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Shakespeare's Last Act: The Starry Messenger and the Galilean Book in Cymbeline

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Shakespeare's Last Act: The Starry Messenger and the Galilean Book in *Cymbeline*

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Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing into heaven?

Acts 1:11, *King James Bible*, London 1611

In the novel *2010: Odyssey Two*, Arthur C. Clarke presents a spectacle of sheer sublimity rather obviously designed to whet his fans' appetites for a cinematic sequel to his 1969 collaboration with director Stanley Kubrick. As a spaceship prepares for its destined landing on the planet Jupiter, the narrator expresses the unspoken awe of the anxious crew by allowing us to see through their eyes:

Jupiter was already larger than the Moon in the skies of Earth, and the giant inner satellites could be clearly seen moving around it The eternal ballet they performed—disappearing behind Jupiter, reappearing to transit the daylight face with their accompanying shadows—was an endlessly engaging spectacle. It was one that astronomers had watched ever since Galileo had first glimpsed it almost exactly four centuries ago; but the crew of the *Leonov* were the only living men and women to have seen it with their unaided eyes.¹

Clarke's narrator, however, may have overestimated just how "endlessly engaging" this interstellar spectacle would prove for earthly audiences; for, truth be told, "almost exactly four centuries" ahead of Clarke's fictional cosmonauts were Shakespeare's real-life groundlings, who saw something strikingly similar but probably just shook their heads in disbelief at the playwright's own outlandish vision of Jupiter. **[End Page 401]**

In 1610, as Clarke's story indicates, Galileo Galilei did not downplay the series of earth-shaking astronomical observations contained in his *Sidereus nuncius*, or *The Starry Messenger*, the culmination of which was "what appears to be most important in the present matter: four planets never seen from the beginning of the world right up to our day"—four moons, as it turns out, in orbit about the planet Jupiter.² Among the implications of Galileo's discoveries at the beginning of 1610 was that all

of history "from the beginning of the world" was suddenly shown to be incomplete—certain timeless objects and universal truths had gone overlooked and unrecorded—"right up to [the present] day." During the Christmas season of 1610–1611, less than a year after Galileo published the news of his discoveries, Shakespeare concluded his drama of the life of King Cymbeline—a play about British history at the time of Christ's Nativity—with what John Dover Wilson speculates was "probably the play's chief attraction for most of the audience": a vision of the Roman god Jupiter floating atop a theatrical machine from the top of the playhouse, then descending through the erstwhile impenetrable "crystalline" spheres of the Ptolemaic cosmos to the level of the stage.³ From the moment that Jupiter appears above the stage until the time he lands upon it, the only other activity the audience sees is that of four ghostly figures engaged in a dance about the descending god, a "slow, circular dance," in the words of Peggy Muñoz Simonds, "in imitation of planetary motions."⁴ Admittedly, it was not unusual to see Jupiter (or "Jove," as he was more often identified) in such Stuart court masques as Jonson's *Hymenai* or Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*; but it was certainly unique to Shakespeare's drama for the god to be lowered to the earth on the back of an eagle, with a book in one hand and a thunderbolt in the **[End Page 402]** other, with four spirits forming a "circle round" him, while he makes explicit reference to "our Jovial star"—in other words, the planet Jupiter.

If it seems incongruous and unlikely, at first, for Shakespeare to have alluded to Galileo's startling scientific discovery at the conclusion of a play primarily set in Roman Britain, a millennium and a half before the invention of the telescope, it has seemed even more unlikely to many readers that Shakespeare would *not* have alluded to Galileo's discoveries, ever, in at least one of his plays. Johannes Kepler, who received a copy of Galileo's *Sidereus nuncius* at the Rudolphine court...

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1. Arthur C. Clarke, *2010: Odyssey Two* (New York: Del Rey, 1982), p. 84.



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