

## Grace in Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>

*excerpt 2014 Santa Clara Lecture*

Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author

“Grace is grace, despite of all controversy.”<sup>2</sup> These words are spoken by the character Lucio in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. Lucio is a fool and a scoundrel, a Fantastic, according to the *Dramatis Personae*. But he is also the loyal friend who takes steps to save a man from suffering death as a penalty for an offense that is only made punishable by an extremely rigid interpretation of law. These words are part of a half-serious exchange with two anonymous Gentlemen in a house of ill repute, and Lucio ends his remark with a jibe, “as for example, thou art a wicked villain, despite of all grace.”<sup>3</sup>

In this scene Lucio and the Gentlemen are playing back and forth between two meanings of the word “grace,” as “the thanksgiving before meat,”<sup>4</sup> and as a central concept of Christian theology, by which, in Lucio’s taunting instance, a villain might be rescued from his wicked proclivities in this life. Still, Lucio’s words are worth pausing over. “Grace is grace” – simply itself, not accessible to paraphrase. This would indeed put it beyond controversy, since there is no language in which it can be controverted, and it would give it a special character, most notably in the Shakespearean world where associations among words, figures, similes, are constant and central. Lucio’s exchanges with the Gentlemen mention that table grace is to be heard in any religion, with the further implication that one would be better for hearing it. In this sense also it is put beyond controversy, and every religion is, so to speak, graced by it. I propose that, in his later plays, Shakespeare gives grace a scale and esthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression—not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself. Hamlet speaks of ideal virtues, calling them “pure as grace.”<sup>5</sup> Prospero, after the scene of rather detached and unceremonious reconciliations, speaks his amazing Epilogue to the audience, asking them to release him from his island, “As you from crimes would pardoned be.”<sup>6</sup> He says, “My ending is despair, Unless I be relieved by prayer, /Which pierces so that it assaults/ Mercy itself and frees all faults.”<sup>7</sup> Prayer opens on something purer and grander than mercy, something that puts aside the consciousness of fault, the residue of judgment that makes mercy qualitatively a lesser thing than grace.

The word “Reformation” suggests that the primary source and effect of the controversy that fascinated Europe was a change in church polity. In fact, in this period people were pondering the deepest thoughts and traditions they shared as Christians. The powerful intervened and criminalized the expression of one or another theology, depending on the regime in power at the time, and this created a factionalism and repressiveness that perverted a rich conversation. Critics and historians have followed this precedent, often eager to identify the sympathies of any figure who did not, himself or herself, make them absolutely clear, as if a leaning were an identity, and might not change from year to year, depending whom one had spoken with lately, or what one had read, or how an argument settled into individual thought or experience. In answer to the question: Which side are you on? “I’m still deciding,” or “I see merit in a number of positions,” would not have been more pleasing to the enforcers of any orthodoxy than outright heresy would be. High order thinking is not so readily forced into pre-existing categories. If we step back from seeing the period as a political struggle first of all, the official view of it, we might see it as passionate and profoundly interesting, entirely consistent with the richness of its philosophic and literary achievements. What *is* grace, after all? What *is* the soul?

Again, I eschew any attempt to identify Shakespeare as the partisan of any side of the controversy, with a few provisos. First, to express any opinion or attitude that offended authority was extremely dangerous, to life and limb and also to the whole phenomenon of public theater. So tact must be assumed. I think it is appropriate to see Shakespeare as a theologian in his own right, though the perils that attended religious expression made his theology implicit rather than overt. Second, Shakespeare tests various and opposed ideas, giving each one extraordinarily rich expression. He savors a good idea.

My third point is a little more complex. Broadly speaking, English religious culture during this period was divided into three parts, Catholic, Anglican and Protestant, Catholicism was traditional, and had major support from the Continent. Anglicanism was the British withdrawal from communion with Rome and from Papal authority, with selected aspects of Catholicism and of Reformed teaching retained or absorbed. The Protestants, as I call them here, are elsewhere called Calvinists or Puritans. They were the faction that became strong enough by the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to carry out a successful revolution and to depose, try and execute the king, Charles I. This happened after Shakespeare’s death, but a movement of such

strength would have to have been formidable for decades... All this is to make the point that there were three highly distinctive, theologically articulate religious cultures in Elizabethan England, not the usual triad of Catholics, Protestants and curmudgeons. When the Laws of Uniformity were passed under Elizabeth, they criminalized both Catholic and Protestant forms of worship in that they departed from Anglican practice. Both Catholics and Protestants lost most of their civil rights, which were restored to them both in the 19th century. Both suffered persecution and martyrdom. So, if Shakespeare seems cautious and elusive, it could mean that he was Catholic, or that he was Protestant, or that he did not want to align himself with or against any faction. His younger contemporary, Rene Descartes, was similarly elusive, probably on these same grounds. He described himself as masked, like an actor. It was the nature of the times.

But if Shakespeare did take seriously the great questions bruited in his civilization during the whole of his lifetime, then he might have reflected on the meaning behind, or beyond, it all—not the geopolitics of it, but the essential, shared truth that underlay these aggravated differences. Grace is grace. How would this be staged?

*In February 2014, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson delivered the 2014 Santa Clara Lecture as part of the 2013-2014 Bannan Institute: What Good Is God? During Marilynne Robinson's visit to campus, Santa Clara Magazine editor, Steven Boyd Saum, spoke with Robinson about grace in her own writing, how to teach discernment, and what it means to be a modern believer.*

**You're here to give a talk called "Grace in Shakespeare." What about *grace* in Robinson, since that's a term that is so often applied to your writing?**

The interpretation of Shakespeare plays that I'm doing is suggesting a different way of turning the question of grace than I myself would have thought of without pondering those plays. I think about that phrase from the Gospel of John, "full of grace and truth"—it suggests more than an *accidental* relationship between grace and truth. The grace of God, I think, is almost simultaneous with the word *God* itself. From the human point of view, I think that when you participate in grace, you're elevated above worldly considerations—grudges, fears, resentments—all those things that you accumulate in the clutter of self-protectiveness that arises as you develop in life. The moments of grace are the moments in which your vision of reality is, for the moment, actually free. You are out of the trenches. And I think that is something that people very often feel they have experienced, that experientially it is true. I often talk to people who have no theological vocabulary, but the minute the concept of grace becomes available to

them, they recognize it. They love it. It could so easily be the core of any sort of reconstruction of our religious sensibilities.

**Have you experienced that in your writing workshops?**

Oh, yes. My students are wonderful. Like everybody else, they're shy about any kind of religious issue and made anxious by it. But these are the kinds of ideas that do engage them. A lot has happened to corrupt the vocabulary of religious thought. It's always been hard, I think, for writers to feel that they could use it as a subject, but it's much harder when the generous impulses of fiction seem to run contrary to the ungenerous constructions that are made of religious sensibility. That's a problem that religious institutions have to solve. Nobody else can do it.

**Let me ask you a question that Michael Engh, S.J., the president of Santa Clara, asked the Dalai Lama when he was just here: How do you teach students *discernment*?**

I don't know. I think that human beings are basically discerning and that you have to be careful not to distract them or mislead them or alarm them. I think that a great deal of the best teaching is simply to take away anxiety: *You can do this, it's in your nature, what do you think?* It is in people's nature, and they can think for themselves. We have created this sort of culture of "right" answers that's based on an irrationalist model that really is blown sky-high. I mean, it has no leg to stand on. Like science, for example—which, God bless, I love science—it has created a dialect of intellectual speech that gets imposed on people through education, and if it fits badly with the uses that they would want to make of language, with the articulations of experience they would want to express, they're left sort of baffled. It silences them, because usually this sort of dialect has such authority. It is learning, as far as they're concerned; it's intellectualism, even. So you can actually sort of freeze people, even in their own thoughts, by giving them conclusions. I think that's one of the things we're dealing with all the time now: people who think that you can't believe XYZ because, rationally—which means in Newtonian terms—it's not possible. But that's just an archaic mode of thought.

**And you're very articulate in talking about what you call the "miraculous" that one discovers through science—this sense of wonder and amazement, whether it's quantum mechanics or the surface of Mercury.**

Exactly. A lot of scientists act as if what they are doing is deflating awe, and what they're doing, in fact, is making the universe into a theatre of awe that nobody could've imagined. I'm glad that they don't act consistently with their own sort of very poor public relations. I mean, I think it's an incredible privilege to live now, when the blossoming of scientific consciousness is just unbelievably beautiful.

**This fall we had Christian Wiman here. He talked about what it means to be a modern believer. I'm wondering what that means for you. I think one finds saying you're *religious* versus being *spiritual* can be a challenge.**

I'm religious. I mean the traditions are articulations of a truth that is greater than any specific articulation. And that, conceptually, they're the language we have, in the same way that English is the language we have. *Spirituality* seems often to me to be unserious at the deepest sense. You know what I mean? I know about things historically, that's just my habit of mind. But it makes me very aware that very thoughtful people have shaped and considered, and that ideas that are

enormously valuable to me have come down through a chain of transmission—which is my religious tradition, our religious tradition. It would seem inhumane to me to try to step free of what is, in many cases, the most beautiful thinking people have done. I really do believe, very deeply, that reverence toward God has to be simultaneous with reverence toward humankind and history too. And that if you refuse the gifts, the best—but also the most painful in many cases, and the most frightening and most tragic—you're sort of betraying all those generations before that were in conversation with God, too. It seems holier-than-thou, in a way, to say I'm *spiritual* and not *religious*.

**Marilynne Robinson** is the author *Gilead*, which won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Her most recently published novel, *Home*, a companion to *Gilead*, won the 2008 L.A. Times Book Prize for fiction and the 2009 Orange Prize for fiction. Robinson is also the author of the modern classic *Housekeeping*, which won the PEN/Ernest Hemingway Award for First Fiction and the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award from the Academy of American Arts and Letters, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. She is also the author of four books of nonfiction, *Mother Country*, *The Death of Adam*, *Absence of Mind*, and *When I Was a Child I Read Books* and she has a fresh novel due out in Fall 2014 entitled *Lila*. Robinson did her undergraduate work at Pembroke College, the former women's college at Brown University, receiving her B.A., *magna cum laude* in 1966. She also received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Washington in 1977. She teaches at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

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<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act 1, Scene 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 4.

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Tempest*, Act 5, Epilogue.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.