

# Shakespeare: pantheist, heretic, defender of the Divine Feminine

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*“if we took for granted that divinity — that which is to be most respected and valued — means mutuality, bodiliness, diversity and materiality, then whether or not we believed that such a concept of God was instantiated...the implications for our thought and our lives would be incalculable” — Grace Jantzen<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction: Shakespeare’s religious philosophy

What are the specific religious ideas underlying Shakespeare’s works? I have described Shakespeare’s religious ideas as “pagan” and written that they include “nature worship” and the “Divine Feminine”, but these are quite general ideas. This paper will aim to describe Shakespeare’s religious philosophy in a more specific and nuanced way. I don’t mean only his personal religion, but in particular, I mean the religious position he expresses and advocates for publicly, insistently and intentionally in his literary works, although this position is disguised in allegories. His religious philosophy is broadly, fundamentally and entirely opposed to Christian theology in particular and to monotheism in general, and can be best described as “pantheistic”.

The point I’ll start with is the question of how deliberately and to what extent he criticizes Christianity. As I’ve said, he carries out all his criticisms through allegories and puzzles. So, in *Hamlet*, in Act II, scene 2, Polonius, believing Hamlet to be crazy, asks him “Do you know me, my lord?” and Hamlet replies blithely and knowingly, “Excellent well, you are a fishmonger” (II.2.174 – 5).

The fishmonger image is repeated and therefore emphasized a few lines later when Polonius reports Hamlet's comment to the king and queen: "Yet he knew me not at first, 'a said I was a fishmonger. 'A is far gone" (II.2.88 – 9).

I've discussed<sup>2</sup> the way this "fishmonger" image may be connected to Giordano Bruno's book *Lo spaccio della besta trionfante*, (the mysterious book in Hamlet's hands<sup>3</sup>) in which a fish constellation often associated with Christianity is taken down from the sky and consumed by Jupiter. In addition, the image of a fish has apparently been associated with Christianity for many centuries. However, the image in *Hamlet* is not exactly a fish, but a *fishmonger*, a person who sells fish. Polonius is not a Christian cleric per se, but he is a powerful member of the Danish court, and the monarchies in Europe at this time were strongly tied to the power of the Christian Church and ruled under "the divine right of kings" or "God's mandate", a political and religious doctrine of royal and political legitimacy. Specifically, in England, Henry VIII had set up the Church of England in 1534. The "position of the monarch role is acknowledged in the preface to the 'Thirty-Nine Articles of 1562'. It states that:

Being by God's Ordinance, according to Our just Title, Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church, within these Our Dominions, We hold it most agreeable to this Our Kingly Office, and Our own religious zeal, to conserve and maintain the Church committed to Our Charge, in Unity of true Religion, and in the Bond of Peace ... We have therefore, upon mature Deliberation, and with the Advice of so many of Our Bishops as might conveniently be called together, thought fit to make this Declaration following ... That We are Supreme Governor of the Church of England ... "<sup>4</sup>

So even though Polonius is not a religious cleric, the reference of Polonius to a fishmonger is linked to Christianity simply because he is a powerful court figure who serves the king. Polonius' functional and symbolic association with

this 'state' Christianity are underscored by remarks sprinkled throughout his lines, such as "God buy ye, fare ye well" (II.i.67) and "With what, i' the name of God?" (II.i.73), conventional and rote displays of Christian piety.

So, how to interpret "fishmonger"? Clearly, it implies some sort of criticism to do with seeking for profit, selling "fish", hawking wares for profit, and so forth. It's easy to assert that by the term "fishmonger", Shakespeare meant to assert that Christian clergy were sometimes corrupt, but that sort of facile and anecdotal criticism doesn't penetrate deeply down into the basic theological problem of a religion where such clergy become possible. The theological problem, according to Giordano Bruno, is deeply structural and related to the notion of the divinity in Christianity.

### **Giordano Bruno's structural critique of Christianity and monotheistic religions**

In the second dialogue of *Gli eroici furori*, Bruno addresses this structural weakness of Christianity (and other monotheisms) where he begins by describing how "a great variety of hunters" seek for "Truth":

So that one goes rambling amongst the wild woods of natural things, where there are many objects under shadow and mantle, for it is in a thick, dense, and deserted solitude that Truth most often has its secret, cavernous retreat, all entwined with thorns and covered with bosky, rough and umbrageous plants; it is hidden, for the most part, for the most excellent and worthy reasons, buried and veiled with utmost diligence, just as we hide with the greatest care the greatest treasures, so that, sought by a great variety of hunters, or whom are some are more able and expert, some less, it cannot be discovered without great labor. (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 63)

Bruno then enumerates the tactics of some of these "hunters" searching for "Truth": "Pythagoras went seeking for it with his imprints and vestiges

impressed upon natural objects...”; “The Chaldeans sought for Truth by means of subtraction...to penetrate by removing and digging and clearing away..”; “Aristotle boasts of being able to arrive at the desired booty by means of the imprints of tracks and vestiges...”, to pick out just a few examples (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 63 – 65). In all, and in this order, Bruno describes the techniques of the following “hunters” of “Truth”: Pythagoras, Anaxagoras and Empedocles, the Chaldeans, Plato, Aristotle. Then, somewhat mysteriously, he completes the list with a certain group of unnamed “theologians”:

Theologians there are, who, nourished in certain sects, seek the truth of nature in all her specific natural forms in which they see the eternal essence, the specific substantial perpetuator of the eternal generation and mutation of things, which are called after their founders and builders and above them presides the form of forms, the fountain of light, very truth or very truth, God of gods, through whom all is full of divinity, truth, entity, goodness. This truth is sought as a thing inaccessible, as an object not to be objectized, incomprehensible. (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 65 – 6)

The only firm clue that by “sects” Bruno means the Abrahamic monotheistic religions such as Christianity, etc., is the term “God”, which has not appeared before in Bruno’s discussion of the strategies adopted by previous “hunters”. It is obvious that Bruno could not concretely name these “certain sects”, given the sensitive nature of his criticism and the fact that he was already a wanted man by the Catholic Inquisition. However, the words “founders and builders” also point to the well-known and common monotheistic ‘revealed’ religions. However, the last sentence: “This truth is sought as a thing inaccessible, as an object not to be objectized, incomprehensible” is the main gist of Bruno’s oblique, indirect but penetrating critique. In Bruno’s view, the clergy (“these theologians”) have set up a god who is all spirit, completely immaterial and

“inaccessible” and consequently their whole activity becomes the act of seeking this remote god. Because these professionals must obviously be kept alive and remunerated for these activities, they must receive some payment or resources, with the result that they have a fundamental conflict of interest: they must keep this god permanently out of the reach of the religious community they serve (in order to keep being paid to access this deity).

This sort of critique is structurally fundamental, and it is very likely that Bruno enumerated all the previous “hunters”, the Greek philosophers, in order to make it seem that the unnamed and anonymous “theologians” are merely members of a long and innocuous list: his main purpose is actually to put forward, however obliquely, this structural criticism of Christianity. This is why he first cautions that Truth (meaning his truth too) is “covered with bosky, rough and umbrageous plants....it is hidden, for the most excellent and worthy reasons”.

So this word “fishmonger”, applied by Hamlet to Polonius, is Shakespeare’s way of translating Bruno’s criticism of Christianity into a single potent image: a “fishmonger” means a purveyor of a religion (through the connection of fish to Christianity) who has an inherent self-interest in keeping this religion intrinsically spiritually unsatisfying for its followers through a god which is immaterial and naturally inaccessible. Of course, to Polonius and to anyone who doesn’t understand the criticism of Christianity behind this word, Hamlet merely looks “mad” or as if he is at least pretending to be.

### **Bruno’s Pantheism**

In order to understand what Shakespeare prefers in the way of religion, and not just what he doesn’t like, it will first be necessary to turn back to *Gli eroici furori* (*The Heroic Enthusiasts*) and see where Bruno goes next, for Bruno doesn’t end the second dialogue with his criticism of the strategically

unidentified theologians. Bruno provides a contrasting and more positive suggestion for those searching for “Truth”, and so he dramatically turns the dialogue into a vivid and somewhat curated retelling of the Greek myth of Actaeon and Diana. We soon realize that out of the “hunters, of whom some are more able and expert, some less”, emerges one, the Heroic Lover, who, adopting a totally opposite tactic to the theologians, will succeed in finding the Truth by looking at “things” and “matter”:

……This truth is sought as a thing inaccessible, as an object not to be objectized, incomprehensible. But yet, to no one does it seem possible to see the sun, the universal Apollo, the absolute light through supreme and most excellent species; but only its shadow, its Diana, the world, the universe, nature, which is in things, light which is in the opacity of matter, that is to say, so far as it shines in the darkness.

Many of them wander amongst the aforesaid paths of this deserted wood, very few are those who find the fountain of Diana. Many are content to hunt for wild beasts and things less elevated, and the greater number do not understand why, having spread their nets to the wind, they find their hands full of flies. Rare, I say, are the Actaeons to whom fate has granted the power of contemplating the nude Diana and who, entranced with the beautiful disposition of the body of nature, and led by those two lights, the twin splendor of Divine goodness and beauty become transformed into stags; for they are no longer hunters but become that which is hunted. For the ultimate and final end of this sport, is to arrive at the acquisition of that fugitive and wild body, so that the thief becomes the thing stolen, the hunter becomes the thing hunted; in all other kinds of sport, for special things, the hunter possesses himself of those things, absorbing them with the mouth of his own intelligence; but in that Divine and universal one, he comes to understand to such an extent that he becomes of necessity included, absorbed, united. Whence from common, ordinary, civil, and popular, he becomes wild, like a stag, an inhabitant of the woods; he lives god-like under that grandeur of the forest; he lives in the simple chambers of the cavernous mountains, whence

he beholds the great rivers; he vegetates intact and pure from ordinary greed, where the speech of the Divine converses more freely, to which so many men have aspired who longed to taste the Divine life while upon earth, and who with one voice have said: *Ecce elongavi fugiens, et mansi in solitudine*. Thus the dogs — thoughts of Divine things — devour Actaeon, making him dead to the vulgar and the crowd, loosened from the knots of perturbation from the senses, free from the fleshly prison of matter, whence they no longer see their Diana as through a hole or window, but having thrown down the walls to the earth, the eye opens to a view of the whole horizon. So that he sees all as one ..... (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 66 – 68) (my emphasis)

It is not possible for a human to see the “sun” or “absolute light” or “universal Apollo” (the deity or Truth being sought), but a human can see “its shadow, its Diana, the world, the universe, nature, which is in things”. The material world is divine. This is a pantheistic idea: a desk, shoes, clouds, a cat, pine trees, pears, for example, like any other material, are a way — in fact in Bruno’s opinion the only way — to access the divine. In his book *De la causa, principio e uno* (*Cause, Unity and Principle*), Bruno states his pantheistic position: “matter, he suggests, is indeed ‘so perfect that, if well pondered, [it] is understood to be a divine being in things...’” (Bruno, quoted in Rubenstein, 86). However, his way of taking an equally pantheistic position here in *The Heroic Enthusiasts* is more metaphorical and symbolic. Instead of the vague word “God”, which he used when discussing the “theologians”, there are two specific gods: Apollo and Diana, both Greek nature gods, one of the sun and one of the moon. Both of these celestial bodies are material. He steps away from monotheism and picks up pagan spiritual strategies, yet, with a difference. These gods are symbols only, and they represent only a conceptual contrivance or a way of thinking about nature — a material way which strategically brings benefits. In another book, *Lo spaccio della besta trionfante*, (*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*), Bruno makes this ideational process clear as Sophia,

the Goddess of Wisdom, describes it:

Those worshipers, then, in order to procure certain benefits and gifts from the gods through the knowledge of profound magic, entered into the midst of certain natural things in which, in such manner, Divinity was latent and through which she was able to and wanted to impart herself to such effects. Therefore, those (pagan) ceremonies were not vain fantasies, but touched the very ears of us gods. Just as we want to be understood by these worshipers, not through utterances of language, which they may be able to contrive, but through utterances of natural effects, they wished to strive to be understood by us through these utterances, as well as through acts of ceremonies....

Those wise men knew God to be in things, and Divinity to be latent in Nature, working and glowing differently in different subjects and succeeding through diverse physical forms; in certain arrangements, in making them participants in her, I say, in her being, in her life and intellect; and they therefore, with equally diverse arrangements, used to prepare themselves to receive whatever and as many gifts as they yearned for. (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 236 – 7)

Bruno's heroine, Sophia, the Goddess of Wisdom, in scholarly manner, describes how the "eternal gods (without placing any inconvenience against that which is true of divine substance) have temporal names, some in some times and nations, others in others" (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 238), and she uses the term "the cult of the Egyptians" as a general catchphrase for all pagan religions, while "senseless and foolish idolaters" is an oblique reference to the powerful monotheisms of Bruno's day, "who triumph by seeing their mad rites in so great repute and those of the others so vanished and broken" (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 236). Sophia makes the material benefits of worshipping material gods clear:

Isis said to Momus that the stupid and senseless idolaters had no reason to



laugh at the magic and divine cult of the Egyptians, who in all things and all effects, according to the respective principles of each, contemplated Divinity. And they knew how, by means of species that are in the bosom of Nature, to receive those benefits they desired from her. Just as she gives fish from the sea and rivers, wild animals from deserts, minerals from mines, apples from trees, so from certain parts, from certain animals, from certain beasts, from certain plants, emerge certain destinies, virtues, fortunes, and impressions. Therefore Divinity in the sea was named Neptune, in the sun, Apollo, on the earth, Ceres, in deserted regions, Diana; and she was differently named in each of other species, which, as diverse ideas, were diverse divinities in Nature, all of which were related to the Divinity of Divinities and source of ideas regarding Nature..... (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 239 – 40)

So in order to receive the assistance of a particular god, “they had to present themselves before him in the manner of ordered species, just as he who wants bread goes to the baker, he who wants wine goes to the cellarer, he who longs for fruit goes to the gardener” (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 240).

So, returning to *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, “Apollo” and “Diana” represent “temporal names” of material nature gods (Apollo is associated with the sun and Diana with the moon, which are material heavenly bodies). By presenting ourselves to nature gods through sincere ceremonies we will come closer to the Divine, immersing ourselves in nature (as Actaeon is consumed by his material dogs) because the Divine is in all of nature: “Sophia: So, *natura est deus in rebus*” (“nature is god in things”) (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 235). This is a strategic sort of spirituality which anyone can personally engage in and Bruno implicitly contrasts it with the exclusive sects presided over by “theologians” who are purveyors of a permanently inaccessible immaterial god.

And what is the result of engaging in such a spiritual practice of the material? Not surprisingly, Actaeon (the only successful “hunter” in Bruno’s list of philosophers) becomes a stag, an animal, symbolizing his awareness that human beings are animals, part of nature and material too (without such awareness enormous mistakes can be made, as we see with climate change and the impending death of the oceans). Taking that awareness one step further, Actaeon is devoured by his dogs, and “free from the fleshly prison of matter, the eye opens to the view of the whole horizon. So that he sees all as one; he sees no more by distinctions and numbers…” (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 68). Though Actaeon has technically succumbed during his enlightening adventure, he has won clarity and found the Divinity through his realization that he is one with nature:

Thus you can of yourself determine the mode, the dignity, and the success, which are most worthy of the hunter and the hunted. Therefore the enthusiast boasts of being the prey of Diana, to whom he rendered himself, and of whom he considers himself the accepted consort, and happy as a captive and a subject. (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 69)

Bruno’s retelling of this myth, like the gods, Apollo and Diana, he puts forth, is another strategic and conceptual mind tool — or another metaphor — to help the reader accomplish closeness and smooth *mutual relations* with nature and the universe *based on respect for material matter and processes*.

This spiritual coming closer to nature is not seen as a social task, where self-serving, social-hierarchical sects come into play, but rather it can be accomplished on one’s own (Actaeon is alone), by paying reverent and respectful attention to nature and realizing that mind, body and spirit are all material and not separate at all. In spiritual practice, this is what Starhawk calls “the Old Religion” (Starhawk, 27), and what is also sometimes called

“witchcraft”. (It is known as a spiritual practice without a formal structure or “sects”: solitary witches are numerous, while there are also ‘covens’, groups of up to 13 witches, but these are also not sects.)

### *Hamlet* and pantheism

So, turning back to *Hamlet*, the image of the “fishmonger”, twice attached to Polonius, stands as an example of Shakespeare’s powerful one-word critique of Christianity, along the same lines as Bruno’s dismissal of the theologians.

However, following Bruno, *Hamlet* also does present a character who embodies the goddess Diana, the material natural world, as Bruno sees it in his pantheistic vision. (Shakespeare humbly acknowledges the profoundly deep philosophy he got from Bruno in the famous “alas poor Yorick” speech: “he hath bore me on his back a thousand times” (V.i.186), Hamlet tells Horatio, as he holds up Yorick’s skull, meaning that Bruno’s ideas have inspired Shakespeare to write what he did.) So we shouldn’t be surprised that the goddess Diana (also we can call her the Divine Feminine) is hidden in many of Shakespeare’s works (hence all the myriad allusions to Diana in many of Shakespeare’s plays, where the female main characters in disguise symbolize the hidden Divine Feminine). In *Hamlet*, she is hiding in Ophelia.

The earliest allusion to Diana in connection with Ophelia occurs in Act I, scene 3, when Laertes is cautioning her against falling in love with Hamlet. Laertes advises her: “The chariest maid is prodigal enough/ If she unmask her beauty to the moon. (I.iii.37 – 38) The word “chariest maid” could also refer to Diana, the maiden goddess, and Diana was naked, bathing by moonlight when she was spotted by Actaeon, so her action became a bit reckless or extravagant. Laertes actually begins his speech with an interesting and rather esoteric sort of image: “Think it no more”, he tells Ophelia, “For nature crescent does not grow alone/ In thews and bulk, but as this temple waxes/ The inward service

of the mind and soul grows wide withal.” (10-14) He is trying to say that as “the body develops, the powers of mind and spirit grow along with it”, as the footnote in the text translates, but his stilted and pompous manner of speaking means that his word choices like “temple” for “body” and “crescent” for “grow”, while natural for him, can also be seen as Shakespeare secretly referencing, (as Ophelia is present and the lines relate to her situation), the goddess Diana: crescent (moon), temple, nature.

Ophelia is also called “Nymph” at the end of the famous “to be or not to be” speech:

- Soft you now!  
The fair Ophelia! - Nymph, in thy orisons  
Be all my sins rememb' red. (III.1.55 – 89)

Why is Ophelia there (she is quietly reading a book) and why does this ‘soliloquy’ (it isn’t really a soliloquy since Hamlet is not alone) end with Hamlet’s address to her? “Orisons” are prayers, and so Hamlet seems to be piously (or maybe defiantly) asking Ophelia to pray for his sins. However, this is just a surface appearance. Ophelia’s association with prayers and a mythical Greek supernatural female figure, a nymph, gives her a religious dimension. A nymph is a mythical creature associated with the air, seas, forests, or water, or particular natural spots. Often found in the goddess Diana’s entourage (also in Ovid’s account of Diana and Acateon, which Shakespeare clearly knew), nymphs are seen as divine spirits who animate or maintain Nature (embodying the soul of a natural spot), and are often portrayed as young and beautiful maidens.

Moreover, this religious dimension is not a Christian one at all: it alludes to the pagan pre-Christian religion of ancient Greece based on material elements

in nature: the moon, the sun, the stars, the rocks, the ocean, and so forth. This material and religious link we have to other animals and nature also references, as David Abram, says, “totemism” which is the “animistic assumption, common to countless indigenous cultures but long banished from polite society, that human beings are closely kindred to other creatures, and indeed have various other animals as our direct ancestors” (Abram, 77). This is the realization that Acateon has (in symbolic form) when he is turned into a stag. So the materialism which Shakespeare proposes is linked to keeping material nature sacred and honoring it as we respect ourselves. Ophelia is quietly present for Hamlet’s statement about materialism<sup>5</sup> (“to be or not to be”) because she embodies its spiritual implications. His “sins” are therefore really pagan heresies: we are embedded in nature and belong to nature in an intimate and material way just like any animal, plant or rock. Our body is the source — our only source — of all our thoughts about god and anything else. As David Abram puts it, “*All our knowledge...is carnal knowledge*”:

We are in *and of* the world, materially embedded in the same rain-drenched field that the rocks and the ravens inhabit, and so can come to knowledge only laterally, by crossing paths with other entities and sometimes lingering, responding to a thing’s sparkle or its calloused coolness, slowly becoming acquainted with its characteristic tenor and style, the unique manner in which it resists our assumptions. *All our knowledge*, in this sense, is carnal knowledge. (Abram, 72)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty similarly writes “It is not that life is a power of being or a spirit, but rather, that we install ourselves in perceived being/brute being, in the sensible, in the flesh” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Coole, 103).

It is also interesting that there are two actual books appearing on stage in *Hamlet*. Hamlet is reading the first one, and it is surely Bruno’s heretical *Lo*

*spaccio della besta trionfante*. But how about this second one, which Ophelia reads? To understand this book better, we should read the whole set of lines introducing this book.

Polonius: Read on this book,  
 That show of such an exercise may  
 Color your loneliness. We are oft to blame in this —  
 'Tis too much prov'd — that with devotion's visage  
 And pious action we do sugar o'er  
 The devil himself. (III.i.43–8)

On the surface, Polonius is demonstrating his usual conventional Christian piety (he blames himself for having neglected to prevent the trouble that Hamlet is causing to the court). He therefore is linking Hamlet with the devil.

Indeed, underneath Polonius' muttering, the devil himself — heresy — might be present. “The heretics of the medieval and early modern periods ascribed materiality to divinity, whereas the heretics of the contemporary world ascribe divinity to materiality” (Rubenstein, 101), and indeed, “to be or not to be”, by asserting that the body's own material is the origin of all the thoughts and understandings it has, including those about the afterlife (and presumably god), is quite heretical. By using the term “the undiscover'd country”, Hamlet distances himself from the Christian concepts of god and heaven (even in a way raising doubts about them), and Shakespeare has indeed “sugar'd over the devil himself” by glossing over his own heresies.

It is very possible that this scene of the Hamlet and Ophelia together can be a sort of picture allegory (this sort of visual ‘tableau vivant’ technique was often used in court masques) to suggest that we should reflect deeply about the material philosophy Hamlet hints at while Ophelia, symbolizing the Divine Feminine, sits reading, a visual symbol of studying and pondering. Moreover,

the “devil” was commonly depicted as Pan, the Greek god of nature with the body of a man and the legs of a goat: “Christian mythology parlays the ‘horn, hooves, shaggy fur, and outsized phallus’ of Pan into the paradigmatic ‘image of Satan’” (Rubenstein, 103). And Pan was known as a lover of the Greek nymphs. So it is certain that Ophelia’s book is just as heretical as Hamlet’s book. The “devil”, or Pan, is Hamlet’s “real god”, since both Bruno and Shakespeare were pantheists.

Later in the play, as Ophelia presents various members of the court with flowers according to the ‘language of flowers’, the symbolic meaning associated with each type of plant, Laertes compares her speech to a text or “document”:

Ophelia: There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember.  
And there is pansies, that’s for thoughts.

Laertes: A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted.

Ophelia: [*to Claudius.*] There’s fennel for you, and columbines. [*To Gertrude.*] There’s rue for you, and here’s some for me; we may call it herb of grace a’ Sundays. You may wear your rue with a difference. There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets but they all wither’d (IV.v.175 – 185)

Ophelia, always associated with nature (symbolized by the continual flower imagery appearing when she is on stage), and then appearing reading a book (and earlier the recipient of a poem), now is revealed, as poem and book are peeled away, to be herself a text (“A document”) to understand and interpret, just as nature and the material world have been subject to various philosophies throughout time (as Bruno enumerates in *Gli heroici furori*). And in *Hamlet*, she is perpetually subject to a rumor that she will become, or already perhaps is, a violated and ruined woman. Laertes, with overtones of panicked fear, cautions her not to open her “chaste treasure” (I.iii.31), Hamlet sarcastically asks her “Ha ha! Are you honest?” (III.i.102) and tells her “get thee to a nunn’

ry" (II.ii.120); and Ophelia herself poignantly sings a song about an unmarried young woman losing her virginity: "Quoth she, 'before you tumbled me/You promis'd me to wed" (IV.v.62 – 3).

Mary-Jane Rubenstein and many other scholars have lamented the privileging of certain categories: "God" over "world", "spirit" over "matter", "male" over "female", "mind" over "body", "western" over "eastern", in "traditional Western metaphysical divisions" (Rubenstein, 149). The allegory<sup>6</sup> in *Hamlet* supports the idea that Ophelia's constant association with moral and sexual degradation is a metaphor for the unfair and invalid (and indeed environmentally catastrophic) dualities which have placed matter below spirit, body below mind, female below male, animal below human, world below god, eastern below western, non-white below white, those who reject fossil fuels below those who want to use fossil fuels, and even goddess below god (as there is no goddess in Christianity). Ophelia symbolizes matter, body, female, world, goddess, all of them, all of us, the degraded, the negated, the trampled on.

In *Spaccio*, in connection with his criticism of Christianity, Bruno uses similar imagery of nature as a strumpet, where Momus accuses Orion, the symbol of Christ, of making men believe:

That white is black, that the human intellect, through which they see best, is blindness, and that which according to reason seems excellent, good and very good is vile, criminal, and extremely bad. I want them to understand that Nature is a whorish prostitute, that natural law is ribaldry, that Nature and Divinity cannot concur..... (Bruno, *ETB*, 255)

About this passage, Hilary Gatti writes:

....it is with the removal of Orion from the skies that Bruno's reform reaches



its most provocative and dramatic climax, challenging the cultural and philosophical premises of the European cultures, both Catholic and Protestant, of his times. (Gatti, 157)

Gatti goes on to say “it is debatable if *Hamlet* can be subjected to such a militantly anti-Christian interpretation....” (Gatti, 157), but indeed, as I have shown, the imagery and language surrounding Ophelia makes it clear that she symbolizes the material divine, that missing element in what Mary-Jane Rubenstein terms “the Western symbolic” (Rubenstein, p.20). (The Western symbolic is what Gatti calls “the cultural and philosophical premises of the European cultures”). Ophelia’s death is the death of the Goddess in the Western symbolic, at the hands of the monotheistic sects, and Hamlet’s grief and rage at her graveside suitably express Shakespeare’s own feelings.

Shakespeare entirely is on her side, and just as Hamlet loves her and fights over her body in the grave scene, so does Shakespeare place her highly in his heart and uses his works to wage a battle to fight for her resurrection: the goddess, the body, matter, the material, the world, the witches, and all the others who threaten the power the Western symbolic (Rubenstein, 20).

### **Ophelia’s burial subtly rejects Christianity and monotheism**

In particular, Ophelia’s burial scene, where the idea that Ophelia should be buried with Christian funeral rites is pointedly declined, reveals Shakespeare’s deep criticism of Christianity. This subtle rejection of Christian funeral rites for Ophelia is accomplished through an adroit logical fallacy. The character named Doctor of Divinity presiding over the funeral explains that:

Her obsequies have been as far enlarg’d  
As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful,  
And but that great command o’ersways the order,

She should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd,  
 Till the last trumpet; for charitable prayers,  
 Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her.  
 Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants,  
 Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home  
 Of bell and burial. (V.i.226 – 234)

The priest asserts that Ophelia's "death was doubtful", commonly termed an 'open verdict', and so suicide cannot be ruled out. Therefore, according to him, her grave should by rights be strewn with "shards, flints, and pebbles" and she should not be given a Christian burial ("should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd").

However, in Gertrude's eye-witness account of Ophelia's death, Ophelia actually fell into the water when a branch broke ("an envious sliver broke"):

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,  
 That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.  
 There with fantastic garlands did she come  
 Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples,  
 That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
 But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
 There on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds  
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
 When down her weedy trophies and herself  
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide  
 And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
 Which time she chaunted snatches of old tunes,  
 As one incapable of her own distress,  
 Or like a creature native and indued  
 Unto that element; but long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay

To muddy death. (IV.vii.166 – 183)

Thus the priest's conclusion that Ophelia's death is a suicide is a logical error, and it serves to call into question the priest's judgment and authority. In fact, it is the priest and the Christian religion that become "doubtful" through this little spot where the two accounts of Ophelia's death fail to match. Below the surface of the pious priest's conventional concerns, Shakespeare rejects a Christian burial for Ophelia because in no way is Ophelia, (the world, the goddess, the cosmos), a Christian. Christianity is revealed to be merely a mundane political structure with categories, dogma and rules that serve to privilege its powerful, as indeed as Bruno also implies in *Gli eroici furori*.

Moments later, Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave and asks that dirt should be heaped "Till of this flat mountain you have made/T' o'ertop old Pelion, or the skyish head of old Olympus" (V.i.253 – 5). Here we see Shakespeare going out of his way to adorn Ophelia's funeral with pagan religious imagery (Olympus was the home of the Greek gods) and this imagery is soon reemphasized when Hamlet appears moments later and shouts that "millions of acres" of soil can be thrown on top of him and Ophelia "till our ground/ Singeing his pate against the burning zone/ Make Ossa like a wart" (V.i.281 – 3). Ossa is another Greek mountain, near Pelion and Olympus, famous in Ancient Greece, and "the burning zone" is the sun, so Hamlet becomes cosmic-minded here (as a few lines earlier, when he comes forward, saying "whose phrase of sorrow/ Conjures the wand'ring stars..." (V.i.256)). Stars and the sun are cosmic images that now make Ophelia's death resonate as a cosmically religious event which is beyond the ability of Christianity to handle (since Christianity relegates the material world).

And there is one fascinating detail here: the theme of piling mountains Ossa, Pelion and Olympus atop each other is not original to Shakespeare (he

changes it slightly to make it soil topped to equal the heights of these mountains), but is a story from the Greek myths about Otus and Ephialtes, collectively called the Aloidae:

Aloi'adae or ALO'ADAE (Ἀλωεῖδαι, Ἀλωιάοι or Ἀλώαδαι), are patronymic forms from Aloeus, but are used to designate the two sons of his wife Iphimedeia by Poseidon: viz. **Otus** and Ephialtes. The Aloeidae are renowned in the earliest stories of Greece for their extraordinary strength and daring spirit. When they were nine years old, each of their bodies measured nine cubits in breadth and twenty-seven in height. At this early age, they threatened the Olympian gods with war, and attempted to pile mount Ossa upon Olympus, and Pelion upon Ossa.<sup>7</sup>

The key phrase here is “threatened the Olympian gods with war”. *Hamlet* can be thought of Shakespeare’s own personal attempt to “confront the gods” and ask “why not change the situation (of unfair monotheism privileging certain categories) which surrounds the spiritual story circulating and predominating in the west?” So *Hamlet* is very audacious, and had it been understood in its time, it would also certainly have been seen as very heretical, and definitely ‘militantly’ so, to return to Gatti’s question above.

Moreover, there is a specific reference to Bruno’s material concept of the divine in Ophelia’s funeral scene when Hamlet asks Laertes, “What wilt thou do for her?.....’Swounds, show me what thou’ do./ Woo’t weep, woo’t fight, woo’ t fast, woo’t tear thyself?/ Woo’t drink up easel, eat a crocodile?/ I’ll do’t”. (V.i.274–77) Hidden amongst the ordinary acts of mourning is one incongruous act (“eat a crocodile”) and it is that strange “crocodile” (not found in Denmark) that recalls *Spaccio* and Bruno’s admiration of the ancient Egyptian religion: “from this you can infer how the wisdom of the Egyptians, which is lost, worshiped not only the earth, the moon, the sun, and other stars

of the heaven but also crocodiles, lizards, serpents, onions" (Bruno, *ETB*, 241). The sacred material world was the religion of the Egyptians, and Ophelia, though dead, participates in this spiritual idea. Her death represents its tragic absence in the Western symbolic.

In death, Ophelia as a symbol of the sacred material world, is not just made clear by Hamlet's references to the stars and the sun but also in Gertrude's phrase describing Ophelia in the water: "Or like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element"; where we might think of a fish, a frog or a snake or even a plant, the other-than-human person or agent, in other words.

### Pantheism in *As You Like It*

Leaving *Hamlet*, where I see Ophelia as material nature encoded in flowers and nature and associated with texts, the works of various philosophers who have attempted to describe nature, I'll turn briefly to *As You Like It*, where Rosalind has some similar associations with texts and nature and serves to show pantheism successfully accomplished and won. (This success is what makes *As You Like It* a comedy).

The phrase "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones," is first heard in Duke Senior's long speech:

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,  
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet  
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods  
More free from peril than the envious court?  
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,  
The seasons' difference; as the icy fang  
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,  
Which when it bites and blows upon my body,  
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say

'This is no flattery; these are counsellors  
 That feelingly persuade me what I am.'  
 Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
 Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
 Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
 And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
 Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
 Sermons in stones, and good in everything.  
 I would not change it. (II.i.1 – 17)

Duke Senior, having retreated into a forest to survive, now does not have civilized accoutrements, and so makes do with what nature has to offer. Underneath the obvious meaning, however, is the radical idea that nature and the universe have been described, distorted and pigeon-holed in certain ways through being written about and characterized in books. Especially the idea of “sermons in stones” is fascinating because sermon is specifically a religious term. In fact, many religions, such as Shinto and witchcraft, don't have sermons at all. Shakespeare seems to be calling for religions that use no texts, in other words, they rely on nature (“stones”) in a direct, personal and experiential way as each practitioner decides. This aspect of witchcraft is described by Starhawk in *Spiral Dance*: “There is no set prayer book or liturgy” (Starhawk, 38). Perhaps this was one reason that Shakespeare far preferred witchcraft, or as Starhawk calls it “the Old Religion” (27) and I've uncovered his preference for it demonstrated in especially three plays: *Macbeth*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *The Winter's Tale*.

Later, this idea of books and texts being found in nature is innocently embodied (once again, Shakespeare skillfully hides his heresies) when Orlando writes love poems to Rosalind and hangs them on the trees:

Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love,  
 And thou, thrice-crowned queen of night, survey  
 With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above,  
 Thy huntress' name that my full life doth sway.  
 O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,  
 And in their barks my thoughts I'll character,  
 That every eye which in this forest looks  
 Shall see thy virtue witness'd every where.  
 Run, run, Orlando, carve on every tree  
 The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she. (III.ii.1 – 10)

In this Brunian world, Orlando finds his voice and at the same time, he can properly worship the Goddess<sup>8</sup>: he names Rosalind as a huntress or votary among the companions of the hunt of which the goddess Diana (“the thrice-crowned queen of night”<sup>9</sup>) is patron. Once again, we glimpse Diana in the forest. Indeed, Giordano Bruno’s pantheistic philosophy comes to life in this forest where Rosalind is “the fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she”, or the Goddess.

#### Note

- 1 *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* by Mary-Jane Rubenstein, page 12.
- 2 [https://www.academia.edu/39160576/Why\\_does\\_Hamlet\\_call\\_Polonius\\_a\\_fishmonger\\_](https://www.academia.edu/39160576/Why_does_Hamlet_call_Polonius_a_fishmonger_)
- 3 [https://www.academia.edu/6937932/\\_Stand\\_and\\_Unfold\\_Yourself\\_Prince\\_Hamlet\\_Unmasked](https://www.academia.edu/6937932/_Stand_and_Unfold_Yourself_Prince_Hamlet_Unmasked)
- 4 <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/articles-religion>
- 5 For a fuller discussion of “to be or not to be” and its materialist philosophy, please see my paper:  
[https://www.academia.edu/41066250/The\\_theoretical\\_turn\\_to\\_the\\_material\\_in\\_the\\_humanities\\_spooky\\_powers\\_and\\_shadowy\\_presences](https://www.academia.edu/41066250/The_theoretical_turn_to_the_material_in_the_humanities_spooky_powers_and_shadowy_presences)
- 6 [https://www.academia.edu/6937932/\\_Stand\\_and\\_Unfold\\_Yourself\\_Prince\\_Hamlet\\_Unmasked](https://www.academia.edu/6937932/_Stand_and_Unfold_Yourself_Prince_Hamlet_Unmasked)
- 7 Smith, William, et. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.  
(<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0104:entry=aloeid>)

ae-aloiadae-bio-1&highlight=otus) accessed July 17, 2020.

8 [https://www.academia.edu/37234061/\\_The\\_fair\\_the\\_chaste\\_and\\_inexpressive\\_she\\_the\\_Divine\\_Feminine\\_in\\_As\\_You\\_Like\\_It](https://www.academia.edu/37234061/_The_fair_the_chaste_and_inexpressive_she_the_Divine_Feminine_in_As_You_Like_It)

9 Thrice-crowned queen of night means the divinity who ruled on earth as Diana, in the heavens as Cynthia the moon goddess, and in the underworld as Hecate or Proserpina.

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