

BARDGATE

Was Shakespeare a Secret Catholic?

Peter W. Dickson



ANY persons comfortable in the modern tolerant secular culture may recoil from the idea that the genius behind the works attributed to William Shakespeare could be found in his religious orientation, a growing suspicion among scholars who sense that the man from Stratford-on-Avon might have been living a “double life” as a secret Roman Catholic. This discussion about whether the Bard remained inwardly a Catholic while Queen Elizabeth and her regime sought the suppression and execution of large numbers of Catholics (especially after 1581) was until recently confined to the quiet groves of academe. Those scholars of Shakespeare’s works aware of this history (not all are!) usually consider the old Catholic/Protestant argument as too unsavory a topic and are probably happy with the possibility that it may now be too esoteric for a broader audience.

The disinclination to probe into the religious issues of the time meshes well with the mania known as “multiculturalism” or the politics of “diversity” which holds that personal identity should be understood in terms of differences arising from physical characteristics—race, gender or sexual orientation—as opposed to what is inside one’s mind. At the same time, these new cultural trends have fueled an egalitarian spirit that encourages the leveling down or unmasking of persons who have served as symbols of greatness in the past. The Bard in this regard has not been spared clinical dissection by deconstructionists, feminists, historicists and the like. This new iconoclasm encourages scholars to ask whether he might have been a racist or a sexist toward women as well as being perhaps an anti-Semite, given his portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Beyond these, the preoccupation with sexual identity deepens the old suspicions that some passages in the *Sonnets* of 1609 suggest the Bard himself might have had homosexual or bisexual tendencies.

Whatever the truth, sensitive aspects of his personal life are no longer considered taboo or off limits, as was the case a century ago when Oscar Wilde shocked everyone by citing the *Sonnets* in defending himself in the British courts against charges of sodomy. Wilde’s sensational trial and conviction—he ended by serving two years hard labor—provoked a reexamination of what Shakespeare the man was all about. And about the time of Wilde’s release from prison appeared Sidney Lee’s *A Life of William Shakespeare*, arguably the most widely-read biography of the Bard of all time.

The years 1898-99 were crucial because Lee not only took upon himself the task of discrediting Wilde’s interpretations of the *Sonnets*, he also lashed out at suggestions that the Bard was raised as and remained a Catholic until his death in 1616, an argument advanced by Bowen and Simpson in a controversial work entitled *The Religion of Shakespeare*. A major issue seized upon by Lee was the revealing Catholic-style “spiritual testament” of the father (John Shakespeare)¹ which Lee insisted was a forgery—an argument that became the party line among the orthodox who wished to cleanse Shakespeare’s family of Catholicism.

Lee's tactics were successful, driving the Catholic question back into the closet for nearly a century. As a reward for defending the national icon from accusations of both Catholicism and homosexuality, the Crown saw no irony in creating Lee (born Solomon Lazarus) a Knight of the Realm, one of the first Englishmen of Jewish origin to be so recognized.

Although the homoeroticism suggested in some poems could be deflected by keeping the focus on Shakespeare's more widely-appreciated dramas--three dozen in total--Lee, who died in 1924, never managed to stamp out totally the suspicion that the Bard was inclined towards Catholicism. The idea of a Catholic Bard was pursued by a few maverick and mostly Catholic scholars in Britain at mid-century, such as Christopher Devlin, Hugh Ross Williamson, and Peter Milward. They were encouraged in this regard by a landmark work entitled *Shakespeare and Catholicism* published by two German scholars, Mutschmann and Wentersdorf, in 1952. But the orthodoxy that Shakespeare was a sincere member of the Anglican Church was too strong a view to be easily shaken among scholars.

Only in recent years has the Catholic question come closer to center stage when in 1985 Ernst Honigmann tried to fill up those troublesome "lost years" in a book of that topic. This is the period when nothing significant is known about the Bard, the period between his marriage in late 1582 and the sudden appearance in April 1593 of the highly polished literary work entitled *Venus and Adonis*, the first to bear the name of "William Shakespeare."

Honigmann speculated that during this mysterious decade young William may have been the "William Shakeshafte" who was a tutor in the household of aristocratic Catholic families (the Houghtons and Heskeths) up north in Lancashire. Presumably, these connections could have facilitated his move to London and his rapid rise in the world of the London theater. This Lancashire twist or variation on the secret Catholic theory is highly seductive. Even E.K. Chambers, who first stumbled on the possible Shakeshafte connection in the early 1940s, found it irresistible, as do many scholars today. This is so, perhaps, because Shakespeare's first solid link to the theater is through the Lord Chamberlain's Men, formed in 1594, which consisted largely of former members of the Lord Strange's Men (also known as Derby's Men). This particular acting company was owned by the most prominent family in Lancashire, the Stanleys, who were intertwined with the Houghtons and the Heskeths. Thus, the Lancashire variation on the Catholic connection was a potential boon in that it permitted scholars to explain how a young man from the Midlands with no university education acquired the polish and aristocratic connections that eventually opened the door to the world of the London Theater.

Peter W. Dickson is a private scholar presently at work on a book entitled Shakespeare and the Men Who Stole the Bard. He is a former political-military analyst for the CIA (1971-91) and the author of an intellectual biography of Henry Kissinger entitled Kissinger and the Meaning of History, published by Cambridge University Press in 1978. He is a graduate of Kenyon College and has three Master's degrees: from Harvard, Georgetown University, and the University of Michigan. He has lived in Arlington, VA since 1974. He can be reached at PWDBard@aol.com.

From a Black Hole to Catholicism

The appearance in 1985 of Honigmann's book, which revived interest in the Catholic question, was timely because just then mainstream scholars were beginning to lament as never before the apparent dead end in their efforts to grasp both the Bard's inner life and to find hard evidence about his activities as a literary figure. The most compelling expression of this angst came from the pen of Gary Taylor, the junior editor who worked with Stanley Wells on the new Oxford edition of Shakespeare's works. At the conclusion of his own book, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1989), Taylor declared that Shakespeare's mind was a "literary black hole" that no person would ever be able to penetrate or fathom:

Shakespeare himself no longer transmits visible light; his stellar energies have been trapped within the well of his own reputation. We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him . . . it is no use pretending that some uniquely clever, honest, and disciplined critic can find a technique, an angle, that will enable us to escape this trap. (411)

Professor Samuel Schoenbaum, whose famous *Shakespeare's Lives* Taylor used as a model, restated the frustration in his own unique language in a new and unforgettable concluding passage to the 1991 edition of his work:

Perhaps we should despair of ever bridging the vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record. What we would not give for a single personal letter, one page of a diary! (568)

But this sense of a dead end to Shakespeare scholarship was about to shift in a dramatic fashion. Even though Honigmann's claim of a Lancashire/Catholic connection was deemed "unproven," given the prevalence of the name "Shakeshafte" in Lancashire, his work opened a possible path in a new direction. Among some mainstream scholars there was also a largely unstated hope that pursuit of biographical research pointing to the Catholic background might help make the man from Stratford town more real, more understandable and in the process blunt the attacks of skeptics known as anti-Stratfordians and the growing popularity of the theory that "Shakespeare" was merely a pen name for the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere.

Given such pressures both internal and external on the Shakespeare Establishment, it is not a total surprise that nearly half the biographical works published after Honigmann's work on the "lost years" took the Catholic question seriously. The best known in this regard are those written by Gary O'Connor, Russell Fraser, Eric Sams, Ian Wilson, and Anthony Holden, especially the last two, who are, perhaps not coincidentally, from Lancashire.

Wilson's book, *Shakespeare The Evidence* (1993), which marshalled evidence for the Bard's Catholic connections, was so impressive that Taylor finally felt safe enough to disclose more fully and unambiguously his private fascination with these connections, which he had noticed nearly a decade earlier, even before Honigmann's book appeared in 1985.² He declared his escape from

the Shakespearean Black Hole in an essay entitled “Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton” in the Spring 1994 issue of the *English Literary Renaissance*:

I cannot prove that Shakespeare was a Catholic. But then, if he were one, he would have had strong incentives to prevent anyone from being able to prove it. And the hypothesis that he was a Catholic will, if we believe, account for all the relevant facts in both the biographical and literary record. (298)

Taylor’s astonishing conversion to the secret Catholic theory was one of several indications that this was the new cutting edge of research, especially for a younger generation of scholars hoping to find something fresh in a field long-considered well-plowed-over. Another sign of a changed landscape was the decision to hold two discussion groups or panels concerning the topic of “Religion” (a code word for the Catholic question) at the annual conference of the Shakespeare Association of America in April 1999. Even more remarkable was that a major conference was held three months later at Houghton Castle in Lancashire to encourage frank discussion of this hot topic. Not surprisingly, this resulted in passionate exchanges, in part because the advocates of a Catholic Bard, especially those based in Lancashire, are eager to promote their locale with a restored Houghton Tower as a major Shakespeare cultural site. They are frank about their desire to get a piece of the Shakespeare tourism revenue enjoyed for so long in both Stratford-on-Avon and London.³

The Bard’s Catholic dossier

All these developments since the mid-1980s would have been hard to predict, but they now form the background to a Catholic Bard movement which has come into full bloom with the first-ever documentary film about the life of Shakespeare, produced by Michael Wood for the BBC and the PBS channels in America. In the film’s companion book, entitled *In Search of Shakespeare*, Wood goes far beyond Honigmann, Holden, and Wilson to argue that Shakespeare was born, raised, and married as a Roman Catholic, and in the end “dyed a Papist,” to quote the words of Richard Davies, an Anglican priest living in the late 1600s.

Although the Manchester-born Wood rejects the Lancashire connection as unproven, his lavishly-illustrated work is a solidly-documented reconstruction of the world from which the Bard emerged, a network of recusant or crypto-Catholic families from South Warwickshire where, as in Lancashire and a few other locales, the gentry held onto the Old Faith well into the late 1500s.

Building upon prior research by such as Mutschmann, Wentersdorf, and also Leslie Hotson, Wood arguably has produced the greatest Shakespeare biography since that of Lee a century ago, and perhaps of all time, precisely because it explores crucial evidence which Lee and then later famous scholars such as Chambers, Rowse, and Schoenbaum sought to suppress or dismiss as having no influence on the Bard’s literary impulses and genius.

However, the price Wood pays for these new and radical insights into the author’s mind may prove quite high. His vision of a writer torn between the Medieval and the Modern world would not have been so challenging, had he not gone further, postulating a man in perpetual conflict or

tension with a harsh, often brutal, Protestant regime, an Elizabethan police state. All this cannot help but jar the inclination in Britain to see the Tudor dynasty as a largely positive development in the evolution of the nation and to view the political world of the great Queen “Glorianna” and the literary works of Shakespeare as sympathetic, or of the same spirit or worldview.

Indeed, more than one scholar has suggested that the Queen and her most trusted Minister, William Cecil or Lord Burghley, commissioned some of his dramas, notably the histories, to champion the values of their Protestant island nation in response to the threats from the Catholic Hapsburgs and their Austrian cousins. Shakespeare’s life spans almost the entire Counter Reformation, which intensified after the Council of Trent in 1556 and culminated in the Thirty Year’s War, which broke out in 1618, two years after Shakespeare’s death in 1616 and five years before the publication of the famous First Folio in 1623.

Nonetheless, determined to expose traditional views of the Queen and the Tudor regime as far too idealistic or romantic, Wood conveys how he “feels the pain” of harshly-persecuted and in many cases executed Catholics, especially the cousins and friends of Shakespeare’s parents, John Shakespeare and Mary Arden from the Arden clan, well known for its Catholic outlook. Wood is on solid ground here. He draws upon and cites the prior in-depth archival and genealogical research of Charlotte Stopes, Edgar Fripp and Mark Eccles as well as the landmark work of Mutschmann and Wentersdorf. However, Wood curiously fails to mention either Hotson’s landmark work, *I, William Shakespeare* (1938), or Ian Wilson’s more recent book, *Shakespeare: The Evidence* (1993), which has deepened the appreciation of how Shakespeare’s parents were acquainted with or had family ties to some of the most notorious Catholics of the entire period: Edward Campion, the Cottoms, Edward Arden, John Somerville, and Richard Debdale in the 1580s. Indeed, Mutschmann and Wentersdorf were indebted to Hotson’s pioneer research. And it was Hotson’s book which was the first Shakespeare-related book to focus attention on the network of South Warwickshire families to which Wood devotes an entire chapter (14): the Catesbys and Grants, and the Winters who supplied the leaders of the conspiracy to blow up King James while in Parliament, the notorious Gunpowder Plot, narrowly foiled in November 1605. William Shakespeare’s father (John) had business dealings with the Grant family and his mother was a cousin of Arden whose nephew was a Somerville and whose mother was a Grant and so on (Wood 283-4, Wilson 314-15).

Here we are not talking about ordinary “secret” Catholics, most of whom kept a low profile and conformed outwardly to the Anglican Church—earning the odd name of “Church Papists”—but about those fanatical in their loyalty to Rome, men willing to sacrifice and who in fact lost their lives in challenging the authority of Queen Elizabeth and the Anglican Church. The Grant family estate at Northbrook was used to hold secret performances of the Mass (Wilson 53).

For his part, Wood has no doubt that William Shakespeare remained a staunch Catholic even if he was less defiant than these and conformed outwardly like a Church Papist. William named his twins—Hamnet and Judith, born in 1585—after their Godparents, Hamnet and Judith Sadler, well known for their attachment to the Old Faith (Wood 97). From this Wood concludes that “William had not abandoned the old social and religious loyalties of his family” (103).

In the 1580s, there was every incentive for those Englishmen and women still inclined toward

Catholicism—and there were still many at that time in the general populace—to hang onto that inner faith for one good reason. In late 1580, Philip II of Spain had unified all of Iberia—meaning the great fleets of both Portugal and Spain—a development that sent shock waves throughout Europe and especially within England. From that moment on, it was thought, Queen Elizabeth's days were numbered, with few giving her much chance to survive the Armada that would inevitably come to liberate Britain from the Protestant heresy.

Yet Elizabeth survived. And what then could be more revealing when, despite the Queen's triumph and Britain's glory, we find William's father, John Shakespeare, turning up on a recusancy list which Wood (rightly) notes is consistent with the later Catholic-style "spiritual testament." As for William, when in May 1597 he bought the mansion in Stratford known as New Place, he was taking possession of a residence associated only with the most prominent and fervent Catholic families, the Cloptons and the Underhills, the latter being recusants who had been caught up in the Somerville plot (Wood 214).

Wood makes only passing mention of the lawyer Thomas Russell, but his importance to any secret Catholic Bard theory cannot be stressed too much. Hotson actually centered most of his 1938 work upon this crucial Russell/Shakespeare relationship. He did not explicitly assert or prove that Russell was a crypto-Catholic but Russell's strong friendship with Tobie Matthew and Endymion Porter, arguably the two most controversial secret Catholics in the entire Jacobean-Caroline period, speaks volumes about the kind of man William trusted to handle his estate. And surely the same can be said when we consider that a decade earlier, in the wake of the notorious Gunpowder Plot, his favorite daughter Susanna appeared on a list of recusants (those failing to attend Easter Service in April 1606). William rushed to extricate her from this mess by marrying her off to the good Anglican doctor John Hall, who was not so anti-Catholic himself, once treating a "Romish priest" for an ailment, an act of charity which easily could have cost the Doctor his own security.

And in March of 1613, not long before his death, William Shakespeare purchased the labyrinthian London tenement known as the Blackfriars Gatehouse, notorious for decades as a secret hideaway for crypto-Catholics. Among Shakespeare scholars, Ian Wilson deserves the most credit for highlighting the controversial Catholic connections associated with this building. It was Wilson who criticized Rowse and Schoenbaum for disingenuously arguing that this purchase was merely an investment property. In Wilson's words,

Now in all this the major source of interest is why, with all London to choose from, Shakespeare should have selected, as a purportedly casual investment, this notoriously Catholic Gatehouse, with all its secret hiding places still retaining their secrets. It is not even as though he bought it as a bargain; he paid 140 pounds for it, more than twice the amount he had paid for New Place. So was it really just an "investment pure and simple"? (375)

The bottom line is that the two most important real estate acquisitions of Shakespeare's life, New Place and the Blackfriars Gatehouse, were both properties long-known to have strong historical associations with Catholics.

Toward the end of his book, Wood—who gives no hint of having read Wilson's book, despite

the fact that it sold very well—carefully dances a minuet around the second of these two properties. In a considerable understatement, he observes: “Shakespeare was a cunning and discrete person: the purchase of the Blackfriars gatehouse and its later history may yet throw new light on his business dealings and perhaps his religious sympathies at the end of his life” (331). Actually, given the building’s history—well-known long before the purchase was made in 1613—“brazen” would be a better term than either “cunning” or “discrete.”

“Brazen” because, while the man from Stratford was taking steps to buy this notorious Catholic hideout in Blackfriars, five Shakespeare dramas were being featured at festivities celebrating the first royal wedding since Henry VIII’s last marriage seventy years before, the highly political marriage of King James’s daughter Elizabeth to Frederick, Elector of the Palatinate and leader of the German Protestants. Thus, at the very moment when Shakespeare’s dramas, including the popular *Henry V*, were being featured as the centerpiece of the Court’s confirmation of a new Protestant Heidelberg/London alliance, the Bard apparently had the nerve to embark on a real estate transaction which would bond him ever more closely with the Catholic underground in London. Can one imagine a greater incongruity? Not only was he a secret Catholic but a very cocky, smug one at that, almost defiant towards the Crown, for which he had labored nearly twenty years as senior dramatist from the Lord Chamberlain’s Men—under James, the King’s Men.

Unaware of this jarring contradiction between Shakespeare’s actions and the Court’s decision to highlight Shakespeare’s works in celebration of its alliance with the German Protestants, Wood deserves some credit for inadvertently pointing our attention toward another odd juxtaposition of events. He notes in passing that one Sunday morning in October 1623, a floor beam cracked inside the Blackfriars Gatehouse, sending most of 300 crypto-Catholics attending a secret Mass on the fourth floor plunging to their deaths in full public view, an event that occurred only a month or so before the famous anthology or folio of Shakespeare’s dramas hit the London bookstores. This is why Wood suggests that further study concerning this notorious building will shed more light on Shakespeare’s “religious sympathies, at the end of his life” (331).

Actually, the building in which the Catholics were pancaked to their deaths was nearby, just across a small courtyard which provided a ready space for a mass grave for the deceased. Nonetheless, the proximity of these two clandestine Catholic meeting places inside the Blackfriars district and the overall pattern of evidence of the Bard’s Catholic origins until the end of his life both point in the same direction. Despite a few places where he questions wild speculation that Shakespeare was sent to France for training to become a Jesuit and where he points to the non-sectarian worldview reflected in the dramatic works, Wood maintains throughout his book his strong suspicion that the Bard never abandoned or broke free of his parents’ strong attachment to Roman Catholicism. Although well aware that this conclusion is difficult for mainstream scholars to swallow, he concludes that the Anglican priest Richard Davies had no reason to lie when he claimed that Shakespeare “dyed a Papist.” In Wood’s words: “. . . it may be, as Davies records, that he was drawn to his childhood certainties at end. And if he did go through the last rite of passage on his death bed, was it perhaps as much loyalty to the past, to his parents and ancestors, and to the spirits of England, which to many of his generation had been “leased out to a pelting farm”? (340)

In this regard, it is worth noting that Shakespeare's parents lived very long lives, certainly long enough to have heard about their son's great literary fame in the early 1600s. Shakespeare outlived his mother by little more than seven years. Given that he seems to have remained faithful to his family's religious heritage and seems to have spent an inordinate amount of time living in the provincial backwater which was his hometown, he should have pondered what his achievement might have meant to them, though there is no hint of that in any of his works.

Whatever the case, Wood is convinced that Shakespeare lived this "double life." He conformed outwardly toward the Anglican Church while living in his hometown in Stratford. This was not too difficult. The crushing fine of £20 per month was only for non-attendance at Sunday service, meaning that he could—like most Church Papists—still pass up taking the Anglican Communion at the altar rail without incurring any penalties. How he sustained his Catholic identity in secret it is difficult to say, but in the large city of London it was probably easier to do given the existence of hideouts like the one he purchased in 1613. Wood finds a clue in the astute observation of Mutschmann and Wentersdorf about how Huguenots (French Protestants) such as the Mountjoys, with whom he lived in London as a boarder, were exempt from Anglican Services (381). Although more research is necessary, this exemption may have been granted to others living with Huguenots, making this strategy another in the bag of clever tricks Catholics were known to play to elude the regime's watchdogs. Shakespeare, a high profile dramatist attached to the Royal Court for nearly two decades, astonishingly left no record of active association or membership in a London Anglican parish, which such an exemption would help explain.

The Bard: an icon or a heretic?

From the perspective of the general public, the idea of Shakespeare living a "double life" as a crypto-Catholic may not seem so alien now as in the past. If nothing else, Wood and the other advocates of a Catholic Bard can, ironically enough, benefit from the historical amnesia which Wood set out in part to overcome. When one raises the Catholic question, not only among the general public but even with scholars who have no personal memory of a time when religion in the West played an important factor in determining one's identity, a typical response is: why couldn't a Catholic have written the Shakespearean dramas, the sonnets and other poems? What difference would it make whether or not the author of these fictional works was a crypto-Roman Catholic from the Midlands? Yet anyone even casually familiar with the significance of Protestantism to the national identity knows otherwise. Wood for one emphasizes that a Catholic Bard would have been "unthinkable" to scholars in the nineteenth century. A more accurate word would be "repugnant" as was the case with Sidney Lee and many scholars who followed in the last century. The greatest Shakespeare scholar prior to Lee was James Halliwell-Phillips who drew a clear line on the question of a Catholic identity—the father (John), perhaps, but definitely *not* the son (William). Wood and those who share his view are calling into question this compartmentalization.

The reason for the prior fierce hostility toward a Catholic Bard is that for more than three centuries and on both sides of the Atlantic the twin pillars of Anglo-Saxon culture of the English-

speaking peoples, have been the King James Version of the Bible published in 1611 and the works of William Shakespeare, in particular the dramas in the First Folio of 1623. The British achieved national self-definition not only through military achievements on the battlefield or the high seas as against the Spanish Armada in 1588, but through this magnificent translation of the Bible and the simultaneous flourishing of English literature and theater, of which the apex was the great Bard.

It was in this historical-political context that Shakespeare became a cultural symbol or icon, an expression of both English nationalism and Protestantism, which had, by the early 1600s, become inextricably intertwined, leaving virtually no room for a Catholic tradition to survive in England in any significant fashion, even in literary works. The fingers on one hand are nearly ample enough to count the readily identifiable literary figures from the Elizabethan-Jacobean era who could be said to be Catholic, or biased in that direction.

The bottom line is that Roman Catholicism remained an outlawed religion in England for three centuries. In contrast, Judaism was tolerated in Spain for more than a thousand years until Queen Isabella issued the edict of expulsion, after which virtually all Spanish Jews departed for Italy and ultimately the Ottoman Empire, where they were accepted. While Spanish Jews were able to practice their faith as a visible minority until 1492, in England, which had been totally Catholic until the 1520s, Catholics who wished to sustain their religious identity after 1580 risked crushing fines for non-attendance at Anglican services and imprisonment or execution for harboring priests or attempting in any way to promulgate their faith.

Thus, the personal stakes for Roman Catholics were high, and in a highly polarized environment of sectarian strife where the State recognized only one form of Christian faith, it is no trivial matter or issue if Shakespeare really was deep down, inwardly a secret Catholic who “dyed a Papist,” as Davies had claimed in the late 1600s. Yet all the evidence assembled by Wood, and before him by Hotson, Mutschmann, Wentersdorf, and Wilson, points very much in that direction.

Certainly, living a double life as a secret Catholic would have entailed considerable stress, not merely on a daily basis, but especially in the creative fields of drama and poetry, which were subject to close review by the Anglican censors. It would have meant repressing one’s inner spirit or core value system twice over, something that the executed Jesuit poet Robert Southwell had warned against. In a poem to a person with the initials *W.S.*, Southwell urged a return to more spiritual themes in literary endeavors. Wood believes “*W.S.*” was William Shakespeare on the grounds that Southwell was related to the Catholic Ardens from whom the Bard’s mother descended.

Shakespeare’s Folio and “the Evill Time”

Despite his faithful historical reconstruction of the family background and religious orientation of Shakespeare, Wood fails to grasp the misfit between his account of the Bard’s life and how his works were perceived by his contemporaries. Perhaps the most forceful, convincing way to convey this gross misfit is to turn attention to those who attached the greatest significance to his works and why they took steps to preserve his dramas for posterity in the form of a massive, and quite

expensive anthology, known in time to come as the *First Folio*.

It was no coincidence that the sudden rush to publish these thirty-six dramas in late 1621 took place in the midst of the momentous and pivotal controversy known as “the Spanish Marriage Crisis,” the focus of several works by the famous nineteenth-century historian Samuel Rawson Gardiner and more recently Thomas Cogswell in his *The Blessed Revolution* (1989). King James had alarmed the Protestant nation by his attempts to engineer a dynastic union with Spain—the “Home of the Antichrist” for Puritans and many Anglicans as well—by marrying Prince Charles to the King of Spain’s sister.

Once the *First Folio* began appearing in London book stores in December 1623—not long after the Spanish Match collapsed, ruining the King’s great dream—there could be no mistake whatsoever about the political sentiments of those behind the folio project. The book was dedicated to the “Incomparable Paire,” the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, leaders of the party opposed to the “creeping Catholicism” personified or symbolized by the idea of a Spanish Princess of Wales. The memory of “Bloody Mary,” Queen Elizabeth’s half-Spanish Catholic sister, was still alive in those opposed to any move towards Rome.

Pembroke, a hard-core Protestant like his uncle Sir Philip Sidney (the famous poet) and his granduncle Leicester (Queen Elizabeth’s famous favorite) was crucial to the folio project. As the Lord Chamberlain, and through his assistant (the Master of the Revels), Pembroke had control over the royal actors and also the power to approve or disapprove all publications planned by the fifteen or so authorized London printers. The Bard’s former associates in the King’s Men, Henry Condell and John Hemmings, who supposedly assembled the manuscripts, were likewise staunch Anglicans, as their longstanding roles as sextons at the parish of Saint Mary Aldermanbury attest. Their advanced age (both were well past 60) explains why these actors had a strong identification with the glory days of Queen Elizabeth’s long reign. Thus, the *First Folio* which ensured Shakespeare’s immortality was a project driven to completion by those fearful that the Spanish Marriage or Match would mean an eventual return to Catholicism.

Furthermore, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare’s patron (to whom the astonishingly amorous *Sonnets* dedications were written in 1593-1594), had been for many years a close political ally of “the Incomparable Paire.” In fact, Southampton and also the eighteenth Earl of Oxford—brother-in-law to Pembroke and Montgomery—were the most outspoken leaders of a virulently anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish faction known as the “Patriots.” Both Earls suffered imprisonment in the 1621-1623 period for their opposition to the Spanish marriage and their open denigration of King James as a pawn in the hands of the Spanish Ambassador and the Hapsburgs, both Spanish and Austrian.

The utter contempt in which these Shakespearean Patriots held King James and his lover, the notorious Duke of Buckingham (George Villiers) was shared by the London public, which took at face value rumors of the King’s homosexuality and which was even more convinced that the King and the Duke were also secret Catholics. The latter accusation was almost certainly false and the former difficult to prove. Nonetheless, the King’s cavalier actions and the defiant conversion to Catholicism by the Duke’s mother, were more than enough to make these fears seem justified.

Thus, many English were infuriated by what seemed to them to be a duplicitous game in which union with Spain (the AntiChrist) was being promoted by two homosexual crypto-Catholics. It was for these reasons that the famous poet Michael Drayton described the early 1620s when the Shakespeare folio project was launched as “the Evill Time.”

Given the strong anti-Catholic views of Southampton and others linked to the First Folio, it would have been nigh impossible for anyone at the time not to see the Shakespeare folio as an implicit, if not explicit, celebration of a far, far better England than the one King James and the Duke were envisioning for the future. In sum, the folio was a profound political statement or reminder in a most uncertain time—“the Evill Time”—of what it meant to be English, to be an Englishman as opposed to a “Spaniard,” a derogatory term frequently used to label the supporters of the King and Buckingham.

Even Ben Jonson, long envious of the Bard, was by early 1623 appalled by the risks taken to pursue the Spanish Marriage, which may explain this passage in his famous dedication to the Bard’s memory:

Triumphe, my Britaine, thou hast one to showe,
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time!

Given this tense situation, Jonson may well have made the odd decision to place one of the historical dramas, *Cymbeline*, after the tragedies so that it rather than *Antony and Cleopatra* was the last play in the folio. *Cymbeline* is the story of a heroic rebellion of Celts against the harsh rule of Imperial Rome. The analogy to 1623 would have been almost impossible for anyone to overlook.⁴

How then was it possible that the Bard could have been a life-long secret Catholic and yet his dramatic works, in the form of a high-profile anthology, were produced by and for those most concerned about a possible restoration of Catholicism in Britain? Had he fooled all of the people all of the time?

Literary evidence: decisive?

The foregoing question is only the beginning of the problems associated with the idea that Bard was a secret Catholic. Perhaps the biggest problem can be seen in the literary works themselves, the works to which those scholars totally opposed to the advocates of a Catholic Bard always turn to make their case.

Shakespeare scholars for the past two centuries have had a strong proclivity to view the Bard and his literary works through the prism of the humanist traditions associated with the Renaissance and to consider him primarily a secular dramatist, modern in spirit. A.C. Bradley was the foremost spokesman for this perspective in his highly-praised work, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1905). After remarking that “Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular,” Bradley added:

. . . while Shakespeare was writing, he practically confined his view to the world of non-

theological observation and thought, so that he represents it substantially in one and the same way, whether the period of the story is pre-Christian or Christian. He looked at this "secular" world most intently and seriously; and he painted it, we can not but conclude, with entire fidelity, without the wish to enforce an opinion of his own, and, in essentials, without regard to anyone's hopes, fears, or beliefs. His greatness is largely due to this fidelity in a mind of extraordinary power. (145-6)

Actually, when compared to rivals and contemporaries such as Marlowe, Kyd, Lyly, and Jonson, Shakespeare conveyed a deeper understanding of the Christian theology and liturgy than they did. Nonetheless, the vast majority of scholars endorse Bradley's conclusion that the Bard deliberately and rigorously avoided using his works, especially the histories and tragedies as vehicles for conveying a definitive statement or message concerning such Christian conceptions as original sin, predestination, redemption, and eternal salvation. Although it's likely that this exclusion was partly to avoid problems with the censors, the non-sectarian quality of the Shakespeare dramas explains in part their lasting appeal to the more secular audiences of later centuries.

Another factor that undercuts the notion of a "Catholic" Shakespeare is something that all scholars agree upon, which is that in preparing his literary works, the real Bard drew only on Protestant Bibles, most frequently the Geneva Bible (1569), the best known Protestant Bible available in the English language prior to the 1611 King James version. Actually, it would not have been at all out of the ordinary had Shakespeare used the centuries-old but still respected Latin version of the Holy Bible, the Vulgate. We might expect some reflection of the Catholic-Latin tradition, had he been in fact a secret Roman Catholic, one who learned his Latin at the Stratford grammar school. Moreover, since he never went to the university, a dramatist from a humble background might have been more inclined to show off his knowledge of Latin with phrases or quotations from classical Roman literature as well as the Vulgate. There is some of that in his dramas but curiously not a great deal, which may explain Jonson's remark that the Bard had "small Latin and lesse Greek."

A third factor questioning the Bard's Catholicism is that *Hamlet*, arguably his greatest drama, has a strong Protestant tone with a highly, almost obsessively, introspective Danish Prince returning home from his studies at the University of Wittenburg, famous for the doors of its chapel, to which Martin Luther nailed the ninety-five theses that launched the Protestant Reformation. Peter Usher has made a compelling argument that *Hamlet* contains a sub-text that speaks of the new cosmology of infinite space and the heliocentric universe of the Copernican theory (135-6), a theory which took root at Wittenburg in the 1540s and was expounded in Copernicus's *de Revolutionibus*, a book the Roman Catholic church had placed on their Index of forbidden works.⁵

Ultimately, while the Bard may have conveyed a deep understanding of the Bible, Christian theology, and traditional liturgy in his plays, the themes of his dramas do not even show much of a Christian focus, to say nothing of Catholicism. As Roland Frye observed in his classic work *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (1963), more than thirty persons die in the Bard's plays but not one utters the name of "Jesus Christ" or even "God" on their death beds (51-2). Portraits of martyrs who give their lives for their faith, which one might expect from a crypto-Roman Catholic dramatist, are missing from his dramatic works.

These considerations drove Frye to the same conclusion that most Shakespeare scholars have found inescapable: drama was for the Bard a mirror held up to nature, one that portrayed men and women as they are; it was not a mirror meant to reflect saving grace or revealed theological truths. This recurrent theme of holding “a mirror to nature” can be found in Hamlet’s speech in Act III Scene 2 where the Prince states emphatically that the purpose of acting or playing, “both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” Such sentiment reflects the man-centered focus of the Renaissance Humanism which echoed Protagoras’s famous assertion that Man was “the measure of all things.” Shakespeare’s plays focused on life here on earth. They did not serve as vehicles for theological doctrines or commentary on life after death, and heaven or hell, major themes in the works of Christian writers like Dante and Milton.

Perhaps, the strongest sign of the Bard’s independence from Christian Doctrine is how he chose to handle the issue of suicide. Several figures in his dramas, even those set in the Christian era, die as a result of suicide, an action that was (and remains) an abomination in terms of Catholic doctrine. Even Protestant theologians in Shakespeare’s time voiced this long-standing Christian condemnation of suicide or “self-slaughter.” The Tudor regime was especially rapacious in confiscating the wealth of families who had the misfortune of having a member who committed suicide. Except in rare cases calling for the performance of “maimed rites” at burial when there was uncertainty about the cause of death, or where the person in question did not fully realize what they were doing to themselves (as in the case of Ophelia in *Hamlet*) those who committed suicide were not allowed a Christian burial. Condemned to eternal damnation, they were buried in unmarked graves, or even beneath the cross points where roads or highways came together. This harsh theological message and burial practices which essentially obliterated any physical remembrance of the departed, are impossible to reconcile with the more empathetic perspective concerning suicide in Shakespeare’s plays. And it is doubly difficult to imagine why a dramatist, who was at the same time a secret Roman Catholic—a courageous commitment which required an enormous emotional and psychological investment in the face of official repression—would have strayed boldly beyond Christian tradition to portray suicide in the manner chosen by the Bard, if it was done simply for theatrical effect.

As a professional dramatist, he had to be sensitive to both the Tudor regime’s dictat and the audience’s religious orientation. Yet, Shakespeare repeatedly refused to let such considerations constrain his artistic imagination. This decision to subordinate one’s inner Christian-Catholic convictions on the sensitive issue of suicide for the sake of art, is not what one would expect from a man struggling to preserve his inner faith as a crypto-Catholic when he could simply have chosen to write more comedies or other kinds of drama.

Religious conviction or historical realism?

These observations have not, however, deterred the advocates of a Catholic Bard from probing the canon in search of a partiality toward the Old Religion, if not evidence of a strong commit-

ment. (See Appendix A, page 128.) There are various allusions here and there such as references to the Catholic practice of prayers for the dead or the Bard's willingness to portray friars and nuns in a positive light as in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Measure for Measure*. As Wood observes, Shakespeare also appears to have toned down the virulently anti-Catholic bias toward ecclesiastical figures present in the original source material he utilized for *King John*. And strangely, Shakespeare treats the Catholic Catherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII* with sympathy.

But these hints of a Catholic bias remain episodic and Bradley, Frye, and other scholars more comfortable with a secular or Protestant Bard insist that these scattered allusions to Catholic traditions or practices were added only for local color and historical realism, especially for those plays set in Italy. Furthermore, no one should be surprised to detect here and there some echoes of "Ye Olde Faith" in the dramas since barely two generations prior to Shakespeare's birth everyone in England had been a Roman Catholic. *Henry VIII* is, in fact, the only work which dates to the period following Luther's break with Rome. To have projected a strong Protestant message in the other thirty-five dramas would have appeared ludicrous. In "holding the mirror up to nature," he had every reason to recapture the pre-Reformation world as faithfully as possible.

Ultimately, the most telling aspect of Shakespeare's works was underscored by Roland Frye. "Though Shakespeare could express Christian and other doctrines in memorable and impressive words, he never treats these doctrines as ends in themselves, but always makes them subordinate to his development of character and action" (271). In fact, the Bard placed such a high priority on achieving dramatic effect that certain inconsistencies crept into his plays, perhaps partly by design and partly by a lapse of attention to accuracy or detail. In the words of Alfred Harbage in *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (1952):

A thousand details could be marshalled to prove that the plays of Shakespeare and other popular dramatists lack religious consistency Shakespeare's own mind was everything but "disciplined," and his plays are full of incongruities. His Protestants use Catholic expressions, and his Catholics Protestant ones; his Christians, pagan expressions, and his pagans, Christian ones. In *The Winter's Tale* divine revelation comes from the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, and yet Polixenes wants his name, if he prove false, "yok'd with his that did betray the Best." On the other hand, even the friars and holy nuns invoke the gods. It is not surprising that in the popular drama we should find evidence of Christian faith intermingled with paganism, irreverent humor, agnosticism, and fatalism. (145-6)

To summarize the mainstream scholarship: although Shakespeare had a profound understanding of the Holy Bible and theological issues and utilized Christian themes as background and source material for many of his dramas, his genuine efforts toward historical realism were not always consistent, and he never made Christian theology the core of the dramatic action in any of his dramas. At the very most, mainstream scholars will admit that *Measure for Measure* is his most Christian-like drama, with the Duke's assumption of the identity of a monk. Even so, the play is highly unorthodox and controversial. And, as Frye observed, it was no mere coincidence that the

censors in Catholic Spain excised this one Shakespearean play in toto from the few copies of the First Folio that made their way to Spain in the early 1600s.

Taking all of the evidence into account, Shakespeare's works contain neither a strong nor a consistently overt Christian message as is the case with the works of Dante before him or of Milton after him. Samuel Schoenbaum, America's foremost Shakespeare expert prior to his death in 1996, was justified in dismissing the efforts of those like Peter Milward to locate with precision the Bard's theological convictions and where they appear in his literary works:

The facts are ambiguous: too ambiguous to justify a recent Jesuitical commentator's conclusion that the Bard felt a positive nostalgia for England's Catholic past, although the same writer is on safer ground when he claims that Shakespeare shows much familiarity but little awkwardness in his treatment of Catholic customs and beliefs. / What remains clear it that the artist takes precedence over the votary, and he resists efforts on the part of sectarian apologists to put him into a convenient theological pigeon-hole. (*Life* 50)

These observations bring us back to the political imperative for the senior royal dramatist that he avoid any hint of opposition to the Anglican Church as established by a Tudor dynasty which he in fact celebrated in *Henry VIII*. Furthermore, in contrast to his comedies and tragedies, several of which are set in the pagan or non-Christian era, his historical plays actually reinforced this sense of a distinctly English national spirit independent from Rome.

Backfitting the canon

So where does this leave Wood and other advocates of a Catholic Bard? Well they remain stuck with the difficult task of trying to find a trace of the hard-core Catholic from the Midlands in the literary works. And it is on this crucial level where Wood's book, despite its considerable virtues with regard to non-literary or biographical evidence about the man from Stratford, comes apart at the seams. We can detect this unraveling at three distinct points when Wood tries to reconcile an inwardly-Catholic Bard with Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry, including the *Sonnets*, and with *Hamlet*, the drama which seems to reflect more of the Bard's inner life than the other plays.

With respect to the first works that bore the Shakespeare name on their title pages—*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*—Wood either did not know or hides from his readers the fact that the publishing firm for these two landmark works, the Vautrollier/Field family, had a long and deep association with the Protestant cause. The publisher of these two works, Richard Field, was a staunch Protestant from Stratford-on-Avon. After moving to London in the 1580s, he married into the Vautrollier family—Huguenots who had made a reputation by publishing works advancing the spirit of the Reformation. They published the translations of and commentaries on the works of Calvin prepared by Arthur Golding, who also translated Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on which the Bard so often drew for inspiration.⁶ In fact, Field's father-in-law, Thomas Vautrollier, was such an avant guard publisher that he was willing to print the works of the controversial Giordano Bruno, the

Italian humanist and philosopher whose writings so enraged the Vatican that they burned him at the stake in 1600. Everything about the Vautrollier/Field publishing family strongly suggests that it would not have published anything that bore a Catholic message. Had Shakespeare of Stratford been the author of the Shakespeare canon, Field was in a position to know because his father, as neighbor to the Shakespeares of Stratford, would have known that John Shakespeare had appeared on a list of suspected Catholics (recusants) in 1592, only a year before Field published *Venus and Adonis*. The gulf between the worldview of the Vautrollier/Field family and a crypto-Catholic Shakespeare is immense. The question of why this family would have had anything to do with him must be addressed. A Catholic Bard would have sought and probably could have found a London publisher who was not so fanatically opposed to Catholicism.

Wood shows no awareness of this gross incongruity. Perhaps he might argue that appearing to belong to a stable of writers associated with this Protestant publishing house was yet another brilliant act of deception. But at some point these rococo arguments begin to strain credulity, particularly when Wood attempts to explain the deeper thought processes that went into the composition of the 154 *Sonnets* published in 1609.

In addition to never offering a credible explanation why a living author would have wanted such intimate, highly-revealing poems in print, Wood offers us the bizarre theory that the “153” *Sonnets* (the last two being “versions of the same one”) were modeled on the 153 prayers in the Catholic Rosary! (305) Here one sees how deeply Wood is attached to the idea of a crypto-Catholic Bard, even though he admits from time to time that Shakespeare’s mind had to have transcended Catholicism. Concerning the *Sonnets*, Wood concludes lamely: “Although any relationship is distant (if anything these are really a secular parody of the sacred), some numberings do shadow the old prayers he must have known as a child” (305).

Wood finds himself in a similar box when he strives to find a strong Catholic bias to *Hamlet*. He is not convincing, even taking into account the famous Ghost scene in which Hamlet’s father reappears lamenting that his murder prevented him from receiving the last rites. As Stephen Greenblatt argues in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, the Ghost scene is formulated with enough calculated ambiguity as to be susceptible to a number of different reactions or readings—such as the notion that the Ghost was the Devil in disguise—a view compatible with Protestant teachings—come to lead the young prince into Sin by urging him to seek personal revenge for the murder of his father.

Shakespeare after Wood: disintegration?

How Wood’s book and film will be received on this side of the Atlantic where the Bard is not a longstanding national icon remains to be seen. The reaction in Britain has been mixed, with many finding Wood’s analysis and presentation convincing, if not infectious. Yet others such as Clive James of the prestigious *Times Literary Supplement* totally ignored the issue of the Catholic Bard, dismissing Wood as a handsome, engaging “walking talking head” ideally suited for outdoor shots with television cameras. This curt dismissal and refusal to address the main substance of Wood’s book may become part of a strategy of silence or damage control, since the book and the

film bring into focus a schism over the Catholic question which has been dividing Shakespeare scholars for more than a decade.

Given that Wood's meticulous research with regard to the biographical evidence is so compelling, there is every reason to expect that the other scholars convinced that Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic will come to his defense. Certainly, his work tends to reaffirm the credibility of prior works published by like-minded biographers such as Holden, Sams, and Wilson.

Yet, despite this growing critical mass, how far this movement will go depends on whether those scholars who consider Wood's film to be a highly distorted reading of the literary works and thus "history as fantasy" mount a major offensive to discredit him. Prior to Wood, dismissing the advocates of a Catholic Bard was more easily accomplished in quiet out-of-the-way places within the halls of colleges and universities or in academic journals. Now the Shakespeare Establishment seems no longer confident of the final outcome and is conveying mixed signals. While on the one hand the prestigious *Shakespeare Quarterly* can publish an essay trashing the Lancashire (Shakespeare) variation of the secret Catholic theory, the Folger Library which publishes this quarterly is permitting discussion of a Catholic perspective on *Hamlet* in private summer seminars restricted to those with doctorates.

However, since Wood's book and film carry the imprimatur of the BBC, they have upped the ante greatly in this debate and have telescoped the controversy concerning the Catholic question which otherwise might have taken another decade to reach the crisis stage. Wood was quite aggressive in his annotated bibliography, preemptively ridiculing a forthcoming article in *Shakespeare Survey* by Robert Bearman which once again dismisses John Shakespeare's Catholic-style "spiritual testament" as an eighteenth-century forgery—something that, as Wood correctly says, makes no sense given the absence of any credible motive for such a forgery at that time.

Clearly, the brilliant, clever Wood has caught the more orthodox scholars off-guard and they are not amused. In a review for the Sunday edition of *The Times*, Ferdinand Mount belittled the Catholic theory, noting the dispute over the authenticity of the father's spiritual testament and dismissing unnamed Catholics as the primary enthusiasts for this radical reinterpretation of Shakespeare. Perhaps the most revealing criticism has come from Gary Taylor (the Bard as a Black Hole theoretician) who in the *Guardian Review* expressed considerable jealousy and bitterness:

I have been saying since 1984 that Shakespeare was Catholic, and that fear of arrest motivated his seeming inscrutability. So I should be delighted that what was, 19 years ago, just another example of my eccentricity *has become BBC Worldwide orthodoxy*—I should be, but I'm not. There is something obscene about using the political assassination of Christopher Marlowe, or the legal torture and public execution of martyrs like Edmund Campion, Edward Arden, and Robert Southwell, *to spice up someone else's dull biography. Shakespeare never sacrificed anything for anybody.* ("Invention" emphasis added)

Taylor is correct. In comparison, Shakespeare appears to have been a gutless secret Catholic; but that seems consistent with the man who hoarded grain during a famine and whose strong bent

for litigation on even small matters betrays a basely materialistic value system. To the Catholic faithful, he could never have been a hero or a martyr—but Taylor does not put it that bluntly.

Most orthodox scholars can be expected to reiterate (correctly in our view) that the Bard's mind was far too complex and subtle for him to have been a secret and therefore sectarian Catholic. Even the radical feminist Germaine Greer has rejoined the Establishment, attacking Wood on this precise point. The same reservation can actually be found buried in the praise on the dust jacket of Wood's book from Stanley Wells, arguably the preeminent Shakespeare scholar of today. Wells cautiously said only that Wood's book "evokes the physical and intellectual environment in which Shakespeare lived and worked with vivid and original immediacy."

Like other recent Shakespeare biographers such as Park Honan and Katherine Duncan-Jones, Wells remains convinced that the Bard transcended his environment, including whatever was of a Catholic nature or spirit. In his own magnum opus entitled *Shakespeare—For All Time*, published in 2002, Wells made clear his view that the Catholic connections remain speculative or unproven. In his words, "All his life records suggest that both he and his father were conforming members of the Established Church and the absence of dogma which is one of the most conspicuous, and highly-valued aspects of Shakespeare's writings militates against the hypothesis that he adhered strongly to a doctrinaire creed" (25). These words amount to a categorical rejection of the theory that the Bard was a secret Catholic.

Like Lee, Rowse, and Schoenbaum before him, the skeptical Wells returned to the argument that the transcendental, timeless quality we detect in many of the Shakespeare works is proof that the Bard could never have retained an abiding attachment to a religion that generated the Counter Reformation, against which the Tudor regime was fighting for its survival. Wood and his admirers and supporters can and will respond by referring to the consistent pattern of biographical evidence pointing directly to a such an attachment and culminating in the Bard's astonishing purchase of the Blackfriars Gatehouse in 1613, shortly before his death. Their equally strong skepticism about "transcendence" brings to mind the famous German philosopher Hegel, who once remarked to his students that to expect a man to transcend his background and time is like asking him to "jump over his own shadow."

Perhaps the deeper underlying question which Wood's book poses and which those who kneel at the grave in Stratford-on-Avon fear the most in their heart of hearts: Was the man from Stratford town simply far too Catholic ever to have been the real genius behind the works? Has not Wood's high profile exposé of the Stratford man as a secret Catholic widened—not narrowed—the gap between this elusive fellow and the Shakespeare canon? Were the skeptics or anti-Stratfordians correct all along in arguing (since the 1850s) that we have had the wrong man?

This question—invigorated (presumably inadvertently) by Wood—cuts most deeply and explains why some give the impression that they hope that the Wood film and book will just blow over. For this reason, many scholars will follow Clive James and simply ignore Wood so as to avoid drawing attention to his book. No doubt they hope that the anti-Stratfordians will fail to take advantage of the schism over the Catholic question within the Shakespeare Establishment.

Those in favor of the strongest alternative Bard, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, would have

no difficulty in seizing the advantage since their candidate ended his flirtation with Catholicism in 1580-1581 by betraying his Catholic cousins as traitors in dramatic fashion before the Queen. From this perspective, the Shakespeare canon might be seen as an abandonment (betrayal?) of the Catholic worldview—which is precisely the reason why many honest Catholic intellectuals and scholars have looked askance at efforts to turn the Swan of Avon into a Son of Rome.

Only time will tell how Bardgate—this now 150-year old controversy over who really wrote the Shakespeare canon—will unfold over the next few years. Harvard Professor Stephen Greenblatt, revered among scholars of English literature as the guru of the New Historicism movement, is due to publish next year his magnum opus, yet another Shakespeare biography. In the past, he has conveyed some empathy for those scholars digging up new or reexamining old evidence that point to the strong Catholic origins of the man from Stratford. But Wood's high profile book and film have upstaged Greenblatt, making it virtually impossible for him to dance around the Catholic issue as he did in his last book, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, published three years ago.

It is no exaggeration to conclude that the Shakespeare Establishment faces a deep systemic crisis over this vexing Catholic question, one that will not go away soon and that offers a scenario with long-term repercussions for the publishing houses that sustain interest in the Bard, now widely regarded as an icon of the new Global Village. W.W. Norton, which, like Oxford University Press, has a huge stake in traditional Shakespearean scholarship, reportedly gave Greenblatt a one million dollar advance to produce the forthcoming biography, to be subtitled: "Will in the World." This work should provide a good litmus test for how much money can sway scholarship, and whether "Will" transcended the "World"—and jumped over his own shadow. _____ ©

Appendix A

Traces of Roman Catholicism in Shakespeare's Works?

Examples from Shakespeare's works which might reflect a distinctly Catholic conviction are very few—not surprising given the Tudor regime's censorship of writings to ensure conformity to the Anglican Church. Nonetheless, scholars who believe that the Bard was partial to Catholicism, if not a pro-active secret Catholic, cite passages from the literary works to support their argument. The following are those most frequently cited:

- 1 his favorable portrayal of those committed to monastic life such as the friars and nuns in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Measure for Measure*, and *A Comedy of Errors*;
- 2 the Ghost scene in *Hamlet*, which deals with the theme of purgatory and the need for prayers for the death for the sake of their ultimate salvation. Also Horatio's epitaph upon the death of *Hamlet*: "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest";
- 3 the phrase "Bared ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang" in "Sonnet 73," perhaps a lament concerning the Protestant destruction of some church property;
- 4 his toning down to some degree of the virulently anti-Catholic source material for his drama, *King John*;
- 5 his sympathetic portrayal of Henry VIII's Spanish wife, Catherine of Aragon, in the drama *Henry VIII* and the anti-divorce passage about marriage being "a world without-end bargain";
- 6 the Duke as a "Christ-like" figure in *Measure for Measure* which most scholars admit is the Bard's most Christian-oriented drama. (However, none of the dramas ever mention Jesus Christ, and Catholic censors in Spain considered this drama the most offensive and removed from circulation any copies found there.)
- 7 his failure to praise or to venerate Queen Elizabeth in any of his writings: the famous Silence which seems inexplicable given what other literary figures said in favor of her and the Tudor regime. (However, advocates of a Catholic Bard overlook Archbishop Cranmer's predictions about baby Princess Elizabeth in the final scene of *Henry VIII*.)

Appendix B

Division among Shakespeare biographers since 1985 when Honigmann revived the Catholic/Lancashire theories:

Traditionalists

Philip Edwards (1986): accepts father's Catholicism but not for the son or his plays which show "an absence of specifically Christian doctrine, Catholic or Protestant."

Peter Levi (1988): father was Catholic; the son here and there showed some sympathy for the old faith but accepted the Anglican Church and avoided theological issues. Levi rejects the Lancashire connection theory.

S.H. Burton (1989): rejects all so-called Catholic evidence, yet finds Honigmann's Lancashire theory intriguing even if far from proven.

P.E. Razzell (1990): claims father's Catholicism was only a late conversion.

Dennis Kay (1992): rejects claim about Catholicism of the father; finds Lancashire theory intriguing but still unproven.

Stanley Wells (1995): avoids Catholic issue almost totally, merely noting that perhaps the father's "prosperity declined, possibly as a result of Catholic sympathies."

Dennis Kay (1995): "Some evidence for Catholic inclinations exists, but it is not conclusive"; leery of Lancashire theory given anti-Catholic sentiment in the plays.

Park Honan (1999): argues Bard was inwardly Catholic but still an English nationalist who kept Protestant/Catholic differences out of his works; intrigued by Lancashire theory but sees it as unproven.

Katherine Duncan-Jones (2001): ridicules secret Catholic theory but struggles to explain Bard's inner convictions and recusancy of his favorite daughter.

Catholic Theory Advocates

Russell Fraser (1988): holds young Shakespeare from a Catholic family but did not wear religion on his sleeve; yet is intrigued by Catholic question and Lancashire Theory.

Gary O'Connor (1991): thinks Bard had "strong instinctive sympathy" for Catholicism but was also an English nationalist; conformed as an Anglican, but inwardly a Catholic; Lancashire connection "not conclusively proven" but something similar fairly probable.

Russell Fraser (1992): gives the Catholic question even greater weight than in his 1988 book, but remains agnostic about the Lancashire connection.

Ian Wilson (1994): presents strong case for the Catholic family background, religious orientation; rejects the Lancashire connection but highlights the notoriously Catholic Blackfriars Gatehouse.

Eric Sams (1995): stresses Catholic family heritage, the plausibility of the Lancashire connection, and the probability that in 1582 the Bard was married in a secret Catholic service.

Anthony Holden (1999): asserts flatly that John Shakespeare raised his son as a secret Catholic who was then "obliged to conform outwardly to Protestant orthodoxy" as a kind of "furtive papist"; embraces Honigmann's thesis of the Lancashire connection.

Michael Wood (2003): considers Lancashire connection as not proven; otherwise, presents the strongest arguments since Mutschmann and Wentersdorf in favor of a crypto-Catholic Bard.

Appendix C

Ian Wilson's evidence of the Stratford man's Catholicism:

In *Shakespeare: The Evidence* (1994), Ian Wilson cites most of the evidence that suggests the Stratford man came from a Warwickshire network of Catholic families and remained a secret Catholic until his death. Wilson overlooked the crucial religious exemption gained by residency in the Mountjoy household. He tries but fails on pages 410-412 to make a convincing argument about the so-called "Catholic evidence" in the Bard's literary works.

- 1 The explicitly Catholic-style testament of John Shakespeare, the Stratford man's father. Chapter 4 (44-58)
- 2 The fact that John Shakespeare's name appears on the recusancy list for March 1592 (123) and the Stratford man's daughter (Susanna) on a similar list for April 20, 1606 (320)
- 3 The Stratford man's marriage to Ann Hathaway in Temple Grafton in 1582 in what appears to have been a Catholic ceremony (57)
- 4 The Stratford man in 1585 naming his twins after Hamnet and Judith Sadler, a couple well-known as Catholics (58)
- 5 The Bard's dedications to the Earl of Southampton, who was raised a Catholic until age 8, but later became a staunch Protestant, a fact Wilson ignores (136-137)
- 6 "Shakespeare's" *impresario* design in 1613 for the Earl of Rutland, whose Catholic orientation is overstated by Wilson (371)
- 7 The warning on the Stratford man's tomb not to move his bones in violation of the Protestant practice of removing bones for storage after a period of time (394-396)
- 8 The Stratford man's ties to Warwickshire Catholic families, some of which were deeply involved in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, drawing on research by Leslie Hotson and Peter Levi (314-320, 453-455, 485)
- 9 Thomas Combe and William Reynolds, two Catholics who appear in the Stratford man's will (391)
- 10 A note from the 1660s by Richard Davies, chaplain at Corpus Christi (Oxford), that the Bard "died a Papist" (410-411)
- 11 A Benedictine tradition that the Bard received the last rites of the Catholic Church (397, 450).
- 12 Purchase by Shakespeare in March 1613 of the Blackfriars Gatehouse, a haven in London for secret Catholics, three of whom (John Jackson, William Johnson, and John Robinson) appear as co-trustees or leaseholders of the property--Robinson also appearing in the Stratford man's will of 1616 (372-376, 396-297, 418)

Notes

1 In 1757 a brick-layer repairing the roof of the Henley Street house in Stratford discovered a small booklet in 16th-century handwriting that included the phrase, "I, John Shakspear . . ." After passing through the hands of several locals it came to the great Shakespeare scholar Edmund Malone, who pronounced it genuine and published it in 1790. Another hundred years of discussion over its origin and meaning was resolved when other examples were found that proved it to be a conventional "spiritual testament" to the signer's Catholic faith, probably acquired by Shakespeare's father in the early 1580s when a neighbor of the Shakespeare's, Sir William Catesby, harbored the Jesuit missionary, Edmund Campion. The pamphlet was probably hidden under the roof in 1583 during the house searches that followed an attempt by a local Catholic youth to assassinate the Queen (Schoenbaum *Life* 41-6).

2 In 1985, Gary Taylor cited evidence of the Bard's strong Catholic family background and contemporaneous claims based on figures such as Speed that Shakespeare was a "papist." Taylor argues that this might explain why Shakespeare made Sir John Oldcastle—a hero to some Protestants—a figure of fun similar to Falstaff—a willingness to exploit a point of view which many of his contemporaries would have regarded as "papist" ("Oldcastle" 99).

3 The only other in-depth analysis of the new Catholic Bard movement prior to this essay was published by Dr. Michael Davies, lecturer in the English Department at the University of Leicester. His well-sourced essay entitled "On this Side Bardolatry: The Canonization of the Catholic Shakespeare" appeared in the October 2000 issue of *Cahiers Elisabethains*, a bilingual journal published by the Centre d'Études et Recherches sur Renaissance Anglaise at the University of Montpellier in France. Although Davies is fair and judicious in his description of this movement, he is not comfortable with the theme of religious secrecy because he fears it opens the door to the kind of wild speculation that may only increase the myth-making among scholars concerning the real life of the poet.

In addition, Davies bemoans the crass commercial motives of many in this movement, especially the Lancastrians such as Professor Richard Wilson, who want to create a grandiose and alternative "northern Shakespeare center" and to "resurrect Houghton Tower's mythical status as a palace of high European culture." Because Davies directs his criticism at the "cultural-profiteering" of the Lancastrian clique within what is a much broader Catholic Bard movement, he actually fails to come to terms with the solid biographical-historical documentation in the Warwickshire and London records for the strong Catholic family background of William Shakespeare and his family as presented in the works of Ian Wilson and now Michael Wood—both of whom are from the Lancashire region but who interestingly choose not to advance that particular regional connection. For his part, Davies concludes that further probing into the historic religious background, whether Catholic or not, will not fundamentally shake the now well-established tradition of a Bard who is secular, faithless, and therefore of universal appeal—a Global Icon.

4 See Roger Stritmatter's analysis of the curious placement of *Cymbeline* at the very end of the First Folio in an article in the Fall 1998 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*.

5 This fact is emphasized in Usher's important essay titled "Shakespeare's Support for the New Astronomy" published in the 2002 issue of *The Oxfordian*.

6 Arthur Golding was the maternal uncle of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford.

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