Shakespeare and the Prodigal Son Tradition

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Although William Shakespeare was often attracted to the Bible's most famous parable, critics have generally missed the considerable importance of the Prodigal Son narrative to the English dramatist. J. Dover Wilson, Robert Pierce, Alan R. Young and a few others have discussed the influence of the parable on the Henry IV plays; Susan Snyder, in her perceptive essay "King Lear and the Prodigal Son," has shown the Biblical story to be a shaping influence on the great tragedy; and Peter Milward has also shown the recurrent presence of the parable's themes in several of Shakespeare's plays.1 Otherwise, the theme has been treated only superficially in Shakespearean studies, despite the fact that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the parable was an enormously popular subject, inspiring dozens of plays (which affected English drama broadly), and despite the fact that the story was visually represented nearly everywhere:

... on the walls of houses, taverns and churches, in stained glass windows, among collections of woodcuts and engravings, on cushions, bed-hangings and coverlets, and on stoneware jugs, goblet lids and painted cabinets.2

My argument is simply that an awareness of the rich iconographic and literary traditions of the Prodigal Son can enhance one's understanding of several passages in Shakespeare's works; and in the case of a few plays, The Merchant of Venice and the Henry IV dramas in...
particular, useful new readings may be generated. There is value, then, in recovering a sense of the enormous artistic tradition familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The parable of the Prodigal Son was one of the most prominent subjects for Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art. In stained glass windows, illuminated manuscripts, woodcarvings, etchings, and paintings the greatest parable of the New Testament is vividly displayed. In the works of countless unknown artisans, as well as in the masterworks of Dürer, Bosch, Holbein and many Dutch and Flemish painters including van Leyden, van Dyck and Rembrandt, one can see rendered the touching story of youthful profligacy, extravagant living, extreme poverty, paternal forgiveness, and reunion. With some artists like Dürer and Rembrandt the theme was lovingly reworked many times, indicating a profound infatuation with the story. The parable was a fruitful emblem, capable of many meanings and countless interpretations, the artists of each period and country often recasting the story to match their own particular interests (Vetter vii; Young 281-82). The parable gave Dutch painters an occasion to depict countless tavern scenes and other tableaux of low life. ("The prodigal among the whores" was a widespread subject of sixteenth-century Dutch painting as Konrad Renger amply illustrates.) These topics were rather standard by the time Shakespeare imagined Falstaff, Hal, Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet in the Henry IV plays.

Similarly, and parallel to the visual arts, one discovers a massive outpouring of literary treatments of the Prodigal Son narrative on the Continent and in England. The widespread interest in the theme may be traced as far back as St. Augustine who interpreted the story as an allegory of his own spiritual pilgrimage. In Augustinian terms the human soul (peregrinatio animae) is on a journey, first away from home, and finally toward a gracious Father's embrace. The parable was a concise