

*Fidele Signaculum.*

*Írások Szőnyi György Endre tiszteletére / Writings in Honour of György Endre Szőnyi*

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**Worms:**

**Their Diets and Dramas in *Hamlet* and Luther**<sup>829</sup>

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**Introduction :**

**The Virus of Heresy or the Parrhesia of /Ref/W/orms?**

Five hundred years ago, on the 18th of April 1521, in the German town of Worms, a daring monk of the Augustian order and professor of Holy Scripture of the almost brand new University of Wittenberg, was summoned to appear at the Diet convoked by the new Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V. Everything and everybody was young. The University of Wittenberg, established in 1505, was just sixteen years old; the Habsburg Emperor (born in 1500) only twenty one; the monk, named Martin Luther, born in 1486, was thirty five. Luther's theological ideas concerning justification, free will, the authority of the Word rather than the Pope, were seen as dangerously heretical. Throughout the Middle Ages and at the dawn of the early modern age, two heinous enemies were said to have threatened mankind: plagues and heresies. In the culture controlled by the Catholic Church, if anything was really viral, it was heresy because it destroyed not just the frail human body but one's "eternal jewel" (*Macbeth*, 3.1.67) that is, the soul. The greatest English heresy-hunter, Saint Thomas More made it clear that his ambition was no less than stripping off the mask ("visor") of heretics in order to reveal their ugly faces:

That ye maye the more clerely perceyue the malycyouse mynde of these men, and that theyr pestilent bokes be bothe odyouse to god and deadly contagyouse to men / and so muche the

<sup>829</sup> A kutatás a Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem által támogatott, Egyesített Bibliolvasó (EBO) fejlesztése és kutatási perspektívái (20738B800) projekt keretében készült.

more perylouse in that thyer false heresyys wylyly walke forth vnder the counterfayt visage of the trew crysten faith: thys is the cause and purpose of my present labour / wherby god wylling I shall so pull theyr gaye paynted vysours, that euery man lysting to loke theron, shall playnely perceyue and byholde the bare vgly gargyle facys of theyr abominable heresy.<sup>830</sup>

According to More, Luther was “a foolish friar, to an apostate, to an overt incestuous lecher, a plain agent of the devil, and a manifest messenger of the hell”, who “is not besprinkled with a few spots, bit with more than half venom is poisoned all the wine – which is in itself right rotten. [...], [he is ] “the contagion [...] to infect a feeble soul, just as the stench of a plague sore infects a whole body.”<sup>831</sup>

For Luther, however, it was a matter of conscience to cry out for the truth, even if the world finds this behavior dangerous and foolish. Luther called himself the clown of a God who was playing a frightening game with his creatures under various masks. Luther took the risk whether the gospel he had discovered would break through the rock-hard ground of the human tradition.

Unless I am convinced by sacred Scripture, or by evident reason, I cannot recant, for my conscience is held captive by the word of God, and to act against conscience is neither right nor safe.<sup>832</sup>

Michael Foucault calls this act *parrhesia*<sup>833</sup>; the Greek word meaning frankness, openness, and the courage of truth. This term is frequently used also in the New Testament.<sup>834</sup>

Whether or not his hagiographic followers lionized him, Luther’s taking a firm stand in Worms was the scandal of the empire and, I propose to say, the proto-drama of the 16th century.

### Luther’s Worms in Hamlet’s worms

Therefore, it is no wonder that four scores later this episode captured even Shakespeare’s imagination. Hamlet, playing the madman, weaves the Luther-episode into one of his cryptic

<sup>830</sup> Thomas More, “The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer,” in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, 8. Parts I–III. The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, eds., Loius A. Schuster, C. Richard Marius and James P. Lusardi (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1973), 34.

<sup>831</sup> Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Mary Gottshalk (New York: Scepter Press, 2006), 395.

<sup>832</sup> R. C. Sproul, “Is Your Conscience Captive to God?” *DesiringGod*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/is-your-conscience-captive-to-god>.

<sup>833</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the College De France 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>834</sup> Mark 8:32; John 7:4; John 7:13; John 7:26; John 10:24; John 11:14; John 11:54; John 16:25; John 18:20; Acts 4:13; Acts 4:29; Acts 4:31; Acts 28:31; 2 Cor 3:12; 2 Cor 7:4; Eph 6:19; Phil 1:20; Heb 3:6; Heb 4:16; Heb 10:19; Heb 10:35; 1 John 3:21; 1 John 4:17; 1 John 5:14.

puns or puzzling riddles in response to the question concerning the whereabouts of the dead body of Polonius whom he had killed unwillingly, in his mother's closet.

ROSENCRANTZ

Ho, Guildenstern! bring in my lord.

Enter HAMLET and GUILDENSTERN

KING CLAUDIUS

Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET

At supper.

KING CLAUDIUS

At supper! where?

HAMLET

Not where he eats, but where he is eaten: a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table: that's the end.

KING CLAUDIUS

Alas, alas!

HAMLET

A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING CLAUDIUS

What dost you mean by this?

HAMLET

Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.<sup>835</sup>

Critical editors of the drama since the 19th century have recognized in the "emperor" a direct allusion to the Emperor Charles V., and in the "politic worms" and the "diet" a reference to the Diet of Worms. Harold Jenkins, the editor of the Arden *Hamlet* says in a footnote: "There is a

<sup>835</sup> Shakespeare's texts are download from <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/>. Accessed March 28, 2022.

play on *diet*, council, with reference to the Diet at the German city of Worms, presided over by the *emperor*. In 1521 it pronounced its ban on Luther after his famous refusal to recant.”<sup>836</sup>

Before attempting to decipher these enigmatic images, let us try answer two questions:

1. Why was Shakespeare impressed, or perhaps even inspired, by the Worms-drama? Is there, perhaps, an affinity between the dramatic mind of the German theologian and the imagination of the English playwright? 2. How did Shakespeare’s image of Luther develop? What channels mediated Luther’s story to Shakespeare’s imagination?

### **Analogy in Difference: Theological Drama and Dramatic Theology?**

As for the first question: Luther’s theology, was /is ultimately dramatic. One of Luther’s self-images was that of the “court-jester”<sup>837</sup> (*Hofnarr*). As Eric W. Gritsch aptly says, Luther appears

to have worn his heart on his sleeve, tipping his cap to the troubled consciences of common folk, ringing his bells to warn the mighty in both church and world of God’s unyielding power, and tapping his feet to the tune of the gospel’s cheering and chilling news of Christ’s lordship in a world nearing its end.<sup>838</sup>

Luther radically appropriated and even enacted St. Paul’s paradox about wisdom and foolishness: “the foolishness of God is wiser than men [...] God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise” (1Cor 1, 27, 27, KJV). Moreover, Luther very frequently used such dramatic terms in his theology as “game”, “laughter”, “theater”, “mask”, “disguise” and “hiding”. Luther also spoke about creation and history as the “face or mask of God” (*larva dei*), a *Mummenschanz*, a masquerade.”<sup>839</sup>

The marrow of Luther’s theology is the idea of the hidden God, *deus absconditus*. God, according to Luther, conceals himself (godself) under the mask of his opposite: *Deus absconditus sub contrario suo*. Luther never failed to emphasize the difference between the revealed and the hidden God (*deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*). Luther frequently mentions

<sup>836</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, New Arden Edition (London: Methuen, 1982), 340.

<sup>837</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin – God’s Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>838</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>839</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

with St Paul (1Cor 4,9) that Christians have become a “spectacle” for the world (*theatron to kosmos*). Commenting on Galatians 5,11, Luther again remarks:

Thus God wears the mask of the devil, and the devil Wears the mask of God; God wants to be recognized under the mask of the devil, and He wants the devil to be condemned under the mask of God. (LW 27,43)<sup>840</sup>.

A major theme in Shakespeare studies is the discrepancy between appearance and reality. This is another striking similarity between Shakespeare and Luther. Both of them, in their own ways, were passionately committed to the quest of reality, whatever they might have meant by it. Both of them, though being aware that “Humankind cannot bear very much reality” (Eliot), were willing to carry the burden of their journey into the naked truth of the unknown in order to grasp, perhaps only to touch it, as the mad Lear says on seeing the naked Edgar: “*thou art the thing itself*” (KL 3,3, 111)<sup>841</sup>. The climax of Luther’s famous *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) is Thesis 21:

The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross calls *the thing what it actually is*. (t. mine, TF)

Both know that real knowledge comes through suffering: in Shakespeare, reality or authenticity is gained in the painful or joyful *anagnorisis* (recognition) at the end of the plays; for Luther it is the cross that humiliates the puffed-up human ego and makes us acknowledge who we really are.

Both of them sarcastically, even scatologically ridicule egoistic and evil characters. Luther said: “I resist the devil, and often it is with a fart that I chase him away.”<sup>842</sup> Moreover, he almost verges on blasphemy when talking about Moses who wanted to see the face of God. God, said Luther, humbled him by showing him his back, or, his “rearward” part (Ex 33, 18-23).<sup>843</sup>

<sup>840</sup> *Luther’s Works* ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959–). Further citations of this work (as *LW*) are given in the text.

<sup>841</sup> For Shakespeare editions, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://shakespeare.kre.hu/>.

<sup>842</sup> “The Scatological Luther: Martin Luther, lover of the scatological joke,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (Summer, 2012), accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/summer-2012-american-vistas/the-scatological-luther/>.

<sup>843</sup> See Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross Reflections of Luther’s Heidelberg’s Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

Falstaff, in a moment of self-irony says: “I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass” (MWW 5.5.115),<sup>844</sup> which could be a pun on “arse”; Hamlet speaks on the hidden part of strumpet Fortune (Ham 2.2.493); Patroclus calls Thersites a “ruinous butt” (TC 5.1.33).

### **The Historical “Journey” from Luther’s Diet of Worms into Shakespeare’s Diet of Worms**

As for the second point: the nature of this question demands a historical quest. To unravel the layers of the literary sources would be an exciting philological investigation, but we must confine ourselves only to the immediately relevant sources. It seems to be reasonable to read these sources “backwards”: first, documents that were directly known by Shakespeare; then the ones that these direct sources mediated for him. Rarely is the martyrologist John Foxe’s (1516–1587) work *Acts and Monuments* discussed in the context of Shakespeare studies. First published in Latin in 1559, it had an enlarged English edition in 1570, and several further editions followed. If pious Elizabethan Protestants could afford it, this huge book was on their bookshelves next to the Bible in English. Shakespeare probably used the 1584 edition of Foxe: we have textual evidence in 2–3 *Henry VI*, *King John* and *Henry VIII* that Shakespeare heavily relied on it.<sup>845</sup>

Here is how Foxe described the end of the events in Worms in his 1583 edition of *Acts and Monuments*, Book 7.

considering (sayde he) your soueraigne maiesty, and your honors require a playne aunswere: thys I say and professe as resolutely as I may, without doubling or sophistication, that if I be not conuincd by testimonies of the Scriptures, & by probale reasons (for I beleuee not the Pope, neither his generall Councils, which haue erred many times, and haue bene contrary to themselues) my conscience is so bound and captiued in these scriptures and word of God which I haue alledged, that I will not, nor may not reuoke any maner of thing, considering it is not godly or lawfull to do any thing

<sup>844</sup> William Stockton, “‘I am made an ass’: Falstaff and the Scatology of Windsor’s Polity,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49, no. 4 (2007): 340–60, accessed March 28, 2022, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236725262\\_I\\_am\\_made\\_an\\_ass\\_Falstaff\\_and\\_the\\_Scatology\\_of\\_Windsor%27s\\_Polity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236725262_I_am_made_an_ass_Falstaff_and_the_Scatology_of_Windsor%27s_Polity).

<sup>845</sup> Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare’s Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare’s Sources* (London / New York: Continuum, 2001), 172–77.

against cōsciēce. Herevpon I stand and rest. I haue not what els to say. GOD haue mercy vpon me.<sup>846</sup>

Foxe's source was the book of Henry Bennet who translated Melanchthon's *Life of Luther* and published it in 1561<sup>847</sup>, fifteen years after Luther's death. The translator identifies him as a man from Calais; and his book *A Famous and Godly History*. The book is divided into two parts, which were published together: (1) A Poem: Encomy of Martine Luther<sup>848</sup>; (2) The hystolry of the Lyfe and Actes of Martine Luther, Doctour of Diuinitie. Faythfully set foorth by Phillip Melan•thon.<sup>849</sup>; (3) Martine Lulthers declaracion of hys doctrine, before the Emperours Maiesty, Charles the fyft, the Prin•ces Electors, the Estates of the Empyre, in the i•turney an• assembly of Princes at Wormes.<sup>850</sup>; (4) An intimalcion, geuen by Philip Mellancthon to hys Auditorye, at Vitteberg. The yere 1546. Of the decease of Mar|tyne Luther. (∴)<sup>851</sup>; (5) Philip Mellancthons Oracion, made and recited for the Funeralles of the Reuerens man Marrin• Lulther at Vitteberge.<sup>852</sup>

Not unlike Ben Jonson's *To the Memory of my Beloved Master William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us* in the First Folio of 1623<sup>853</sup>, Benett's *The Encomy of Martine Luther* is also a fine example of hagiography.

A head where Pallas misteries wer fraight,  
A face where •oumy brightlye dyd appeare,  
An eye yt could discerne ech mynde • sleight,  
And eares contēpning priuate •au• to heare  
A tong that dyd pronounce the sacred truth,  
A prareirs pen, that paynted well the same.  
A zeale that moued Tigrish hartes to ru•he,  
And could to vertue mild•s mindes enflame  
A mynde aspiring ay to wysdomes throne.

<sup>846</sup> John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments Online*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/index.php?realm=text&gototype=&edition=1583&pageid=864>.

<sup>847</sup> Philip Melanchton, *A famous and godly history contaynyng the lyues a[nd] actes of three renowned reformers of the Christia[n] Church, Martine Luther, Iohn Ecolampadius, and Huldericke Zuinglius. The declaracion of Martin Luthers faythe before the Emperoure Charles the fyft, and the illustre estates of the empyre of Germanye, with an oration of hys death, all set forth in Latin by Philip Melancthon, Wolfgangus Faber, Capito. Simon Grineus, [and] Oswald Miconus, newly Englished by Henry Bennet Callesian*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A08486.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

<sup>848</sup> Ibid., <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A08486.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid., <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A08486.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

<sup>850</sup> Ibid., <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A08486.0001.001/1:4.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

<sup>851</sup> Ibid., <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A08486.0001.001/1:4.3?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid., <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A08486.0001.001/1:4.4?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

<sup>853</sup> Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of my Beloved Master William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us", in *The Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 3. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1910), 287–89, accessed, March 28, 2022, <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/jonson/benshake.htm>.

A hart that neuer drad the Tirantes might.  
 A rocke yt wold remoue from truth for none  
 Disdayning death in quarell of the ryght.  
 These golden gifts, in Luther shined bright  
 For which he now receiues immortal light.

### “Worms” in Shakespeare’s Poems and Plays

Shakespeare seems to have been obsessed with “worms” and the “worm”, for example in the celebrated Sonnet 71: “No longer mourn for me when I am dead [...] Give warning to the world that I am fled / *From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell*”.

Worm is associated with death in Shakespeare’s only explicitly religious Sonnet 146: “Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,[...] / *Shall worms, inheritors of this excess, / Eat up thy charge? is this thy body's end?*”

Worm in Shakespeare is almost exclusively associated with death, or at least with the finite, fragile nature of human life, if not with the utmost reverse of human dignity. In *King Lear*, both Lear and Gloucester realize the wormhood nature of human existence in the midst of their undeserved sufferings. When the mad Lear is confronted with the naked Edgar as Poor Tom, he says:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou *owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide*, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume [...] Thou art the thing itself. (3.4.71)

Poor Tom’s nakedness also evoked the worm as the image of ultimate human reality for Gloucester, as he is lead unto the imaginary cliffs of Dover by his Edgar disguised as a madman.

I’ the last night’s storm I such a fellow saw; Which made me think *a man a worm* (4.1.36–7).

The cosmic dimension of *King Lear* has frequently made critics think of the gigantic tapestry of the *Book of Job*, and not without a cause. Bildad says in the shortest speech and chapter of this long book:

How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his sight. *How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm?*” (Job, 25,4–6)

The worm is, again, associated with death in the Prince's epitaph of his rival Hotspur at the end of *King Henry IV* part I. These are the last and deeply philosophical words leaving the lips of the dying ambitious young Percy:

But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool;  
And time, that takes survey of all the world,  
Must have a stop. O, I could prophesy,  
But that the earthy and cold hand of death  
Lies on my tongue: no, *Percy, thou art dust*  
*And food for[...]*

The two half-sentences unite the dead Percy with the Prince remaining alive after the great combat of death and life. The Prince cannot but praise his enemy in his noble epitaph.

*For worms, brave Percy: fare thee well, great heart!*  
Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk!  
When that this body did contain a spirit,  
A kingdom for it was too small a bound;  
But now two paces of the vilest earth  
Is room enough [...]

We could go on convoking dozens of further worms-words from other plays and poems of the bard, but let us conclude that the worm-image is a pregnant word loaded with the meaning of death. Discussing the metaphors of insects, spiders and worms in John Updike's novels, a Polish scholar says

the worm is a small crawling animal, living close to the earth and feeding on decaying matter, it is associated with physicality, material decay, disintegration, and dirt. Metaphorically, it can express a certain perspective on man's condition: it emphasizes human mortality and transience; points to his insignificance in the grand scheme of things; finally, it indicates human weakness and ugliness, both physical and spiritual impurity.<sup>854</sup>

These tiny animals are frequently used as important baits for fishing, occasionally even for carrions.<sup>855</sup> Maggots<sup>856</sup> are the larval stage of a fly – that stage between the egg and the chrysalis (cocoon). These three maggots are differently sized, some of them are squats, pinkies,

<sup>854</sup> Iwona Filipczak, "Of Worms and Insects: Metaphors of the Human Condition in Selected John Updike's Novels," in Marie Crhova and Michaela Weiss, eds., *Silesian Studies in English 2015: Proceedings of the 4th International Conference of English and American Studies* (Opava: Silesian University in Opava, 2016), 184.

<sup>855</sup> Akira Ueda et al., Comparison of Baits and Types of Pitfall Traps for Capturing Dung and Carrion Scarabaeoid Beetles in East Kalimantan, *Bulletin of the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute* 14, no.1 (no. 434) (2015): 15–28, <https://www.ffpri.affrc.go.jp/pubs/bulletin/434/documents/434-2.pdf>.

<sup>856</sup> "Maggots – The Perfect Fishing Bait," *AnglingTimes*, January 29, 2014, <https://www.anglingtimes.co.uk/advice/bait/maggots-the-perfect-fishing-bait/>.

and casters. Squats are the larvae of the small House Fly, pinkies are the larvae of the Greenfly, and maggots are the larval stage of the European Bluebottle fly. Worms can be used as baits for fishing and carcasses<sup>857</sup> for different types of baits.<sup>858</sup>

### **Hamlet' s Puns: Maggots, Carrions, Worms, the King, and the Body (of the Lord)**

The word worm has indeed a privileged status in the vocabulary of *Hamlet*. Having decided to put on an antic disposition, Hamlet develops a cryptic language which seems to be chaotic and thus the evidence of his madness. However, such self-concealment is revelation of his high intelligence.

The fishmonger Polonius uses Ophelia as a worm or a maggot for a bait. The images of the maggot and the carrion are yoked together when Hamlet aggressively alludes to Ophelia to the “fishmonger” Polonius. The fishmonger metaphor is not a nonsense as Polonius not only “looses” his daughter but uses her as a bait to gain evidence for the cause of Hamlet’s madness, just as the mousetrap will catch the conscience of the King. Ironically, it was Polonius who had just used Reynaldo as a bait to spy on Learthes’s whereabouts in Paris:

Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth:  
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,  
With windlasses and with assays of bias,  
By indirections find directions out (2.1.66–69)

On meeting with the spying Polonius, Hamlet uses the image of the maggot:

HAMLET

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a  
god kissing carrion,—Have you a daughter?

LORD POLONIUS

I have, my lord.

HAMLET

Let her not walk i' the sun: conception is a

<sup>857</sup> “Can I use animal carcasses as bait instead of normal bait?” posted by “u/Nateddog21,” accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/reddeadr redemption/ comments/9xeoqr/can i use animal carcasses as bait instead of>.

<sup>858</sup> “Fishing Baits Used by Anglers,” *www.fish-uk.com*, accessed March 28, 2022, [https://www.fish-uk.com/fishing\\_baits.htm](https://www.fish-uk.com/fishing_baits.htm).

blessing: but not as your daughter may conceive.  
Friend, look to 't.

What does Hamlet mean by his provocative address to Polonius? The sun also has a special meaning in the plays. To Claudius's cynically kind address: "our son" Hamlet's first cryptic response is an aside: "A little more than kin and less than kind" (king, kin, kind). Then his direct reply is likewise cynical: "I am too much in the sun." As the sun is frequently the emblem of kingship, we may conjecture that Hamlet means "I wish I were not close to you. The sun's power is ambiguous: it can conceive, create life, but in a dead dog it might breed disgusting maggots, i.e., it could breed maggots by impregnating or inseminating even dead organic body."<sup>859</sup> The sun (or the dead dog?) is a "good<sup>860</sup> kissing carrion" or a "god kissing carrion."<sup>861</sup> "The idea that maggots and the like were produced by a process of spontaneous generation caused by the sun, the source of life, shining on dead matter was a commonplace of the time."<sup>862</sup> Carrion can be also a loose woman as in *Troilus* 4.1.72–73.<sup>863</sup>

Scholars have noted that between 1586 and 1595 Wittenberg had two students named Rosenkrantz and Gyldenstjerne and that it was the favourite university for the Danes to study abroad. Raymond B. Waddington<sup>864</sup> and other scholars<sup>865</sup> explored this analogy, and I have proposed elsewhere that Wittenberg is a metaphor of the drama and assessed whether the Hamlet / Luther parallels proposed by scholars are considerable insights or too stretched, i.e. far-fetched.

Most recently Stephen Greenblatt, in his celebrated *Hamlet in Purgatory*, wittily summed up the established critical consensus that in the play "a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost."<sup>866</sup>

<sup>859</sup> A political comment as hate-speech on 27 September, 2012: "Dobrev kivirágzott, mint a penész a napon rohadó májkonzerv oldalán [blossomed like mold on the side of a can of liver paste rotting in the sun]." [https://www.facebook.com/kontra.hu/posts/347353777135849?utm\\_source=mandiner&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_campaign=mandiner\\_202109](https://www.facebook.com/kontra.hu/posts/347353777135849?utm_source=mandiner&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=mandiner_202109).

<sup>860</sup> Warburton and others: "god kissing carrion."

<sup>861</sup> Piotr Sadowski "'A god/good kissing carrion': *Hamlet* 2.ii.181," *English Language Notes* 39, no. 1 (2001): 23–7, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-39.1.23>.

<sup>862</sup> *The Oxford Shakespeare: Hamlet*, ed., George Richard Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213.

<sup>863</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>864</sup> Raymond B. Waddington, "Lutheran Hamlet," in *English Language Notes* 27, no. 2 (1989): 27–42.

<sup>865</sup> Cay Dollerup, *Denmark, 'Hamlet,' and Shakespeare: A Study of Englishmen's Knowledge of Denmark Towards the Sixteenth Century with Special Reference to 'Hamlet'* 2 vols. (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1975), Vol.1.128; See also Gunnar Sjögren, "The Danish Background of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Studies* no. 4 (1968): 221–30; Steve Sohmer, "Certain Speculations on *Hamlet*, the Calendar, and Martin Luther," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2, no. 1 (1996): 5, accessed March 28, 2022, <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/02-1/sohmshak.html>; <http://www.shu.ac.uk/emls/02-1/sohmshak.html>.

<sup>866</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989), 240.

Greenblatt, without quoting Raymond B. Waddington<sup>867</sup>, develops the Claudius-Hamlet dialogue concerning the dead body of Polonius. Claudius asks: “Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?” Hamlet’s reply: “At supper”. Claudius: “At supper! where?” Hamlet: “Not where he eats but where he is eaten” (4.3.16–19). The rest is the worm/Worms wordplay that we mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

The significance of these words extends beyond the cruel and callous joke about Polonius; the supper where the host does not eat but is eaten is the Supper of the Lord.<sup>868</sup>

Greenblatt is right to suggest that the allusion to the Lord’s Supper is perhaps a subtle subtext of the play. However, unlike Waddington, Greenblatt does not notice another hidden potential of the Rosencranz-Claudius-Hamlet “trialogue”: “bring in the Lord / ..where is Polonius? / At supper” (4.3.15–17). The question of the Eucharist triggered perhaps the hottest debates not only between Protestants and Catholics but Protestants and Protestant (i.e. Lutherans and Zwingli) in the sixteenth century. Though the Lutheran position was not as far from the Catholic position as the Swiss sacramentalist’s. The groups belonging to one or the other of the two positions would frequently ridicule one another:

If God was actually bread [...] it meant that could be eaten by worms, flies and mice, that the divine body could decay and rot, or that, passing through the intestines, it could be transformed into excrement.<sup>869</sup>

If we associate the dead body of Polonius that is eaten by the worms with the Eucharist, which, at least in the Catholic and Lutheran tradition means “eating the Lord’s body”, then perhaps, in retrospect, we add another potential interpretation to the frequently debated but unsolved puzzle.

ROSENCRANTZ

My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go  
with us to the king.

HAMLET

The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing—

GUILDENSTERN

<sup>867</sup> Waddington, “Lutheran Hamlet,” 28.

<sup>868</sup> Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 241.

<sup>869</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

A thing, my lord!

HAMLET

Of nothing: bring me to him. (4.2.29)

There are various explanations:

1. Body= Polonius; King =Claudius: *Polonius is with Claudius (in his palace); but Claudius is not with Polonius (=Claudius is not dead -yet.)*
2. King 1= Claudius; King 2=Old Hamlet: *“Claudius has the body =he is alive, but Old Hamlet is dead.”*
3. body 1= King’s body (his sacred reign =Old Hamlet)” *Old Hamlet (body 1)embodied the sacred body of kingship; but Claudius is not with the sacred body, ie. the kingship, Claudius a usurper.*

If we associate the Lord Supper with the Eucharist, i.e. the Body of Christ; then, retrospectively we may suggest :at

1. Christ (the King) is with the Body (Catholic and Lutheran Real Presence in the Eucharist);
2. Christ (the King) is not with the Body (Reformed – Symbolic and not Real Presence)

There is no denotative meaning of this puzzle; however, playing games with possible meanings can be stimulating intellectually.

### **Eating, the Body, Dying and the Cycle of Life.**

It is not enough to identify topical reference; we have to recognize that these puns revolve around eating. Polonius is at such a supper where his body is eaten rather than eating. His body is not the subject but the object of eating. The Eucharist as a grotesque subtext of Hamlet’s words is indeed echoed here. We fat (and feed) all creatures (including worms) so that they would fat (or feed) us. A diet is not just a political convocation but as a noun it refers to the kinds of food that a person, animal, or community habitually eats.<sup>870</sup>

<sup>870</sup> “definition of diet”, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=definition+of+diet>.

Hamlet's "madness" reveals wisdom concerning not only the nature of death as "levelling", "equaling" kings and beggars, but also his perception of the cycle of life and death as the natural rhythm of the eternal recurrence.

HAMLET

[...] we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table: that's the end.

KING CLAUDIUS

Alas, alas!

HAMLET

A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING CLAUDIUS

What dost you mean by this?

HAMLET

Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (4.3.24–33)

Shakespeare's verbal imagination was steeped in the heritage of common wisdom (*philosophia perennis*). Whether consciously or not, he shared the common wisdom of the past, the present and, perhaps, even of the future. His language abounds in proverbial, mythological, iconographical, and, of course, topical allusions. "Every beggar is descended from a king and every king is descended from a beggar"<sup>871</sup> is one of the proverbs in the huge and impressive *Dictionary of Proverbs* collected from the literature and dictionaries of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, published in 1950.

In emblem-books, worms are also associated with skulls and bones – all symbolizing transience and death. George Wither's *A collection of emblemes, ancient and modern*, published in 1635,<sup>872</sup> echoes Hamlet's "the two dishes" of the beggar and the king "on one table". The visual message of the icon says: "A skull sits on a worm-infested grave on which lie a scepter

<sup>871</sup> Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), accessed March 28, 2022, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015016495585&view=1up&seq=59>.

<sup>872</sup> "George Wither's Emblem Book (1635)," *The Public Domain Review*, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/george-wither-s-emblem-book-1635>.

and the spade.” (Emblem 48). The epigram at the end of the long poem says: “For, when the Fatal blow, Death Come to strike, He makes the Beggar and the King alike.”

Doyle notices that in Hamlet’s above quoted witty exchange of words with Claudius on “*how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar*”, the image of the cycle of life is implied. Hamlet wittily proposes that the king may not only be eaten by a worm, but even by a beggar: “This phrase is especially troublesome with its almost cannibalistic implications. In this grisly, yet effective, illustration of a warped food cycle, the worm holds a certain precedence over all creatures: the king is consumed by the worm, which is consumed by the fish, which is eaten by the beggar, who at his death will be eaten by the worm again: and the cycle continues, beginning at the end – death.”<sup>873</sup>

#### **Conclusion:**

#### **The Drama and the Transfiguration of the Worm**

With all these on our minds we may return to, indeed, conclude with Luther’s idea, which I would call “the transfiguration of the worm.” Luther says that God would let His Son descend from heaven and be nailed to the cross, where He, too, hangs like a serpent or a worm, the object of scorn and contempt, as Christ Himself laments in Ps. 22:6. LW 22,340. On the cross, the Son of Man becomes a “worm” with the words of Psalm 22 which is said to be quoted by Jesus. This worm, says Luther in his commentary on Psalm 8,4 “is mocked, spit upon, scourged, crowned, and crucified [...] His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the sons of men. He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men.” (LW 12, 123)

The worm is identical with the brazen serpent as he explains in his exegesis of John 3:

This signifies that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, born of a virgin, became like us condemned people and hung on the cross like a poisonous, evil, and harmful worm [...] He was not regarded as a godly person but as a venomous worm unworthy of having the sun shine onto Him, as a menace to the entire world. (LW 22. 340)

The American Luther scholar Kenneth Hagen says: “The meaning of Christ as worm on the cross carried the connotations of Christ being abject, the object of contempt, forsaken,

<sup>873</sup> doyle7, “Hamlet’s Speech of Worms,” *Reading (Dys)functional Families: An Interpretive Project*, September 24, 2015, <https://readingdysfunctionalfamilies.wordpress.com/2015/09/24/hamlets-speech-of-worms/>.

nauseating, abominable, rotten stench, scandal, offensive or, simply, rotting worm.”<sup>874</sup> The appearance of Christ for the world, for the unbelievers is that of a worm. But only this worm, which has turned out to be the most beautiful butterfly, can save us from perdition and heal us from our terminal disease.

The worm for Luther has a crucial role in the grand drama of humanity. Luther appropriates Gregory the Great’s ideas about God’s deception of Satan. According to the patristic tradition Satan also has a role in the redemption and it was prefigured in the Book of Job. In the Book of Job Satan claims that sinful beings are his own property. Thus, God has to “pay” the ransom to Satan, too. Therefore, he offers his own son as a ransom for mankind to the devil. Christ’s cry that he is forsaken by God is the sign that God has indeed passed him on to the devil. Satan is like a great Leviathan who devours Christ in his eagerness (the image of the open mouth of the Leviathan is depicted in hundreds of pictures of the Harrowing of the Hell in medieval iconography). Satan is so dazzled by the perfect humanity of Christ that he is happy to accept him as ransom for all those he had swallowed. But in his admiration of Christ’s perfect humanity, Satan fails to notice his divinity which pierces him through the jaw. Here, then, Christ is the bait, and the devil is caught as if on a fisherman’s hook.

Nor did the humanity conquer sin and death; but the hook that was concealed under the worm, at which the devil struck, conquered and devoured the devil, who was attempting to devour the worm. Therefore the humanity would not have accomplished anything by itself; but the divinity, joined with the humanity, did it alone, and the humanity did it on account of the divinity. (LW 26,267)

God took a sharp fishhook, put an angleworm on it and threw it into the sea. The worm is the humanity of Christ, the hook the divinity. On the hook the worm is “gebunden”, bound. The devil says, “Should I not swallow the little worm?” He did not see the hook. Christ on the cross is pure man, a worm. The humanity did not conquer sin and death; but the hook that was concealed under the worm, at which the devil struck, conquered and devoured the devil, who was attempting to devour the worm.<sup>875</sup>

But this is not the end of the worm-story. We can speak about the resurrection of the worm. Commenting on the Genesis story of Sarah’s death, Luther remarks:

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<sup>874</sup> Kenneth George Hagen, “The Testament of a Worm: Luther on Testament and Covenant,” *Consensus* 8, no. 1 (1982): 19.

<sup>875</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

it has pleased God to raise up from worms, from corruption, from the earth, which is totally putrid and full of stench, a body more beautiful than any flower, than balsam, than the sun itself and the stars. (LW 4,190)

Hagen quotes Clement of Alexandria for whom the worm is not just the symbol of humiliation but it is used also as a resurrection symbol: the worm comes forth from the decaying flesh of the phoenix bird. “Now, from the corruption of its flesh there springs a worm, which is nourished by the juices of the dead bird, and puts forth wing.”<sup>876</sup> The transformation of the phoenix from a worm is proof of Christian resurrection.

Two hundred years after Shakespeare, the America polymath Jonathan Edwards uses the same image in his *Images and Shadows of Divine Thing*:

The silkworm is a remarkable type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which make such glorious clothing. Christ became a worm for our sakes [...], and by his death finished that righteousness with which believers are clothed, and thereby procured that we should be clothed with robes of glory.<sup>877</sup>

Having come to our final conclusion, we mention that in the Orthodox tradition of *theosis* the transformation of man into divinity is also frequently depicted with the image of an ugly worm’s metamorphosis into a beautiful butterfly, the path already taken by the life, death and resurrection of the Son of Man. In the words of an “Unworthy Seraphim”:

Make no mistake, our little *silkworm must die in order to become a butterfly*, but the place where it dies is Christ. – St Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*

Transformation, transfiguration, metamorphosis – this is at the heart of the Christian faith [...] as St Teresa stated above, *we are a worms destined to become butterflies!* No doubt many of us today feel this way. Something like a worm crawling through the mud, hoping they are not eaten a bird (I mean the spiritual birds of anxiety, rage, fear and despair). All the while we sense deep within that we are meant to become butterflies. Meant to become something entirely beautiful. Meant to fly high and free, even above the predators that seek to eat our souls. To be like Christ because we see Him for Who He IS (1 John 3:2). Christ speaks constantly of the Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospels because He is inviting us into a new reality. Imagine the worm and the butterfly, and the vast difference between what they see of the world.<sup>878</sup>

<sup>876</sup> Ibid.

<sup>877</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Images and Shadows of Divine Thing,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance, and David Waters, vol. 11 (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>878</sup> Webmaster, “The Metamorphosis of the Silkworm – The Spiritual Hunger of Our Times,” April 20, 2017, <https://ocf.org/metamorphosis-silkworm-spiritual-hunger-times/>.