PEW GRANT PROPOSAL:
SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC FAITH

Jason Crawford

I. Overview

For this Pew Grant, I propose to spend a month at Duke University in the summer of 2025, writing the last of four major chapters in my long-standing book project, *Shakespeare's Tragic Faith*. The book has been solicited for a series published by Boydell & Brewer.

II. Background

Some of my most challenging and meaningful experiences at Union have involved reading and watching tragic plays with my students. Plays such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Shakespeare's *King Lear* have a way of provoking us to ask questions, because they represent some of the most atrocious sufferings humans can endure. My students and I always find ourselves wrestling with questions about what these stories of human suffering mean and what we can learn from them. And we often find ourselves asking an even more interesting question: what do these tragic plays ask us to *do*?

Plays do have a way of asking their audiences to do something. To attend a play is to join with a community and to see something made real right before our eyes. In both the pagan context of ancient Greece and the Christian context of medieval Europe, the theater was closely related to the rituals of religious worship. Theatergoers were well aware that the experience of watching an actor (as King Lear) say, "You must bear with me… forget, and forgive" and the experience of watching a minister say, "Take, eat, this is my body" have something in common. They perceived that theater makes invisible or far-off realities present, and that it invites us to respond to those realities in formative ways.

Over the past several years, as I've joined my students in asking what these old plays can mean for modern believers, I've been working on a research project that explores Shakespeare's tragedies as religious and ritual texts. Plays like *Hamlet* and *Lear* are especially fascinating in their religious orientation. They have long been regarded as founding texts of modern and secular literature, but they are also deeply rooted in the culture of Reformation England, a culture in which the development of Protestant theology and church life were changing the way Christians thought about ritual, liturgy, and God's presence in material things. Shakespeare's plays are deeply concerned with those changes, and their writer is clearly thinking hard about the sort of spiritual work he wants to ask his audiences to do.

The project began with an invited lecture I gave at Duke University in 2017. Since then, I have published articles on tragedy in the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, have given talks on Shakespeare's tragic plays at Baylor's Symposium on Faith and Culture and at a plenary session of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, and have written a book about tragedy's first cousin, comedy. As I've worked on those various projects, I've had the

outlines of a book about Shakespearean tragedy come gradually into view. In the summer of 2025, I hope to draft the final chapter of that book.

III. The Book Project

In this book, tentatively titled *Shakespeare's Tragic Faith*, I consider two big questions about Shakespeare's tragic plays. First, I ask about the implications of these plays for how we understand the emergence and the origins of modern culture. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the tragic drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries rose to prominence alongside an array of modern cultural forms, from empirical science and state surveillance to interior solitude and religious doubt. Its power seems to be linked to those emerging cultural forms, and to the experience of living in the newly disenchanted world they helped to usher in. At the same time, I want to ask how these plays are rooted in practices much older than modern culture: the practices of Christian liturgy and worship. The power of Shakespeare's tragedies is linked to these older cultural forms, too, in ways modern readers and audiences are often quick to miss.

I investigate the connection between Shakespeare's plays and Christian liturgy by paying close attention to Shakespeare's own language of tragic experience. The key terms his plays use to describe tragic action – *conscience*, *passion*, *remember*, *repent*, *confess*, *assume*, *despair* – are intriguingly different from the vocabularies we have inherited from Aristotle's *Poetics* and the long classical tradition of tragic theory. And these Shakespearean terms all have deep genealogies in the practices of the medieval church. *Assume* and *passion* are both linked to narratives of Christ's incarnation and liturgies of Eucharistic celebration; *remember* and *despair* both have rich histories in medieval practices of confession and penance. In early modern England, all these terms are in crisis and under contest, and Shakespeare uses them to map out new experiences of guilt, judgment, grace, and hope.

My book maps out a new theory of Shakespearean tragedy by considering these ancient religious terms as guides to the liturgical form of Shakespeare's plays. The word *liturgy* literally means "the work of the people," a form of collective enactment by which a community affirms and assesses its core commitments. Tragic plays are liturgical events, opportunities to join in collective practices of confession, proclamation, and lament. Shakespeare's language of tragic experience, rooted as it is in the rituals of medieval and Reformation-era religious life, maps out the possibilities of these plays as liturgical occasions and lays down blueprints for our own engagement with them.

In writing this book about the liturgical forms of Shakespeare's tragic plays, I'll be informed both by current conversations about the nature of cultural modernity and also by recent scholars and theorists who are charting out new forms of "affective" reading, forms of reading that emphasize not critical detachment but holistic engagement. Theorists such as Marielle Macé and Lucy Alford have been raising questions about reading as a liturgical practice, a collective exercise in acting out the truth together and reimagining our lives in light of our deepest shared beliefs. By working outward from the ritual and liturgical vocabularies that do so much to direct the forms of early modern tragedy, I hope to reflect on these plays as scripts for our own work of reflecting, proclaiming, and faithful living.

IV. Plans for the Pew Grant

Two of the four major chapters of this book have appeared in print as articles, and in summer 2018 I did the research and rough drafting of a third chapter as a visiting fellow at Oxford University (with help also from a Pew Research Grant). For the 2024-25 Pew Grant, I propose to research and write the one major chapter of the book that I haven't yet touched. In this crucial last chapter of the book, I turn to Shakespeare's late play *The Winter's Tale*, in which tragedy gives way to miracles of restoration, forgiveness, and grace. What makes those miracles possible? I will take up this question by considering the ordering and enactment of time in the ritual culture of medieval and Reformation England. *The Winter's Tale* is explicitly concerned with time: the figure of Time himself speaks the interlude that separates the atrocities of Acts 2 and 3 from the restoration of Acts 4 and 5, and these final Acts centrally involve the experiences of celebrating festive seasons, enduring delay, anticipating consummation, remembering and relinquishing the past. These experiences are integral to the liturgical life of the late medieval and early modern church. Shakespeare engages deeply with that liturgical life as he fashions his own drama of suffering, longing, and consummation.

This chapter will require extensive research in the printed records of English ritual culture across the Reformation, and I propose to do that research, during the summer of 2025, in the libraries at Duke University. As a place to finish drafting this book, Duke makes special sense. The first significant piece of the book developed as a lecture that I gave at Duke in 2017, and both the chapters I have published as articles have developed in close relationship with the Duke's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* is their journal, and one of the best in the field). Two of the editors of the series for which the book has been solicited are on faculty at Duke and have taken a keen interest in the work. So the opportunity to spend a summer working at Duke would mean I have access not only to a world-class library but also to a community of scholars, in both the English Department and the Divinity School, who have already done much to encourage and enrich my work on this project.

The libraries at Duke are a treasure trove of materials related to my work. In addition to its excellent collections in modern scholarship, the library holds numerous reproduction copies of early modern texts such as the 1549 and 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, an array of fifteenth-century English-language primers, manuscript and print graduals for the musical services of Advent and Lent, and various versions of the pre-Reformation Sarum rite that directed liturgical practice in so many English churches. It also holds, in reproduction copies, a rich collection of Reformation-era liturgical and seasonal reflections such as Daniel Heinsius's *Two Eloquent and Acute Discourses upon the Nativitie and Passion of Christ* (1618) and James Anderson's *Ane Godly Treatis, Callit the First and Second Cumming of Christ* (before 1603). These texts represent the background of Shakespeare's grammar of sacramental waiting and ritual time.

A month at Duke would give me the opportunity to engage deeply with these texts and to enjoy the intellectual community of colleagues who have supported the project from the beginning. It would be a great help as I take this last major step toward having a complete draft of the book.

V. Project Schedule and Plans for Dissemination

As I mentioned before, the book has been solicited to be part of a series at Boydell & Brewer. I propose the following timeline for my grant-related work.

Jun.-Jul. 2025	research and write chapter at Duke University
Aug. 2025	submit formal proposal to Boydell and Brewer
Sep.-May 2025-26	revise chapter drafts into complete book manuscript
Summer 2026	submit complete manuscript to publisher

VI. Proposed Budget

I propose to use the Pew funds in two ways. First, the funds will free me from the need to teach overload courses during the summer of 2025, something I otherwise might well have to do. And second, the funds will make it possible for me to travel to Durham, NC, and pay for lodgings and other expenses while doing this research at Duke.

Travel to and from Durham	$400
Summer lodging in Durham	$2000
Stipend applied toward summer teaching release	$2100

VII. Synopsis of Previous Pew Grant Project

My previous Pew Grant, “Sacred Comedy” (2021), supported my early work on my book about comedy, now entitled *God’s Fools*. I finished that work as planned, and the book is now in production at Bloomsbury / Applause Books, with a release date in early 2025.

PEW GRANT PROPOSAL:
FAITH STATEMENT

Jason Crawford

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As a way of addressing the relationship of this project with my Christian faith, I want to reflect on two trends in literary studies that have done much to shape my work as both a teacher and a writer.

First: *a post-secular turn*. The citizens of modern western societies tend – regardless of our religious affiliations – to share certain assumptions about what is religious, how religion matters, and where religion does or does not belong. We tend to start from certain ideas about knowledge, selfhood, time, freedom, and belief. And we tend to be shaped, in these ideas, by the ideologies of a culture that conceives of many of its most important institutions and spaces as "secular."

Where does the idea of secularity begin? What does secularity mean for the theological, devotional, and missional work of the Christian church? To what extent did the concerns of our secular age in fact emerge *from* the work of the Christian church at the end of the Middle Ages? My scholarly interest in the relationship between modern and pre-modern culture arises from my interest in these large questions. I began my graduate career as a literary medievalist, writing about allegorical traditions from Augustine to Dante. But I also found, as I got deeper into my exploration of those medieval traditions, that questions about modernity were always with me. I began to suspect that medieval texts might have something crucial to teach us about what we have lost, and gained, in becoming modern. And as I began to read more widely, I learned that there was a lively conversation underway, both in the academy and in the public sphere, about the long histories of modernity and secularity.

That conversation remains lively. Secular modernity, we are coming to understand, was never inevitable, never a settled era or state, and never a neutral position from which to carry out the work of civic or academic life. And "religion" was never a bounded sphere of activity or knowledge. In the light of these basic insights, scholars and theorists across the disciplines have been exploring the possibilities of a "postsecular" approach to understanding the contemporary world, an attempt to think critically about the many forms the category of the secular has taken and the many ends it has served. In my own home discipline of medieval and early modern studies, many scholars have been raising questions about the relationships between a modern and secular culture and the older, religious cultures that modernity supposedly displaced. Turns out that the sacramental forms and spiritual presences of the old order haven't disappeared from modern culture in nearly the way some modern thinkers have tended to imagine.

Second: *an affective turn*. As I finished my work on that first book, I found myself reflecting on questions beyond the historical, questions about how literary texts engage our loves, form our imaginations, and invite us into embodied practices. Much recent scholarship has suggested that literary texts don't just *represent* human cultures but also *enact* and *order* living human experience. This idea raises fascinating possibilities. What does it mean to respond to George

Herbert's poems of worship as worshippers, or to respond with vision to Dante's poetry of vision? Must such forms of reading be regarded as naïve? Is it possible that critical reading might include these forms of participatory and affective reading?

I'm exploring these questions in various ways: in 2021 I published an essay in *Christianity & Literature* about literary reading as a Sabbath practice, and next spring I'll publish my book *God's Fools*, in which I claim that something apocalyptic or eucharistic, something like a sacred ritual, happens in the performances of many modern comedians. In those writing projects, I've tried to attend to the ways in which verbal art can invite us into formative participation.

In *Shakespeare's Tragic Faith*, too, I hope not just to write a critical study of tragedy but also to model a faithful response to tragedy, a response that engages with the power of Shakespeare's tragic plays to help us in our experiences of suffering, longing, and loss. I hope to write a book that engages with tragedy as a way of cultivating wisdom. And I hope to explore what my scholarship might have to say to a world in need of beauty and truth. None of this is easy, but I am humbly eager for the help of my colleagues and students as I learn to write with all my heart about things that matter to our shared work of living in faith.