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## Kinship and Twinship in *Jacob and Esau*

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The author

## Kinship and Twinship in *Jacob and Esau*

Kent R. Lehnhof

The Tudor biblical drama *Jacob and Esau* was entered into the Stationer's Register in 1557–58. It was probably printed soon thereafter, although the only extant copies of the play date from 1568, which might represent a second printing. The 1568 text does not indicate whether it is a first or second printing, nor does it identify the play's author, prompting modern-day scholars to make speculative attributions. Some have argued in favor of Nicolas Udall, the headmaster of the Westminster School, while others have championed William Hunnis, the master of the children of the Chapel Royal. In addition to this uncertainty about the play's author and its date of initial publication, there is also disagreement in the academic community as to the play's date of composition (Edwardian or Marian) as well as its theological stance (rigidly Calvinist or something more Erasmian).<sup>1</sup>

But if these matters remain indeterminate or in dispute, the one thing that cannot be questioned is the play's focus on family relations. Lexically, the play is littered with familial terms. By my count, words like "father," "mother," "son," and "brother" appear 261 times over the course of the play—which means that one out of every seventy words in the play is a term of kinship.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with this focus on the family, the stage directions assiduously establish the familial roles of the principal characters as they enter the playing space for the first time. When Rebecca and Jacob make their initial appearance in 1.3, the stage directions introduce them as "REBECCA, *the mother*" and "JACOB, *the son*." When Isaac arrives in 1.4, the stage directions describe him as "ISAAC, *the husband*," and put him in conversation with "REBECCA, *the wife*." The only biblical principal who is not introduced in this fashion is Esau. Instead of identifying Esau as a "son" or "brother," the stage directions in 1.1 present him as "ESAU, *a young man, [Ragan's] master*" and again in 2.2 as "ESAU, *the master*." Unlike his twin, Esau is not situated within a family relation but within a master-servant relation. This discrepancy appears to be by design. The stage directions that take pains to tie together Isaac, Rebecca, and Jacob in the bonds of kinship are just as careful to keep Esau apart. Esau's separation implies that he is not a "true" son to Isaac and is therefore undeserving of the birthright blessing. Accordingly,

“JACOB, *the son*” does no great wrong in orchestrating affairs so as to win the blessing for himself.

The implications of these early stage directions are upheld and amplified elsewhere in the play. In what follows, I demonstrate this to be the case by reviewing some of the ways the interlude seeks to justify Jacob’s usurpation, most interestingly in its systematic and strategic deployment of kinship ties and familial terms. After explaining how the play leverages family relations to elevate Jacob and overthrow Esau, I concentrate on one family relation in particular: namely, the complicated bond between twin brothers. As I will make clear, the interlude’s treatment of twinship raises pressing questions about the way wealth, affection, and opportunity are distributed among siblings, anticipating by several decades the heated debates about primogeniture that characterize the 1630s. As we shall see, the interlude’s staging of the twin relation puts pressure on traditional and formal modes of apportioning benefits, edging toward an antinomianism that is exhibited most fully in the epilogue, where the prescriptions of consanguinity and primogeniture take a back seat to the unalterable decrees of God. Whereas the first five acts of the play ask us to attend to Abraham’s immediate family, bound together by blood and birth, the epilogue focuses our attention on God’s eternal family, bound together by acts of divine election. In the end, what the interlude upholds as the most important form of filiation is not the material bonds between blood relatives but the mystical bonds that come about as God arbitrarily adopts this or that sinner.

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Inasmuch as *Jacob and Esau* supports Jacob’s efforts to supplant Esau, the stageplay sounds a rather unconventional note. As several scholars have shown, the standard Tudor interpretation, as articulated in sermons and scriptural commentaries, is that Jacob behaved ignobly in the business of the birth-right.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the Geneva Bible can be said to represent the prevailing view. Its marginal gloss to Genesis 27:19 advises: “Although Iaakób was assured of this blessing by faith: yet he did euil to seke it by lies and the more because he abuseth Gods Name thereunto.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 30:30 is highly critical of Jacob’s actions, complaining that he “insinuateth himself with many lies, bringeth nothing whiche may rightly commend him, and in many things he deserveth reprehension.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, *Jacob and Esau* sets itself against orthodox interpretations such as these—and sometimes against the scriptural account itself—so as to sanction Jacob’s unethical acquisition of his father’s blessing.<sup>6</sup>

One of the ways the play does this is by offering us an airbrushed version of the supplanter. Though Tudor churchmen faulted the biblical Jacob for being self-serving and impatient, the individual we are given to meet in *Jacob and Esau* is both pious and benign. This Jacob is loath to violate the law of

primogeniture and only does so when assured that it is God's will. He exhibits, as David Bevington observes, "a moral nicety not observable in the biblical Jacob."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the interlude improves our opinion of Jacob by displacing blame for the birthright transaction onto Rebecca and Esau. As Michelle Ephraim explains, Rebecca plays no part in the pottage plot in Genesis, but she is the one who instigates the scheme in *Jacob and Esau*. As a consequence, Jacob's actions in the interlude have more to do with filial obedience than with his personal ambition. As Jacob himself announces, his pursuit of the birthright does not proceed from his own prerogative but from his mother's "enticement."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the stageplay effectively excuses Jacob's course of action by making Esau a more enthusiastic participant in the birthright exchange than his scriptural counterpart. As Naomi Pasachoff points out, the biblical Esau does not offer to buy his brother's pottage; it is Jacob who insists on being compensated. In the interlude, on the other hand, Esau offers to purchase the food the instant he arrives.<sup>9</sup> Jacob has neither time nor need to manipulate his twin, for as soon as Esau smells Jacob's fare, he spontaneously offers to buy it with his most precious possession: "Refresh me therewithal, and boldly ask of me / The best thing that I have, whatsoever it be" (31). In this portrayal, Jacob does not drive a hard bargain but merely acquiesces in an exchange that Esau has proposed all on his own. And lest we worry that Jacob is taking undue advantage of Esau's state of extreme need, the playwright invents a servant for Esau who undergoes the same deprivation as his master yet retains the ability to reject the birthright-for-pottage exchange. Ragan is just as hungry as Esau, but he would not stoop to sell his blessing: "I would fast and fare ill, ere I ate of that price," Ragan says (33).<sup>10</sup> Esau, on the other hand, regards the deal as not only equitable but downright generous. If Mido's report can be trusted, Esau showers Jacob with thanks the entire time he eats, his effusive gratitude and obvious enjoyment attesting to his satisfaction with the swap (34). According to Esau, the pottage is so delicious that it is easily worth a birthright. In his eyes, "It were sin not to sell one's soul for such gear" (38). Even after Esau's hunger has been sated and the pottage has been consumed, he remains content with the bargain. Rather than recriminate against his twin, Esau expresses no regrets. "Repent me? wherefore? . . . / If it were to do, I would do it [again] to-morrow" (38). Esau's intense and abiding satisfaction reassures the audience that Jacob is no swindler. He does not put one over on Esau so much as he brokers a mutually beneficial exchange in which value is maximized, each twin receiving what he prizes most.

Of course, this mutually agreeable arrangement only works if one of the parties has a warped value system, as Esau does. And this brings us to another part of the play's persuasive program. At the same time that the drama strives to vindicate Jacob, it aims to vilify Esau. Scholars like Murray Roston and John Curran might object that "vilify" is too strong a word, for they believe

that the drama pulls its punches in its portrayal of Esau. In their eyes, the Esau we encounter in *Jacob and Esau* is guilty of little more than sounding his hunting horn too early in the morning: disturbing the peace, if you will.<sup>11</sup> However, their indulgent view of Esau overlooks too much. Curran, for instance, claims that “There is truly no way to transform Esau’s hunting, a neutral quality in Genesis 25:27, into a heinous crime (especially in such a hunting-obsessed upper-class culture as Tudor England).”<sup>12</sup> Yet there are a number of ways in which the stageplay does just that. Indeed, this would seem to be the overarching objective of the play’s opening speech, in which Esau’s servant expounds—for fifty uninterrupted lines—on the improvidence of his master’s fieldcraft. According to Ragan, Esau embarks on his hunts several hours before dawn, without breaking his fast or packing provisions. He then ranges for hours on end in the forest, making himself so hungry that “he would be glad of a dead horse to eat” (5). In perfect fulfillment of Ragan’s fulminations, this is precisely what we see in the play: Esau undertakes several futile hunting trips that reduce him to such a weakened state that he cannot stand upright and would fain eat anything, including his hounds, his servant, and “the brawn of my very arm” (27). Not without reason does Rebecca complain that her eldest “giveth himself to hunting out of reason” (20).

In his apology for Esau, Curran is compelled to admit that Esau “clearly wastes his own energy and Ragan’s in his hunting.” Nevertheless, Curran insists that Esau’s frenetic activity “has not been unproductive”: “As the biblical account predicates, Esau’s adventures have yielded savory food for Isaac and hence have been appreciated greatly. . . . [H]is efforts have borne tangible fruit, whereas Jacob’s have not.”<sup>13</sup> This claim, however, matches up with the biblical account more than it does the interlude itself, for the drama does little to cultivate the image of Esau as a successful or productive hunter. Indeed, all of the hunting excursions dramatized or described in *Jacob and Esau* are abject failures, save for the final one, which is left unstaged. The audience never sees Esau capturing food. Instead, we see him perishing for want of it. The allegedly fruitless Jacob, on the other hand, has no problem producing victuals when they are required—whether it be pottage for his brother or goat for his father. Contrary to Curran’s claims, the drama goes out of its way to present Esau’s hunting in a dark light, transforming it, as Bevington observes, into “a wildly irresponsible pastime, like dicing.”<sup>14</sup>

But even if we were to look past Esau’s profligate hunting practices, the play would still present us with plenty of other reasons to dislike him. The stage directions, as noted above, identify Esau first and foremost as a “master”—but it is hard to imagine a worse one. He berates and beats his servant in 1.1, tries to cannibalize him in 2.2, and then treacherously betrays him in 2.3. Moreover, he does all this without a second thought. Instead of feeling bad about his abusive actions, Esau wishes only to increase their

scope. Anticipating the day when he will assume his father's authority, Esau plans to be an absolute tyrant, forcing everyone to bow before him:

And when I am once in my place of succession,  
 And have all manner things in full possession;  
 I shall wring all louts and make them stoop (I trow);  
 I shall make the slaves couch as low as dog to bow.

(72)

Given Esau's sadistic streak, it can come as no surprise that none of the play's servants has any affection for him. As Mido states, "[A]ll good folks are glad Jacob's part to take," but "None loveth Esau but for his father's sake" (71). So outspoken are the supporting characters in their opposition to Esau that it sometimes seems as if these characters have been created for the sole purpose of turning us against the elder twin. This is certainly the case with Hanan and Zethar, the pair of disgruntled neighbors who spend their only scene onstage complaining about Esau's incivility. As Naomi Pasachoff remarks, the only function these characters carry out in the play is to inveigh against Esau's bad nature and contrast it with Jacob's good nature.<sup>15</sup>

Esau's most damning detractor, however, is neither a neighbor nor a servant. It is his own mother. Rebecca's antipathy toward Esau is apparent to everyone—even blind old Isaac, who says: "O wife, I perceive ye speak of affection; / To Jacob ye bear love, and to his brother none" (20). Rather than finesse her feelings, Rebecca is forthright in her response: "Indeed, sir, I cannot love Esau as well / As I do Jacob, the plain truth to you to tell" (20). This state of affairs is evident in her speech patterns. When Rebecca speaks to or about Jacob, she tends to emphasize their bond, as in 1.3, where Rebecca addresses him as "son Jacob," "dear son," and "my sweet son Jacob" (13, 16, 16). With Esau, however, Rebecca seems reluctant to acknowledge their attachment, much less emphasize it. For instance, Rebecca refers to Jacob in her exchange with Isaac in 1.4 as "your younger son and mine," but refers to Esau in this same conversation only as "your son Esau"—as if she herself bore no connection to the older twin (20). Her estrangement from Esau is physically evident as well. Whereas Rebecca regularly keeps company with Jacob, appearing alongside him in seven of her fourteen scenes, she shares the stage with Esau only once, in the very last scene of the play. Her allergy for Esau is arresting, indicating that he is the exception to the rule: the son that not even a mother can love.

Esau, to be sure, does not pine for more attention or affection from his mother. In his eyes, Jacob's proximity to Rebecca is not cause for envy but for contempt. With unconcealed disdain, he derides his twin for being unable to leave their mother's protective presence: "Nay, he must tarry and suck mother's dug at home: / Jacob must keep home, I trow, under mother's wing"

(9). Esau, on the other hand, could not care less what Rebecca thinks or does. As he boasts in the opening scene, “I pass not, whether she do me praise or blame” (7). Michelle Ephraim proposes that the play prompts us to associate Esau’s disregard for Rebecca with his degeneracy. In her view, the play promotes a proto-feminist perspective by implying that Esau’s contempt for women is coextensive with his reprobate status—as if the play were suggesting that the dividing line between election and reprobation is holding women in esteem, as the saintly Jacob does.<sup>16</sup> This is an intriguing claim and well worth pursuing, but as we pursue it, we would do well to expand its scope, for Esau not only disprizes his mother but also his father.

Admittedly, Esau’s disrespect for Isaac, manifested primarily through neglect, is not as obvious as his scorn for Rebecca. Esau does not disparage his father as openly as he does his mother, and Isaac, for his part, dutifully defends Esau’s rights as the eldest son. Because Isaac takes Esau’s part when Rebecca takes Jacob’s, we might expect these two relationships to mirror one other, Isaac and Esau being just as close as Jacob and Rebecca. But the staging of the play effectively disallows this idea. Whereas Jacob and Rebecca are virtually inseparable onstage, Esau does not share a scene with Isaac until 5.4 and only appears alongside his father on one other occasion after that. Curran would have us believe that Esau’s “best quality” is “his urge to please his father,” but the son we see in *Jacob and Esau* does not exhibit this urge.<sup>17</sup> This Esau does not feast his father with frequent gifts of savory meat; rather, he rarely sees the man, allowing so much time to pass between visits that Isaac is left to wonder what has become of him: “I marvel, where Esau my son doth become, / That he doth now of days visit me so seldom” (46). Even Esau recognizes that he is at fault, admitting, “Now, since I last saw mine old father Isaac, / Both I do think it long, and he will judge me slack” (46). Isaac professes early on that he loves Esau, but this affection would seem to originate entirely in Esau’s status as the eldest son, since Esau does little else to draw his father’s love.

In considering the interpersonal indicators of Esau’s degeneracy, then, we should perhaps cast the net a bit wider than his disregard for his mother. Though it is true that Esau disrespects Rebecca, his comportment toward his father and his brother are not much better. At issue is Esau’s relationships—or lack thereof—with *all* of his family members. For it is certainly the case that Esau is the one unintegrated member of this biblical family. Isaac, the venerable patriarch, is so tied to his family that he never appears onstage without a wife or a child at his side: such is the case in all seven of his scenes. Jacob, for his part, is accompanied by a family member in nine of his eleven scenes, and Rebecca is with family in nine of her fourteen scenes. Esau, on the other hand, almost never shares the stage with his parents or his twin. In only two of Esau’s seven scenes is he in the company of Isaac, Rebecca, or Jacob.

Character	Total scenes	Scenes w/family	Percentage
Isaac	7	7	100%
Jacob	11	9	82%
Rebecca	14	9	64%
Esau	7	2	29%

Unlike the other principals—“ISAAC, *the husband*,” “REBECCA, *the mother*,” and “JACOB, *the son*”—Esau is not enmeshed in a web of familial relations, nor does he care to be. His alienation and apathy offer compelling evidence of his irredeemable state. Stressing the importance of familial bonds, the stageplay makes Esau’s rejection of these bonds a primary sign of his spiritually compromised condition.

But the final scene might change all this. In a turn both unexpected and unscriptural, the interlude ends with a reconciliation of sorts. In Genesis, Esau does not allay his anger toward Jacob until many decades later. The stageplay hastens his mollification, making it happen in a matter of hours. Significantly, Rebecca is the one who brings about this softening, which she does by embracing Esau as her son. Though Rebecca has avoided referring to Esau as her son prior to this point in the action, she now addresses him as “son” three times in quick succession (once on 84 and twice on 86), using the maternal appellation to enforce obedience. In this final scene, Rebecca heaps on the terms of kinship—“son,” “mother,” “brother”—so as to get Esau to buckle and bow beneath the weight of his familial obligations: “My *son* Esau, hear me; I am thy *mother*: / For my sake let pass this grudge against thy *brother*” (86; my emphasis). The first word of Esau’s reply is also a familial term—“mother”—and it offers us our first indication that Rebecca’s appeal is working. From there, the familial terms proliferate—on Esau’s part and on the part of others—as missing kinship connections are quickly put in place and Esau is unexpectedly brought into the fold.<sup>18</sup>

ESAU: *Mother*, though it be a great thing that ye require:

Yet must all malice pass at your desire;

And for your cause, *mother*, this mine anger shall slake.

REBECCA: I thank thee, *my son*, that thou dost it for my sake.

ESAU: For your sake, with Jacob I will be at accord.

REBECCA: And shall I call thy *father* to be as record?

ESAU: As pleaseth you, *mother*, I can be well content.

(86; my emphasis)

Whatever happiness or harmony we discover at the close of the play—“As pleaseth you, mother, I can be well content”—comes about as the formerly

aloof Esau is incorporated into the family unit, transformed from an abusive “*master*” into an obedient son.<sup>19</sup>

However, even as the interlude emphasizes the importance of familial relations, it does not romanticize them. As is evident when Rebecca leverages the force of “son,” “mother,” and “brother” to make Esau knuckle under, familial bonds in *Jacob and Esau* can be both coercive and constraining.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the play does not pretend that the family is a place of abundance or equality. In *Jacob and Esau* there never seems to be enough to go around, whether it be pottage or parental affection or birthright blessings. There is only one bowl of pottage, just as there is only one birthright blessing. Accordingly, struggle is inevitable. And in this struggle, one brother’s gain is always the other brother’s loss. But because these particular brothers came into the world together, the zero-sum logic that governs their lives seems especially arbitrary and unjust. Jacob and Esau once shared a womb, but after they are born, they are not allowed to share anything else. The all-or-nothing schema that governs their lives invariably turns them against each other. And by dramatizing this difficult dynamic—by showing us how sibling rivalry can turn twins into enemies—the play raises difficult questions about the division of affection, opportunity, and wealth among family members.

\* \* \*

In Shakespeare’s plays, twinship is often imagined as a relationship of transcendent unity. This is the prevailing sense in *The Winter’s Tale* when Polixenes uses the terms of twinship to describe his childhood friendship with Leontes:

We were as twyn’d Lambs, that did frisk i’ th’ Sun,  
And bleat the one at th’ other: what we chang’d,  
Was Innocence, for Innocence: we knew not  
The Doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream’d  
That any did: Had we pursu’d that life,  
And our weake Spirits ne’ re been higher rear’d  
With stronger blood, we should haue answer’d Heauen  
Boldly, not guilty; the Imposition clear’d,  
Hereditarie ours.

(TLN 130–38)<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, twinship indicates a pairing so harmonious that not even original sin intrudes. Yet such a conceptualization can only be fantastical, as Shakespeare—himself a father to twins—must surely have understood. Although Polixenes’ twinned lambs enjoy a perfectly reciprocal relationship, exchanging innocence for innocence, actual twins are forced to compete for familial resources. In early modernity, to give but one example, mothers of twins were routinely told they could not produce sufficient milk for both

babies and were advised to send one away to a wet nurse.<sup>22</sup> This inevitable competition is what the passage from *The Winter's Tale* ignores. As Gail Paster points out, Polixenes' sentimentalizing simile fails to take into account the unavoidable rivalry of twins, particularly the possibility that only one can find a place at the maternal body and that the acceptance of one twin necessarily requires the rejection of the other.<sup>23</sup>

*Jacob and Esau*, on the other hand, never overlooks this possibility. Indeed, it is pretty clear that the mother in this play can love only one twin at a time. Isaac suggests as much when he observes that Rebecca gives all her love to Jacob and none to Esau (20), and Rebecca's behavior corroborates this claim. For most of the play, Rebecca acts as if Jacob is her only son. Calling him "son Jacob" and "my sweet son Jacob" and "dear son," she showers him with love and works tirelessly to bring about his elevation, even though this entails Esau's ruin (13, 16, 16). Wholly devoted to her younger son, Rebecca is unsympathetic—even antagonistic—toward her older son. "Such his conditions be," Rebecca says of Esau, "That I wish of God he had ne'er been born of me" (21).

When Jacob flees to Haran, however, the situation shifts. Instead of speaking ill of Esau to others, as she has done throughout the play, Rebecca now resolves to speak directly to Esau—and warmly at that. For the first time in the play, she refers to the elder twin as her son ("son Esau") and takes up a maternal stance in relation to him: "My son Esau, hear me; I am thy mother . . ." (86).<sup>24</sup> Rebecca's turnabout is strategic, inasmuch as it helps her placate Esau's anger, but it is also suggestive, inasmuch as it lends credence to the idea that Rebecca can only love one twin at a time. Jacob's flight, it would seem, has finally freed up Rebecca to acknowledge and attend to his brother. It's as if Jacob's departure has created a vacancy or opening in Rebecca's heart that allows, at long last, for Esau's acceptance.

Isaac, in his dealings with the boys, appears more even-handed than his wife. To be sure, he does not openly disparage either son, as Rebecca does Esau. But even with Isaac, an either/or schema can be seen to structure the parent-child relation, the primary difference being that the identities of the preferred and non-preferred sons are swapped. While Rebecca is fondly addressing Jacob as "son Jacob," Isaac is doing the same with Esau. In 3.4 (Isaac's first scene with Esau), Isaac repeatedly refers to the hunter twin as "son Esau." In fact, only once in the entire scene does he refer to Esau by name only; the six other times he addresses Esau, he adds the filial marker to the proper name or uses the filial marker by itself, as in "son Esau" (four times), "Esau my son," and "mine own dear son" (46–48).

But then Isaac confers the birthright on Jacob. Although he blesses the younger twin by mistake, Isaac believes the error to be incorrigible and switches his emotional investments accordingly. Subsequent to the blessing scene, Isaac gives Jacob the full "son" treatment, as in 5.4, where he refers

to the younger boy as “son Jacob” and “dear son Jacob” (83). Esau, on the other hand, appears to lose his filial standing along with his birthright, for the next time Isaac talks with Esau he drops the filial identifier he has used in all earlier conversations and addresses the elder twin as “Esau” only: “Ah Esau, Esau, thou comest too late! / Another to thy blessing was predestinate, / And clean gone it is from thee, Esau” (74).<sup>25</sup> For Isaac, it would seem that the birthright blessing and the term “son” travel together—to have one is to have the other, and to lose one is to lose the other.

Thus, for father as well as for mother, filial affection is curiously constrained. To judge from their usage of the term “son,” Isaac and Rebecca can only embrace one twin at a time. For Isaac, it is the twin to whom the birthright currently belongs (Esau initially and Jacob ultimately), while for Rebecca it is the twin who is currently at a disadvantage (Jacob initially and Esau ultimately). But even though the identity of each parent’s “son” switches over the course of the play, the singularity of the parent/son relation does not alter. When each parent takes on a new “son,” he or she does so by relinquishing the former one. In this way, the interlude implies that sonship is exclusive: each parent is only capable of having one “son” at any given moment.<sup>26</sup>

By presenting parental affection in this manner, the interlude portrays the twin relation as an all-or-nothing affair. This is certainly true of the contested inheritance. Isaac’s estate, like his affection, is made out to be indivisible, even though this would not have been the case in Old Testament times. In the Hebrew tradition, all sons stood to inherit from their father. The privilege reserved for the eldest was merely a double portion of the inheritance, not the whole of it.<sup>27</sup> And this is where *Jacob and Esau* begins. When Isaac and Rebecca argue over the inheritance in 1.4, Isaac explains that the elder son “must have *double portion* to another” (22; my emphasis). But by the time we reach the blessing scene, the play’s all-or-nothing ideology has caught hold and the Hebraic custom has been cast aside. When Isaac blesses Jacob, he does not confer upon him a double portion, as would have been proscribed by Mosaic law. Instead, he bequeaths everything he possesses to Jacob, leaving nothing for the unfortunate Esau: “And here, to succeed my place, mine heir I thee make, / Of all thing that I have possession to take” (68). In the same way that Isaac appears unable to acknowledge more than one son at a time, he appears unable to accommodate more than one heir.

By making Jacob his sole heir, Isaac effectively impoverishes Esau. Such an action is at odds with Hebraic custom, but it aligns with the early modern practice of primogeniture, which called for fathers to transmit their terrestrial holdings intact to their eldest sons. This was deemed necessary to ensure that familial estates remained of sufficient size to continue rendering an adequate income, but this benefit came at the expense of the younger sons, who were left with little or nothing. Forced to fend for themselves, younger sons were

compelled to work for a living, while their idle elder brothers enjoyed all the advantages of the ancestral estate. As Joan Thirsk notes, "The contrast was too sharp between the life of an elder son, whose fortune was made for him by his father, and who had nothing to do but maintain, and perhaps augment it, and that of the younger sons who faced a life of hard and continuous effort, starting almost from nothing."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the unhappy lot of the younger son became proverbial in the period. "During the sixteenth century," Thirsk explains, "to describe anyone as 'a younger son' was a short-hand way of summing up a host of grievances. . . . 'Younger son' meant an angry young man, bearing more than his share of injustice and resentment, deprived of means by his father and elder brother, often hanging around his elder brother's house as a servant, completely dependent on his grace and favour."<sup>29</sup> In Tudor England, the plight of the younger son was particularly egregious because the English practiced primogeniture more widely and more rigorously than anywhere else in Europe.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Continental visitors—no strangers to primogeniture themselves—were often taken aback by the state of affairs in England, commenting in letters and diaries that English inheritance practices were "very harsh compared with what they knew at home."<sup>31</sup> This severity supercharged the English debates about primogeniture, infusing them with much more passion than the relatively calmer debates on the Continent.<sup>32</sup>

As one might imagine, these debates had a way of spilling over into the public playhouses. Louis Montrose, for instance, has shown that primogeniture—and the social stresses it produces—drives the action in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. To be sure, Orlando foregrounds the issue in the play's opening lines as he bitterly complains that his all-inheriting older brother has reduced him to a state of ignoble destitution. Orlando's remonstrance thrusts all of us—characters and audiences alike—into the middle of a simmering public controversy. However, Montrose advises that Shakespeare "is not merely using something topical to get his comedy off to a lively start." Rather, "the expression and resolution of sibling conflict and its social implications are integral to the play's form and function."<sup>33</sup> As Montrose proceeds to show, one of the primary pleasures of the play is watching Shakespeare utilize all the machinery of pastoral romance to remedy the seemingly inevitable degradation of the younger brother in a primogenital system. By the time the play ends, Orlando's gentility has been preserved and his material well-being has been assured. Thus, without actually contravening the principles of primogeniture, Shakespeare deftly creates a palliative illusion of sibling harmony, social leveling, and universal contentment that virtually everyone can appreciate.<sup>34</sup>

*As You Like It* is not the only play in the canon in which something like this occurs. Shakespeare cultivates an equally appealing illusion of sibling harmony and social leveling in *The Comedy of Errors*, which also begs ques-

tions about birth order.<sup>35</sup> As does *As You Like It*, *The Comedy of Error* sorts its central siblings into the all-important categories of “elder” and “younger” from the start. In the opening scene, Egeon—who says his sons were virtually indistinguishable (TLN 55–56)—nevertheless distinguishes between them on the basis of birth order when describing how he and Emilia tied them to a spare mast to survive their shipwreck. According to Egeon, Emilia was “more carefull for the latter borne” and therefore took pains to secure him, while Egeon was “like heedfull” of the other (TLN 81, 85). A few lines later, however, Egeon says he wound up with the younger twin when the mast split, rather than the older twin he supposedly had in hand just moments before (TLN 127). A number of editors have deemed this an authorial lapse, including Henry Cunningham, R. A. Foakes, and Stephen Greenblatt, who fault Shakespeare for an “oversight,” a “conflict of details,” and “an inconsistency,” respectively, in their footnotes to the line in which Egeon claims to have ended up with the younger twin.<sup>36</sup> Patricia Parker, on the other hand, has proposed that the contradiction can be resolved if we imagine that the parents bind their preferred sons to one side of the mast and then cross over to the other side to bind themselves—an arrangement that would enable them to keep their eyes fixed on their favorite child by looking down the length of the mast at him.<sup>37</sup> Parker’s reading is both clever and careful, but it is certainly counter-intuitive—so much so that it has taken us several centuries to sort things out, if that is what Parker has indeed done. (Greenblatt, apparently, remains unconvinced, for his claim of “inconsistency” postdates the publication of Parker’s note by five or six years.) However, the one point on which everyone can agree is that *The Comedy of Errors* plays fast and loose with birth order. The drama begins by acknowledging that one twin is older and identifying him for us (i.e., the one in Egeon’s arms). But from that point forward, the comedy plays a shell game of sorts, switching the twins around so quickly or counter-intuitively that it is tough to keep track.<sup>38</sup>

But if we critics have puzzled over which of Egeon’s sons is the eldest, the characters themselves are curiously unconcerned. Given the substantial advantages afforded the firstborn son in Shakespeare’s day, the audience members would probably have perceived this to be a weighty and pressing matter, yet neither of the Antipholus brothers nor any of the other characters attempts to identify which twin is oldest when ironing things out at the end of the play.<sup>39</sup> Such an omission would seem to be key to the comedy’s happy conclusion, since any effort to ascertain which twin is older would introject an unwelcome element of sibling rivalry into the newly reestablished relation, reducing one of the twins to the socially and economically subordinate status of “younger son.” To get a sense of just how awkward things could become were birth order brought up, we need only note that if Antipholus S is in fact the younger son (as Egeon indicates in TLN 127), then his seven-year quest “to finde his fellow forth” (TLN 201) is financially foolhardy, for

the second he locates his elder brother, he recovers the one person on earth who stands between him and the whole of his father's estate. As if to ease us past this barrier to happiness and harmony, the play makes it difficult to determine which twin is the eldest and then subtly averts our attention from the birth-order issue. As a result, it becomes much easier to revel in the eventual reunion. We can rejoice that the Antipholus twins have finally found one another, without worrying that one of them may have lost his patrimony in the process.

In its final scene, then, *The Comedy of Errors* sidesteps the question of birth order. But it does not overleap it altogether. Once the Antipholuses have been dismissed to bliss and the stage has been all but cleared, the Dromios—at long last—broach the sensitive subject. However, the Dromios do not raise it with respect to their masters but with respect to themselves, and they do so not to determine who should inherit but to determine who should walk in front. With the servant twins, there is so little at stake that it finally becomes safe to acknowledge once again that one twin must necessarily be older than the other.<sup>40</sup> This reproductive reality no longer threatens the comedic close because the penurious Dromios have nothing to give or receive. All they have are their ebullient personalities, and they bring these squarely to bear on the matter. With characteristic cheer, the Dromios agree to settle seniority in the future by drawing lots but to act in the meanwhile as if they were born at the same time.

DROMIO E: Will you walke in to see their gossipping?

DROMIO S: Not I, sir, you are my elder.

DROMIO E: That's a question, how shall we trie it.

DROMIO S: We'l draw Cuts for the Signior, till then, lead thou first.

DROMIO E: Nay then thus:

We came into the world like brother and brother:

And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another.

(TLN 1911–18)

It is a rousing bit of bonhomie. In the play's final lines, the Dromios conjure up and then cast out the specter of sibling rivalry that has haunted the action throughout. With effusive good will, they drive out the ghosts of Cain/Abel and Jacob/Esau, reassuring us that brothers need not be enemies. As does *As You Like It*, *The Comedy of Errors* offers an unlikely but irresistible fantasy of fraternal unity.<sup>41</sup>

At times, it seems that *Jacob and Esau* wishes to move in a similar direction. As was mentioned above, the interlude strays from its scriptural sources in the final scene to give Esau a few lines suggestive of a softening. Yet this pathway is not clear. The rift between Jacob and Esau cannot be credibly closed up without contradicting the biblical narrative, to say nothing of sev-

eral centuries of bad blood. Isaac's twins are archetypal adversaries, fated to fight over the birthright they cannot share. So overdetermined is their antagonism that their names served as a sort of shorthand in early modern England for irreconcilable property interests, as can be seen in the curriculum at the Inns of Court. From the late fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, students at the Inns of Court were called upon to adjudicate moots, or conjectural cases, in order to develop and demonstrate their understanding of legal principles and procedures. The most widely used and well-known of these moots was titled "Jacob and Esau." Patterned after the story in Genesis, this moot paints a picture of intractable sibling conflict. As Karen Cunningham explains, it articulates "a particularly competitive vision . . . in which alliances shift swiftly, even among brothers, and devotions dissolve into one another." It establishes the clear expectation that property rights will be contested, and that the conflict will most likely come from within one's own family or class.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the moot taps the essence of the scriptural story and emphasizes how property claims complicate sibling relations and how sibling relations complicate property claims. In both the moot and the myth, sets of twins are used to highlight how quickly and completely heritable wealth can convert even the closest of relations into the fiercest of foes.

So while early modern authors may use twinship in the abstract to convey ideas of mystical union and harmony, or complementarity and cohesion, little of this endures when twinship is brought down to the material plane and patrimonies are placed in the balance. As *Jacob and Esau* makes clear, traditional inheritance practices have a toxic effect on the twin relation, corrupting what could otherwise be supernal, sublime. This is poignant enough, but *Jacob and Esau* goes even further. As it explores the operation of primogeniture in the case of Isaac's sons, the interlude questions the logic and legitimacy of the age-old practice.

To be sure, *Jacob and Esau* is not the only play to do something like this. In *King Lear*, for instance, Gloucester's second son, Edmund, inveighs at length against the practice of primogeniture, disparaging his country's obsessive regard for birth order as an outmoded "custome" or "curiosity." But at least in Edmund's case, there is an appreciable interval between his nativity and his brother's: "some twelue, or fourteene Moonshines," as he admits (TLN 337–39). With *Jacob and Esau*, the difference between elder and younger is a matter of seconds, not months: a sliver of time so negligible as to underscore how haphazard the distinction can be. Indeed, with *Jacob and Esau* the eldership appears to have been up in the air until the very last moment. According to Genesis, Rebecca's sons "stroue together within her," as if the fetuses were aware what was at stake and were jockeying for position (Gen. 25:22). When the crucial moment came, Esau happened to have the upper hand and emerged first, but the narrowness of his victory is indicated by his inability to free himself from his brother's grasp. When Jacob comes out, he

is clinging to Esau’s heel, his unbroken hold hinting that he might have managed a reversal, if only he’d had a bit more time (see Gen. 25:22–26 and *Jacob and Esau* 80).<sup>43</sup> Jacob and Esau’s photo-finish delivery invites us to see the all-important title of “firstborn” as an arbitrary honor which could easily have fallen to the other twin, had things proceeded slightly differently. By compressing the natal timeline so tightly, twin births impress upon us how narrow the margins can be, prompting us to wonder whether seniority is significant enough to be the sole criterion by which estates are settled.

Yet even if we are comfortable relying on birth order, we still cannot rest easy with twins, for twin births can complicate all kinds of things—including something as seemingly straightforward as birth order. To see how this is so, we need look no further than the delivery of Judah’s daughter, Tamár, recounted in the book of Genesis, just a few chapters after the story of Jacob and Esau:

Now when the time was come that [Tamár] shulde be deliuered, beholde, there were twinnes in her wombe.

And when she was in trauel, the one put out his hand: & the midwife toke and bounde a red threde about his hand, saying, This is come out first.

But when he plucked his hand backe againe, lo, his brother came out, & the midwife said, How hast thou broken the breache vpon thee? & his name was called Phárez.

And afterwarde came out his brother that had the red threde about his hand, and his name was called Zárah.

(Gen. 38:27–30)

Which of these boys should be deemed the elder and which the younger? Genesis does not clarify, abruptly abandoning the narrative at this point. Historically, however, Phárez appears to have been deemed the eldest and the heir, much to the displeasure of Zárah and his descendants, who rejected the ruling and revolted from the tribe of Judah.<sup>44</sup> As this story and the story of Jacob and Esau goes to show, seniority can be tricky to determine and/or defend when twins are involved, all of which tends to undercut the logic and legitimacy of primogeniture. Where twins are concerned, birth order looks less like a firm, bright line and more like an artificial assignation.

Another thing the story of Phárez and Zárah brings to the fore is the role the midwife plays in the bestowal of the birthright. As the biblical narrative indicates, the midwife is the principal witness to the birth event, and it is on the basis of her testimony—both in Old Testament times and in the early modern era—that twins are sorted into the categories of older and younger.<sup>45</sup> This basic fact makes it slightly harder to talk about birth-order inheritance as an expression of fate or destiny, as Isaac attempts to do in his argument with Rebecca. Isaac tells his wife that he cannot shift the birthright to Jacob

because he is bound by “Nature’s law” to acknowledge his eldest son, who merits this special treatment “by descent” and “by due course”:

The title of birthright, that cometh by descent,  
Or the place of eldership coming by due course,  
I may not change nor shift for better nor for worse.  
Nature’s law it is, the eldest son to knowledge,  
And in no wise to bar him of his heritage.

(24)

Yet Isaac’s belief that birth-order inheritance is utterly inalterable—proof against human desires or designs—seems rather naive, once the role of the midwife is admitted. At least where twins are concerned, eldership is not altogether straightforward. It is subject to the midwife’s decision, and she could very well mix things up, either by honest mistake or intentional deceit.

This point poses a threat to the natural integrity of birth-order inheritance, but it is a point that *Jacob and Esau* presses home by giving Rebecca’s nurse and midwife a prominent role. In Genesis, Deborah is mentioned only once: at the time of her passing, several decades after the events portrayed in the play.<sup>46</sup> In *Jacob and Esau*, on the other hand, Deborah is centrally involved from start to finish. When the ousted Esau wants to reassert his rights as the firstborn son, he goes to Deborah, for it is her testimony that stands behind and props up his position as the elder twin.

ESAU: Is it true that, when I and my brother were first born,  
And I by God’s ordinance came forth him biforne,  
Jacob came forthwith, holding me fast by the heel?

DEBORAH: It is true; I was there, and saw it very well.

(80)

Deborah verifies that Esau was born first (which is what he wants to hear), but the fact that Deborah is in a position to do this has far-reaching repercussions. As Michelle Ephraim observes, “her reply to his anxious request emphasizes her role, and not God’s, in determining his birthright.”<sup>47</sup> Birth-order inheritance is supposed to be straightforward and clear, but *Jacob and Esau* assails this idea by demonstrating the degree to which everything depends on the unsupervised acts of an underclass female.

In its enactment of the struggle between Jacob and Esau, then, the interlude fosters a measure of skepticism about the absoluteness of birth order. As it does so, it anticipates by seventy years or more the primogeniture debates that erupt in England in the 1630s, when authors like John Earle and John Ap Robert follow the interlude’s lead and use the story of Jacob and Esau to critique the practice of primogeniture.<sup>48</sup> These later authors, however, do not mine the story for complexity as intensively as does the interlude. Whereas

Earle and Robert grant that Esau is the eldest, the interlude makes us wonder whether such a thing can ever be certain in the case of twins. By making much of the one-two timing of twin births, as well as the influence and agency of the midwife in designating which twin was born first, the interlude uses twinship to unsettle the very idea of seniority, indicating that it is too uncertain and insubstantial to be the cause for one boy's enrichment and the other boy's abasement.

Nevertheless, the play's progressivism only goes so far. None of the characters, for instance, pushes for a partible inheritance. Rebecca is the most radical voice in the play, but even in the heat of her argument with Isaac she never questions the fairness or fitness of giving everything to a single son, nor does she propose that the inheritance be divided evenly between her boys. Rebecca is on board with one twin inheriting all—she just wants that twin to be Jacob. It is not her intent to put an end to primogeniture; she merely wishes to modify it so that the birthright goes to the worthiest son, irrespective of his place in line. By validating Jacob's elevation, the interlude clearly upholds Rebecca's preference for merit over seniority. And if we align ourselves with her, as the play suggests we do, we gain the ability to avoid many of the barbs the play's twins have laid bare. In this way, the staging of twinship in *Jacob and Esau* helps us see eldership as arbitrary, insubstantial, and—at least in some cases—unknowable. But none of this matters if birth order ceases to be the pivot point on which patrimonies turn.

The shift from seniority to merit, though, launches another kind of inquiry that the twin relation once again throws into high relief. By all accounts, Jacob is the worthier son. But why should he be so different from his brother, considering all they have in common?<sup>49</sup> Looking forward to a slew of modern-day twin studies, *Jacob and Esau* uses its twin subjects to reflect on the relative importance of nature and nurture in the formation of individual character.<sup>50</sup> The play's "nature versus nurture" inquiry is explicitly opened in 1.2, when Hanan and Zethar try to account for Esau's unruliness. Zethar wants to fault Isaac for being too indulgent, but Hanan points out that Jacob does not exhibit any of his brother's boorishness, even though his upbringing was identical. What's more, Esau has been bad from birth, so his ill manners must be intrinsic, instead of acquired.

[Jacob] giveth not himself to wildness any when.  
 But Esau evermore from his young childhood  
 Hath been like to prove ill, and never to be good.  
 Young it pricketh (folks do say), that will be a thorn,  
 Esau hath been naught, ever since he was born.  
 And whereof cometh this? of education?  
 Nay, it is of his own ill inclination.

They were brought up both under one tuition;  
But they be not both of one disposition.

(11–12)

In fine empirical fashion, Hanan makes a comparative study of the play's twinship pair to exclude environmental factors and establish the innateness of Esau's "ill inclination."

Hanan's conclusions are corroborated by Rebecca's testimony. In fact, Rebecca can do Hanan one better. Whereas he claims that "Esau hath been naught, ever since he was born," she can go even earlier, verifying that Esau was already obstreperous *in utero*. Moreover, Rebecca can add the word of God to the "nature" side of the argument. As she tells Jacob, she has it on good authority that her sons' natures were set from the start:

I remember, when I had you both conceived,  
A voice thus saying from the Lord I received:  
Rebecca in thy womb are now two nations  
Of unlike natures and contrary fashions.

(14)

Whereas modern-day twin studies split causation pretty evenly between environment and heredity,<sup>51</sup> *Jacob and Esau* discounts the "nurture" side almost entirely, insisting that what separates Rebecca's twin sons are the "unlike natures" with which they arrived. Of course, the interlude does not impute the twins' radically dissimilar dispositions to genetic variation. In this particular twin study, the x-factor is not DNA but divine election. Jacob has it, ergo, he is good; Esau lacks it, ergo, he is bad. This is a thoroughly Calvinist construction, but it is one the play embraces. As Dalia Ben-Tsur notes, the interlude explicitly moves away from the traditional, medieval reading in which Jacob prefigures the younger Christian brother who acquires the blessed status that his older Jewish brother ends up forfeiting through faithlessness. In its place, the play puts forward a predestinarian reading that ratifies Calvin's claim that the election of God is what makes the difference between persons.<sup>52</sup>

The play's Calvinist proclivities are manifest in both the prologue and the epilogue, which speak with a special authority. As Chanita Goodblatt points out, these sections are set off from the paired couplets of the rest of the play by being written in rhyme royal: a complex verse form that was associated with "serious" poetry in the period and that gives these sections added weight and gravity, which are used, in turn, to anchor a predestinarian interpretation of the biblical episode.<sup>53</sup> In this interpretation, God elects Jacob and rejects Esau prior to any action on their part: "before Jacob and Esau yet born were, / Or had either done good, or ill perpetrate" (2). This pre-natal selection might

seem premature, but that is precisely the point. We must not believe that human beings can act in such a way as to earn or merit God's mercy, for this would invert the cosmic hierarchy, effectively allowing creatures to compel the Creator. To the contrary, we must acknowledge that none of us deserves salvation; hence, God's election is always unwarranted and unmotivated. As the prologue insists, He "chooseth whom he will" (2).

To illustrate this principle in the New Testament, Jesus talks of pairs of people, one of whom is received into heaven, the other of whom is left behind.

I tell you, in that night there shalbe two in one bed: the one shalbe receiued, and the other shalbe left.

Two women shalbe grinding together: the one shalbe taken, and the other shalbe left.

Two shalbe in the field: one shalbe receiued, & another shalbe left.

(Luke 17:34–35)

*Jacob and Esau* communicates this same concept using twins, which is perhaps even more arresting, inasmuch as their side-by-sideness exceeds that of bedfellows or workmates. Twins are always already tethered together, so God's decision to divorce them, exalting one and expelling the other, emphasizes the inscrutability of His election. By utilizing the twin relation to make this point, the interlude underscores the unpredictability of God's grace and drives home its Calvinist doctrine.

The play tips its doctrinal hand in both the prologue and epilogue by deploying a kinship term different in kind from all the other terms appearing in the play. This exceptional term is "adoption"—a word that does not occur anywhere else in the interlude but figures prominently in both the prologue and the epilogue, where it is used to describe the manner by which God selects his children and forms his family:

But now for our coming we shall exhibit here,  
Of Jacob and Esau how the story was;  
Whereby God's *adoption* may plainly appear

(2; my emphasis)

Yet not all flesh did [God] then predestinate,  
But only the *adopted* children of promise

(89; my emphasis)

Because the play as a whole does so much to problematize and attenuate the consanguineal kinship relationships in which it traffics, this turn to adoption feels altogether decisive. By staging family relations in such a way as to draw out their intractability, inequity, and indeterminacy, the interlude prepares us

to turn away from the idea of the earthly family, bound together by tricks of birth and blood, to embrace instead the idea of the celestial family, assembled through acts of divine adoption. In a play obsessed with kinship, the form of connection that turns out to be most crucial is the unfathomable one whereby God arbitrarily selects one individual and not another.

*Jacob and Esau*, then, uses family relationships—twins in particular—to do a number of things. It systematically and strategically invokes kinship terms and kinship relations to establish that Jacob is the true son and rightful heir, while Esau is the outsider, undeserving of the birthright blessing. At the same time, the play leverages the twinship of Jacob and Esau to pry into the problematic apportionment of wealth, affection, and opportunity among siblings. In particular, the drama troubles traditional, birth-order inheritance practices by using twinship to underscore how arbitrary, and even uncertain, the categories of “elder” and “younger” can be. Finally, the play utilizes the twin relation to underline the arbitrariness of other, even more crucial, categories: namely, “elect” and “reprobate.” The division between Jacob and Esau—one twin so full of grace because God decides to love him, and the other twin so full of spite because God resolves to hate him—dramatically demonstrates the potent yet unpredictable operation of divine grace. Despite its sustained focus on Abraham’s immediate family and the kinship ties that give it shape, the play ultimately fixes our gaze on the family of God, bound together neither by blood nor by birth but rather by God’s mercy, as exercised in impenetrable acts of election, or “adoption.” Consonant with its Calvinist commitments, the interlude signals the supreme importance of God’s grace by elevating it above all other forms of interrelation, including the natal bond between parent and child and the always-already interconnectedness of the twinship pair.

## Notes

1. The case for Udall is made by Leicester Bradner, Lily Cambell, John King, Murray Roston, Helen Thomas, and Greg Walker. The case for Hunnis is made by Naomi Pasachoff, C. C. Stopes, and Paul Whitfield White. Those arguing for an Edwardian date of composition include David Bevington, King, and Stopes. Those who see the play as Marian include Campbell, Pasachoff, Thomas, and White. Critics who characterize the play as Calvinist include Dalia Ben-Tsur, Bevington, Campbell, and Roston. Thomas reads the play as Erasmian. See Dalia Ben-Tsur, “Early Ramifications of Theatrical Iconoclasm: The Conversion of Catholic Biblical Plays into Protestant Drama,” *Partial Answers* 3.1 (January 2005): 43–56, esp. 52–54; David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), esp. 109–11; Leicester Bradner, “A Test for Udall’s Authorship,” *MLN* 42 (1927): 378–80; Lily B. Cambell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1959), esp. 214–15; John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), esp. 301–5; Naomi E. Pasachoff, *Playwrights, Preachers, and Politicians: A Study of Four Tudor Old Testament Dramas* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975), esp. 18–56; Murray Roston, *Biblical Drama in England: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), esp. 76–78; C. C. Stopes, *William Hunnis and the Revels of the Chapel Royal* (Vaduz: Kraus, 1963), esp. 265–70, 331–34; Helen Thomas, "Jacob and Esau—'rigidly Calvinistic'?" *SEL* 9 (1969): 199–213, esp. 200, 211–13; Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 166; and Paul Whitfield White, "The Bible as Play in Reformation England" in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Volume 1 (Origins to 1660)*, ed. Jane Milling and Peter Thomason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87–115, esp. 118–19.

2. All references to *Jacob and Esau* are to the version reprinted in *Six Anonymous Plays*, ed. John S. Farmer, 2nd series (Guildford: Charles W. Traylen, 1966), 1–90. All quotations of the play are cited parenthetically, by page number. In counting kinship terms in the play, I have not included terms like "child" or "whoreson" that are not used to establish kinship connections but are used to signify something else, like youthfulness (in the case of "child") or scurrility (in the case of "whoreson").

3. See Pasachoff, *Playwrights, Preachers, and Politicians*, 24–29; and White, "Bible as Play," 103–4.

4. All references to the Bible are to the Geneva Bible, 1st ed. (Geneva, 1560).

5. Qtd in Chanita Goodblatt, "Performance and *Parshanut: The Historie of Jacob and Esau*," in *Religious Diversity and Early Modern English Texts: Catholic, Judaic, Feminist, and Secular Dimensions*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti and Chanita Goodblatt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 153–77, 170.

6. Though the majority of early modern exegetes found Jacob's actions unsavory, a few read the tale allegorically, as a prediction that the old faith of Judaism would be supplanted by the new faith of Christianity. In this post-Reformation formulation, Jacob is the hero: the righteous younger son who obtains the blessing his elder brother forfeits due to his obduracy and unbelief. See Roston, *Biblical Drama*, esp. 76, and Ben-Tsur, "Early Ramifications," esp. 53.

7. Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics*, 110.

8. Michelle Ephraim, *Reading the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 56.

9. See Pasachoff, *Playwrights, Preachers, and Politicians*, esp. 30.

10. As Ragan considers the proposed deal he exclaims, "Alack, alack, good blessed father Isaac, / That ever son of thine should play such a lewd knack!" (33). Ragan's choice of words lightens the tone of the moment and lifts the birthright exchange out of the realm of "theft" or "betrayal." But it is also telling that the son Ragan takes to be playing the "lewd knack" in these lines is not Jacob (as one might expect) but rather Esau (as is clear from the context). By speaking of the prospective transaction as a prank being played—not by Jacob on Esau but by Esau on Isaac—Ragan silently acquits Jacob, whose own deceptive acts are swept under the rug.

11. See Roston, *Biblical Drama*, esp. 77; and John E. Curran, Jr., "Jacob and Esau and the Iconoclasm of Merit," *SEL* 49 (2009): 285–309, esp. 293.

12. Curran, “*Jacob and Esau*,” 293.

13. *Ibid.*, 294.

14. Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics*, 111.

15. Pasachoff, *Playwrights, Preachers, and Politicians*, 35. Curran, for his part, does not deny that nobody likes Esau. He insists, however, that “Esau’s unpopularity can tell us nothing substantial about him. . . . The servants’ verdicts, while rendered with the utmost assurance, are quite unreliable” (“*Jacob and Esau*,” 295). I am not convinced that we have good cause to question the credibility of the servants—especially since everything else we see and hear supports their assertions. Furthermore, I find it unlikely that the playwright would invent a whole cadre of non-biblical characters and have them speak with one voice against Esau in the hopes that we would set at naught their collective criticism.

16. See Ephraim, *Reading the Jewish Woman*, esp. 57.

17. Curran, “*Jacob and Esau*,” 304.

18. By my count, 5.10 has twenty kinship terms—more than any other scene in the play.

19. Although critics largely ignore the ambivalence of the reconciliation scene, Esau raises the possibility that he is merely playing nice and biding his time. In an aside to Ragan, he says: “It must now be thus; but when I shall Jacob find, / I shall then do as God shall put into my mind” (87).

20. The coercive force of familial bonds can also be seen in the way masters use terms like “son” and “brother” to exert control over their servants. Rebecca, for instance, tries to get Mido to pick up his pace by saying, “Go, hie thee at once, then, like a good son, Mido” (83). Jacob uses the same approach, telling Mido that he is “a good son to go quick on your errand” (43). In similar fashion, Esau tries to subdue Ragan (who is upset that no pottage remains) by addressing him as “brother mine” (40).

21. All references to Shakespeare, cited parenthetically by through line number, are to *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*, ed. Charlton Hinman, intro. Peter W. M. Blayney, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

22. See Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), esp. 178.

23. See Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), esp. 264. Robert Bearman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust reports that of the 32 sets of twins born in Stratford-upon-Avon between 1560 and 1600, in only 18 cases did both twins survive the first three months. Qtd in Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 231.

24. Admittedly, Rebecca has not had many opportunities to address Esau as “son” up till now, as this is the first time they appear onstage together—but this fact in itself is quite telling.

25. Subsequent to the blessing, Isaac will only address Esau as “son Esau” one more time—at the very end of the play, after Jacob has left (87).

26. The same either/or logic applies to servants as well. After Jacob is blessed, Mido explains that the household servants must obey Jacob now, not Esau: “And from henceforth we must all make courtesy and bow / Unto master Jacob and not to Esau

now" (71). Just as the play's parents can only love one child at a time, the play's servants can only obey one master.

27. The Mosaic law requires a father to acknowledge his firstborn son with a double portion, even if he dislikes the son's mother or prefers another son (Deut. 21:15–17). When it came time for the biblical Jacob to distribute his inheritance among his twelve sons, he awarded a single portion to each and then added a second or double portion to Joseph, his favorite (see Gen. 48:21–22).

28. Joan Thirsk, "Younger Sons in the Seventeenth Century," *History* 54 (1969): 358–77, 368.

29. *Ibid.*, 360.

30. See Louis Adrian Montrose, "'The Place of a Brother' in *As You Like It*: Social Process and Comic Form," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32 (1981): 28–54, esp. 31.

31. Joan Thirsk, "The European Debate on Customs of Inheritance, 1500–1700," in *Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe, 1200–1800*, ed. Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk, and E. P. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 177–91, 185.

32. *Ibid.*, esp. 190.

33. Montrose, "The Place of a Brother," 33.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Outside of the comedies, we can also see Shakespeare treating the topic in *King Lear*, where Edmund cannot conform himself to the fact that Gloucester's lands will go to Edgar just because he was born first: "[W]herefore should I / Stand in the plague of custome, and permit / The curiosity of Nations, to depriue me? / For that I am some twelue, or fourteene Moonshines / Lag of a Brother?" (TLN 336–40).

36. See Henry Cunningham, ed. *The Comedy of Errors*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1926); R. A. Foakes, ed., *The Comedy of Errors*, Arden ed. (London: Methuen, 1962); and Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Comedy of Errors*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et. al (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 683–731.

37. Patricia Parker, "Elder and Younger: The Opening Scene of *The Comedy of Errors*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34 (1983): 325–27, 325.

38. Readers of the play encounter additional obstacles in keeping track of the twins, for the paratextual material in the Folio (the only extant version of the play) can be quite confusing. Whereas the Folio is pretty consistent in using the speech prefixes "E. Drom." and "S. Drom." to identify Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse, respectively, the text does not embrace the correlative speech prefixes "E. Ant." and "S. Ant." until the final scene. For the majority of the play, the Folio uses the same, generic speech prefixes for both of the Antipholus brothers: "Antiph.," "Anti.," "Ant.," or "An." To determine which twin is meant, readers must rely on contextual clues and stage directions, which present problems of their own. In acts three through five, the stage directions identify each twin by city, as in "Antipholus Siracusia" (TLN 1183) and "Antipholus Ephes." (TLN 995). In acts one and two, however, the stage directions do not do this. Instead, they refer to the Ephesian twin as "Antipholus Sereptus" (TLN 273) and to the Syracusan twin as "Antipholus Erotos" (TLN 162)—a device that inverts the identifying initials of each twin. Whatever clarity a prefix like "E. Ant." might offer—in the rare instances in which it is used—is compromised by the fact that "E" can abbreviate "Ephesus," as it does in 3.1 (TLN

619), but can also abbreviate “Erotes” (i.e., Syracuse), as it does in 2.2 (TLN 409). Compared to the relatively consistent and straightforward handling of the Dromios, the disorienting nomination of the Antipholuses appears intentional: a bit of linguistic legerdemain to make us lose sight of the original distinction of older and younger.

39. In the Roman play that is the source-text for Shakespeare’s comedy, birth order is one of the first questions raised when the twins are reunited. However, Plautus quickly moves us past the vexing problems this poses by summoning up the fantastical idea of simultaneous birth. In other words, *The Menaechmi* takes liberties with reproductive reality to prevent the potentially bitter facts of birth order from souring the scene of reunion:

MESSENIQ: Which was the elder, you or your brother?

MENAECHEMUS: We were both the same age.

MESSENIQ: How is that possible?

MENAECHEMUS: We two were twins.

(5.7, pg. 125)

Additionally, Plautus makes inheritance issues less exigent by assigning a paternal benefactor to each boy. In Plautus’s version, the lost twin is taken in by a rich and childless man who promptly settles his entire estate on the foundling, creating an idyllic situation in which neither sibling needs to compete with the other because each is already sole heir to a sufficient fortune (Prologue, pg. 11). See Plautus, *The Menaechmi of Plautus*, trans. Joseph H. Drake (New York: MacMillan, 1916).

40. Sid Ray makes a similar point, explaining that because the slaves “have nothing to inherit, determining who is superior and who inferior is hardly an issue.” Sid Ray, *Mother Queens and Princely Sons: Rogue Madonnas in the Age of Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 53.

41. This fantasy probably held great allure for the audiences at Gray’s Inn, where *The Comedy of Errors* was famously featured in the Christmas revels of 1594. As Sid Ray points out, the questions the stageplay raises about older and younger would have resonated with the students at Gray’s Inn because birth order effectively sorted them into separate camps. In one camp were the firstborn sons who were at Gray’s Inn to gain a basic understanding of property laws to prepare them to maintain and administer the manorial estates they stood to inherit. Because these older sons had no plans to practice law, they could afford to be cavalier about their coursework, abandoning their books as occasion arose to pursue the pleasures of the city. In the other camp were the second and subsequent sons who had to take their studies much more seriously since the law was to be their livelihood. “Within the confines of the Inns,” Ray reasons, “tensions no doubt existed between those who had to study (younger sons) and those who had the privilege not to (eldest sons).” As if to alleviate these tensions, *The Comedy of Errors* ends on a note of brotherly harmony, with the two Dromios refusing to let their natural rivalry ruin their relationship. *Ibid.*, 54.

42. Karen Cunningham, *Imaginary Betrayals: Subjectivity and the Discourses of Treason in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 27.

43. We encounter a reversal of this kind a little later in Genesis, when one twin thrusts his hand out first and is marked by the midwife as the eldest, only to have his brother push past him, stripping the “older” twin of his birthright and seizing it for

himself (see Gen. 38:27–30). This episode will be considered in more detail later in the essay.

44. See W. H. Bennet and John D. Keyser, "The Modern Descendants of Zara-Judah," Hope of Israel Ministries, <http://www.hope-of-israel.org/zara.htm> (accessed 26 October 2017).

45. For the role of the midwife in early modernity, see Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, esp. 185–90; and Caroline Bicks, *Midwiving Subjects in Shakespeare's England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

46. "Then Deborah Rebekeh's nurse dyed, and was buried beneath Beth-él vnder an oke: and [Jacob] called the name of it Allón bachúth" (Gen. 35:8). The only other place where Deborah might be indicated is Gen. 24:59, which advises that Rebecca was accompanied by her sister and "her nurse" when she left home to marry Isaac.

47. Ephraim, *Reading the Jewish Woman*, 65.

48. See John Earle, *Micro-cosmographie or, a Piece of the World Discovered; in Essayes and Characters* (London, 1633); and John Ap Robert, *The Younger Brother His Apologie* (London, 1634).

49. cf. Paul Whitfield White, who writes: "In juxtaposing older and younger brothers, the play explores the question of how it is that youths, given identical Christian upbringing and education, can turn out so differently" ("Bible as Play" 103).

50. The pioneer of modern-day twin studies is Sir Francis Galton, a nineteenth-century Englishman who was also cousin to Charles Darwin. "Twins have a special claim on our attention," Galton wrote, "It is, that their history affords means of distinguishing between the effects of tendencies received at birth, and those that were imposed by the special circumstances of their after lives" (qtd in Dominus). In his 1874 essay, "On Men of Science, Their Nature and Their Nurture," Galton gave us the phrase "nature versus nurture," which gets at the heart of his and many other twin studies. Meta-analysis shows that in the past fifty years, nearly 3,000 twin studies have been published, utilizing more than 14.5 million sets of twins to measure the relative contributions of heredity and environment in the expression of nearly 18,000 human traits. See Susan Dominus, "The Mixed-Up Brothers of Bogotá," *The New York Times Magazine* (9 July 2015), <http://nyti.ms/1JVNT75> (accessed 11 July 2015); Francis Galton, "On Men of Science, Their Nature and Their Nurture," *Proceedings of the Royal Institution of Great Britain* 7 (1873–75): 227–36; and Tinca J. C. Polderman and Beben Benyamin, et al., "Meta-analysis of the heritability of human traits based on fifty years of twin studies," *Nature Genetics* 47 (2015): 702–9.

51. Meta-analysis of the twin studies published between 1958 and 2012 indicate that variations in human traits and diseases are due 49% to genetic factors and 51% to environmental factors and/or measurement error. See Polderman and Benyamin, "Meta-analysis," 702.

52. See Ben-Tsur, "Early Ramifications," esp. 52–53.

53. Goodblatt, "Performance and Parshanut," 159–60.

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