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Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection

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Prayer, Despair, and Drama

Elizabethan Introspection

Peter Iver Kaufman

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Introduction

This is a book about the rituals and ideas that made late Tudor Calvinism "a more spiritual and reflective religion" and about a corresponding reflexivity in sonnet and soliloquy. Among many Elizabethan Calvinists, assurance of election amounted to pious dis-ease, a disorienting, though an ultimately consoling, self-inventory. Emphasis in reformed Christianity, notably in England, it has been said, shifted from devotion to deliberation. No argument here; one can readily agree that reflection replaced devotion, if one narrowly conceives of devotion as reverence for saints, shrines, and shrivers. But I want to examine deliberation as devotion and then to place my findings on what has been called "the full internalization" of Protestantism, that is, the English Calvinist construction of a prodigal identity or self, alongside Spenser's Redcrosse, Marlowe's Faustus, Hamlet's resolve, and John Donne's "inward researches" to see whether correspondences encourage us to think of an aesthetics of experience that conditioned or structured Elizabethan self-consciousness.¹

Prayer, Despair, and Drama is a small book, busy with religious sentiment, prayers, poems, and plays, and it tries to accommodate or argue with many colleagues who have been to them before me. Chapter summaries are compulsory, but readers may be best served if I preface them with something of the historical context, with a sketch of the fate of religious reform in sixteenth-century England.

* * *

One could say Elizabeth and English Protestantism were born together. To marry Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, the eighth Henry had
to divorce the English church from Roman Catholicism, for Pope Cle­
ment VII refused to annul the king’s first marriage. Had Clement obliged
Henry, the king’s “great matter” would have ended there, for he was
taken with Anne, not with the reformed doctrine. In fact, he had written
against Luther with help from his trusted adviser, Thomas More (1521).
And More was unalterably convinced that the “feeling faith” of contin­
nental Protestants and their impressionable English disciples distorted
religious truth, which only church authority, attentive to the Roman
Catholic tradition, could protect.

Yet from 1534, England had no use for Rome’s protection. During
Elizabeth’s first fifteen years and Henry’s last, the king’s government
ruthlessly repatriated the English church, dissolved its monasteries, con­
fiscated and redistributed their properties, and spent their revenues. If
nothing else, the considerable material advantages of such reform kept
Henry VIII from contemplating any reconciliation that might have re­
quired restitution. Besides, the king was counseled by the shrewd op­
portunist, Thomas Cromwell, and, for the remainder of his reign, by
Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was increasingly in­
fluenced by continental reformers and interested in prospects for greater
English participation in international Calvinism. But Cranmer had to
tread carefully; his sovereign proved, in time, as indecisive in church re­
form as he was inconstant in affairs of the heart.

Only when Elizabeth’s half-brother Edward succeeded their father did
Cranmer have the chance to “Calvinize” the English church. By 1548 the
Chantries Act took full effect, eliminating the masses that once sped the
souls of deceased patrons through purgatory (which was itself shortly
legislated out of existence). Priests were allowed to marry; obligatory
confession, denounced. In 1549, a set of English rituals replaced the Latin
liturgies, and revisions three years later made the English Prayer Book
more consistently Calvinist. Lecturers imported from the continent had
a similar effect on the minds of those preparing for the ministry at Cam­
bridge and Oxford. The 1533 articles of faith declared against the adora­
tion of images and saints and for the doctrine of divine predestination.
Then Edward died.

The accession of Elizabeth’s older half-sister Mary made it hard for
English Calvinists, at home and in diaspora, to identify God’s will with
their fate, for Mary and her husband, Philip II of Spain, were intent on
reestablishing English Catholicism. The government executed Cranmer
Introduction

and his closest colleagues. Would God have predestined or permitted such a disappointing turnabout and left the elect at the mercy of monarchs only too eager to reimpose their faith on the realm?

But after five years, God's plan, if no more intelligible, should have seemed at least less menacing. Reginald Pole, the papal legate, insisted that restitution precede absolution and reunion with Rome, and such insistence slowed Catholicism's and Mary's progress. Philip eventually broke Pole's resolve, but it hardly helped matters when he fell afoul of Rome for other reasons and was excommunicated by Pope Paul IV. Recatholicization survived neither Mary nor Pole, who died within hours of each other.

Elizabeth was crowned queen in 1559. Her religious settlement restored the 1552 Prayer Book and replaced Mary's bishops with reformers. To many, if not most, English Calvinists, this "triumph of Protestantism" left but one challenge: to round up and reeducate reluctant Catholics. But a restless minority saw the settlement as an invitation to further reform, to root out remnants of "popery" in the reformed church, remnants that more complacent Protestants thought unobjectionable and, some said, necessary for "good order." Edward Dering, Walter Travers, and William Fulke made it abundantly clear that they thought Elizabeth and England had gotten off to an excellent start in 1559 but that they still awaited a more perfect reformation, and ever more impatiently so.

During the 1560s, the agitation for further reform was essentially a Cambridge phenomenon and largely confined to controversies over worship. At the start of the next decade, however, Thomas Cartwright, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, was deprived of his position for having advocated, inter alia, consistorial or presbyterian church government. John Whitgift, his chief critic and Master of Trinity College at the time, was subsequently rewarded with an appointment to the episcopal bench (1577), which he had defended and kept defending. Cartwright and his allies, notably John Field and Thomas Wilcox, continued to press for more sweeping reform of liturgy and polity, petitioning parliament with verve but to no avail. The queen resented their impertinence. The likes of Matthew Sutcliffe, Dean of Exeter, scolded them for failing to think through their alternatives to prevailing church administration. But it was Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1583, who was seen by the persistent and more radical reformers to stand squarely and all-too-dependably in the way of further reform.²
Whitgift was not oblivious to the church’s enduring abuses and inequities. He was disturbed, for instance, that only small portions of appropriated tithes were reaching incumbents while unconscionably large amounts remained in patrons’ coffers. But making headway against such scandals required the government’s cooperation and the archbishop had to purchase it with his own. He may secretly have agreed with Edmund Grindal, his predecessor at Canterbury, who angered the queen by refusing to proscribe pastors’ unsupervised public conferences (prophesying), but he consented to their suppression and planned to devise exercises “not lyke unto that which they called prophecies . . . but some other more private, such as shall seeme best to our selves both for the peace of the churche and their better instruction.”

Whitgift also understood that he would more easily get and retain government cooperation if he could count on overwhelming clerical cooperation, so he legislated liturgical uniformity and frowned on dissent, denying the pulpit to the discontented. Even friends compared his dedication to combat nonconformity with that of the Spanish inquisitors. Enemies thought him and the English episcopacy still closer to Catholicism. They easily conceded the bishops’ Calvinism but charged that if they were forced to choose between their reformed opinions and the dignities and perquisites of their office, English officials would drop the doctrine. John Udall’s fictional bishop, Diotrophes, confided that he had come to terms with papists in his diocese. They helped him defend episcopacy (“beare up oure authoritie”) against learned critics’ pamphlets, and he forbade those same critics of Catholicism from preaching (“wholsome barking”). Presumably Udall and his friends knew Whitgift had ordered recusants to surrender their rights of patronage to local bishops, but, to such implacable critics, the surrender seemed no solution, only badly camouflaged collusion.

Dissidents believed their “wholsome barking” depleted the ranks of sinners in England and hastened church reform. Whitgift and his associates found it “disdainful,” “spightful,” full of “curious and willful contradictions,” and intolerably disruptive during the late 1580s. They stepped up efforts to silence their critics and were awarded an unwanted notoriety in the anonymous Marprelate satires that branded them as “petty popes.” Against Marprelate, it was said that the church’s chief executives were major factors in England’s unparalleled piety and that there was “never a more learned clergy in anie church since the apostles’ time.” No thanks
to "disordered and seditious schismatics," who, left to themselves, "infect[ed] the commonwealth with factions." So they simply could not be left to themselves. John Udall was imprisoned, as was Cartwright. John Penry, suspected of having fathered Marprelate, was executed in 1593.5

Looking back on such terribly unsettling consequences of the Elizabethan settlement, apologists for the dissidents put their distinctive spin on the story. They associated the excitement and freedom identified with Elizabeth's accession with the increased incidence of scriptural study and "godlie talk." But, as Josias Nichols pointed out, all that study and conversation eventually raised questions about the church's customs that, upon informed inspection, seemed unscriptural as well as "unprofitable." Yet "the greater sort . . . being old barrels which could holde no newe wine [had been] addicted partly to poperie and partly to licentiousnesse." Nichols praised Edmund Grindal for bridling reactionaries; nonetheless "a newe and freshe assault" followed the "goodlie space of quietnesse" when Whitgift succeeded Grindal at Canterbury. The new archbishop weighed in with the "old barrels," insisting that dissidents subscribe to the queen's supremacy, the Prayer Book, and the articles formulated by the episcopal bench. Nichols explained that Whitgift's quarry had no quarrel with the queen's prerogative but that they considered the other provisions absolutely unacceptable. The result of continued pressure and resistance was "a great division."6

Partisans from both sides fired insults across the divide. Conformists dubbed their critics "precisionists," "anabaptists," "peevish puritanes." Dissidents hurled "petty popes" and "old barrels" to the right, "donatists" and "anabaptists" to the left, when some among them grew more irascible and separatist. It is seductively simple to draw polemically charged names into a historical narrative but dangerous to use them descriptively. "People falslie termed puritanes," for example, get stuck with the epithet, excusable perhaps because dissidents later came to embrace the name. Still, anachronism is just about unavoidable. Despite a growing body of literature that thoughtfully qualifies and reclassifies, naming never ceases to be controversial. Even "Calvinist" seems something of a violation, for Walter Travers objected in 1583 that only misguided Catholics immortalized founders (Dominican, Franciscan, Scotist, Thomist).7

But naming is necessary. Travers's objection may be set aside, because on both sides of the "great division" English Protestants battled for bragging rights to John Calvin's legacy. Prayer, Despair, and Drama is
concerned with those Calvinists, dissidents and conformists alike. Their hold on and in this book depends on their tenacious interest in the revealing as well as the consoling character of religious experience. Until we more completely parse it in the following chapters, the experience they countenanced and expected of reformed Christians will seem like an odd, if not impossible, mix of despondence, vertigo, and ecstasy. They were sure that it compassed intense sorrow for sin, "holy desperation" for mercy, and eventual, wondrous assurance of election and salvation. They called it piety; I will call them pietists.

William Perkins, prominent among them, taught at Cambridge from the 1580s to his death in 1602. He was friendly with leading conformists, known lately as "Calvinist Episcopalians," one of whom, James Montagu, preached his funeral sermon. Yet enemies of episcopacy in England and puritans in New England celebrated and circulated his work. Perkins, then, seems to have straddled the "great division"; his career confounds those working with the familiar names and classifications, "Puritan," "Anglican," and the like. His practical divinity, however, virtually begs on his behalf for the name "pietist" because it typically concentrates on defining works of faith, which "concurre to justification" as "signs" and "effects" of election (never its causes), in terms of an internal struggle with remnants of sin and doubt in regenerate and reformed Christians.8

The absence of struggle, for Perkins, was the sum and substance of impiety. He detested religious indifference. He scowled at Christians feverishly preoccupied with the "assurance of lands and goods to themselves and to their posterity" while they were "drowsie," spiritually numb, and "slacke in making sure to [them]selves the election of God." That was a sad yet also a predictable situation—predictable, from Perkins's perspective, because it seemed to him that only part of the reformed program reached reformed Christians. They learned well enough that no church had custody of "the over-plus of the merits of Christ." But they had never been compellingly told, or perhaps they had forgotten, that Christianity was a summons to self-criticism and repentance. They took for granted the "endlesse efficacie" of Jesus's atonement and just assumed that God would directly apportion grace to the generally faithful, more or less morally scrupulous, and routinely modest. Perkins countered that God predestined only those few whom he elected. They could obtain assurance of election and strength to persevere in righteousness if they intensely and often experienced uncertainty and dis-ease and took
"nothing to [them]selves but shame and confusion." Their humility and "holy desperation" generated a feeling of repentance that grew "little by little," conspicuously in their prayers but in "godlie talk" and scriptural study as well. Much of Perkins's work, exhortation and explanation, pairs piety with prayerful self-concern and with "serious invocation of pardon," both of which fashion the pietists' prayerful prodigal self. Pietists, then, did not pray for what God had not given them; they prayed to inspire a prodigal's remorse and to refortify the confidence that God's most fundamental gift, election, had been theirs all along. The reasons for election were mysterious; the results were demonstrable and reassuring to those who "descend[ed]" into their hearts, rebelled against the rule of sin within, and warded off diabolical doubts about God's vast mercy and about their own recuperation.9

* * *

The first chapter of Prayer, Despair, and Drama comes upon pietists "much in prayer" and discovers just how important their prayers were. To critics who charged that they evinced a morbid self-interest, pietists replied that appeals to God both "pressed down" and "stirred up." The "down" and "up," they claimed, were sensible together, sinister apart. They had in mind a dialectic between faith and doubt, an "interchangeable course," to quote one, that swerved between good cheer and grief. To present that course, I have drawn on some of the pietists' many efforts to distinguish "godly sorrow" from "feigned repentance" and "sudden qualms," and I have recounted their quarrels over the relative values of scripted and impromptu prayers. The purpose is simply to illustrate pietist devotion, yet the first chapter concludes with a glance ahead at performance art to put the pietists' self-absorption in another context, ideally a suggestive and useful context, but also to prefigure the connections made in the third chapter between prayer and drama, specifically between pietists' prayers and Hamlet's self-absorbed asides.

The second chapter returns to the sixteenth century, to the Elizabethan Calvinists who reserved a special place in reformed orthodoxy for self-absorption. At the time, as I just noted, advocates of "all this looking to our selves" were blamed for spreading gloom. Those charges resurface in the late twentieth century as scholarly observations, the gist of which is that such concentrated "looking" and self-lacerating marked either the late Renaissance disintegration of the self or the dislocations that
attended and thwarted early modern attempts at integration. All three chapters of *Prayer, Despair, and Drama*, but none more than this second, which looks closely at the practical divinity or theology behind the prayers, subject observations and charges of that character to significant qualification and argue that, for the late Tudor pietists, coming ungled was a precondition for coming together, *religans*, for reforming the self and conforming to God’s will.

Pietists instructed preachers that their “wholsome barking” must disconcert auditors and get them to “plow up their hearts.” The task was to teach Christians how to feel about themselves and what to think about their feelings, most urgently when they were coaxed into, and lost in, despair. Pietists’ sermons and their literature of consolation invested considerable capital in the discussions of “contrary grace,” discernible, they thought, in the first and feeblest tremors of regret as well as in the most wretched sense of desolation. The aim was to redeem the dis-ease induced by pietists’ “barking,” a dis-ease that “adequated” subjects to their election and to the object of their desire.

Aphorisms abounded: “a grieved spirit is no argument for a faithless heart”; “desire for mercy in the want of mercy is the obtaining of mercy”; unfeigned repentance is “no ordinary three hours matter” but is “to be crushed in peeces in feeling”; “care not for hell, for the nearer we feel it, the farther we are from it.” To understand “contrary grace” and the therapeutic role of religious despair, we must restore the pietist practical divinity that generated something of a culture of confirmation in which aphorisms such as these made sense and, moreover, made sense of the wretchedness and irresolution experienced by dutiful pietist pilgrims. Theirs was that “interchangeable course of sorrow and comfort, of faith and fear.” Nonetheless, each pilgrim was likely to match John Jewel’s disdainful description of the “wavering minded man... unstable in all his waies.” That course and wavering should be familiar to readers of Spenser’s *Redcrosse* and Marlowe’s *Faustus*. The second chapter closes by considering what pietists might have made of such protagonists.10

There is certainly no more conspicuous and curious specimen of Elizabethan wavering than Hamlet. Is he stalling for time, deliberately puzzling his prey and screwing up his courage to kill Claudius? Is he groping for an independent fate, attempting to wriggle free from the role of revenger in which his father’s ghost and his script have trapped him? Or is he the consummate expression of late Tudor melancholia?
The third chapter sifts answers to these and cognate questions, because Hamlet's run of self-recrimination so strikingly resembles the prayerful improvisation of the pietists' prodigal self.

The soliloquacious Hamlet is fond of what some now see as "lengthy speeches of self-erasure." The same "some" might say much the same thing about English Calvinists who spent countless hours "erect[ing] an inquisition over [their] hearts," as William Perkins directed. But inasmuch as bruising self-interrogation was therapeutic, practiced to complete a soterially advantageous submission to God's will—in the latter instance—and insofar as Hamlet's brooding self-interrogation led finally to humility and readiness ("readiness is all"), emphasis might better be placed on recomposition and composure than on decomposition and "erasure."

The ritual recomposition or refashioning of the self was the desideratum of pietist prayer and devotional literature. To keep theatrical rituals in an altogether different orbit or to satisfy ourselves with having spotted but superficial similarities hardly seems to make sense. It is not only that we are now learning that religious opposition to the theater was less uncompromising and less effective than scholars once thought. Segregation ill serves our study of the social construction of the self in Elizabethan England, where religious and dramatic cultures interpenetrated. Of course, the distinctiveness of pietist self-formation ought not to be understated. As dissidents increasingly realized how pointless it was to petition past Whitgift, Bancroft, and other apostles of order, they amplified the summons to self-inventory, sorrow for sin, and helplessness before God, which had sounded less stridently before. Shakespeare had entirely other reasons for creating Hamlet, and other results. As library acquisitions attest, the interpretive possibilities associated with those contested reasons and incontestably impressive results are just about inexhaustible. Hamlet cannot exclusively or very easily be enrolled among the pietists' "emblem[s] of alienated agony," but his alienation, agony, and soliloquacious introspection suggest that consequences drawn from a doctrine of divine predestination into pietist devotional literature were part of a larger cultural practice, an Elizabethan therapy of sorts and an aesthetics of experience.11

Opinions differ about Christianity's responsibility for anxiety and agony. Jean Deprun thought they were integrally related to piety. God was the supreme object of Christians' desires. He was, in part, hidden,
and he was said to be angry. Deprun maintained that, from the time of
Augustine through that of Pascal, divine anger was wed to each Chris­
tian's purported defection, as effect to cause, and that coupling perpetu­
ated profound dis-ease among the faithful. From a different angle, how­
ever, Christianity's successes imposing meaning on experience seem to
have allayed anxiety. William Bouwsma suggested that the imposition
frequently gave life "a measure of reliability and thus reduc[d], even if it
[did not] altogether abolish, life's ultimate and terrifying uncertainties."
Inevitably, though, rival consolations competed for the imagination. If
not for Marlowe's Faustus, at least for many medieval and early modern
Christians, the church effectively countered the regressive pull of magic,
to some extent by incorporating its seductively comforting elements. But
the church was most successful setting boundaries that made uncertain­
ties and ambiguities more manageable, mostly by mapping relatively clear
routes through the uneven terrain of this world and into the next. Protes­
tants were persuaded that Catholicism provoked and manipulated rather
than diminished dis-ease. Calvin charged that priests "torture souls with
many misgivings and immerse them in a sea of trouble and anxiety." Yet,
as Bouwsma found, Calvin also understood that anxiety was an antidote
for "worldly security," which was the chief obstacle to faith. Only the
unregenerate were carefree. Among the faithful, anxiety was the neces­
sary foil to hope. It was there to be overcome, but stubbornly there, all
the same. 12

So there is something to recommend Jean Delumeau's striking con­
tention that Catholicism and Calvinism alike prospered through culpabi­
lisation. Delumeau collected many more bits and pieces of evidence
than did Deprun to document a confessionally bipartisan campaign to
terrify Christians. Catholics and Protestants harped on the narrowness
of the "narrow gate" (Matthew 7:13) and "door" ("strive to enter by
the narrow door; for many I tell you, will seek to enter and will not
be able to": Luke 13:24). Pessimistic preaching stressed the dire conse­
quences of even the smallest transgressions. Frescoes and woodcuts kept
tormented spirits, cadavers, and gaping caskets before Christians' eyes.
Fear near totally eclipsed forgiveness. The result, according to Delu­
meau, no mean practitioner of culpabilisation himself, was an alleged "de­
Christianization" of early modern Europe. 13

To say I take a different approach is an understatement, although to
say more now will keep me introducing indefinitely. Yet I was interested
to see that Delumeau cast John Donne as the epitome of Elizabethan pessimism and that John Stachniewski, who appraised Donne independently and far more thoroughly, caught and emphasized his “dominant mood of despair.” But when the speaker in Donne’s Holy Sonnets begs for “repair” and thus performs his repentance by dramatizing the tension between faith and doubt, the poet seems to me to give voice to the pietists’ program for rehabilitation. Praycr, Despair, and Drama concludes with a look at the Holy Sonnets, a final look at the Elizabethan aesthetics of experience that stretched some years into the seventeenth century. For Delumeau, guilt and fear constitute a constant refrain. For Stachniewski, the last word is “despair.” My last word is “Donne.”

Notes

1. Patrick Collinson, The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 95, for “full internalization”; and C. John Sommerville, The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 179, for “reflective religion.” Four alternative approaches invite preliminary comment: (1) John N. King, Spenser’s Poetry and the Reformation Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), to my mind, is among the most nuanced and engaging efforts to find doctrine or theological themes “at work” in Elizabethan literary culture. That challenge has kept literary historians and several historical theologians preoccupied for generations. (2) Joel Fineman, Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) brilliantly elaborates the structuring of early modern self-consciousness without even a nod to religious deliberation. All converges on “the rhetoric or rhetoricity of praise.” (3) Hamlet was sure that a play was just the thing to “catch the conscience” of his unrepentant king; Martha Tuck Rozett, The Doctrine of Election and the Elizabethan Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) suggestively speculates on the Calvinist conscience and the didactic function of drama. (4) Anne Ferry, The “Inward” Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) labors to document the lack of correspondence. Prayer, Despair, and Drama, on the whole, is compatible or collateral with the first and, as a whole, addresses an oversight in otherwise generative attempts to parse “poetic presence” and subjectivity. I shall have little more to say, then, about advocates of the first two alternatives. Specific reservations about the third and fourth, as well as arguments and counterproposals are included in what follows, as are my arguments with colleagues similarly interested in Elizabethan sentiment but apt to construe religious and dramatic despair as symptoms of late Tudor “destabilization” and “dislocation.” For “patterns of

2. See, for example, Sutcliffe’s *A Treatise of Ecclesiastical Discipline* (London, 1590), 146–50.


6. Josias Nichols, *The Plea of the Innocent wherein is averred that the ministers and people falslie termed puritanes are injuriously slandered for enemies or troublers of the state* (London, 1602), 6–11.


don, 1605), 265; and John Jewel, *An Exposition upon the two epistles of the Apostle St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (London, 1594), 196.


