

2013

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Recommended Citation

Connell, Martin. "The Date of Easter and Shakespeare's 'Progress of the Stars': Creed and Chronometry in the Sixteenth Century." *Worship* 87, no. 2 (2013): 130-148.

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The Date of Easter and Shakespeare's "Progress of the Stars": Creed and Chronometry in the Sixteenth Century

William Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" opens with the question "Is this a holiday?" followed by another, "What, know you not?"¹ The queries seem benign and, perhaps, humorless four centuries after the drama about the assassination of the ancient Roman emperor premiered at the Globe Theater in 1599,² but — within a century of King Henry VIII's start of the Church of England (1534) — chronometry was a grave matter of church and state. Audience members would likely have poked one another as the play began because Flavius's questions reveal social rubs between churches and calendars in late Elizabethan England.³

Because Shakespeare wrote other dramas of ancient Roman history — "Antony and Cleopatra" and "Coriolanus" within the decade after "Julius Caesar" — one cannot claim that he took up the imperial figure *only* because of a late sixteenth-century's calendar controversy. But Shakespeare's first Roman play coincided with the worst span of controversy between the Vatican and Canterbury, adding at least another reason for Londoners to be amused at hearing Shakespeare's lines about time in light of Britain's time-keeping broils. Chronometry pops up throughout the play, so here

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¹ Act 1, Scene 1, lines 2–3; as from *Julius Caesar*, ed. William Montgomery (New York: Penguin 2000) 5. All quotes from the play will be cited as *Julius Caesar* and come from this edition with the citations according to Act, Scene, and lines (e.g., 1.1.1.2–3 above).

² See James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (New York: HarperCollins 2005), the year during which "Julius Caesar" premiered at the Globe Theater.

³ The seminar on "Historical Research: 16th Century to the Present," at the North American Academy of Liturgy Meeting in Montreal, 5–8 January 2012 supplied hospitality and critical reading and feedback for this essay; to the seminar, its convener, James Turrell, and my friend Donna Trump, who also read the essay critically, I am thankful.

I highlight how post-Reformation, Catholic-vs.-Protestant aggressions were a likely source of Shakespeare's Caesarian punctuations regarding time.

Many of the declarations from Caesar's eventual slayer, Brutus, are about time, as here speaking to Lucius:

Brutus: Is not tomorrow, boy, the first of March?

Lucius: I know not, sir.

Brutus: Look in the calendar and bring me word (2.1.40-42).

Why would Brutus not know the day? Or why did Shakespeare put puzzlement about the date in the play? Earlier in the scene, Brutus — in an aside to the audience, then piqued on matters of the calendar — had said:

I cannot by the progress of the stars
Give guess how near to day (2.1.2-3).

Indeed, up to the murder of Caesar, characters ask questions about time, as the emperor himself, not long before his death, asks, "What is't o'clock?," a question placed two scenes later on the lips of the emperor's murderer's wife, Portia: "What is't o'clock?"⁴ So, what was the matter with time in Elizabethan England?

FROM THE JULIAN CALENDAR TO SHAKESPEARE'S
"JULIUS CAESAR"

Julius Caesar of history introduced his calendar to the Roman Empire in 45 B.C.E., an improvement over its predecessor, but still not in synch with the "the progress of the stars."⁵ The Julian year was 365.25 days long, the extra quarter-day (0.25) the result of a 366th day added every fourth year, a bissextile day, in Latin, or, in our usage, a "leap year."⁶ At first glance the length of a year then

⁴ From Caesar: 2.2.114; from Portia: 2.4.24.

⁵ For summary of the calendar reform under Julius Caesar, and the gradual disjunction, see Bonnie Blackburn and Leo Franc Holford-Strevens, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Year* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1999) 670-83.

⁶ The time of year for the "leap" continues from the Julian calendar. The extra day then was the second sixth day before the Kalends of March, February 24, VI Kal. Mart., as known and usually abbreviated in Latin, which would be two

seems pretty close to today's chronometry — with its year of 365.2422 days — but in reality the difference between 365.25 and 365.2422 days made the Julian year about eleven minutes, twelve seconds longer than the actual year. The calendar date gradually fell behind the sun, no big whoop from year to year, or even from decade to decade, perhaps, but from century to century the increments added up to more than ten days.

For a few centuries after the Empire's promulgation of the Julian calendar, the gap between the progress of the stars and human chronometry was not noticed, yet in the early Middle Ages the discrepancy was apparent to the wise and Venerable Bede (ca. 673-735).⁷ Bede wrote *The Reckoning of Time* to reconcile the calendars of Egypt, Rome, Ireland, and England — his local Northumbria, in particular — so that in his land, indeed in his very monastery, monks and those in formation to be monks, whom Bede taught, could be sure that their Easter coincided with Easter as reckoned elsewhere. For then, as now, Christianity maintains that temporal unity signifies social communion, and temporal diversity social fracture.

The complicated formula for the date of Easter established in the fourth century — the Sunday after the full moon after the spring equinox — contributed to uncertainty in time-measurement, so the chronometric gap between Julius Caesar's calendar and the heavens widened.⁸ Expansive treatises devoted to the disjunction of calendar and star-gazing were written in and after the thirteenth century — from English philosopher-bishop Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1175-1253), for example, and Franciscan friar-empiricist Roger Bacon (1214-1294) — but, still, none effective.

Nothing had happened by two centuries later, when German mathematician and astronomer Johann Müller of Königsberg (1436-1476) — known to history as "Regiomontanus" — published a calendar for the years 1475 to 1534, in which he differentiated

days instead of one, which gave the term *bissextile* day, for two (bi-) sixths (sext-) of the Kalends of March, comparable to the two days of February 28-29 in leap years now.

⁷ Conflicts about the date of Easter appear in various places of Bede's *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. and intro. Leo Sherley-Price, rev. R. E. Latham (New York: Penguin 1968) *passim*.

⁸ Blackburn and Holford-Strevens, 682-83.

principles from practice, the “decrees of the Fathers” from “the usage of the Church.” Nudging the Church to change, Regiomontanus’s time-reckoning prompted Pope Sixtus IV (papacy 1471–1484) to invite him to Rome to assist with the reform of the calendar, but the astronomer died shortly after his arrival in the Eternal City. The calendar had still not been amended by the time Martin Luther posted his *Theses against Indulgences* on 31 October 1517, which, unlike earlier calendar proposals, were effective, initiating the Reformation. Luther’s indictments of the papacy are well known, but his contentions with northward antagonists less so, yet these contentions were manifest in the calendar chasm to come.

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANNULMENTS

[*The English Defender of the Vatican’s Faith.*] Between Martin Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) and King Henry VIII’s establishment of the Church of England (1534), Luther and the monarch contended over the number of sacraments. Henry VIII was the Vatican’s heavenly advocate, its *defensor fidei*, as the king argued in favor of the Catholic seven sacraments against Luther’s two.⁹ Henry wrote his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*: “In this little book, gentle reader, we have clearly demonstrated, we hope, how absurdly and impiously Luther has handled the holy sacraments. For — though we have not dealt with all matters contained in his book — we thought it necessary to defend the sacraments, which was our only purpose. . . . Who would have doubted, had I said nothing else, how unworthily, how without scruple he [Luther] treats the sacraments. . . . He so undervalues customs, doctrine, manners, laws, decrees and faith of the church — yea, the whole church itself — that he almost denies there is any such thing as a church, except perhaps such a church as made up of himself and two or three heretics, of whom he is chief!”¹⁰

No scribe of moderation, Luther responded on 15 July 1522, addressing the king as “you Thomist swine, effeminately querulous,” and the Church at Rome as “the scarlet woman, drunk with the

⁹ Pope Leo X (1475–1521, papacy 1513–1521) granted Henry the title *Defensor Fidei* on 3 October 1521.

¹⁰ King Henry VIII, “*Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*,” *English History in the Making*. Vol. 1, ed. William L. Sachse (New York: John Wiley and Sons 1967) 182–83.

wine of her fornications." (Ouch!) He assessed the monarch's theological work as an "idiotic and ignorant book from stupid and stolid King": "One would think that this great King was here either in very truth suffering from a lesion of the brain, or that some enemy, in order to disgrace him, had published this book under the King's name. Whoever saw greater insanity than this? . . . O Defender of the sacraments! O Supporter of the Romish church, twice a Thomist and by far the most deserving of the Pope's indulgence! . . . Ours is God's word and work. Here I stand, here I sit, here I remain, here I glory, here I triumph, here I laugh at the Papists, Thomists, Henrys, Sophists and all the gates of hell, nay, at the sayings of men, however saintly, and their fallacious customs. The word of God is above all."¹¹ Even with Henry's defense of Rome, the church-state coziness did not last long when Pope Clement VII (papacy 1523–1534) refused to annul Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The spat between pope and adulterer was over Henry's marital life, not his sacramental theology, but the monarch's desire to marry Anne Boleyn led him to seat church authority in his realm, in Canterbury, by declaring himself the supreme (and only) ruler of the church in 1534.

God, Politics, and Churches: Martin Luther, King Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth I. Two major church events took place between the death of Luther (1546) and the calendar reform (1582): first, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) responded to the indictments of the reformers by honing its biblical, doctrinal, and ecclesial foundations; second, in 1558 the English throne received a new monarch, Queen Elizabeth, who was as abstemious with sex (and marriage) as her father had been profligate. Consulting her court magus, John Dee, for a propitious date, Elizabeth was crowned on 15 January 1559. With religion a high priority, Elizabeth passed the Act of Uniformity a short time later, mandating Sunday church attendance, the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and abrogating communion with Roman Catholic churches. She was the "Supreme Governor of the Church of England," the first woman to hold such a high ecclesial office.

¹¹ E.S. Buchanan, *Luther's Reply to King Henry VIII, Now First Englished after the Lapse of Four Centuries* (New York 1928) 6–7, 11, 36, 41, 42, 47.

Thirty-five years after Elizabeth's father had severed ties with Rome, Pope Pius V (papacy 1566–1572) aided the Catholic Rebellion against Elizabeth's Protestant hegemony with a papal bull against her, *Regnans in Excelsis*, "Ruling on High," issued on 27 April 1570. Responding to Queen Elizabeth's pro-Protestant and anti-Catholic initiatives, Pope Pius took aim at the monarch's authority, praising Elizabeth's predecessor, "Mary, the lawful Queen of famous memory," and indicting Elizabeth as the "false Queen of England and abettor of crime." Pius's bull details her alleged crimes: "This very woman, having seized the crown and monstrously usurped the place of supreme head of the Church in all England together with the chief authority and jurisdiction belonging to it, has once again reduced the kingdom — which had been restored to the Catholic faith and to good fruits — to a miserable ruin."¹²

In Pius's portrait, Queen Elizabeth had filled the church with "heretics, oppressed the followers of the Catholic faith, instituted false preachers and ministers of impiety, and abolished the sacrifices of the Mass, prayers, fasts, choice of meats, celibacy, and Catholic ceremonies," replacing them with the "unholy rites and the institutes of Calvin." She "rejected the authority of and obedience to the Roman pontiff," and had "thrown prelates and parsons into prison, where many — worn out by long languishing and sorrow — have ended their lives in misery." Pius V declared Elizabeth's reign invalid: "We solemnly declare, out of the fullness of our apostolic power declare, the above-mentioned Elizabeth a heretic and supporter of heretics, and she and her followers have incurred the sentence of excommunication and are cut off from the unity of the body of Christ."

THREE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CALENDARS

The Julian Calendar. A half-century before its excommunication of Queen Elizabeth, the Vatican had excommunicated Luther (1521), and during the fray between England and Rome over Henry's marriage, Luther was occupied translating the Bible into German, authoring two catechisms, composing hymns of praise as media of new, evangelical theology, writing liturgies faithful to his theology,

¹² Translations of excerpts from *Regnans in Excelsis* by Martin F. Connell.

and gradually being pulled into the social and political frays of the Church. Among many practical matters calling for Luther's expertise and leadership was the error of the date of Easter, which rocked his church's authority and stability. In 1539, commenting on the fourth-century Council of Nicea, Luther wrote: "One ember from these wooden articles [of the Council of Nicea] has kept glowing, namely, the one about the date of Easter. We do not observe this article quite correctly either — as the mathematicians and astronomers point out to us — because the equinox in our time is far different than in that time, and our Easter is often celebrated too late in the year. . . . I suppose [as did Constantine] that the present again calls for a reform and correction of the calendar in order to assign Easter its proper place. But no one should undertake that except the exalted majesties, emperors and kings, who would have to unanimously and simultaneously issue an order to the whole world saying when Easter is henceforth to be celebrated. Otherwise, if one country were to start without the others, and worldly events, such as markets, fairs, and other business, were governed by the present date, the people of the country would appear at the markets of another country at the wrong time, which would result in wild disorder and confusion in everything. It would be very nice, and easy to do, if the high majesties would want to do it, since all the preparatory work has been done by the astronomers and all that is needed is a decree or command."¹³ The reformer was wise in discerning that the correction of the calendar should be undertaken only by a secular authority, some "exalted majesties, emperors, and kings." Luther was more aware than the pope that on the ecclesially divided continent "wild disorder and confusion in everything" would result from a calendar change mandated from the religious, rather than imperial or civil, authority.

The Gregorian Calendar. Perhaps because the papacy was not an eyewitness of church fragmentation as northern reformers were — or, perhaps, simply out of naïvete — Pope Gregory XIII (papacy 1572–1585) accepted the Council of Trent's charge of reforming the calendar. He consulted Calabrian astronomer-brothers Luigi and

¹³ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," as in *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress 1966) 61–62, 66.

Antonio Lilio, and in 1575 they presented their work to the pope, who appointed a calendar commission headed by German Jesuit-mathematician Christopher Clavius (1538–1612) to assist him with the reform. Clavius was at the *Collegio Romano* studying theology when in 1579 Pope Gregory called on his expertise.

By the start of the sixteenth century, the calendar lagged behind the sun by some ten or eleven days. The core of the calendar problem revolved around figuring out the date of Easter, so in the earlier part of the bull on the revision of the calendar, *Inter gravissimas*, Pope Gregory XIII presents three changes: “Intent, then, on the accurate date for celebrating Easter according to the holy Fathers and ancient Roman Pontiffs, especially Pius I and Victor I, and the great ecumenical Council of Nicea among others, we add and mandate the following three necessary changes:

- first, the fixed date of the spring equinox;
- next, the correct placement of the fourteenth [day] of the moon in the first month, which happens either on the day of the equinox itself or the moon that follows it;
- and last, the first Lord’s Day [Sunday] that follows this very fourteenth day of the moon.”

Fascinating in the bull is the overriding concentration on saints’ days. Resetting Easter at its proper time was the papal reason described at the start of the bull, but much of what follows is spent protractedly assigning to other dates the saints whose annual feast days occurred on the dates that were to be skipped in 1582, October 5–14. Temporarily assigned to new dates for 1582 were the martyr-saints Dionysius, Rusticus, and Eleutherius; pope and confessor Saint Mark; martyr-saints Sergius and Bacchus, Marcellus, and Apuleis; and pope and martyr Callistus, with the sanctoral order of dates returning to the traditional assignments by 18 October 1582, the feast of the Evangelist Saint Luke.

The Gregorian reform also promulgated the new prescription for the frequency of leap years, amending the one-in-four years of the Julian calendar to one every four years yet skipping the centennial years. Near the end of the bull, the pope threatens with punishments those who would not heed the papal mandate: “We forbid all printers from daring to print outside the immediate

jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Church (H.R.C.), or to benefit from them in any way, under the threat of the forfeiture of books and a penalty of one hundred ducats of gold payable to the Apostolic Chamber. All people are absolutely forbidden to violate this page of our precepts, mandates, statutes, desires, proofs, prohibitions, advice, abolitions, exhortations, and requests, or to dare act against them. People who try this will incur the wrath of our All-Powerful God and His Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul."

In an instruction just after the October 5–14 leap of Gregory XIII's mandate, and recognizing that there were places that would have received the instruction too late, Pope Gregory sent out an update, prescribing that the lost days could be observed a year later than its first promulgation: "Because of the difficulty in taking these words to all places of the Christian world, we desire that the transcription and printing of these words be underwritten by a public official and some official seal of an ecclesiastical dignitary, of the same, completely indubitable faith that may be had by all people in all places, where they welcome the original words if they are displayed and make clear." The places that heeded Gregory's decree immediately were Catholic — Spain, Portugal, and the Italian states — but even in these the reform required civil legislation. In France there were objections, but at the end of the year, from December 10 to 19, 1582, France leapt ahead. The last Roman Catholic region to accept the reform of the calendar was Transylvania, which skipped from December 15 to 24, 1590.

Queen Elizabeth's Calendar (Almost). From our side of history, after the Enlightenment, and after the introduction and use of the scientific method, it is difficult to appreciate that there was no difference between the science of astronomy and the occult of astrology. We project scientific rigor back onto those we revere for nascent astronomy — Nicholas Copernicus, Galileo, Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler — but they were as attentive to star-gazing for predictions and prognoses of social and political life (and for cold, hard cash too) as they were to astronomy for what we, after the Age of Reason, now call "science." (In fact, Kepler's mother was tried for witchcraft.¹⁴)

¹⁴ See James A. Connor, *Kepler's Witch: An Astronomer's Discovery of Cosmic Order amid Religious War, Political Intrigue, and the Heresy Trial of His Mother* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2004).

Queen Elizabeth and her advisors knew that their calendar trailed behind the progress of the stars, but stronger for them than the movement of heavenly bodies, than *de revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, was ignoring Vatican authority. Elizabeth's Secretary of State and Privy Councillor, Sir Francis Walsingham, lived near a book-collector renowned for his knowledge of both science and astrology, one John Dee. Dee had cast horoscopes for Queen Mary and her husband, Philip II of Spain, and on Elizabeth's accession to the throne, Walsingham delivered a copy of Pope Gregory's *Inter gravissimas* to John Dee, soliciting his opinion on the Vatican's calendar mandate and threat. He wrote up a sixty-two-page treatise, "A Playne Discourse and humble Advise for our Gracious Queen Elizabeth, her most Excellent Majestie to peruse and consider, as concerning the needful Reformation of the Vulgar Kalendar for the civile years and daies accompting, or verifying, according to the time truely spent."¹⁵ Employing astronomical analysis, the summary of John Dee's treatise was that "The Romanists have done verie imperfectly, in chosing and preferring the time of Nicene Councell, to be the principal marke, and foundation of reforming the Kalendar: Although that Nicene Councell . . . ought chiefly of all Christians to be regarded & kept in memorie . . . Christians should regard [Christ's] birth as the Radix of Time."

On the practical level, Dee indicted the Gregorian reform as too hasty, with its single leap from 4 October to 15 October 1582. Dee recommended that the queen declare 1583 the *Annus Reformationis*, the "Year of the Reformation," a year in which two or three days would be lopped off each month from May to September 1583, and the calendar that would proceed from 1584 forward as "Queen Elizabeth's Perpetual Kalendar," thereby circumventing Pope Gregory's temporal authority. Queen Elizabeth's 1583, by John Dee's recommendation, would be the Counter-Calendar, with increments advancing until all followed the Queen's lead on time. For, in the end, then as now, the time-keeper rules over all.

¹⁵ Unpublished manuscript, at the Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1789, folios 1-62. My knowledge and citations from the Playne Discourse are from two secondary sources: Robert Poole, "John Dee and the English Calendar: Science, Religion and Empire" (1996), unpublished (http://www.hermetic.ch/cal_stud/jdee.html, 9 February 2012); Ian Seymour, "The Political Magic of John Dee," *History Today* (January 1989) 29-35.

A biographer of John Dee wrote that his “reputation became the pawn in the religious conflicts of the Commonwealth,”¹⁶ for — just a few decades after the start of the Church of England — stalwart Anglicans, Vatican loyalists, and Puritan purists of the Bible all vied for the Queen’s favor. To one side, John Dee was “philosopher, mathematician, technologist, antiquarian, teacher and friend of powerful people,” yet to his detractors he was “a magician deeply immersed in the most extreme forms of occultism,” “a sorcerer and a necromancer, a black magician left over from the medieval past.”¹⁷

Queen Elizabeth approved of Dee’s draft for the proclamation of 1583 as the *Annus Reformationis*. The Parliament of 1584–1585 passed “an Act, giving Her Majesty authority to alter and make a calendar, according to the calendar used in other countries.”¹⁸ Yet, fearing that their acceding, even gradually, to the reform of Pope Gregory would be seen as acknowledging the Vatican’s authority, bishops of the Church of England rejected Dee’s proposed reform in spite of the monarch and her Parliament’s thumbs-up.¹⁹ The Anglican bishops, therefore — for contentious ecclesial motives, rather than astral verities — thwarted England’s reform of the calendar, and England and its colonies maintained the incorrect date for another century and a half, during which the Puritans sailed to North America, where the Julian calendar continued apace. This span of European history — between Gregory XIII’s late-sixteenth-century correction of Julian chronometry (1582) and the time when England finally adopted the Gregorian chronometry (1752) — is manifest when one researches

¹⁶ Peter J. French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1972) 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–2. At the conclusion of his biography, Peter French writes of “his powerful personality, his abstruse philosophy, his genius and his lunacy,” and perhaps Dee’s reputation played a role in the bishops’ rejection of Dee and Parliament’s proposed reform at *ibid.*, 208.

¹⁸ See Patrick Collison, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Berkeley: California University Press 1967) 270.

¹⁹ French, 7: The bishops “feared that such a reform so soon after the Pope had ordered one on the Continent would appear to be weakness on the part of English Protestants in their determination to resist the papacy.”

anything of English history between 1582 and 1752, when the Gregorian calendar was finally accepted in England.²⁰

BACK TO SHAKESPEARE'S CAESAR

The Church of England had been established for more than a quarter-century when William Shakespeare was baptized on 26 April 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, eighteen and a half years before the Vatican's promulgation of the Gregorian calendar.²¹ Queen Elizabeth had been on the throne already for more than five years by the time of Shakespeare's initiation into the Church, and for more than forty years by the time the "Julius Caesar" premiered at the Globe. The monarch's Protestant leanings had been in place for most of Shakespeare's life, yet her age instigated hope for Catholics and fear for Protestants that — since she hadn't married or had children — her successor would be Catholic.²²

²⁰ Looking for the birth date of the first U.S. President, George Washington, for example, one often finds two dates and two years, one as "February 11, 1731 (O.S.)," and another, "February 22, 1732 (N.S.)." ("O.S." and "N.S." are abbreviations of "Old Style" and "New Style," the former the Anglican *Julian* date, the latter the Roman Catholic *Gregorian* date.) Dates between 1582 and 1752 can manifest two errors, the date and even the year, as one sees with Washington's birth date. One finds the ten-day gap for the day, and a difference of the year. The latter is because in England and its colonies the legal year began not at the juncture of December 31 and January 1, but of March 24 and 25, when the start of the new year coincided with the traditional date for the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary at the announcement of the angel Gabriel.

King George II's new, if late, calendar revision of 1752 had two main ingredients: first, the correction skipped the days — by then eleven, not ten — that the Julian calendar lagged behind the Gregorian; second, that the new year would begin no longer on "Lady Day," as the British called March 25, but on January 1. (Because Washington died after the English correction and because he died outside the span of January 1 to March 24, his death, 14 December 1799, appears with only one date and one year.)

²¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. "William Shakespeare," accessed 2 December 2011: <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/EBchecked/topic/537853/William-Shakespeare>.

²² See Shapiro, 1599 (as in note 2), whose work relates the play to another historical exigency, describing spring 1599 as "the months preceding the composition of 'Julius Caesar' [when] there were a rash of attempts upon Elizabeth's life" (148). He takes up "Julius Caesar" — and some aspects of the calendar controversy — and puts the Roman emperor's slaying in the play in the context of the threats to the queen in 1599.

Many scholars of Elizabethan society have combed through Shakespeare's work to find evidence of his religious amities or enmities. Many of Shakespeare's plays can be brought into the study, but, by my assessment, sparingly few given the volume of his work. Studies have highlighted the fine his father paid in 1592 for not attending church, but John Shakespeare's debts (and inability to repay) would have been as strong a reason for his absence from church as any theological or ecclesial affiliation or sympathy with the Vatican.²³ William's daughter Susanna might have been Catholic (recusant), and his close friends in Stratford-upon-Avon, Hamnet and Judith Sadler — after whom Shakespeare and his wife named their own twins Hamnet and Judith — might also have been Catholic, but such associations were not unusual in the Christian society of late sixteenth-century England. Fact is, Shakespeare was baptized in (1564), married in (1587), and buried out of (1616) the Church of England.

Plays that take up theological matters, while piquing, are not many.²⁴ So, too, with "Julius Caesar," I am arguing. That the title character was the Roman emperor — the reviser of the calendar change in the first century B.C. — does not add very much to an effort to find in Shakespeare a Vatican sympathizer, a recusant. Given his usual wit and commentary on social manners in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, the time references in "Julius Caesar" are more likely the fruit of his humor about a nation that knew its government and church were keeping time erroneously but dared not correct its chronometry simply because it did not want to acknowledge the Vatican. Shakespeare's historical drama merely highlighted how theological, ecclesial, and social prejudices besmirched God's creation resplendent in the sky.

Confusion and humor regarding time would have been particularly ribald in 1599, for — more than in any other year after the Gregorian reform — 1598 had seen a five-week gap between the Roman Catholic (Gregorian) date of Easter, March 12, and the Anglican (Julian) date of Easter, April 16. That the "progress of the

²³ Robert Bearman, "John Shakespeare: A Papist or Just Penniless," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 56 (2005) 411–33.

²⁴ Dennis Taylor, "Introduction: Shakespeare and the Reformation," in Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England* (New York: Fordham University Press 2003) 1–25.

stars" is put on the lips of Brutus, Caesar's killer, would have provoked knowledgeable English folks who knew that their nation's calendar was wrong as — heeding the Act of Uniformity without public dissent — they waited five weeks for the English Easter when other countries had celebrated it accurately weeks earlier. In fact, as Shakespeare wrote "Julius Caesar," a pamphlet circulated widely on the grievance of the English calendar gap: "In the yeare of our Lord 1598 lately by past, according to the decree of the Nicene Councell, and late Kalendar, set out by Lillius, Easter day, fell upon the twelft daie of March, in the olde Kalendar and Almancks, whereby we yet reckon in England and Scotland: And White Sunday upon the last daye of Aprill: And Fastings even, upon the twenty foure of Ianuary: Whereas after the vulgare maner and count, Easter daie was celebrate that yeare, the sixteenth daie of Aprill, White Sunday, the fourth of Iune: And Fastings even, the last of February. Yee see the distance betweene the one calculation and the other, is more than the space of a Moneth: what errour it may growe to by the proces of time, it is easie by this example to perceive."²⁵ Church leaders in Scotland and England

²⁵ M. Robert Pont, *A newe treatise of the right reckoning of yeares, and ages of the world, and mens liues, and of the estate of the last decaying age thereof this 1600. yeare of Christ, (erroniously called a yeare of Iubilee) which is from the Creation, the 5548. yeare. Containing sundrie singularities, worthie of observation, concerning courses of times, and revolutions of the heauen, and reformatiōs of the heauen, and the reformatiōs of calendars, and prognostications: with a discourse of prophecies and signes, preceeding the latter daye, which by manie arguments appeareth now to approach. With a godlie admonition in the end, vpon the words of the Apostle, to redeeme the time, because the dayes are euill* (Edinburgh, 1599) 61. Accessed by Early English Books Online, CSB/SJU Libraries (6 February 2012).

As a time-reckoner living outside England, Robert Pont was not alone in combing through the Bible for signs of the end. In the last decade of the sixteenth century, Scotland produced a number of apocalyptic treatises, many of them drawing from the Book of Revelation, such as mathematician John Napier's *A Plaine Discouery of the whole Revelation of Saint John* (Edinburgh 1593). Napier, like Robert Pont — and like many for whom the Bible was accessible in the vernacular for the first time in centuries — no longer sought advice from experts, but went to the Word of God itself, unmediated and unbridled by another. See Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1979) in particular 111–49, on Scotland, and 191–95, on Robert Pont's indebtedness to John Napier's earlier treatise.

Pont proposed that the end was near, indeed, that it would be in the following year, 1600, based in his reading of only one verse in the whole of the Bible, in his

also rejected Pope Gregory XIII's new calendar because it was Catholic, but, more than being Catholic, it was also correct astronomically. Characteristically, Shakespeare was poking fun at the state's obstinacy. The slaying of Julius Caesar the emperor in "Julius Caesar" mimicked the knowing audience's hope that the Julian calendar would, like the drama's protagonist, soon be put to rest.

The main source for Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" was Thomas North's English translation (1579) of Jacques Amyot's French translation (1559) of a Latin translation of Plutarch's originally Greek *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, written a few years after the birth of the historical Jesus.²⁶ North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives* helps us understand that Shakespeare knew of the incorrect date because North addressed the calendar in the same work: "For the Romanes using then the auncient computacion of the yeare, had not only such incertainty and alteracion of the moneth and times, that the sacrifices and yearly feasts came by little and little to seasons contrary for the purpose they were ordained: but also in the revolution of the sunne (which is called Annus Solaris) no other nation agreed with them."²⁷ The questions of the historical drama — Flavius's "Is this a holiday?" and "What, know you not?"; Caesar and Portia's "What is't o'clock?"; and Brutus's "Is not tomorrow,

words: According to the Prophecie of the *Revelation*, in the which, we finde also, at the end of the 14. chapter, this number 1600, where it is said, *That the Vine-presse of Gods wrath was trodden without the Cittie, and blood come out of it, to the horse bridies, by the space of 1600. stades or furlungs*. This number, some of the learned vnderstande to be meant of yeares, as though after the out-running of 1600. Yeares, the end shalbe, when the wicked shalbe tormented in hell, after the similitude of a woundrous great bloud shed in the field (84). The Puritan Movement — in England, the Netherlands, and in North America — not only took the Bible seriously, many Puritans took it seriously from individual interpretations of it.

In the later sixteenth century, and through the seventeenth century, the Bible gave them their charge even though that charge was not from a community's discernment, but from an individual chaining together Bible verses — from different original languages, different centuries, different places, and addressed to different community — and juxtaposing them toward offering a sure predication of the proximate end of the world. See Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Penguin 1975) 87–106, 287–305.

²⁶ *Julius Caesar*: xxxii–xxxiii.

²⁷ Thomas North, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (London: Thomas Vautroullier and John Wight 1579) 791.

boy, the first of March?" — are funneled into Brutus's imperative to Lucius, "Look in the calendar and bring me word." Lucius might have replied, "Whose calendar?" but — having highlighted the problem of English chronometry after Pope Gregory XIII's calendar with the questions, and with the Act of Uniformity looming over the nation on the brink of expansion and imperialism — Shakespeare sought drama and humor, not a fine or imprisonment.

THE DATE OF EASTER AND
DIVISIONS OVER TIME TODAY

The Date of Easter. On reading of the Protestant-vs.-Catholic calendar controversy in Europe in the centuries after the Reformation, one might think that church fracture over Easter started then, but in reality churches have been divided about the date of Easter from the faith's start. The Jewish word for "Passover" in the Greek New Testament is *pascha*. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke date the death of Jesus on "Passover" (πάσχα, Mark 14:16 / Matthew 26:19 / Luke 22:15), while the Gospel of John dates the death of Jesus on the Day of Preparation for Passover (παρασκευῃ, 19:14), one day earlier than in the Synoptics. Both cannot be historically correct, but we know that the evangelists, while not ignoring history, had theology as their primary purpose in writing for communities of faith in the second half of the first century (see Luke 1:1-4).

Neither exact history nor a universal prescription for the date of Easter was a goal of any evangelist. The death of Jesus is what was remembered on Easter for the next three centuries,²⁸ and churches were divided over when that celebration would take place. (Greek churches then, and still, use the same word for Easter that Jews use for Passover, *πάσχα*.)

A universal formula for the date of Easter was prescribed by the Church in the fourth century, under the aegis of the Roman emperor, but the formula was both unacceptable to some churches and difficult for those in remote places to implement. (In the seventh century, the Venerable Bede was simply trying to ascertain just when Easter was supposed to be. The formulas for figuring the day from the two

²⁸ See Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, Alcuin Club Collections 86 (Collegeville: SPCK 2011) and Martin Connell, *Eternity Today*, vol. 2 (New York: Continuum 2006) 101-57.

giants of church chronometry at the time — Alexandria, in the East, and Rome, in the West — supplied different calculations.)

Moreover, most Orthodox Churches follow the Julian calendar, the one England was following against the Vatican, and today we still see “Orthodox Easter” is usually marked on a Sunday different than “Easter” by Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Even secular efforts at reconciling the date of Easter have not been effective. Attempts to have a World Calendar that would fix Easter on the second Sunday of April (April 8–14) — closest to calculations from the New Testament evidence about the day Jesus died²⁹ — have never been accepted by all churches, even though — as Martin Luther recommended way back in 1539 — the World Calendar prescription comes from a secular, not church, authority.

Following the secular effort and recognizing the ecclesial burden of chronometric division, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) appended to The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC) an appendix on “the Revision of the Calendar,” advocating for Christian unity reflected in a common chronometry for Easter: “Recognizing the importance of many who express concern for the assignment of the feast of Easter to a fixed Sunday and concerning an unchanging calendar, the holy, ecumenical Vatican II, having carefully considered the effects which could result from the introduction of a new calendar, declares as follows: 1. The Sacred Council would not object if the feast of Easter were assigned to a particular Sunday of the Gregorian Calendar, provided that those whom it may concern, especially those not in communion with the Apostolic See, give their assent. 2. The sacred Council likewise declares that it does not oppose efforts designed to introduce a perpetual calendar into civil society.”³⁰ The first declaration gives primacy to Sunday and to the Gregorian Calendar, and the second recognizes earlier attempts to introduce a world calendar into society. Divisions in the church about the date of Easter, therefore, have colored and divided Christianity since the religion broke away from Judaism in the first century. Which evokes the

²⁹ Raymond E. Brown, “Appendix II: Dating the Crucifixion (Day, Monthly Date, Year),” in *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday 1994) 1350–378.

³⁰ “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963,” in *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1: *The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, new revised edition, Austin Flannery, ed. (Northport, NY: Costello 1998) 37.

question: Need unity on the date of Easter or regarding time-keeping in general be a condition for unity in the church?

THE COST OF CHRONOMETRIC FIXITY

When Pope Gregory XIII issued the new calendar in 1582, his instruction was not without threats. The bull *Inter gravissimas* ended with these warnings: "All people are absolutely forbidden to violate this page of our precepts, mandates, statutes, desires, proofs, prohibitions, advice, abolitions, exhortations, and requests, or to dare act against them. People who try this will incur the wrath of our All-Powerful God and His Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul." In the late sixteenth century it was the pope's way or the highway to divine wrath. The calendar would be one for all, with the divine punishment incurred for disobedience.

Four centuries later, in "The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar" (1969), the calendar readmitted variation. Feasts that ranked lower in gravity allow for variations at the discernment of dioceses and bishops' conferences (SC #48-55).³¹ Fixity was the four-century exception; before the printing press enabled the Council of Trent to prescribe a universal liturgy and calendar, and after Vatican II Christian calendars, like Christian liturgies, allow for variations, for back then only the medium of print enabled any element of worship to be minutely, uniformly, and universally prescribed. (How the medium of the internet will change Christian worship and calendars remains to be seen, but the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries give us a peek into the Church's ready adoption of and adaptation to a new medium of mass communication.)

The matter of my investigation takes up the date of Easter, which, in the Table of Liturgical Days in the General Norms, is at the top of the list. Many, many seasons and days are on the list before the ingredients for the variety of a "particular calendar" are permitted for regions, dioceses, communities, and parishes. So — taking into account that the Church universal has been divided over the date of Easter for more centuries than not — other questions emerge: If calendar synchronicity over Easter is necessary for church unity,

³¹ "General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar (1969)," in *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, third edition (Chicago: LTP 1991) 173-84.

why so? Since the Church has never known such unity, what gives time-uniformity such gravity and the Church such an exigency?

THE LEAP SECOND

Divisions about time-reckoning are not only in religious bodies. Early in 2012 in Geneva, Switzerland, seven hundred delegates from seventy countries met not about the leap *year*, but the leap *second*. Since the 1950s the world has run on two clocks, one on the micro-level, by the frequency of electrons spinning around atoms (the atomic clock, or cesium clock), and the other on the macro-level, in the traditional and observable way, by the earth's rotation (the planet's clock). The planet's clock now lags behind the atomic clock by a second, and getting the two clocks in synch was the hope of the conveners in Geneva.

While the gap between these two clocks is not as large or consequential as the lag between the Anglican Julian and Roman Gregorian Easters and calendars in 1598, still "a panel of experts at the International Telecommunications Union, an arm of the United Nations, began a discussion eight years ago, but could not come to a consensus to keep or get rid of them [the two clocks]. The United States and Britain have been butting heads over the issue most of the time."³²

This again reveals that chronometry strikes deep in people, families, businesses, societies, nations, and religions. Cultural, theological, and ecclesial differences come to light when the matter of time-reckoning is on the table, whether in the sixteenth-century rub between England and the Vatican or in the twenty-first century rub over atomic and astronomic time.

³² Kenneth Chang, "A Second Here a Second There May Just Be a Waste of Time," *New York Times* (18 January 2012).



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