MARIAN MOMENTS IN
EARLY MODERN BRITISH DRAMA

Concerning itself with the complex interplay between iconoclasm against images of
the Virgin Mary in post-Reformation England and stage representations that evoke
various ‘Marian moments’ from the medieval, Catholic past, this collection answers
the call for further investigation of the complex relationship between the fraught
religio-political culture of the early modern period and the theater that it spawned.

Joining historians in rejecting the received belief that Catholicism could be turned
on and off like a water spigot in response to sixteenth-century religious reform, the
early modern British theater scholars in this collection turn their attention to the
vestiges of Catholic tradition and culture that leak out in stage imagery, plot devices,
and characterization in ways that are not always clearly engaged in the business of
Protestant panegyric or polemic. Among the questions they address are: What is
the cultural function of dramatic Marian moments? Are Marian moments nostalgic
for, or critical of, the ‘Old Faith”? How do Marian moments negotiate the cultural
trauma of iconoclasm and/or the Reformation in early modern England? Did these
stage pictures of Mary provide subversive touchstones for the Old Faith of particular
import to crypto-Catholic or recusant members of the audience?

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Performance assumes a string of creative, analytical, and collaborative acts that, in defiance of theatrical ephemerality, live on through records, manuscripts, and printed books. The monographs and essay collections in this series offer original research which addresses theatre histories and performance histories in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century life. Of especial interest are studies in which women’s activities are a central feature of discussion as financial or technical supporters (patrons, musicians, dancers, seamstresses, wigmakers, or ‘gatherers’), if not authors or performers per se. Welcome too are critiques of early modern drama that not only take into account the production values of the plays, but also speculate on how intellectual advances or popular culture affect the theatre.

The series logo, selected by my colleague Mary V. Silcox, derives from Thomas Combe’s duodecimo volume, *The Theater of Fine Devices* (London, 1592), Emblem VI, sig. B. The emblem of four masks has a verse which makes claims for the increasing complexity of early modern experience, a complexity that makes interpretation difficult. Hence the corresponding perhaps uneasy rise in sophistication:

> Masks will be more hereafter in request,  
> And grow more deare than they did heretofore.

No longer simply signs of performance ‘in play and jest’, the mask has become the ‘double face’ worn ‘in earnest’ even by ‘the best’ of people, in order to manipulate or profit from the world around them. The books stamped with this design attempt to understand the complications of performance produced on stage and interpreted by the audience, whose experiences outside the theatre may reflect the emblem’s argument:

> Most men do use some colour’d shift  
> For to conceal their craftie drift.

Centuries after their first presentations, the possible performance choices and meanings they engender still stir the imaginations of actors, audiences, and readers of early plays. The products of scholarly creativity in this series, I hope, will also stir imaginations to new ways of thinking about performance.
Marian Moments in Early Modern British Drama

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ASHGATE
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Thomas Rist is a lecturer in English at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and a member of the university’s Centre for Early Modern Studies. He is author of various academic essays and articles on the involvement of early-modern theatre in the religio-politics of the period and he has published one book: *Shakespeare’s Romances and the Politics of Counter-Reformation*. Among his forthcoming publications is a second book: *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England* (Ashgate, 2007/08).
Preface
Regina Buccola and Lisa Hopkins

In 2002, Katharine Goodland organized a panel at the Renaissance Society of America conference titled ‘Mariological Moments in Early Modern Drama.’ A number of other panels at the conference addressed the same issues as those that, in the main, concerned us: the persistence of remnants of beliefs specific to Catholicism in the prose tracts, poetry and drama of early modern England and, in the case of our panel, what vestiges of Marian devotion, in particular, might indicate about the dramatic plots and characters in which they surfaced. In the few years since that conference, a number of literary scholars as well as historians of religion have also begun to re-examine the religious conflicts of Reformation England on a spectrum that runs from recusancy to anti-Catholic polemic. Marian devotion has come in for reconsideration during this time as well, but no one has yet systematically studied the presence of what we have come to term ‘Marian moments’ in the drama of the age.1

Hence this collection, which has more than doubled in terms of authors since that original Renaissance Society of America meeting. Marian Moments in Early Modern Drama is almost evenly divided between essays devoted to Shakespearean plays (the first five) and essays that consider Jacobean works by other dramatists (the final four). Since so little is reliably known about the production of early modern plays – including who, exactly, wrote them, when they were originally written and staged, what the production looked like, and who, exactly, saw them – early modern dramatic criticism is often a study in possibilities and contingencies rather than certainties. Marian Moments approaches the uncertainties of early modern dramatic history as opportunities to reconstruct the significance of Marian references

in the popular drama at a time when such gestures would have been doctrinally unacceptable in Protestant England.

One of the certainties that recent studies such as those referenced above has shaken is the notion that the Reformation worked in England. Many scholars over the past few decades have challenged this assumption, raising important questions about, for example, continued references to purgatory in early modern drama long after such a halfway house for the soul had been eradicated from accepted Church teaching in England. Marian Moments in Early Modern Drama shifts this consideration to references to the Virgin Mary. At times, such references deal with the overt, as in Thomas Rists’s analysis of the virginal heroine of John Marston’s The Tragedy of Sophonisba, dubbed ‘The Wonder of Women’ in the original main title of the play. As Rist notes, the long-standing critical preference for what was originally the play’s subtitle, The Tragedy of Sophonisba, as a main title constitutes a back construction which elides the Marian resonance of the play’s title and the depiction of its heroine. Rist recovers these aspects of the play, highlighting the Mariolatry implicit in heralding a heroine who chooses death over loss of virginity: ‘The Wonder of Women.’

In other cases, Marian Moments trades in stage pictures of far greater subtlety. The originator of the RSA panel and of this collection, Katharine Goodland, explores King Lear’s final entrance onto the stage carrying Cordelia’s limp body as evocative of popular depictions of Mary mourning over the body of the crucified Jesus. As Goodland explains, such images were familiar not only from religious iconography in churches, but also from medieval passion plays. Therefore, two distinct strands of religious history cohere in Shakespeare’s depiction of a mortal king mourning the child who could and would have saved him if only he had had faith in her.

King Lear offers a unique, masculine invocation of a Marian motif. While the gender analysis in the essays collected here is consistently complex, Goodland’s essay is the only one that is not focused on female characters in early modern plays. Therefore, this collection also attempts to address important questions not only about how Mary might have been evoked in early modern drama, but also about what such stage portrayals of one of the most significant women in Christian history (Eve being her greatest rival for the title) suggested about the social roles of the women in the audience and on the throne. While there can be no definitive answers to these questions, bringing the presence of Marian references to the fore in our analysis of early modern drama necessarily changes our view of it, and of the characters – usually women – that such references impact. During the course of our work on this project, we have all come to think differently about these plays as well as others that we routinely teach and see staged. In the case of the non-Shakespearean plays gathered here, perhaps the Marian resonance will provide new ways of teaching texts that have been relatively recently added to the early modern pedagogical repertoire.

such as Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*, or constitute an argument for teaching neglected texts like George Chapman’s *The Widow’s Tears*. In any case, it is our hope that this collection will serve as a useful starting point for further analysis and discussion.

**Works Cited and Consulted**


*Early Modern Catholicism*, edited by Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).


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Foreword

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Some recent historical analyses of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English religious culture have emphasized the slow process by which England was Protestantized and the persistence of elements of a residual Catholic culture within the emerging, eventually dominant, Protestant one. Countering older accounts of the English Reformation, which portrayed the country as ready to throw off a corrupt, papally-centered medieval Catholicism, some recent historians have argued that the new Protestant orthodoxy was largely a top-down imposition on a religiously conservative and resistant populace and that elements of the ‘old religion’ had a remarkable persistence in the first hundred years after Henry VIII’s break with Rome.¹ Specific governmental orders and official and non-official waves of iconoclasm damaged or destroyed many of the signs of the older religion—rood screens, stained-glass windows, wayside crosses, sites of pilgrimage, relics, etc.—but habits of mind and patterns of private devotion were harder to eradicate. One of the areas of practice in which residual Catholic culture was most evident is that of Marian devotion.

The studies of dramatic texts included in this collection of essays detect ‘Marian moments’ in the plays of Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries, but such ‘moments’ occurred in life as well as in art in early modern England. In the former they were part of a fabric of religious and folk practices that shaped both public religious ceremonials and private devotion: pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham; processions; communal Marian devotions within and outside churches; personal reading of (both illustrated and non-illustrated) primers or Books of Hours, recitation of Marian litanies, prayers and poems such as the Stabat Mater and the Obsecro te and praying of the rosary.² Anthropologically speaking, practices centered on the mediatory figure of Mary were part of the art of everyday living in pre-Reformation England and since, not surprisingly, such habits were hard to change or eradicate, they lingered as a residual presence in the newly Protestant nation.

² See Duffy, 256–65.
Queen Elizabeth’s strategy of rule involved appropriating elements of idealized womanhood from the cult of Mary. As John Phillips has noted in his study of English Protestant iconoclasm, most rood screens, which contained not only the image of Christ on the Cross but also, in addition to the figure of John the Baptist, the image of Mary as both mother and mediatrix, were removed from English churches and often the royal arms of Queen Elizabeth were set up in their place—an act that emphasized state control of religion as well as the displacement of the Queen of Heaven by the Queen of England. Queen Elizabeth not only replaced her half-sister, Queen Mary, but, to some extent, she attempted to assume the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in English culture. This is one reason why Henry Cuffe, in the voice of the condemned rebel, the Earl of Essex, inserted a section into the valedictory ‘The Passion of a Discontented Mind’ expressing strong devotion not to the feminine earthly monarch but to the Queen of Heaven:

And thou faire Queene of mercy and of pitty,
Whose wombe did once the World’s Creator carry,
Bee thou attentive to my painefull dittye,
Further my Sutes deare gracious blessed Mary;
If thou begin the Quire of holy Saints
Will all be helping to preferre my plaints. (25–30)

Mary here is presented in her traditional roles as Mother of God, as supreme mediatrix and as font of mercy and pity. Given the cultural competition between the cult of Elizabeth and the cult of Mary, it is not surprising that these politically dangerous lines were omitted from the printed version of this poem.

Catholic and crypto-Catholic authors as well as religiously ambiguous or conflicted writers nostalgic for certain forbidden features of residual Catholic culture could portray certain female figures in their writings in ways that resonated with the older Marian devotion. The essays in this collection concentrate on this phenomenon in the drama, but, of course, the practice manifested itself in other genres as well—in poetry, in fiction, in religious devotional verse and prose. John Donne, for example, in his religious lyric, ‘Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward,’ even went so far as to depict Mary as a co-redemptrix, a theologically extremist formulation within the Marian tradition:

… durst I
Upon his [Christ’s] miserable mother cast mine eye,
Who was God’s partner here, and furnish’d thus
Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransomed us? (29–32)\(^6\)

Donne kept a picture of the Virgin in the deanery of St. Paul’s until his death, despite
the Protestant demotion of Mary to the status of ordinary saint.

Radical Protestants, of course, were hostile to traditional forms of Marian
devotion. The rabidly anti-Catholic father of Richard Crashaw, William Crashaw,
whose pen did heavy labor, wrote a much-reprinted work entitled *The Jesuites
Gospel* (1610) in which he adopted a Protestant hard-line stance, provoked by Justus
Lipsius’s book on the Virgin of Halle. At the start he lists the supposed Catholic
beliefs to which he objects:

1. That the Milke of Marye may come into comparison with the blood of Christ.
2. That the Christian mans faith may lawfully take holde of both as well as one.
3. That the best compounde for a sicke soule, is to mixe together her milke and
   Chrits blood.
4. That the sinnes & spirituall deseases of the soule are cured as well as by her
   milke as his blood.
5. That Christ is still a little childe in his Mothers armes, and so may be prayed unto.
6. That her milke and the merit and vertue of it, is more pretius and excellent
   than Chrits blood. (1)

Five other tenets are also listed as repugnant:

1. That no man, but a woman did helpe God in the worke of our redemption.
2. That God hath made Marye partaker and fellow with him in his divine
   Majestie and power.
3. That God hath devided his Kingdome with Marye, keeping Justice to himselfe,
   and yelding Mercy to Her.
4. That a man may appeale from God to Her.
5. That a man shall oftentimes be sooner heard at Gods Hands in the mediation
   of Marie, then of Jesus Christ. (2)

Attributing extreme Mariolatry to the Jesuits, Crashaw not only objects to viewing
the Virgin as a co-redemptrix and as a privileged mediator, but also seems fearful of
Mary’s female power and the ability of women to infantilize men. Outraged by the
cult of the Infant Jesus,\(^7\) he expresses his fear that

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Press, 1978), 31. See George Klawitter, ‘John Donne’s Attitude Toward the Virgin Mary: The
Public versus the Private Voice,’ in *John Donne’s Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of
John T. Shawcross*, edited by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway,

\(^7\) One of the most famous cases is that of ‘The Infant of Prague,’ a statue moved from Spain
to Bohemia in the sixteenth century and which became a cult object in the seventeenth century.
Crashaw objects to the figures of the maternal Mary and infant Jesus as putting the emphasis on the carnal rather than the spiritual: ‘for what can the carnall man, much more the Atheist, the Turke, and the Jewe imagine of Christ, when he that is his pretended Vicar suffers his followers to speake and write of him [Christ], and pray to him, as a playing childe, and sucking infant, and to describe him in his behaviours as a very childe, greeving and crying that any should touch his mothers papes but onely himself?’ (63). Putting Mary too close to the center of devotion, then, supposedly contaminates religion with a debilitating and distracting female presence, creating a goddess idolatrously set in rivalry with God.

In his final evaluation of Roman Catholicism Crashaw portrays it as irremediable heresy. Seeing it as dangerously feminized, he views the carnal Mary as an idolatrous figure, a goddess who would displace Jesus at the center of Christian religion. His corrective Protestant view of Mary de-physicalizes her: ‘… her spiritual bearing of Christ was happier then her carnall, and her selfe more blessed by conceiving Christ in her heart then in her wombe, and by beleeving in him then by bearing him, for her bearing him in her body would not have saved her soule, if she had not more happily borne him in her heart’ (15–16). Only by replacing the lactating, affectionately maternal Mary with a spiritualized one can Christianity, in his view, tolerate her presence. In this approach, a true Christianity is both masculinized and dissociated from the kind of physical embodiment signaled by Mary’s maternity.

Though most mainline Protestants did not take such a hostile approach, Marian piety was, at the least, controversial in early modern England—a sign of a potentially dangerous return to what was conceived as idolatrous Catholic practices and retrograde (unscriptural) beliefs. Anthropologically speaking, however, the Marian presence in English culture was hard to eliminate, given some of the human psychological and emotional needs it satisfied. An idealized woman, a mother who was seen as an endless source of love and compassion, an image of perfect piety and holiness, Mary was hard to replace in the lives of English Christians. In one sense, a displacement of some of her qualities onto other figures, male and female, actual or fictional, was a partial solution to the problem as was the portrayal, in the drama and elsewhere, of a certain nostalgia for her immediate cultural presence.

In this context, the ‘Marian moments’ of the plays studied in this book strike to the heart of some of the most important cultural and religious struggles of early modern England. In *King Lear*, for example, Katharine Goodland argues, those older customs of mourning for the dead associated with the figure of Mary grieving over the body of the dead Christ, which were under assault in Protestant
England, were transformed in the inverted Pietà of the final scene, which ‘probes the nature of grief in a society in which this vehement and debilitating passion has lost its public footing.’ The shift from Catholic to Protestant culture entailed a movement toward a ‘general distrust of grief, and the public expression of grief in particular’ and a consequent replacement of ‘communal rituals of mourning of pre-Reformation England’ by ‘written works of mourning—elegies, published sermons, and treatises. …’ Shakespeare’s play demonstrates, Goodland claims, in the change of ‘the exemplar of mourning’ from female (Mary, Cordelia) to male (King David mourning over Absalom, Lear over Cordelia), a new privatization of mourning (as in Cordelia’s reported, offstage emotions) and removal of it from communal rituals. Nevertheless, Goodland states, ‘Lear’s mourning over Cordelia is haunted by the Virgin’s mourning over Jesus’—one of numerous examples of the Catholic past’s intrusion into Protestant England’s present, ‘the taboo pietà … resuscitated in the breath of the tragic actor’ against the background of medieval dramatic portrayals of Marian grief.

The cultural volatility of Marian figuration and of the Jacobean context for the Elizabethan characterization of Queen Elizabeth as ‘fairy queen’ or cult object is explored by Regina Buccola in her essay on Thomas Dekker’s confused and confusing play, The Whore of Babylon. She notes that what should be a clear distinction between Catholic idolatry and Protestant virtue breaks down as the rival Titania, the queen of fairies, and the Empress of Babylon ‘threaten repeatedly to collapse into one another, imploding the distinctions between the warring factions of Christianity and revealing them for what they might, horrifyingly, be: the same thing.’ Given the fact that ‘[l]ike fairy belief, sustained devotion to Mary constituted popular culture resistance to politically-prescribed religious hegemony,’ the use of this material for religio-political purposes was hazardous.

One of the important moments in English dramatic history came when English Protestant authorities banned the performance of the medieval religious dramas that continued to be performed in the sixteenth century: this attempt to suppress a form of popular entertainment that contained disapproved Catholic elements was only partly successful since many of the elements of these plays migrated to the secular stage of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Alice Dailey, for example, demonstrates how, in George Chapman’s tragicomedy, The Widow’s Tears, ‘Chapman’s adaptation of religious material necessarily links his play to earlier Christian drama’—particularly in the ‘parodic revision of the scenes at Christ’s empty tomb on Easter morning’ found in the play’s final two acts. The Marian material she discusses is that relating to Mary Magdalen, whose weeping at Christ’s tomb is the model for the behavior of the character Cynthia, who, ironically, turns from a ‘goddess-like paragon of marital chastity’ to a loose woman. Dailey examines the Jacobean play against the medieval

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dramatic handlings of the scene of the discovery by the three Marys of Christ’s empty tomb, only to emphasize the distance between the sacred material and the profane thematics of Chapman’s drama, which turns holy material to ‘burlesque’ as the dramatist portrays the human depravity he perceived in his contemporary world, a religiously pessimistic perception to which the medieval religious sensibility would have seemed alien. One way of eradicating the culture of the ‘old religion’ was to mock it.

Marian material in the drama could take the form of secularized versions of attributes of the Virgin. Alison Findlay, in her discussion of *All’s Well That Ends Well*, argues that, in this play, ‘moments which celebrate virginity and maternity can be read as a secular refashioning of the cult of relics, images, and rituals in which Mary had assumed a tangible authority of her own in the lives of Christians.’ She claims that ‘[t]he authority of the patriarchal world is subverted by a tripartite representation of the Virgin Mary as virgin, mother and intercessor in the figures of Diana, Helen, the Widow and the Countess’ and that ‘[t]he play sets up the speech of kings, fathers and husbands to be deconstructed by a Marian maternal language that prioritizes human flesh and feeling, including female desire.’ Behind the character of Helen she sees the figure of the Virgin Mary as mediatrix, a role that was translated into courtly terms by the contemporary St. Francis de Sales. Beyond this, in this play ‘Marian examples of love as sacrifice and intercession offers a feminized image of the divine’—just the sort of thing William Crashaw hated and feared. Findlay demonstrates how some of the Marian characteristics that modern feminists decry as poor ones for women—perfect obedience, self-sacrifice, willing suffering—actually and paradoxically are dramatized in Shakespeare’s play as forms of empowered self-assertion.

In her discussion of Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Stephanie Hodgson-Wright claims that the play ‘generates a strongly argued debate about submission to and resistance against tyranny’ and invokes ‘“Marian moments” to underpin its key points.’ Noting that the name of the central character links her both to Mary, Queen of Scots and to the Virgin Mary, Hodgson-Wright argues that Cary demonstrates how, in marriage, the Catholic wife is more empowered than the Protestant one because ‘her relationship with the Church was essentially separate, affording her a limited amount of spiritual autonomy.’ The tyrannical Herod, on the other hand, exemplifies Protestant hostility to the presence of the feminine in religion: ‘Herod’s excision of the queen regnant from the Judean body politic might be read as analogous to the theological excision not only of a spiritual female presence in religious observances, but also of the spiritual autonomy of the individual female subject, by the Protestant Reformation in England.’

Lisa Hopkins observes that, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, ‘two religious systems jostle for pre-eminence … [and] women tend to adhere to the older one.’ She examines the pan-European (and Mexican) phenomenon of the black Madonna, some four hundred examples of which existed by the sixteenth century, including that found at the shrine at Loreto and that of England’s ‘holiest shrine’ at Walsingham, whose Madonna was
a copy of the one in the former. Hopkins argues that ‘Othello reproduces the concerns and emotions generated by Black Virgins by similarly bringing together and exploring images of blackness, virginity, identity and salvation, in order to situate its domestic tragedy within an epistemological and eschatological context. Ultimately … Othello presents a world in which the loss of the rich heritage and complex possibilities of Mariology is perceived as imposing stark limitations on human behavior and self-image.’ In line with some recent discussions of Shakespeare’s Catholic background, she concludes that ‘[i]n Othello, we seem to see one more sign of the consequences of the loss of Catholicism’—a loss that might, for Shakespeare, have been a personal one.9

There are ‘[e]choes of … devotion [to Mary],’ Helen Ostovich argues, in Shakespeare’s presentation of Queen Isabel in Richard II. This historical child-bride of the king is associated, specifically, with the Marian virginal metaphor of the enclosed garden. The three scenes in which the Queen appears put her ‘in the paradoxical position as maid, wife, widow, and mother’ and she is associated ‘generally with the cult of the Virgin Mary and the related cult of Elizabeth.’ Ostovich interprets Isabel’s religious language as authoritative confirmation of the monarchical legitimacy of Richard, not just as political partisanship, arguing that Shakespeare uses a residual Catholic language to deal with political ideology in this drama. In a similar fashion, Thomas Rist argues that John Marston’s Sophonisba, in evoking the medieval cult of the Virgin, ‘presents such [a] cult in a world of moral and political relativity in which “the honour of the saints” could no longer be taken for granted, reflecting challenges to the cult of Mary which the Reformation brought to the fore and which themselves render Marston’s “Marianism” self-consciously political.’ Instead of using the older symbolic language to reinforce an ideology of kingship, however, Marston, Rist claims, chooses to suggest ambiguity in religious/national divisions in post-Reformation English culture.

Together, the essays in this collection highlight the presence in the time of Shakespeare and his contemporaries of a Catholic symbolic residue10 of Marianism, which dramatists utilized for figurative purposes to enrich the thematic material of their plays. The little-recognized presence in post-Reformation England of elements of a pre-Reformation Marianism helps to confirm the view of Christopher Haigh, Eamon Duffy and others that English Catholicism was slow to recede from its position of cultural centrality. Given the psychological, emotional, and social needs satisfied by Marian devotion, it is not surprising that the figure of Mary did not fade into the background as quickly as the more determined Protestant reformers wished it would. As the essays dealing with the meaning of Mary for women demonstrate, Marianism was not necessarily the politically-retrograde ideology from which Protestantism liberated women: in fact, as several contributors suggest, the opposite

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