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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Jacobean censorship and its internalising as a kind of new taboo for Shakespeare and other playwrights. In 1606, the Puritan influence on performances took an important step: the “Act to Restrain Abuses of Players” was issued, forbidding profanity on stage. A comparison of Quarto texts and the First Folio versions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* shows that expletives were cancelled, though not consistently; oaths and swearing are adapted to new spaces (Egypt) and times (British ancient history) in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear*. Anglican Britain does not feature in plays after 1606, which may be due to the necessity of avoiding references to God, substituted with pagan deities such as Jupiter and Apollo. In Shakespearean texts after 1606 language had to be modified according to the new Canon. Folio versions sometimes weaken the language, causing some loss of characterisation and power.

KEYWORDS: Censorship in Jacobean times; *Hamlet*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Othello*; *Antony and Cleopatra*; *King Lear*.

Taboo and censorship are often connected, with religious practices offering some of the earliest examples of this relationship. One of the oldest is the taboo concerning the name of God, Yahweh. The second commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Exodus 20:7), prompted Second Temple Judaism (in about 500 BCE) to develop a taboo

resulting in the replacement of the most sacred name – the Tetragrammaton, YHWH – with the more neutral “Adonai” (meaning “my lord”).

The nexus between taboo and censorship in early modern English drama is far from straightforward, showing instead a nuanced interplay between official regulation and linguistic norms. The 1606 Act to Restrain Abuses of Players is a key moment in theatrical censorship, since it formalised restrictions on religious language that had previously been more loosely enforced; this act marked a shift from the relatively permissive Elizabethan stage to a sterner Jacobean approach to stage content. Shakespeare’s variations in the use of oaths, expletives, and religious references before and after 1606 can show how official censorship reshaped not only the dramatic language itself, but potentially the conceptual framework within which playwrights approached religious and political themes. In particular, a brief comparison of select lines in the Quarto and the Folio versions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, and some analysis of oaths and exclamations in *King Lear* and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, will emphasise the evolution of Shakespeare’s language response to these new restrictions, in the light of the interplay between official censorship and artistic expression.

To be performed, early modern plays had to be subjected to the control of the Master of the Revels, who examined the playwrights’ manuscripts to assess whether they contained any offence to the rules of propriety, from the religious, sexual, and political points of view. As some scholars have shown¹, the work of the Master of the Revels was not always consistent, probably due to haphazard reading practices based on samples rather than a thorough perusal of the whole text. The haphazard nature of the censorship allowed for some flexibility in language use, which Shakespeare naturally exploited. Yet, this inconsistency also meant that playwrights, including Shakespeare, had to contend with a somewhat unpredictable scenario of what was permissible, possibly leading to self-regulation in their plays.

Under Elizabeth’s reign, swearing was reprimanded, but no law explicitly prohibited it, probably because the Queen herself was known to resort quite frequently to the manly habit of reinforcing her speech with oaths and

¹ See especially Dutton 1991, Dutton 2002, Shirley 1979. See also Clare 1990, Clare 1999, Clegg 1997, Taylor 1993.

swearwords. I am referring here to mild oaths, such as “by God”, “by my faith”, or the like. Heavier ones, which were generally widespread and therefore mirrored in plays, involved the body of Christ and his Passion (“by the rood”, “by God’s wounds” shortened to “swounds”, “by God’s blood” shortened to “sblood”, and the like).

Religious reaction to the general abuse of oaths had always been intense; I will mention two examples². In a particularly heated didactic poem by Stephen Hawes (Hawes 1509, first issued in 1509, with two reprints in 1531 and 1555), swearing is equated to a new crucifixion. Jesus Christ himself is supposed to be denouncing the swearers:

They newe agayne do hange me on the rode
They tere my sydes and are nothyng dysmayde
My woundes they open and deuoure my blode [...]
Wherefore ye kynges reygnyng in renowne
Refourme your seruantes in your courte abused [...]
Meke as a Lambe I suffre theyr grete wronge
I maye take vengeaunce thoughe I tary longe [...]
Lo se my kyndenes and frome synne awake
I dyde redeme you from the deuylls chayne [...]
Yet to the deuyll ye go nowe wyllingly. (Hawes 1509, 5-6)

A long sermon preached by Abraham Gibson in 1613 contains a detailed and pedantic analysis of different types of swearing, which according to the preacher deserve a worse punishment than that which befell to “those that crucified *Christ* at the day of iudgement”, who will be condemned to spend eternity “*in the Lake that burneth with fire and Brimstone*” (Gibson 1613, 24, 36). Oaths are defined here as

blasphemous, horrible, terrible, by the parts or adiuncts of Christ, as by his *life, death, passion, flesh, heart, wounds, blood, bones, armes, sides, guts, nailes, foote*, [...] vvhich a gracious heart cannot but melt to heare, tremble to speake, quake to thinke, and yet (good Lord) how common are they in the mouthes of the prophane sonnes of *Beliall*, whereby they peirce the sides, wound the heart, teare the soule, and rend in pieces the body of our blessed *Sauour*, worse then *Indas*, [...] *worse then the Souldiers* [...] these instead of Crosse & Nailes, do between their owne teeth grinde him, and

² Both Gazzard 2010 and Munro 2017 give a few more examples of published indictments of swearing.

teare him. They did it *ignorantly*, these *wilfully*: they but once; these often [...] Wherefore as these commit the greater sinne, so they must expect the greater condemnation³.

This religious sentiment, though extreme in both portrayals, contributed to the ideological background of later, more formalised censorship of stage language. The intensity of such religious objections helps to explain why, when official censorship did come into force under James I, it focused particularly on religious oaths and expletives. Swearing on stage became a further occasion of reproach in the vexed question of performances: as is well known, the Puritans hated the theatre and would manage to close playhouses in 1642; but all sorts of ‘godly’ preachers ranted for decades about the wickedness of plays, denouncing their influence on audiences, their evil example and their nefarious effects on morals.

Pamphlets, sermons, and libels condemning performances and the playwrights’ use of oaths on stage intensified in the second half of the 16th century, with works such as Stephen Gosson’s *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), Philip Stubbes’ *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), up to the later *Histrio-mastix: The Players’ Scourge, or, Actors’ Tragaedie* (1633), by William Prynne, and, almost at the end of the century, Jeremy Collier’s *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*.

Under King James I, the attempt to moralise the stage took on more vigour than under Elizabeth. The king’s passion for performances may have influenced the decision to reform manners and morals on stage, so that preachers were discouraged from attacking it: its vices were to be ruled out, allowing performances to survive.

James rose to the throne in 1603, and 1606 is particularly significant in this context. In that year, many dramatic masterpieces were produced and staged in England: *Macbeth*; according to some philologists *Antony and Cleopatra* (though 1607 is more likely); Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*; Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*; and a few months earlier *King Lear*, which was staged at Court in December 1606.

³ Italics are in the original text. Elsewhere, if not differently specified, they are mine.

Politically, 1606 is above all the year of the trials of the conspirators involved in the Gunpowder Plot of November 1605⁴. As is known, English Catholics were disappointed by James' religious position as it emerged in the first two years of rule (although James came from Catholic Scotland, and although his wife Anna was Catholic, he pronounced himself against Catholicism), so they tried to blow up the House of Lords at Westminster Palace, with the intent to restore a Catholic monarchy. There was more than one conspirator, of course, but Guy Fawkes became the lasting symbol of the plot. The Gunpowder Plot has lingered in the English collective consciousness for centuries, with bonfires celebrating its defeat on the 5th of November 1605 and continuing to this day. A Guy Fawkes mask was created, was worn by the protagonist of the successful film *V for Vendetta*,



Guy Fawkes mask in V for Vendetta, 2005, directed by James McTeigue

and still is by the members of the Anonymous activist group (which has attacked several institutions and has recently been very active against the Russian invasion of Ukraine).

On the 27th of May 1606, the Act which concerns misdemeanours on the stage was issued, the so-called Act to Restrain Abuses:

⁴ The plot was discovered on the night of November 5, 1605; the trial was held from January to May 1606.

An Act to restrain Abuses of Players

Anno 3 Jacobi I Cap 21

For the preventing and avoiding of the great Abuse of the Holy Name of God in Stage Plays, Enterludes, May Games, Shews and such like; Be it enacted by our Sovereign Lord the King's Majesty, [...] That if at any time or times after the End of this present Session of Parliament, any Person or Persons do or shall in any Stage-play, Enterlude, Show, May-game or Pageant, jestingly or profanely speak or use the holy Name of God, or of Christ Jesus, or the Holy Ghost, or of the Trinity, which are not to be spoken but with Fear and Reverence, shall forfeit for every such Offence by him or them committed Ten Pounds; the One Moiety thereof to the King's Majesty, his Heirs and Successors, the other Moiety thereof to him or them that will sue for the same in any Court of Record at Westminster, wherein no Essoin, Protection of Wager of Law shall be allowed.

(Ten Pounds was quite a remarkable sum, more or less the pay of a year for an established actor⁵.)

Shakespeare's characters often "take the name of God in vain": one must wonder whether his plots were shifted to non-Christian countries so that his characters could enhance their speeches with oaths and swearwords, involving not God but Jupiter, or Apollo, or Diana, or other pagan deities. (Although pamphleteers and critics of drama condemned pagan invectives as well; but, of course, "by Jupiter" was unlikely to stir the censor's wrath as much as "by God".)

Setting his plays in a foreign, exotic, or ancient milieu was something Shakespeare did from the very beginning of his career. While his histories were, as is well known, a celebration of the Tudor dynasty staging recent English history, both his tragedies and his comedies were often set in non-English, non-contemporary, and sometimes non-Christian locations: from *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar* in ancient Rome, to *The Merchant of Venice*, divided between Belmont and Venice, to *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona, many of Shakespeare's pre-1606 plays show characters who are far away in time or place, professing non-Anglican beliefs. After 1606, however, there were virtually no plays set in

⁵ For a thorough comment on the Act, see Gazzard 2010.

modern England. *Macbeth*, probably dated mid-1606, is set in 11th-century Scotland; *Antony and Cleopatra* is divided between Egypt and Rome; *Coriolanus* is again set in ancient Rome; *Cymbeline* in ancient Britain; *The Winter's Tale* in Sicily – with a mention of the Delphi oracle, therefore probably at the time of Magna Graecia; *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in ancient Greece, and *The Tempest* between the memory of Milan and an unnamed island somewhere in the Mediterranean⁶.

Critics have wondered whether Shakespeare internalised the official command and relocated all his post-1606 plays to places where the Act would not apply⁷.

Some study has been devoted to amendments of oaths and swearwords made before the printing of the First Folio, and sometimes the dating of plays – for instance, the debated *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*⁸ – is based on the presence or absence of expletives; although not all the oaths were corrected before publication in the Folio. Shirley (Shirley 1979, 105-06) points out that Hamlet's lines are sometimes weakened in the Folio version, where an anaemic "Why" substitutes the heavy expletives present in the original version.

For instance, when Hamlet is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are trying "to pluck the mystery out of [him]", he exclaims:

"'Sblood (Q2), do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.361-62).
"Why (F), do you think that I am easier to be played on than a pipe?" (3.2.359-60).

⁶ A recent hypothesis is that the island may be Lampedusa, although Shakespeare's general disregard for geographical and historical accuracy is well known.

⁷ Giorgio Melchiori is convinced of this and proposes it as his working hypothesis in one of his many essays on *Othello* (Melchiori 1985). In his opinion, Shakespeare did not want to risk haphazard cutting of his text, therefore "he decided that the action of all his later plays should take place in pre-Christian times or in pagan countries, where there was no question of mentioning the Christian God" (ibid., 10-11).

⁸ For a long time, *All's Well* was dated in the same span of years (1601-03) as the other 'problem plays', *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*. In 2005 the second edition of the *Oxford Complete Works* (Wells and Taylor 2005), influenced by a seminal essay by Macdonald P. Jackson (Jackson 2001), dated it 1606-07. The recent *New Oxford Shakespeare*, devoting various essays to *All's Well* (see References), dates it to 1605.

In his soliloquy of 2.2., “Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I”, after the Player’s monologue about Hecuba, Q2 has a “swounds” transformed in F to a weak “Ha, why”:

Hamlet, Q2

Who calls me villain? breaks my pate
across?
Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my
face?
Tweaks me by th’ nose, gives me the lie
i’t’h’ throat
’As deepe as to the lungs? Who does me
this?
Swounds, I should take it. For it cannot be
But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall
To make oppression bitter; or ere this
I should have fatted all the region kites
With this slave’s offal... (2.2.507-15)

Hamlet, First Folio

Who calles me Villaine? breakes my pate
a-crosse?
Pluckes off my Beard, and blowes it in my
face?
’Tweakes me by’t’h’Nose? giues me the Lye
i’t’h’Throate,
As deepe as to the Lungs? Who does me
this?
Ha? Why I should take it: for it cannot be,
But I am Pigeon-Liuer’d, and lacke Gall
To make Oppression bitter, or ere this,
I should haue fatted all the Region Kites
With this Slaues Offall... (2.2.566-74)

A similar weakening occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, where in Q Mercutio uses the oath “Zounds” twice, in his quarrel with Tybalt and his subsequent death, and both instances are corrected in the Folio:

Romeo and Juliet, Q2, Q3, Q4:

No, ’tis not so deepe as a well, nor so
wide as a church door, but ’tis enough,
’twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and
you shall find me a grave man. I am
peppered, I warrant, for this world. A
plague o’ both your houses! *Zounds*, a
dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a
man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a
villain, that fights by the book of
arithmetic! Why the devil came you
between us? I was hurt under your arm.
(3.1.97-105)

Romeo and Juliet, First Folio:

No: ’tis not so deepe as a well, nor so
wide as a Church doore, but ’tis inough,
’twill serue: aske for me to morrow, and
you shall find me a graue man. I am
pepper’d I warrant, for this world. A
plague a both your houses! *What*, a Dog,
a Rat, a Mouse, a Cat, to scratch a man
to death! A Braggart, a Rogue, a Villaine,
that fights by the booke of Arithmeticke!
Why the deu’le came you betweene vs? I
was hurt under your arme.
(3.1.103-09)

(Previously, in “Zounds, consort!” (3.1.48), when Mercutio makes fun of the word “consort” used by Tybalt to describe his friendship with Romeo – “what, do you make vs Minstrels?” –, “Zounds” is changed in F into the weak “Come”).

Lucy Munro (Munro 2017, 126) reminds us that Hamlet (and Hamlet only) swears quite heavily and frequently in the play. His “Zounds” and “Sblood” are shared by such characters as Richard III, Iago, Mercutio, Aaron and Falstaff, among others: “not... the critical company that Hamlet generally keeps”. Munro jokes about possible footnotes to make the reader aware of the disruptive force of the oaths and the insight they give into the character of the prince: “in addition to conveying strong emotions, such oaths were often associated with youth, masculinity, high-status and religious transgression” (Munro 2017, 133). All of this can be applied to Mercutio, while the motive for Iago’s swearing in 1.1. is different: Munro underlines the passion (“impatience and vigour”, 126) that Iago shows in his dialogue with Roderigo, who, while lamenting his lack of progress in gaining Desdemona’s favours, opens the play with a pallid “tush”. Both expletives are cut in F.

Among others, Shirley (1979) and Melchiori (1985) show how the progression of oaths accompanies the destruction of Othello at Iago’s hand: in the beginning, Othello’s lines are terse and rational, the language of Venetian civilisation Othello has learned, which he loses when he loses faith in it, and finds again when he discovers the lie Iago has imposed on him (Melchiori 1985, *passim*); in the inverted parable of the contamination of his mind by Iago’s devilish manoeuvres, Othello’s language disintegrates, and his oaths culminate in the heavy “Swounds” in one of the final confrontations with Desdemona before her murder. No oaths are present in the Folio. (Luckily, an unexpurgated quarto of *Othello* has survived – a very late one, dated 1622 –, and we can compare it with the Folio. Melchiori shows very effectively, though, how both the Quarto version and the Folio version are authorially relevant, and how F adds key passages, compensating for the loss of the previous strategy⁹.)

⁹ Here as elsewhere, Melchiori shows his uncanny capacity of predicting the ways of criticism well in advance: in 1984, he underlines how we should not choose a version above the other, but should realise that we have two *Othellos* (or more), both authorial, both worthy of being considered Shakespearean. In 1984 he knew of Stanley Wells’ and Gary Taylor’s decision to print

Even from this brief account, it is apparent how expletives are one of the many devices through which Shakespeare individualises his characters.

Turning briefly to *Antony and Cleopatra*, we notice a couple of oaths that remain unchanged from Qs to F (again, because they involve non-Christian entities).

Some unusual and strongly topical oaths are expressed by the Egyptian queen, but also by the Roman commander Antony. When Cleopatra learns from the Messenger that Antony is married to Octavia, these are her words:

Melt Egypt into Nile! and kindly creatures
Turn all to serpents! (2.5.78-79; F, 2.5.1124-25)

And a little later,

So half my Egypt were submerged, and made
A cistern for scaled snakes! (2.5.94-95; F, 2.5.1146-47)

Here, Cleopatra's longing for destruction reminds me of Macbeth's, when he orders the witches to answer his command and evokes the destruction of mankind:

I conjure you by that which you profess,
Howe'er you come to know it, answer me.
Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yeasty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and *pyramids* do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you. (*Macbeth*, 4.1.51-62)

two separate texts of *Lear* (in the 1986 *New Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, reprinted with revisions in 2005); certainly he could not know that in 2006 *Hamlet* as well would be printed separately, by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (see references), in its three versions from Q1 to Q2 to F.

In both cases, everything in the world must be subjected to the fulfilment of the protagonists' wishes and needs, in a highly egotistic perception of profit and loss.

Antony's swearing is somehow less desperate. He resorts to oaths that the Act might find objectionable: "The gods best know..." and later, "By my sword", which fits his status as a warrior and was a common oath, present in *Hamlet* as well, because of the cross-like hilt that most swords sported. But when he tells Cleopatra he is leaving for Rome, he imitates his queen with an oath which takes its substance from the fertile climate of Egypt and the main source of its fecundity:

ANTONY
By the fire
That quickens Nilus' slime, I go from hence
Thy soldier, servant. (1.3.68-70; F, 1.3.381-82)

Antony's piety has shifted from the Roman gods to the Egyptian ones, a subtle reminder of his swerving loyalties from Rome to his goddess of love.

I would like to conclude with an example from *King Lear*, which was written a few months before the Act to Restrain Abuses but would be staged at Court a few months later. According to Shirley, maybe Shakespeare "foresaw the impending legislation" (Shirley 1979, 127).

As one tends to forget, the play is set in ancient Britain, in the 8th century BCE. Lear and Kent swear "by Apollo"; God becomes "the gods". There are many daring lines, the cruellest being Gloucester's well-known, desperate statement about the human condition: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport (4.1.38-39)".

This is too important a statement to risk it being cut, as it expresses the despair of the suicidal Gloucester with memorable synthesis. Of course, the chronological setting may simply be derived from Shakespeare's sources for *Lear*, which placed the fable in a very distant time; or, did Shakespeare set his play in ancient Britain to allow statements such as this one, and to be sure the Act did not forbid it? The answer, as elsewhere, remains open.

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