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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482

Accusing the Christ Figure in Shakespearean Drama: Typological Imitations of Corpus Christi Cycle Trial Narratives

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Citation:

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Abstract

At first glance, the medieval Corpus Christi plays from N-Town, Wakefield, and York detailing the events of Christ's crucifixion bear little resemblance to secular renaissance dramas, such as the plays of Shakespeare. However, further inspection reveals a fascinating phenomenon that deserves exploration: despite the apparently non-religious nature of the work, secular dramas often present their protagonists as typological representations of Christ. In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, Antonio resembles Christ in that he is targeted by Shylock, a "wolfish" Jewish figure who insists on upholding the law; this approximates the way in which the Passion plays represent Christ as the victim of bloodthirsty Jewish officials of the law. Similarly, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* depicts a female character, Hermione, who can be interpreted as a Christ figure due to the events which befall her. Just as Christ was unjustly accused, put on trial, crucified, and ultimately rose again, so is Hermione unfairly accused of adultery, put on trial by her husband, experiences an apparent death, and finally is "resurrected" when her husband discovers her as a living statue at Paulina's house. The

Corpus Christi plays address issues quite diverse from the problems of secular renaissance drama, which causes the reader to question why these different genres nevertheless bear remarkably similar protagonists. This paper claims that the criminal trial acts as the trope through which Shakespearean dramas represent their protagonists as typological Christ figures. The Jhesus characters of the Passion plays and the Shakespearean protagonists experience the same specific sort of trial: the charges against the accused are illegitimate, the outcome of the case seems predetermined, the events leading to the trial enact an "othering" process, the accusers pose a greater threat than the accused, and the accused obeys a higher law than the dictates of the legal system. Thus, by mimicking the structural components of Christ's trials in the Corpus Christi cycles, the renaissance dramas create figures who perform the same narrative role as Christ does within the Passion plays, which suggests an inherent similarity between two otherwise radically-different types of drama.

At first glance, the medieval Corpus Christi plays from N-Town, Wakefield, and York detailing the events of Christ's crucifixion bear little resemblance to secular renaissance dramas, such as the plays of Shakespeare. However, further inspection reveals a fascinating phenomenon that deserves exploration: despite the apparently non-religious nature of the work, secular dramas often present their protagonists as typological representations of Christ. In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, Antonio resembles Christ in that he is targeted by Shylock, a "wolfish" Jewish figure who insists on upholding the law; this approximates the way in which the Passion plays represent Christ as the victim of bloodthirsty Jewish officials of the law. Similarly, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* depicts a female character, Hermione, who can be interpreted as a Christ figure due to the events which befall her. Just as Christ was unjustly accused, put on trial, crucified, and ultimately rose again, so is Hermione unfairly accused of adultery, put on trial by her husband, experiences an apparent death, and finally is "resurrected" when her husband discovers her as a living statue at Paulina's house. The Corpus Christi plays address issues quite diverse from the problems of secular renaissance drama, which causes the reader to question why these different genres nevertheless bear remarkably similar protagonists. This paper claims that the criminal trial acts as the trope through which Shakespearean dramas represent their protagonists as typological Christ figures. The Jhesus characters of the Passion plays and the Shakespearean protagonists experience the same specific sort of trial: the charges against the accused are illegitimate, the outcome of the case seems predetermined, the events leading to the trial enact an "othering" process, the accusers pose a greater threat than the accused, and the accused obeys a higher law than the dictates of the legal system. Thus, by mimicking the structural components of Christ's trials in the Corpus Christi cycles, the renaissance dramas create figures who perform the

same narrative role as Christ does within the Passion plays, which suggests an inherent similarity between two otherwise radically-different types of drama.

Throughout the Corpus Christi cycles, the trials convicting Christ consistently operate using illegitimate and unsubstantiated accusations against Christ, thus compromising the trials' integrity. For example, the N-Town *The Passion Play II* contains a quotation in which Annas claims, "We knowe he hath wrowth gret fole/ Ageyns the lawe shewyd present.¹ By describing Christ's offenses as mischievous "gret fole," the play suggests that the charges against Christ were unjustified and illegitimate. Whereas folly may be distasteful or immature, it hardly constitutes the type of criminal behavior that warrants a punishment as severe as crucifixion. Additionally, the Passion plays conventionally represent Pilate as being in disagreement with the Jewish officials, Caiaphas and Annas, as to Christ's guilt. In the segment, *Christ's Death and Burial* of the York cycle, for instance, Pilatus tells Caiphas and Anna, "Sirs, before youre sighte,/ With all my might/ I examined him right,/ And cause non in him cowthe I knawe."² Caiphas and Anna insist that Jhesus has been stirring up trouble, breaking the Sabbath, and claiming to be "Goddes sonne," but Pilatus still hesitates. Pilatus' confession of Jhesus' innocence is especially noteworthy considering that Pilatus has just given a rather impassioned speech in which he claims that he will condemn any criminal to death by hanging: "Who makes oppressioun,/ Or dose transgressioun,/ By my discessioun/ shall be demed dewly to di[e]"³; Pilatus is a man of great power, but he is disinclined to punish Jhesus because he is not convinced of Jhesus' guilt.

Furthermore, the Passion plays also consistently suggest that there are covert personal reasons behind the Jewish officials' desire to prosecute, and indeed persecute Christ. In the N-Town drama, the torturers reflect a raw, bloodthirsty, personal desire to harm Jhesus. The Wakefield *Scourging* contains sadistic dialogue clearly indicating that the torturers punish Jhesus solely for their own pleasure, as when 2 Tortor narrates, "Now fall I the first to flap on his hide," to which 3 Tortor responds, "My hart wold all to-brist bot I might till him glide!"⁴. The vengefulness of the torturers combined with Pilatus' doubts about the offenses suggests that the charges against Christ are invalid and driven by violence rather than justice. In the same way, the aforementioned Shakespearean dramas display characters who are victims of illegitimate and unjust accusations. In *The Winter's Tale*, for instance, Leontes barrages his wife with false accusations. Leontes attacks Hermione with vicious claims that she has been unfaithful to him, such as when he slanders her to Camillo using a stream of interrogations:

Ha not you seen Camillo-
But that's past doubt, you have, or your
eyeglass
Is thicker than a cuckold's horn- or heard-
For a vision so apparent, rumor
Cannot be mute- or though- for cogitation

Resides not in that man does not think
My wife is slippery? If thou wilt confess,
Or else be impudently negative,
To have nor eyes, nor ears, nor though, then
say
My wife's a hobbyhorse, deserves a name
As rank as any flax-wench, that puts to
Before her troth-plight; say't and justify 't.' ⁵

Leontes makes this specious claim for little reason other than his own paranoia and discomfort at his wife's potential power; indeed, the falseness of his claim is affirmed both by Camillo's outrage at Leontes suggestion, and by Apollo's oracle.⁶ Similarly, Shylock's claims against Bassanio in the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice* appear just as questionable, especially because Bassanio contends that Shylock's suit against Antonio arises more from Shylock's personal misanthropy, rather than any genuine desire to uphold the law: "it must appear/ That malice bears down truth. And I beseech you,/ Wrest once the law to your authority/ To do a great right, do a little wrong,/ And curb this cruel devil of his will."⁷ In this quote, Bassanio entreats Portia, who is judging the case, to use her authority to check Shylock's malicious will against Antonio. The victimization of Hermione and Antonio at the hands of unjust claims unites them with the Christ of the Corpus Christi plays.

Furthermore, both the Corpus Christi plays and the secular renaissance dramas suggest that some authority has predetermined the outcome of the trial. In the N-Town *The Passion Play I*, for example, Jhesus refers to his salvific role before he has been condemned and handed over to the authorities. He says to Maria Magdalen, "The[e] to save I have grett skille,/ For sorweful hert may sinne amende./ All they prayour I shal fulfille."⁸ Although the authorities have not yet apprehended Jhesus, he knows that he will save Maria Magdalen and others through his death. Furthermore, this quote uses the language of fulfillment to suggest that Jhesus is completing a task that has been determined in advance. The end of this drama confirms that was the trial's outcome was "ordeyned" in order to rescue humanity⁹; Jhesus' role as savior necessitated his death as the only possible sentence. The trial scene in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* operates in an analogous manner. On a surface level, the trial seems predetermined by Shylock's insistence on bloodshed. He refuses to accept the agreed-upon sum in exchange for Antonio's bond, saying "If every ducat in six thousand ducats/ Were in six parts, and every part a ducat,/

I would not draw them. I would have my bond."¹⁰ No sum of money, regardless of its size, can convince Shylock to forfeit his right to a pound of Antonio's flesh. However, Portia counters Shylock and furtively fixes the outcome: dressed as a judge, she controls the trial, rules in Antonio's favor, and thwarts Shylock's attempt to control the trial.

Additionally, the characters of secular renaissance drama resemble Christ in

that the trial process marginalizes them in a manner similar to that which Jhesus experiences in the Corpus Christi plays. In the context of the Corpus Christi plays, Jhesus receives inhumane treatment and undergoes a process of "othering" at the hands of his persecutors. Sometimes the othering is as simple as making the claim that Christ's persecutors inhabit a different religious tradition than Christ does. The Passion plays accomplish this by portraying Jhesus' enemies as Muslim. In the Wakefield *Scourging*, for instance, a torturer says, "Now, by Mahowne, oure heven king." ¹¹ Instead of worshipping Yahweh, the torturers call upon the name of Mohammed. Moreover, references to Mohammed are not unique to the Wakefield dramas, but also appear in the York *Crucifixion of Christ* ¹² and the N-Town *Passion Play I* ¹³. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio's experience of religious othering at the hands of Shylock figures him as a type of Christ. Shylock targets Antonio specifically because he is a Christian, as a heightened version of the religious tension between Christ and his Jewish persecutors: "How like a fawning publican he looks./ I hate him (Antonio) for his is a Christian;/ But more, for that in low simplicity/ He lends out money gratis, and brings down/ The rate of usance here with us in Venice." ¹⁴ Shylock's antipathy towards Antonio, based on religious and personal reasons, rather than any genuine legal threat, unites Antonio with the Jhesus of the Passion plays. Another way in which characters become marginalized is by enduring inhumane or insulting treatment. In the case of the Passion plays, Christ endures treatment that is insulting and inhumane to the extent that it is emasculating. For instance, the York *Crucifixion of Christ* envisions Jhesus's persecutors calling him child's names, such as when they taunt, "Lokis that the ladde on lenghe be laide," ¹⁵ (*Crucifixion* 40), and "Have done believe, boy, and make the[e] boune,/ And bende thy bake unto this tree." ¹⁶ In other instances, the Wakefield texts relate that Jhesus is treated by the Tortors as a work animal, ¹⁷ vstripped naked and beaten, ¹⁸ blindfolded ¹⁹, and forced to sit before their feet on a stool ²⁰. The torturers and officials also hurl insulting comments at Jhesus, as when Caiphas hurls "Harstow, harlot, of all?" ²¹ at Jhesus, and Anna questions his mental capacity by stating that Jhesus is "inwardly flayed, not right in his gere" ²². Antonio experiences the same sort of marginalization in *The Merchant of Venice*. He recognizes himself as a marked man who will be targeted, claiming to Bassanio, "I am a tainted wether of the flock,/ Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit/ Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me." ²³ While Antonio could here be wallowing in self-pity and over-exaggerating his quandary, there is also a very real possibility that Antonio would be the object of persecution: besides being religiously different from Shylock, Antonio is also vulnerable to attack due to his expressions of homosexual desire for Bassanio. Antonio reveals feelings for Bassanio which would have been deemed inappropriate in Elizabethan England, vowing to Bassanio, "I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it,/ And if it stand as you hoursef still do,/ Within the eye of honor, be assured/ My purse, my person, my extremest means/ Lie all unlocked to your occasions." ²⁴ Antonio's willingness and desire to give completely of himself to Bassanio signifies that his feelings for Bassanio surpassed those of close friendship. Thus, Antonio becomes a typological

Christ figure through his marginalization based upon sexual orientation; both Antonio and Jhesus are described as powerless and emasculated individuals. Hermione also experiences marginalization and loss of power in *The Winter's Tale* based upon sexual classification. Leontes' declarations of her alleged impurity have tainted Hermione's reputation so that by the time of her trial, she is considered nothing more than a "hobbyhorse" or a common whore. She recognizes this marginalization and the helpless position it has places her in, saying, "Myself on every post/ Proclaimed a strumpet; with immodest hatred/ The childbed privilege denied, which 'longs/ To women of all fashion." ²⁵ . Hermione has been classified as a whore, and the loss of the "childbed privilege" indicates that the integrity of her motherhood has also been denied. Thus, the two acceptable tropes for women within these dramas, that of virgin or mother, have both been denied to Hermione; she is marginalized because she does not fit into appropriate and conventional constructions of femininity. Antonio and Hermione both become Christ-like figures partially as a result of the marginalizing process that occurs as a step of the criminal trial in Corpus Christi dramas.

The marginalization process is especially significant to the Corpus Christi criminal trial because it serves to shift the balance of power even more firmly to the side of the accuser and the legal officials. In the Passion plays, Jhesus appears relatively powerless, albeit at his own choosing, at the hands of his persecutors. In none of the Passion plays does Jhesus taunt his persecutors or react violently in any way. Caiphas and Anna worry that Jhesus threatens Jewish law and will ultimately destroy it, entreating, "If he procede thus, we shall us all repent,/ For oure lawys he distroy[h] daily with his dede." ²⁶ Ironically, however, Caiphas uses the same language, specifically the word "destroye," to describe his own power: "I, Caiphas, am jewge with powerys possible/ To destroye all erroris that in oure lawys make variawns." ²⁷ In truth, vengeful Caiaphas could be just as dangerous to the Jewish people as he is claiming Jhesus is. Hermione, the female protagonist of *The Winter's Tale* is also subject to punishers who wield significantly more power than she does, thus uniting them typologically with Christ. Hermione experiences a similar process of disempowerment. Though she initially exhibits feminine power that could be interpreted as threatening, due to the excessive obviousness of her pregnancy, her influence over Polixenes, ²⁸ and her comfort with discussing sexuality, ²⁹ she becomes marginalized as soon as Leontes slanders her chastity. Though the trial against Hermione ends and her purity is affirmed by the Delphian oracle, she does not recover from the marginalization; even when she reappears at the end of the play, she is little more than a living statue. As a statue she is the epitome of a marginalized being, deprived of freedom of movement or thought. The power exerted over the victims by accusers and punishers has a circular relationship to marginalization; the marginalization allows the victims to become even more powerless, which then slates them as increasingly marginalized. The parallel structure of powerlessness transforms the protagonists of the secular dramas into typological Christ figures due to their participation in the form of criminal trial that occurs within the Corpus

Christi plays.

Finally, the secular renaissance dramas figure their protagonists as types of Christ by portraying figures who answer to a higher system of law than the state. The accused, therefore, undergo a criminal trial for charges of treason or seditious behavior against the state. In both types of drama, the accuser insists on upholding the states government, but the accused appeals to a higher, nobler authority. In the N-Town *The Passion Play I*, for example, Annas epitomizes a governmental official committed to upholding the law. According to the stage directions, his attire even resembles that of an official of the "hoold lawe," for he is "beseyn after a busshop of the hoold lawe in a scarlet gowne, and over that a blew tabard furryd with white, and a mitere on his hed, after the hoold law." ³⁰ This passage explicitly describes Annas' attire in terms of the hoold law, and the dialogue reinforces the text's characterization of Annas. At the very moment of his entrance, Annas contends that his task is to suppress any who oppose the law, for "The lawsys of Moyses no man shal denye!" ³¹. Furthermore, the torturers of "The Buffeting" from *The Wakefield Cycle* reveal that they fear Jhesus because he opposes Mosaic law. For instance, a torturer reports to Caiaphas that Jhesus "has bene for the preche full many long yeris,/ And the people he teche a new law." ³² The text places the "hoold," Mosaic law of the Jewish leaders in opposition to the radical new law that Jhesus preached; the officials misinterpret the sort of law that Jhesus brings and assume that he has come to wrest control from the officials. Thus, the officials react in order to protect and maintain their governmental structure.

The accusatory figures of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *The Merchant of Venice* act out of similar dedication to the existing law. When Leontes tries Hermione in court in *The Winter's Tale*, he perceives her alleged affair as a threat to his kingship, rather than a betrayal of their romance:

Hermione, queen to the worthy
Leontes, king of Sicilia, thou art here
accused and
arraigned of high treason, in committing
adultery
with Polixenes, king of Bohemia, and
conspiring
with Camillo to take away the life of our
sovereign
lord the king, thy royal husband ³³

Although adultery is listed as one of her offenses, the high frequency of words relating to kingship and governance suggests that the romantic betrayal would be of less consequence than a royal betrayal. Words such as *treason*, *conspiring*, *sovereign lord the king*, and *royal* draw attention to Hermione's threat to Leontes' kingship, but only two words in this passage allude to their marriage: *adultery* and *husband*. Shylocks' character in *The Merchant of Venice*

enacts a similar devotion to the governmental law. He insists that the exact stipulations of his bond be upheld. When other characters entreat him to act with mercy, he denies, saying “I stand here for the law” ³⁴ and again, “I crave the law! The penalty and forfeit of my bond.” ³⁵ Both Shylock and Leontes play similar roles to Christ’s persecutors in the trial narratives of the Passion plays due to their insistence on and dedication to an existing legal structure.

Furthermore, the protagonists of the Shakespearean dramas often display dedication to a higher authority than the existing legal structure, thereby acting as types of Christ. Jhesus, for example, claims in “The Scourging” that his involvement with God’s power exempts him from the control of the Roman officials: “Sich powere has thou noght to wirk thy will thus with me,/ Bot from my Fader that is brought, one-fold God in persons thre.” ³⁶ Other Passion plays claim that Christ has been ordained to a higher authority. By using the language of ordination, the text thereby affords a legal context to Jhesus’ life and mission. The N-Town *Passion Play I*, for instance, uses the word “ordeyn” or “ordenawn” five times within the span of twenty lines to show that Jhesus’ death and role as savior has indeed been ordered by the “goostly ordenawns” ³⁷ of a higher authority. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio offers himself up to repay Bassanio’s debt to Shylock, thus allowing his loyalty to Bassanio to counter the intentions of the law. Thus, Antonio perceives that his relationship with Bassanio should take precedence over both the demands of the law and the instinct for self-preservation; he ignores his duty to the state and duty to himself to act out of a higher and nobler sentiment: that of love and commitment to Bassanio. When Antonio perceives that he is at death’s door, he tells Bassanio, “Command me to your honorable wife. Tell her the process of Antonio’s end, Say how I love dyou, speak me fair in death; And when the tale is told, bid her be judge/ Whether Bassanio had not once a love.” ³⁸ . Antonio’s loyalty was not to himself or to the state, but to his love for Bassanio. Thus, Antonio acts as a type of Christ by opposing the law and sacrificing himself in order to perform the ultimate act of love.

Although there are significant and defining differences between the medieval Passion plays and the secular dramas of the renaissance periods, interesting similarities may also be explored, such as the presence of typological Christ figures in secular drama. While the Renaissance dramas dealt with a different set of questions than the Passion plays, the structure Corpus Christi trial narrative prevailed into the Shakespearean Renaissance drama, which allows the reader to discern a measure of convergence between the two diverse types of drama.

About the Author

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poetry in representing divinity and divine interactions with humanity in 17th century English poetry, focusing on the works of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Robert Southwell, Richard Crashaw, and John Milton

Endnotes

1. Bevington, Passion II, 365-366

2. Bevington, Death, 49-52

3. *ibid*, 10-13

4. Bevington, Scourging, 134-135

5. Winter, I.2.267-278

6. Winter, III.2

7. Merchant, IV.1.212-216

8. Bevington, Passion, 490-492

9. *ibid*, 919, 949

10. Merchant, IV.1.85-87

11. Bevington, Scourging, 408

12. Bevington, Crucifixion, 61

13. Bevington, Passion, 369

14. Merchant, I.3.38-42

15. Bevington, Crucifixion, 40

16. *ibid*, 73-74

17. Bevington, Scourging, 52-53

18. *ibid*, 132-125

19. Bevington, Scourging, 390

20. *ibid*, 360

21. Bevington, Buffeting, 129

22. *ibid*, 182

23. Merchant, IV.1.114-116

24. Merchant, I.1.135-139
25. Winter, III.2.100-102
26. Bevington, Passion, 15-16
27. *ibid*, 47-48
28. Winter, I.2.57-59
29. *ibid*, 80-84
30. Bevington, Passion, introductory stage directions
31. *ibid*, 4
32. Bevington, Buffeting, 65-66
33. Winter, III.2.12-18
34. Merchant, IV.1.142
35. *ibid*, 205-206
36. Bevington, Scourging, 116-117
37. Bevington, Passion, 376
38. Merchant, IV.1.272-276

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Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal
ISSN 1718-8482