EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Wavering in Faith: Pythagoras, Metempsychosis, and the Fate of the Soul in English Renaissance Drama

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In Thomas Heywood's 1637 entertainment *London's Mirror,* a series of famous historical figures appear on stage to praise the greatness of the ancient English city. And while the text claims to present a portrait of London 'without any falsity or flattery', the tone of the show is unambiguously celebratory, as the various worthies (whether historically connected to London or not) appear on stage to celebrate both the city and Britain itself. In the second part, 'the great philosopher' Pythagoras is introduced as the consummate thinker on numbers.[1] Heywood's Pythagoras notes how the number four is central to nature (four elements, four humours), as well as to British politics since the monarch rules over four kingdoms: England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.[2] Heywood here implies that the existence of exactly four such realms is neither coincidental, nor contingently historical, but a product of God's calculated design.

On the face of it, that Heywood chooses Pythagoras to explicate the mathematical underpinnings of Britain's political structure feels unsurprising, since the philosopher was celebrated in the Renaissance for a wide variety of intellectual achievements. In mathematics, he was known then, as now, for the famous geometrical theorem that bears

[1] Pythagoras, in the play, is the man who 'taught in his schools that ten was the nature and soul of all number' because, he explains, all numbers are a series of tens plus additional units. But ten, Heywood notes, is really a variation on the Pythagorean notion of the 'quaternion': the first four whole numbers (one, two, three, and four) add up to ten. Thomas Heywood, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood* (New York: Russell and Russell), vol. 4, p. 310.
[2] Ibid., pp. 311-12.

his name.[3] Baldesar Castiglione, in *The Courtier*, begins the third book by claiming that Pythagoras cleverly calculated the extraordinary size of Hercules based on the size of that hero's foot.[4] Francis Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning*, meanwhile, says Pythagoras 'did suppose numbers to be the principles and originals of things'.[5] Likewise, Browne, in *Religio Medici*, in the context of the beauty of the Trinity: 'I have often admired the mystical way of Pythagoras, and the secret magic of numbers'.[6]

Beyond mathematics, Pythagoras was recognized as an authority on diet, eschewing the consumption of beans, but endorsing vegetarianism. And while this nutritional regimen was denigrated by Bacon as deriving from 'scruples and superstitions',[7] it was praised by Thomas Elyot as a commendable example of dietary moderation. Indeed, Elyot suggests that a meatless diet was one reason that Pythagoras and his students 'excelled all other in finding out the secrets and hid[den] knowledges of nature'.[8] Vegetarianism accorded with a love of animals generally.[9] Michel de Montaigne's essay 'Of Cruelty', relates that he 'was wont to buy fishes of fishers and birds of fowlers to set them free again'.[10] Thomas Browne defends the reality of guardian angels by arguing that the notion is not Catholic but originates with Pythagoras and Plato.[11]

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[3] Leonardo da Vinci was just one luminary who admired this achievement. Christiane L. Joost-Gaugier, *Pythagoras and Renaissance Europe: Finding Heaven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 38. According to legend, Pythagoras was so excited about the discovery of the theorem that explained the nature of the right triangle, that he sacrificed a bull, or, in some versions, one hundred bulls. Christoph Riedwig, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching and Influence*, trans. by Steven Rendall et al (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 27.

[4] Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. by Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (New York: Scribner, 1903), p. 171.

[5] Francis Bacon, *The Major Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. by Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 200.

[6] Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, ed. by D. Lloyd Roberts (Edinburgh, 1898), sect. 12. For ease of reference, section numbers are given for this work.

[7] Bacon, *Major Works*, p. 207.

8 Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, ed. by S.E. Lehmberg (London: Dent, 1962), vol. 3, p. 22. Citations for this work are given by book and section number. The painter Peter Paul Rubens collaborated with Frans Snyders on a painting entitled *Pythagoras Advocating Vegetarianism* (1618-20) which might have 'served as an excuse to present a still-life of fruit and vegetables'. Almelec Isman, 'Portraits of Wisdom: Ancient Greek Philosophers in European Painting', *Pamukkale University Journal of Social Sciences*, 39 (2020), 281-92 (p. 283).

[9] Christoph Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence*, trans. by Stephen Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Joost-Gaugier, *Pythagoras and Renaissance Europe*, pp. 36-7.

[10] Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. by John Florio, ed. by L.C. Harmer. (London: Dent, 1965), vol. 2, p. 122.

[11] Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 37. On the view that such angels exist, Browne continues in the same section, 'there is no heresy in it: and if not manifestly defined in Scripture, yet it is an opinion of a good and

Still others connected Pythagoras to music and theories of universal harmony. God's arrangement of the heavenly spheres created the celestial song that was, in turn, the archetype for all human music,[12] and more generally, harmony served as a model for the healthy mind, which could be restored, if needed, through music itself. In 'Of Names', Montaigne relates how 'two young men, whom [Pythagoras] heard complot and consult (being somewhat heated with feasting and drinking) to go and ravish a chaste house' were dissuaded from their crime when the philosopher arranged for musicians to play a 'grave, severe, and spondaical kind of music' which 'did sweetly enchant, allay, and entrance their rash, violent, and lawless lust'.[13] These last two notions – Pythagoras as philosopher of number and as philosopher of music – are particularly emphasized by today's scholars of the period.[14]

With all this in mind, it would be easy to imagine that Pythagoras, was, from a Renaissance point of view, universally understood as an intellectual and moral hero of

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wholesome use in the course and actions of a man's life, and would serve as an hypothesis to salve many doubts, whereof common philosophy affordeth no solution'.

[12] Joost-Gaugier, *Pythagoras and Renaissance Europe*, pp. 82, 123. 'Pythagorean harmony was bound up with astronomy'; see Leonid Zhmud, *Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 286. Some even suggested Pythagoras himself invented music; see Joost-Gaugier, *op. cit.,* p. 151. To this day, Pythagoras is sometimes still credited with the discovery that basic musical intervals (such as the octave) 'can be reduced to simple numerical relations'; see Riedwig, *Pythagoras*, p. 27. When harmony could be understood mathematically, 'the discernment between agreeable or disagreeable sounds was no longer the exclusive domain of one's ears'; see Arnold Hermann, *To Think Like God: Pythagoras and Parmenides, the Origins of Philosophy* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004), p. 94.

[13] Montaigne, *Essays*, p. 313.

14 'Pythagoras and Pythagoreans considered number to be the first and most important principle of the universe'; see Christopher S. Celenza, *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence: The Symbolum Nesianum* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 6. For Pythagoras as influential in mathematics, see also, for example, H.E. Stapleton, 'Ancient and Modern Aspects of Pythagoreanism', *Osiris* 13 (1958), 12-53; Frank Wilczek, 'On the World's Numerical Recipe', *Daedalus* 131.1 (2001), 142-7; and Richard J. Oosterhoff, 'From Pious to Polite: Pythagoras in the Res Publica Litterarum of French Renaissance Mathematics', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74.4 (2013), 531-52. An interesting account of the various myths and misconceptions about Pythagoras and mathematics appears in Alberto A. Martinez, *The Cult of Pythagoras: Math and Myths* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012). Representative studies of Pythagorean harmony include John M. Steadman, 'The "Inharmonious Blacksmith": Spenser and the Pythagoras Legend', *PMLA* 79.5 (1964), 664-65; and Anthony Aveni, 'Is Harmony at the Heart of All Things?' *The Wilson Quarterly* 25.1 (2001), 54-65. A good overview of the issues can also be found in Gunter Berghaus, 'Neoplatonic and Pythagorean Notions of World Harmony and Unity and Their Influence on Renaissance Dance Theory', *Dance Research*. 10. 2 (1992), 43-70 (esp. pp. 44-52).

the highest order: innovative thinker,[15] animal rights activist, and a musical feminist.[16] He was, indeed, by some modern accounts, an ideal classical hero because his beliefs so often accorded with early modern Christian thinking.[17] And yet, contrary to this view, one crucial element of Pythagorean ideology remained stubbornly apart, his belief in *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of souls, or, simply, reincarnation.

Thus, in *London's Mirror*, presenting Pythagoras in present-day England could be taken, by an audience aware of his views on the soul, as not a normal dramatization, but a dramatic representation of reincarnation. In so doing, Heywood takes a significant risk, because, as this paper will argue, the common association of Pythagoras with metempsychosis carried with it profane questions about the nature of the soul itself.

In this respect, Heywood's Pythagoras constitutes a mirror image of the one who appears in an entertainment staged within Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. There Androgino represents a modern-day Pythagoras whose soul has passed through various bodies since his death in ancient times.[18] But unlike the noble philosopher conjured by Heywood, Jonson's Pythagoras is both the vehicle for, and the butt of various jokes inspired by reports that Pythagoras himself remembered his own past lives and was aware of the travels of other men's souls. Supposedly, Pythagoras remembered, among others, his life as Euphorbus, a hero of the Trojan War; he once recognized a friend as a reincarnated dog.[19] His rejection of the consumption of meat and beans is mentioned in *Volpone*, though the principled nature of this abstinence is undermined by Androgino's admission that he has since embraced these foods as required by the various other bodies he has occupied.[20] The philosopher's past as Euphorbus is mentioned as well, along with a wide range of other incarnations, including many as animals.

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[15] Some accounts say Pythagoras himself coined the very word *philosophy*; see Riedwig, *Pythagoras*, pp. 90-1.

[16] Joost-Gaugier traces this move towards making Pythagoras into a kind of saint to 'the earliest years of the Renaissance' where, among other things, he was credited with the invention of the letter Y. According to her, 'The light of Pythagoras burned even more brightly during the sixteenth century' (pp. 19-20, 37).

[17] Ibid, p. 29.

[18] Thomas Greene argues that just as Androgino's soul was once contained in the body of Pythagoras, 'that juggler divine', and went on, 'fast and loose', to enter other bodies, so too do the human jugglers of the play themselves operate on the basis of a fast and loose soul'; see Thomas M. Greene, 'Ben Jonson and the Centered Self', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 10. 2 (1970), 325-48 (p. 338).

[19] E.M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 54.

[20] Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays*, ed. by Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.2.39-40. Subsequent references to *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* are from this edition and given in parentheses.

None of this, though, displays any of the reverence that Heywood displays because in Jonson, metempsychosis is not a quiet association, but rather a specific invocation. Indeed, in *Volpone*, Jonson targets Pythagoras generally and metempsychosis particularly for ridicule in the entertainment which culminates in a celebration of foolishness itself (1.2-66-81). *London's Mirror* and *Volpone*, then, represent two extreme models for dealing with Pythagoras in light his troubling views on the soul. Heywood celebrates Pythagoras as an unparalleled genius and avoids reference to metempsychosis at all. Jonson, by contrast, uses metempsychosis to satirize Pythagoras for his absurd and anti-Christian notion. Most early modern English dramatists, however, take a more fascinating middle ground, embracing the intellectual and spiritual tensions that the figure of Pythagoras offers. For these writers, Pythagoras' belief in reincarnation provides a way to invoke dangerous anti-Christian notions of the soul while remaining shielded by the philosopher's reputation for unparalleled wisdom.

The Immortality of the Soul

Unsurprisingly, an orthodox Christian account of the nature of the human soul and its fate after death dominates the early modern period.[21] Humanity was a special creation of God, infused with something of divine essence. Moreover, that special something, the immortal soul, survived the death of the earthly body where it was embraced in paradise or faced infernal punishment.[22] Thus, Pierre de la Primaudaye, in his widely read *French Academy*, provides a number of arguments to prove the immortality of the soul. In the 1594 English translation, he argues that the notion is entirely entailed in the idea of a just Deity, for

> the religion of God, his providence, and the immortality of our soul are so fast linked and joined together, and depend in such sort one upon another, that they

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[21] For purposes of this paper, I consider only the question of the immortal soul and its fate after death. Early modern debates over the larger questions of the soul as the animating principle of life, sometimes termed the 'organic soul' and heavily influenced by Aristotelian thought, were much more complex, but not relevant to the discussion at hand. For more on these complexities, see, for example, Lorenzo Casini, '"Quid sit anima": Juan Luis Vives on the Soul and its Relation to the Body', *Renaissance Studies* 24.4 (2010), 496-517. In studies of English literature of the period, these questions have often been discussed in the context of the work of John Donne. See, for instance, James Jaehoon Lee, 'John Donne and the Textuality of the Two Souls', *Studies in Philology* 113.4 (2016), 879-918; and Ramie Targoff, 'Traducing the Soul: Donne's "Second Anniversarie"', *PMLA* 121.5 (2006), 1493-1508.

[22] Allesandro Guetta, *Italian Jewry in the Early Modern Era: Essays in Intellectual History* (Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014), p. 153.

> cannot be separated, neither indeed is it lawful to separate them. For he that abolisheth the one, shaketh also that faith which we ought to hold of the rest: because if our souls be not immortal, there is neither punishment nor reward, either for virtue or vice, or for the good or ill deeds of men.[23]

The point here is that the natural world of men abounds with wickedness and moral abuse, much of which goes unpunished. 'The worst men', La Primaudaye writes, 'make themselves Masters and Lords of the world, as if it were created only for them', while 'good and just men seem to have been created only for a prey to the wicked'. Unless we can rest assured that God will punish such wickedness in the afterlife, religion amounts to nothing but 'a vain and foolish opinion and fancy of the mind of man'.[24] Shakespeare's Claudius makes a similar point in *Hamlet*, observing how 'in the corrupted currents of this world' men can commit all manner of sins, not only avoiding punishment but reaping reward for it. 'But', the King observes grimly, 'it is not so above' where God's knowledge and justice is absolute.[25] In short, the only way for believers in a just and omnipotent God to make sense of such a world is to know that the souls of sinners will suffer in the afterlife, while the souls of the virtuous will be blessed in Heaven. La Primaudaye's discussion demonstrates how, for orthodox Christianity, a mortal human soul or, indeed, a soul that remained on Earth in a new body, was entirely incoherent. Allow the possibility of a soul that either dies with the body or finds a new body, and countless other aspects of common doctrine crumble.

Still, even the safest and most conventional social views are never entirely impervious to skepticism, radicalism, and heresy. The orthodox view of the immortal soul was challenged, even if only cautiously, and even as that sort of cautious challenge was met with reproach and condemnation. Among the most important of such early modern challengers was the Italian physician and philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525). Pomponazzi was already well-known for his independent mind when he published his *Treatise on the Immortality of the Soul.* In that book he argued that if we follow Aristotle's positions, a rational soul cannot survive death, since reason and consciousness depend on the senses and therefore the living body. For Pomponazzi, every experience we have of the soul and everything we know of the soul is based upon and grounded in worldly, material existence; to posit an immaterial, and thus immortal spirit, would be to venture

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[23] Pierre de La Primaudaye , *The Second Part of the French Academy*, trans. by Thomas Bowes, (London, 1594), Kk1v.

[24] Ibid.

[25] *Hamlet*, 3.3.57-60. All references to Shakespeare are to David Bevington's edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* 6th ed. (New York: Longman, 2008). Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

outside everything we know about the soul.[26] Pomponazzi's *Treatise* and subsequent defenses of it were banned in some places, and Pomponazzi was formally ordered by Rome to amend it such that it did not maintain the mortality of the soul.[27] Most interestingly, though, is that Pomponazzi officially maintained that he was only spelling out what had been said and entailed in Aristotle, and that the mortality of the soul was not his position but merely that of Aristotle. In this way, he retained a means by which he could plausibly deny accusations of heresy. Pomponazzi thus invoked the notion of 'double truth', claiming that as one modern historian puts it 'the truth of philosophy was mortality while the truth of theology was immortality'.[28] But this strict division of what was known by faith and what could be demonstrated by reason was difficult for Aristotelian scholars such as Pomponazzi and his colleagues to maintain. As one contemporary pointed, out what would be the use of even praying to God for forgiveness if the soul did not live on after death?[29] In the case of Pomponazzi himself, the claim that one could separate the truth of faith from the conclusions of reason may well have been a convenient, if not necessary evasion, for Pomponazzi made a point of noting that the belief in an immortal soul was a boon to the powerful in society who can employ fear of punishment in the afterlife to manipulate the masses.[30] Likewise, he insisted the willingness to be heretical was a crucial skill of any philosopher who genuinely sought the truth.[31] And yet his official stance allowed him to present heretical ideas of the soul under the cover of a discussion of the ideas of a thinker of legendary status.

The ideas of Pomponazzi eventually spread throughout Europe, so it is possible that some English playwrights were familiar with him. But whether they were or not, many English playwrights of the time developed a similar strategy to entertain and place on stage provocatively heretical ideas of the soul. For dramatic purposes, the convoluted and abstruse thinking of Aristotle is impractical, but another Greek philosopher provides a

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[26] Andrew Halliday Douglas, *The Philosophy and Psychology of Pietro Pomponazzi.* (1910; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962), pp. 99-100.

[27] Ian Maclean, 'Heterodoxy in Natural Philosophy and Medicine: Pietro Pomponazzi, Guglielmo Gratarolo, Girolamo Cardano', in *Heterodoxy in Early Modern Science and Religion*, ed. by John Hedley Brooke and Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1-29 (p. 14). The Church later relented on this point, largely through the intervention of Pomponazzi's friend Cardinal Pietro Bembo; see Martin Pine, *Pietro Pomponazzi: Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance* (Padova: Editrice Antenore, 1986), p. 127. Pine provides a highly detailed account of the imbroglio that followed.

[28] Martin Pine, 'Pomponazzi and the Problem of "Double Truth"' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29.2 (1968), 163-76 (p. 163).

[29] Pine, *Radical Philosopher*, pp. 55-6.

[30] Maclean, 'Natural Philosophy and Medicine', pp. 13-14.

[31] Ibid, pp. 10-11.

simpler, more accessible, and thus more tempting pagan heresy to challenge Christian orthodoxy on the soul: Pythagoras and his idea of metempsychosis.[32]

Metempsychosis as Theory of Personality

As we have already seen, Christian orthodoxy required the rejection of any notion that souls, after death, could migrate into another body, human or non-human. On principle, to imagine that a person's soul had once belonged to an animal, or, indeed, could later inhabit an animal, seemed to denigrate the very notion of a divine soul bestowed upon a human being by God. The soul, were this view to hold, would no longer be a heavenly spark uniquely gifted to humanity by a loving Creator, but rather another bit of spiritual dust, endlessly floating through the world, landing where it may.

Nevertheless, the notion of metempsychosis lived on in early modern culture. In part, the longevity of the idea must have been due to the reputation of Pythagoras in general. Likewise, it may have fueled fantasies (as it still does today) that allowed anyone to imagine that he was once a famous hero of antiquity. Most importantly, the idea seems to have remained in circulation because it provided a simple and compelling theory of personality. Why might one man, for instance, be, for no immediately apparent reason, vicious and cruel? Could his brutality be explained by the fact that such a man was once, literally a brute? Was a tyrant bloodthirsty because he bore the soul of an actual predator such as a lion? Indeed, since animals often had proverbial and conventional associations with various human characteristics, the links were easy to make. A stubborn man may have once been a goat. A graceful woman was, perhaps, a swan somewhere on the journey of her soul. The features of the beast remain with the soul even as it moves to a man, just as Androgino learned to love beans while inhabiting the body of a mule.

Montaigne, for one, was aware of the temptation to explain personality through metempsychosis and took pains to show how such a theory is flatly illogical when carefully considered. In his 'Apology of Raymond Sebond'[33] Montaigne points out that

[32] For details on the origins of this notion in Pythagoreanism, see Zhmud, *Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans*, pp. 221-38.

[33] In 'Of Cruelty', Montaigne suggests that Pythagoras 'borrowed metempsychosis of the Egyptians, but since it hath been received of divers nations'. Montaigne, *Essays*, 123. The modern scholar Zhmud points out that there is no solid historical reason to link the specific origins of metempsychosis with Pythagoras but that it is always tempting since 'he was a tangible historical figure'. In fact, he argues, the idea seems to have arisen in a variety of early cultures, gradually making its way into Greek religion by the sixth century BC; see *Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans*, p. 228. Still, the early reports 'leave no doubt

if a soul inhabits various bodies over the course of years, it is not at all clear how could one discern which attributes remained with the soul as it moved from one creature to the next. He asks, for instance, what sort of behaviour we would expect from 'the lion in whom abideth the soul of Caesar', noting, that, obviously the lion could not possibly spend his day dwelling on 'the passions which concerned Caesar'. He would be a lion.[34] Conversely, and to extend Montaigne's line of thinking, how could a man's viciousness be explained by having the soul of a dangerous animal such as a wolf? The wolf's soul would have previously been that of another animal – perhaps a dove – before its lupine reincarnation. Other absurd implications suggest themselves to Montaigne and are almost unspeakable. He suggests, for example, if souls move about here and there eternally, would it not mean that a man might at some point engage in sexual intercourse with his own mother 'in the shape of a mule's body'?[35] For that matter, again, extending Montaigne's implication, might we not be in danger of cannibalism, perhaps consuming our own family members, every time we sit down to eat flesh?

Shakespeare suggests a similar line of thinking, seeing metempsychosis as a tempting yet untenable account of personality. Late in *The Merchant of Venice*, Gratiano invokes the notion for its value in explaining character, seeing almost no other way to account for the cruel inhumanity of the moneylender Shylock as he prepares to kill the merchant Antonio. He eventually becomes so frustrated that he briefly considers a Pythagorean view of the soul to account for it.[36] To Shylock he says:

> Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith
> To hold opinion with Pythagoras
> That souls of animals infuse themselves
> Into the trunks of men. Thy currish spirit
> Governed a wolf who, hanged for human slaughter,

that Pythagoras […] paid special attention the soul (psyche) and its survival after death'; see Riedwig, *Pythagoras*, p. 62. On the other hand, 'there is no evidence that his followers dwelled upon the past. In fact, the movement seemed much more preoccupied with the future fate of the soul rather than its previous exploits'; see Hermann, *Pythagoras and Parmenides*, p. 19.

[34] Montaigne, *Essays*, 2:223.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Todd Borlik has argued that Shakespeare here may have seen and been influenced by a play entitled *Pythagoras*, now lost, performed by The Admiral's Men in 1596. Without a surviving text of that play, however, it is impossible to know for certain what Pythagorean notions, including metempsychosis, were raised in that play. Borlik cites this passage mostly as evidence of the Gratiano's familiarity with the philosopher to argue in favour of a Pythagorean interpretation of other lines by the same character; see Todd A. Borlik, 'Unheard Harmonies: *The Merchant of Venice* and the Lost Play of *Pythagoras*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 29 (2006), 191-224 (pp. 194-195, and 204).

> Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
> And, whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
> Infused itself in thee; for thy desires
> Are wolvish, bloody, starved and ravenous. (4.1.130-8)

Gratiano, clearly, dabbles with just the sort of reasoning that Montaigne strove to reject. He sees the 'starved and ravenous' qualities of Shylock as so extreme that normal human development cannot explain them.[37] Had Shylock inherited the soul of a wolf, and the lupine hunger for flesh survived the transmigration, his 'ravenous' character becomes explicable.

Of course, had Montaigne been present to council him, he could have dissuaded Gratiano from even contemplating such a line of thinking, by, as we have seen, asking why the wolf that supposedly infused itself into the trunk of the embryonic Shylock did not inherit any unwolvish qualities from whatever creature it had been in its previous incarnations. Fortunately, for Gratiano's own Christian soul, his temptation to accept the ideas of the pagan Pythagoras does not advance too far. Even Gratiano, never called a great thinker in the play, recognizes that to employ such an explanation would be to reject Christian notions of the soul. The heresy is tempting but only so much that he is 'almost' willing to accept it, even though he knows it is contrary to his 'faith'. Like his fellow Venetian, Pomponazzi, Gratiano presents and defends the view, though he ultimately must, publicly at least, denounce it, no matter how compelling it may be.

Metempsychosis and the Afterlife

This kind of wavering on the verge of heresy alarmed other thinkers of the time, who worried that not everyone would disavow it is quickly as Gratiano does. As La Primaudaye reminds us, the entire Christian sense of divine justice relies on the acceptance of the dogma that the soul, after death, passes on to another realm of one sort or another, not into another body. After all, how can a Christian soul ascend to Heaven and reside in the presence of God if it re-establishes itself continually in the body of one earthly creature after another? Indeed, Christians had long held that beasts simply do not

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[37] 'Such invective refigures Shylock not as domestic slave but rather as interloping carnivore; hence the smooth transformation of 'dog' into 'cur' into 'wolf' as the passage progresses'; see Bruce Boehrer, 'Shylock and the Rise of the Household Pet: Thinking Social Exclusion in *The Merchant of Venice. Shakespeare Quarterly* 50.2 (1999), 152-70 (p. 163). jstor.org/stable/2902184.

have this kind of immortal souls as humans do. The conclusion, then, must be, as Thomas Browne has it,

> that the whole frame of a beast doth perish, and is left in the same state after death as before it was materialled unto life: that the souls of men know neither contrary nor corruption; that they subsist beyond the body, and outlive death by the privilege of their proper natures, and without a miracle: that the souls of the faithful, as they leave earth, take possession of Heaven.

On the other hand, if an embodied, transmigrated, 'materialled', soul trapped in the body of a bird or mule, cannot go to Heaven, it cannot, presumably, go to Hell either. Browne, therefore, rejects metempsychosis, declaring it 'impossible'. Indeed, so difficult is it to square the greatness of Pythagoras himself with the appalling theological implications of metempsychosis, that Browne concludes the view must have been falsely attributed to the philosopher. He cannot, he says 'believe the wisdom of Pythagoras did ever positively, and in a literal sense, affirm' the notion. [38]

Shakespeare's Malvolio, whose faith in God never seems to waver, even if his faith in humanity does, makes just this point in *Twelfth Night*. When Feste torments the fastidious steward in the madhouse, pretending to be a priest evaluating the poor man's sanity, he asks Malvolio, 'What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild fowl?' (4.2.50-1). Though some have suggested that Feste has the transmigration of souls in mind when he poses the question,[39] it seems more likely that Feste intends the question to be unanswerable, sounding superficially learned but really being balderdash. In this way, he hopes to flummox and stimy Malvolio who has insisted he can show himself to be sane by answering any 'constant question' (4.2.49). But faced with this bizarre query, Malvolio rallies and ingeniously invokes metempsychosis to provide a rational answer to an insane inquiry, replying that in the view of Pythagoras, 'the soul of our grandam might inhabit a bird' (4.2.52-3). When asked his own opinion of this view, Malvolio answers as a prudent Christian should – indeed, as Browne does – and says he rejects the position because is inclined to 'think nobly of soul' (4.2.55). Of course, this perfectly sound and orthodox answer does not help him since the question itself is part of the larger plot to humiliate

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[38] Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 37. Jessica Lynn Wolfe argues that Browne held 'conflicting' views on metempsychosis, but that argument depends on a much-broadened conception of the concept, including a multitude of other kinds of transformations; see '"Men Are Lived Over Againe": The Transmigrations of Sir Thomas Browne', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 83.1 (2020), 61-94 (pp. 61-2). DOI: 10.1353/hlq.2020.0007.

[39] Walter N. King, 'Shakespeare and Parmenides: The Metaphysics of *Twelfth Night*'. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 8.2 (1968), 283-306 (p. 303). jstor.org/stable/449660.

and punish Malvolio. Feste abandons him, teasingly suggesting that he should embrace metempsychosis but warning him that it will entail, as it did for Pythagoras, vegetarianism, because he will 'fear to kill a woodcock lest thou dispossess the soul of thy grandam' (4.2.59-60).

When Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus faces his final reckoning the notion that the human soul might inhabit a woodcock, or any other animal, and therefore not move on to the afterlife is precisely the appeal of the heresy. The puritan Malvolio, convinced of his own salvation, naturally sees becoming a beast as a denial of his final reward. But for Faustus, confronting the prospect of imminent fiery damnation, his reward for sin, the possibility of life as an animal seems almost like a paradise in itself:

> Ah Pythagoras' *metempsychosis,* were that true,
> This soul should fly from me, and I be changed
> Into some brutish beast.
> All beasts are happy, for when they die,
> Their souls are soon dissolved in elements,
> But mine must live still to be plagued in hell.[40]

Like Gratiano, Faustus wavers in his faith, longing to believe a pagan notion because it provides a more convenient account of the soul than the Christian orthodoxy that he knows (only too well) to be true. But Faustus also recognizes, to his eternal sorrow, the same problem that La Primaudaye realized: that without an eternal soul that faced judgement after bodily death, there can be no divine justice. For Faustus, of course, this fantasy of absence, where divine justice cannot touch the soul is exactly what drives his momentary Pythagorean apostasy.

But the reality of his impending damnation makes the prospect of metempsychosis and the escape from Hell it promises, ultimately untenable. Indeed, he discounts the notion in the very line of verse that he introduces it – *were* that true – reminding the audience that metempsychosis remains outside the realm of allowable, even of seriously conceivable belief, even for those willing to deal with the Devil.[41] Transmigration of souls allows Faustus the tantalizing possibility that Hell is not his destination because Hell is not a

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[40] Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. by J.B. Steane (London, Penguin, 1986), 5.2.184-89. Subsequent references to Marlowe are given in parentheses.

[41] As one critic has noted, early in the play, Faustus jokes about living in the afterlife with the philosophers of old who did not believe in Hell: the specific old philosopher may have been Pythagoras. T. McAlindon, 'Classical Mythology and Christian Tradition in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*', *PMLA* 81.3 (June 1966), 214-23 (p. 216). jstor.org/stable/460807.

destination at all. The soul might rather continue on its journey through thinking men and blissfully unaware beasts. But, as with Tantalus, that image of succor is stolen away, here by the knowledge that the pagan Pythagoras was deceived in this matter, and that the soul truly is subject to damnation. In the play's first act, Faustus was all too ready to twist philosophy and doctrine of all kinds to justify his embrace of dark magic, but here metempsychosis cannot be wrenched into verity and stubbornly remains in the realm of what 'should' be.[42]

Pythagoras on the Moon

In addition to *London's Mirror*, the Heywood text with which this paper began, there is one other extant early modern English play which features Pythagoras as a character: John Lyly's *Endymion*. There, Cynthia, desperate for a remedy for the endless sleep that has consumed Endymion, sends to all the world's centers for learning and arts, hoping that someone among 'the soothsayers in Egypt, or the enchanters in Thessaly, or the philosophers in Greece, or all the sages in the world can find remedy' for the bewitched man.[43] Thus when Pythagoras arrives, it is as the representative of ancient humanistic learning generally, and of Greek philosophy in particular. Moreover, he is specifically called upon so that his extraordinary learning can be practically applied to a real and serious problem. But no sooner has he appeared on stage than his philosophy is gently derided by Cynthia as a series of 'ridiculous opinions', a judgment that Pythagoras himself quickly endorses, admitting that 'thickness' had clouded his earthy judgement

[42] Marlowe also alludes to metempsychosis at the beginning of *The Jew of Malta* where Machevill, the soul of Machiavelli, appears on stage to introduce the play. Machevill does not mention Pythagoras by name, or even metempsychosis specifically but suggests that after his death 'was his soul but flown beyond the Alps' to France where it inhabited 'the Guise' after whose death it proceeded to England (Pro.1-4). The notion that the Duke of Guise was a reincarnation of Machiavelli – which is meant to explain his ruthlessness – is enough to suggest that Marlowe is thinking of the Pythagorean idea of metempsychosis. If so, Marlowe employs the concept rather loosely: after Guise's death, Machevill's soul has, apparently, been at liberty to wander as it pleases outside of a material body. Seeing Guise as a latter-day Machiavelli seems to be original to Marlowe; see Arata Ide, '*The Jew of Malta* and the Diabolic Power of Theatrics in the 1580s', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46.2 (2006), 257-79 (p. 262), jstor.org/stable/3844642. As MacDonald Jackson has noted, Faustus' invocation of Pythagoras here is similar to that of Antonio in Marston's play *Antonio's Revenge*; see 'Shakespeare and the Quarrel Scene in *Arden of Faversham*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57.3 (2006) 249-93 (293), jstor.org/stable/4123511. Antonio, though, unlike Faustus, is thinking of the fate of the souls of others, not his own. Similarly, the terrible alternative to being embodied in a beast is not Hell but to be reincarnated as a human and thus continually subject to the sinful world of men. See John Marston, *The Malcontent and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.2.110-14.

[43] John Lyly. *Endymion*, ed. by David Bevington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 3.1.48-50. Subsequent references to this play are given in parentheses.

and that the brightness of Cynthia has 'pierced through' his ignorance. He is now, he says, 'ashamed to remember my grossness' (4.3.46-51).[44] In normal life, the judgement of all men is clouded and confused, whereas in the court of Cynthia, the personification of the Moon, absolute Platonic truth is evident, 'not in colours', as Gyptes says, 'but life'. (4.3.53).[45]

As for helping rescue Endymion, Pythagoras notes that he has 'alleged all the natural reasons' to explain Endymion's permanent sleep (4.3.59-60), but since we already know that his sleep derives from a spell cast by Dipsas the witch, the audience readily understands that those natural reasons are unlikely to help. When Pythagoras and Gyptes finally examine Endymion, they are able to rule out natural causes, but can only conclude that 'some strange enchantment' is to blame (4.3.151). Pythagoras does little more in the play, but in the end, he resolves to remain in Cynthia's court, giving up what she terms the 'vain follies of philosophers' in favor of 'such virtues as are here practised' (5.4.301-2).

Given the fame of Pythagoras as a well-known ancient philosopher, it is plausible to see him in this play, as Robert Knapp does, as a representative of the failure of pagan naturalism generally in the new world ordered by Christian love.[46] But other more famous Greek philosophers such as Plato or Aristotle might have served just as well or even better for this purpose. Thus it may be better to suggest that Pythagoras here represents not just ancient philosophy but the worst excesses of ancient philosophy, even among men who were acknowledged geniuses. We never learn what, precisely, are the 'ridiculous opinions' that Pythagoras renounces, but, given the frequent association of Pythagoras with metempsychosis in the period, and especially in the drama of the period, it is plausible to imagine that transmigration of souls was chief among these intended blunders, and not, for instance, how to calculate the lengths of the sides of triangles. Lyly's presentation of Pythagoras is not the fawning glorification that we saw with

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[44] Cynthia's goodness, it has been noted, contrasts 'the predicament of mankind, foolish, irrational, and condemned, but forgiven'; see John Weld, *Meaning in Comedy: Studies in Elizabethan Romantic Comedy* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1975), p. 130.

[45] Gyptes is, presumably, a soothsayer brought from Egypt, in accordance with Cynthia's command. 'Such characters as […] Pythagoras, Gyptes and the lords appear to be little more than conveniences'; see Percy W. Long, 'The Purport of Lyly's *Endimion*'. *PMLA* 24.1 (1909), 164-84 (pp. 181-2), jstor.org/stable/456826. 'All [Lyly's] plays reflect Elizabethan royalism in that they possess some dominant and central figure of worldly or divine authority or, as in *Endimion*, of both'; see G. Wilson Knight, 'Lyly', *The Review of English Studies* 15.58 (1939), 146-63 (p. 161), jstor.org/stable/508943.

[46] Robert S. Knapp, 'The Monarchy of Love in Lyly's *Endimion*', *Modern Philology* 73.4, Part 1 (1976), 353-67 (p. 366), jstor.org/stable/435737.

Heywood, but something closer to the suspicion that so many of his contemporaries showed of the philosopher: The genius who was wrong.

Metempsychosis presents an opportunity for early modern dramatists to play along the borderlines of forbidden heresy, raising questions about the orthodox accounts of the soul by framing those challenges as jokes or frustrations, or debates about one of the great philosophers of the ancient world. Jonson's characters can amuse themselves with an account of metempsychosis, so long as it is as vacuous and ludicrous. Faustus can long for, but never accept it. Feste can assert its truth but only as part of a clownish ruse. Gratiano can be tempted to accept the heresy, but his faith never topples. It only wavers.