

**DECODING SHAKESPEARE:
THE BARD AS POET OR POLITICIAN?**

by

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In recent years the most notable trend in Shakespeare studies has been the investigation of the playwright's Catholic religious orientation and the exposition of its significance for the interpretation of his plays and poems. This trend may have reached its culmination with the publication in 2004 of Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in theatre, religion and resistance* and Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* in the following year. Both of these books assert unequivocally not only that Shakespeare was reared a Catholic and remained so throughout his life, but also that his Catholic Recusancy shaped his career as a poet and dramatist to such an extent that his works may be read as an encoded account of the tribulations and dissident activities of the English Recusant community under Queen Elizabeth and during early years of King James's reign. In Asquith's words, the aim is to overturn Shakespeare's image as "a writer so outstanding that the politics of his time are irrelevant, even distracting." "Instead of diminishing Shakespeare's work," she maintains, "awareness of the shadowed language deepens it, adding a cutting edge of contemporary reference to the famously universal plays and giving them an often acutely poignant hidden context" (xiv-xv). Writing in a New Historicist mode, Richard Wilson is even more explicit about dismantling the longstanding image of Shakespeare as the Bard of universal human significance:

Like the film [*Shakespeare in Love*], the construction of a

Shakespeare in love with Protestant empire serves the ideological function of annexing the plays to the dominant Anglo-Saxon discourses of populism and individualism, and so to globalisation and American hegemony. It is easy to see why a ‘global Shakespeare’ who prefigures a republican politics, consumerism and the public sphere by articulating what Annabel Patterson calls ‘the Popular Voice’ of Protestant London should be consecrated in the transatlantic university system.

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Richard Wilson and Clare Asquith have written books very different in tone and intention, but it is crucial to observe that both are advancing two bold but distinct claims. One is historical or biographical: Shakespeare did not just grow up in a Catholic household and retain sympathy, to a greater or lesser extent, for the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church; rather, he was a faithful practicing Catholic whose beliefs and experiences are manifest in his works and crucial to their interpretation. The second claim, while distinct, grows out of the first and implies a theory about the nature and function of literature: namely, the personal beliefs and immediate practical goals of a writer – as well as his social and political circumstances – are determining factors in the meaning and value of his work. That Asquith and Wilson apply essentially the same method to the same body of documentary evidence with the same goal of turning up evidence of Shakespeare’s Catholicism and its significance and arrive at startlingly different versions of the world’s preëminent dramatist is powerful evidence of the futility of proving the first claim. The second claim, however, is more interesting but also quite

destructive to literary study, because it is a variety of the thesis that all discourse is political. This assumption, which currently dominates academic literary scholarship, threatens to render it nugatory and irrelevant to higher education.

The idea that Shakespeare was reared in a Catholic family and that his works evince residual Catholic sympathies is hardly novel. The Jesuit historian Herbert Thurston was, for example, pursuing this line of inquiry early in the twentieth century, and a sometime Presbyterian minister, John Henry de Groot, made a detailed case for the impact of a Catholic upbringing on Shakespeare's drama in 1946 with *The Shakespeares and 'The Old Faith'*, which was reprinted in 1994 with a postscript by Rev. Stanley Jaki, O.S.B. E.A.J. Honigmann's *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* created a stir in 1985 with its identification of the youthful Shakespeare with the William Shakeshafte who served as an actor-playwright-schoolmaster among the Lancashire Catholic gentry, but it was at the turn of the new century that the "Catholic Shakespeare" became a fixture in Shakespeare studies, taking center stage (so to speak) with Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001) and *Will in the World* (2004).

The historical claim about Shakespeare's religion is, finally, a matter of fact, and it is unlikely that there will ever be sufficient evidence to make the matter incontrovertible. Although the notion that Shakespeare was Catholic is both attractive and persuasive insofar as it accounts for some of the lacunae in poet's biography and explains various puzzles in his plays and poems, Asquith and Wilson are considerably less cautious about biographical conjectures than their predecessors and provide no new evidence to justify their level of confidence. To be sure, most scholars have for quite some time accepted the authenticity of the Catholic "Spiritual Last Will and Testament"

of the poet's father, John Shakespeare (even though the original document, first discovered in the eighteenth century, has disappeared and exists today only in a transcript), and it has come to seem far more likely that his citations for Recusancy actually resulted from his religious convictions rather than a fear of meeting creditors at the services of the Church of England. A series of Recusant school masters at the grammar school of Stratford upon Avon when Shakespeare was *most probably* a student there – no actual records of his attendance have survived – is suggestive. Similarly, Honigmann's identification of Shakespeare with the Shakeshafte employed by Sir Alexander Hoghton of Lea in his Catholic redoubt in the north of England is plausible. Finally, a new book in German by Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel (I have only seen a notice, not read the book) reports the discovery of an entry in the Pilgrims' Book of the English College in Rome, for 16 April, 1585, of the name "Gulielmus Clerkue Stratfordienses," with subsequent similar entries in 1587 and 1589.

In addition to these tantalizing hints, there are two hostile assertions of Shakespeare's Catholicism by seventeenth-century writers. In his *History of Great Britain* (1611), John Speed attacks the Jesuit, Fr. Robert Persons, under his pseudonym Nicholas Doleman because he "hath made Oldcastle a ruffian, a robber, and a rebel, and his authority, taken from the stage-players, is more befitting the pen of his slanderous report, than the credit of the judicious, being only grounded from this papist and his poet...." (quoted by Schoenbaum, *Compact Documentary Life*, 193). The poet, of course, is William Shakespeare, whose Sir John Falstaff, a character in the first and second parts of *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, was originally called Sir John Oldcastle, the name of a fourteenth-century proto-Protestant martyr. Oldcastle's

descendants, who included the powerful Lord Cobham, were evidently offended. The name was changed, remaining only in Prince Hal's reference to "my old lad of the castle" (*1 Henry IV* I.ii. 41), and a disclaimer was offered in the epilogue of *2 Henry IV*. Late in the century Richard Davies, sometime Chaplain of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and afterwards Rector of Sapperton, wrote that Shakespeare "died a papist" (Schoenbaum 55). Some scholars have been too quick to dismiss these allegations as misapprehension or mere legend. At the very least such references suggest that the poet had a reputation as a Catholic, and that the charge was not wholly implausible. Otherwise, it is hard to account for the nervous apology at the end of the second part of *Henry IV*.

Nevertheless, there is nothing to justify the extravagant fancies woven out of these tenuous threads of information by Wilson and Asquith. Not infrequently, each of them resembles a "symbolist" out of Dan Brown rather than a literary scholar. Addressing himself to *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, Wilson ingeniously accounts for the name of Portia's mysterious home, "Belmont," by deriving it from the name of a Catholic country house:

Belmont was not only a pun on the surname of the dramatist's patrons, the Montagues, but the actual name of one their seats in Hampshire, famous as Mass centre. So Shakespeare reverses the malaise of the house of *Montague* with his *Belmont*. And if this was staged, as is possible, under the aegis of the Earl of Southampton, at one of the great houses of his pious grandmother, Lady Magdalen Montague – Montague House, on the site of the former priory of St. Mary Overy beside London Bridge, and

Battle Abbey and Cowdray in Sussex – a journey from the mercenary Rialto to a merciful Belmont would have prepared the audience with an idea of just what to imagine in that chantry in the country, with its inlaid floor, altar-plate, swinging censers and ‘concord of sweet sounds’ (*Merchant* 5.1.83).

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As tortuous as this discussion is, it would seem to be a not unreasonable explanation of the name of Portia’s bountiful haven, where the other characters find a respite from the competitive anxiety of mercantile Venice; and Portia is thus identified with Lady Montague who provides a refuge for English Catholics and a safe place for the celebration of Mass. The only trouble with this explanation is that it is wholly unnecessary. It is generally accepted that the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as many of its details, is derived from one of the stories in Ser Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone* (1558). The hero of the tale, Giannetto, in order to recover the money he has borrowed from his God Father and save him from the murderous intentions of a Jewish usurer must find out how to marry a wealthy lady who is the mistress of ... *Belmonte*. The allusion to a Catholic country house that is “famous as a Mass centre” is an unnecessary hypothesis.

It is instructive to remark that Clare Asquith, who is quite as eager as Wilson to find a Catholic “code” in all Shakespeare’s works, takes no notice of the Montagues and their country estate Belmont in connection to *The Merchant of Venice*. According to her reading, Portia is a symbol for the much courted Queen Elizabeth, whom the play is counseling to reject the both the “Protestant” suitor, the Prince of Morocco, and the

“Catholic” Hapsburg Prince of Aragon, in favor the loyal Englishman Bassanio.

Antonio, who faces gruesome dismemberment at the hands of Shylock the Jewish money lender is a symbol for Catholic loyalists, who face the harsh penalty of being hanged, drawn, and quartered on account of their faith, although they are true to the Queen and support “English” patriots like Bassanio. Portia’s ingenious success in saving Antonio through legal maneuvering in Act IV thus becomes a plea to the Queen to intervene and halt the persecution of Recusants.

Both of these efforts to interpret *The Merchant of Venice* by “decoding” Shakespeare’s supposedly cryptic system of writing overlook what are traditionally the play’s most meaningful themes: the tension between mercy and justice, grace and law, and marriage and friendship, and the endlessly fascinating character of Shylock – a merciless antagonist who is yet genuinely human and sympathetic, revealing the flaws in the Christian protagonists, even as he ruthlessly pursues his “pound of flesh.” Different interpreters will argue over the details of these issues, but at least they can have a fruitful argument. How does one mediate between the diametrically opposed allegories of Asquith and Wilson? And the discrepancies between them multiply. You may have been wondering why Asquith treats the Prince of Morocco as a figure for Protestantism. According to her version of Shakespeare’s code, all characters with dark complexions represent Protestantism; light complexions conversely indicate Catholicism. (By the same token, tall characters indicate Catholicism, short character Protestantism.) For Wilson, however, the dark-skinned Moor is just the opposite:

The specificity of Lorenzo’s warning against one who is
 ‘dull as night’, like the Moroccan Prince misliked for his

complexion (2.1.1) seems to point, through the ‘Moorish’ pun that would be developed in *Othello*, at the most dangerous of all those ‘strangers suspected to be priests’ as they filtered through ‘Little Rome’: Father Thomas More, ‘direct heir of that famous Sir Thomas More’, who came to live at Battle in 1592 from Madrid, on a mission to intrigue for Spain. (256)

Does the Moor represent Protestantism because of his dark skin? Or is he a Catholic priest because “Moor” is a pun for the name “More”? It is difficult to imagine that anyone sitting in the audience or reading the text for pleasure and edification would even consider this question. Instead, they would notice that the Prince of Morocco fails to win Portia’s hand because he chooses the golden casket bearing the inscription, “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire,” rather than the lead casket with the inscription, “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (II.vii.9,16). If the Moor is a symbol, he is a symbol for a man who fails to comprehend what true marriage requires of both spouses.

The differences between Asquith and Wilson are not, then, simply a matter of incompatible critical methods, because neither of them is really interested in literature as such. What divides them is the incompatibility of their political and religious agenda. Wilson plainly is not drawn to Catholics as Catholics, but rather as a persecuted minority providing a useful weapon against what he takes to be Protestant bourgeois ideology. The Shakespeare that emerges from his study is not just a Catholic, but a Catholic of a very specific kind: he has eventually escaped from the influence of Jesuit “terrorists” who

darkened his youth and reacted against “the suicidal violence of the fanatics with a project of freedom and mutual toleration” (ix). To have discovered such an agreeable Shakespeare is evidently a great relief, since Wilson admits to sharing with Alison Shell a worry “about researching Elizabethan Catholic resistance as a corrective to the domination of the academic WASP patriarchy, given that the Vatican is such a repressive tyranny, with its medieval doctrines on women, contraception, and divorce,” to which “litany of hate” Wilson himself adds “the Church’s murderous bigotry on gay rights” (4). Shakespeare, we learn in the course of the book, was not *that* kind of Catholic, but presumably an early avatar of Marxism and sexual liberation, who may hence be studied without fear of incurring a political taint.

Almost inevitably, efforts to construct a systematic allegory of a great literary work, unless, like Dante’s *Commedia* or Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, it is evidently tied to a traditionally available set of symbols, prove to be merely arbitrary. It is for this reason that Wilson and Asquith, who agree that Shakespeare can only be read by an elaborate process of decoding, agree about almost nothing else. Consider, for example, their divergent treatments of *King Lear* as a cryptic treatment of the Catholic political situation in the wake of the disastrous Gunpowder Plot. “On the allegorical level,” Asquith argues, “the message is clear: the destructive force of the Reformation has extinguished integrity and truth in England.” In specific terms, “the story of Edgar mirrors in every detail the story of the Counter-Reformation Jesuit underground mission to England” (209). According to Wilson, to the contrary, *King Lear* is “significant, not only as a reflection of Shakespeare’s religious doubt but also as an image of his alienation from the Catholic patrons of his youth.” Especially in the later altered folio text, “its reticence [is]

a critique of martyrdom and its despair a resistance to the resistance in which its author had been raised. Politic Shakespeare reduced *King Lear*, it might be said, to complete his separation from the Jesuits” (287, 289). But in Asquith’s eyes, “Shakespeare presents the English Jesuits not as the arch-enemy but as the country’s one reliable guide to truth” (181).

As such comparisons of Asquith’s version of the “Shakespeare code” with Wilson’s suggest, interpreters who rely on an esoteric key to ferret out the hidden meanings of a text are likely to discover what they were looking for in the first place. Asquith begins her study by revealing that her interest in Shakespeare’s hidden Catholic code began when she witnessed a theatrical dramatization of Chekhov stories in the Soviet Union in 1983 (she is the wife of a British diplomat). Soon she realized that the performance involved topical references critical of the Communist State; they were clear to her but evidently too subtle and elusive for the KGB agents present to object. Now it would appear that Asquith has missed the point of her own anecdote: Chekhov’s stories were available to mount a covert critique of the horrors of Soviet tyranny *only because they were not tied inextricably to the political and social events of Czarist Russia when the author lived*. Chekhov’s vision was evidently deep enough and broad enough that he saw his own time as it reflected fundamental human nature and recurrent features of the human situation. It is for this reason that his work is still worth reading and watching on the stage.

Shakespeare was almost certainly reared a Catholic and may well have retained close ties to the Recusant community throughout his career. It is not at all unlikely that he “died a papist.” There is certainly plentiful indication that he was aware of the

religious conflicts of his own time. Consider again *The Merchant of Venice*. When Bassanio first arrives at Belmont to attempt winning Portia's hand by choosing the correct casket, she begs him to delay his choice. She has longed for him to be the man to wed her, but now she fears he will select the wrong chest and she will lose his company forever. "Let me choose," he responds, / "For as I am, I live upon the rack." To which she says, "Upon the rack, Bassanio! then confess / What treason there is mingled with your love." And a few lines further down, when Bassanio has again protested his love, Portia quips, "Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack, / Where men enforced do speak any thing" (III.i.24ff). No secret code is required to recognize that this nervous, rueful joking alludes to torture designed to elicit confessions from suspected traitors and information about their associates. It altogether possible that, even as Shakespeare's audience was listening to his lines in 1596 at the Theatre, north of the Moor Fields, Jesuit prisoners were being subjected to the rack less than two miles south in the Tower of London on the banks of the Thames. It is almost certain that some of his audience, who would thrill to the threat of Antonio having a pound of his flesh cut away near his heart, had witnessed the gruesome execution and dismembering of Fr. Robert Southwell the previous year at Tyburn, about four miles to the west.

So there is no question that Shakespeare's plays include some very provocative references to the religious and political issues of his day, but what is their dramatic effect? In large measure they add a grim reminder of harsh reality to a comedy with numerous fairy tale elements and thus intensify its conflicts. Insofar as these allusions to torture on the rack may be taken as a comment on religious persecution, they must be taken in conjunction with the figure of Shylock. Although he is identified as a Jew in the

play, a London theatre audience in the 1590s would recognize him as a Puritan, who like Shylock would have been a religious dissident associated with hatred of the theatre and extreme frugality. As a man of theatre, Shakespeare had every reason to detest Puritans, and Shylock is indeed portrayed as a ruthless villain. All the same, the poet has given Shylock one of his most moving speeches in protest of religious prejudice: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal’d by the same means, warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?” (III.i.58ff). It is almost impossible to fit this character comfortably into any of the actual political conflicts or religious alignments of Shakespeare’s era, but he speaks to us across the centuries, probably more poignantly than he did to the poet’s contemporaries.

If Shakespeare was a Catholic, this is important because it immersed him in the Christian tradition, which is vital to Western civilization, and because it undoubtedly intensified his sympathies. He took the materials at hand and shaped them into a vision that transcends the particular concerns of the time in which he lived. Even if Asquith’s or Wilson’s or someone else’s secret Shakespeare code turns out to be true in every detail, it would hardly have any *literary* significance. Would the *Iliad* be a better poem if we discovered that Homer’s “dark lady” was the model for Helen, and that she was an allegory for Mycenaean cultural hegemony? A preoccupation with the minutiae of Shakespeare’s personal life and religious and political affiliations can only lead us away from his real achievement. Moreover, it is finally a losing proposition for departments of English. If Shakespeare is only of interest insofar as he supports a political program or a cultural regime, then he probably ought to be studied by political scientists and

sociologists. In fact, if the only interest in literature is political or sociological or religious, it is hard to see what the point of English departments is. In my experience, literary scholars are quite inept as social or political scientists. What a literary scholar can usefully expound is Shakespeare's dramatization of human nature and the human condition. This imaginative vision provides a measure of all our local and temporary political arrangements. And it is this vision that makes him an indispensable factor in our moral and cultural reality and in the education of our youth, not the advice – if any – that he may have offered to King James or the to Catholic Recusant community in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot.