is closer to animals than to angels; there is even an explicit reference to his distance from heaven. In the same play, the earth is described as 'but the draught wherein the heavenly bodies discharge their corruption; the very muckhill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements. Man is the slime of this dungpit, and princes are the governors of these men' (IV.ii.137-141). It is a pessimistic version, but the image is still predicated on the great chain of being, in which earth, at the centre of the universe, is also the lowest of the heavenly bodies, and where men are subdivided into the governors and the governed, although the subdivision itself is debased. At the other extreme is a poem such as 'Man' by George Herbert, which starts with an allusion to the great chain of being:

<div style="text-align:center">

Man's ev'ry thing,
And more: He is a tree, yet bears no fruit;
A beast, yet is, or should be more:
Reason and speech we only bring.
(ll. 7-10)[35]

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It then presents an optimistic picture in which all things in the world are made for man, in whom they converge:

He is in little all the sphere
Herbs cure our flesh; because that they
Find their acquaintance there
(ll. 22-24)

The poem invokes the correspondence theory of the rational universe, according to which the great chain of being is reflected in man, and thus each link in the chain corresponds to, and is therefore in accord with, man. Donne, too, repeatedly uses this concept; he says in one of his sermons, for instance, that 'every species being a link of God's great chain, and a limb of his great creature, it seems not to be put into our power, to break his chain'.[36]

However, in his earlier poetic work, Donne employs the concept far more subversively. An exemplary instance is provided by 'The Sun Rising', the first line of which

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[35] George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by John Tobin (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 83-4.
[36] *The Works of John Donne* (London: John W. Parker, 1839), p. 434.

challenges the order of the universe that places mankind lower than celestial bodies: 'Busy old fool, unruly Sun'. This is shocking, especially if the Sun is considered the astronomical counterpart of God.[37] The poem sustains the same irreverent metaphor, presenting the speaker of the poem as more powerful than the sun, which he 'could eclipse and cloud … with a winke' (l. 13), and finally turning the lovers' bed into the centre of the universe. Of course, subversion requires an established order that can be subverted, and the poem still relies on the model of the great chain of being for its scandalous effect. However, if the model were incontestable, it would not be possible to question or even play with it in any way. Whereas Donne the preacher returns to defend the widely accepted view of creation, Donne the poet seems aware that this model of the universe is becoming one of a number of ontological possibilities, whether he regards this as a positive change or not. In 'The Anatomy of the World' he famously writes:

> 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,
> All just supply, and all relatïon:
> Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
> For every man alone thinks he hath got
> To be a phoenix, and that then can be
> None of that kind of which he is, but he.
> (ll. 213-18)[38]

Here a new ontological model is perceived to have displaced the old one with disastrous consequences. In this new order – or rather disorder – the social and political hierarchy has been abandoned, leaving fragmentation and incoherence to rule. Instead of a wider social world of 'relation' and ordered 'coherence', the new ontology is centred on 'every man alone', the individual who must be distinguished and unique. Such a person is self-creating and self-perpetuating, like the 'phoenix' that rises out of its own ashes: it is the model of the absolute self.

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[37] 'The Sun Rising', in *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, p. 245. All references to this poem are to this edition.
[38] 'The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World', in *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, p. 811.

Although E. M. W. Tillyard makes confident assertions such as 'the Elizabethans pictured the universal order under three main forms',[39] given that there are instances of different ways of thinking about the world in the early modern period, it is doubtful whether it makes sense to talk about 'the Elizabethans' or refer to their 'World Picture' as if they shared a single, unified vision. The premise of Tillyard's book is to examine the concept in Elizabethan literature, but the account has a tendency to simplify the ideas behind the literature of the age, coming to the conclusion that 'Spenser Sidney Raleigh Hooker Shakespeare and Jonson … are united in holding with earnestness passion and assurance to the main outlines of the medieval world picture as modified by the Tudor regime, although they all knew that the coherence of this picture had been threatened'.[40] Tillyard makes it clear how frequently the image of a unified order is used in the literature of the time (and the reader can find many more examples in his book), but his contention that the theory is held onto 'with earnestness passion and assurance' is not convincing.[41]

The point Tillyard does not tackle in any detail is precisely the 'threat' to this picture he mentions. It may be true that, as Arthur O. Lovejoy claims, the great chain of being was 'the plan and structure of the world which, through the Middle Ages and down to the late eighteenth century, many philosophers, most men of science, and, indeed, most educated men, were to accept without question';[42] but the key point is that it is *most* people. Donne's 'The Anatomie of the World' shows an awareness that some things in the world have undoubtedly changed. As Theodore Spencer says,

> In the sixteenth century the very basis of common agreement about man and his place in the world was being questioned. Was it really true that the earth on which

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[39] Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 37.

[40] *Ibia.*, p. 130.

[41] Criticism of Tillyard's methods is nothing new. See for instance, Don Cameron Allen's review of *The Elizabethan World Picture* in *The American Journal of Philology*, 66 (1945), pp. 434-436, Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 1-32, Jonathan Dollimore, 'Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, and the New Historicism', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 2-17, Hugh Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 158-182, and Graham Bradshaw, *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (London and New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 1-7. It is worth noting however, that the objections to Tillyard are based on the totalising streak of his criticism, rather than the scholarly content of his writing. Indeed, it is remarkable that, to my knowledge, there have been no extended studies of the subject since Tillyard and Lovejoy. It is high time to look at the idea of the great chain of being afresh, as I intend to within the study of being in Shakespeare's work more generally.

[42] Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 59.

man lived was the center of the universe and man himself the end for which the universe had been made? Did man show, in practice, that he was a proper member of an ordered state? Was he, after all, even a rational animal?[43]

Even the examples given earlier to illustrate the ubiquity of the idea of the great chain of being in works of literature are not so straightforward on closer examination. Ulysses' speech, for instance, though certainly orthodox in itself, starts to look less reliable when considered in the light of its speaker and the context of the speech. For, despite Ulysses' invocation of an ideal and rational universe, the world of *Troilus and Cressida* is one of radically destabilised values. In Troy, Hector argues that value is ontologically inherent, saying that 'value dwells not in particular will … 'tis precious in itself' (II.ii.53-55), whereas Troilus contends that value is invested in objects by their treatment, and that nothing is intrinsically valuable: 'what's aught but as 'tis valued?' (II.ii.52). Later in the play even Ulysses changes his position on value, saying to Agamemnon, 'Perseverance, dear my lord, / Keeps honour bright' (III.ii.151-2): honour is no longer an intrinsic value. As Lars Engle points out, Ulysses 'contradicts his "degree" speech by making individual worth entirely dependent on continual cultivation of fickle public demand'.[44] Although the great chain of being is present in Shakespeare's work, 'what is clear is that Shakespeare is aware of the persuasive rather than descriptive status of claims to divinely sanctioned nature and culture, as well as of the importance of rhetorical skill in claiming and maintaining power'.[45] Ulysses appears to adopt whatever position is politically expedient, and the great chain of being is reduced to a piece of rhetoric.

Hamlet's praise of mankind is also not as optimistic as it initially seems: the eulogy ends with 'And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?' (II.ii.273-4), contradicting his praise of the rational part of man in the preceding lines. Hamlet now sees man as characterised by his physicality; the part of him that is dust is his true essence. The use of the word 'dust' is significant both in its disparaging tone and in its echo of the funeral rites, 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. Despite everything wonderful about humanity, as far as Hamlet is

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[43] Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. vii.

[44] Lars Engle, *Shakespearian Pragmatism: Market of His Time* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 156.

[45] Claire McEachern, 'Shakespeare, Religion and Politics', *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 188.

concerned, all that marvellous man boils down to is dust. The creature is ultimately made of nothing but the dust to which he will return in death. By concentrating only on the physical element of man, and not the rational soul, Hamlet's speech contradicts the image of an ordered universe in which things have innate divine significance. Hamlet does not unconditionally accept the idea that human beings are intrinsically meaningful or rational.

Even the initial confidence of Richard II in his identification with the sun breaks down later in the play, when he no longer speaks of himself as the sun but 'like glistering Phaëton' (III.iii.176) – the charioteer who drives the sun and not the sun itself. If the king can be deposed, the belief that there is a divine order inherent in the world becomes debatable. Richard's queen may ask, 'wilt thou … /… fawn on rage with base humility, / Which art a lion and the king of beasts?' (V.i.31-5), but it seems that the lion is powerless to assert his sovereignty. By using the theory of the great chain of being alongside things that seemed medieval or otherwise antiquated even in his day – such as trial by combat – Shakespeare relegates it to a bygone era. Thus, though the same solar metaphor connects *Richard II* to *I Henry IV*, in which Prince Hal soliloquises, 'herein will I *imitate* the sun' (I.ii.185, italics mine),[46] by Hal's time the identification of the king with the sun is not self-evident. Indeed, kings rise and fall in Shakespeare's plays as a result of human actions such as rebellion, murder and revenge, with no clear sense that there is a divine purpose behind the changes of regime.[47]

Upward mobility is frowned upon by characters such as Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*, whose reaction to Malvolio's aspirations is 'Here's an overweening rogue' (II.v.27), but in other plays the very plot allows and even endorses social mobility. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though under a spell, Bottom the weaver becomes the beloved of a queen, and in *All's Well that Ends Well*, a low-born woman succeeds in marrying a count. The characters of these plays are not in the least constrained by an *a priori* notion of an inflexible social order. Indeed, Shakespeare puts imagery that derives from the great chain of being in Helen's mouth when she calls herself 'the hind that would be mated by the lion', only to subvert the notion immediately through the actions of the play. As she says, 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven' (I.i.219-20) – heaven does not have absolute control. Shakespeare even puts levelling sentiments into the mouth of the king:

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[46] *Henry IV Part One*, ed. David Bevington, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[47] See fn 41 of this chapter for critical studies of this subject.

> Strange is it that our bloods,
> Of colour, weight, and heat, poured all together,
> Would quite confound distinction, yet stands off
> In differences so mighty.
>> (*All's Well that Ends Well* II.iii.119-121)

In so doing, he refutes the idea that there is something inherent in a person's being that determines their rank. In the Epilogue of the same play there is even a moment when the actor-king drops his act on stage, 'The King's a beggar now the play is done' (Epilogue, l. 1); the actor's quibble on 'beggar' playfully collapses the hierarchy that normally divides king from beggar, exposing both as contingent roles rather than fixed, innate identities. The additional quibble on 'play' suggests that such distinctions exist only within a limited space of make-believe. In all these instances, it is not clear how Shakespeare's dramaturgy can be fully reconciled with the great chain of being. Even Marston, whose use of the great chain of being occurs only in passing, follows the passage quoted earlier with the line 'there goes but a pair of shears betwixt an emperor and the son of a bagpiper, only the dyeing, dressing and pressing, glossing makes the difference' (IV.ii.142-4). This suggests that ostensibly fixed class distinctions are in fact a matter of dress and outward appearance, things that can be altered by a tailor's shears, and thus that the order of things is not so inherent after all. It is not that the ontological model of the universe as a *scala naturae* is not prevalent in the Renaissance – far from it. But it is not always used as straightforwardly as an account such as Tillyard's might suggest.

The simplicity of the great chain of being is also complicated by original sin, which is the guilt of existence, one of the fundamental Christian doctrines about the ontology of man. The great chain of being allowed man a measure of freedom as part of his inherent constitution, but for the Christian church, he was not quite as free as he might initially seem. Although all beings in the universe were organised in a supposedly rational order, there was a problem with man's being *within* this order. As Spencer explains, 'though man was essential in the scheme, he had, through original sin, betrayed his trust, and therefore his position, when seen realistically, was as dark and miserable as it was, theoretically, bright and noble'.[48] Privation theory suggests that sin is non-being. Thus man is infected by an element of non-

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[48] Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, p. vii.

being that rebels against the order of being. Some of the echoes of this pessimistic view of being are reflected in Hamlet's disparaging description of man as the 'quintessence of dust', and the view of the earth in Marston's *The Malcontent* quoted earlier: 'the very muckhill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements'. A geocentric universe could mean both, optimistically, that the earth was the very centre of creation and significance, and, pessimistically, that it was the furthest from the heavens. In the latter model, man has been cast as far from holiness as is possible in the universe.

In *Renaissance Man*, Agnes Heller argues that the idea of sin and original sin seemed to have been in decline in the lives of laypersons in the Renaissance due to the increasing practical secularisation set in motion by the nascent forces of capitalism. However, the idea – heavily influenced by Augustine – that man is inherently fallen and flawed is fundamental to early modern Christianity. Indeed, original sin was an important ontological theory that was being reasserted at the end of the sixteenth century by Catholics and Protestants alike: both Calvin and Luther include it in the founding ideas of the Protestant doctrine, and the Council of Trent explicitly declared it to be a fundamental tenet of Catholicism.[49] As a result of original sin, all human beings are susceptible to evil and temptation, forfeiting the innocence that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall. In Catholicism, humans can be redeemed by baptism, because while concupiscence – man's lack of control over his passions – remains after baptism, it is an inclination towards sin and not a sin in itself. But in Protestantism baptism is not enough, because concupiscence is identified with original sin; it is a sign of the sinful nature of humanity. Thus for Luther, Christians require faith in all activities in life and the grace of God in addition to baptism:

> It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary

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[49] See *The Council of Trent*, trans. by J. Waterworth (London: Doleman, 1848), pp. 21-29. For a history of original sin see Norman P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longmans, 1927); and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), pp. 344-74, which gives an account of the genesis of the doctrine in the writings of the church fathers. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 4: Reformation of Church and Dogmas (1300-1700)* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.[50]

Our goodness has been marred by original sin and it is only through the power of God's grace that we can be saved from our natural inclination towards depravity. However, the ontological status of evil as lack of being means that being itself cannot be inherently evil. Ontologically, then, humans are good, though full of evil, and cannot realise this goodness due to the imperfection of their rational faculties after the fall. Although man is burdened with original sin, he is, in some ways, morally neutral at an ontological level. Calvinism is less hopeful, contending that man is born in a state of complete hereditary depravity, because Adam 'perverted the whole order of nature in heaven and on earth' and 'sin was transmitted from the first man to all his posterity'.[51] Original sin is thus the permanent state of mankind after the fall, a state that cannot be redeemed through any action by the individual, since human beings, even at their best, are so far from the perfection of God that only the grace of God can possibly save them. Original sin is the cause of our fallen nature, and the cause of all other sin:

> Original sin … seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh' (Gal 5:19). And that is properly what Paul often calls sin.[52]

Original sin corrupts us at an ontic level, in our very natures. It is not that existence is good and burdened with evil, but that our existence is itself defective. If the only way man's existence can be corrected is by the God who made that existence, then for Calvinism man is ontically flawed.

It is also worth examining original sin and the ontology inherent in it due to its conspicuous absence from Shakespeare's work, despite being a theory that was clearly available to him. In his entire oeuvre, there is not a single mention of 'original sin', and there

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[50] Martin Luther, 'The Augsburg Confession', in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 29.

[51] John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), p. 246 & 247.

[52] *Ibia.*, p. 251.

are only two contexts in which 'sin' is used in this sense. The first is in *Henry V*: 'we will hear, note, and believe in heart / That what you speak is in your conscience washed as pure as sin with baptism' (I.ii.30-2);[53] and the second in *Othello*, when Iago says that it is easy for Desdemona 'to win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin' (II.iii.338-9). But in both cases the reference is employed for rhetorical effect and does not relate to being.[54]

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

At the same time as accentuating man's fallen nature, the Protestant Reformation and its abolition of monastic vocations changed the way religion worked. Instead of the church mediating between man and God, with those in monastic orders praying for the laity and devotion taking place only in church, one's relationship with God was to inform every activity, every vocation and one's private devotion: 'for Protestantism ... religion becomes a subjective relationship between man and God'.[55] As Max Weber observes, 'now every Christian had to be a monk all his life',[56] for devotion was now no longer a separate activity, but something to be expressed by the way one lived.

The Reformation moved the centre of religious activity from the church to secular life, making secular life itself part of divine worship. However, once the emphasis starts to fall on the experience of one's life, it becomes easier to secularise the world and value everyday life for what it is, and not as part of one's worship of God. Donne's 'The Sun Rising' is sensitive to this change, its speaker telling the sun 'This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere' (l. 30). This cosmological metaphor employs the image of the geocentric universe, situating the lovers in place of the earth and at the centre of all significance and value. The poem inverts the supposedly divine hierarchy of kings and subjects by redefining what princes and states are by what is important to the speaker of the poem: 'She's all States, and all Princes I; / Nothing else is' (l. 21). There is still a hierarchy in which the speaker is 'all princes' and

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[53] *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[54] Other scholars have found traces, references and themes that relate to original sin elsewhere in Shakespeare's plays. See for instance John Gillies, 'The Ontological Question of Original Sin in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64 (2013), pp. 396-424, and Heather Anne Hirshfield, 'Hamlet's "firse corse": Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54 (2003), pp. 424-448.

[55] Agnes Heller, *Renaissance Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 85.

[56] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 121.

the woman remains figuratively subjugated as 'all states', but this is not the divine hierarchy in which the king is the representative of God – the speaker has arbitrarily turned himself into a prince. That he declares 'nothing else is' also shows not only that they are the centre of everything but also that they *are* everything, that their existence contains all else. The poem presents a secular valorisation of human life and love, making the individual's experience of paramount importance. In this poem, the orthodox ontological world view is manifestly mutable, and the person's place in the universal scheme of being is less fixed. The placement of human beings at the centre of significance and value is closer to the ontological theory of the absolute self, though not fully articulated as such.

Renaissance humanism's revival of classical thought contributed to this climate of change by introducing philosophical ideas from antiquity that at times flatly contradicted Christian ideals. For instance, although it was widely criticised for its emphasis on pleasure, Epicureanism presented a view of life which was thoroughly this-worldly and which celebrated the pleasures of living systematically condemned by Christianity. But humanists sought ways to reconcile classical thought with Christianity. Lorenzo Valla's interpretation of Epicureanism in *De Voluptate* is one such attempt: it condones the search for pleasure in life, but commends God's love as the highest form of pleasure. However, new economic developments, new thoughts and new possibilities, suggested amongst other things by the revival of classical philosophy, were undoubtedly destabilising the view that the status quo was immutable. As Heller observes, 'The development of the forces of capitalist production was destroying feudal ties, traditions, and norms of behaviour; faced with new opportunities, men more and more rejected the abstract, absolute norms of Christianity'.[57] This change is marked by an increasing denial of the idea that one is meant to fit into a pre-existing world order, and an emphasis on man's ability to make of himself what he will.[58] To repeat Helen's

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[57] Heller, *Renaissance Man*, p. 85.

[58] I am not endorsing a teleological account of the rise of individualism of the kind famously furnished by Jacob Burckhardt in *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S. G. C. Middlemore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), and echoed in books such as Ernst Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. by Mario Domandi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). There are many factors in this period that destabilise traditional models of ontology, but this does not mean that this view of existence could not have been questioned before. I merely wish to establish that there are alternatives to the dominant scholastic and theological models of ontology in Shakespeare's time, and that the various social forces at the time may have been conducive to different ways of thinking. See John Jeffries Martin, 'The Myth of Renaissance Individualism', in *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 208-224, and John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) for a balanced analysis of individualism in the Renaissance.

maxim in *All's Well that Ends Well*, 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven'. As Stephen Greenblatt argues, 'in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful, process',[59] and in Shakespeare one of the most remarkable examples is Iago:

> 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, wither to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry – why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. (I.iii.320)

For Iago, the individual will has full jurisdiction over every part of his being. The body is something to be worked upon, something that can be micromanaged. There is no suggestion that any external power works upon this garden, that there is any unchangeable order to the garden, or that this garden was itself made by a higher power. Although there is no way of knowing exactly what the general populace of Shakespeare's day thought of themselves and their place in the world, that Iago's speech was written to be readily comprehensible to Shakespeare's audience shows that this way of thinking was current enough to be the subject of popular entertainment.

There is certainly plenty of lip service paid to the traditional world view, but there is no ontological determinism in this anthropocentric model. Analysing one of the forms of early modern self-expression, Heller writes that '*the world view of the autobiographies of the Renaissance is based on a practical atheism and on the image of man creating the world*'.[60] The term 'practical atheism' is particularly noteworthy: it is not that people stopped believing in God, but that in practice the everyday actions of most people had become more important to them. From this increasingly widespread pragmatic point of view there is no predetermined hierarchy dividing people into rigid ranks, and man is no longer seen as a microcosm controlled by universal forces beyond his power: he is what he makes himself. This is the view of the world which Donne describes when he writes, ''Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone, / All just supply, and all Relation', for it breaks the chain and the

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[59] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 2.
[60] Heller, *Renaissance Man*, p. 236.

interconnectedness of all things. Edmund espouses this position clearly in *King Lear* in his first soliloquy:

> This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on.
>
> <div align="right">(I.ii.118-26)</div>

One might make the case that these examples demonstrate the chaos that ensues when the great chain is broken, but a God-given order that is so easily broken can scarcely claim to be ontologically immutable. If one's place in the order of the universe is not fundamentally divinely ordained, it ceases to be an ontological matter. For Edmund, moral choice and disposition are experienced as a matter of active choice, not passive influence, and one is not defined by the form of one's existence; in other words, there is freedom. It is not that one is more fully what one is the closer one is to God, and conversely that one lacks being the more one falls to sin: one is what one does, what one makes oneself. As Edmund's use of the possessive pronoun in 'our own behaviour' and 'our disasters' shows, fate and fortune become excuses instead of determining factors. Shakespeare highlights the change in the theoretical understanding of the world by making Gloucester a mouthpiece for the older view of cosmological influences and interconnected counterparts, his bastard son representing a world of unfettered freedom to do good or evil. Like Edmund, Richard of Gloucester in *Richard III* says, 'I am determinèd to prove a villain' (I.i.30), playing on two possible meanings: that villainy is his destiny, a pre-determined role, and that it is his own free choice, what he is determined to do. The destabilisation of the predominant understanding of being is precisely what allows Shakespeare to make such a quibble and give Richard this freedom. Shakespeare starts to play with ontological determinism in such a way that it is not divine necessity but audience enjoyment that dictates the 'need' for a character to be the way they are. Thus even a simple play on words starts to involve the audience's understanding of being.

<div align="center">✳✳✳</div>

Of the playwrights contemporary with Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe most consistently presents the valorisation of human activity and 'practical atheism'. *Doctor Faustus* is set in an early modern version of the medieval world, complete with devils, and relies on the concept of damnation. But as a play it treads a fine line by making Faustus sympathetic, and the value he places on his worldly aspirations meaningful. Thus, though the 'practical atheism' of *Doctor Faustus* has an unfortunate outcome, one cannot help but wonder at the potential Faustus would have had in a universe unconstrained by divine limitations. More interesting because of the manifest lack of divine restriction are the two *Tamburlaine* plays, which are entirely about human success with no sense of divine intervention or punishment despite the atrocities that Tamburlaine commits. Action is Tamburlaine's creed; as he says in his first appearance, 'I am a Lord for so my deeds will prove / And yet a shepherd by my parentage' (I.ii.34-5).[61] In the world of these plays, being a lord is the same as acting like one, because one can make oneself into what one desires. For Tamburlaine, fate and fortune are things that humans can control themselves: 'I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains / And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about' (I.ii.174-7). Even celestial events are the figurative product of human activity: 'So shall our swords, our lances, and our shot, / Fill all the air with fiery meteors' (IV.ii.51-2). The power of man is everything in these plays. Indeed, Marlowe repeatedly objects to the idea that values inhere in being. Thus, in 'Hero and Leander' Leander rehearses this argument against virginity:

> This idol which you term virginity
> Is neither essence subject to the eye
> No, nor to any one exterior sense,
> Nor hath it any place of residence,
> Nor is't of earth or mould celestial,
> Or capable of any form at all.
> Of that which hath no being do not boast;
> Things that are not at all are never lost.
> Men foolishly do call it virtuous;
> What virtue is it that is born with us?
> Much less can honour be ascribed thereto;
> Honour is purchased by the deeds we do.
> Believe me, Hero, honour is not won
> Until some honourable deed be done.

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[61] *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Again the emphasis is on *deeds*; as the invocation of 'the eye', 'exterior sense', 'place of residence', and 'form' makes clear, no importance is placed on the metaphysical and the intangible. Commonly espoused ideas that are supposed to be part of one's constitution – such as virginity – may not even have being. Marlowe's plays are about human power, possibility and the value of this life rather than the afterlife.

Montaigne's *Essays* also focus on the living human being, or rather *a* living human being: 'myselfe am the groundworke of my booke'.[63] Montaigne unflinchingly examines being in its own terms, and not in terms derived from a greater power. He does not exalt the human being, or make assumptions about what being is, or how it corresponds to other forms of being. '[T]o what end', he asks, 'serve these rules that exceed our use and excell our strength? I often see that there are certaine ideas or formes of life proposed unto us, which neither the proposer nor the auditors have any hope at all to follow, or and which is worse, no desire to attaine'.[64] Montaigne works within the observable limits of human life, questioning and analysing, instead of venturing to build grand metaphysical theories about, the nature of man. In his longest essay, Montaigne famously challenges the concept of a great chain of being by exploding the idea that we are better than animals: 'When I am playing with my cat, who knowes whether she have more sport in dallying with me than I have in gaming with her? We entertaine one another with mutuall apish trickes. If I have my houre to begin or to refuse, so hath she hers'.[65] This is especially ironic considering the title of the essay, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond', Sebond being a prominent supporter of the idea of the great chain of being. The essay does include statements consistent with that idea, as when Montaigne observes how man

> perceiveth and seeth himselfe placed here amidst the filth and mire of the world, fast-tied and nailed to the worst, most senselesse, and drooping part of the world, in the vilest corner of the house, and farthest from heavens coape, with those creatures that

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[62] 'Hero and Leander', in *The Complete Poems and Translations*, ed. by Stephen Orgel (London: Penguin 2007), p. 12.
[63] Montaigne, *The Essayes*, p. xxxiii.
[64] *Ibia.* p. 507.
[65] *Ibia.*, p. 226.

are the worst of the three conditions; and yet dareth imaginarily place himself above the circle of the moon, and reduce heaven under his feet.[66]

But the notions that Montaigne touches on alongside such passages are at odds with the older hierarchical conception of the universe. Take this reflection, for example, which Marston will later echo:

> The soules of Emperours and Coblers are all cast in one same mould. Considering the importance of Princes actions, and their weight, wee perswade ourselves they are brought forth by some weighty and important causes; wee are deceived: They are moved, stirred and removed in their motions by the same springs and wards that we are in ours. The same reason that makes us chide and braule and fall out with any of our neighbours, causeth a warre to follow betweene Princes; the same reason that makes us whip or beat a lackey maketh a Prince (if hee apprehend it) to spoyle and waste a whole Province. They have as easie a will as we, but they can doe much more. Alike desires perturbe both a skinne-worme and an Elephant.[67]

Although the lackeys and the 'skinne-worme' still seem to belong to a hierarchy, the noblemen and emperors in this picture are not the same as the kings and subjects in the great chain of being, for they are different in name only, not in nature. If one chain of the divinely ordered universe ceases to be true, who is to say that the same holds true of any other link? Indeed, for Montaigne, not only is the place of man in the hierarchy questionable, but animals may also be said to have as much or more rationality than mankind:

> We perceive by the greater part of their workes what excellency beasts have over us, and how weake our art and short our cunning is, if we goe about to imitate them. We seem notwithstanding, even in our grosest workes, what faculties we employ in them, and how our minde employeth the uttermost of her skill and forces in them: why should wee not thinke as much of them? Wherefore doe we attribute the works which excel whatever we can performe, either by nature or by art, unto a kinde of unknowne, naturall, and servile inclination?[68]

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[66] *Ibia.*, p. 226.
[67] *Ibia.*, p. 239.
[68] *Ibia.*, p. 228.

It may not seem much to point out that animals can accomplish things that human beings cannot, but these examples jeopardise traditional beliefs about human ontology, dismantling a carefully built up structure by pulling out the bricks in the middle. As Spencer explains,

> It would be difficult to find a work more typical of the conventional picture of man's central place in the universe than the *Natural Theology* of Sabunde. But Montaigne's pretended defense of it smashes the whole structure to pieces … He proceeds to demolish Sabunde by launching an elaborate attack on the arrogance and vanity of man. Although on the surface he seems to be repeating merely the traditional platitudes about the misery of the human condition, Montaigne in fact goes very much deeper, and strikes at the entire inherited concept of what it means to be a human being[69]

Indeed, by the end of the essay Montaigne explicitly denies that we *can* know anything about being:

> We have no communication with being; for every humane nature is ever in the middle betweene being borne and dying; giving nothing of it selfe but an obscure apparence and shadow, and an uncertaine and weake opinion. And if perhaps you fix your thought to take its being, it would be even as if one should go about to graspe the water: for, how much the more he shal close and presse that which by its owne nature is ever gliding, so much the more he shall loose what he would hold and fasten. Thus, seeing all things are subject to passe from one change to another, reason, which therein seeketh a reall subsistence, findes her selfe deceived as unable to apprehend any thing subsistent and permanent: forsomuch as each thing either commeth to a being, and is not yet altogether: or beginneth to dy before it be borne.[70]

Montaigne has no reliance on the idea that an immortal soul, or the unchanging existence of God, is being itself. If there is no way we can know anything about being, then there is no way of ascribing anything to being either. Even if a power with higher intelligence, such as God, had given man an ontological disposition, there is no way man could know it. That this last quotation is almost a direct quotation of Plutarch also goes to show the lack of new ontological theories in the Renaissance as well as the profound effect that ancient philosophy was having on the thinkers of the day.

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[69] Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, p. 34.
[70] Montaigne, *The Essayes*, p. 309.

The idea that man's being is not inherently part of any world order also creates the premise for an objective view of the universe as separate from man – the essential stance of scientific enquiry – and by extension, for a model of ontology that defines itself in opposition to the world. The destabilisation of the traditional conception of creation plainly contributed to the establishment of modern science pioneered by Francis Bacon. For, in order to objectify the world for the purpose of analysis and experiment, it is necessary to empty it of inherited meanings – the idea that the eagle is the king of birds cannot be scientifically proved. In terms of the philosophical terminology mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, a scientific examination of the world requires the suspension of the lifeworld – the world of ordinary significance. With the suspension of the lifeworld goes the divine connection between different forms of being, and the symbolic counterparts that connect diverse existences: scientific analysis relies on detachment rather than interconnection. This move is also indispensable for the Machiavellian model of politics, which denies that a ruler is divinely ordained, or that politics has anything to do with piety. Machiavelli argues that 'if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need'.[71] Indeed, religious institutions are only political tools: 'principalities are won by prowess or by fortune but are kept without the help of either. They are maintained, in fact, by religious institutions, so powerfully mature that, no matter how the ruler acts and lives, they safeguard his government'.[72] Machiavelli demystifies power by showing comprehensively how one may gain and maintain power effectively, however immoral the means may seem. Here is just one example of such advice: 'we can say that cruelty is used well (if it is permissible to talk in this way of what is evil) when it is employed once and for all, and one's safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far as possible turned to the good of one's subjects'.[73] It is a model of politics that is founded on an instrumental view of the world and human ability, for it sees the world as an object that can be manipulated from a detached perspective. This is the beginning of the split between the individual and the world which eventually leads to the formulation of Descartes' *cogito*, and the ontological model of the absolute self.

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[71] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 48.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[73] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

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Although some form of absolute being, and most notably the idea of the great chain of being, was still prevalent in Shakespeare's time, and frequently used in theological tracts as well as poetic imagery, it is also apparent that it was not an incontestable 'world picture'. There are views present in the Renaissance that cannot be reconciled with a divinely ordered universe. The Reformation contested the idea of a unified church and destabilised the notion of religious belief. Even Donne, who became the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, is troubled by the fact that there are diverse schools of religion. In Holy Sonnet XVIII, for example, he demands, 'Show me, dear Christ, thy Spouse, so bright and clear' (l. 1), but it seems that Christ's spouse, the Christian church, is far from being clear to anyone.[74] The lack of a single, unified religion does not annihilate faith, but it makes it harder to believe unreservedly, since even higher authorities – the kings and queens who have been appointed by the grace of God – cannot seem to settle for one true religion. If no one can say for certain what the true vision of the church is, and therefore the true religion of the world, then who is to say that there is such a thing as truth? Who is to say which creed is correct? The Reformation contributes factors that lead to the climate of change, instilling doubt and shaking foundations in ways that will not necessarily be settled by taking up Protestant belief. But the Reformation is not the only destabilising factor. The rise of capitalism, the scientific objectification of the world, the discovery of the New World and different cultures, the rediscovery of Pyrrhonian scepticism, all contribute to some form of practical secularisation as a result of which the church ceased to be the sole, unquestioned foundation of everyday experience.

It seems equally true, however, that questioning ontotheology does not lead to any new theories about being – although something resembling the idea of an absolute self is starting to take shape, even as it is condemned – so that the picture we get of ontology in the Renaissance is one of a radically unfettered sense of existence. For some thinkers and writers, man has been stripped down to his barest essentials, but no attempt has been made to theorise what existence is, how it works, what this means, and what can be said about it. A space of freedom has opened up regarding how one can think about being. Montaigne's claim that nothing can be said about being is representative of this lack of definition.

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[74] 'Sonnet: "Show me, dear Christ"', in *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, p. 463.

Contemporary ideas are clearly present in Shakespeare's work. He creates many characters who speak from a point of view which takes the ontological theory of absolute being – such as the great chain of being – for granted. However, there are also plenty of situations in which such ideas are not treated as self-evident facts, and are directly questioned, or used in their secularised variant, such as Ulysses' speech on degree which, it should be noted, makes no mention of God. Indeed, any possibility of ontological certainty is interrogated through the repeated questions 'who am I?' and 'what am I?', which, as I noted in the first chapter, are posed in many of the plays. Such moments of intense questioning, of the loss of self, are precisely the moments when characters cannot see themselves fitting into an order in which their existence makes sense, when they cannot take for granted any pre-existing model of ontology. A fixed hierarchical vision of the universe is often incompatible with what the plays do, and what some characters say.

Although God as absolute being seems to be the predominant ontological concept in the early modern period, it should also be clear that the great chain of being was not the only theory delineating man's ontological constitution in the Renaissance. There are variations on the Christian vision of man, and challenges to this obsolescent world view are present in many writings, including Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, many of the ontologically problematic lines mentioned in the first chapter cannot be explained fully in terms of the Renaissance theories examined in this chapter. Since the alternatives to absolute being are not progressive theories, but rather doubts about the applicability of an ordered universe, it may be that there is nothing that *can* be said about being in the Renaissance once being is unshackled from its prescribed place in the universe. Writers such as Marston simply make use of the ontological theories available to them, such as the pessimistic view of the great chain of being, and even the notion that 'there goes but a pair of shears betwixt an emperor and the son of a bagpiper' is a commonplace that can be found in other writers such as Montaigne.

The difference with Shakespeare is that he does not simply employ available notions. He tackles the questions in their own right, considering ontological matters deeply through the interactions between his characters, and using the very form of the play to question the foundations of being. Ultimately, Shakespeare's implicit understanding of being corresponds to no particular model of Renaissance ontology. Even a line such as Parolles' 'simply the thing I am / Shall make me live' (IV.iii.336-7) makes one consider what the 'thing I am' *is*,

without adducing any existing theories to explain it. But neither is it simply an open-ended invocation of some mysterious sense of being, for Shakespeare does make the most fundamental assertion about being: that it is the thing that makes one understand that one lives. On some level this may be obvious, but Shakespeare is stripping down being to its essence, and finding that, at the basic level, it is neither a metaphysical attribute that dictates Parolles' rank in a hierarchical world order, nor something as elusive as some accounts make it seem, for it grounds an individual's experience. Hamlet's soliloquy, 'To be or not to be', likewise raises questions about what it means to be, for if Hamlet's being belongs to the greater being of God, then his being or not being is not for him to decide. As a consequence, being in Shakespeare's works cannot be explained through the traditional scholastic or theological models, or in terms of Marlovian self-creation, or as the ungraspable mystery that Montaigne claims it is. Shakespeare is thinking through the question of being in his own way, through the medium of dramatic writing and the characters of the play, touching on matters that were yet to receive theoretical treatment in philosophy. The plays dramatise problems to do with being that exceed the capacity of the theories of Shakespeare's age to address them, though the climate of the age was one in which theories that did address them could arise.

Chapter 5

'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods'
Absolute Being

The previous chapter argued that Shakespeare's ontology cannot be understood solely through early modern theories of being, the most popular of which was a form of absolute being: the great chain of being. But is there any kind of absolute being present or presupposed in Shakespeare's works? Many characters in the plays evince an implicit belief in absolute being, and Shakespeare uses the vocabulary of the great chain of being for imagery and characterisation, but this does not mean that his plays present absolute being as the ontological truth. Since the Christian form of absolute being posits God as the absolute being, this chapter will examine the way that Shakespeare stages and presents God or gods in his plays, and the ways that characters invoke gods, in order to clarify Shakespeare's dramatisation of their ontological understanding of their imaginary world. Although variations of absolute being are evident in his works, I will argue that no form of absolute being *structures* Shakespeare's works. Indeed, Shakespeare draws attention to the reason why one may see existence in terms of an absolute being, but by no means ratifies this way of thinking. However deep Shakespeare's private commitment to the Christian faith of his country may have been, as a dramatist he is acutely aware of the existence of things that undermine the Christian conception of being. Shakespeare is clearly interested in phenomena and experiences that cannot be explained by absolute being, showing thereby that he is by no means fettered by the conception.

To recapitulate: absolute being is the ontological theory that there is an ultimate being from which everything else derives its being. This can take the form of the great chain of being in which the Christian God is being itself, imparting being to everything else to a greater or lesser degree, or it can be formulated like Spinoza's concept of a prime mover that

causes everything in an absolutely necessary way. The prime mover does not have to be a conscious being like the Christian God; it is just that without which there would be nothing, that which sets everything in motion and structures the world in the way that we experience it. Any theory that posits the existence of one being that produces, encompasses and epitomises all other forms of being falls into the category of absolute being.

One concept of absolute being envisions this being as God, or a god, or some type of deity. The question is whether Shakespeare is suggesting or presupposing the existence of some kind of absolute being when he makes gods appear on stage, or when incidents which might imply the existence of a deity occur in the plays. There are several instances of such appearances and intimations of deific activity. For instance, Hymen appears at the wedding ceremony at the end of *As You Like It*; Jupiter descends on the back of an eagle in *Cymbeline*; Diana comes down from the heavens in *Pericles*; Apollo is reported to have spoken by proxy through an oracle in *The Winter's Tale*; Venus, Mars and Diana send signs to the protagonists in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; music is heard as Hercules leaves Anthony in *Anthony and Cleopatra*; Hecate appears amongst the witches in *Macbeth*; and Ceres, Iris and Juno appear in Prospero's masque in *The Tempest*. Do these appearances provide confirmation of a belief in absolute being?

The first thing to note is that none of these gods is the Christian God. This is no doubt due in part to the censorship of the early modern stage that forbade the depiction of sacred matters in order to suppress the Roman Catholic Corpus Christi cycle play tradition. In 1576 the Diocesan Court of High Commission at York banned actors from depicting or staging 'the Ma(jest)ye of God the Father, God the Sonne, or God the Holie Ghost' as well as 'anythinge plaied which tende to the maintenaunce of superstition and idolatrie or which be contrary`ne to the lawes of God or of the realme'.[1] Naturally, this prevents the physical impersonation of God on stage, separating secular entertainment from devotional practice. Nothing, of course, prevented Shakespeare from having pagan gods appear, or be invoked, on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. However, unlike the Christian God, the pagan gods do not constitute a form of absolute being, both because they are not singular and because they have no direct control over being and creation. Thus, though they prophesy and bless

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[1] Quoted in Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300 to 1600*, 3 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 115-16.

and give signs to certain characters, as Jupiter does for example in *Cymbeline*, they are never shown to have any power over being.

Another notable factor is that the deities that appear in the plays are used mostly as a narrative device or dramatic trick. In *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *As You Like It*, Diana, Jupiter and Hymen seem to resolve the plot in the tradition of the *deus ex machina*. However, of these three plays, *Pericles* is the only one in which the apparition has any effect on the actual plot, with Diana directing Pericles to his long-lost wife. In *As You Like It*, the plot has already been resolved through the manoeuvrings of Rosalind, and Hymen has no direct hand in making these events come about. In all three cases, the appearance of deities serves primarily as a theatrical spectacle to create a sense of wonder and romance rather than as an integral part of the dramatic narrative. It is no coincidence, therefore, that gods feature prominently in three of the plays that later came to be dubbed Romances on account of their often dreamlike, fairytale atmosphere. But there are similar uses of gods as a theatrical spectacle in other plays. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen,* the signs that Palamon, Arcite and Emilia see in response to their prayers to the gods are not strictly necessary for the advancement of the plot either. These portents create an eerie theatrical effect, anticipating the events at the end of the play and thus creating dramatic tension without divulging their exact meaning. Nevertheless, the gods have no direct hand in the occurrences of the play. Shakespeare even changes the ending from the Chaucerian source in which Arcite dies after his horse is scared by a fury sent by the gods:

> Out of the ground a furie infernal sterte
> From Pluto sent at request of Saturne
> For which his hors for fere gan to turne,
> And leep aside, and foundred as he leepe;
> And ere that Arcite may taken keep,
> He pighte hym on the pomel of his heed
> That in the place he lay as he were deed
> (*The Knight's Tale* 2684-2690)[2]

Shakespeare removes the fury and makes Arcite's death an accident, denying the gods' any part in the events. All that remains of Saturn's part in the accident is a simile describing the

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[2] 'The Canterbury Tales', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by L. D. Benson, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

flint which frightens Arcite's horse when its hoof causes a spark: the 'envious flint, / Cold as old Saturn, and like his possessed / With fire malevolent, darted a spark' (V.iv.61-3).[3] By having Palamon, Arcite and Emilia invoke the deities, Shakespeare exploits the theatrical power of the supernatural in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, but he excises any important role they may play in the plot.

The music that sounds as Hercules leaves Anthony in *Anthony and Cleopatra* makes use of a similar effect. Hercules does not physically manifest himself on stage, so that the audience has only the nameless soldier's surmise that 'the god Hercules, whom Anthony loved, now leaves him' (IV.iii.14).[4] There is no sure way of knowing that the sound of the hautboys beneath the stage is meant to signal the departure of an actual deity, but that does not undermine the portentous effect created by the music, giving a mystical resonance to the fall of Anthony. Whether the appearance of Hecate in *Macbeth*, almost certainly an addition by Thomas Middleton, should be considered in this context may be a matter for debate.[5] Nevertheless, Hecate exhibits features similar to those of Shakespeare's other deities in that she adds visual interest to scenes, but does not actively further the plot; indeed, despite her claim that she is 'the mistress of your charms, / The close conniver of all harms' (III.v.6-7), the witches seem to be able to work perfectly well without Hecate. As Nicholas Brooke notes, 'her function is rather spectacular than narrative';[6] the scenes Hecate is in call for masque-like song, dance, and stage machinery, such as when 'A spirit like a cat descends' in the stage

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[3] *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. by Eugene M. Waith, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[4] *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. by Michael Neill, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). All references to this play are to this edition.

[5] On the additions by Middleton, see Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-linguistic Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 104-5, and David L. Frost, *The School of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 262-67. *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. by John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) confidently prefaces the play with the words 'adapted by Thomas Middleton', while *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) has no hesitation in including 'The Tragedy of Macbeth' with Middleton's other plays. For objections to the view that Middleton had a hand in revising *Macbeth*, see David J. Lake, *The Canon of Thomas Middleton's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 279, Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 86-7 & 121-123, and Brian Vickers, 'Disintegrated', *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 May 2010, p. 14, *Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive* <http://find.galegroup.com/tlsh/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TLSH&userGroupName=rho_ttda&ta bID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=EX1200553750&type=multipage&con tentSet=LTO&version=1.0>[accessed 28/08/2016].

[6] Nicholas Brooke, 'Introduction', in *Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 53.

directions in Act III, scene iv. The supernatural creates a moment of audio-visual entertainment in an otherwise dark and intense play. The important thing is not what power the gods have, but that they are perceived as gods and can impart an uncanny atmosphere to the drama.

In all of these instances the gods create particular dramatic effects, whether as visual entertainment and exotic pageantry, or as a mysterious presence that can foresee events which the characters within the play are incapable of perceiving. But even in the latter case they are the dramatist's tools rather than metaphysical entities presented as speaking from beyond the human plane of reality. These gods are beings created by Shakespeare to fulfil a dramatic function: it is the dramatist who has power over their being. Shakespeare does not imply that there really are such powers at work in the world or that they can solve real problems. This is most apparent in *The Tempest*, which demystifies onstage deities through Prospero's wedding masque. Prospero starts his vision with the injunction, 'No tongue! All eyes! Be silent!' (IV.i.59),[7] emphasising the fact that, both onstage and offstage, those watching the gods are spectators. He also makes no secret of the fact that they are 'Spirits, which by mine art / I have from their confines called to enact / My present fancies' (IV.i.120-3). Far from being all-powerful gods, they are 'spirits', illusions created by Prospero's 'art'. It is clear that these shadowy discarnate divinities are subordinate to the magician who calls them forth. The spirits that take on the shapes of Ceres, Iris and Juno are not even summoned for 'divine' purposes, but merely for what Prospero self-deprecatingly calls his 'fancies', and earlier, 'some vanity of mine art' (IV.i.41), suggesting that he considers such theatrical spectacles mere bagatelles. It is the spirits in the guise of gods that are under his control, and not he who is under theirs.

Prospero can create the sense of a perfect comedy ending by conjuring up illusory gods, but it is not they who bring about the harmonious ending. Like the gods Shakespeare presents within his plays, the gods in Prospero's pageant are subject to the power of the magician-artist and are circumscribed by the framework of the masque. Their being holds only for as long as the spectacle is sustained by Prospero, and the moment he is disturbed they '*heavily vanish*' (IV.i.138). Prospero even metatheatrically calls them 'actors', baring the

[7] *The Tempest*, ed. by Stephen Orgel, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). All references to this play are to this edition. All references to this play are to this edition.

theatricality of his 'magic' to his audience: 'Our revels are now ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits, and / Are melted into air, into thin air' (IV.i.148-50). Once the performance is over, the divine figures played by the actors cease to exist, dissolving back into the airy nothing fleetingly given a local habitation and a name by the magician. In many ways this is paradigmatic of the way Shakespeare uses deities in his other plays, presenting them within the frame of a dramatic spectacle to allow the audience to see how a dramatic spectacle operates. These actor-gods are fictive devices designed for entertainment, and have no control over ontological matters. Shakespeare uses non-absolute forms of deities by staging only pagan gods, and gives them no power over being, removing any ontological importance from stage deities. Thus the appearance of gods on the stage does not reinforce the idea that there are deities who epitomise being and have absolute power over being. Scrutiny of the gods that appear on the Shakespearean stage does not bring one any closer to understanding Shakespeare's ontology.

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Gods on stage are mainly a spectacle, an exotic source of theatrical power that a dramatist can harness to add a mystical dimension to his plays. But Shakespeare is doing something entirely different in the plays where gods are called upon but do not make a physical or implied appearance. God and gods are often invoked in many of Shakespeare's plays where there is no confirmation of their existence. One of the most obvious examples is *King Lear*. Many of the characters in this play demonstrate a clear belief in pagan deities: Lear invokes 'The mysteries of Hecate and the night' (I.i.110) and swears 'by Apollo' (I.i.161) and 'by Jupiter' (I.i.179), Kent swears 'by Juno' (II.ii.212) and Gloucester cries out 'O you gods!' (III.vii.69) when his eyes are being put out. As William Elton observes, 'the opening scene discovers to us a king apparently firm in his polytheistic-naturalistic faith, a ruler convinced of his dependence on the higher powers, who support him and from whom he derives his being and his end'.[8] This is especially apparent from the way that Lear swears 'by the power that made me' (I.i.208), a curious switch into the singular 'power' despite the multiple pagan deities he invokes, as though the absolute power he is referring to here is that of something

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[8] William R. Elton, King Lear *and the Gods* (Kentucky, KY: Kentucky University Press, 1988), p. 172.

closer to the Christian God. There is a clear indication of belief in absolute being. However, whatever the characters may believe, none of their repeated invocations of the gods are ever answered, and there is no confirmation that there is a higher power that made them. As Gloucester helps Lear to a hovel, Kent says, 'The gods reward your kindness' (III.vi.5); but instead of a reward from the gods, Gloucester has his eyes gouged out by Cornwall and Regan. When Edmund confesses to having sent a soldier to kill Lear and Cordelia, Albany cries 'The gods defend her' (V.iii.254), but the plea is a cue for the most harrowing stage direction in the play: '*Enter* LEAR *with* CORDELIA *in his arms*', which Hugh Grady calls 'a calculated refusal of the realization of the utopian moments which the play has just projected'.[9] As David Loewenstein argues, *King Lear* 'depicts a meaningless and hostile universe where neither God nor gods answer multiple human appeals to supernatural powers, whether these appeals be for protection, divine justice, or vengeance'.[10] There is no active intervention by a deity, nor any sign that God or the gods have any control over the events in the play or over existence in general.

However, even when there is no obvious response to their prayers, characters in the play repeatedly try to rationalise their predicament through divine explanations. After his blinding, for instance, Gloucester says that 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport' (IV.i.38-9) despite the fact that his suffering is patently caused by human treachery and cruelty. Likewise, Edgar says, 'Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours / Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee' (IV.vi.73-4), even though 'it is Edgar, rather than the merciful heavens, who has saved Gloucester',[11] employing merely human means. The emphasis is on 'think': even if the gods have not preserved Gloucester, he can believe they have. Edgar exploits Gloucester's penchant for rationalising events as the will of the gods, using the language of divine intervention as a means of convincing him to abandon all thought of suicide. Even if one did take Edgar's claim that the gods had saved Gloucester at face value, there is no discernible reason why he has been kept alive, given that

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[9] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 178.

[10] David Loewenstein, 'Agnostic Shakespeare?: the godless world of *King Lear*', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 156.

[11] David Scott Kastan, '"A rarity most beloved": Shakespeare and the Idea of Tragedy', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume 1: The Tragedies*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 11.

he dies later in no providentially meaningful way. As Stephen Greenblatt concludes: 'All attempts by the characters to explain or relieve their sufferings through the invocation of transcendental forces are baffled';[12] nothing justifies their trust in a greater power that gives meaning to their griefs.

The same lack of divine purpose applies to abstract concepts such as justice. For instance, it may seem reasonable for Edgar to say that 'the gods are just' (V.iii.168) when he defeats Edmund in single combat later in the play, but the context of the speech makes it clear that he is talking about Gloucester:

> The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us:
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got
> Cost him his eyes.
>
> (V.iii.168-71)

Whatever the justice of Edmund's end, it is preposterous to suggest that Gloucester deserved to have his eyes gouged out for adultery, or that Cornwall and Regan are carrying out the gods' will in doing so. Lowenstein's claim rings true when he says that '*King Lear* deeply challenges a providential view of the world and universe in a culture that widely believed that God actively intervenes in human affairs to punish, chastise, test, and reward'.[13] Shakespeare always shows that the suffering, preservation and retribution attributed to divine intervention are human in origin, or that their attribution to divine intervention is a human explanation of a problem that cannot be easily solved. As Stephen Booth says, 'in the unlikely event that *King Lear* has anything to teach us – it may be the necessity of recognizing that what makes sense may not be true'.[14] Absolute being makes sense to the characters, but the evidence of the play as a whole reveals this world view to be without objective foundation.

There are two perspectives at work here: one is the viewpoint of the characters, from which a supernatural explanation provides a meaningful rationalisation of their circumstances, and the other is the point of view of the play, which refuses to ratify the characters'

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[12] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), p. 179.

[13] Loewenstein, 'Agnostic Shakespeare?', p. 165.

[14] Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 6.

understanding. This dichotomy makes it clear that any notion of absolute being in *King Lear* is a creative fiction and not the ontological standpoint of the play. As Loewenstein puts it:

> The wide range of appeals made by the play's characters to supernatural powers highlights the desperate and elusive attempts to comprehend human suffering and savagery, while calling attention to the radical and experimental nature of the play when it comes to positing any kind of religious and providential consolation or belief.[15]

Stanley Cavell likewise concludes that 'all appeals to gods are distractions or excuses, because the imagination uses them to wish for complete, for final solutions, when what is needed is at hand, or nowhere'.[16] It might be argued that the bleak view of human life produced by the events of *King Lear* implicitly harbours a providential design; that Shakespeare encourages religious belief by painting a dark picture of the world before the advent of revealed faith. However, as Elton argues in great detail, the movement of the play is from paganism to atheism, a final disbelief in the power of the gods to interfere with the world. There is no progression towards Christianity, for 'Lear's attitude toward Cordelia's death, his sense that death ends all, as opposed to the Christian view of eternity, is essentially the heathen attitude as the Renaissance knew it'.[17] It is the kind of attitude that Feste mocks as unchristian in *Twelfth Night*: 'the more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul being in heaven' (I.v.65-6). To treat *King Lear* as an allegory of the necessity of Christian faith fails to do justice to the complexities of the play and the dark hopelessness of a tragedy that takes the inadequacies of the idea of absolute being seriously. Elton claims that any imposition of Christianity on the play is either an effect of a critic's prior commitment to Christianity, or wishful thinking on their part, a desire to impose an eschatology on what strikes them as an otherwise intolerable ending.

This 'agnosticism', as Loewenstein terms it, is naturally easier to depict in a play like *King Lear* with its pagan setting. As Elton argues, for an early modern audience, 'that Lear, as a devotee of natural religion, might more easily than an adherent of a revealed faith decline into disbelief is evident', and 'a pagan, no matter how devout, might already be considered

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[15] Loewenstein, 'Agnostic Shakespeare?', p. 165.
[16] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 74.
[17] Elton, 'King Lear' *and the Gods*, p. 254.

an atheist'.[18] However, it is not only in *King Lear* that there is a disjunction between what the characters believe and what the plays structurally imply about their world. Loewenstein makes a distinction between *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, contending that

> Shakespeare's Hamlet remains, at the end, a Christian prince who believes that 'there's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will' and, echoing Matthew 10:29 (in the Geneva Bible) that 'there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow'. Yet *King Lear* is a play that seems to go to the other extreme: there Shakespeare imagines a pitiless and ruthless world without any providential meaning or supernatural forces or religious institutions that (despite being invoked by its characters) shape human life, actions, and events, or help to explain inhospitable conditions such as the terrifying, titanic storm Lear endures, or offer consolation in response to the harsh realities of human misery.[19]

However, it is inconsistent to claim that *Hamlet* is a Christian play because it has a 'Christian prince' who believes in providence, whereas *King Lear* is a world 'without providential meaning' despite the fact that characters invoke supernatural forces. If *King Lear* is an 'agnostic' play despite what the pagan characters believe, it is equally possible that *Hamlet* has no providential design in spite of how Hamlet himself may interpret his place in the world at one particular moment. Indeed, Horatio's summary of Hamlet's life contrasts sharply with the providential terms Hamlet uses as he senses his tragic destiny drawing near:

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
> Of *accidental* judgements, *casual* slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning, and forced cause,
> And in this upshot purposes *mistook*
> Fallen on th'inventor's heads.
> (V.ii.364-9; my italics)

Here it is not providence, but chance, human plots, and accidents that have determined events. As David Bevington points out:

> This is the secular humanist speaking, and it sorts well with the dramatic voice in *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and other tragedies of the Jacobean period that explore the daunting prospect of a world that is presided over not by a benign overseeing deity

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
[19] Loewenstein, 'Agnostic Shakespeare?', p. 177 & 157.

who makes sure that every smallest event in our lives is ultimately meaningful, but by unforeseen accidents, 'casual' violence, the profound ironies in which human beings are too often the unwitting authors of their own unhappiness.[20]

For all Hamlet's talk at the denouement of 'a divinity that shapes our ends', the story as Horatio tells it does not have a providential rationale. Like *King Lear*, the characters in the play may attempt to comprehend the ontological meaning of the world by appealing to an absolute, transcendental power that presides over them, but that does not mean that such a power exists. Providential design is not even the one and only concept that can be used to explain the events. Theoretically, knowledge of the absolute should allow one to understand all of being through the one true being, but the existence of conflicting accounts of what being is suggests that if there is a single absolute power, it is unfathomable by human beings. But if there is an incomprehensible absolute being, Shakespeare does not gesture towards it or encourage faith in the unknowable: if it cannot be known, then it is irrelevant to mankind's ontological understanding. After all, if there is an unknowable absolute order of being, then theories such as the great chain of being cannot reflect it. Shakespeare consistently presents the notion of absolute being from the limited perspective of human beings as a rationalisation of the contingency of the world, a response which arises from the desire to make sense of the world.

It is not only in *Hamlet* that the ontological supremacy of absolute being is questioned. *Richard II,* for example, shows the breakdown of the belief in an ordered rational universe controlled by an absolute being. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, there are many allusions to the great chain of being in *Richard II*, as Richard is frequently associated metaphorically with the sun, the king of planets. One indication of the way that trust in this symbolic order dissolves in the play is that, after being used confidently by the king and his subjects alike, this metaphor stops being associated with Richard at all. In the deposition scene, Richard asks his reflection, 'Was this the face / That like the sun did make beholders wink?' (IV.i.283-4) – in retrospect, he was 'like' the sun and not the sun itself. The sun metaphor is transferred to Bolingbroke as Richard exclaims: 'O that I were a mockery king of snow, / Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke / To melt myself away in water-drops'

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[20] David Bevington, 'The Debate about Shakespeare and Religion', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 35.

(IV.i.260). But the entire image is governed by the subjunctive 'that I were'. Richard does not accept that he is a 'mockery king' or that Bolingbroke is the sun; he is obliquely highlighting the fact that the opposite remains the case. It would require Richard to not be what he is – a real king – for Bolingbroke to be king. Richard is not the 'mockery king of snow', and Bolingbroke is not the sun, for he cannot melt the existence of the previous king away. This confuses the direct symbolic connection between the king and the sun, for neither Richard nor Bolingbroke is definitively king, and the metaphor does not fit the ambiguous situation caused by the deposition. Richard wishes Bolingbroke 'many years of sunshine days' (IV.i.221): the king is now just someone who enjoys sunny days rather than the sun itself, and even these sunny days are numbered, since they can be measured in days and years.

When Richard is still convinced that he is the symbolic counterpart of the sun at the beginning of Act III, scene iii, he is also confident that 'The breath of worldly men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord' (III.ii.56-7). Richard's ontological understanding is essentially structured around the idea that an absolute being shapes his being as that of a king, and gives him the power to be king. However, this quickly breaks down, so that by the end of the play he does not even know what he is, but is left trying to figure out 'whate'er [he] be' (V.v.38), without coming up with an alternative answer. According to the great chain of being, Richard is meant to be God's representative on earth, closer to God than other people; but even when this supposedly unchangeable position is being threatened, no help comes from above. If, as Richard claims, 'God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay / A glorious angel' (III.ii.60-1), then the angel has no power to help Richard. Shakespeare presents Richard coming to terms with his all-too-human existence in circumstances that do not make sense in terms of the Christian concept of absolute being that previously formed the ontological bedrock of his identity. Following his existential crisis, Richard's understanding of being is that 'Nor I nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing' (V.v.39-41): Richard's world becomes ontologically indeterminate: instead of possessing an innate and absolute significance, there is nothing at the heart of his being. Absolute being in *Richard II* turns out to be an unstable and dangerous structure, for the divine hierarchy of being has no power to uphold itself.

It is worth mentioning that some critics have viewed this breakdown of the divine order as an event that sets the reinstatement of order into motion. As Phyllis Rackin summarises:

> The conservative critics of the mid-twentieth century saw the plays as essentially medieval, the expressions of conservative ideology, cautionary tales based upon a political theology that attributed all the sufferings of the Wars of the Roses to the deposition, two generations earlier, of the divinely anointed Richard II.[21]

Thus, the history plays have been read in a teleological fashion with the end of *Richard III* reinstating the divine order that was lost through the deposition of Richard II, the whole sequence being seen as a sophisticated piece of propaganda which glorifies the Tudor monarchy as the fulfilment of providential design. E. M. W. Tillyard famously bases his *Shakespeare's History Plays* on his study of the great chain of being in *The Elizabethan World Picture,* where he contends that

> In the total sequence of his plays … [Shakespeare] expressed successfully a universally held and still comprehensible scheme of history: a scheme fundamentally religious by which events evolve under a law of justice and under the ruling of God's Providence, and of which Elizabeth's England was the acknowledged outcome. The scheme, which, in its general outline, consisted of the distortion of nature's course by a crime and its restoration through a long series of disasters and suffering …[22]

There is no doubt, based on contemporary texts, and on Tillyard's own research, that this view of history was widely held in Shakespeare's time. For instance, Hall's *The Union of the two noble and illustre Families of Lancaster and York* does what it suggests in its title and relates the history of England and the War of the Roses within an overarching grand narrative that concludes with the marriage of Henry Earl of Richmond to Elizabeth of York, and *The Mirror for Magistrates* moralises the rise and fall of illustrious historical persons in terms of sin and punishment. However, although Shakespeare does stage events in a way that can be

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[21] Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press), p. 43.

[22] E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944; London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 234-5. Similar ideas can be found in M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961); Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); and George Ian Duthie, *Shakespeare* (London: Hutchinson, 1951) amongst others.

interpreted in this providential light, he does not choose to present providential design as an absolute fact. For instance, the clergymen in *Henry V* go to great lengths to justify Henry's claims to the throne of France, but Shakespeare undermines their assurances by including evidence of dubious motives behind the church's support for the wars in France. The church has reason to support the king's ambitions, since a bill is being proposed in parliament which would make them 'lose the better half of [their] possession' (I.i.8).[23] Henry may say that his victory at Agincourt was because 'God fought for us' (IV.viii.118), but there is no clear reason why one should believe that the victory is a direct result of God's intervention on the evidence Shakespeare provides.

As can be seen in other plays, the fact that characters happen to credit God with the outcome of events does not prove that the play presents God that way. Other critics of Tillyard's teleological interpretation have objected, amongst other things, that the history plays are too ambivalent, too open to diverse interpretations, to be viewed as serving a dominant ideological objective. As A. P. Rossiter points out:

> Contemporary 'order'-thought spoke as if naïve faith saw true: God was above Englishmen and ruled with justice – which meant summary vengeance. This historic myth offers absolutes, certainties. Shakespeare in the Histories always leaves us with relatives, ambiguities, irony, a process thoroughly dialectical.[24]

This dialectical ambivalence is the hallmark of the history plays for Rossiter, since 'one-eyed simplifications are not only falsifications; they amount to a denial of some part of the mystery of things'.[25] Norman Rabkin supports this view, calling attention to 'Shakespeare's habitual recognition of the irreducible complexity of things'.[26] The retributive narrative may be a part of the story of the history plays, but it is not the only one. The moment it ceases to be the only reading, it no longer supports the idea that the plays constitute a single cohesive narrative.

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[23] *Henry V*, ed. by Gary Taylor, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). All references to this play are to this edition.

[24] A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. by Graham Storey (London: Longman, 1989), p. 22.

[25] *Ibia.*, p. 51.

[26] Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 61.

Of course, the notion that there is no God-given pattern structurally inherent in the plays is not universally accepted. Peter Lake, for example, discerns a providential design in *Julius Caesar*, arguing that 'the play induces the audience to place the (inherently Christian) providential frame, afforded them by the prophecies, prodigies and structural symmetries of the plot, around the (decidedly un-Christian) doings of the Roman, pagan, and republican protagonist of the play'.[27] As this quotation suggests, Lake's argument is premised on the portentous storms, meteors and prophecies that precede important events in the drama, inferring from these signs that the Christian audience would be able to pick up the messages from an omnipotent power that the pagan Romans miss and ignore in their benighted condition. To quote Lake's argument at length:

> Armed with the providential framework provided to them by the play's insistent pattern of portents and prophecies, the audience might well see this ... as an expression of a providential patterning of events, which uses the dominant characteristics (in Christian terms, the defining 'sins') of the central figures to frustrate their own (sinful) purposes, bringing the conspirators to judgement and death at Philippi, even as the sins of Caesar and Rome have been punished by the conspirators' resort to political violence and all its dreadful consequences. Built into such a providential reading of the play would be the extraordinary blindness of the leading characters in the face of the signs and prophecies provided to them, which, if heeded, would have saved them from the fates visited upon them by the play's end.[28]

This is problematic on many levels. It is inadequate to treat the serious dilemmas of the conspirators and the state under Julius Caesar as something that could have been avoided if they had been enlightened by the Christian faith, not least because there is no clear indication of what a properly Christian response to the problems would have been, even if they had heeded the portents. It is also contradictory to say that the conspirators are punished for their 'sinful purposes', when these 'sinful purposes' are precisely what result in the punishment of 'the sins of Caesar and Rome'. There is no sense in saying that the tools of providence are themselves punished by providence for carrying out the providential design. Lake's reading is, as he says,

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[27] Peter Lake, 'Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the Search for a Usable (Christian?) Past', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 127.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

An intensely Christian one, predicated on the existence of an omnipotent and immutably just and merciful God whose both mysterious and beneficent purposes could be seen working their way through the events of human history, in ways that not merely conferred meaning and coherence on those events but sent admonition and exhortation about that meaning and coherence to all those with eyes to see.[29]

This, along with the idea that the characters are being punished for their sins through their actions, is reductive. It begs the question of whether the action is coherent and meaningful only in the light of providence, or a series of meaningful events which cannot easily be explained. Reframing the play in a providential light devalues the human struggles in which the noble characters are engaged, their desire to do what is right, and any genuine admiration one might feel for their actions.

There is also the problem that the supposedly Christian portents are present in Shakespeare's source text by Plutarch, a fact that Lake fails to address in his argument. Plutarch writes, for instance, that 'strange and wonderful signs were said to be seen before Caesar's death', such as 'fires in the element and spirits running up and down in the night, and also the solitary birds to be seen at noondays sitting in the great market-place'.[30] These portents are echoed in *Julius Caesar* by Casca: 'never till tonight, never till now, / Did I go through a tempest dropping fire' (I.iii.9-10); 'yesterday the bird of night did sit, / Even at noonday, upon the market-place, / Hooting and shrieking' (I.iii.26-8); and also by Calpurnia: 'ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets' (II.ii.24).[31] Again, Plutarch says that 'there was a slave of the soldiers that did cast a marvellous burning flame out of his hand, insomuch as they that saw it thought he had been burnt, but, when the fire was out, it was found he had no hurt',[32] which Casca reports as follows:

> A common slave – you know him well by sight –
> Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn
> Like twenty torches joined, and yet his hand
> Not sensible of fire, remained unscorched.
> (I.iii.15-18)

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[29] *Ibia.*, p. 126.
[30] T. J. B. Spencer, *Shakespeare's Plutarch* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 86.
[31] *Julius Caesar*, ed. Arthur Humphreys, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). All references to this play are to this edition.
[32] Spencer, *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, p. 87.

There are many more examples, including the fact that it is Plutarch who tells of the 'certain soothsayer that had given Caesar warning long time afore, to take heed of the day of the Ides of March'.[33] Clearly, Shakespeare follows his source closely, providing no reason to interpret these portents as the work of a Christian deity. His inclusion of supernatural signs is just as attributable to Plutarch and the desire to create an exciting dramatic effect as to a wish to hint at a subsuming providential design. While there are plays in which Shakespeare takes the idea of providence seriously, such as *Hamlet*, in these plays the notion of providence is presented as a point of view held by a character at a particular moment rather than a summons to worship embedded in the structure of the play. I am inclined to believe, like Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, that 'drama is not for [Shakespeare] primarily a vehicle for propounding moral, religious and ethical values'.[34] Shakespeare is not trying to draw the audience's attention to the providential patterning of their own lives, warning them what might befall if they ignore divine signs, and he does not suggest that human problems become any easier by listening to the call of providence.

Absolute being is presented as a concept that makes sense to certain characters, but not as a necessary truth espoused by the play as a whole. Indeed, very few characters in Shakespeare's plays are devout believers in any religion, Isabella in *Measure for Measure* being the most notable exception. That Isabella takes the great chain of being for granted is apparent from the way it tacitly informs her speech: 'Women? Help heaven, men their creation mar / In profiting by them' (II.iv.127-8).[35] Here she suggests that men demean themselves in taking advantage of a creation ontologically lower than themselves, and Angelo betrays his adherence to the same preconceptions in his reply: 'I suppose we are made to be no stronger / Than faults may shake our frames … Be that you are, / That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none' (II.iv.133-5). This line rests on an assumption consistent with the *scala naturae*: that one is made to be a certain way, and that overstepping the boundaries of one's category of being is tantamount to not being. The pun on 'none' and 'nun' insinuates

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[33] *Ibia.*, p. 87.
[34] David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.
[35] *Measure for Measure*, ed. by Brian Gibbons, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). All references to this play are to this edition.

that being a nun violates the ordained nature of a woman, reducing Isabella to non-being. Angelo attempts to manoeuvre Isabella into doing what he desires, using her own belief system to do so. However, this Christian conception of absolute being cannot provide an unequivocal understanding of being in the play. Or rather, the great chain of being cannot necessarily help characters to understand their own being. Even though Angelo knows how to use the Christian discourse of absolute being, he is torn about how to understand himself: 'What dost thou or what art thou, Angelo?' (II.ii.177). Questions about being arise in spite of the dominant theory. The language of the play demonstrates the characters' belief in the great chain of being, but also betrays the fact that there are experiences that do not make sense according to this scheme. Absolute being does not have absolute power in Shakespeare's drama: belief in it turns out to be contingent rather than a necessary truth, the belief of individuals who desire a cogent explanation.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The idea that absolute being is something that characters create out of their desire for an explicable world chimes with Greenblatt's observation that 'Shakespeare was fascinated by the way in which disoriented or anxious people construct desperate explanatory hypotheses … about their world'.[36] The specific context of Greenblatt's argument is the place of purgatory in the early modern consciousness and Shakespeare's employment of the religious beliefs of his day for dramatic effect. In both 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists' and *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt's basic argument is that Shakespeare appropriates the discourse, rituals and theatricality of religion for their dramatic and poetic effects to make use of their symbolic resonance, and in doing so 'evacuates' and therefore secularises their original metaphysical meaning. He says, for instance, that

> *King Lear* is haunted by a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been *emptied out*. The characters appeal again and again to the pagan gods, but the gods remain utterly silent. Nothing answers to human questions but human voices; nothing breeds about the heart but human desires; nothing inspires awe or terror but human suffering and human depravity.[37]

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[36] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 158.
[37] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York, NY: Methuen, 1992), p. 176.

By staging outmoded forms of belief, Shakespeare demystifies them, revealing the mechanisms of belief that are constructed by the characters who hold such beliefs. But there is another reason; in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt perceives that

> What there is again and again in Shakespeare, far more than in any of his contemporaries, is a sense that ghosts, real or imagined, are good theater – indeed, that they are good for thinking about theater's capacity to fashion realities, to call realities into question, to tell compelling stories, to puncture the illusions that these stories generate, and to salvage something on the other side of disillusionment.[38]

These old rituals and beliefs make good theatre, which harnesses their residual power over people's beliefs in order to furnish the fiction on stage, highlighting at the same time as undermining the efficacy of this shared cultural discourse. What Greenblatt points out about exorcism and purgatory also holds true for absolute being and the great chain of being. Shakespeare participates in their discourse, and uses the cultural heritage of this ontological theory to create engrossing drama, to show characters trying to make sense of their world in similar terms. But he also shows characters deviating from this model, thereby questioning whether absolute being can fully explain the ontological predicament of human beings.

This is not to say that Christianity is irrelevant to Shakespeare's works. Indeed, Shakespeare is inescapably indebted to the rich religious culture of his time, and tackles Christian problems and theological debates in various ways in his works. As Felicity Heal writes:

> The limited appearance in his plays of representations of current religious politics in no sense indicates that Shakespeare's work was disengaged from the language of belief. On the contrary, his plays are steeped in biblical references, from both the Geneva and Bishop's Bibles.[39]

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[38] Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 200.
[39] Felicity Heal, 'Experiencing Religion in London: Diversity and Choice in Shakespeare's Metropolis', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, ed. by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 76.

There is no denying the importance of religious language and theology in Shakespeare's works. The ways in which Shakespeare engages with religious matters have been of great critical interest recently, ranging from arguments about the nature of Shakespeare's personal faith to analyses of the ways in which Shakespeare draws on the religious language and debates of his time. David Scott Kastan provides a comprehensive discussion of the former in *A Will to Believe*, arguing that it is essential to engage with questions of belief and religion in Shakespeare's plays, even though we cannot know, and do not need to know, Shakespeare's personal beliefs to do so. In the same field, Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare* shows the value of reading Shakespeare through the framework of his possible recusant heritage.[40] Brian Cummings' *Mortal Thoughts* is a notable example of the latter type of study, examining the importance of the religious culture in early modern thought, and showing how the idea that selfhood depends on secularisation glosses over a crucial aspect of early modern life.[41] Cummings analyses the way that religious language and debates permeate concepts such as luck; language use such as swearing; supposedly irreligious acts such as suicide; and theatrical devices like the soliloquy in Shakespeare's plays and in the works of his contemporaries.

There is no doubt about the fact that Shakespeare uses religious concepts, thoughts and language in his work. However, it does not follow that Shakespeare's works are therefore deeply or consistently religious, or, more importantly for this thesis, that his ontology is conclusively Christian and absolute. As Alison Shell points out, 'the biblical allusions in the work of professional playwrights like Shakespeare tend to be deployed in the service of generalized moralism, or of simple ornamentation, or as a way of fastening their own work more firmly in the minds of the auditors'.[42] This is one dimension of Greenblatt's argument about exorcism and purgatory: Shakespeare makes use of religious language and ritual, but he empties them of their doctrinal import, redeploying religious culture in a secular context. Indeed, Eric Mallin considers this one of the chief features of Shakespeare's use of religion: 'While the symbolic, thematic elements of Christianity certainly find their way into his work,

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[40] Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[41] Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, & Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[42] Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 7.

Shakespeare activates these features in decidedly irreligious or ironic ways'.[43] Cynthia Marshall stretches this claim to include ontological matters:

> Like the way scientific discourse determines the dominant worldview in the West today, theology in Renaissance England provided the accepted terms for considerations of essence and existence. One need not have been particularly devout to draw on religious terminology; it was simply the available language for investigating questions on topics ranging from the functioning of the human body to social interaction to the politics of pleasure.[44]

A similar point is made by Kastan, who argues that 'Religion provides Shakespeare with the fundamental language of value and understanding in the plays ... It supplies the vocabulary in which the characters understand themselves and are presented to be understood';[45] however, this mixes up two rather different points. It is true that language in Shakespeare' plays is deeply embedded in the religious culture to which he belonged, but it is not the only way in which characters understand themselves, and it is not the one 'fundamental language of value and understanding'. In fact, the plays seem to frame religion in such a way as to question the understanding of the world it demands and its supposedly fundamental values.

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It is precisely because Shakespeare engages with theological problems that he is not blind to the problems associated with the Christian model of absolute being. Returning to a point made in the previous chapter, in Renaissance ontology there is an acknowledged problem about the being of evil and sin. For if God is being, then nothing which has being can be evil. Here is the quotation from William Perkins again:

> Hugo de S. Vict. saith: *There is no cause of the will of God, which is the cause of all things.* And this very thing common reason will teach vs, because there must first some certaine ground be laid, from whence euery thing should haue or take the being and existence thereof; and this ground is euen the very will of God. For a thing is not first, and then afterward God willeth it to come to passe; but, because God hath

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[43] Eric S. Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 3.

[44] Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and the Early Modern Text* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 21.

[45] David Scott Kastan, *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 6.

decreed that a thing should come to passe, or be done, therefore it is; And yet shall not God therefore bee the cause of sinne: because sinne is not properly a thing, action, or being, but a defect only: and yet neuerthelesse it is not therefore nothing. For whatsoeuer hath a being, is either Really and positiuely, or else in Reason onely. And vnder those things which are in Reason, are contained not only notions and relations, but also priuations: because they haue not a reall matter and forme out of the vnderstanding. But sinne hath not a positiue and reall being, & yet it hath a being in Reason (as they terre it.) For so farre forth it is in the nature of things being, as it may cause a true composition in the mind: and although it does not exist positiuely, that is, by matter, or forme created; yet it is priuatiuely: because that by the remoue or taking away of originall righteousnesse, that doth immediatly and truly follow and exist. Neither doth it follow, as some other naturall habit, or as a pure negation, but as a certaine thing betweene both, that is, a want and absence of the contrarie good.[46]

The problem is that the idea that sin is the lack of being – privation theory – cannot explain the reality, temptation, thrill, and being of sin and evil. Those elements of life cannot be demarcated cleanly as a 'negation' that does not truly exist. Michel de Montaigne flatly contradicts this idea by affirming that evil is part of being: 'Our life is composed, as is the harmony of the World, of contrary things … both … goods and evils … are consubstantiall to our like. Our being cannot subsist without this commixture, whereto one side is no lesse necessary than the other'.[47] This means that for him being is not absolutely good, and there is no strange state of non-being needed to make sense of evil. Privation theory is one way of dealing with sin and evil, but it avoids the ontological problem by using verbal evasions. It is all very well to say something is a lack of existence, but it is not clear what this means. If something does not really exist, how can one experience it, or talk about it? It is not enough to dismiss problematic experiences as sin. The absoluteness of absolute being seems to belie itself when it comes up against that which it defines itself in opposition to, something which must be negated in order for being to be what it is.

The prohibitions against the presentation of sacred subjects on stage does not preclude the depiction of a world organised in accordance with absolute being. The question is whether one can reconcile all the chaos, death, and conflict the plays portray with an

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[46] William Perkins, *A C[hristian] and [plain]e treatise of the manner and order of predestination and of the largenes of Gods grace*, trans. By Francis Cacot and Thomas Turke (London: F. Kingston, 1606), p. 58-9, in *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:3741:75> [accessed 26/05/2014].

[47] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. by John Florio (London: Routledge, 1898), p. 560.

absolute beneficent order. This is in line with Schelling's critique of Spinoza's idea of an absolute primary mover: if there were such a causal power organising the being of everything, how would it be possible for free will, self-understanding, reason, or evil to arise? There are many things that absolute being cannot include or rationalise without making them cease to be, and Shakespeare excels at staging these anomalous elements of existence. As was observed in the first chapter, Shakespeare's plays are full of characters questioning their being, feeling in conflict with what they are, or not knowing what they are. Viola and Iago say 'I am not what I am' (*Twelfth Night* III.i.139;*Othello* I.i.64), seeming to articulate a sense of being that cannot be understood through a monolithic or even comprehensible ontological system. They press up against the limits of language to try and express the inexpressible, incomprehensible nature of their existence through equivocation and contradiction. There are countless other examples of characters who feel divided in their being, or who sense something indefinable about their existence: ''Twas I, but 'tis not I' (*As You Like It* IV.iii.134);[48] 'By a name / I know not how to tell thee who I am' (*Romeo and Juliet* II.i.96); 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (*King Lear* I.iv.221); 'I am nothing; or if not / Nothing to be were better' (*Cymbeline* IV.ii.368).[49] In each of these instances the issue is not simply that the character feels divorced from the true order of being, but that they experience something that cannot be captured by the explanation that one's being partakes of absolute being. What fascinates Shakespeare are those elements of experience that do not fit the ontological model of absolute being. In creating characters like Macbeth, Richard III, or Hamlet, who contend with, revel in, and suffer from feelings that allegedly have no ontological validity, Shakespeare repeatedly exposes the negative, ontologically liminal energies that no concept of absolute being can contain. In his drama, how things ought to be does not explain how things are.

Thus the most ontologically interesting passages in Shakespeare's plays are exactly those that cannot be explained in terms of absolute being. At various moments Shakespeare makes certain characters express fragmentation, an overwhelming sense that one is not what one is, that a single and absolute order of being cannot grasp this radical disunity with oneself. 'I am not what I am' echoes 'I am that I am' in Exodus 3:14 only to deliberately subvert it;

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[48] *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dusinberre, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Cengage Learning, 2006). All references to this play are to this edition.
[49] *Cymbeline*, ed. by Roger Warren, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

it contradicts the idea that one's being is part of the greater absolute being of God, and that one's knowledge of one's being is also the knowledge of God. In a system of absolute being, being is singular, and although privation theory suggests that there can be such a thing as lack of being, it is not possible to have a *split* sense of being in such a system. At first glance, Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' (III.i.55) might seem to make sense in terms of absolute being. One could read it as meaning that by choosing to be, he chooses to be true to the divinity which is being within him, whereas by choosing not to be, he would fall away from being towards sin. Being is God, and non-being is sin and evil. However, the lines that follow the opening of this monologue do not corroborate such a reading. 'To be' is not about being true to one's being, raising oneself to a higher sense of being, but about suffering 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (III.i.57) in the mind, that is, stoical endurance and passive continuance. 'Not to be' is 'to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them' (III.i.58-9), which is an altogether more confusing notion, the most popular interpretation being suicide. Alternatively, 'not to be' is to take action against adversity instead of passively enduring it, and in doing so somehow losing one's being. If taken as suicide, from a Christian standpoint such a solution is sin, non-being, as well as a literal loss of being through death. But the way that the question is presented, and the fact that it is a question at all, shows that being is the fundamentally complex matter that creates such questioning and ambiguity. Rational explanations of being cannot explain away the aberrations in life, the real difficulties faced by existing, the problems that cause one to wonder whether to be or not to be. The rest of the speech runs through the reasons why the only thing that keeps people from suicide is fear of death and ignorance of the afterlife:

> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office, and the spurns
> That patient merit of th'unworthy takes
> (III.i.69-73)

Being comes with many difficulties and unbearable experiences, and if one says that all of these things are actually non-being, then one denies the reality of the injustices and adversities one faces in life. But if all these things are part of being, then being cannot be completely

good. Absolute being relies on the negation of many things that are experienced as existing things. Despite the Christian society of *Hamlet*, the references to heaven and purgatory, and Hamlet's avowed belief in providence towards the close of the play, the predominant ontology of Hamlet is not that of Christian absolute being. Christianity is an important aspect of *Hamlet*, but it does not dictate the ontology of the play. Shakespeare shows again and again how the moral quandaries and existential crises people face are incompatible with the notion of absolute being. Although he engages seriously with theological issues, he is not blind to their shortcomings, and his attention is always on the reality of the problems people face, and on the explanations they contrive to rationalise these problems.

Even those who start off by being comfortable with the prevailing social ontology, those who are not initially aware of any split in their being, can come to realise that a singular notion of being cannot make sense of their experience of being. Othello, for instance, is a convert to Christianity, and Shakespeare litters Othello's vocabulary with references to God and religion to emphasise this point. For instance, he swears a solemn oath to the Duke 'as truly as to heaven' (I.iii.124), an oath he uses fourteen times in the play; he refers to scripture readily, saying for example that Emilia has 'the office opposite to Saint Peter / And keep[s] the gates of hell' (IV.ii.93-4); he rebukes his soldiers on the strength of their shared Christianity, commanding them, 'For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl' (II.iii.168), thus implicitly contrasting Christianity with barbarism; and in the climactic moments of the play he exhibits an obsession with the fate of Desdemona's soul, when he says, 'Come, swear it, damn thyself' (IV.ii.36), and before he kills her, 'have you prayed tonight Desdemona?' (V.ii.25), 'Think on thy sins' (V.ii.40), and 'Confess thee freely of thy sin' (V.ii.53). One effect of these expressions and allusions is to make Othello appear more Christian than those who were born Christian, more Venetian than the Venetians. In order to be accepted as part of this society, Othello constantly has to reinforce its values. But Othello's Christianity also underpins the way he understands himself as a Christian being. That Othello believes unreservedly in the unity of his being is apparent from his belief that he can explain himself by narrating 'the story of [his] life' (I.iii.130), that a single narrative can contain what he is. As James L. Calderwood says, 'Othello … assumes the priority of identity; he is what he so perfectly is. By repeating his identity in words, he acquires

Desdemona'.[50] Because Othello sees no difference between what he is and the language in which he expresses himself, he does not perceive that there can be a split in anyone's ontological understanding. This is perhaps what Harold Bloom is trying to point to when he says that 'Shakespeare implicitly celebrates Othello as a giant of mere being, an ontological splendour, and so a natural man self-raised to an authentic if precarious eminence'.[51] It is risky to make value judgements concerning the correct understanding of ontology one ought to possess, but if being at one with oneself is to be 'mere being' and an 'ontological splendour', then Othello is both of these things. However, I contest the idea that Shakespeare actually *celebrates* this ontological wholeness. Although the integrity of Othello's confidence in the unity of his existence may be admirable – if unity is what is desired – it also puts him at the mercy of forces that an absolute conception of being cannot comprehend. A Christian theory of absolute being that sees being and goodness as the same thing cannot make sense of evil, sin or any force absolute being must deny in order to be absolutely good.

Othello's confidence in the wholeness of his being is part of what opens him up to the machinations of Iago, whose understanding of himself is 'I am not what I am'. Iago is a self-consciously bifurcated being, not one with himself, but secure in the fluidity and instability this duality allows him. Iago does not need any rationalised notion of order because chaos works for him. It is convenient for him that people are so willing to make coherent stories out of their experience, as Othello does when he pieces together Iago's 'evidence' about Desdemona to create a picture of her infidelity. Ultimately Othello's world view is out of sync with a world that contains Iago, and his belief that 'Men should be what they seem' (III.iii.129), the fact that he 'thinks men honest that but seem to be so' (I.iii.399), is undermined by Iago's use of his knowledge that being is not necessarily singular. Grady makes the following observation about Othello's heroic discourse:

> Othello's heroism … is not so much a hollowness 'within' Othello's discourse as it is the reverberating sound of a once culturally empowering rhetoric in the empty chamber created by Iago's instrumentality. In that environment of nihilism, Othello's painfully constructed heroism can find neither confirming speech nor gaze.[52]

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[50] James L. Calderwood, *The Properties of* Othello (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 105.
[51] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 446.
[52] Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, pp. 129-30.

Grady's point is specifically about Othello's language, but a similar point can be made about his ontology. Othello's ontology was also once 'culturally empowering', but once Iago has knocked the foundations from under the idea of absolute being, Othello's world of meanings begins to seem arbitrary. Arguably, Othello's discourse and understanding are still 'culturally empowering', but it is precisely because they are only *culturally* empowering that they do not have power over Iago. The Venetian society in *Othello* is outwardly a culture of absolute being, where one's being is defined by the place one occupies in society. Thus Cassio is injured by his loss of 'reputation' (II.iii.258), and pleads to Desdemona to intervene, 'that by your virtuous means I may again / Exist, and be a member of [Othello's] love' (III.iv.112-3): according to Cassio's phrasing, existing is synonymous with occupying a place in Othello's social circle. Similarly, Othello expresses the loss of meaning in his life by stating that he no longer has any social meaning: 'Othello's occupation's gone' (III.iii.360). But unlike Cassio and Othello, for whom being is being part of a social order, Iago is defined by not being his being. Absolute being affirms order and the status quo, but cannot impose order on the disorderly elements which cannot officially be recognised as 'being'.

Othello's sense of his being collapses when Iago is exposed at the end, because, as Cavell points out, 'Iago is everything Othello must deny'.[53] For Othello to have confidence in the meaning of his existence, he cannot accept what Iago represents – the existence of something that absolute being cannot accommodate. The change is signalled by Othello's adoption of ambiguous Iago-like speech: 'that's he that was Othello? Here I am' (V.ii.281). His being is no longer singular, its story simple to narrate, and something he completely understands. The phrase 'he that was Othello' contains what he used to be, what he can comfortably refer to as 'Othello', but what he is no longer coincides with what he ought to know he is, because the way he understands his existence is fractured. The 'I' no longer refers to his stable sense of being, but is defined in relation to it. What, then, is Othello? While it is important not to equate 'self' and 'being', Calderwood makes a strong point when he reasons that 'what emerges is not the image of a unique and essential self but a series of generic snapshots … Instead of a self-core discoverable at the centre of his being, Othello's "I am"

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[53] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 136.

seems a kind of internal repertory company, a "we are"".[54] Calderwood has in mind Othello's final speech:

> Set you down this,
> And say besides that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him – thus!
>
> (V.ii.350-354)

In killing himself, Othello signifies that he is both the 'I' that does the killing, and the 'turbanned Turk', the 'circumcised dog', that is killed. In effect, he signals his non-identity with either of these beings: he is and is not the 'turbanned Turk'. Othello evokes a being that defies rational definition and then destroys it. But his last speech also involves Othello's final attempt to reinforce an ordered sense of being, represented by Venice, against which the Turk poses a threat. Othello may be a murderer, but it is not obvious how he has 'traduced the state' in the play. What is scandalous to the state is his aberration from the official order of being that he enacts in his final speech. He becomes something devious like Iago. The enactment of the fact that there are types of existence that cannot be included in the Christian concept of absolute being jeopardises the structural integrity of this ontological order. However, removing Othello from the picture does not erase the problems his plight has revealed: order cannot be reinstated where it has ceased to be the only meaningful interpretation of being. Shakespeare highlights what happens to those who cannot make sense of their being in a system of absolute being, and dramatises the problems faced by this ontological theory.

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Shakespeare undoubtedly uses the theory of absolute being, both in the form of the great chain of being and as a belief system to which many of his characters implicitly subscribe. However, absolute being is not the overarching ontological structure that governs the plays.

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[54] Calderwood, *The Properties of* Othello, p. 103.

Instead of reinforcing the idea of an underlying order of absolute being, neither the appearance of deities nor incidents that imply the existence of a deity are suggestive of a divinity such as the Christian God, who is a form of absolute being. Shakespeare uses gods and their supernatural powers to create theatrical spectacles, and as narrative devices, instead of as manifestations of absolute being. These deities do not have power over being and never change being or cause being. Indeed, in plays where they do not appear as characters, God and gods are not shown to have any objective existence. In refusing to reinforce the characters' beliefs in gods, staging no supernatural responses to prayers, Shakespeare shows that absolute being – a power that would define being – is not an irrefutable fact about existence but something that people construct in an attempt to understand the world.

Shakespeare's plays make use of religious language, engage with serious religious problems and present religious versions of absolute being, but early modern religious ontology is not the conclusive way being is staged in his drama. A systematic explanation of the world does not necessarily correspond to how things are, or provide adequate means of comprehending experience. Shakespeare follows questions raised by problems of the ontology of evil in Christian ontology to their logical conclusion, showing the shortcomings of the concept of absolute being through the way he treats the marginalised forms of being that this concept excludes. Monolithic explanations of how things are, or how things ought to be, are confounded by Shakespeare's multifarious presentation of experience, and the ontological questions that arise from inexplicable dilemmas such as the experience of a ruptured sense of being. Questions of being in Shakespeare's plays are not easily explained by an application of absolute being, because they do not discern in human experience an order consistent with such a theory. Instead of trying to deny the existence of negative or confusing elements of existence by insisting on the primacy of absolute being, Shakespeare's plays expose the fact that it is this lack of order itself that produces the concept of absolute being.

Chapter 6

'As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin'

The Absolute Self

Instead of positing an absolute being that causes all other beings, Shakespeare's plays present absolute being as an idea human beings use in order to rationalise their existence. Shakespeare does not fully subscribe to the predominant ontology of his time. But if Shakespeare's ontology is not an ontology of absolute being, what is it? Are any of the characters presented as possessing, or speaking in a manner consistent with, belief in any other form of being? One of the most common ontological standpoints to which Shakespeare's characters implicitly subscribe is that of the absolute self, as is evident when they behave or express themselves in a fashion that *grounds the existence and meaning of the world in themselves.* This mode of being is expressed in three different ways: as a complete reliance on one's own perceptions of the world; as a self-centred stance that sees the value of the world as dependent on oneself; and as a solipsistic denial of what is perceived to be the external world. However, the fact that certain characters espouse some form of absolute selfhood does not mean that Shakespeare also holds such beliefs. It will become apparent that Shakespeare does not endorse the supremacy of the absolute self, and that he exposes its destructive tendency. But if the absolute self is such a destructive illusion, what makes characters embrace it to begin with? And to what extent do the plays show that a conception of being as inalienably social is capable of resisting the claims of the absolute self?

Because many modern notions of selfhood and subjectivity are based on the ontological model of the absolute self, this chapter will share some ground with recent studies of selfhood and subjectivity in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. However, it should be noted that an ontological study differs from a study of subjectivity, because

notions of self and subjectivity rely on notions of being, but are not equivalent to them. This is because subjectivity depends on how one understands one's own existence, but existence does not rely on subjectivity.

The ontological concept of the absolute self bears a resemblance to the concept of absolute being insofar as it serves as an ontological foundation, but differs from it in that it does not necessarily create other beings. Although it is possible for the absolute self to fall into complete solipsism and imagine that the world exists only in its mind, or that the world exists only as long as the self in question perceives it, this is not a necessary consequence of absolute selfhood. The chief definition of the absolute self is rather that the existence of everything else is based on the *certainty of one's own existence*. Naïve realism – the commonly held idea that something exists because it is verified by one's senses – is a philosophically unsophisticated consequence of this ontological idea. While Descartes' presentation of absolute selfhood is more complex, and he thus rejects the reliability of the senses, the clearest philosophical formulation of the absolute self is his *cogito*, which bases certainty on the premise that 'I am, I exist', which is meant to be indubitable because it 'is necessarily true whenever it is stated by me or conceived in my mind'.[1] On this understanding of being, ontological foundations lie within the thinking being rather than in some higher power. It may be objected that using Descartes in a study of Shakespeare is anachronistic. However, as Marshall observes, there were 'forces that were shaping a liberal, autonomous subject'[2] in the early modern period, and it is not difficult to prove that, although Descartes expresses this philosophical idea most clearly, the idea was not invented by him and is present in its nascent form in many early modern texts.[3]

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[1] René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 14. While it is true that Descartes intended this 'I' to be a personal reflection, it is nevertheless the paradigm case of absolute selfhood. In teaching this way of meditating on existence and inviting the reader to follow the same steps as himself, he establishes a way of thinking about being that goes beyond experimental thinking.

[2] Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and the Early Modern Text* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 2.

[3] There is, however, a long tradition of critics who argue that Cartesian dualism was not possible in Shakespeare's time because it was not possible to have a distinct, autonomous inner life. See for instance Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), Francis Barker, The *Tremulous Private Body: Essays in Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984), and Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Cf. Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), which argues that the experience of interiority is historically defensible. I will return to this subject below.

It is worth observing that the notion of an absolute self is not strictly compatible with the notion of an absolute being, because the two theories propose different foundations for being: a prime mover and the thinking being. However, both notions of being can be held by someone without his necessarily perceiving the contradiction. Even Descartes draws on the prototypical image of the prime mover and the great chain of being in his contention that 'something which is more perfect … cannot be made from that which is less perfect',[4] and that therefore, 'although it is possible for one idea to generate another, this does not lead to an infinite regress. Eventually one has to reach some first idea, the cause of which is like an archetype that contains all the formal reality which is found only intentionally in the idea'.[5] But proof of the existence of God for Descartes is that one would not be able to imagine such a perfect being unless such a being existed: 'the whole force of this argument consists in the fact that I recognize that it is impossible for me to exist with the kind of nature I have, that is, having in myself the idea of God, if God did not truly exist'.[6] God may be an external entity, but the certainty of his existence depends on the acknowledgement by the absolute self that such a being can be thought to exist. Because it is indubitable that we exist and are the sorts of beings we are, God must exist: the ontological foundation that allows one to know God is the absolute self. Descartes notionally believes in the existence of a prime mover, but knowledge of his prime mover is paradoxically – but perhaps not intentionally – reliant on the absolute self. Thus, when characters in Shakespeare's plays who profess some kind of belief in an absolute being also say things that suggest an implicit belief in the absolute self, there is an inherent contradiction, but it is not necessarily problematic. Such instances only show the depth and complexity of Shakespeare's depiction of ontological understanding in his drama.

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Of the various ways in which the absolute self is manifest in the plays, the most unconscious is found in professions of sense-certainty: the conviction that things must be because they are

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[4] Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 33.
[5] *Ibia.*, p. 36.
[6] *Ibia.*, p. 43.

perceived to be by a human being. In the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, Christopher

Sly bases his belief in the reality of his transformation on the evidence of his senses:

> Am I a lord, and have I such a lady?
> Or do I dream? Or have I dreamed till now?
> I do not sleep: I see, I hear, I speak,
> I smell sweet savours and I feel soft things
> *Upon my life*, I am a lord indeed,
> And not a tinker nor Christopher Sly.
> > (Induction 2.66-71; my italics)[7]

Sly's belief is not immediate; he questions his situation, raises the possibility that he is

dreaming, and conducts a simple verification test by comparing the information furnished

by his five senses with what he has been told. Sly rejects the possibility that he is dreaming

by process of elimination. Moreover, having based his conclusion on the evidence of his

senses, Sly swears that he is a lord upon his 'life': to base the objective reality of the world on

one's senses is tantamount to basing it upon one's existence – one's being – because it does

not rely on anything external to oneself for further proof. Innocuous or banal as this example

may seem, Sly implicitly subscribes to a metaphysical position based on the ontology of

absolute selfhood. This allusion to the reliability of sense perception at the beginning of the

play is not accidental either, for it becomes a repeated theme in the framed play, as in the

ridiculous moment when Petruchio makes Katherina deny the evidence of her senses and

agree with whatever he says is the case:

> Petruchio: Good lord, how bright and goodly shines the moon!
> Katherina: The moon? The sun; it is not moonlight now.
> Petruchio: I say it is the moon that shines so bright.
> Katherina: I know it is the sun that shines so bright.
> Petruchio: Now by my mother's son, and that's myself,
> It shall be moon, or star, or what I list,
> Or e'er I journey to your father's house.
> > (IV.v.2-8)

One of the several things that are going on in this exchange is that Shakespeare is playing

with stage conventions: there is no way for the audience to know whether it is Petruchio or

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[7] *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by H. J. Oliver, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). All references to this play are to this edition.

Katherina who is speaking the truth, and without Katherina's opposition Petruchio's first line would be a perfectly acceptable setting of the scene. As Catherine Bates observes:

> The prerogative to conjure out of thin air a place, a time, a person's identity or gender is, of course, that of the playwright … When Petruchio invites Kate to imagine that the sun is the moon and so forth he is doing neither more nor less than the tricksy Lord who lays on 'The Taming of the Shrew' in order to beguile the drunken Christopher Sly.[8]

Shakespeare undermines not only Katherine's sense-certainty, but the audience's as well: we are not allowed to trust everything we hear. Perception, whether aural or visual, is not presented as stable, and professions of sensory perception cannot be taken for granted. Furthermore, this dialogue highlights the lack of mutuality in the sort of certainty that is based on an absolute self. However ironic the scene may be, it raises real questions about the potential solipsism involved in founding certainty on one's own existence. Petruchio, like Sly, even swears by his 'mother's son' – that is, himself – underscoring the self-centredness of his demand that Katherine subscribe to what he says alone. Petruchio clearly does not believe what he says, but this incident in *The Taming of the Shrew* discloses the workings of absolute selfhood precisely through its exaggerated, self-conscious use of the position. Shakespeare even contests the legitimacy of absolute selfhood within the world of the play, showing that he deliberately makes Petruchio adopt this position. Thus, in response to Petruchio's eccentric declaration, 'I will not go today; and ere I do, / It shall be what o'clock I say it is', Hortensio comments, 'Why, so this gallant will command the sun' (IV.iii.192-4), displaying his belief in an external world that exists regardless of what one claims, and undercutting Petruchio's zany display of authority. Later in the play, Hortensio's wife wryly remarks, 'He that is giddy thinks the world turns round' (V.ii.20), highlighting the way perception is affected when one's understanding of the world is centred on oneself. Relying on oneself alone, one cannot even test the veracity of the senses: the world seems to be spinning because one is giddy, as in dizzy, or giddy as in foolish, but not because it actually turns. Even in comedic and trivial instances the certainty of absolute selfhood is contested.

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[8] Catherine Bates, 'Love and Courtship', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. by Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 118.

Gertrude also bases ontological certainty on her perception when Hamlet sees the ghost of his father in the Queen's closet. In response to Hamlet's question 'Do you see nothing there?' Gertrude answers 'Nothing at all, yet all that is I see' (III.iv.127-29). For Gertrude, seeing is proof of being: as long as she can see something, it exists, and vice versa. This is clearly incompatible with the idea of God as an absolute being[9] – by nature such a being cannot be seen – showing that the Queen's ontological understanding is not defined by such an all-encompassing power, although it is important to emphasise that this does not mean that Gertrude is not a believer. These incidental remarks reflect the character's intuitive grasp of the world rather than constituting a formally stated belief. As in the examples cited from *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Queen's line has the effect of destabilising the perception of the audience, in this case by casting the existence of the ghost into doubt, contradicting what Hamlet says and what the audience sees and hears, since the stage directions clearly state that the ghost enters at this point, and the ghost is given lines in the text.[10] Indeed, because the ghost is physically present on stage, and because it has been seen by others earlier in the play, the Queen's inability to see or hear the apparition throws into relief the insufficiency of the senses as an ontological foundation.

Gloucester displays the same ontological reliance on his senses in *King Lear*. This is one instance of two contending ontological positions being held by one character, since Gloucester is also a spokesperson for planetary influence, cosmological significance and absolute being in the play. But Edmund is plainly aware of Gloucester's propensity to believe what he sees, and he uses a physical prop in the shape of a letter to fool Gloucester into

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[9] Take for instance St. Augustine's claim that 'OF things visible, the world is the greatest, of inuisible, God', in Saint Augustine of Hippo, *St. Augustine, Of the citie of God vvith the learned comments of Io. Lod. Viues. Englished by I.H.* (George Eld., 1610), p. 215, in *Early English Books Online*, Text Creation Partnership digital edition <http://gateway.proquest.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:7273:215> [accessed 27/05/2014]. The idea of an 'invisible God' is a commonplace in early modern texts, suggesting that people were used to thinking of things that existed beyond the sensory faculties.

[10] The Folio and Second Quarto texts say 'Enter Ghost' at this point (p. 271 & p. 62), and the First Quarto 'enter the ghost in his night gowne' (p. 44). Page references are to the British library copy of the first quarto: *The tragicall historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke by William Shake-speare. As it hath been diuerse times acted by his Highnesse seruants in the cittie of London: as also in the two vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where* (London: Valentine Simmes, 1603), the Folger copy of the second quarto: *The tragicall historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke. By William Shakespeare. Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect coppie* (London: James Roberts, 1604), and the Bodleian copy of the first folio: *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies. Published according to the True Originall Copies* (London: Isaac Jaggard, and Ed. Blount, 1623), *The Bodleian First Folio: digital facsimile of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays*, Bodleian Arch. G c.7 <http://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>[accessed 06/08/2016].

thinking that Edgar is planning patricide. His suspicions having been aroused by the *sight* of Edmund hiding the letter, Gloucester repeatedly asks to *see* the letter, saying 'Let's see. – Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles' (I.ii.35-6), and then a few lines later, 'Let's see, let's see' (I.ii.43). Gloucester's tacit belief in the correlation between visual objects and their ontological actuality is indicated by the way he equates seeing with being, thinking, like Gertrude, that if there was nothing there he would not see it. Of course, the letter is physically present, but Gloucester's overreliance on his senses confuses the existential reality of the letter with the truth-value of its contents. Although it does not make the act any less disturbing, the fact that it is Gloucester' eyes that are gouged out is symbolically apt, for it is Gloucester's visual perception and confidence in ocular proof that have led him astray. As Gloucester says himself, 'I stumbled when I saw' (IV.i.21): he could not rely on his eyes to tell him what was before him.

In Chapter 5, I argued that Othello's understanding of being is consistent with the hierarchical model of absolute being; however, there is a difference between Othello's self-understanding and his implicit treatment of the world in relation to himself. Othello's insistence on visual confirmation of Desdemona's infidelity is similar to Gloucester's tendency to trust in visual objects for ontological proof. When Iago first broaches the possibility that she is cuckolding him with Cassio, Othello insists that suspicion alone will not suffice to convince him:

> No, Iago,
> I'll *see* before I doubt, when I doubt, prove
> And on the proof there is no more than this:
> Away at once with love or jealousy!
> > (III.iii.192-5; my italics)

Othello thinks himself incapable of believing that something is the case unless he sees it and has absolute proof. The relationship between Othello and the world initially seems straightforward to him: if something actually exists or has actually happened, he will be able to perceive it and prove it. However, later in the same scene Othello begins to revise this simple assumption, saying to Iago, 'Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, / Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof' (III.iii.362-3). Instead of seeing, doubting, then proving that the adulterous act has taken place, Othello already doubts, and now desires to see the proof,

which is to be provided by Iago. This complicates Othello's method of ontological verification, since somewhere along the way Iago has insinuated himself into the process and stands between Othello and what he perceives. Iago uses this position to conjure up images in Othello's mind with words instead of providing real visual proof. When he says, 'Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topped?', Othello immediately replies, 'Death and damnation!' (III.iii.398-9): Iago's lubricious language has had the same emotional impact on him as actually catching Desdemona *in flagrante delicto*. Iago then weakens Othello's notion of proof, insisting on the unfeasibility of his witnessing the act – 'It is impossible you should see this / Were they as prime as goats' (III.iii.405-6) – before shifting the emphasis from actual visual proof to 'imputation and strong circumstances / Which lead directly to the door of truth' (III.iii.409-10). By the next scene, Iago has succeeded in replacing what Othello says he will have to see to believe – the actual act of adultery – with the handkerchief as a symbol of that which cannot be seen: 'Her honour is an essence that's not seen, / They have it very oft that have it not. / But for the handkerchief –' (IV.i.16). Othello's demand for visual proof cannot be fulfilled, but by deft sleight of mind Iago substitutes for visual confirmation a symbolic representation that stands for visual proof. At the end of the play this is all the validation that Othello needs: 'I *saw* my handkerchief in's hand! ... I *saw* the handkerchief' (V.ii.62-6; my italics). All this is possible precisely because of Othello's instinctive belief that what he perceives is true. Throughout this process Othello remains unaware that he has ceded his authority to make decisions about the world to somebody else's narrative. As his repeated invocation of the fact that he 'saw' the handkerchief shows, Othello is still under the impression that this constitutes in itself the requisite visual proof of Desdemona's adultery.

Othello is not actually an absolute self because of Iago's part in the process of proof: the absoluteness of the absolute self has been undermined. Nevertheless, it is an important example, because Othello's ontological belief is premised on his confidence that he sees things as they are: even if he is not an absolute self, he acts like one, and this, along with his naïve belief in his place in the social ontology of absolute being, is part of what allows Iago to deceive Othello. As Hugh Grady points out, 'Iago had to master and then deploy a discourse designed to subject Othello, in terms of the concepts and values of Othello's own belief-

system'.[11] Othello insists on the authority that visual proof gives him to kill his wife until the proof is refuted by Emilia's revelation. He thinks his own belief is absolute, and justifies his conviction and killing of Desdemona as the execution of divine justice, as 'a sacrifice' (V.ii.65). In marked contrast, Desdemona does not rely on her senses or try to clear herself of her husband's charges, choosing instead to appeal to Heaven to confirm her innocence. For Desdemona the absolute is God. Thus when Othello says, 'Swear thou art honest!' Desdemona replies, 'Heaven doth truly know it' (IV.ii.39): Desdemona's ontological justification lies in a higher power, in absolute being, and not in the judgement of an individual. As Stanley Cavell argues, Othello has gradually turned the unknowable other into stone, 'smooth as monumental alabaster' (V.ii.5): 'So there they are, on their bridal and death sheets. A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not'.[12] The wish to be the arbiter of what exists, to be an absolute self, is always at the expense of the other; it denies other beings, turning everyone else into visually examinable objects.

Although it is not hard to find such instances of sense-certainty, of characters who base their conviction that the world exists on the certainty of their own existence, it is more common in Shakespeare's works to find expressions of sensory doubt, and the idea that perception cannot adequately comprehend what is happening.[13] In *The Comedy of Errors*, for instance, the bewildered Antipholus of Syracuse, encountering Adriana, who claims to be his wife, asks himself: 'What, was I married to her in my dream? / Or sleep I now, and think I hear all this? / What error drives our eyes and ears amiss? (II.ii.173-5).[14] Antipholus immediately entertains dream-doubt,[15] and is willing to question whether his senses are functioning correctly, rather than insist on the reliability of his perceptions. Likewise, in the same play Dromio of Syracuse frantically demands, 'Am I Dromio? Am I your man? Am I

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[11] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 130.

[12] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 141.

[13] Although this does not affect the experience of those who do act as if their senses are incontrovertible, early modern psycho-physiology was sceptical about sensory perception on the whole. For more on this, see Sean H. McDowell, 'Macbeth and the Perils of Conjecture', in *Knowing Shakespeare: Senses, Embodiment and Cognition*, ed. by Shankar Raman and Lowell Gallagher (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 32-4.

[14] *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. by T. S. Dorsch, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). All references to this play are to this edition.

[15] The philosophical idea that everything one experiences might be a realistic dream.

myself?' (III.ii.72-3). And when the Antipholi finally come face to face, Adriana entertains

the same sensory doubt: 'I see two husbands or mine eyes deceive me' (V.i.331). Instead of

privileging their own view as the correct one, these characters question the authority of their

senses when presented with a world that does not match their experience. The same is true

of the climactic moment in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Claudio asks Leonato to confirm

that his senses are fully operational before making his accusations based on sensory evidence:

'Leonato, stand I here? / Is this the Prince? Is this the Prince's brother? / Is this face Hero's?

Are our eyes our own?' (IV.i.69-71).[16] Although he is reassured that they are by Leonato,

who answers 'All this is so' (IV.i.72), it nevertheless transpires that the misunderstanding in

question is based on an unreliable perception of events: it was dark and the Prince and

Claudio did not see that it was Margaret at the window, not Hero.[17] Claudio has made a

mistake, but he does not insist from the outset that the evidence of his eyes is incontestable,

asking for corroboration before proceeding with his allegation, and readily relinquishing his

belief when it is proved to be unfounded. From these instances, and from the fact that, in

cases where characters insist on sense-certainty it is invariably undermined elsewhere in the

play, it seems reasonable to infer that Shakespeare is sceptical or even critical of attitudes that

foster the conviction that one can make one's own existence the ontological foundation of

everything else.

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Taking one's own perceptions as truth can be problematic, but it is also a relatively benign

and subconscious adherence to absolute selfhood. Its main danger lies in the inability to see

things from a detached perspective, because the absolute self secures its foundation at the

expense of external objects and any viewpoint that is not its own. Again, this does not

necessarily mean that such a self thinks nobody else exists, or that nobody else matters. As is

clear from the example of Othello, to espouse absolute selfhood does not mean one ceases to

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[16] *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by Sheldon P. Zitner, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). All references to this play are to this edition.

[17] For a detailed account of the epistemology of *Much Ado About Nothing*, see James A. Knapp, 'Mental Bodies in *Much Ado About Nothing*', in *Embodied Cognition in Shakespeare's Theatre*, ed. by Laurie Johnson, John Sutton, and Evelyn Tribble (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), pp. 86-104. Knapp's argument is based on an early modern mind-body duality, and the ultimate fallibility of the senses even in a model of body and mind where the body is meant to reflect the mind.

care about or believe in the existence of others or in an external world. However, to adhere to the ontological position of the absolute self is necessarily to be self-centred, for if one's being is the guarantee of ontological validity, then it is always at the expense of any other foundation, and anyone else's being. Because one's own being is the only certainty when the self is the foundation, one's own values can come to seem more important than anything else. This is what I will call the individualistic absolute self, which is the second way the ontology of absolute selfhood manifests itself. If the first mode of absolute selfhood is relatively harmless, because it is a matter of one's judging the world based on how one perceives it, this second form of absolute self is more problematic, because the individualistic absolute self seeks to impose its own values on the world, or to privilege its own values above any other values. If Petruchio's contradiction of Katherine's views is taken unironically, then he comes firmly into this category.

King Lear demonstrates this second sort of absolute self at the beginning of the play, because he treats the world as if it is the way he thinks it is. As noted in the previous chapter, Lear invokes the gods and calls on 'the power that made me' (I.i.208), but the immediate source of ontological validity lies in himself. This is apparent from the telling moments in which Lear asserts the priority of his own interests over those of other characters. For instance, Lear addresses his sons-in-law as 'Our son of Cornwall, / And you, our no less loving son of Albany' (I.i.40-1). In choosing the word 'loving' rather than 'loved' to characterise them, Lear stipulates how Cornwall and Albany *ought* to act towards him, making it sound as if 'loving' means 'believing that one is loved'. His choice of words when he asks his daughters to profess their love for him is also striking: 'Which of you *shall we say* doth love us most?' (I.i.51; my italics). Either Lear is more interested in who *he says* loves him than who actually loves him most, or he makes no distinction between these two things. For Lear, there is no difference between someone loving him and his saying that someone loves him; he does not doubt that his daughters will say exactly what he thinks they will say, because the way he sees the world is the way the world is. Cordelia's unexpected reply is a betrayal of Lear's understanding of the world because it denies Lear the possibility of saying that she loves him most. Lear does not recognise the possibility of something apart from what he perceives; if Cordelia does not speak in a way that corroborates the way he understands love, then Lear

must come to the conclusion that she does not love him. There is nothing apart from the way he thinks things are; everything is part of him.

Lear can say, 'Here I give / Her father's heart from her' (I.i.126) when he disowns Cordelia, as if it is possible for him to give away what is not his to give, because he treats others as an extension of himself. The Arden edition notes here that it is 'a paradoxical use of "give" to mean remove or detach',[18] but it seems too remarkable an expression to be just an unusual usage. Lear talks as if what Cordelia thinks and feels is up to him to decide. It is only possible for Lear to give away something that is in Cordelia if he believes it belongs to him. According to Lear, 'Her father's heart' was never genuinely hers in the first place. Lear decides what Cordelia possesses, because his sense of his ontological primacy overrides the possibility that others have the same sort of being as himself. Others are only others insofar as they exist *for* Lear; they gain their value only in relation to him. Lear's final words to Cordelia before she leaves for France are 'better thou / Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better' (I.i.235-6): things that have no value for Lear might as well have no being. This contrasts sharply with the King of France's words a few lines later, when he discerns that Cordelia's value is intrinsic to her: 'She is herself a dowry' (I.i.243). It might be objected that Lear also has moments of self-doubt and sensory doubt that would challenge the idea of his absolute belief in himself. For instance, in Act I, scene iv, he says:

> Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear.
> Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?
> Either his notion weakens or his discernings are
> lethargied – Ha! Sleeping or waking? Sure 'tis not so.
> $\qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad$ (I.iv.217-221)

One interpretation of these lines is that Lear is starting to doubt the absoluteness of his being as ontological foundation, that he doubts his own ability to see what is happening. However, as the wording of these lines suggests, Lear's logic is rather that if he does not see things the way he expects to see them, he cannot be himself. Lear's existential certainty is bound up with the way he perceives the world and himself to be. At this point even his sensory doubt is a manifestation of his trust in the absoluteness of his existence. However, Lear does not

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[18] *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997), n. 126.

continue to adhere to the ontology of absolute selfhood. When his wits begin to turn later in the play, the truth of the matter begins to dawn on him: 'When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o'their words: *they told me I was everything; tis a lie*, I am not ague-proof' (IV.vi.100-4; my italics). He is made to feel that the world resists his bidding, that he is not everything; the wind and the rain have penetrated his vulnerable flesh and given him a fever. He even realises that his belief in the absoluteness of self was partly the result of the way others treated him rather than a conviction he arrived at entirely by himself.

A more blatant instance of ontological absolute selfhood is furnished in the first half of *The Winter's Tale* by Leontes, who justifies his belief that Hermione is adulterous on the following grounds:

> Is whispering nothing?
> Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
> Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
> Of laughter with a sigh? – a note infallible
> Of breaking honesty! Horsing foot on foot?
> Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
> Hours minutes? Noon midnight? And all eyes
> Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
> That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?
> Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
> The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
> My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings
> If this be nothing.
>
> (I.ii.281-93)[19]

If Leontes' belief in the adulterous actions of his wife has no ontological validity, then the other things Leontes believes – that the sky, Bohemia and his wife exist – must have no ontological validity either. What all these things have in common is that Leontes thinks they are so: for Leontes, denying what he perceives to be true is the same as denying that anything he perceives is true. In the next two lines addressed to Camillo, Leontes is adamant that Camillo confirm his understanding of what is the case:

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[19] *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by Stephen Orgel, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). All references to this play are to this edition.

> Loentes: Say it be, 'tis true.
> Camillo: No, no, my lord!
> Leontes: It is – you lie, you lie!
>   (I.ii.295-6)

The monosyllabic simplicity of the diction in these lines, which revolve around the verb 'to be', underscore the fact that what is at stake in the exchange for Leontes is an ontological issue. Although, ironically, he seeks corroboration from another person, the confirmation that what he believes is true will be a confirmation of Leontes' absolute selfhood.

It is impossible for someone in thrall to an absolute self to think that he is nothing, for his own existence is the thing of which he is most certain; it is easier to deny the existence of everything else than to deny his own existence. This position contrasts starkly with the reaction of Cleomenes, the messenger who visits the oracle of Apollo, and reports that 'the ear-deaf'ning voice o'th'oracle, / Kin to Jove's thunder, so surprised my sense / That I was nothing' (III.i.9-11). The oracle overwhelms Cleomenes' senses and his being, reducing him to nothing in the face of a greater being. Unlike Leontes, who would rather deny the objective existence of the world than efface his own being, Cleomenes' being can be affected by external forces. Perhaps because Leontes does not hear the voice of the oracle himself, it is easier for him to dismiss its contradiction of his conviction: 'There is no truth at all i'th' oracle. / The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood' (III.ii.138-9). If what the oracle says does not square with Leontes' understanding of the facts, then even the oracle is false.[20]

With Leontes' solipsistic disposition in mind it is possible to make some sense of the notoriously obscure passage earlier in Act I, scene i, when Leontes reflects, in language of mounting incoherence, on the possibility of Hermione's infidelity. He starts by talking to Mamillius, but in what follows there is no clear indication of whom or what he is talking about:

> Most dear'st, my collop – can thy dam, may't be
> Affection! – thy intention stabs the centre.
> Thou dost make possible things not so held,
> Communicat'st with dreams – how can this be?
> With what's unreal thou coactive art,

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[20] It is also a deliberate departure from Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, Shakespeare's primary source for the story, in which Pandosto immediately believes the oracle; Leontes believes only when it is too late.

And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent
Thou may'st co-join with something, and thou dost,
And that beyond commission, and I find it,
And that to the infection of my brains
And hard'ning of my brows.

(I.ii.136-45)

As Stephen Orgel observes, 'elucidation assumes that behind the obscurity and confusion of the text is a clear and precise meaning, and that the obscurity, moreover, is not part of the meaning'.[21] The opacity of the passage, combined with the fact that Leontes appears to be talking to himself, suggests both that Leontes does not clearly understand what he is saying, and that he does not see any need to communicate clearly. The lines do not need to make sense, because Leontes does not have an interlocutor who could question his logic; he does not need to know how he came to his conclusion as long as his conclusion convinces him. What makes sense to Leontes does not need to be communicated clearly, because what matters is what he thinks.

Part of the meaningful confusion of the speech rests on the many possible meanings of the word 'affection', which is the crux of this section of the monologue. One compelling definition is the early modern technical sense: a mental condition which causes passions that affect a person so strongly it can cause hallucination and delusion. Leontes has diagnosed himself with a condition of the brain, but far from disbelieving the things he sees and dismissing them as delusions created by his feverish mind, Leontes says that his affection 'stabs the centre', suggesting that his 'affection' has hit on the truth of the matter. He believes he has a privileged insight into facts: 'How blest am I / In my just censure, in my true opinion!' and laments 'Alack for lesser knowledge!', believing he is 'accursed in being so blest' (II.i.36-8) with this supernatural ability. As John Pitcher puts it:

> Leontes supposes he has this knowledge because he has the symptoms of brain fever. The condition that afflicts him, which he calls 'affection', has given him superhuman mental powers. Everyone else is sane but deceived by the adulterers. Only he, inside

[21] Stephen Orgel, 'Introduction' in *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by Stephen Orgel, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 10. See also Stephen Orgel, 'The Poetics of Incomprehensibility', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42 (1991), pp. 431-437.

his frantic hallucinatory state, which no ordinary person would dare trust, has grasped that reality is a lie and unreality the truth.[22]

Leontes recognises that affection belongs to the realm of fiction, since it is connected to dreams, acts in conjunction with 'what's unreal' and keeps company with 'nothing', and hence that he might be experiencing delusions. Nevertheless, he makes a logical leap and concludes that, because affection is able to produce something from nothing, it can also be based on something rather than nothing. Leontes privileges his own observations over everything else, placing absolute trust in his mental convictions and treating himself as the foundation of truth. As Pitcher points out, 'Leontes' conviction that Hermione has had sex with Polixenes and is pregnant by him is entirely solipsistic';[23] he is confident in his own understanding of the world to the exclusion of all evidence to the contrary.

But the abundance of sexually suggestive words such as 'stab', 'coactive', 'fellow', 'co-join', 'something', and, of course, 'nothing' in this speech implies that there is also an erotic subtext which turns on the early modern sense of 'affection' as 'lust' or 'passion'. In this reading, 'thy intention stabs the centre' suggests that the intensity of sexual passion stabs the core of a person like cupid's arrow, carrying with it the suggestion of sexual penetration. Lust can be so strong and intense that it can make the impossible possible, the unreal feel as if it were real, nothing feel like something, pure fantasy seem like solid fact, and inconceivable acts such as adultery probable. It is therefore feasible to Leontes that, since lust can influence fantasies, it is also able to attach itself to a real object of passion. Sexual desire is also connected to 'nothing' as in the early modern vulgar term for vagina, making it possible for that 'nothing' to 'co-join' with 'something' – also a slang term for penis – and make something of nothing through pregnancy. Leontes' diseased imagination is haunted with images of Hermione's supposed sexual infidelity.

But 'thy intention stabs the centre' cannot be Leontes' description of Hermione's lust-stricken state alone; the intensity of Hermione's supposed sexual passion has shaken Leontes to the core. It has stabbed *his* centre: that is why he is rambling almost incoherently. What is it about lust that has overwhelmed Leontes? It may be that the imagined love affair

[22] John Pitcher, 'Introduction', in *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by John Pitcher, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 39.
[23] *Ibia.*, p. 38.

between Hermione and Polixenes has destroyed his trust in his wife and his friend, destabilising Leontes' understanding of the world. But given Leontes' fixation with 'nothing' and the 'unreal' in this speech, it appears partly to be the connection between sex, 'nothing', and 'something' that bothers him. In other words, it is Hermione's generative ability to create something from nothing that is troubling, especially when the act of reproduction does not necessarily rely on Leontes. Hermione's 'affection', her lust, stabs Leontes at the heart of his being because a child conceived independently of Leontes' existence threatens his absolute selfhood. In his study of scepticism and the body in Shakespeare's drama, David Hillman also locates Leontes' scepticism in Hermione's pregnancy: 'his wife's pregnancy can be understood as a rather precise figuration of what is so agonising to Leontes'.[24] According to Hillman, Hermione's pregnancy threatens Leontes' sense of his singleness, presenting him with 'the fear that if he takes the other in, his centre will burst'.[25] Although expressly couched in terms of physical scepticism, the basic argument is similar. Leontes' physical integrity is threatened by the possibility that his body may be encroached upon by another; Leontes' absolute self is jeopardised by the possibility of a being that is not dependent on his own. In the context of a different argument, Cavell makes a similar point: 'it is as if [Mamillius'] very existence is what perplexes his father's mind'.[26] Leontes' children are connected to him only through Hermione, and, as Cavell points out, they appear to replace him in the affections of his wife, so that he is no longer the centre of her attention. Leontes is threatened by anything that undermines his ontological primacy.

Troilus embodies the individualistic absolute self in a slightly different way from Leontes and Lear. Nancy Selleck picks up on this when she argues that 'in contrast to Cressida, Troylus is often at pains to assert his own singleness or "simplicity", and he functions on the basis of the deliberate singleness of his thinking'.[27] As mentioned in Chapter 4, Troilus argues against Hector's claim that 'value dwells not in particular will … 'tis precious in itself' (II.ii.53-55), asking instead, 'what's aught but as 'tis valued?' (II.ii.52). The question is, valued by whom? Helen's value is a social matter for the city of Troy, but for Troilus,

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[24] David Hillman, *Shakespeare's Entrails: Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 153-4.
[25] *Ibia.*, p. 164.
[26] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 195.
[27] Nancy Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 54.

Cressida's value is defined entirely in relation to himself: she is valued as he values her. In Act III, scene ii, when Troilus is waiting for Cressida, he soliloquises:

> I am giddy; expectation whirls me round.
> Th'imaginary relish is so sweet
> That it enchants my sense. What will it be,
> When that the wat'ry palates taste indeed
> Love's thrice-repured nectar? Death, I fear me
>   (III.ii.16-20)

Troilus' position is unmistakably egocentric. Not only are personal pronouns repeatedly used throughout the soliloquy, but there is also no mention of Cressida. The 'relish' is imagined entirely as something abstract that Troilus will experience, a stimulation of his 'sense'. The extended metaphor of consumption shows his desire to incorporate Cressida into himself: she exists for him and not in and of herself. As Anne Barton points out, 'Cressida is regarded by her lover principally as matter for ingestion';[28] indeed, in this soliloquy Cressida is imagined not in human form, but as 'nectar', something to 'taste', and when Troilus is finished with her entirely after her 'betrayal' of him, she becomes 'fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics/ Of her o'ereaten faith' (V.ii.166-7). The association of pleasure and death is also revealing, since death as a colloquial term for orgasm suggests that what will happen is the temporary loss of being in pleasure. As Troilus goes on to say, 'I do fear besides/ That I shall lose distinction in my joys' (III.ii.24-5). His fear seems to be the loss of his hold on his thinking being, the death of the 'distinction' that keeps his monadic existence separate.

Because Troilus sees everything in terms of himself, 'Cressida to him is the Cressida of their relationship; she has no meaning or existence for him outside this context'.[29] Troilus cannot accept a Cressida who does not act the way he thinks she will; he cannot accept something that contradicts what he believes. Thus when Troilus sees Cressida with Diomedes, his first reaction is to deny what he has seen: 'Rather think this is not Cressid' (V.ii.139). As Thersites observes, Troilus will 'swagger himself out on's own eyes' (V.ii.142). Whereas the first sort of absolute self grounds what it sees on its being, the individualistic absolute self

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[28] Anne Barton, 'Introduction' to 'Troilus and Cressida', in The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 480.
[29] Terence Eagleton, Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 17.

denies what it sees on the grounds of its being. Troilus goes on, 'This she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida' (V.ii.144): when Cressida no longer accords with Troilus' view of what she ought to be, Troilus disassociates her from his being and, remarkably, gives another man responsibility for the way she is. Troilus can imagine another person having a similar existence to himself, but that other person is not Cressida. Clearly, he does not engage with her as a fellow creature with the same capacity for ontological self-affirmation. Troilus's next claim is that 'if there be rule in unity itself, / This is not she' (V.ii.148-9); insofar as Troilus defines the Cressida before him as 'Diomed's Cressida', the logical antithesis of Diomed's Cressida should be 'Troilus's Cressida'. The lack of unity consists in the disparity between Diomedes' Cressida and Troilus' Cressida. This has nothing to do with whether Cressida is capable of being both of these Cressidas without any sense of contradiction. From the first time that Troilus and Cressida meet she expresses herself in a conflicted fashion, saying, for instance, 'I have a kind of self resides with you, / But an unkind self that itself will leave / To be another's fool' (III.ii.143-5). Cressida may be inconstant, but she was never a unified and confident absolute self like Troilus. It may be to Troilus' credit, even if he does not fully comprehend it, that he comes to the conclusion that 'This is and is not Cressid' (V.ii.153), for if the terms in which Cressida expresses herself are contradictory, then by contradicting herself she is being paradoxically consistent. The 'unity' of Troilus's world turns out to be the unity between what he thinks and what he sees, a world narcissistically unified in his mind, but through Cressida's infidelity the world is shown to be other than he thinks it is. As Grady says, 'what becomes established at this epiphanic dramatic moment is not the revelation of Cressida's perfidy … but the crashing of Troilus' idealizing and idolizing perceptual field in the face of the resisting materiality of the world – and of Cressida herself'.[30] Troilus' impassioned response to the discovery of Cressida's falsity – 'O Cressid! O false Cressid! False, false, false! / Let all untruths stand by thy stained name, / And they'll seem glorious' (V.ii.185-7) – may seem excessive, but, although the degree of her culpability is debatable, she has put paid not just to Troilus' infatuation but to his ontological stability. Absolute selfhood such as Troilus' may establish the certainty of one's own existence, but only at the expense of others, and of the world. Both ontologically and socially, *Troilus and*

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[30] Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 82.

Cressida shows unbridled individualism pursued to its logical outcome, in which bonds with other people cease to be possible.

Coriolanus manifests his individualistic absolute self in a different way, by literally depriving others of being in war, at one point appearing so soaked in the blood of others that his own men do not recognise him, and he appears 'as he were flayed' (I.vii.22).[31] Both visually and in his actions he uses others to define his own being, but he also reveals this verbally at key moments in the play. His famous retort to his banishment from Rome, 'I banish you!' (III.iii.124), suggests that Coriolanus sees himself as defining the world instead of the world as defining him. The lines that precede the retort support this conclusion:

> You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
> As reek o'th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
> As the dead carcasses of unburied men
> That do corrupt *my* air …
> $\qquad\qquad\qquad$ (III.iii.121-4; my italics)

Even the air belongs to Coriolanus. Everything is defined by its importance to his being. As Jonathan Dollimore observes, 'Coriolanus has an almost manic fear that his oneness will be obliterated by the many'.[32] Coriolanus feels justified in banishing the plebeians from his world, in rejecting their existence on the grounds that it threatens his being. With the blood-drenched warrior protagonist of the play in mind, it is not altogether fanciful to see the corpses in these lines as killed by Coriolanus, and thus the infected air as created by Coriolanus himself, just as the mob that demands his banishment is the direct result of his hatred for the plebeians. However, it is characteristic of him that, despite the unconscious irony latent in his tirade, Coriolanus refuses to acknowledge any consanguinity with the people he addresses. They are as lifeless and inhuman as the 'dead carcasses' he invokes to deride them: to him, they might as well not exist. Coriolanus' famous exclamation 'O me alone!' (I.vi.77) could be taken either as him swearing by himself, which would show the significance he attaches to himself, or as an ecstatic exclamation in response to his being

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[31] *Coriolanus*, ed. by R. B. Parker, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[32] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 223.

recognised as superior to everyone else, one of a kind.[33] In either case Coriolanus places his existence above all else, making himself 'alone'.

Although he is concerned more specifically with subjectivity than with being, James Kuzner disagrees with the view that Coriolanus is what he calls a 'bounded subject'[34] – the sort of subjectivity that arises from the ontology of absolute selfhood. He argues that 'Coriolanus desires undoing, not self autonomy'[35] on the grounds that

> Coriolanus believes war to be beautiful not because it protects or strengthens Rome and its residents but because it smears him into bloody existence on an otherwise blank canvas. Battle turns the corporeal self inside out; it does what the public square does not, makes of him surfaces without depths, a being no longer clearly or only Martius ... but undifferentiated. He becomes exposed to the outside-of-self, mixed with the blood of others.[36]

While it is possible for an individual to seek ontological effacement in the being of others, as one can in a system of absolute being where one forms only one part of a great whole, I do not agree that this is the case for Martius. The lives of others are meaningful to Martius because they are his foes, because depriving them of being by killing them gives him definition. Contrary to Kuzner's argument, Martius expressly says, ''Tis not *my* blood / Wherein thou seest me masked' (I.ix.9-10; my italics). Some of the blood must be Coriolanus', given that Volumnia later gloats that Coriolanus has received two wounds, but Martius expressly denies any 'mixing' of blood. War is not an act of mutual recognition in this case, because the blood that covers Martius is the blood of those he has killed, and because those who have been robbed of being can no longer recognise anything. Martius' attitude to war is expressed as a cannibalistic desire to feed on others; as Cavell notes, 'the general Cominius speaks of Coriolanus' coming to battle as to a feast'.[37] The blood is not something

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[33] I do not think it is necessary to punctuate the full line 'O me alone! Make you a sword of me!' and transfer the lines to a soldier offering himself as a swordsman. If there is another speaking part here, he does not receive any response. Since the stage directions state that the soldiers lift Coriolanus up instead of waving their swords as instructed, it seems more likely that Martius is responding to their action. He is being made into a human weapon, and waved around like a sword.

[34] James Kuzner, *Open Subjects: English Renaissance Republicans, Modern Selfhoods, and the Virtue of Vulnerability* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 106.

[35] *Ibia.*, p. 88.

[36] *Ibia.*, p. 98.

[37] Stanley Cavell, '"Who does the Wolf love?" Reading *Coriolanus*', in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), p. 202.

that becomes part of Coriolanus' body or being, but a 'mask', something he wears and can wash off.

Volumnia is close to the truth when she says that Coriolanus is 'too absolute' (III.ii.41), for Coriolanus does indeed posit himself as absolute, swearing by his singularity. Coriolanus lives, as he says himself, 'As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin' (V.iii.36-7). However, Volumnia does not share Coriolanus' absolute belief in his singular being. As A. D. Nuttall points out, Coriolanus' 'assumption of a power to make himself, as a moral being, is comprehensively undermined by the fact that all this courage, all this aggression, was formed and moulded by the mother'.[38] Volumnia is aware of the vital role she has played in his life by bringing him up to believe absolutely in himself, and of the part social relationships play in forming individuals. Hence, when Coriolanus refuses to be 'false to [his] nature' (III.ii.15) and perform the traditional charade that will allow him to join the senate, Volumnia points out:

> You might have been enough the man you are
> With striving less to be so. Lesser had been
> The tryings of your dispositions if
> You had not showed them how ye were disposed
> Ere they lacked power to cross you.
> <div align="right">(III.ii.19-23)</div>

The ability to *be* absolute itself turns out to depend on his social position, not on his innate value; he can be the man he is when others lack the social power to cross him. Although the tribunes are represented as corrupt, conniving demagogues, they are not wrong in describing Coriolanus as 'this viper / That would depopulate the city and / Be every man himself' (III.i.265-7). If Coriolanus refuses to accept the existence of the populace, who are as 'carcasses' to him, then the community might as well cease to exist. His attitude verges on solipsism, a position which is not supported by the world of the play. Thus when Coriolanus renounces his name and the honorary title bestowed upon him – '"Coriolanus"/ He would not answer to, forbade all names; / He was a kind of nothing, titleless' (V.i.11-3) – he becomes not *more* himself, but 'nothing', a semantic void rather than the absolute value he sees from his own perspective.

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[38] A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 296.

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The individualistic absolute self at its most excessive starts to merge with the last and most extreme form of this ontological position: the solipsistic absolute self. Whereas the first type of absolute selfhood based the certainty of the world on itself, and the individualistic absolute self sought to define the world according to itself, the solipsistic absolute self seeks to deny everything perceived as external to itself, to change the world to suit its being. By describing them as solipsistic, I do not mean that such individuals do not believe that the world exists, but rather that the world does not matter to them in the face of their own absolute selfhood. Some of Coriolanus' and Troilus' ways of being are consistent with this form of absolute selfhood, because the ontology of the absolute self leads to individualism insofar as it finds solidity in its own being at the expense of everything external to itself. The individualist views others chiefly in terms of their value for himself or herself, which can make the world something that exists to be used or consumed. This position is not sustainable, for its consequence, to quote Ulysses, is that

> Appetite, an universal wolf,
> So doubly seconded with will and power,
> Must make perforce an universal prey
> And last eat up himself.
>   (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.iii.121-4)

If anything external to the self is there to be to be consumed, everything becomes 'prey'. The quotation highlights two important factors: first, the appetite is supported by will and power, which means that, to be in a position to prey on the world like Coriolanus, one must first have the power to do so; and second, to prey on the world is to eat up oneself, giving the lie to the idea that one can insulate oneself from it. By making 'an universal prey' of the world, one preys on that which enables one to prey to begin with. For example, while knowing that he 'cannot come to Cressid but by Pandar' (I.i.91), Troilus does not seem to recognise that his personal pleasure is dependent on a social relationship with Cressida, and therefore that his individualism actually relies on a nexus that he fails to recognise. By regarding Cressida as matter for consumption, Troilus eats up what he thinks of her, leaving behind what he later confesses to regarding as 'scraps' (V.ii.166). The process is self-destructive, for in

devouring what gives him pleasure, he destroys his own pleasure. Individualistic absolute selfhood is shown to be self-defeating and self-consuming, because in its most extreme form it can lead to a desire to consume the world, to the kind of solipsism inherent in Coriolanus' propensity to deny the existence of the populace.

I have classified Troilus and Coriolanus as types of the individualistic absolute self rather than the solipsistic self, because they do not actively strive to change the way the world is to fit their being, even if they do act in a way that suggests that they see themselves as ontically fundamental. Since Troilus can say Cressida 'is and is not Cressida' – rather than that she simply 'is not Cressida' – he evidently acknowledges (with great difficulty and pain) that her being can be separated from what he thinks she is. Although disdainful of the public, Coriolanus is also not completely solipsistic either, because he does not deny his connection to his mother at any point in the play, and because his final deference to his family shows that he acted only '*As if* a man were author of himself/ And knew no other kin', where the conditional 'as if' reveals his awareness that it is not possible for him to be a monad.

It is a totally different matter with Richard III, whose creed, 'I am myself alone' (*Henry VI Part III* V.vi.83),[39] epitomizes the monadic, solipsistic absolute self. Unlike Troilus and Coriolanus, Richard reveals his ontological view of the world through his actions more than through his words. There can be no doubt that Richard cares little for the lives and fate of others so long as he achieves his own ends: even his allies are not safe from him once they are no longer useful. Buckingham, for instance, follows Richard on the strength of the assurance that he is Richard's 'other self' (II.ii.120), but Richard is incapable of having any other self, and cuts off Buckingham when he claims his dues. The Duchess of York laments that her sons 'Make war upon themselves, blood against blood, / Self against self' (II.iv.65-6), viewing the brothers as ontologically identical, but Richard does not see his brothers' gains as his own. According to Richard's logic, because he is not made for the world, 'not shaped for sportive tricks' (I.i.14), he must instead make the world fit him. After he has gained the crown, Richard attempts to swear 'by the world –' and is cut off by the Queen, who says ''Tis full of thy foul wrongs' (IV.iv.295): Richard has made the world reflect himself.

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[39] *Henry VI, Part Three*, ed. by Randall Martin, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Although Richard does not generally verbalise the way he sees the world, his final soliloquy after the dream in which the ghosts of his victims appear to him is revealing:

> What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. – Yes, I am.
> Then fly. – What, from myself? – Great reason why:
> Lest I revenge. – What, myself upon myself?
> Alack, I love myself. – Wherefore? – For any good
> That I myself have done unto myself. –
> O no, alas, I rather hate myself
> For hateful deeds committed by myself.
> I am a villain. – Yet I lie; I am not.
> Fool, of thyself speak well. – Fool, do not flatter.
> My conscience has a thousand several tongues,
> And every tongue brings in a several tale,
> And every tale condemns me for a villain.
> Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree! –
> Murder, stern murder, in the dir'st degree.
> All several sins, all used in each degree,
> Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty!'
> I shall despair. There is no creature loves me,
> And if I die, no soul will pity me.
> And wherefore should they, since that I myself
> Find in myself no pity to myself.
> <div align="center">(V.iv.161-174)</div>

Even at this crucial moment, Richard's soliloquy is filled with first-person pronouns. For Richard, the problem is not so much what he has done to others as what he has done and is doing to himself. The only thing that can make him fear is himself, the only love that matters is his own, and the only good that matters is the good he has done himself. All the things he values and fears are contained within the closed narcissistic circle of 'I and I'. Even the voices that condemn him are versions of himself: they are 'the thousand several tongues' of his conscience, not the censure of others. Like the psychomachia in a medieval morality play, Richard's sins open a court case in his mind and condemn him. His despair is self-condemnation, for he has judged himself, and concluded within himself that he is not worth pitying. Yet at this climactic moment some things do find their way into Richard's solipsistic consciousness. The first is the word 'murderer'. 'Is there a murderer here?' asks Richard, then immediately denies that there is, before accepting the designation: 'Yes, I am'. Richard is

haunted by the idea that he is a murderer, a being that can deprive another of being. But it is also significant that Richard fears his murderousness not because of what it has done to others, but because of what it might do to him: 'Then fly', he says, as if to escape himself, as if his murderousness constituted a threat to him. The fear of murder shocks his system precisely because Richard's being is of such paramount importance to him. If he can divest another of being, he might place his own being in jeopardy.

The second thing that slips into Richard's monologue is the idea of another 'creature', another 'soul'. This is the only time in the play that Richard shows any concern for what anyone else might feel for him. For the first time, Richard sees himself from the perspective of another being and understands the indivisibility of his existence from that of his fellow creatures. This point is essential, for although Richard is the epitome of the solipsistic absolute self, the play as a whole does not endorse his ontology. Shakespeare presents characters who act in a manner consistent with this ontological concept, but always undermines their self-certainty. Indeed, Richard's solipsism is flawed at a fundamental level, because, as William C. Carroll points out, 'there is one structure of social order which remains absolutely sacred for Richard throughout the play … the principle of succession'.[40] The individualism that drives Richard and makes him disregard the lives of any other character is actually engendered by the rules of kingship in the very society he appears to disdain.

Richard is one of the clearest examples of the solipsistic absolute being, but Macbeth is a more complex and rich case. From the start of the play, Macbeth harbours world-destroying fantasies. When the weird sisters' prophecy brings out murderous thoughts in Macbeth, he says,

> My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man, that function
> Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not.
>
> (I.iii.140-44)

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[40] William C. Carroll, '"The Form of Law": Ritual and Succession in *Richard III*', in *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age*, ed. by Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 213.

The strength of Macbeth's imagination is such that *what is not* can nullify *what is*. The contents of his mind – what does not yet exist – becomes all that exists for Macbeth. Macbeth's fantasy of secretly imagined things becoming reality is also a desire to destroy the world as it is and replace it with the world of his own imagining. A. P. Rossiter calls this desire 'Macbeth's impulsion … to assert his pattern on the world',[41] an impulsion that resurfaces as Macbeth considers the murder he is about to commit:

> If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly; if the assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence and catch
> With his surcease, success, that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all – here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'd jump the life to come.
> (I.vii.1-7)

Macbeth wishes that the assassination of Duncan ('his surcease') could bring about the desired outcome ('success') without the dire consequences he fears. But why then call that 'the be-*all* and the end-*all*'? Macbeth's desire to reap the envisioned reward quickly and easily is raised to an entirely different level; if he wants 'all' to be, then it is not just about the achievement of success without repercussions. Taking 'the be-all' to mean the actualisation of all that is in his mind – the 'what is not' that is all that 'is' in the earlier quotation – the phrase 'the be-all and the end-all' suggests that all that 'is' in Macbeth's mind will come to be at the cost of the end of all that already is. Arthur Kirsch describes this as Macbeth's aspiration 'to have the omnipotent power to contain the whole world within his own mind and make it entirely in his own image'.[42] Macbeth would stop and bank up the very flow of time to leap over the life that would otherwise have come, changing the course of the future to rid himself not only of the consequences of the murder but the entire 'time to come'. This 'time to come' also includes the afterlife and last judgement. Macbeth wishes that the murder would be the end of the matter, so that he would not have to pay for it in the next life. But to jump the afterlife is to wish for oblivion after death, to skip over the possibility of another life altogether. The 'end-all' is the annihilation not just of this world, but of the hereafter for

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[41] A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. by Graham Storey (London: Longman, 1989), p. 211.

[42] Arthur Kirsch, 'Macbeth's suicide', in *ELH*, 52 (1984), p. 286.

the sake of this deed on which Macbeth stakes everything. *Macbeth* thus reprises a theme Shakespeare employs in his narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, which the author overtly recalls when he has Macbeth imagine murder pacing 'With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design' (II.ii.56). The idea of the present being displaced by a potential future is foreshadowed in these lines of the poem, as the narrator moralises on the action Tarquin is about to undertake:

> ... in vent'ring ill, we leave to be
> The things we are for that which we expect;
> And this ambitious foul infirmity,
> In having much, torments us with defect
> Of what we have; so then we do neglect
> The thing that we have, and, all for want of wit,
> Make something nothing, by augmenting it.
>   (148-154)[43]

Sacrificing what is to what could be, trying to change what is for what is mistakenly perceived to be better by adding to it, paradoxically turns something actually possessed into nothing, destroying being.

Although Macbeth entertains desires to change or annihilate the world as it is, he has a clear understanding of his place in the world. Thus he raises clear social objections to his murdering Duncan:

> He's here in double trust
> First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject,
> Strong both against the deed; then, as his host
> Who should against his murderer shut the door,
> Not bear the knife myself.
>   (I.vii.12-6)

Aware of his ties to others as family, subject and as host, Macbeth acknowledges his social obligations and, unlike Richard, does not automatically assume that his ambition takes priority over everything else. But of all the reasons Macbeth lists 'against the deed', the only one that really gives him pause is his vision of Duncan's murder summoning the compassionate might of 'pity, like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast' (I.vii.21-2).

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[43] 'Lucrece', in *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). All references to this poem are to this edition.

The 'naked newborn babe' symbolizes not just the fundamental social obligation embodied in a helpless infant, but the absolute vulnerability of any other human being. As Kiernan Ryan argues, 'This image embodies a moral code which overrides all others, because it is grounded in a recognition that the claims of other humans on one's "kindness" are as compelling as those imposed by the needs of "a naked new-born babe", regardless of its gender, race, or rank'.[44] To invoke the image of a person at a stage prior to any notions of gender, race, or rank is to raise the notion of being itself. The act of murder violates being, and Macbeth recognises that there are other creatures in the world that have a claim on him, because they share the same kind of existence as himself. Kirsch claims that 'Macbeth is the most self-centered of Shakespeare's tragic heroes',[45] but one of the compelling things about Macbeth is that he is aware that his desires are self-centred, and is troubled by it.

The soliloquy provoked by the vision of the bloody dagger marks a crucial moment in Macbeth's story, because it signals a choice between how things are and how he sees them. The dagger points him to the path of bloodshed he is about to take: 'Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going, / And such an instrument I was to use' (II.i.43-4). To follow the dagger is to accept the act of murder, to let the visions generated by his mind override everything else. Although Macbeth knows that the dagger is not real – 'There's no such thing. / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes' (II.i.48-50) – he nevertheless takes the path that the 'dagger of the mind' (II.i.39) shows him. Having taken the bloody route that his mind has placed before him instead of trusting the corrective inferences of his other senses, Macbeth starts to deny the relevance of anything he perceives to be independent of and external to himself. As Cavell points out, 'In a world of blood, to be pale, exceptional, exempt, without kin, without kind, is to want there to be no world, none outside of you'.[46] Thus, after the murder Macbeth says, 'What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes' (II.ii.58): he cannot look at, cannot face what he has done, and would rather deny the sight of it by making himself blind. He continues:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No – this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

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[44] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, third edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 93.
[45] Kirsch, 'Macbeth's Suicide', p. 269.
[46] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 248.

> Making the green one red.
>
> (II.ii.59-62)

The world no longer has the power to cleanse Macbeth of his crime and guilt. His act of murder has changed the world, and has the power to turn the sea red with blood. Instead of the world shaping human being, Macbeth thinks that his being now shapes the world.

If Richard is an absolute self who comes in part to recognise some kind of need for social relationships, Macbeth is the opposite. Macbeth starts with an understanding of his profound bond with his fellow human beings, and goes on to deny it. After the murder Macbeth tries to disassociate himself from this communal sense of being, from what he previously understood himself to be: 'To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself' (II.ii.72). Macbeth tries to embrace a model of being which would justify his use of the world for his own ends. After killing Duncan, he targets Banquo, saying 'There is none but he / Whose being I fear' (III.i.53-4); at this point Macbeth clearly accepts that there are beings other than his own that are a threat to him, but he is not just denying the fact of other beings but destroying them in order to secure his absolute selfhood. His monologue before the assassination of Banquo is revealing:

> … Come, seeling night,
> Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day
> And with thy bloody and invisible hand
> Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
> Which keeps me pale.
>
> (III.ii.49-53)

Macbeth still recognises others, and therefore still acknowledges the power of 'pity, like a naked new-born babe', figured here as the 'tender eye of pitiful day', associated with seeing and clarity. However, he wants night to 'seel', or blind, the day so that he cannot see the world and cannot be seen by the world, wishing to separate himself from and destroy the 'bond' that ties him to others, 'cancelling' it as if it had never been there to begin with. He wishes to shut his eyes to the world, to deny its existence, and to sever his bond with others. The murder of Banquo and Fleance is essential for him to feel safe in his retreat into complete, fundamental reliance on his own being. Thus when the murderers fail to kill Fleance, Macbeth says, 'I had else been perfect – / Whole as the marble, founded as the rock' (III.iv.21-

2): this is as overt an avowal of the ontology of absolute self as there can be. Macbeth wishes to be 'perfect', 'whole' and 'founded', a foundational being that has no need of external definitions. Whereas other characters who act as if they are solipsistic absolute selves often labour under the delusion that their power to be an autonomous individual is their own, Macbeth creates the conditions under which he can say, 'for mine own good / All causes shall give way' (III.iv.136-7), deliberately adopting the ontology of absolute selfhood in order to justify his deeds.

<div align="center">***</div>

Macbeth's desire to deny the world raises important questions about the allure of absolute selfhood. Why would someone wish to doubt or deny the world? Why would anyone want to subsume the world under their being? The philosophical critique of the individualistic model of the mind-world relationship can help to clarify these questions. The absolute self necessarily thinks that its being is the only certain thing that can be known, but Hegel and Schelling criticise this model of ontology and epistemology, claiming that a being can recognise itself *as being* only if it encounters another being. As Robert Pippin writes, 'a self-consciousness can actually *be* self-conscious *only* in "being recognized"'.[47] In other words, in order to have the self-consciousness required to claim that one's being is the only certain thing, there has to be a prior ontological understanding of oneself as a social being. The same idea is prefigured by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, when Achilles points out that being cannot understand itself and depends on recognition in order to know its existence:

> The beauty that is borne here in the face
> The bearer knows not, but commends itself
> To others' eyes; nor doth the eye itself,
> That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
> Not going from itself, but eye to eye opposed
> Salutes each other with each other's form.
> For speculation turns not to itself
> Till it hath travelled and is mirrored there
> Where it may see itself.
>   (III.iii.106-11)

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[47] Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the* Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 60.

Just as the eye cannot see itself directly, the homophonic '"I" cannot know itself with any immediacy',[48] and must be reflected in other eyes and 'I's. Speculation, consciousness itself, cannot know itself without reference to that which it is not. More specifically, regarding the necessary condition for a consciousness to be able to think 'I am', Schelling observes, almost echoing Achilles': 'the "I am" is precisely only the expression of the coming-to-itself itself – therefore this coming-to-itself which is stated in the "I am" presupposes the having-been-outside and having-been-away from itself'.[49] Contrary to the idea that the self can have its own existence as its foundation – the 'I am, I exist' of Descartes' formulation – for the 'I' to know what 'I' is to begin with, it requires another 'I' in which it can see itself, and from which to distinguish itself. The absolute self is a delusion, since it always already relies on the sociality it rejects in order to find ontological certainty. Thus the absolute self is the result of two impulses: the desire for complete certainty and the desire to reject the world, to be independent of the world.

Criticising absolute being by pointing out the need for mutuality in self-recognition is consistent with many early modern notions of selfhood. And, while selfhood is not the same thing as ontology, it nevertheless gives a certain indication of how people conceived of being in the Renaissance. These ideas of self and subjectivity have some relevance to ontological readings because of the strong connection that the absolute self has to the concepts of inwardness and selfhood, and because most discussions of self are based on the sort of selfhood grounded on this form of ontology. Jonathan Sawday writes that

> 'Selfhood' in the mid-seventeenth century, did not, in fact, suggest the modern idea of ipseity – the quality of having or possessing a 'self'. Rather it expressed the inability to govern the self. 'Selfhood' was the mark of Satan; it was a token of the spiritually unregenerate individual, in thrall to the flesh rather than the spirit.[50]

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[48] Elizabeth Freund, '"Ariachne's Broken Woof": The Rhetoric of Citation in *Troilus and Cressida*', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York, NY: Methuen, 1992), p. 28.

[49] F. W. J. von Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 109.

[50] Jonathan Sawday, 'Self and Selfhood in the Seventeenth Century', in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 30.

This is because 'the word is anchored, in a theological sense, to an entirely negative set of ideas'.[51] Placing the self above the rest of creation is problematic from a religious point of view, because, as argued in the previous chapter, the Christian concept of ontology is one of absolute being. In absolute being, one is part of a greater scheme of being; one's being is part of the being of God. Thus introspection within this religious framework of ontology should lead to the discovery of God within oneself. As Eric Langley points out, God's 'I am that I am' in Exodus 3:14 contrasts with St. Paul in I Corinthians 15:10, 'But by the grace of God, I am that I am': 'On the one hand, the ultimate expression of divine agency, on the other, an acknowledgement of complete subjection: the apostle's assertion, 'I am that I am', defines not an asserted ego, but rather the absence of independent agency, the dominance of God's grace'.[52] The predominant notion of the self in the early modern period is that one is a 'subject', in the original sense that one is subjected to others and to God, and that one is in-dividual, undividable from others and from God. This notion is present, for instance, in John Donne's famous words, 'No man is an *Ilana*, intire of it selfe'[53] and 'there is no *Phenix*, nothing singular, nothing alone'.[54] There is a sense of communality that arises at least partly from the Christian ontology of absolute being. The possession of a self as distinct from the divine ontology is fundamentally problematic in that it poses a threat to the religious ontology of absolute being.

Critics have argued that that this model of intersubjectivity is central to the early modern period, which 'characteristically defines selfhood as the experience of an *other*'.[55] Thus, Marshall identifies a desire for the shattering of the monadic self in Renaissance literature, Kuzner argues that positive forms of vulnerability need to be recognised in early modern texts, and Langley and Selleck point to the interdependence that is inherent in Hippocratic humoralism, the predominant medical theory of the time.[56] Because

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[51] *Ibia.*, p. 30.
[52] Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 272.
[53] John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Helen Gardner and T.S. Healy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 101.
[54] *Ibia.*, p. 98.
[55] Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom*, p. 8.
[56] For this recently popular area of study see also Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000) and *Humouring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004); Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Laurie Johnson, John Sutton and

environmental factors such as dampness and vapours were said to affect the humours, early modern bodies were considered to be highly susceptible to various influences: 'Humoral theory's central principle of assimilation presents a powerful paradigm for the social dimensions of selfhood. As a model of influence and absorption, it suggests a self not only permeated but changed, reconstituted, by what had been outside the self'.[57] This is not a model in which a person is affected by external things, for there is no strict division between the external and the internal: 'humoral theory posits no Cartesian split between mind and body'.[58] Langley makes a similar point based on the fact that the seeing subject played a more active role in this interpenetrating environment, where vision was understood, not as an individual looking out *at* the world, but as each person's eyebeams interacting with the kindred flames emitted by objects in the world and mingling with the eyebeams of others.[59] However, it is also true that this model of vision was quickly becoming obsolete in the face of anatomical advancements, while poetic styles such as Petrarchanism were challenging the poetics of mutuality,[60] and other forces that were to develop into the later form of individualism were starting to surface. Marshall sums up the subjectivity of the period as follows:

> In the face of forces that were shaping a liberal, autonomous subject, there existed a well-established notion of individuality as both morally and ontologically suspect. This older understanding was manifest in multiple ways: in the established sense, derived from humoralism, of the human body as fluid and changeable and of the emotional self as highly volatile; in a religious tradition dubious of claims of individual self-importance; in a textual aesthetic of excess and extension; and in cultural practices that encouraged public display of emotion and shared catharsis. The contrast between these existing elements of early modern English society and the emerging idea of subjectivity demonstrates why and in some ways how an aesthetic of shattering or self-negation took hold: it constituted a counterforce to the nascent ethos of individualism.[61]

Evelyn Tribble (eds), *Embodied Cognition and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Early Modern Body-Mind* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014).
[57] Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom*, p. 58.
[58] *Ibia.*, p. 58.
[59] Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide*, p. 54.
[60] Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, pp. 56-84.
[61] *Ibia.*, p. 2.

Marshall does not deny that autonomous subjectivity was on the rise and recognised to be so, but her study concentrates on the less studied idea of self-negation.

Most scholars studying the intersubjective dimension of early modern selves see it as a means of counteracting Cartesian dualism, both in the early modern period and in early modern literary studies today. Thus Marshall laments that 'The historicist model recently dominant in literary studies has overlooked or suppressed the tendency of early modern texts to shatter rather than to affirm selfhood'.[62] Selleck likewise argues that 'when critical theorists today reject the concept of the "self", they reject a modern convention quite different from the central conventions of Renaissance selfhood, which actually challenge that later, freestanding "self" more radically than does the postmodern "subject"'.[63] Like Marshall, Selleck claims that the challenge to Cartesian monadic subjectivity is already present in notions of subjectivity that precede individualism, and therefore that writers such as Shakespeare and Donne reject newer notions of pure subjectivity by stressing the importance of traditional notions of interpersonal selfhood. Langley, arguing along similar lines, claims that 'Shakespeare's nostalgic vision sees Iago and his egotistic solipsism as a threat to [Othello and Desdemona], and as a challenge to indivisible individualism',[64] arguing that Shakespeare favours traditional forms of subjectivity. Kuzner echoes these sentiments, contending that 'For Shakespeare, bounded selfhood is a pernicious fiction, and openness, despite the abyss into which it can lead, ought to be embraced anyway'.[65]

It is evident from these studies that the early modern period did have a culture of self-effacement, and that there were many, including characters depicted in literature, who opposed, rather than embraced, an isolationist subjectivity that has its ontological basis in absolute selfhood. So can social connection and mutual recognition resist and counter absolute selfhood? The critics quoted above certainly appear to think that intersubjectivity counteracts individuality, as Langley evidently does when he writes of autonomous subjectivity as if it were a disease: 'Iago perverts and pollutes pre-existing structures of ipseic indivisible interdependence'.[66] It certainly seems true that, if Othello had trusted in his mutual bond with Desdemona instead of succumbing to Iago's doubt, the tragedy could have

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[63] Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom*, p. 11.
[64] Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide*, p. 279.
[65] Kuzner, *Open Subjects*, p. 115.
[66] Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide*, p. 276.

been avoided. But Othello defaults to visual verification even before Iago instils doubt in him. Human bonds are weak in the face of absolute selfhood. As Langley writes, 'formative reliance upon relation, response, and interloculation so fundamental to early notions of the subject (precisely subjected to/by/via an other') [can] be appropriated and introjected by an aggressively self-subjecting individual'.[67] There is no doubt that unbridled individualism founded on absolute selfhood can be dangerous, as this chapter has endeavoured to show, but it is too powerful to be defeated by a return to interdependent subjectivity.

One of the problems with studying subjectivity rather than foundational ontological assumptions is that it is difficult to identify what underlies these notions of selfhood. Interdependence can mean participation in a greater domain of existence such as the framework of absolute being, but the concept of interdependence alone cannot clarify what sort of ontology a particular kind of intersubjectivity is based on. In other words, there is no distinct ontology of intersubjectivity because mutual dependence relies on some form of ontology that makes intersubjectivity possible – an understanding of being that is necessarily incompatible with absolute selfhood. Shakespeare is too sophisticated a writer for facile answers, and too clear-sighted to indulge in nostalgia. Critiques of absolute selfhood that see mutuality as the sword with which to combat autonomous selfhood are joining battle at the level of subjectivity, but this kind of individualism is rooted in a more fundamental difference in the way one understands one's existence. Such criticism cannot take into account how seriously Shakespeare takes the allure of the ontology of absolute selfhood and the desire for freedom implicit in the monadic form of being.

Intersubjectivity is not the antidote to absolute selfhood because it is often the very constraints that define one's being that lead to a desire for differentiation. It is clear that the claims of mutuality have no power to stay Macbeth. Evil though it can be, the absolute self is striving to flee from the existing world, willing to destroy it if need be, and itself with it. It is unsurprising that this potential for rebellion against the status quo in Shakespeare's writing has found supporters in humanist critics such as Peter Holbrook, who claims that the works presage liberalism in their depiction of heroic individualism: 'if we associate modernity with individualism and self-realization, with choice, freedom, authenticity – if modernity means

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[67] *Ibia.*, p. 4.

being true to yourself – ... the world has been "Shakespearized"'.[68] For Holbrook, Shakespeare's characters 'remind ... us that my social identity never captures the authentic me'.[69] However, Shakespeare's treatment of those whose ontological foundation is their own being is not straightforward, not least because it is far from clear that true individualism is ever possible. Shakespeare reveals the illusions of self-sufficiency and absolute independence by demonstrating that this absolute selfhood relies on one's social position. It is no accident that the most obvious cases of absolute selfhood include Coriolanus, Richard III and Macbeth, the fate of each of whom speaks for itself. As Stephen Greenblatt points out,

> ... the phrase 'liberty to live after one's own law' could best serve as the motto for some of the most disturbing villains who haunted Shakespeare's imagination. These villains—Richard III, Edmund, Iago—share a desire for liberation, a murderous impatience with what Edmund calls 'the plague of custom' and 'the curiosity of nations.' And they share as well a conviction that everyone in their world exists to be used for their own profit.[70]

The creed of absolute selfhood is 'for mine own good / All causes shall give way' (*Macbeth* III.iv.136-7); it is a desire for freedom from others, freedom even at the expense of others.

But the refusal of mutual recognition is itself part of the attraction of monadic being. For if one requires another being in order to recognise one's own being, as Achilles' speech in *Troilus and Cressida* suggests, then the desire to deny the world and other people is conversely the desire not to be recognised by another, not to recognise oneself. Terry Eagleton captures this perfectly when he writes that the

> strenuously mastering subject finds itself with its feet planted on nothing more solid than itself, and thus endures the diminishment of knowing that there is absolutely nothing outside itself to validate its existence. Its defiant boast ('I take value from myself alone!') is also in this sense its catastrophe ('I am so lonely in the universe!'), and its existence a perpetual irony, as its untrammelled sovereignty drives it to gobble up the whole world and leave itself with no alterity in whose mirror it might confirm its own identity.[71]

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[68] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.
[69] *Ibia.*, p. 57.
[70] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 122.
[71] Terry Eagleton, 'Self-Undoing Subjects', in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 266.

Just as the absolute self refuses to acknowledge anything other than itself, it harbours a desire not to be acknowledged by others. The desire for world-annihilation is a desire for self-annihilation, a desire to get rid of that which allows one to recognise oneself as being. This is the paradoxical freedom of absolute selfhood. Hidden within the desire to be everything is a desire to be nothing. Ulysses' speech on degree in *Troilus and Cressida* refers not only to the social 'power' that allows appetite, but also to the effects of consuming the world:

> Appetite, an universal wolf,
> So doubly seconded with will and power,
> Must make perforce an universal prey
> And last eat up himself.
>
> (I.iii.121-4)

The act of devouring and thus destroying the world is self-destructive. As Philip Kain explains, 'in negating the other, we will negate *ourselves*'.[72] Appetite eats up what allows it to have appetite, absolute selfhood denies what allows it to posit itself as absolute selfhood. This tendency is especially evident in Macbeth, who may not be conscious of this desire for self-annihilation, but whose speech often betrays a desire not to be. For instance, when he wishes 'that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all', the phrase 'the be-all and the end-all' and his wish to stop the flow of time implies that the moment everything comes to be is also the moment when everything ends. The moment of violence, the moment that will make Macbeth's wishes come true is also the instant that everything ceases to be: Macbeth betrays a covert desire that it will be the end of himself. His wishing to 'jump the life to come' also implies that he wishes to leap over life and the afterlife altogether and become nothing. As Ewan Fernie puts it, 'Macbeth shoots straight for the negative, exemplifying the pleasures of destruction, including self-destruction'.[73] Even when he wants to deny the sight of his bloody hands Macbeth expresses it in self-destructive terms: 'What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes' (II.ii.58). After the deed is done, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth voice this urge towards self-destruction in more explicit terms. Lady Macbeth says, ''Tis safer to be that which we destroy, / Than by the destruction dwell in doubtful joy' (III.ii.7-8), and Macbeth,

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[72] Philip J. Kain, *Hegel and the Other: A Study of the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 43.

[73] Ewan Fernie, *The Demonic: Literature and Experience* (New York, NY: Routledge), p. 54.

later in the same scene, says, 'Better to be with the dead / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace' (III.ii.20-1). As Kirsch observes, 'The only desire Macbeth and Lady Macbeth … have in common [after the murder], though they cannot share it, is the desire for extinction'.[74] Denial of the world is almost always a denial of one's own being.

<center>***</center>

The absolute self is an ontological position that many characters implicitly adopt, either because they blindly trust in the veracity of their own senses, because they value their own judgement over those of any perceived other, or because they are prepared to destroy what they have for what they want. In most cases, the absolute self privileges the experience of one person above that of everyone else, and Shakespeare problematizes their doing so in every case. It is plain, therefore, that absolute selfhood cannot be called 'Shakespeare's ontology'. Shakespeare's ontology is not one of absolute being or absolute selfhood. But it is also true that Shakespeare is sensitive to the seductiveness of self-certainty, freedom, and even the destructive nature of absolute selfhood, because it is a force that rebels against the constraints that delimit what can be. Fernie defines this 'violent hostility to being' as demonic evil, but also recognises that destruction contains 'a potential for creativity over against what merely is',[75] a desire for a different way of being. Intersubjectivity cannot resist or overthrow the belief that the self can be a foundation for the knowledge of existence, because absolute selfhood often arises out of resistance to the very social forms that are supposed to be able to disarm it. Even Marshall's concept of the self that is a burden to early modern subjects has a hidden dimension, since the self that desires to be shattered must still be shattered into some way of existing *with* others which Marshall never identifies. It is no coincidence that Marshall associates this sort of self-shattering with the experience of the theatre, where, 'through imaginary immersion in these events, the subject is pleasurably shattered, lost to him- or herself'.[76] In shattering one's self, one is absorbed into a world of meaning in which being can make sense, and theatre is precisely the sort of space in which one has a meaningful existence as part of an audience. But loss of distinction and self is not always pleasurable or

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[74] Kirsch, 'Macbeth's Suicide', p. 274.
[75] Fernie, *The Demonic*, p. 10.
[76] Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self*, p. 50.

positive. If Shakespeare does look to intersubjectivity as a positive force, then perhaps it is not a relationship between people figured in reactionary terms, but a potential mutual recognition that belongs to a future in which 'all the breathers of this world are dead'.[77]

As I will clarify in the next chapter, interdependent social relations do not occur in a philosophical vacuum like Hegel's master-slave dialectic; they exist in the world, and just as the absolute self cannot escape the constraints of this world, all human interaction must exist within it too. Beings, whether they think themselves mutually constituted or absolute, exist within a greater space of being which they cannot step outside, and which absolute selves seek to destroy rather than be trapped in. But what is this space? In order to depict different ways of being, Shakespeare must be portraying them from a separate, detached standpoint. What ontological standpoint must the author be occupying in order to dramatise and evaluate these diverse modes of existence? To answer these questions, it is necessary to transcend the ontological standpoint of the characters and examine the ontological ideas that are operating in the plays at the level of structure.

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[77] 'Sonnet 81', in *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), l. 12.

Chapter 7

'I am not what I am'

The Space of Being

So far I have examined the way that Shakespeare's characters implicitly understand being as either part of the absolute being of God, or as something grounded in the absolute self. However, given that both notions are also undermined by the plays, and that the most ontologically complex lines in Shakespeare's works, such as 'To be or not to be', or 'I am not what I am' cannot be explained using either of these notions, it is clear that Shakespeare's ontology cannot be encompassed by these two theories of being. So what ontological perspective does Shakespeare have that allows his drama to challenge these notions of being? To answer this question I will delve further into fundamental ontology and consider what allows one to comprehend being to begin with. It is no longer a matter of what individual characters are shown to believe, and more a question of how the play presents being at a structural level. In other words, it is not what the characters' utterances suggest about their understanding of being, but what grounds those utterances in the first place. This chapter will argue that the ontological foundations of Shakespeare's drama are revealed most clearly when meaning reaches its limits. Instead of attempting to show what being is, Shakespeare uses poetry to reveal the space in which being can be experienced as being.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the characters who deny the world in order to affirm their absoluteness need a world *to* deny. Self-certainty requires the self to be part of other beings it always already understands. One way of clarifying this is to use Descartes as an example: without a preconceptual understanding of what it means for there to be a world, what it means to dream, what it means to think, and what it means to be an 'I', it would not be possible even to doubt the world, let alone conclude that *cogito ergo sum*. Phrased as a simple inversion, the basic contention *contra* Descartes is 'I am therefore I think', not 'I think

therefore I am'. Adorno's argument against the Cartesian model of being reveals precisely this problem:

> The I as an entity is implicit even in the sense of the logical 'I think, which should be able to accompany all my conceptions', because the sequence of time is a condition of its possibility and there is no sequence of time save in temporality. The pronoun 'my' points to a subject as an object among objects, and again, without this 'my' there would be no 'I think'.[1]

In order even to think of oneself, one must already live within an understanding of oneself as existing amidst the beings that surround one. Being as a meaningful presence cannot be understood through that presence alone. Shakespeare's plays expose the inadequacy of the absolute self as a ground of being, showing that any attempt to posit the self as the foundation of being is itself predicated on the need for a prior understanding of being. But conceptualising this prior understanding of being is not easy, precisely because it is preconceptual and thus what allows one to conceptualise to begin with.

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Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is one of the most definitively ontological speeches in Shakespeare's works, but one that diverse theories of ontology have struggled to make sense of. It is therefore important to examine the pertinent lines in detail in order to define precisely the ontological problem the soliloquy addresses.

> To be, or not to be – that is the question;
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them; to die, to sleep –
> No more, and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished
>   (III.i.55-63)

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[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1973), pp. 183-84.

There is no reason to think that being has anything to do with God or a higher power in these first eight lines, nor does Hamlet give any indication that he considers his being in isolation, as if it were an absolute self. Indeed, Hamlet does not use the personal pronoun 'I' at any point during this speech. The entire soliloquy is conceived and phrased impersonally, using the general, non-specific third person 'he', or the equally general, collective 'we' and 'us'. Hamlet talks about what '*flesh* is heir to' rather than what 'I am heir to': it is the plight that he shares with the rest of his kind. 'To be' is to 'suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'; it is to endure the way the world happens to be, a predicament shared by everyone living in such a world. In other words, 'to be' is inseparable from the world in which Hamlet lives, a world he regards as irredeemably vitiated by

> Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office and the spurns
> That patient merit of th'unworthy takes
>   (III.i.70-73)

Hamlet is not describing his particular grievances alone, but expanding them emphatically to include things that other people in general, irrespective of their rank, gender and occupation, have to suffer or endure; these problems are part and parcel of the way things are in Elsinore. Being for Hamlet is being in a world. There is no way for him to be and not be part of this intolerable world plagued by outrageous fortune. One is always already part of a meaningful universe, whether one wants to be or not. That is why 'not to be' corresponds with 'to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them'. The 'sea of troubles' is simultaneously internal and external. If Hamlet wants to end the suffering and inequities of the world he lives in, he must die, because the world is part of himself, and he is part of the world. When he first hears about the murder of his father, Hamlet believes that his task is to correct the world. 'The time is out of joint', he says, 'O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!' (I.v.186-7). The fact that he thinks he was 'born' to set it right also suggests that, at this point, he does not think that he is part of the problem, because he sees himself as the solution. But in his later soliloquy Hamlet has come to realise that the problem is deeper, caused by the way things are, and that he is part of the way things are.

So how can this elusive sense of being be explained? While it is not possible to say what being is in the same way that one can say 'being is God' in the case of absolute being, or 'the self is the foundation of being' in the case of the absolute self, it is possible to talk about being in terms of how it manifests itself in everyday experience, with some help from philosophers who have tackled the subject. In this form of ontology, there are two parts to being: one part is the human being, the entity that experiences itself as present – which is what Parolles refers to when he says: 'Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live' (*All's Well that Ends Well* IV.iii.336-7) – and the other part is the space of being which allows human beings to comprehend their existence.[2] What I have chosen to call the space of being is the area that Wittgenstein points to in his notion of language games, or grammatical systems; it is what Heidegger calls 'being', 'world', 'clearing', and many other names at various points in his career; and it is an aspect of what Adorno calls the negative, although he chooses not to phrase it in ontological terms.[3] Essentially, the space of being delimits what we can think and do from the moment we are born. If being was merely human being without this space of being, it would be no different from the Cartesian model of absolute selfhood examined in the previous chapter; it is the additional element of the space of being, which is conceived of as part of existence, that distinguishes this form of ontology. According to Mark Wrathall,

> The clearing … does not name a thing, or a property or characteristic of things, or a kind of action we perform on things, or even the being of things. It names, instead, a domain or structure that allows there to be things with properties and characteristics, or modes of being. This is not a spatial domain or physical entity, or any sort of entity at all. It is something like a space of possibilities.[4]

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[2] *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. by Susan Snyder, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3] I have included this brief reference to other philosophers because it is imperative to note that the philosophical ideas behind the readings of the plays in this chapter are not exclusive to Heidegger. However, to avoid confusion over the various critical terms used by different philosophers, and because it is easier to see the connection between other forms of ontology by using Heidegger's terminology, this chapter will mainly refer to Heideggerian philosophy for the sake of clarity.

Although my use of 'the space of being' is predominantly metaphorical, there is inevitably a sense of location attached to it, because how the space of being is disclosed differs according to space and time. For a more detailed discussion of space, place and ontology, see Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), as well as Heidegger's own use of 'the place or location of being' [*Ortschaft des Seins*] in Martin Heidegger, 'Seminar in Le Thor 1968', in *Four Seminars*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 19.

[4] Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 14.

In other words, the clearing, or the space of being, is what determines how things make sense to us, and what possibilities are available to us. It is because the being of things is available to our being that we are able to relate to them. All other forms of relating to the world, such as knowledge or language, depend on things being meaningful to us in this most basic way. Thus Heidegger, referring to this space as 'world' and our existence as 'Dasein', claims that 'Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only because Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is':[5] human beings are able to engage with things because we are always already part of the space of being, the world, and this state of constantly existing within a meaningfully present world *is* what we are. In contrast to the way that the ontology of absolute self posits itself as the foundation that gives the world meaning, and therefore splits self from world, this model of being sees the self as fundamentally bound up with a world of meaning with which the individual is obliged to engage.

This space of being is not essentially separate from human being. The reason that human being and the space of being are both called 'being' is because 'the "two" are actually the same phenomenon considered from distinct viewpoints'.[6] The space of being makes beings, including one's own being, meaningful to human beings, and human beings open up the space of being by virtue of their existence. Calling the space of being simply 'Being', Heidegger says:

> The fundamental idea of my thinking is exactly that Being, relative to the manifestation of Being, *needs* man and, conversely, man is only man in so far as he stands within the manifestation of Being … One cannot pose a question about Being without posing a question about the essence of man.[7]

Humans are humans only within the space of being, but the space of being exists only because there are humans. They are both part of the same being, because the space of being is itself part of what it is to be human. As Heidegger states, equating the being of Dasein more explicitly with being as the space of being:

[5] Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?', trans. By David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 84.
[6] Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 241.
[7] Martin Heidegger, *Martin Heidegger in Conversation*, ed. Richard Wisser, trans. B. S. Murthy (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1970), p. 40.

> Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein's Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being – a relationship which itself is one of Being. And this means further that there is some way in which Dasein understands itself in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly. It is peculiar to this entity that with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. *Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being.* Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.[8]

In other words, Dasein, or human being, is the only sort of being for which the meaning of things that exist (including our own being) matters. Because that relationship with the space of being – the space that allows us to make sense of our being and other beings – is what it means to be, that relationship between our being and the space of being is part of what Heidegger refers to as 'being'. Our understanding of being is an essential part of our being. The space of being is fundamentally bound up with human beings and is part of what makes us what we are. Using the term 'ex-sistence' to refer to human being, Thomas Sheehan clarifies the two-in-oneness of the space of being and human being as follows:

> There are not two separate things, ex-sistence over here, the clearing over there, with 'needing' and 'belonging' as the glue that binds them together. The 'two' are actually the same phenomenon considered from distinct viewpoints: either *ex-sistence* as the clearing or that same *clearing* as what makes possible all meaningfulness. As thrown-open, ex-sistence always already *is* the existential space in which the existential understanding of things-in-their-being takes place.[9]

The space of being makes things existent to human beings in a meaningful way, but it is human being that makes meaning itself necessary, that opens up the existence of things *as* meaning. This is not something that we do consciously or that we *do* at all: it is something that *is*, that happens by virtue of our existing. Most of the time one is not even aware of it, because it is taken for granted. It is only on rare occasions that the clearing becomes present, and this is when things fail to make sense, when things lose the meaning they had up to that moment.

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[8] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquerrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 32. For the distinction between 'ontic' and 'ontological', see p. 12, fn 12.
[9] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 241.

The soliloquy that begins 'To be or not to be' marks the moment when everything – life, revenge, the whole world – becomes meaningless to Hamlet, and that which normally allows him to make sense of the world comes into focus. Hamlet becomes aware that he is part of the space of being and that the space of being is part of him. He recognises that he is one of the beings that contributes to the way the world is just by existing. And if the problems of the world are in part created by him, the only way that Hamlet can end them is by putting an end to his own being. Therefore, 'To be or not to be' is a question of whether or not to continue to be meaningful to himself and others; whether or not to continue to be part of what makes the world what it is.

What Hamlet wants, above all, is 'to die: to sleep – / No more', to no longer be one of the beings that makes things what they are, to have no future possibilities, to not have to face anything 'more'. But his fear is that he cannot not be – that his meaningful presence will not end with death:

> to die: to sleep –
> To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
> Must give us pause.
> (III.i.63-67)

The vision of an afterlife affords Hamlet no comfort, for he yearns to cease being meaningful to himself and living within relations of meaning. All he wants is not to be: 'It is the continuation of existence after death that is the most frightening possibility. Non-existence is the release, the dissolution, of the body from its torments of being'.[10] For Hamlet, the answer to the question of whether 'to be or not to be' is clearly 'not to be', but not to be may not be possible. Even the resemblance of death to sleep suggests that one may continue to dream, and dreams are imbued with meaning. The only way one can truly not be is not to have been born to begin with. Andrew Cutrofello observes that Hamlet's bawdy reference to the 'nothing' (III.ii.114) that lies between Ophelia's legs 'not only alludes to the vulgar term for vagina, but in so doing hints at an unexpressed desire to return to the womb in the specific

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[10] Brian Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts: Religion, Secularity, & Identity in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 199.

sense of never having been born'.[11] Unfortunately, complete annihilation remains uncertain for Hamlet, and his fear that one cannot but make sense of existence as long as one continues to exist in some conscious form betrays the fact that questioning being requires a basic understanding of being to begin with. As Heidegger says, 'The question about being itself and nothing is by right … infinitely deeper than – that is, it is in an essentially different realm from – the familiar question, "To be or not to be", as usually understood in connection with the world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*'.[12] The more fundamental question implicitly begged by Hamlet's question is 'Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?' That is the question to which Hamlet's question ultimately leads: why is there existence at all?

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Most of the time we are not even aware of the space of being. Whether reaching for a pencil to write something down, driving a car, or falling in love, we are engaging with meaning: the pencil is something to write with, the car will take one where one wishes to go, the person one is in love with is someone we wish to be with. These processes are not rationalised relations of knowledge; whether a pen, a car or one's lover, whatever we engage with is present and meaningful to us without our having to think about definitions or functions each time. When Viola, as Cesario, says to Olivia, 'you do think you are not what you are' (*Twelfth Night* III.i.137), she evidently means that Olivia is not the person she thinks she is, because the person Olivia thinks she is in love with is an illusion. But this line also includes the ontological sense in which what Olivia *is*, including the possible ways the world can be for her, does not match up with how it would be for Olivia if she knew that Cesario was female. To Olivia, Viola *is* Cesario. This is similar to reaching for a pen and picking up a letter opener; one may not notice that it is not a pen until one tries to write with the letter opener, but that does not change the fact that it is a pen for one up to the point when one realises it is not doing what one wants it to do. Time and circumstance reveal what something is. This is what is at stake in the enigmatic passage at the end of *Twelfth Night* when Viola says: 'Do not embrace me till each circumstance / Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump / That

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[11] Andrew Cutrofello, *All for Nothing: Hamlet's Negativity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), p. 11.
[12] Quoted in Cutrofello, *All for Nothing*, p. 78.

I am Viola' (V.i.245-7). Viola knows that being Viola requires the right circumstances; that in this place at this time, and dressed as she is, no one can take her *as* Viola without consciously reminding themselves that she is not Cesario and a man; just think how naturally Orsino continues to call Viola 'boy' (V.i.261) and says 'Cesario come – / For so you shall be *while you are a man*' (V.i.375-6). It is for the same reason that Orsino, seeing the twins face to face, calls the sight 'a natural perspective that is, and is not' (V.i.210): what he sees 'is' in that it is present to him, but 'is not' in that it does not make sense, because it cannot be the case. As Peter Kishore Saval remarks, 'Viola's "that I am Viola" seems to lie not only at the limit of the future of the play, but at the limit of what can be unequivocally said'.[13] A time when Viola can live *as* Viola with all the possibilities that entails – embracing her brother as his sister, marrying Orsino – is deferred to some indefinite future. Viola's enigmatic utterance presses up against what can be said, insofar as it points out that she is not what she is right now, and that she is not yet what she will be. Because what Viola/Cesario is at this moment is thrown into question, it destabilises the normal sense of what it means for someone to 'be': Shakespeare draws attention to the given sense of being by staging situations that expose the space of being without conceptualising it. Only when something fails to be comprehensible is it brought to one's attention in a way that is not immediate. Everything is always already understood as what it is, because the relation with something or someone's meaningfulness is part of our being. The fact that things do normally make sense can be exposed by the use of paradoxes that push at the limits of meaning.

Being is usually too unobtrusive, too much a part of the way one lives, to be noticeable, but in speeches such as Hamlet's 'To be or not to be', Shakespeare brings the space of being – the very thing that makes meaning possible – into view and scrutinises it. Heidegger calls these moments when meaning fails 'astonishment' or 'anxiety' and, referring to the space of being as 'the Being of being', he writes: 'In astonishment we restrain ourselves. We step back, as it were, from being, from the fact that it is as it is and not otherwise … Thus, astonishment is the disposition in which and for which the Being of being unfolds'.[14] When one questions why everything is the way it is and not otherwise, when life is drained

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[13] Peter Kishore Saval, *Reading Shakespeare through Philosophy* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p. 141.

[14] Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (New Haven, CT: New College and University Press, 1956), p. 85.

of meaning and everything seems arbitrary, that is when the space of being is revealed as that which makes us as we are. As Lee Braver says, 'We discover what kind of beings we are when the content of our lives is temporarily suspended'.[15] But this suspension can only ever be temporary, because the very encounter with the space of being shows us how completely we belong to the world of being we inhabit:

> One of the features we discover is that we are entirely of this world. Attempts to surpass it toward something transcendent, to escape the Cave in order to look upon real Being, constitute something like Sartre's bad faith, that is, the endeavor to settle the unsettling aspects of our being such as mortality and the lack of metaphysically approved ways of living.[16]

In being astonished into realisation of the space of being, one recognises that there is no transcending this space, that one cannot help making sense of things as one does. But it also allows one to see that the world, however far it lies beyond one's power to change it, need not be the way it is.

That the space of being is a sort of 'space of possibilities' does not mean that we humans exist alongside our possibilities, with our possibilities always available to us. Because the space of being is what allows us to conceive our possibilities, and the space of being is part of human being, being human means that we *are* possibility, we live *as* possibility. Michel de Montaigne, quoting Plutarch, thinks of human being and possibility as two separate things:

> We have no communication with Being; as human nature is wholly situated, for ever, between birth and death, it shows itself only as a dark shadowy appearance, an unstable weak opinion. And if you should determine to try and grasp what Man's *being* is, it would be exactly like trying to hold a fistful of water: the more tightly you squeeze anything the nature of which is always to flow, the more you will lose what you try to retain in your grasp. So, because all things are subject to pass from change to change, Reason is baffled if it looks for substantial existence in them, since it cannot apprehend a single thing which subsists permanently, because everything is either coming into existence, (so not fully existing yet) or, if it has been born, it is beginning to die.[17]

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[15] Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p. 45.
[16] *Ibia.*, p. 45.
[17] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. by John Florio (London: Routledge, 1898), p. 309.

In other words, we cannot say what we are, because we are constantly becoming what is possible for us and never *are* anything concretely. But if possibility, the space of being, is itself part of what we are, then becoming is also part of our being. Montaigne sees only one of the two parts of being, as if it were solely the present presence of a human being to himself, whereas being also includes what we could be and what we are becoming. In Sheehan's words, '*being* myself ("in the present," as it were) means being myself *as possibility*, even stretched ahead, ever becoming, never at rest'.[18] It is because we are finite and not fully self-present that we require meaning at all, and meaning is possibility in the sense that we understand beings in terms of their possibilities.

Olivia's phrasing when asking Cesario's purpose betrays the way being is bound up with potential: 'What are you? What would you?' (I.v.203). She asks an ontological question about what he is, and what his intentions are. Because she is trying to work out Cesario's possibilities, she attempts to make sense of what he is by establishing what he is going to do. When Troilus is confused about Cressida's identity and says, 'If there be rule in unity itself, / This is not she' (V.ii.148), it is because his understanding of Cressida's existence, which is tied up with her potential as his faithful lover, is confounded by what he sees. The same idea goes some way towards explaining Richard II's perplexity at his deposition, when he says 'I, no; no, I, for I must nothing be' (IV.i.201; folio spelling); he cannot make sense of his existence, his 'I', because he sees no future possibilities for his being. Without possibilities, human being cannot comprehend itself.

Human being differs in this sense from the way that God's being is conceived of in traditional Western theology, a model elucidated in the third chapter of this thesis. God is not possibility and has no need for the space of being because every possibility is constantly present to Him. God does not need to make sense of His being or the being of other things: 'The God of traditional theology is not an onto-logist, because God does not mediate. In fact, God does not do meaning at all. "Ontology is an index of finitude. God does not have it … Only a finite being requires ontology"'.[19] The fact that we can understand what things

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[18] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 174.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

mean only in terms of their possibility is an intrinsic feature of our particular form of finite, human, being. This is because

> If ex-sistence as provative self-absence (=possibility) were converted into full self-coincidence and actuality, we would not be able to (and we would not need to) make discursive sense of anything. Making sense of things requires the imperfection and incompleteness of possibility.[20]

Making sense of things comes with being human, because as imperfect beings we constantly understand ourselves in terms of what we are not. This is the reason why ontotheology seeks to base human being on a greater absolute being, because the absolute being is the only thing that can perfect our imperfect being. Our imperfection makes sense from this point of view only if we are part of a greater perfection.

To say that we constantly open up a space of being or a space of possibility as part of our ontological constitution suggests that we have control over our possibilities. That is what Sartre suggests when he states that 'existence precedes essence',[21] meaning that the individual's 'existence' can choose what his public 'essence' is. However, we do not exercise active or conscious control over this space of being or how it makes the world meaningful to us. We cannot choose what possibilities are available to us, though we can choose to pursue a possibility that is available to us. As Heidegger contends, 'the only way in which we can really understand man is as a being bound to his own possibilities, bound in a way that itself frees the space within which he pursues his own being in this or that manner';[22] he calls this 'thrownness', because we have no choice over the space of being we are thrown into when we come into existence:

> The fact that such things get dis-covered along with the openedness of our own ex-sistence does not mean that this matter is under our control. Only *what*, in *which* direction, to *what extent*, and *how* we actually dis-cover and dis-close is a matter of our freedom, although always within the limits of our thrownness.[23]

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[20] *Ibia.*, p. 241.
[21] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 26.
[22] Quoted in Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment*, p. 79.
[23] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 206.

The space of being determines our potential, our possibilities, but the space itself is not something we can control. Human beings are bound to the possibilities that we cannot help but unfold by virtue of being finite beings living in a particular place at a particular time. As Edmund says in *King Lear*, 'Men are / As the time is' (V.iii.31-2).

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One example of how the space of being operates in Shakespeare is furnished by the scene in *The Taming of the Shrew* when the Lord tricks Sly into thinking he is a lord. As noted in the previous chapter, all of Sly's senses seem to reliably inform him that he must be a lord, what the other characters say he is confirms this inference, and he chooses to accept and believe that he is therefore a lord. However, believing that he is a lord and being treated like one is clearly not the same as *being* a lord. As the Huntsman says, 'he shall think by our true diligence / He is no less than what we say he is' (Intro 1.67): saying something is so does not make it so. This begs the question of what differentiates a real lord from a beggar dressed as a lord.[24] If Sly lived in the sort of world where it was possible for a beggar to become a lord, there would be little fun in the practical joke that the Lord plays. The joke is only possible because the space of being is opened up in a way that makes the idea that Sly could actually become a lord ludicrous. A beggar dressed up as a lord also raises questions as to why the world is this way and not otherwise, why Sly cannot be a lord, and what makes a lord a lord anyway, which is itself a way of opening up the space of being to scrutiny. The basic fact that certain things cannot be understood as meaningfully possible shows the limits of the space of being.

Whenever one is talking about the being of characters in a play, there is the added metatheatrical consideration that these roles are being played by actors: they are lords and beggars only by virtue of the play. As the epilogue states in *All's Well that Ends Well*, 'The King's a beggar, now the play is done' (Epilogue, l. 1): the characters are meaningful only as what they are within the space of the play. This implication is also present in Viola's paradoxical statement, 'I am not what I am' (III.i.139), which includes the metatheatrical

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[24] *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by H. J. Oliver, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

awareness that the part the actor is playing is not what the actor is. By making the characters talk about their own and others' roles, and change or adopt roles, Shakespeare draws attention to the play as the medium within which these roles make sense. Plays are thus structurally similar to the space of being, with the chief difference being that one has a creator, while the other does not. Without actors, there is no play, and without the play there are no actors, and the space and duration of the play circumscribe the actors' identities as the characters they play. Metadramatic lines and actions draw attention to the space of the play as that which makes the play what it is, just as ontologically complex lines bring the space of being into focus. Indeed, as with Viola's 'I am not what I am', the lines that bring the space of being into focus also tend to be metadramatic, in that they highlight both the framework of the play and the space of being that makes the play itself and the events in the play meaningful.

It is not only in *The Taming of the Shrew* that being is understood in hierarchical terms. In fact, in Shakespeare's works to 'be oneself' often means to 'act according to one's social status', as in the following examples from *Henry IV Part 1*: 'I will from henceforth rather be myself, / Mighty and to be feared' (*I Henry IV*, I.iii.5-6),[25] and 'I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord, / Be more myself' (*I Henry IV*, III.ii.92-3).[26] In other words, the space of being makes things meaningful in terms of hierarchy and social position. The same is true in *Hamlet*, the most obvious instance being Polonius' advice to Laertes: 'to thine own self be true' (I.iii.77) and to Ophelia: 'You do not understand yourself so clearly / As it behoves my daughter' (I.iii.95-6); as John Lee notes, 'to "vnderstand your selfe" is the equivalent of "to know one's place"'.[27] To be is to fulfil one's social function, which is why Claudius refers to himself as 'Denmark' (I.ii.49), and says that something 'hath put [Hamlet] / So much from th'understanding of himself' (II.ii.8-9) when Hamlet feigns madness. It is because one's being is one's social meaning in Elsinore that murdering one's brother for social advancement becomes a possibility. Claudius says that 'My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen' are the 'effects for which I did the murder' (III.iii.54-5). Two of these three things, the crown and Claudius' ambition, are tied to the hierarchical understanding of being. Without the

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[25] The Oxford edition notes for these lines read 'i.e. my royal self… Dent's familiar examples of "to not be (or be) oneself" (O64.1) all post-date Shakespeare'.
[26] *Henry IV Part One*, ed. David Bevington, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
[27] John Lee, *Shakespeare's* Hamlet *and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 160.

concept of a better or worse social position there would be no such thing as ambition, and without hierarchy there would be no crown.

Here the more social dimension of the space of being becomes apparent. To repeat a point made earlier, we are thrown into a particular space of being, we have no choice over what web of significances we find ourselves in, and by existing we perpetuate a particular space of being. This is why we *are* our space of being, we are not just passively affected by it or living within it; we actively create and take part in it. This is why I concluded that Hamlet needs to die if he truly wishes to break free from the sort of existence he has to lead. Naturally, as a result of whatever actions we take during our lives, the space of being may change and different possibilities may come into play, but how this shift occurs, what this shift is, and whether it occurs at all is not always within our control. There is no obvious metaphysical rule that dictates how a space of being comes to be, because there is nothing guiding being from without, there is nothing outside being. The society one lives in at any given time is an expression of the space of being, since society, as a collective of beings living with one another, is limited to what is possible for the beings that make up that society. Just as one seldom notices the space of being in everyday life, one is mostly unaware of society, which is to say that one does not normally think about society when, for example, buying a loaf of bread. It is only when something goes wrong – the bread is in short supply and prohibitively priced perhaps – that one notices the effect of society on one's life. In other words, one normally lives within the meanings of society, which are themselves inherited from the meanings circumscribed by the space of being.

Moments such as Hamlet's soliloquy beginning 'To be or not to be', or his levelling conversation with the gravedigger, are the anomalies. If the conventional social ways of acting – as a prince, as a revenger – were not meaningful to Hamlet on some level, they would not have any power over him. It is because he is one of the beings that makes up the space of being that it requires moments of astonishment to disengage Hamlet from his ordinary understanding of the world, and it is because he can notice, but cannot escape from, the meanings that define him that he must die in order to be emancipated from the world. As he is not an absolute self, he cannot arbitrarily choose to be something else. It is because Hamlet sees how the world is at certain moments in the play, that life, revenge, the whole way that things are in Elsinore stop making sense to him. But, to repeat my point, he simultaneously

realises that he is one of the beings that contributes to the way things are. His very existence helps to create the space of meaning he wishes he could escape. The space of being precludes other ways of being, limits one's possibilities, but also shows the contingency of this space of being beyond one's control. There could be no suspension of meaning if he did not live within those meanings to begin with.

It is when Hamlet feels the pull of his duty as a son and his position as a prince that he feels guilty about procrastinating. And he gives vent to his sense of guilt and shame in the soliloquies beginning 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!' (II.ii.485) and 'How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge' (IV.iv.31-2), finding himself baffled by his compulsion to delay: 'I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, / Sith I have cause and and will and strength and means / To do't' (IV.iv.42-45). These are not the words of the Hamlet who questions his being in Act III, conscious of his entrapment. Hamlet often understands how contingent this world and all its meanings are, but the suspension of meaning can only be temporary. The Hamlet who is pained by his inability to act is the not the clear-minded Hamlet who evokes the image of Alexander the Great's remains 'stopping a bunghole' (V.i.194). It is because Hamlet cannot help questioning being, but must exist within the space of being, that he suffers in his situation. If he could constantly perceive the constraints of his world from a position of historical detachment, and live in this understanding, he would not be in such a predicament. Unfortunately, he cannot opt to be ontically different from everyone else. It is not Hamlet's existence itself that is different from others, but his capacity to be aware of what dictates the way things make sense to him, and of the fact that the way things are is beyond his control. His consciousness of why he can only be meaningful in a certain way is what makes him different.

In Elsinore, the space of possibilities is responsible for the hierarchical understanding of existence that causes ambition, and for the notion of duty. Both murder for social promotion and one's duty to one's family and superiors underpin the systemic problem of revenge. If Hamlet were an unquestioning revenger, the fact that he is the 'the son of the dear murdered' (II.ii.518) *ought* to be sufficient cause for him to take revenge, as is underscored by Laertes' reaction to his father's murder: 'The drop of blood that's calm in my brow proclaims me bastard' (IV.v.117). For Laertes, taking revenge is an affirmation of what he is. While it is the primary cause of ambition, hierarchy is also what reduces people to servility,

precisely because one is what makes one ontologically meaningful, however discontented one may be with what one is. Thus Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unhesitatingly place their loyalty to Claudius over their friendship with Hamlet – 'we both obey / And here give up ourselves in the full bent / To lay our service at your feet / To be commanded' (II.ii.29-33) – adducing the monarch's 'sovereign power' (II.ii.27) as a justification for their obedience. Obedient subjects are what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are. Ophelia likewise is a dutiful sister to Laertes and a submissive daughter to Polonius, obeying their advice to reject Hamlet's advances: 'as you did command / I did repel his letters and denied / His access to me' (II.i.105-7). The reasons that Laertes gives for distrusting the match are themselves dictated by considerations of rank: 'His greatness weighed, his will is not his own. / He may not, as unvalued persons do / For he himself is subject to his birth' (I.iii.17-8):[28] what Hamlet is prescribes what he can be.

Although he cannot avoid sharing the same space of being as everyone else, Hamlet is disgusted by what he is. In the first soliloquy after he has put on his 'antic disposition' (I.v.170), Hamlet is confused about why he remains 'unpregnant of [his] cause' (II.ii.503), to the extent that he does not know what he is any more. As Hugh Grady observes, 'Hamlet's interpellation as revenge-tragedy hero is constantly interrupted by interference from other possible identities, which are displayed to us kaleidoscopically in the most puzzling section of the play'.[29] Unlike Laertes, who shows no hesitation in seeking to revenge his father, Hamlet is inexplicably slow to take revenge, despite the fact that he has every reason to do so as both the subject and the son of the murdered king. Hamlet's delay is incomprehensible to him, because revenge still makes sense to him, and he is still meaningful to himself as a revenger.

This all changes in the next and the most ontologically significant soliloquy. 'To be or not to be': suddenly Hamlet is talking about being instead of about revenge. If Hamlet chooses to continue to be, then he must accept what he cannot but be in this space of being: a revenger, an ambitious man, and the heir apparent. Because revenge cannot transcend the framework of a hierarchical understanding of being, killing Claudius will mean becoming

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[28] *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[29] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli & Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 268.

part of the problem that has caused his dilemma to begin with. As René Girard observes, 'the crime by Claudius looks to [Hamlet] like one more link in an already long chain, and his own revenge will look like still another link'.[30] Part of the problem, as Brian Cummings points out, is that 'No person has the choice about whether "to be": by definition, a person already *is*, and her birth now lies in a prehistory beyond her choice'.[31] To be means Hamlet must be what the space of being, and the society built on it, defines him as being; however consciously at odds he feels with existence as it is, he has to continue to be part of what creates the world that makes revenge necessary.

As Grady points out, the arbitrary nature of the way things are is precisely Hamlet's problem: 'In the fierceness of Hamlet's depression burns a sense that the world need not be the way it is'.[32] Hamlet's disenchantment with the way things are leads to a temporary loss or suspension of meaning, and the ensuing interrogation of being makes him 'terminally alienated from everything his rank entails, including the obligation to revenge his royal father's murder'.[33] But having realised that things need not be the way they are, Hamlet despises others for being what they are without question. An obvious example is when Hamlet teases Polonius about the shape of the cloud:

> Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
> Polonius: By th'mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.
> Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
> Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
> Hamlet: Or like a whale?
> Polonius: Very like a whale.
>
> (III.ii.367-373)

It may be that Hamlet is acting like a madman to persuade Polonius that he is indeed deranged, but in the process he highlights Polonius' obsequiousness in so readily agreeing with his social superiors. That Hamlet finds Polonius objectionable is clear from every description he gives him – 'That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts' (II.ii.319-20); 'Let the doors be shut upon him that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house' (III.i.131-2); 'Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool' (III.iv.39); 'a foolish

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[30] René Girard, 'Hamlet's Dull Revenge', in *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 273.
[31] Cummings, *Mortal Thoughts*, p. 266.
[32] Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli & Montaigne*, p. 264.
[33] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare's Universality: Here's Fine Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 70.

prating knave' (III.iv.213) – and the way he treats Polonius's body after killing him. But even as he scorns Polonius, Hamlet reinforces the very space of being that makes Polonius the sycophant he is: 'I took thee for thy better' (III.iv.30). That Hamlet is simultaneously contemptuous of servility, and highly aware of his rank, underscores the fact that he both detests and is part of the space of being he cannot always be aware of. As Grady observes, Hamlet is 'a problematic figure unable to transcend the reified world in which he is trapped, but equally unable to accept or ratify it'.[34] Hamlet constantly criticises the way people are, but is forever exposing how much he is part of the world he disparages. This is also apparent in his relationship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

> Hamlet: Besides, to be demanded of a sponge! What replication should be made by the son of a king?
> Rosencrantz: Take you me for a sponge, my lord?
> Hamlet: Ay sir – that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities.
>
>   (IV.ii.11-15)

Rosencrantz is despicable to Hamlet, because, as a result of soaking up the will and wishes of his royal superior, Rosencrantz has no shape of his own, no critical awareness of what he is. Yet even as he criticises the fawning of Rosencrantz, Hamlet reasserts his own rank as 'the son of a king', showing that, on some level, he suffers from the same ontological problem as Rosencrantz. This is evident again after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent to their deaths. Hamlet defends his ruthless treatment of them to Horatio:

> Why man, they did make love to this employment.
> They are not near my conscience. Their defeat
> Does by their own insinuation grow.
> 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
> Between the pass and fell incensed points
> Of mighty opposites.
>
>   (V.ii.57-62)[35]

According to Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserved what they got for being what they were, and for being enthusiastically subservient to Claudius. Of course, in their

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[34] Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli & Montaigne*, p. 254.
[35] *Hamlet*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare.

ignorance of Claudius' murder of Hamlet's father, it is understandable from a hierarchical point of view that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should defer to the king rather than the prince, yet Hamlet detests their wholehearted, unquestioning adherence to what they show themselves to be. But once again, at the same time as criticising them for being in thrall to their social role, Hamlet asserts his rank by deriding his erstwhile friends as men of a 'baser nature', and by saying that their mistake was to be caught in the conflict between two social superiors. Although Hamlet is acutely aware of, and radically disenchanted with, the order of things in Denmark, he is incapable of divorcing himself from the world and time in which he finds himself.

Hamlet's cruelty to Ophelia also makes sense in this light, for what he objects to in her is the fact that she is such a dutiful daughter. As Agnes Heller points out, Ophelia's 'obedience to the family and to her sovereign king comes first. She never questions the priority of her loyalties … she never asks questions concerning meaning, right or wrong, or her world and herself, she accepts whatever ready-made meanings are handed down to her'.[36] Hamlet realises that this fair creature has let her father dictate her actions, and that she cannot escape being a product of the society that shaped her: 'Ophelia allows herself to become an instrument in the hands of her father and of the king. She, too, is affected by the disease of the time'.[37] It is as if Juliet should cease loving Romeo because her father told her to. Thus in the first scene of Act III Hamlet asks, 'Where's your father?' (III.i.129) because he can no longer see Ophelia as a person independent of her father. Everyone in the play, including Hamlet, cannot help but be what they are. Even if they differ in their consciousness of what they must be, everyone is a denizen of the rotten state of Demark. The only way not to be is not to be born to begin with:

> Get thee to a nunnery – why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.
>
> (III.i.119-124)

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[36] Agnes Heller, *The Time is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 50.

[37] Girard, 'Hamlet's Dull Revenge', p. 194.

Hamlet recognises that he is a constituent of the rotten way of being, infected by the pride, revenge and ambition that makes sense only in such a world: 'He too – part of him – is "an unweeded garden"'.[38] The best Hamlet can suggest is not to bring forth any more of the beings that keep such a world in existence. Harold Bloom writes that 'Elsinore's disease is anywhere's anytime's. Something is rotten in every state, and if your sensibility is like Hamlet's, then finally you will not tolerate it'.[39] But if your sensibility is indeed like Hamlet's, and you realise that you are infected by that disease, then although you may see the potential for the world to be otherwise, that new world can only exist without you. Hamlet's final conclusion is to 'let be' (V.ii.201-2), to 'let it be' (V.ii.323), to accept that he is limited by the possibilities that are available to him as part of this particular space of being.

Of course, this does not mean that Hamlet ratifies the status quo. As Kiernan Ryan observes, all too often Shakespeare's tragedies 'are pressganged into labouring as secular parables, dramatized cautionary tales, which stress the prudence of obeying, and the folly of flouting, the overt or unspoken rules that secure the way things are'.[40] Contrary to the conservative readings of Shakespeare's tragedy, the bloody spectacle that is the logical conclusion of a way of being that prioritises social hierarchy and revenge over common humanity and forgiveness, exposes the injustice and perversity of Hamlet's world. Hamlet may finally give up trying to set the time right, because he is a man of his time, but through his resistance to his ultimately inescapable fate, he nevertheless shows that the way things had to be for him is the not the way things must always be.

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That fact that the space of being is opened up in a particular way does not mean that one cannot conceive of a different way the world might be, even if one cannot live in that world oneself. Seeing Sly dressed up and treated as a lord, for instance, might allow one to postulate a space of being in which it would be possible for Sly to be a lord, even if Sly cannot actually be a lord. In *Romeo and Juliet*, both protagonists show that they see the world in terms of the

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[38] A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. by Graham Storey (London: Longman, 1989), p. 193.

[39] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 431.

[40] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 69.

Montague-Capulet feud: as soon as Romeo learns Juliet's name, he sees her as an enemy: 'Is she a Capulet? / O dear account! My life is my foe's debt' (I.iv.230-1) and Juliet likewise reacts by calling the Montagues her 'hate' (I.iv.251) and her 'enemy' (II.i.81). For both lovers, the family names 'Capulet' and 'Montague' are inextricable from their being. But Juliet tries to imagine a life in which they could love unconstrained by those names:

> O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
> Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
> Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
> And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
> (II.i.76-9)

Juliet is obviously not asking why Romeo's name is Romeo, but why Romeo *is* Romeo, why that is who he is. To refuse his name would mean denying his paternity and thus change who he is, just as being Juliet's love would mean that she is no longer a Capulet, thus changing who she is. She continues:

> What's Montague? It is nor hand nor foot,
> Nor arm nor face, nor any other part
> Belonging to a man. O be some other name!
> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other word would smell as sweet;
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
> Without that title.
> (II.i.83-90)

Juliet points out that Romeo would have the same face and features even if he had a different name, and that the rose would retain its fragrance whatever it is called. But Juliet does not suggest that one can have *no* name, or that a rose *without* a name would smell as sweet; they would require 'some other name'. In other words, she assumes that what makes another being meaningful is not its physical presence alone, and that a name is something that one 'is'. She does not ask that Romeo be called some other name but that he '*be* some other name'. In imagining a world in which Romeo could 'be another name', Juliet suggests that the space of being could be otherwise. The way that things are for the lovers is contingent, not an unchanging fact of how humans must be, and by attempting to separate the human being she loves from the space of possibilities that makes him what he is, Juliet draws attention to

the space of being that makes the world what it is. In doing so, she raises questions about why things are as they are and not some other way.

Unfortunately, these moments of imaginative insight are unsustainable; there is ultimately no escaping the space of being as it is, even if one can draw attention to it and question why it is so. Overhearing Juliet, Romeo resolves to change who he is: 'Henceforth I never will be Romeo' (II.i.94). But saying one is no longer who one was does not mean that one automatically acquires a new being. Romeo has managed to define himself only as a negation of who he is, as 'not-Romeo'. The result is that Romeo no longer knows how to identify himself when Juliet asks who he is: 'by a name/ I know not how to tell thee who I am' (II.i.96-7). To introduce himself as if he had no name Romeo resorts to introducing himself without *saying* his name: 'My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself' (II.i.98). No matter how hard they try, the possibilities available to them are limited by the space of being they contribute to by existing within it.

A contrasting instance might be Oliver in *As You Like It*, who is able to say ''Twas I, but 'tis not I. I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion / So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am' (IV.iii.134-6).[41] Oliver can change who he is and be accepted as what he becomes. The Forest of Arden is clearly a place of open opportunities, where there are more possibilities for how someone can be. But Verona is less free. Romeo and Juliet cannot help thinking in terms of what things mean in their society; thus, once her fantasy of a virtual realm in which Romeo would be someone else entirely is over, Juliet reverts to her normal understanding of existence: 'Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?' (II.i.103). Contrary to Catherine Belsey's claim that Juliet draws 'the inference that Romeo can arbitrarily cease to be a Montague',[42] the fact that Juliet must admit what Romeo is shows that she knows that her desires cannot correspond to how things are. Romeo may reply to her with 'Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike' (II.i.104), but Juliet knows that her wishing otherwise will not change how things are: 'the place [is] death, considering *who thou art*' (II.i.107; my italics). The moment anyone else identifies him in the Capulet household, Romeo is a Montague, whatever he may say to the contrary. Thus Romeo touches on something important when

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[41] *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dusinberre, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Cengage Learning, 2006). All references to this play are to this edition.
[42] Catherine Belsey, 'The Name of the Rose in *Romeo and Juliet*', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 23 (1993), p. 133.

he laments, 'O tell me, Friar, tell me, / In what vile part of this anatomy / Doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may sack / The hateful mansion.' (III.iii.104-7). The only way he can remove his name from himself is by destroying himself, 'because for humans, "outside" of meaningfulness there is only death'.[43] Romeo's name may not be lodged in his body, and he might still be Juliet's 'dear perfection' were he not called Romeo, but in this space of being, Romeo Montague is who he is, his name is part of his being.

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A rather different space of being is dramatized in *Othello*, as becomes clear by examining Iago. In stark contrast to Juliet, who finds her possibilities limited, Iago is aware that he lives in a world that accommodates possibilities of which others are not aware. This is why I have chosen to include Iago in the chapter on the space of being instead of the chapter on the absolute self. It is true that lines such as 'I follow [Othello] to serve my turn upon him' (I.i.41), and 'In following him I follow but myself' (I.i.57), might suggest that Iago sees the world in terms of himself. Indeed, Stephen Greenblatt classes Iago with those absolute selves dealt with in the previous chapter: 'Richard III, Edmund, Iago … share a conviction that everyone in their world exists to be used for their own profit'.[44] But Iago's actions do not justify such a reading. As Grady states, 'In the end, no individual or class interest of any kind is well served by Iago's plotting'.[45] Iago may claim that he is working 'for [his] own peculiar end' (I.i.59), but it is peculiar in the sense that there is no way in which his plotting benefits him materially, or allows him to see the world in terms of himself. Even Greenblatt contradicts himself, for he says that

> It does not matter that he is dependent on Othello, first as ensign and then as lieutenant, the position he coveted … One of the ironies of Iago's celebrated advice, 'Put money in thy purse' (first at 1.3.333), is that he himself is entirely uninterested in his own well-being.[46]

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[43] Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, p. 112.

[44] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 122.

[45] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 99.

[46] Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, p, 70.

Far from being solipsistic, Iago is too aware of his existence amongst others to think of himself as absolute. As Grady says, 'Iago had to master and then deploy a discourse designed to subject Othello, in terms of the concepts and values of Othello's own belief-system, to Iago's own will'.[47] If Iago is able to comprehend and make use of others' beliefs, then he is not an absolute self.

But why is Iago the obvious choice for examining the way that the space of being changes? It is necessary first of all to consider the most ontologically explicit lines in the play:

> … when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In complement extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.
> (I.i.60-64)

Iago's version of Viola's line in *Twelfth Night* has many more possible interpretations, but in both cases 'I am not what I am' is what might be called a quantum statement (in the sense of quantum physics), in which multiple meanings can exist simultaneously, but only one meaning can be comprehended at a time, and whatever meaning is observed excludes the other potential meanings. One way of taking this phrase is 'I am not what I *seem*', as it is commonly glossed.[48] The lines leading up to the enigmatic statement certainly support this conclusion, given the juxtaposition of the 'outward action' with 'The native act and figure of my heart'. However, it is vital that the ambiguity of the statement is not lost in the process of clarification. Both poetically, and in its implications, 'I am not what I am' achieves something significantly different from the lines preceding it, so that translation into unequivocal terms risks obscuring the complexity of the line. Another possible reading is that it is an allusion to God's 'I am that I am'.[49] In this reading, Iago is showing his awareness of the human nature of his being by making a distinction between the absolute being of God and himself. However, in doing so Iago also disassociates himself from the absolute being of God, signifying that he is not part of the being of God, not part of the great chain of being or any kind of being that relies on absolute being. Although I disagree with his surmise that

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[47] Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 130.
[48] By the Oxford editor, E. A. J. Honigmann, for example: '**I… am** appears to mean "I am not what I seem".
[49] Exodus 3:15, Corinthians 15:10.

Othello was Iago's God, I partly concur with Bloom's contention that 'Iago is Shakespeare's largest study in ontotheological absence',[50] because Iago certainly does operate outside of an ontotheological framework. Without God and therefore the great chain of being, a hierarchical conception of being becomes unjustifiable, which may explain what Iago means when he says, 'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' (I.i.56). For Iago, the very ability to distinguish between beings proves that they are not part of one great being: Iago is not part of Othello's being. In contrast, Othello is defined, like Hamlet, by his role, status, and occupation to the extent that, from his first lines in the play, he claims, 'I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege' (I.ii.21-2). Michael Neill summarises some of the differences between Othello and Iago as follows:

> Where his role as servant of the state is what gives Othello his firm sense of place, for Iago the servile deference implicit in his sour recognition that 'We cannot all be masters' (I.i.43) amounts to a radical displacement … That indeed is among the several meanings enfolded in the famously enigmatic conclusion of the speech on service which concludes his resentful tirade in I.i, 'I am not what I am' (l. 65). Iago is and is not the Moor's servant. To be 'his Moorship's ensign' is to be identified as what, in his own estimate, Iago essentially is not – a man defined only in relation to his master.[51]

As I argued in Chapter 5, Iago is aware that those around him generally understand being in hierarchical terms and therefore is able to use and predict the actions of those who think that is what it means to be. Most of the characters in *Othello* think 'to be' is to fulfil one's role in society. Thus Cassio, hoping to serve under Othello again, says to Desdemona, 'by your virtuous means I may again / *Exist*, and be a member of his love' (III.iv.112-13; my italics). For Cassio, what it means to be is inseparable from whom he serves and what he does. Desdemona likewise tells Brabantio, 'I am hitherto your daughter' (I.iii.185) with reference to her 'divided duty' (I.iii.181). In other words, her duty to her father – being his daughter – was what she was, whereas her duty to her husband – being his wife – is what she believes she is. This understanding of being is most apparent when it breaks down. Racked by his suspicion of Desdemona's infidelity, Othello expresses his existential crisis in terms of his profession: 'Othello's occupation's gone' (III.iii.360), 'occupation' being aptly glossed by E.

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[50] Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p. 435.
[51] Michael Neill, 'Introduction' in *Othello*, ed. by Michael Neill, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 159.

A. J. Honigmann as 'employment, hence life, because life has lost all meaning'.[52] For Othello, his occupation is his meaning, it is what he is.

In Venice, however, unlike Elsinore, hierarchy and rank do not in fact constitute the default basis of being. The characters may claim that they are the roles they play in society, but when they are not actively making claims about their being, they revert to a different way of talking about themselves. As the sheer repetition of the words 'use', 'abuse' and 'misuse' in the play testifies, the characters in *Othello* are defined in terms of their use. Whatever Othello's claims to hereditary rank, what has led to his position as Captain is not his innate value or birth, but his use-value to the Venetian state: 'Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient?' (IV.i.264-5). Othello is 'sufficient'; that is, competent, capable, meeting the needs of the Venetian state. Othello's use is what makes him what he is. Othello understands himself in these terms when he demands to be valued in terms of his 'services, which I have done the signiory' (I.ii.18) from the beginning of the play, an idea he repeats again at the end: 'I have done the state some service, and they know't' (V.ii.337). Even though she speaks of herself in terms of duty, Desdemona also phrases her love of Othello in a revealing way: 'The rites for which I love him are bereft me' (I.iii.258), as if her enjoyment of him is what she loves him for. In response to Othello's vilification of her, Desdemona reflects

> 'Tis meet I should be *used* so, very meet.
> How have I been behaved, that he might stick
> The small'st opinion on my least *misuse*?
> > (IV.ii.109-111; my italics)

Desdemona thinks it only right that she should be understood by Othello as somebody who can be used in the way he has used her, and assumes that she must have *mis*used herself in some way she cannot fathom, changing what she is and how she should be used. Brabantio's repeated outrage at the idea that Desdemona has been 'abused' (I.i.171; I.ii.74; I.iii.61) no doubt contains the sense 'to use (something) improperly, to misuse; to make a bad use of',[53] so that his indignation is directed as much at the idea that Desdemona has been used in the wrong way as his more conscious idea that she has failed in her filial duties. Tellingly, Othello

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[52] E. A. J. Honigmann, 'notes' to *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Cengage Learning, 1997), p. 232.
[53] 'Abuse, v.', *OED*, definition 1a.

uses the same term when he thinks that Desdemona has betrayed him: 'She is gone, I am abused' (II.iii.271); a misuse of him is a betrayal of his existence. Likewise, for Othello, Desdemona's crime is that Cassio has 'used' (V.ii.68) her, and how she has been used has changed her being. This understanding of being is so prevalent that even a nameless senator tells Othello to 'use Desdemona well' (I.iii.292), a phrase Emilia echoes in saying that men should 'use us well' (V.i.101). In every case, it is clear that what someone is depends on their usage, on how they are treated and used. The only real difference between Iago and the other characters is that Iago is aware of how things are, whereas the others still behave and speak as if they existed in a different space of being. Iago takes the use of others to an extreme, using Roderigo to gain funds and frame Cassio, using Emilia to acquire the handkerchief, using Cassio to cast doubt on Desdemona's fidelity, and using Bianca to trick Cassio and Othello.

Iago is sensitive to what people think they are, what people can be, and the way situations can change. Therefore, when Iago says 'I am not what I am', he also means that his possibilities – what he is – are not limited to what others think they are limited to. He is Othello's ensign, but that is not all that he is. As Greenblatt remarks, '"I am not what I am" is Iago's radical declaration of independence from any group to which his birth and career may have assigned him'.[54] Iago has realised that, whatever outmoded values people adhere to, the space of being is already one in which everything, whether a foreign warrior, a handkerchief, one's own wife, people's affections, or trust, is to be used; it is an instrumental space of being in which one is what one makes of others and the world. This may seem incompatible with the suggestion that Iago is in full control of his narrative self-fashioning within limitless possibilities:

> Virtue? A fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme … why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.
>
> (I.iii.320-7)

Iago seems to be saying that we are what we make ourselves; that we have full control over what we are. However, there is a limitation implicit in the garden metaphor, since it presupposes that one can only plant things that exist: we can choose whether we plant lettuce

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[54] Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, p. 59.

or thyme, perhaps, but we cannot invent new plants altogether. Even grafting and breeding – which Iago does not mention – need time and existing plants. Thus the garden is much like the space of being: one can only choose amongst available possibilities. One could create entirely new possibilities only if one were in complete control of reality in the way Emilia envisages a woman might be as a reward for adultery: 'why, the wrong is but a wrong i'th' world; and having the world for your labour, 'tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right' (IV.iii.79-81). This would be equivalent to having control over the space of being: if one could change the world at one's bidding, then one would be able to change meanings, and things that were wrong could be made right. Iago is aware of the limits of his possibilities and does not suggest that he can change what things mean, but he recognises that that there are possibilities that others have not yet realised. Most of the time, we are not aware of being, because we are too busy existing, living within the space of being as beings that simultaneously open up that space. As the nothing (in the sense that it is not a thing) that allows things to be present to us, the space of being is seldom present to us in itself.

Herein lies another aspect of 'I am not what I am': it does not make sense. And in its failure to make sense, this paradoxical statement solicits a recognition of what allows one to make sense of things to begin with: it reveals the normally hidden space of being. In pitting meaning against itself, Iago shows that his physical existence alone cannot account for meaningful being, that there is something hidden that allows us to make sense of existence. As Adorno says, 'the slightest remnant of non-identity suffices to deny an identity conceived as total'.[55] Iago's non-identity with himself shows that there is something more to existence than what is normally meant by 'I am'. Non-identity exposes the negative space on which identity relies. To quote Adorno again, 'contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity … As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself'.[56] Contradiction and enigma are capable of expressing more than they say, because they open up the clearing, or the non-identity, that identity relies on. Poetic techniques throw meaning into turmoil. Creative uses of language light up the inexpressible space of meaning, and allow us to sense

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[55] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1973), p. 22.
[56] *Ibia.*, p. 5.

that which we cannot understand. It is because Iago is intuitively aware of this negative space, this clearing, that he has such power over meaning and existence.

In his default mode of being, Iago has an instrumental understanding of the world, but his consciousness of the ontological arbitrariness of things also means that he is aware of the contingency of the ways he and the other characters understand themselves. This explains why Iago cares so little about his own fate, and why there appears to be no real reason why he uses and abuses others. Although awareness of the contingency of the given state of things does not necessarily lead to nihilism, Iago's instinctive apprehension of the groundlessness of meaning and the ultimate arbitrariness of being leads to his lack of care for himself or others. As Greenblatt says, he 'is entirely uninterested in his own well-being. Hatred as intense and single-minded as his is finally indifferent to his very survival'.[57] Indeed, not only is Iago uninterested in his *well*-being, he is uninterested in his *being*; his rebellion is against being itself, because he does not care about meaning, even though he understands it and why it matters to others: 'his desire is not merely to win in a game of social positioning, but rather to push out this structured social space altogether'.[58] Iago is not trying to improve his position within society; he wishes to destroy the meaningfulness of society altogether. Thus, although Greenblatt attributes Iago's motives to pure hatred, I would contend that Iago is beyond even hatred; he is against meaning itself, a nihilist who takes pleasure in annihilating others' sense of their being. In this sense, 'I am not what I am' is a cancellation of being itself, an expression of Iago's animosity towards being, a way of saying 'I do not want to be what I am'.

This is why Iago's actions lead to the destruction of meaning for others. Othello can no longer understand what he is at the end of the play: 'that's he that was Othello; here I am' (V.ii.281; my punctuation). Othello knows what it means to be 'Othello', but that is no longer what he is; thrust outside of the possibilities within which he understood his being, he cannot understand what he is. Grady argues that 'Othello's heroism … is not so much a hollowness "within" Othello's discourse as it is the reverberating sound of a once culturally empowering rhetoric in the empty chamber created by Iago's instrumentality'.[59] But rather than saying that Othello's discourse is no longer culturally empowering because Iago has

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[57] Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, p. 70.

[58] Daniel Juan Gil, *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics: Sovereign Power and the Life of the Flesh* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 69.

[59] Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, pp. 129-30.

created a chamber of instrumentality around Othello, I would argue that Iago's instrumentality has annihilated Othello's sense of what he is. This is not because Iago has managed to pull Othello into an instrumental space of being, but rather because Iago has made Othello realise that he already exists in such a space of being. As Daniel Juan Gil points out in a slightly different context, 'much *Othello* criticism is premised on the notion that Iago dismantles or unmakes Othello, but I want to suggest that in a strange way Iago is actually building up and clarifying Othello, forcing him to reveal himself'.[60] Iago exposes Othello as what he is – a being defined by instrumental relations of meaning – even if Othello ultimately fails to recognise this fact. What Othello does understand is that what he is does not match what he thought he was. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the refracted sense of being he articulates in his final speech:

> Set you down this,
> And say besides that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him – thus!
>
> <div align="right">(V.ii.350-354)</div>

In killing himself, Othello shows that he is both the 'I' that kills, and the 'turbanned Turk', or the 'circumcised dog' that is killed. His role-playing of both the Venetian and the Turk at the same time is an attempt to make sense of his existence, to try and regain 'he that was Othello'. In other words, he is trying to recapture an interpretation of being that is lost to him in the space of being he finds himself in:

> Othello sees a way both to regain control over what he had called the story of his life and to repair the damage that had been done to the authority of the state he had loyally served. He can do so by personally dragging Iago's actions back into the orbit of the community and its ends. Honest Iago, the perfect insider, had seemed to exemplify that community's values, but he had in fact betrayed them into nihilism: 'I am not what I am'. Othello's task is to identify and destroy an appropriate enemy, a target that the Venetian Christians had long deemed worthy of hatred [and] Othello finds this target in himself.[61]

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[60] Gil, *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics*, p. 70.
[61] Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, p. 73.

The question is, why would Othello's loss of meaning damage the authority of the state? How exactly has Othello 'traduced the state'? If the authority of the state relies on the hierarchical understanding of the world, then Othello's descent into nihilism is an affront to the state, because it shows the contingency of the meanings the state derives its authority from. If a way of being can lose its meaning, then it is not the way it has to be. The fact that the existing meanings are inadequate – that the world is not one in which Othello could live happily with Desdemona, for instance – suggests that its being is not all that it could be. In recasting himself in the form of the hero he used to be, then disposing of his existence by committing suicide, Othello attempts to regain what has been lost. But what has changed is not within the power of a single person to restore to its former state. Othello may well be trying to drag 'Iago's actions back into the orbit of the community and its ends', but Iago will not be dragged back into meaning, into being. In saying 'Demand me nothing. What you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak word' (V.ii.300-1), Iago refuses to make any more sense; he is a kind of black hole, a negation of meaning that mocks everything that is, and any attempt to make sense of him is ultimately bound to fail.

<center>***</center>

The way that Iago defies attempts to make sense of him at the end of *Othello* bears comparison with the mute Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, even though Iago is silent by choice, whereas Lavinia is not. Lavinia is the only character in Shakespeare's works to be present on stage for so long without any lines, a special form of presence that theatre is uniquely able to portray, in that the actors are able to bring being onto the stage without the mediation of language. As Gil points out, 'part of the way in which [Shakespeare] brings the life of the flesh onto the stage is by drawing on the essentially theatrical and bodily nature of his medium, and its ability to put bodies into gestural interaction with other bodies'.[62] If being is meaningful presence, then Lavinia is presence that resists meaning. From her first entrance after her horrific mutilation, everyone around her continually attempts to make sense of her, but every interpretation of her highlights the inappropriateness and inadequacy of a discourse

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[62] Gil, *Shakespeare's Anti-Politics*, p. 14.

that attempts to rationalise her existence. The first and most obvious of these is Marcus'
notorious blazon of Lavinia immediately after her dismemberment:

> Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands
> Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare
> Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments
> Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in
> And might not gain so great a happiness
> As half thy love. Why dost not speak to me?
> Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
> Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind
> Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips
> Coming and going with thy honey breath.
> But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee
> And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue.
> Ah, now thou turn'st away thy face for shame,
> And notwithstanding all this loss of blood,
> As from a conduit from three issuing spouts,
> Yet do thy cheeks look red as Titan's face,
> Blushing to be encountered with a cloud.
>   (II.ii.16-32)

This Ovidian lament, with its incongruous use of amatory platitudes such as 'rosed lips' and
'honey breath', creates a disparity between the horrifying spectacle and the language Marcus
uses in an attempt to make sense of what he sees. It is the expression of an effort to realise a
sight that taxes to the utmost the powers of understanding and utterance. According to some
critics, Marcus' speech is there to make horror sympathetic: 'What it aims at in the first place
is to transform the grotesque figure of horror left by Chiron and Demetrius into an object of
sympathy and pity'.[63] That is, Marcus' speech translates Lavinia's physical plight into
something easier to understand, something that the audience can latch onto. However, if this
is true, the speech also has a paradoxical effect, as Eugene Waith's classic analysis points out:

> These pleasant and familiar images of trees, fountains, and conduits bring the horror
> that has been committed within the range of comprehension. They oblige us to see
> clearly a suffering body, yet as they do so they temporarily remove its individuality,
> even its humanity, by abstracting and generalizing. Though not in themselves

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[63] R. Stamm, 'The Alphabet of Speechless Complaint: A Study of the Mangled Daughter in *Titus Andronicus*',
English Studies, 55 (1974), p. 327.

horrible, they point up the horror; though familiar, they point up the strangeness. The suffering becomes an object of contemplation.[64]

The only way that sense can be made of Lavinia is by objectification. As Andrew Ettin observes: 'The similes oblige us to see the physical manifestation of the suffering, rather than a suffering person. Indeed they do destroy the individuality of the sufferer, even her humanity, by abstracting and generalizing, by demonstrating the reduction of person to object'.[65] By describing her in familiar terms, in poetic tropes, and by itemising the parts of her body, Marcus endeavours to reach an understanding of what Lavinia is. But the elaborate metaphor of Lavinia's body as a tree whose branches have been cut off, and the blazon of her physical features – her 'lips', 'tongue', 'face', 'cheeks' – ends up reprising her dismemberment on a textual level, as if Marcus cannot make sense of her as a whole.[66]

If this soliloquy is an attempt to make the appalling sight of Lavinia more palatable, the point must be that it fails. The effect of the speech is notoriously disconcerting, prompting commentators to opine that it is 'the scene most universally scorned for its ludicrous flight of lyric poetry';[67] that 'the imagery, classically decorous on the printed page, jars indecorously in the theater when confronted by the reality of the silent Lavinia'; and that 'Marcus might be describing a broken water main, not his niece, for all the emotional weight or interior reference his words seem to carry'.[68] One of the perceived problems with the soliloquy is that it is excessive: 'it makes Marcus dwell too long and insist too much on one single aspect of his niece's disaster; it oversteps the limits within which the relation of imagery to fact can be dramatically effective'.[69] However, this is a problem only if one insists that the speech is trying to be comforting, sympathetic or moving, as Ettin implies: 'At its best on stage it confesses the speaker's (or perhaps at times the author's) inability to emotionally internalize unpleasant reality; at its worst it implies an inability to sympathize, an ability only

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[64] Eugene M. Waith, 'Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), p. 47.

[65] Andrew V. Ettin, 'Shakespeare's First Roman Tragedy', *ELH*, 37 (1970), p. 338.

[66] For more on the implicit violence of the blazon form see Nancy Vickers, 'Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981-2), pp. 265-79. and '"The blazon of sweet beauty's best": Shakespeare's *Lucrece*', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York, NY: Methuen, 1992), pp. 95-116.

[67] Albert H. Tricomi, 'Aesthetics of Mutilation in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 27 (1974), p. 16.

[68] S. Clark Hulse, 'Wresting the Alphabet: Oratory and Action in *Titus Andronicus*', *Criticism*, 21 (1979), p. 110.

[69] Stamm, 'The Alphabet of Speechless Complaint', p. 327.

to brutalize'.[70] If sympathy subtracts from the violence of the event, it will not be experienced in its full brutality. The fact that these lines stand out so much and have attracted so much attention suggests that it is a deliberate effect. The obtrusive artifice of the language is alienating: it draws attention to the scene and to the contrived nature of the play, underscoring metadramatically just what it is one has been watching for enjoyment. But the metatheatrical moment is also the moment in which normal systems of signification fail, and the space of being that allows those meanings to make sense is revealed.

The awkwardness of the speech and its excessive length draw attention to Lavinia and 'offers her no opportunity of action or reaction, thus forcing upon her the posture of a frozen statue of misery, which she must keep up too long'.[71] But her stillness and the inappropriateness of the language that fails to capture her in her entirety highlight the presence, the very being of Lavinia: 'to have this poetic transformation frustrated by the physical presence of the actor gushing blood forces the audience to be aware of those things she has lost'.[72] The undecipherable presence of the raped and mutilated Lavinia exposes the world of honour, duty, and revenge in which it is consistent for Titus to kill Tamora's son as a religious 'sacrifice' for 'brethren slain' (I.i.126-7) – a barely disguised validation of revenge – and to kill his own son for filial disobedience. At the beginning of the play, Tamora pleads with Titus to show her son mercy:

> Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,
> A mother's tears in passion for her son!
> And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,
> O, think my son to be as dear to me.
> (I.i.108-11)

But her tears leave Titus unmoved. In Titus' Rome, things make sense only in terms of the system of honour and revenge. Tamora shows how completely she has internalised this way of being when she shows no sympathy for Lavinia's plea to be spared: 'I know not what it *means*; away with her!' (II.ii.157; my italics). In this space of being, existence makes sense only in terms of honour and retribution, and pity means nothing. The Andronici occupy and contribute to the space of being that makes Lavinia's rape and dismemberment a possibility.

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[70] Ettin, 'Shakespeare's First Roman Tragedy', p. 339.
[71] Stamm, 'The Alphabet of Speechless Complaint', p. 328.
[72] Hulse, 'Wresting the Alphabet', p. 110.

In spite of his efforts to comprehend her through description, Marcus cannot fully understand Lavinia: 'Shall I speak for thee? Shall I say 'tis so? / O that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast, / That I might rail at him to ease my mind!' (II.ii.33-35). It is through this failure of comprehension that Lavinia's presence draws attention to being. Marcus cannot speak for her, because her presence remains outside of language: 'the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived'.[73] And it is not only Marcus who fails to understand her; those around her continually fail to make sense of her: 'Alas, sweet aunt, I know not what you mean' (IV.i.4); 'What means my niece Lavinia by these signs?' (IV.i.8); 'How now, Lavinia? Marcus, what means this?' (IV.i.30). Even Titus' claims that he can understand Lavinia – 'Mark, Marcus, mark! I understand her signs' (III.i.144) and 'Hark, Marcus, what she says: / I can interpret all her martryed signs' (III.ii.35-45) – fall short as he admits his inability to make sense of her: 'I will learn thy thought' (III.ii.39); 'Why lifts she up her arms in sequence thus?' (IV.i.49). Rudolf Stamm claims that Titus' explanation of his daughter 'introduces a new and moving motif into the play: an ideal relationship of paternal and filial love endows Titus with a partly intuitive faculty of reading Lavinia's imperfect gesticulation correctly and of becoming her best interpreter'.[74] But all of Titus' interpretations are projections of his own feelings of woe onto Lavinia:

> Had she a tongue to speak, now would she say
> That to her brother which I said to thee.
> His napkin with his true tears all bewet
> Can do no service on her sorrowful cheeks
> <div align="right">(III.i.145-148)</div>

Presumably, all Lavinia wants is 'present death' (II.ii.173) and for her body to be hidden 'in some loathsome pit / Where never man's eye may behold my body' (II.ii.177-8). But the Andronici do nothing but 'look upon her' (III.i.66). Titus assumes that what Lavinia would say is the same as what he says, seeing her as a mirror of himself, and he forces meaning onto her wordless existence.

> Hark how her sighs doth blow.
> She is the weeping welkin, I the earth
> Then must my sea be moved with her sighs,

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[73] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 5.
[74] Stamm, 'The Alphabet of Speechless Complaint', p. 332.

> Then must my earth with her continual tears
> Become a deluge overflowed and drowned
> For why my bowels cannot hide her woes,
> But like a drunkard must I vomit them
> (III.i.226-232)

Not only does Titus repeat Marcus' attempt to make Lavinia's plight poetically comprehensible, he is also unable to distinguish the point where he ends and she begins. He internalises her grief and makes it his own, appropriating the few means of expression – her tears, her sighs – she has left. Titus is adamant that he will make Lavinia mean something, that he will make sense of her existence:

> Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought.
> In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
> As begging hermits in their holy prayers.
> Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
> Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
> But I of these will wrest an alphabet
> And by still practice learn to know thy meaning
> (III.ii.35-45)

No action that Lavinia takes will go unmarked by her father. Everything must be forced into the realm of signification: he will 'wrest an alphabet' from her and learn what she means, that is, make sense of her being. Titus never accepts the fact that he cannot make sense of Lavinia. He does not allow her to be the unintelligible aporia that would lead him to understand being. Unlike Hamlet, Titus never sees past his own woes and his revenge to understand the fundamental ontological problem that underlies his plight. He never faces the fact that he has created and is himself the space of being that has allowed Lavinia to become what she is. Indeed, he seems to fear the possibility that she may not make sense. When he tells Young Lucius, 'Fear her not, Lucius; somewhat she doth mean' (IV.i.9), the implication is that if she does not mean anything, she ought to be feared. And insofar as her presence threatens to render the entire rationale of revenge meaningless, he is right.

Titus finally rids himself of Lavinia's presence for the same 'mighty strong and effectual' reason why Virgilius was right, according to Saturninus, to kill Virginia in Livy's tale: 'Because the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows' (V.iii.40-2). Instead of facing the presence which exceeds his capacity to make sense

of it, he makes sense of Lavinia's existence in terms of the honour and shame it brings on him, just as he killed Mutius at the beginning of the play: 'Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die' (V.iii.45-6). Lavinia is defined right to the end in relation to her father, who projects his own sorrow onto her. Titus' repeated claim that he understands Lavinia, and his sacrifice of her presence to restore meaning to existence, covers the confusion that he ought to feel, and that ought to alert him to the space of being he exists in.

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Shakespeare's most ontologically complex lines expose the fact that being can never mean the existence of an entity alone. Being must entail the combination of individual beings and the space of being which these beings are part of: it is both what we are and what allows us to have a basic understanding of being. However, the space of being is not constantly evident, and lines such as 'I am not what I am' are special, because they expose the space of being by temporarily suspending meaning. This interruption of meaning reveals how existence is normally understood, whether it makes sense to us in terms of hierarchy, honour, instrumentality or anything else. The suspension of the normal understanding of being shows that the way the space of being happens to be is contingent, and yet how necessary it is in order for us to understand existence at all. Thus Shakespeare challenges the way things are while also showing the formidable difficulty of changing them. Titus never even comes to recognise what makes things as they are; Hamlet must let them be in order to expose the human cost of the way existence is understood in Denmark, and change seems possible only through the death of the beings whose existence creates that space of being; Romeo and Juliet fall victim to a world that cannot make sense of what they feel; and Iago attempts to annihilate meaning itself. Shakespeare's treatment of being is an invitation to question whether existence is all that it could and should be. But it is also an affirmation that our existence is inherently meaningful, for it is only when meaning is thrown into question that the way we understand existence becomes a problem. The arts of poetry and theatre are especially well-suited to addressing being, because of the way they can use enigma, paradox, and the physical presence of actors on stage to evoke the negative, or the space of being,

without conceptualising it. As Heidegger says, 'the artwork opens up, in its own way, the being of beings';[75] and again: 'Poetry is the saying of the unconcealment of beings'.[76] Poetry 'gives to airy nothing, / A local habitation and a name' (V.i.16-7),[77] evoking something that has no conceptual existence, and that should have no conceptual existence, perhaps even refusing to give it a name. Shakespeare's ontology is not something that can be theorised, because, instead of saying what being is, he allows being to be and draws attention to it in his writing.

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[75] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 19.
[76] *Ibia.*, p. 46.
[77] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Peter Holland, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Chapter 8

'Thou art all my art'

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to draw out the fundamental questions about being that surface again and again in Shakespeare's plays and to analyse them philosophically. The originality of this thesis is evident: as demonstrated in the review of previous literature on the subject, there has been no single study of Shakespeare that focuses on ontology, and few studies use the word 'ontology' in a philosophically nuanced way.

In order to define the different ways in which being is presented in the plays accurately, it was important to establish the various theories of being in philosophy. In Chapter 2, I provided a brief summary of the history of ontology, surveying various philosophical theories of being that have been formulated across the ages, along with their objectives and potential flaws. These ontological theories fall into three categories: absolute being, the absolute self, and non-conceptual being. The first posits some sort of absolute being, such as God, that is the ultimate meaning of all existence. The second treats the self as the foundation of the understanding of being. The third provides no ultimate answer or foundation of being, seeing being as that which makes understanding possible, but which cannot be comprehended conceptually.

In light of the philosophical theories of being delineated in Chapter 2, I undertook in Chapter 3 a review of current secondary literature relevant to the subject of ontology in Shakespeare, philosophical readings of Shakespeare's works more generally, and the ways that Shakespearean critics have used the term 'ontology'. It became clear that, although ontological questions constitute important aspects of many studies of Shakespeare, they are never the central focus of concern, and never explored in a way that does justice to their complexity.

The study of being in the drama of Shakespeare is not an anachronistic enterprise. The logical starting point for a study of Shakespeare's ontology was to ascertain which of the three basic conceptions of being characterised the ontology of Shakespeare's time. Chapter 4 conducted a broad survey of the philosophical, religious, and poetic views of ontology in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, paying particular attention to the ways these views are presented or contested in Shakespeare's writing. It became evident that the predominant ontology of the time was a Christian variant of absolute being, which positioned God as the absolute, but that this paradigm was in the process of being challenged by Shakespeare and a growing number of his contemporaries.

Chapter 5 pursued the theme of ontotheological absolute being through a more exhaustive study of the manifestation of absolute being in Shakespeare's plays. While many characters exhibit an inherent belief in absolute being, I argued that, given the presentation of divinity in the plays, it is not a belief that is ratified by the narratives of the plays. Even though his work is rooted in the age in which he wrote, Shakespeare's ontology cannot be understood fully in the terms of his period alone.

But absolute being is not the only ontological paradigm operating in Shakespeare's plays – also present is the absolute self, competing with the ontology of absolute being and offering an entirely different account. Chapter 6 offered an ontological study of *Coriolanus, Troilus and Cressida, King Lear, Macbeth, The Winter's Tale* and *Othello* from the perspective of particular characters, who, I argued, base the certainty of the existence of the world on their own existence. It became apparent, however, that this virtually solipsistic conception of being was consistently undermined, both poetically and structurally, by the plays. While Shakespeare does justice to the allure of this ontological understanding, he problematises it intensely.

Since both foundational conceptions of being – absolute being and absolute self – turned out to be inadequate for a full analysis of Shakespeare's ontology, I decided to examine key lines and passages in the plays in order to see why they could not be explained by these ideas, and what ontological questions they raised. In these adversions to being, it was not easy to explain what being means: no fundamental grounding of being could make sense of the ways existence is being presented by the plays. This meant that I had to change the question of ontology in Shakespeare from 'what is being?' to 'what allows the comprehension of being

to begin with?' And the answer, it transpired, is that Shakespeare gestures towards a preconceptual sense of existence, a space of being generated by human beings, which allows beings to understand existence in a basic, everyday way. The ontology of Shakespeare's plays reflects the ontology of beings more generally. The profoundly ulterior space of being which surfaces in the more complex passages in the plays revealed that, even when nobody is aware of it, people – both fictional and real – require a basic understanding of being in order to comprehend that they are beings. For the conception of absolute being or absolute self even to make sense, one needs to have a basic understanding of being to begin with; that is, one must already exist as part of a space of being. The space of being is not static, but it is ubiquitous; it is necessarily present in various forms in Shakespeare's plays, and indirectly undercuts the other two theories of being, even when characters are espousing them.

Shakespeare's more profound ontology – examples of which I have discerned and revealed in particular lines and speeches from a number of plays – informs and organises his drama more generally, implicitly subverting the other conceptions of being articulated in the plays, even while making those conceptions possible. If being for Shakespeare is the connection between beings and the space of being that allows those beings to understand themselves *as* being, then it shows that no conception of being is absolute, since all theories depend on a contingent space of being that allows conceptions of being to arise. To be able to present absolute being and absolute selves as limited understandings of being, and to phrase the question of being in such an intricate way, Shakespeare needs to be writing with an awareness of this preconceptual form of being.

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The philosophy that Shakespeare invites the audience to perceive through the dramatised predicaments of his characters is that meaning starts and ends with human beings. Just as no human being is infinite, no single meaning transcends the rest. Being is meaningful presence, but the way that presence is meaningful changes. Shakespeare's ontology is grounded and down-to-earth, and the best one can do is to say with Feste's Hermit of Prague 'That that is, is' (*Twelfth Night* IV.ii.15): being is the way it is because it is not otherwise. Since one needs

to have a basic understanding of being even to question it, one cannot even attempt to figure out being without relying on it.

But if there is no ultimate reason why things are as they are, it also follows from this that things can change. The complex ontological moments in Shakespeare's plays reveal, first, that being is inherently meaningful for humans, and second, that this meaning is contingent. The moments when meaning is suspended, or when being becomes a problem, are the moments when the meaningfulness of everyday life comes into focus. These moments, however, also expose the fact that nothing grounds the way things are, that there is no fundamental reason why things happen to make sense the way they do. The contingency of meaning does not automatically lead to nihilism; instead it shows that being is meaningful, but that it is not the only way things can be. In tragic circumstances, contingency points to the possibility of a redemptive future. Ontological questioning in the plays reveals that meaning – that is, the unconscious way humans make sense of being – is not fixed, and can be otherwise. As the discussion in the previous chapter showed, tragedy often happens when people do not realise that the world is contingent.

By not adopting a metaphysical approach, and by implicitly revealing that there is no absolute meaning to being, Shakespeare's ontology challenges the metaphysical project of discovering the ultimate meaning of being. In doing so, Shakespeare's drama manages to express more than philosophy can express, because it is not possible to make a philosophical argument claiming that being has no ultimate metaphysical meaning without making a metaphysical statement about being. As Andrew Bowie contends:

> Art, precisely because it is a mode of non-discursive intelligibility, which does not consist in propositions, arguments, and syllogisms, nonetheless makes sense of ourselves in a way that actually resonates with what is now coming onto the scene as more important than the conscious deliberative capacities of individual subjects.[1]

Art can show what philosophy cannot say, and can even disclose the world that grounds philosophical thinking. Thus, John Joughin writes,

> Rather than regarding Shakespeare as a poor unwitting adjunct of reason or as somehow subsumed within its project, the dramatist's open-ended resistance to conceptual control might finally turn out to be a far more crucial resource for critical

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[1] Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 182.

thought. In this sense, we might say that Shakespeare unwittingly provides access to the 'literary conditions of philosophical questioning' itself.[2]

Clearly, there is much that Shakespeare's work can do for philosophy without being subsumed by philosophy. Shakespeare shows the shortcomings of philosophy; and to some extent this might explain why Shakespeare's work remains so alive and relevant today, whereas much metaphysical philosophy does not.

At its best, imaginative literature is capable of taking reason to the limits of what is articulable in order to point to something beyond it. Heidegger refers to this as 'projective saying', which he defines as 'that in which the preparation of the sayable at the same time brings the unsayable as such to the world'.[3] But if Shakespeare's drama is inherently capable of a deeper treatment of ontology than philosophy, why undertake a philosophical analysis of that drama at all? Indeed, if the value of Shakespeare's plays lies in his ability to express things non-conceptually, what is the point of a study like this? I am acutely aware of the complexity, and perhaps even the irony, of attempting to explain how Shakespeare's drama contrives to express the inexpressible. Even if one can feel the way a Shakespearean drama makes sense of one's existence, ordinary language lacks the concepts and theories, not to conceptualise this feeling, but to mark out the way it cannot be conceptualised. As Agnes Heller says, Shakespeare's plays 'reveal the covering and the hiding, for they reveal the truth that there always remains something unrevealed and unrevealable'.[4] It is necessary to employ philosophical ways of thinking precisely in order to transcend them. Philosophy is one way of taking thought and expression to the limits of conceptualisation, after which art must take us the rest of the way. The role of philosophical thinking in literary analysis might be likened to the parts of a rocket that must be jettisoned to allow it to leave the atmosphere. Philosophy can assist thought in achieving the heights it needs to reach to do justice to the complexity of the literary text, but eventually it must be cast off in order to grasp what concepts cannot comprehend.

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[2] John J. Joughin, 'Philosophical Shakespeares: An Introduction', in *Philosophical Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 11. See the rest of the introduction for a very lucid examination of Shakespeare, philosophy and literary theory in Shakespeare studies.

[3] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 46.

[4] Agnes Heller, *The Time is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 370.

As Adorno points out, 'the goal of a philosophical interpretation of works of art cannot be their identification with the concept, their absorption in the concept; yet it is through such interpretation that the truth of the work unfolds'.[5] Philosophy can help to untangle the complexities of a work of art, but it cannot provide a definitive answer to what the work of art means. Shakespeare's works are not examples of Cartesian, Hegelian, Heideggerian or any other kind of philosophy, but philosophy can lead one to an awareness of something in Shakespeare's works that can be revealed only by ostension.[6]

The philosophical exploration of ontology in Shakespeare's plays shows that Shakespeare reveals something crucial about being, and connects art to existence. This is a connection that Shakespeare emphasises himself in lines such as 'Now thou art what thou art by art as well as by nature (*Romeo and Juliet* I.iii.84), and 'Thou art all my art',[7] where he plays on the second-person singular form of the verb 'to be' and the homophonous word meaning a work of art. Given the importance of being in Shakespeare's works, this play on words is not merely rhetorical; it sets up a correlation between 'art' and 'art' – between art and being – as if to say, 'art can show thee what thou art'.

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[5] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1973), p. 14.

[6] My argument here has something in common with Paul H. Fry's *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), even though Fry's reading of Heidegger differs from mine. For another argument on theory's inability to subsume and systematise literature, see also Mark Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), which contends that there is something about literature and art more generally that resists explanation.

[7] 'Sonnet 81', in *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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