

WE MUST SPEAK BY THE CARD OR EQUIVOCATION WILL UNDO US

Oxford, Campion, and the Howard-Arundel Accusations of 1580-81

Richard Desper



And gilded honor wrongfully displaced, . .
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced, . .
And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill, . .
And captive good attending captain ill: . .

Sonnet 30



“We must speak by the card,¹ or equivocation will undo us,” Hamlet jokes to Horatio as he attempts to extract information from the gravedigger in Act V Scene 1. While *equivocation* and words of the same root appear nine times in the dramatic works of Shakespeare, the substance or meaning of the word is a powerful and recurring theme in the plays, as it is also in the life of the Earl of Oxford. We see this particularly in two of the watershed events that occurred during his early years, the so-called Oxford-Howard controversy of 1580-81 and the arrest and trial of Edmund Campion.

If we dismiss two appearances of the weaker word *equivocal*,² the more powerful words *equivocate*, *equivocation*, and *equivocator* appear seven times: once in *Hamlet* and six times in *Macbeth*. These plays share a common theme, the issue of regicide, also strong in a number of other Shakespeare plays, particularly *Richard II*, and *Julius Caesar*. In every instance where this theme is mentioned, it is connected with the meaning of the word *equivocation*, if not the word itself. We believe that the root of this thematic material and its connection with the term *equivocation* can be found in the events of 1580-81, when the English government first launched its campaign to eliminate the threat posed by militant Catholicism to the parties in power.

The Queen's tolerance

The reign of Queen Elizabeth began in 1558 in a spirit of toleration. Of necessity she was aligned to the Protestant side; her claim to the throne rested on the Protestant position since the marriage of her mother, Anne Boleyn, to King Henry VIII was regarded by Catholic Europe as invalid. But Elizabeth herself was not inclined to stir up religious controversy. Her coronation on January 15, 1559³ followed the ancient ceremonies, including a Mass,

although some difficulty was encountered in procuring a prelate to place the crown on her head (Jenkins 42-45). Elizabeth was determined at first and for a long time after to place national unity above the religious contention that had caused such grief in the past: "When she later tersely told her advisers she would not 'open windows in men's souls,' she gave full notice that the religious excesses were at an end" (Luke 34). Early on, she issued a religious proclamation which Jenkins regards as "a masterpiece of compromise . . . to use the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed and the Epistle and Gospel in English . . . [and while] the remainder of the religious service was to be in Latin . . . outright preaching . . . was prohibited" (35). The Oath of Supremacy, which had led to the executions of Sir Thomas More and John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, during her father's reign, was reworded: rather than "Supreme Head of the Church," she became "Supreme Governor of the realm . . . in all spiritual things or causes, as in temporal" (Jenkins 34).

The touchstone of any policy is its actual application, as here in the case of one William Ely. Mr. Ely was ordained a Catholic priest in 1557, during the reign of Queen Mary, and was appointed President of St. John's College, Oxford, in 1559. Under Queen Elizabeth such officials were required to take the Oath of Supremacy, which he persistently refused to do and so was deprived of his office in 1563. Unlike More or Fisher under her father, however, no prosecution took place, and so William Ely remained free, dying in 1609 at an advanced age. Many Catholics like Ely were allowed to live their lives in peace because they demonstrated no public challenge to the Queen's right to rule.

Outbreak of the Controversy

According to Mauvissière, the French Ambassador, the fight between Oxford and his Howard cousin broke into the open on December 26, 1580. On this day, Lord Oxford took the occasion to confess, apparently before the entire Court, that he had been a secret Catholic for some years. At the same time he accused his first cousin, Lord Henry Howard, Howard's kinsman, Charles Arundel,⁴ and their associate, Francis Southwell, of being secretly reconciled to the Roman Catholic Church and, worse, involved in treasonable cor-

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respondence with Catholic agitators (Ward 207).

In a letter dated December 25, 1580, the Spanish Ambassador, Mendoza, reported that Howard, Arundel, and Southwell had presented themselves at his door “at midnight, [and] though I had never spoken to them, they told me of the danger in which they found themselves of losing their lives, unless I would hide them” (Ward 209). The three evidently stayed in their Spanish sanctuary for only a short time, for by January 9, 1581 they were placed under arrest, as reported by the same Mendoza, and their interrogation undertaken by Christopher Hatton, appointed for this purpose by the Queen (215). In an effort to save themselves by discrediting Oxford, these three, Charles Arundel in particular, sought to defend themselves with a series of *ad hominem* accusations directed at their accuser (Nelson).

Despite the extreme nature of these charges, we know that Oxford remained for some time as much in the Queen’s favor as ever, for on January 22, 1581 he was one of the leading figures at a great tournament held before the Queen and the entire Court (Wright, “Sunne”). He continued in favor until March, when one of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting, Anne Vavasor, gave birth to an illegitimate son in one of the Queen’s own chambers at Court and named Oxford as the father (Ward 211-4). It seems clear that it was for this indiscretion, not for his dispute with the Howards, that he was banished from Court for two years.

Catholics in danger

During this period the Crown had begun to harden its policies towards the Catholic religion. Although Burghley and Walsingham had been pushing for some time for more stringent laws with which to punish recusants, it was only at this point that the Queen became sufficiently alarmed to call a Parliament to deal with the issue. Bills were drafted, and although she denied Burghley and Walsingham the more extreme measures they were requesting, the movement against the Catholics was finally set in motion (Read 247-8). An Act of Parliament was passed in 1581-82 at Westminster declaring:

All such were declared guilty of high treason, which dissuaded . . . her Majesty’s subjects from their obedience to their Prince, or from the religion now professed in England, or that should reconcile to the Church of Rome. (Ward 214)

As Ward suggests, the timing indicates that Oxford’s revelations during the Christmas holidays of 1580-81 may have had more to do with the Queen’s change of heart than the well-known mission of the Jesuits Campion and Persons, who had, by then, been in England for over six months (214). It seems that whatever it was that Oxford said to the Queen that night carried greater weight than months of advice from Burghley and Walsingham.

As for the three accused, their eventual fates were varied. Henry Howard, evidently an

astute politician, remained a player on the English political scene into the next century, and though he never managed to reinstate himself with Elizabeth, he was finally created Earl of Northampton by James I, and given a position of authority on the Privy Council. Charles Arundel languished in the Tower for several years and, upon his release, fled to France to live on a stipend from Philip II of Spain (218-9). He was later accused of writing the infamous anonymous pamphlet, "La Vie Abominable . . . du comte de Leycester," more commonly known as "Leicester's Commonwealth," which appeared in England during his exile and which attacked the character of the Queen's long time favorite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Francis Southwell, as far as we know, disappears from the records at this point.

General Background to the Controversy

It is important to recognize that England was, at best, in the same state of political and religious instability that it had been for decades and that was tearing France and the Lowlands to pieces. Officially the nation had returned to Roman Catholicism during the reign of Queen Mary. While historians differ in their estimates of the Spanish strength, it is clear that a goodly segment of Elizabeth's subjects continued to adhere to the religion of their forefather throughout her reign. Many Catholics saw Mary Stuart, the exiled Queen of Scots, living in prisonlike confinement in England as a "guest" of the Crown, as a successor to Queen Elizabeth, a situation that filled Burghley and Walsingham with deep concern. Plots such as the "Rising" of the Northern Earls in 1569 and the Ridolfi Plot of 1571, though thwarted by Walsingham, did not help the cause of the peaceful Catholics with the Queen, who was kind enough under normal circumstance, but who could be extremely cruel when frightened.

Thus the English Catholics of the day, the Catholic nobility in particular, were in a bind, caught between Tudor absolutism and Papal absolutism, each claiming authority from above. Oxford's family had a history of five hundred years of service to the Crown of England, one remarkably devoid of any tendency towards rebellion. But of the sixteen earls that preceded Edward de Vere, fourteen had been Catholics, while his father and grandfather were born Catholic, turning Protestant when Henry VIII broke with Rome. It may be understandable that Catholicism, like some sort of forbidden fruit, held fascination for the young Earl, no doubt strengthened by his visits to France and Italy in 1575-76.

To what extent was Oxford involved?

Several questions naturally arise regarding the Earl of Oxford and his role in this issue, to wit: why the need to break with Catholicism at this time; why so openly, to the Queen herself, in front of the entire Court; and why the obvious urgency?

On 14 November 1580, an Englishman, Humphrey Ely, brought a query before Cardinal Sega, Papal Nuncio to the Court of Philip II in Madrid. Speaking on behalf of several unnamed English noblemen and Jesuit priests, Ely asked whether one would incur sin by assassinating Queen Elizabeth (Meyer 490). Cardinal Sega replied immediately on his own authority that they would not incur sin, since the Bull of excommunication issued by Pope Pius V in 1570 absolved all Englishmen of their oath and obligation of allegiance to her (Jenkins 157). Sega's interview with Ely is documented in his letter to Rome, and while promising to write to Rome for opinion of a higher authority, Sega urged Ely to tell the Englishmen to make haste and act without awaiting the reply from Rome, lest the plans of their conspiracy become known (Meyer 269-272).

Cardinal Sega received his reply from Cardinal Como, Vatican Secretary of State, in a letter dated December 12, 1580. Speaking, we must assume, for Pope Gregory, Sega stated:

Since the guilty woman of England rules over two such noble kingdoms of Christendom and is the cause of so much injury to the Catholic faith, and loss of so many million souls, there is no doubt that whosoever sends her out of the world with the pious intention of doing God service, not only does not sin but gains merit.

Thus, in the words of Meyer, who brought this material to light:

Inasmuch as Gregory represents the assassination of Elizabeth as "meritorious" and as "a good work," he, who previously was such a stickler for legal exactitude, abandons the standpoint of the canonists and takes his stand among the advocates of political murder He is the same pope who ordered a *Te Deum* to be sung on receiving news of the massacre of [French Protestants on the Feast of] St. Bartholomew No other pope is more completely the child of his age than Gregory XIII. (270-2)

Considering the timing of the Humphrey Ely query with respect to the outbreak of the Oxford-Howard controversy, one is led to the distinct possibility of a connection between the two. Between November 14 and December 26 there was enough time (roughly five weeks) for word of Sega's response—including his urging of the conspirators to make haste—to reach the Englishmen who had sent Ely. Although history does not record whether Oxford was involved with the men who sent Ely with his query or received his response, the timing of his disclosure makes it a fair guess.

It is difficult to gauge Oxford's involvement and intentions based on the meager information available. If among those who asked the question, he may have hoped for a different answer, or he may have wished to force the issue. He also may have sensed an imminent dan-

ger to the Queen and felt an obligation to warn her under his oath of allegiance as an earl. If only peripherally involved, perhaps through his cousin, he may have overheard something he wasn't meant to know. Perhaps he heard talk, but suddenly realized that what he had regarded as little more than after-dinner chatter was about to take a dangerous turn, one that smacked of treason. In any case, he may have felt that the quickest way to stop the involvement of his Catholic cousin and his friends, and perhaps also to show which side he himself was on, was to bring it to light in front of the entire Court while they were gathered for the holiday. In that way all would hear for themselves what he had to say so that the risk of his words being misunderstood, misquoted or ignored would be diminished. And perhaps, like Hamlet at the performance of the play within a play, he could access the responses of certain members of the audience when caught by surprise.

Was Campion involved?

Another aspect of Humphrey Ely's query must also be brought to light. In his letter of 14 November 1580 to Cardinal Como, Cardinal Sega reports that Ely's query originated not only with certain English noblemen, but also comes from English Jesuit priests (Meyer 490). This suggests strongly that the Jesuits in England were not all of the same mind with regards to the morality of such an assassination. The most notable Jesuit priests in England at the time were Edmund Campion, the great preacher and writer, and Robert Persons, commander of their joint mission.

Campion claimed throughout that his mission was purely spiritual, that he had no desire to harm the Queen, but the activities of Persons in subsequent years reveal that he had a much more militant approach to the restoration of Catholicism in England. This suggests that there may have been a disagreement between them about how best to fulfill their mission. We feel there is a strong possibility that Campion and Persons were the English Jesuits mentioned in the letter.

An even more definite connection may be established between Humphrey Ely and Edmund Campion, however, in the person of Humphrey's brother William Ely, mentioned earlier as the Catholic President of St. John's from 1559 to 1563. Records at St. John's reveal that Campion was admitted to St. John's as a scholar shortly after the College was founded in the reign of Queen Mary. He became a junior fellow in 1557, receiving his B.A. in 1561, his M.A. in 1564, and remaining on the faculty until 1569. William's brother Humphrey, previously a student at Brasenose College, was elected a scholar of St. John's College in 1566, leaving within a few years for reasons of conscience. Thus Campion was definitely in residence at St. John's College during the term of William Ely, and while Humphrey Ely too was a student there. Like all the colleges at the time, St. John's was small, with no more than fifty or

sixty students (Priddey). It would have been impossible for these men not to have been well-acquainted with each other.

If Campion were one of the previously mentioned English Jesuits, it would make sense that he would choose Humphrey Ely as the messenger to clarify the attitude of the Holy See. Campion's past associations with both Elys would have made Humphrey, who was in England in the summer of 1580, a suitable person for this delicate mission. If we believe that Campion, as he claimed, had no desire to harm the Queen, it could well be that he had hoped for a different answer from the one they received from the Pope. It was William Ely, among others, who had helped to ground Campion in Catholic doctrine while he was a divinity student at St. John's. Campion may have seen fit to consult his former mentor, who then offered to contact his brother Humphrey to ask an answer of the Pope. Humphrey, an expatriate divinity student at the English College in Rheims, had visited England in disguise in the summer of 1580, no doubt paying a visit to his older brother. He was reported as leaving Rheims for England on June 5, while Campion reached Dover (DNB) on June 25. Humphrey Ely is next reported in Madrid, as noted earlier, on 14 November 1580, finally returning to Rheims on May 2, 1581 (179), where he would remain from then on.

Campion and the Ely brothers were perhaps hoping that the Pope would "speak by the card" and advise against assassination, which would have put an end to the matter. Instead, an answer came back that placed them, and (we suggest) the Earl of Oxford, in a dilemma. In fact, it placed the entire nation in a potentially serious dilemma.

Is there a link between Oxford and Campion?

History records that both Edmund Campion, as a member of the Oxford faculty, and Edward de Vere, as candidate for his M.A., were involved in the ceremonies at Oxford University in August and September of 1566, ceremonies in which the entire Court took part. It does not tell us if they met or if they knew each other then or later. History does not normally record such minutia. The likelihood, however, is that these two would have been drawn together, either then or earlier, by virtue of their common interests in language, rhetoric, and drama. Oxford's rank, his intelligence and level of learning, his obvious interest at the time in Catholicism and questions of religion and government, would draw Campion to him, while Campion, known for his wit and his charm as well as his scholarship and his speaking ability (Read 248) would have been someone of great interest to Oxford.

We tend to forget how small and unchanging were the sixteenth century communities of writers, scholars, peers, and government officials, and to what a large extent they overlapped. Added together they would have made up a group the size of a small town, one few new people entered or old ones left (except through birth and death). Those who did not

know each other personally would certainly know of each other.

Oxford would have known Campion or known of him through Archbishop Parker, a close friend of Burghley's, who commended Campion as a scholar to Burghley in the days before his Catholicism became an issue (Read 248). Campion's letter to the Privy Council, sent soon after his return to England, in which he denied that he had any intention of dealing with matters of State policy, would have been known to Oxford; if not through Burghley then through Sussex. According to Read it was "widely distributed in manuscript" (248).

While still in hiding, Campion had five hundred copies of a Latin pamphlet on this theme printed up and distributed at the Oxford Commemoration in June 1581, causing an immense response, both from the scholars who appreciated its language as from the government officials who were terrified of its effects. It's hardly possible that Oxford was unaware of this pamphlet, and the propaganda war that it unleashed (Read 248). Oxford's own secretary, Anthony Munday, added his pen to the fray. According to Read, there were at least thirty relevant pamphlets, pro and con, published before 1590, in all languages. "In short, Campion and his works became a *cause célèbre*" (248).

Campion was finally run to ground shortly after his pamphlet appeared and put in the Tower to await trial for treason. In August the officials allowed a public discussion to be held in the Tower chapel whereby Campion debated the Deans of St. Paul's and Windsor.

At the first conference there was a considerable audience, at later ones the audience was restricted. . . . [These conferences] may have been intended to create the impression that Campion was given every opportunity to justify his position (249)

If Oxford was as involved with this issue as his revelations at Christmas suggest, he could easily have been present at these debates in which, it is obvious, Campion again won over his listeners through the force of his argument and his native charm, for, as Read tells us, "after four conferences had been held they were abandoned. . . . Late in October the government resorted to the tactics of examination under torture" (249) but failed to obtain a confession. Campion was tried in late November and quickly executed on December 1.

Read states that "under the terms of his indictment he should have been acquitted. . . . In effect they made a martyr out of him." Read continues:

We need not follow in detail the literary controversy which followed. It was all anonymous and . . . some of it was issued by authority. Two of the pamphlets have been ascribed to Burghley himself (251).

One of these pamphlets, a long tract defending the Crown's treatment of Campion: the Execution of Justice in England, not for Religion but for Treason was translated into Latin,

French and Dutch and widely distributed on the Continent (Read 251).

The debate over the treatment of Campion would rage for years to come. Everyone with any ties to London or the government, even thousands of people overseas, were engaged in this issue on one side or the other. There can be no question that Oxford was involved; the only questions are “in what way” and “to what extent”?

Does Shakespeare speak of the issue?

We have identified what we believe to be at least one reference to Edmund Campion, in Act IV Scene 2 of *Twelfth Night*:

Clown. Bonos dies, Sir Toby: for, as the old hermit of Prague, that never saw pen and ink, very wittily said to a niece of King Gorboduc, “That that is is”; so I, being master Parson, am master Parson; for, what is “that” but “that,” and “is” but “is”?

We believe that Shakespeare intended insiders to see Edmund Campion as “the old hermit of Prague”; Campion had served as a Professor of Rhetoric in the University of Prague after joining the Jesuits and before his return to England. Queen Elizabeth is identified as the “niece of King Gorboduc” and Robert Persons (sometimes spelled Parsons, as it was pronounced) as “master Parson.” Indeed, Campion had been brought before the Queen and the Earl of Leicester in August 1581 in an effort to persuade him to abjure his Catholic faith with promises of royal favor. We have suggested that the quoted passage alludes to Campion’s interview before Queen Elizabeth after his arrest in 1581 (“Allusions” 37). We have also suggested that the “Funeral Elegy for Master William Peter” by “W.S.,” written—we are told by the orthodox Shakespeareans—to mourn the death of an obscure Exeter gentleman, speaks instead in expressively sympathetic terms of the martyrdom of Edmund Campion. If Prof. Donald Foster is correct in his claim (1989) that, with his computer program, *Shaxicon*, he has succeeded in identifying the author of the “Funeral Elegy” as the author of the Shakespeare canon, this may help bring Oxford and Campion closer together and, in the process, strengthen the argument for Oxford as Shakespeare (“Elegy” 79 et seq).

Was Campion honest?

During his 1580-81 ministry in England, before and after his arrest and imprisonment, Campion repeatedly stated that his mission to England was religious rather than political in nature. But could it be that this attitude with regards to the issue of regicide was for outward show and did not reflect his inner feelings?

Campion's personal views on regicide may be inferred from a play he staged while in self-imposed exile in Prague. While working as a professor of Rhetoric at the University of Prague, he wrote and staged a play on the subject of the biblical King Saul to entertain the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian (Waugh 81). We may consider that: a) the only source of information on King Saul is the First Book of Samuel in the Bible; b) the major theme of I Samuel is the relationship between King Saul and David; c) the character of David is therefore essential to any play about King Saul, and d) David's attitude towards King Saul, as expressed in 1: Samuel 26:9, even as he is hunted as an "outlaw" by Saul and his army, is: "Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?"—a question David asked at a moment when he could easily have killed the sleeping King.

Thus, according to the Bible, even with his own life at risk, David would not strike back with violence against King Saul. It can't be that Campion, already aware of the issue, would write and produce a play for the Court of Maximilian that had no bearing on his own situation. By logical deduction, it can be seen that the theme of his play must have been that of total opposition to regicide. This being the case, it is difficult to see Campion as a supporter of regicide only a few years later.

The Doctrine of Equivocation

How do we account for the implicit and explicit approval of the assassination of Queen Elizabeth by certain leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in this era? It may well be that a process called *Equivocation* was involved, which led these learned men down the garden path to support acts which one would consider to be, of their nature, immoral. The simple definition of *equivocation* is that of "speaking in a manner subject to two or more interpretations and usually intended to mislead or confuse" (Webster). A notable example of such is in Act III Scene 1 of *Richard III*, where Richard, Duke of Gloucester states: "I say, without characters, fame lives long"; then in an aside to the audience: "Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word." He is playing here with two meanings of the word *character*, either "personal integrity," or "written characters passed down to succeeding generations" (Webster).

Kermode in his Foreword offers a deeper interpretation to *Macbeth*:

As no man . . . can choose an apparent good in preference to a real one unless his will is corrupted by appearance, evil acts imply the constant presence of *equivocating factors* in the world of moral choice. In other words, no one does an evil act unless the consequences of it appear to him more desirable than the consequences of not doing it; and since they cannot be so in truth, they clearly

present themselves to him, as he deliberates upon the issue, in an *equivocal manner*. (1357, emphasis added)

The application to the Catholic prelates in terms of their response to the query brought to them by Humphrey Ely is self-evident. They see an apparent good: restoring the Catholic faith to England, and choose that over the real good: obeying the commandment against the taking of life. In actuality, the apparent good is an illusion. The violent death of Queen Elizabeth, rather than restoring the Catholic Faith to the nation under Mary Stuart, would most likely have led to a civil war over the succession. Thus, even if one judges the restoration of Roman Catholicism to be a sufficient good to outweigh the homicide, the apparent good cannot be presumed. The “Rising” of the Northern Earls had clearly shown the folly of counting on a popular uprising to support the Catholic faith. Nonetheless, English Catholic exiles such as Cardinal Allen and the Jesuit Robert Persons, continued for decades to support such unrealistic expectations. In reality the actual good of restoring England to the Catholic Church was an illusion; such a murder would only have served to “let slip the dogs of war.”

Shakespeare’s stand against regicide

The quotation from *Julius Caesar* is particularly apt since, in the play in general and this quotation in particular, the playwright expresses the dire consequences of such a murder. The tragic hero of the play, the virtuous Brutus, allows himself to be persuaded that Caesar’s assassination will result in the restoration of the Roman Republic, his apparent good. Nothing was further from the truth, whether in Caesar’s day or in Elizabeth’s.

A passage in *King John* bears even greater relevance to the issue of potential assassination plots against Queen Elizabeth. In his authority as Legate for Pope Innocent III, Pandulph proclaims to King John:

Then, by the lawful power that I have,
Thou shalt stand curs’d and excommunicate,
And blessed shall he be that doth revolt
From his allegiance to an heretic,
And meritorious shall that hand be call’d,
Canonized and worshipp’d as a saint,
That takes away by any secret course
Thy hateful life. (III:1:172-80, emphasis added)

One can draw a strong parallel between the sense of this speech and the tenor of Cardinal Como’s response, in his December 12, 1580 letter, to Cardinal Sega. The same scene proceeds to what Herschel Baker refers to as Pandulph’s equivocating⁵ defense of oath-

breaking (*Riverside* 806):

Therefore to arms! Be champion of our Church, . . .
 France, thou mayst hold a serpent by the tongue, . . .
 Than keep in peace that hand [of King John] which thou dost hold.
 For that which thou hast sworn to do amiss
 Is not amiss when it is truly done; . . .
 The better act of purposes mistook
 Is to mistake again, though indirect,
 Yet indirection thereby grows direct,
 And falsehood falsehood cures. (III:1:255-97)

It is well known that great liberties were taken with history, both in terms of facts and chronology, in the writing of *King John*. What emerges is a topical lesson apropos to Elizabeth's time, intended in its day to forge English public opinion into a strong defense against its religious and military foes abroad. Recalling from his reading of history the last time a foreign foe⁶ mounted an invasion threat against England, that led by the French Dauphin during the latter days of King John, the author brought to life the same King John who, like Elizabeth, had fallen afoul of the pope of his day, Innocent III. Shakespeare has been taken to task for ignoring the major historical milestone of John's reign, Magna Carta, but Magna Carta was not relevant to the theme of his play: English patriotism in the face of a foreign threat.

The issue of equivocation also appears in Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost. He cries:

Angels, and ministers of grace defend us!
 Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd,
 Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
 Be thy intents wicked, or charitable . . . ? (I:4:39)

Hamlet is suffering from his attempts to discern between goodness and wickedness and from his awareness that an evil may present itself in the guise of a good. He saw the danger that he may succumb to a false temptation, as, for instance, would Macbeth. When Lady Macbeth states:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
 What thou art promis'd . . . That I may . . .
 Chastise with the valor of my tongue
 All that impedes thee from the golden round,
 Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
 To have thee crown'd withal. (I:5:15-30)

Having seen the predictions of the Weird Sisters come to pass, when Macbeth becomes thane of Cawdor and of Glamis, she sees the fulfillment of the third prediction, that he shall end by becoming King of Scotland as a matter of pre-ordained destiny. By the distorted logic of equivocation, helping Macbeth to his destiny by conducting King Duncan into the next world would not really be a sin, but merely giving destiny a hand. She urged her husband on with a self-serving, equivocating interpretation of the morality of the situation.

The Reign of King Edward the Third, originally anonymous though recently admitted by Riverside to the Shakespeare canon, offers an interesting episode in which the substance of *equivocation* may be found, if not the word itself. I refer to the king's efforts to seduce the Countess of Salisbury with smooth words in Act II, Scenes 1 and 2:

King Edward. Engage thy power to redeem my joys,
 And I am joyful, Countess, else I die.

Countess. I will my liege . . .
 That power of love, that I have power to give,
 Thou hast with all devout obedience.

Here the king invokes the interesting argument that since he will die if he does not possess the Countess, it is her duty as a royal subject to save his life by yielding to his lustful entreaties. The lady's rejoinder contains the proviso "that I have power to give" with which she skillfully denies him his desires. The king then enlists her very reluctant father, the Earl of Warwick, to entreat the Countess on the king's behalf. When the king approaches her again, the Countess argues, artfully but cogently, that removing that contingency amounts to killing her husband, who "now lies fast asleep within my heart," where she proposes to dispatch him in the king's presence with a dagger.

In terms of equivocation, the proposed apparent good may be framed as: "Save the king's life by yielding, lest he pine to death of desire." The actual good, achieved by the Countess, is the honoring of her marriage vow.

Richard II

The regicide theme appears most prominently in *Richard II* where the substance of *equivocation* may be easily discerned although the word again does not appear. The young sovereign presented England with a constitutional crisis. By blood, he was their rightful king, and all England owed him allegiance. But along with the right to the crown came a responsibility to the nation, a concept that the king chose to ignore. During his minority his excess-

es were curbed somewhat by the Lord Protector, his uncle, Thomas of Woodstock,⁷ Duke of Gloucester, and by two other uncles, the Dukes of Lancaster and of York, sometimes on the field of battle, other times in Parliamentary actions. When he became his own man at twenty-one, Richard stripped Gloucester of his power, ordered his capture and imprisonment in Calais Castle, and probably his murder there as well.

Are life and property safe under these circumstances? What is to be done with such a king? The king is the prime suspect, but he cannot be personally targeted, as the Duke of Lancaster expresses to Gloucester's widow:

Duke. God's is the quarrel; for God's substitute,
 His deputy anointed in His sight,
 Hath caus'd his death; the which if wrongfully,
 Let Heaven revenge; for I may never lift
 An angry arm against His minister. (I:2:37-41)

Unable to bring the king to the bar of justice, Bolingbroke, Lancaster's son, challenges instead Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, commander of Calais Castle, where Gloucester died, to a trial by combat. This, however, never takes place, for when the king realizes that Norfolk's defeat would be his own defeat, however limited, one witnessed by God himself under the rules of Trial by Combat, he finds an out by sending both Bolingbroke and Norfolk into exile, although Bolingbroke's is limited to ten years. With the death of John of Gaunt, the king seizes the Lancaster lands to deprive Bolingbroke of his inheritance and of possible power against himself.

With this he has gone too far. The nobility could not make a murder case against the king, but when he interferes with hereditary rights to property he constitutes a threat to them all. They unite against Richard and unseat him. The equivocation consists of Bolingbroke's stated intention of limiting his insurrection to the recovery of his rightful inheritance. But is it possible for the issue to stop there? Consider the scene of Richard's surrender.

Boling. Stand all apart,
 And show fair duty to his Majesty.
 [*He kneels down.*]
 My gracious lord . . .

K. Rich. Fair Cousin, you debase your princely knee
 Up, cousin, up; your heart is up, I know,
 Thus high at least [*touching his own head*],
 Although your knee is low.

Boling. So far be mine, my most redoubted lord,
 As my true service shall deserve your love.

K. Rich. Well you deserve; they well deserve to have
 That know the strong'st and surest way to get. (III:3:187-201)

All of this amounts to a very complex game. Bolingbroke cannot make the straightforward play for the throne that would alienate many of his followers. He aims, instead, for the cause he used originally to enlist their support, that of hereditary property rights.

But by this time it is impossible for Richard to continue as king; the situation has become unmanageable. Shall the army disband and return to their respective homes, leaving Richard, once again in control, free to deal with them one by one? If the individual nobles did not realize the impossibility of keeping Richard on as king, once having taken actual power from him in Bolingbroke's cause, it will occur to them in the near future. Bolingbroke plays his hand well and the murderer of Thomas of Woodstock is eventually brought to justice.

The apparent good was that of restoring a man's lands and upholding hereditary property rights. The actual good? Perhaps it should have been that of upholding the divine right of a king and the prohibition against regicide, in which case Bolingbroke is a rebel and an usurper, pure and simple. Perhaps it should have been that of exacting justice for the blood of a kinsman, in which case Bolingbroke is a Hamlet who succeeded in his cause. It is a dilemma, one that, as Henry IV, Bolingbroke would wrestle with to his grave. As he will say in a later play, "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

The Nature of the Decision Process

It has been said that there are four criteria that may be used to arrive at a rational decision. The first we may epitomize as *maximum return*, in which we choose between alternatives on the basis of which course of action we foresee will result in the most positive outcome for ourselves. The second is *minimum regret*, in which our foremost interest is that of avoiding negative outcomes for ourselves. The third, *maximum participation*, involves the relaxation of our personal self-interest to a certain extent to cooperate with others in achieving a common positive outcome, i.e. "the greatest good for the greatest number."

The fourth criterion, which may be epitomized as *missional necessity*, is of much more limited application, but is given the highest priority for those who choose it. *Missional necessity* requires that we make a conscious decision to devote our lives to a particular mis-

sion, thus defining our roles in life and establishing priorities by that decision. The mission defined by that role, be it physician, military officer, husband, wife, minister, rabbi, or priest, imposes a priority in all our future decision-making, once the commitment is made, limited only by the bounds of moral integrity.

Edmund Campion and Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, were each bound by roles involving missional necessity. Campion's vows as a priest involved dedicating his life to the Church, while Oxford's oath of allegiance dedicated his life to service of the Crown of England. While both chose paths of virtue, neither took his vow or his role lightly, and the result was a parting of the ways. Campion gave his life for the Roman Catholic faith, while Oxford forsook that faith when faced with a conflict with his mandate as an English peer to support the Crown. Thenceforth his brief exploration of Roman Catholicism was at an end, and his religious allegiance was to the Church of England.

Oxford's own religion

Oxford's father was enough of a Protestant to support the fire-eating reformist playwright and preacher, John Bale (DNB). His mother's family was all Reformist Protestants, including his uncle, Arthur Golding, who spent his life translating Calvin (Golding). His first tutor, Sir Thomas Smith, helped create the Protestant state with his treatises and assisted with the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* (Hughes 24, 29). His guardian, Lord Burghley, pursued a Protestant policy as chief advisor to Queen Elizabeth and took care to provide his wards with Protestant tutors. But what of Oxford's own personal beliefs?

It is interesting that in Oxford's own personal Geneva Bible (Stritmatter 108), the passage in which David passes up an opportunity to kill King Saul is underlined:

11: The Lord keep me from laying mine hand on the Lord's anointed:⁸ but, I pray thee, take now the speare that is at his head, and the pot of water,⁹ and let us go hence. 12: So David toke the speare and the pot of water from Saul's head, & they gate them away, and no man sawe it, nor marked it. (I: Samuel: 26)

Did Oxford, pondering the issues involved in the dispute that separated his countrymen, seek out and underline those biblical verses that pertained to the crucial issue, when if ever it was right and proper to dethrone "the Lord's anointed"? This was certainly an issue Shakespeare addressed over and over in his plays.

If Oxford were the author of the Shakespeare canon, we would expect to see a purely Anglican stance in the plays. As Daniel Wright points out, Shakespeare does demonstrate a solid knowledge of Anglican doctrine and practice. Furthermore, Appleton has suggested an active role for Oxford in championing the cause of the established church during the Martin

Marprelate controversy which began in 1589. Thus, while Oxford was reaching out towards the Old Religion in 1580, hoping perhaps for a peaceful resolution of the impasse between it and the established Church of England, he held no sympathies for the Puritan movement.

The writings of Shakespeare mirror the attitudes of the Earl of Oxford. Shakespeare neither ignores nor condemns Catholicism in the plays. In *Henry V* the King not only offers praise to God for his victory at Agincourt, but also orders that the Catholic hymns *Non nobis* and *Te Deum* be sung (IV:8:118-28). In *Hamlet*, the ghost laments that he died without benefit of the Catholic sacrament of confession, and thus is condemned for a time to a fate which very much sounds like Purgatory. The good work of the sacrament, had it been available to old King Hamlet, presumably would have been his salvation, but this was prevented by the stealth of his brother Claudius (I:5:9-13). Lacking that, he was consigned after death for some time to the pangs of Purgatory, a Catholic concept not embraced by the Protestants.

Whatever his private views, Shakespeare portrayed the religion of his characters as he found them. Henry V lived in a Catholic England, and was Catholic himself, with little sympathy for the Lollards, forerunners of the Protestant reformers of Shakespeare's time. To portray him otherwise would have been to misread history. Hamlet's home, eleventh century Denmark, was a Catholic nation, and is portrayed as such. He portrays Friar Lawrence sympathetically. Indeed, he deals respectfully with Catholic individuals, and even with their beliefs and practices, but holds scant regard for the church hierarchy, as is evident in his portrayals of Pandolph in *King John* and of English prelates in *Henry V* as scheming politicians.

That Oxford held his religion less dear than his country seems clear from his decision to desert his Catholic cousin and stand with the Crown in 1580. His years with the great humanist scholar and teacher Sir Thomas Smith suggest that *humanism*, the opening of Renaissance horizons to the literature, art, and moral philosophy of the classical past, was as important to him as religion, perhaps more important, and certainly less stressful. His ancestry, his interest in history, in the theater, art and music, in Italy and France, would attract him to Catholicism, while his education and the beliefs of his mentors would have instilled the Protestant view, but perhaps to an even greater degree, a humanist approach to life. His adventure with the Catholic Church in 1575 through 1580 was probably rooted, at least in part, in the support he found for Catholic doctrines and practices in scripture and not from the claims of papal authority. Like his nation, he was torn by two irreconcilable points of view, each demanding total acceptance. It may be that for him, total acceptance was impossible. Perhaps the best he could manage was an uneasy equivocation, and to give each side its day in court, by putting its adherents on the stage.

The Nature of the Evidence

It must be conceded that connecting the Oxford-Howard controversy, which erupted in December and January of 1580-81 with the query sent to Pope Gregory XIII by way of Humphrey Ely, is based on circumstantial evidence. We have no surviving documents identifying Lords Oxford and Howard as the English noblemen Humphrey Ely alludes to in his interview with Cardinal Sega. Nor would we expect to, for the diplomats and couriers of the time were very careful not to name names unless it was absolutely necessary.

Similarly, one cannot definitely identify Edmund Campion and Robert Persons as the “*medesimi padri Gesuiti*” mentioned by Sega in his letter to Rome. Likewise, we have no definite knowledge that Oxford and Campion met and formed a friendship either before or during the September 1566 Court visit to Oxford. History only records that both Campion and Oxford were present¹⁰ for the better part of a week, during which time Campion took a prominent role in public ceremonies, personally meeting both Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Leicester. Nor do we have evidence that Oxford and Campion met at any point during the latter’s 1580-81 mission to England.¹¹

Indeed, one must concede that the connection suggested here could be the result of no more than a coincidence. Cardinal Sega mentions having been contacted on behalf of “some English noblemen” in November 1580, while the Earl of Oxford feels a compelling need to expose himself, Lord Howard, and two others as secret Catholics in December. Cardinal Sega mentions “itinerant Jesuit Fathers” in connection with the same query, and we know that two such Jesuits, Campion and Persons, were pursuing their mission in England at the time. This, too, could be no more than a coincidence. In a court of law, all of this would be referred to as “circumstantial evidence.” Nevertheless, there have been many occasions on which juries of twelve “good men and true” have decided that in some cases, a sufficient body of circumstantial evidence may be taken as fact. _____ ©

Notes

- 1 Many take “the card” to be the compass card by which one steers a course.
- 2 *All’s Well That Ends Well*, V:3:250; *Othello*, I:3:217.
- 3 Year numbers here follow our present practice whereby the New Year begins on January 1.
- 4 Lord Henry Howard is not to be confused with his nephew Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, son of the late Duke of Norfolk.
- 5 Indeed, Baker states later that “This being a history play, the dynastic situation itself (which Shakespeare, as usual, distorts for his own purpose) exemplifies equivocation” (*Riverside* 806).
- 6 Excluding incursions by English exiles as in the Wars of the Roses.
- 7 The details of the excesses of King Richard II are only vaguely reported in the Shakespeare play, but are laid out in greater detail in the anonymous play “Thomas of Woodstock.”
- 8 In this Oxford shares the attitude we have previously attributed to Edmund Campion regarding David and King Saul.
- 9 For Edward de Vere, in particular, there may be a special symbolism in the pot of water. In his office of Lord Great Chamberlain, he held the privilege of serving the monarch personally on the day of coronation, including the providing of water from an ewer (Ward 346).
- 10 Humphrey Ely may have also been present for the royal visit of September 1566. We know that he was studying at Oxford in 1566, but we lack evidence of his whereabouts on the week in question.
- 11 It must be remarked that Campion’s policy in 1580-81 was to travel incognito, wearing ordinary clothing rather than the trappings of a priest. Thus anyone who offered him food or lodging could plead ignorance as to the identity of his guest. This could be important to the host, who might otherwise be brought up on charges of harboring one later adjudged to be a dangerous and treasonous conspirator. Because of this it is understandable that the documentation of Campion’s 1580-81 travels is, of necessity, most sketchy. While imprisoned in the Tower in 1581, Campion did his best to assure his fellow Catholics that he had not identified any of those who had extended him their hospitality. Thus we should not be surprised that evidence of a 1580-81 meeting between Oxford and Campion, did it occur, did not survive.

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