PEW GRANT PROJECT DESCRIPTION

SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY: A GENEALOGICAL POETICS

Jason Crawford

I. My Book Project

This project begins with the following plain facts about tragedy. In the sixteenth century, European (and especially English) writers begin producing tragic plays of astonishing power and cultural resonance. These plays have, at the level of their tragic form, no real medieval precedents. And many of these plays channel, and help to generate, the energies of an emerging culture that we now call "modernity," so much so that some of them – *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* – have been taken by many readers as primal or paradigmatic, the blueprints for new forms of selfhood, secularity, realism, skepticism, disenchantment, or decay.

Within the terms of the literary histories that have largely prevailed in English criticism since the seventeenth century, these facts of the matter can seem uncomplicated and incontestable. But they come loaded with difficult questions. Why does tragic drama emerge, especially, in places where the European reformations are generating powerful energies of theological and cultural crisis? How are we to understand the emergent modernity of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in light of the "religious turn" that has transformed recent scholarly conversations about the sacred and the secular in early modern drama? How can our accounts of early modern tragedy make sense of Hegel and Nietzsche, who have taught us to suspect that tragedy is opposed both to modernity and to Christianity? I want to reflect on these large questions by writing a new poetics for Shakespeare's tragic plays. And I want to fashion this new poetics by reckoning with two specific developments in recent theory and criticism.

First: *the genealogies of modernity*. Scholars across the disciplines have been much concerned, in recent years, with the relationships between western modernity and the things against which modernity defines itself. Many theorists working on the challenges of a postsecular and postcolonial world – Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, José Casanova – are raising important questions about modernity's origins, exclusions, and outer limits. And many medieval and early modern scholars are raising similar questions in our own work at the borders of the modern. My own first book, *Allegory and Enchantment* (Oxford University Press, 2017), explores the long genealogies of modernity by considering the surprising vitality of medieval allegorical forms in the hands of early modern writers. In this second book, I will build on recent work by scholars such as Sarah Beckwith, John Parker, and Regina Schwartz, who have shed light on the relationship between early modern drama and the old forms of ritual and devotion that early modern reformers set out to renounce.

My experiment in reading Shakespeare genealogically will begin by asking whether it's possible to build a poetics of tragedy using Shakespeare's own language of tragic experience. The key terms Shakespeare persistently uses to describe tragic action – *conscience*, *passion*, *remember*, *repent*, *confess*, *assume*, *despair* – are intriguingly different from the vocabularies we have inherited from Aristotle and the long tradition of tragic theory. And these Shakespearean terms all turn out to have deep genealogies in medieval theology and ritual practice. *Assume* and *passion* are closely linked to narratives of Christ's incarnation and liturgies of Eucharistic celebration; *remember* and *despair* belong to medieval practices of confession and penance. In early modern England, all these terms are in crisis and under contest, and all of them will go on to be powerfully generative in the later history of modernity. By building a poetics of Shakespearean tragedy around these terms, I hope to raise fresh questions about the deep genealogies of Shakespeare's tragic plays. Does the ritual work of his tragedies mimic, mourn, supplant, or refashion the ritual work of Christian liturgy and sacrament?

Second: *an affective turn*. There is a long tradition of giving attention to the aesthetics – the affective work – of tragic drama. Aristotle already is interested in tragedy's affective and ritual work, as are more recent theorists from Hegel to Žižek. The affective terms fashioned by these writers (pity, recognition, guilt, catharsis, ecstasy) will figure prominently in my account. But a growing number of scholars are also charting out new forms of affective reading: we are working toward an appreciation of texts not only as representing historical conditions but also, at the same time, as enacting and ordering affective experience. By working outward from the ritual and liturgical vocabularies that do so much to direct the forms of early modern tragedy, I hope not just to revisit the cultural history of early modern religion but also to think about these plays as themselves liturgical texts, invested with an abiding power to enact experience and effect change. In each chapter of the book, I will take up a key term or cluster of terms – *conscience*, for instance, or *remember* – and will investigate the work that term does in Shakespeare's plays, turning as I go to the term's cultural histories, to its cousins and counterparts in the lexicon of tragic theory, and to its potential for refashioning the language in which we talk about tragedy's history and significance.

II. My Plans for the Pew Grant

In the summer of 2018, I'll be writing a key chapter of the book, a chapter that centers on the word "passion." The language of passion is central to Shakespeare's tragic plays ("passion" can in fact refer to a tragic utterance or experience, as when Hamlet speaks of actors who can "tear a passion to tatters"); and it has complex genealogies, before and after the Reformation, in accounts of the sufferings of Christ, and in the liturgical observances associated with these accounts.

A Pew Grant would greatly enrich my work on this chapter because it would enable me to spend a few weeks at Oxford's Bodleian Library, with the library's rich collections of early printed liturgical, homiletic, and devotional books. The Bodleian holds copies of the 1549 and 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, the 1560 *Liber precum publicarum*, and the Latin Sarum rite (in editions ranging from 1494 to 1527) that directed liturgical practice in many English churches before the Reformation. These texts will all matter centrally to my arguments. The Bodleian also holds pre-Reformation devotional texts such as *The Passion of Owr Lord Iesu Christe wythe the Contemplations* (1508) and the *Speculum Passionis Domini Nostri Iesu Christi* (1519), and post-Reformation texts such as Abraham Fraunce's *The Countesse of Pembrokes Emanuel, Conteining the Natiuity, Passion, Buriall, and Resurrection of Christ* (London, 1591) and Miles Coverdale's, *Fruitfull Lessons, Vpon the Passion, Buriall, Resurrection, Ascension, and of the Sending of the Holy Ghost* (London, 1593). These texts represent the deep backgrounds of Shakespeare's language of passion; I would, at the Bodleian, spend a great deal of time with them, as I likewise would with the library's extensive holdings of the early modern books that occupy the foreground of my investigation: Shakespeare's own tragic plays.

If given this opportunity, I would expect to finish the chapter by the end of summer 2018 and to submit it as an article to a journal such as *Religion and Literature* or *English Literary History.* Eventually, of course, it will appear as part of a larger book. I genuinely hope that the book can be of use both within and beyond the world of early modern literary historians. Certainly my experiments thus far in reading Shakespeare theologically have done much to challenge and deepen my own faith. And my scholarly work is slowly renewing my understanding of the roles the Christian tradition has played, and will continue to play, in the still-bewildering, still-bewildered world of modern secularity. Thank you for considering my proposal.

PROJECT SCHEDULE

Sept. 2017-May 2018:	drafting two other chapters of the book preparations for my work on "passion" chapter
Jun.-Jul. 2018:	research and writing at the Bodleian
Aug. 2018:	finish writing chapter; submit as article

PROJECT BUDGET

Travel to and from Oxford:	$1400
Summer lodging in Oxford:	$2400
Incidental travel expenses:	$700

ON FAITH AND MY DISCIPLINE

Jason Crawford

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As a way of addressing the importance of faith to my scholarly work, I want to return here to the two trends I mention in my project proposal, and I want to say a few words about how I respond to these trends both as a scholar and as a Christian. One of these trends is a long-standing interest of mine, and the other is emerging into my view right now, raising new questions for me and beckoning me in new directions.

First: *the genealogies of modernity*. Modern westerners, regardless of our religious convictions, tend to share certain habits of mind by which we define what is religious, where religion can matter, where religion does or does not belong. We tend to work from a common a set of assumptions about freedom, selfhood, knowledge, work, time, causality, and belief. And we tend to be shaped, in these assumptions, by the ideologies of a culture built around certain notions of the "secular." It is crucial, then, that thoughtful Christians reflect seriously on what it means to be secular. Where did modern 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 genealogies of modernity arises from my interest in these broad questions. I began my graduate career as a literary medievalist, under the spell of Dante; but I also found, as I got deeper into my exploration of medieval poetry and culture, that questions about modernity were always with me. Reading C. S. Lewis, who was an important guide for me in my early years of graduate school, helped me to understand that medieval texts have something crucial to teach Christians about what we have lost, and gained, in becoming modern. As I began to read more widely, I learned that there is a lively conversation underway, both in the academy and in the public sphere, about what's at stake in the terms "modern" and "secular," about where the genealogies of these ideas are to be found and what sort of work they continue to do. This conversation stems partly from western perplexities about Islam, and partly from the surprising importance of religion to the recent political and cultural history of the United States; but it arises mostly from our still-maturing sense that modernity is much more contradictory, heterogeneous, and fragile than we once thought. 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 understanding and managing religion, culture, or the material world. And "religion" was never a bounded sphere of activity set apart from the rest of the human and natural order. We need, all of us, to re-think the meanings and the histories of these terms; and the church needs to lead the way.

Second: *the affective turn*. I have, in recent years, found myself growing more and more interested in drama, and in the poetics of tragedy and comedy. These forms fascinate me because they are so close to ritual. In what may be the two most consequential periods of dramatic writing in the western tradition – in ancient Athens and early modern London – the roots of drama in religious ritual are still a living memory, still practically a living reality. How, then, are we to account for the sort of power the plays of Sophocles, Aristophanes, Marlowe, and Shakespeare still have for contemporary audiences?

In asking such a question, I hope to follow the turn of many recent theorists and critics to questions beyond the historical: questions of affect, enchantment, sympathy, desire, and belief. Much recent critical work, as I mention in my project proposal, has cultivated an appreciation of texts not just as *representing* historical conditions but also as *enacting* and *ordering* human experience. And these questions matter to me as a Christian reader in particular ways. What might it mean to respond to 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? Must *critical* reading necessarily be detached, disenchanted, purely cognitive, and purely secular? I am attracted to tragedy as a subject partly because tragic drama has an ancient association with ritual and devotional practice. In my work on tragedy, I am eager to reflect on the special ways in which tragedy might help us to understand, and to experience, the power of literary texts to provoke wonder and worship, justice and love.

I hope, then, in this project, to write not just a cultural history of modernity but also a living poetics of tragedy, a poetics that engages with the power of Shakespeare's tragic plays to help us in our experiences of suffering, conflict, prayer, longing, and loss. I hope to write a book that responds to tragedy as tragedy, that cultivates wisdom in the midst of suffering and compassion in the midst of a fallen world. And I hope, in the process of writing this book, to explore in new ways who my audience might be, and what my scholarship might have to say to a world in need of beauty, tenderness, and truth. Is it possible, in a book of literary reflection, to reach beyond the members of my scholarly sub-discipline and beyond the walls of the academy? I don't know quite where these questions will lead me, but I am eager to explore them, and I am humbly eager for the help of my colleagues and students as I learn to write with all my heart, in the hope of Christ, about things that matter to many of us right now.