

“The most important subject that can possibly be”: A Reply to E. A. J. Honigmann*

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E. A. J. Honigmann has taken the trouble to express an opinion of my Shakespeare biography *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Seine Leben—Sein Werk*. For this I am very grateful to him. I am also grateful for his clear definition of his own position with regard to a “Catholic Shakespeare” and for his comparative description of the differing standpoints of the author and reviewer.

Honigmann criticizes in general that I offered “a tidy interpretation of the evidence, where every detail fits in with [... the] main thesis”, whereas he himself “prefer[red] to leave gaps and uncertainties when clear-cut evidence is lacking” (54). But since “clear-cut evidence” for Shakespeare’s Catholicism is not at all lacking but to be found in abundance (as will be demonstrated below), I may well take Honigmann’s general criticism as a compliment.

His basic criticism of my Shakespeare biography is that it puts too much stress on the significance of Shakespeare’s Catholicism. In response to this, all I can say is: my general thesis fits in with the ‘Konfessionalisierungsthese,’ a theory that has been debated for some time among distinguished historians of the early modern era and is now fully accepted. According to this thesis religion played a central role in the life of every individual at that time.¹ Shakespeare’s contemporaries were fully aware of this. For example, Michel de Montaigne (1533-92), who is known to have exerted a strong influence on

*Reference: E. A. J. Honigmann, “Catholic Shakespeare? A Response to Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel,” *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/03): 52-60; Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2003).

Shakespeare, remarked: "I have, since I was borne, seene those of our neighbours, the English-men, changed and re-changed three or foure times, not only in politike subjects [...], but in the most important subject that possibly can be, that is to say, in religion [...]"²

After long and thorough study of the historical sources and the discovery of new (or newly interpreted) contemporary textual and pictorial evidence (in the evaluation of which numerous experts of other disciplines assisted), I have come to the conclusion that Shakespeare was a Catholic and that his religion is the key to understanding his life and work. Nevertheless, I am inviting criticism and am waiting for counterarguments.

In his comparative description of the differing standpoints of reviewer and author Honigmann writes:

Like Hammerschmidt-Hummel I favour a Catholic Shakespeare, though with a difference: her Shakespeare studied at the English College Rheims [...], visited the English College in Rome [...], which, with much else, follows from her certainty that his parents were Catholics. My Shakespeare was probably (but by no means certainly) brought up as a Catholic, probably continued as a Catholic in his "lost years," and possibly returned to his Catholic faith on his death-bed, after (probably) converting to the Church of England when or soon after he started his career in the theatre. Even though it seems incredible that a writer so curious about other nations should never visit any, I know of no hard evidence that he did—which is not to say that he could not have done so. (54)

Honigmann attempts to reduce Shakespeare's Catholicism to just a few phases in the dramatist's life—childhood, adolescence, the lost years and the final phase. But even these he questions: "What is the evidence for this 'Catholic Shakespeare'?" The "Catholic Shakespeare," he says, can only be established on the basis of two kinds of circumstantial evidence: (1) the known or presumed "Catholic sympathies" of the dramatist's family, friends and patrons and (2) the "Catholic attitudes" embedded in the plays (52-53).

(1) "Catholic sympathies" of the dramatist's family, friends and patrons?

Contrary to Honigmann's assumption there is definite proof of the strict Catholicism of the dramatist's parents, eldest daughter, relatives, friends, teachers, first employer and patron. His mother, Mary Arden, came from the collateral line of a family of arch-Catholic gentry that was involved in a Catholic plot.³ The dramatist's father, John Shakespeare, possessed a so-called Borromeo, or Jesuit testament, a personal written profession of the Catholic faith,⁴ each paragraph of which contained his name.⁵ The possession of a Jesuit testament was sufficient for a charge of high treason and condemnation by the courts. John Shakespeare concealed his copy in the rafters of his house in Henley Street, where it was discovered by chance around 250 years later.⁶ Honigmann remains silent about this decisive piece of evidence, which clearly contradicts his assumption that Shakespeare's family only had "Catholic sympathies." Nor does he mention that treasurer John Shakespeare paid salaries to illegal (evidently Catholic) teachers, among them one William Allen, presumably identical with the founder of the Catholic College in Douai/Rheims (*Collegium Anglicum*). And he does not refer to the fact that both the dramatist's father and his eldest daughter (Susanna) were on the list of Catholic recusants, who refused Anglican services, especially holy communion.⁷

Honigmann considers it "very likely" (56) that the young Shakespeare was taught by the Catholic schoolmaster Simon Hunt. But it can, in fact, be taken for granted that Hunt, who was schoolmaster in Stratford from 1571 to 1575, taught Shakespeare because John Shakespeare, who became mayor of the town in 1568 and a justice of the peace, would, of course, have sent his eldest son to the local grammar school (refounded in 1553). The sons of the English bourgeoisie were already attending the new grammar schools since the beginning of the sixteenth century. They became theologians, lawyers, doctors, teachers or writers. As early as 1516 the humanist Richard Pace exhorted

Pace exhorted England's aristocracy not to "leave the study of literature to 'the sons of peasants.'"⁸ It is thus hard to understand why Honigmann should be so intent on casting doubt on Shakespeare's schooling at Stratford.

Honigmann mentions that Hunt fled to Douai in 1575 and later became a Jesuit (56), but he does not mention that Shakespeare's teacher had a successful career as a Jesuit priest at Rome, becoming English penitentiary (confessor) at the Holy See, in succession to Robert Parsons, one of the leading minds among English Catholics in exile and an arch-enemy of the English crown. Schoolmaster Hunt, an influential Catholic personality from the dramatist's Stratford environment, took one of his pupils with him: Robert Debdale from Shottery, Shakespeare's schoolmate and a neighbour of Anne Hathaway, who became the poet's wife in 1582. In 1585, when a further rigorous anti-Catholic penal law came into force, Debdale died a martyr's death in England. In the same year Simon Hunt died in Rome. The whole historical context suggests that Shakespeare was bound up in the network of English Catholics in exile.

Shakespeare left his home town of Stratford abruptly in February 1585. I am convinced that he travelled to the Continent and to Rome. The evidence for this I discovered in the ancient pilgrims' book (number 282—from 1580 to 1640) of the Venerable English College in Rome in October 2000.⁹ In April 1585 there is an entry for one "Arthurus Stratfordus"¹⁰ at the hospice. Further entries are to be found between 1585 and 1592 and again in 1613 (for example "Gulielmus Clerku Stratfordiensis" [1589], Latin for "William, Clerk of Stratford"). Like other Catholics, who had to fear the government's almost perfect espionage network on the Continent, especially in Italy and Rome, the poet could have used the name of his home town as a pseudonym. 1585 was a crisis year, when war broke out with Spain, and English Catholics met in Rome to work out strategies for winning England back to Rome (for example the Armada project).

Honigmann does mention these findings in passing, but he plays down their significance and conceals the fact that, in the period from

Shakespeare's "lost years" (1585-92) and then once again in 1613. He ignores that the name "Stratfordus" very clearly points to Shakespeare. For 1591 I did not find the pseudonym (as Honigmann claims), but only a damaged place where a name had (later) been carefully scratched out.¹¹ In 1613, when Shakespeare concluded his literary career, he must have travelled to Rome once more. This time he again used the name of his home town—and with it the Christian name of his brother Richard, who had died in February 1613. The entry thus reads "Ricardus Stratfordus."

My assumption that Shakespeare must have been educated at a Catholic college Honigmann calls "wishful thinking" (57). But the poet's academic education is apparent from the knowledge contained in his works (cf. *As You Like It* 3.3.5-29; 5.1.35-41, and *The Taming of the Shrew* 1.1.27-38). Some of his characters talk about rhetoric, philosophy, logic, music, poetry, mathematics and metaphysics. There are, in fact, numerous indications that the young Shakespeare received a basic academic education at the Jesuit-oriented Collegium Anglicum at Douai/Rheims. It was a typical feature of the careers of young English Catholics to avail themselves of this Catholic college, as they avoided Oxford and Cambridge on account of the compulsory Oath of Supremacy. And at that time it was the only Catholic college for young English Catholics. It enjoyed immense popularity and rapidly increased the number of its pupils within a very short time.¹² In *The Taming of the Shrew* (2.1.80-82) the dramatist expressly mentions Rheims as a seat of learning.¹³ When William reached college age in 1578, the Shakespeares mortgaged a considerable part of their property¹⁴—presumably to finance their son's expensive studies. The Douai diaries contain partly erased entries (1578 "[Guilielmus erased]", 1580 "[26 erased]" and 1587 "[Guilielmus erased]")¹⁵ that also suggest Shakespeare's presence. Furthermore, as is apparent from certain passages in his plays, Shakespeare was familiar with the nomenclature of the classes at the Collegium Anglicum: Rhetoric, Poetry, Syntax, Grammar and Rudiments.¹⁶

That Shakespeare was educated at a Catholic college is also apparent from the well-known record that he had been a schoolmaster in the country in his youth. It was Honigmann who in *Shakespeare: The "Lost Years"*¹⁷ took up the schoolmaster claim again and convincingly substantiated it. In William Shakeshafte, repeatedly singled out for positive mention in the 1581 will of Alexander de Hoghton, a Catholic, Honigmann saw the young teacher (and musician) William Shakespeare. It was Honigmann who first recorded in print that Sir Bernard de Hoghton, a Catholic and current owner of Hoghton Tower, had spoken to him of an oral family tradition according to which Shakespeare had lived in the aristocratic Catholic household of his ancestors for two years.¹⁸ One is thus bound to ask how Honigmann views his own research findings.

It is, in fact, astonishing that no one should hitherto have come up with the obvious idea that the Shakespeares, too, could have chosen for their son's education the (among Catholics) very popular Collegium Anglicum. The reason for this might be that in mainstream English historiography the view had predominated that the college had served exclusively to train priests, but this was not the case.

The young Shakespeare may have obtained his post as an illegal teacher (and musician) in the aristocratic Catholic household at Hoghton Tower through close contacts that existed between William Allen and Sir Thomas de Hoghton. Sir Thomas, who went into exile in Flanders, had helped Allen to found the college.

Alexander de Hoghton's will (1581) is puzzling. At a certain point Honigmann capitulated: "As I see it, the will is unclear and eccentric [...] and could have caused all kinds of trouble."¹⁹ It was there that I succeeded in revealing a secret organization (with precise rankings and payment) that was founded for a particular good purpose. This purpose, however, is nowhere clearly described. In his review Honigmann mentions neither my decoding nor my interpretation that—a year after the beginning of the Jesuit mission in England, when a further rigorous anti-Catholic penal law had come into force—the testator's primary concern was probably to protect the

mission priests known to have been at Hoghton Tower. They were hunted as traitors. It is certain that the Jesuit priest and subsequent martyr Edmund Campion, once celebrated at Oxford as "England's Cicero," preached at Hoghton Tower in the summer of 1580, when the young Shakespeare was probably already employed there.

This extremely valuable historical document gives us information not only about Shakespeare's first—illegal—employment but also about his involvement in the Catholic underground. For he was in the first rank of de Hoghton's secret organization and was paid for life. Honigmann makes no mention of these significant circumstances or of the fact that Shakespeare was possibly the author of a moving lament on the martyrdom of Edmund Campion.²⁰

One of the most important pieces of evidence of the poet's active involvement in the illegal Catholic scene of his day is a document confirming his purchase of the eastern gatehouse at Blackfriars in London in 1613. This gatehouse was the secret meeting place for fugitive Catholics. Legally protected by a trust deed (similar to that of Alexander de Hoghton), the specific use of the gatehouse was safeguarded for the time after Shakespeare's death. This new knowledge was gained with the help of experts in other disciplines. It fits in perfectly with the general context of Elizabethan politics and religion but is unfortunately ignored by Honigmann, who, instead, criticizes the fact that it does not conform with Schoenbaum's version of the Blackfriars Gatehouse conveyance (56). But Schoenbaum's view is that the purchase was purely an investment, which is not at all convincing. For the astounding degree of complexity in this trust arrangement, which contains stipulations that extend far beyond Shakespeare's lifetime,²¹ shows that Shakespeare was making a considerable personal contribution to the survival of the old religion.

As regards the dramatist's patrons (Lord Strange and the Earl of Southampton), Honigmann doubts whether they were "pillars of Catholicism" (53). It does seem plausible that Strange, influenced by his training at court, should have inclined towards the new religion and consequently come into conflict with his arch-Catholic family (especially his father), as demonstrated by Park Honan.²² But it must

not be forgotten that the English Catholics in exile, under the leadership of Sir William Stanley, considered him to be a Catholic and on this basis, and because he was closely related to the royal line, offered him the English crown.²³ The Earl of Southampton, too, came from a staunchly Catholic family. His father had been imprisoned in the Tower for his Catholic faith, and at both his country seat of Titchfield Abbey and his London residence priests came and went and were concealed. Southampton, Shakespeare's patron, friend and rival, was indeed one of the pillars of Catholicism—at least until, a few years after the accession of James I, he became a protestant, at the urging of the king and much to the annoyance of English Catholics.

(2) "Catholic attitudes" embedded in the plays ?

Honigmann's view that the dramatist's works contain only "Catholic attitudes" and that Shakespeare had possibly become a protestant when he commenced his theatrical career in London (54), is simply not tenable. Shakespeare's plays, especially *Romeo and Juliet* and *Measure for Measure*, are particularly rich in Catholic thought, Catholic rituals, strikingly positive depictions of priests and monks, and invocations of the Virgin Mary and numerous saints. There are many metaphorical references to pilgrimages. Since the nineteenth century this has led many scholars to suppose that Shakespeare must have been Catholic. The late Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, for many years a patron of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, devoted a chapter of his autobiography to this question, and once said in a lecture that it could be demonstrated with a fair degree of certainty from Shakespeare's works that he was very sympathetic towards things Catholic, in particular monasticism.²⁴ But one could not actually prove Shakespeare's Catholicism this way. The newly discovered external historical sources now provide hard evidence for the poet's Catholic faith. This proves to be—as mentioned above—the key to understanding his life and work.

Mention should also be made of the fact that in my Shakespeare biography I present two new pieces of evidence that confirm Shakespeare's links with the Catholic underground, his travels on the Continent and his use of Catholic institutions. Unfortunately, Honigmann has overlooked both.

The one is Robert Greene's autobiographical prose tract *Groats-worth of witte, bought with a million of Repentance* (1592), where a self-assured young actor, who as a country author has also written (morality) plays and has just arrived in London, must be Shakespeare, as had already been observed by the English historian A. L. Rowse.²⁵ Re-examining this source, I noticed that the stranger tells us—in coded form—something about the nature of his activities in the period from 1585 to 1592 (identical with the 'lost years'), saying that he "for seven years was absolute Interpreter of the puppets."²⁶ "Puppets" reminds one of the "players" in Alexander Hoghton's will. If both terms are references to priests, the new arrival (Shakespeare) is saying that for the previous seven years he was a mediator or translator for the priests ("puppets").²⁷ We thus have additional written evidence that in the seven lost years the dramatist played an important but extremely dangerous role as a mediator in the Catholic underground. Honigmann has unfortunately confused this crucial, highly informative, less familiar passage with the better-known one in *Groats-worth of witte*, where Robert Greene roundly abuses Shakespeare as an "vpstart Crow" and where the actors ("puppets") are not spared either. He mistakenly claims that I interpreted "puppets"—here quite clearly used to mean actors—as meaning priests, and reacts with irritation: "'puppets' means 'priests,' a point repeated again and again, we may ask why, if this is correct, Greene [...] did not call them priests" (59).

The second piece of written evidence newly interpreted by me but overlooked by Honigmann is *L'Envoy to Narcissus* (1595) by Thomas Edwardes.²⁸ There it is said that the poet "differs much from men" and was "Tilting under Frieries." Monasteries had previously been a prominent feature in English landscapes and towns, but in Shake-

spere's day there were none left in England. Under Henry VIII they had been dissolved, destroyed or rebuilt as homes for the nobility or gentry. Thus Shakespeare can only have stayed at monasteries on the Continent.

Conclusions

It should be clear from the above that Honigmann's contentions are untenable and that he in many cases clings to a state of research that has been superseded by new findings. The reviewer ignores historical evidence, such as John Shakespeare's Borromeo or Jesuit testament or William Shakespeare's purchase of a building which gave shelter to hunted priests, helped them to escape to the Continent and which was thus a considerable contribution to enabling Catholicism to survive in England. Since Honigmann has not come up with sound and well-founded counterarguments, I unreservedly maintain my contention that Shakespeare was a Catholic and that his Catholic faith is the key to understanding his life and work.

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NOTES

¹See the conference proceedings of the interdisciplinary international colloquium "Religion and Culture in Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" at Mainz (24-27 March 2003), ed. Peter Claus Hartmann, due to be published shortly, and the author's lecture "Catholic Minority Culture in England from 1580 to 1650 with Particular Reference to Shakespeare."

²De Montaigne, Michel Eyquem. "An Apologie of Raymond Sebond." *Montaigne's Essays: Renaissance Editions, Book II*. Trans. John Florio. Appleton: Lawrence U. 3 August 2004 <<http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/montaigne/2xii.htm>>.

³Edward Arden of Parkhall, the head of the family, was hanged as a traitor in 1583.

⁴The preformulated text was the work of the cardinal of Milan, Carlo Borromeo (1538-84), who gave copies to the leaders of the Jesuit mission, Father Edmund

Campion and Father Robert Parsons. Campion und Parsons distributed large numbers of these testaments to English Catholics.

⁵William Shakespeare, *Plays and Poems*, ed. Edmond Malone (1790), vol. I, pt. 2, 162-166 and 330-331. Reproduced in Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1975) 41-43.

⁶Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare* 41.

⁷John Shakespeare: Public Record Office, State Papers Domestic Elizabeth I, S.P. 12/243, no. 76. Susanna Shakespeare: Kent County Archives Office, Maidstone, Sackville MSS, ref. U269 Q22, 37 and 39. Reproduced in Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare* 39 and 235.

⁸P. J. Helm, *England under the Yorkist and Tudors 1471-1603* (London: Bell, 1972) 341.

⁹I published these findings for the first time in the epilogue of my book *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare: Dichter und Rebell im katholischen Untergrund* (Freiburg i. Breisgau: Herder, 2001).

¹⁰Reproduced in *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk* 73, fig. 63 a.

¹¹Reproduced in *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk* 73, fig. 63 b.

¹²See *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare* 71ff.

¹³This must have been an allusion to the Collegium Anglicum and not to the university. In *Notes & Queries* (5 March 1938) Richard H. Perkinson pointed out that Rheims in the age of Shakespeare (because of the English College that had been transferred to the French city from 1578 to 1593) would have been "recognized as the most important source of Catholic activity in England rather than as a seat of general culture." See also The Arden Edition of *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Methuen, 1981) 201.

¹⁴See Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare* 37.

¹⁵*The First and Second Diaries of the English College, Douay, and an Appendix of Unpublished Documents*, ed. Fathers of the Congregation of the London Oratory, with an historical intr. by T. F. Knox. (London: D. Nutt, 1878) 8, 9 and 14.

¹⁶This is discussed in full length in *Die verborgene Existenz* 76-90.

¹⁷(Manchester: MUP, 1985, repr. 1998). With this book Honigmann created an international stir among scholars. However, English Shakespeare experts remained reticent. The book received hardly any mention. While Katherine Duncan-Jones has four entries for the name Honigmann in the index to *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life* (London: Thomson Learning, 2001), though in each case in connection with other works by him, the index to *Shakespeare: For All Time* by Stanley Wells (London: Macmillan, 2002) makes no mention of him at all. During a long telephone conversation in early April 2003 Honigmann told the author he was a *persona non grata* in Stratford-upon-Avon. In the course of the summer of

2003, however, contact with Stratford was resumed. Honigmann's review "Catholic Shakespeare? [...]" appeared in *Connotations* in December 2003.

¹⁸See Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The "Lost Years"* 28-30. Sir Bernard confirmed this to me by telephone in November 2002.

¹⁹Honigmann, *Shakespeare* 26.

²⁰The lines are: "The scowling skies did storm and puff apace, / They could not bear the wrongs that malice wrought; / The sun drew in his shining purple face; / The moistened clouds shed brinish tears for thought; / The river Thames awhile astonished stood / To count the drops of Campion's sacred blood. // Nature with teares bewailed her heavy loss; / Honesty feared herself should shortly die; / Religion saw her champion on the cross; / Angels and saints desired leave to cry; / E'en heresy, the eldest child of hell, / Began to blush, and thought she did not well." Reprinted in *Die verborgene Existenz* 32-35, from Henry Foley, *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*. 7 vols. (London, 1877-1883, repr. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1966) vol. 3, "George Gilbert," 658-704, 623.

²¹See chapter D: "The catastrophe of Blackfriars" in *Die verborgene Existenz* 145, where this complicated set of agreements is discussed in detail.

²²*Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 66-67.

²³"[...] in September 1592, Hesketh was commissioned by Sir William Stanley and the jesuit Father Holt to encourage the earl's son and successor, Ferdinando, lord Strange, to lay claim to the succession to the crown after the death of Elizabeth, on the ground that the Stanleys 'were next in propinquity of blood' to the queen." *DNB*, s.v. "Hesketh, Richard (1562-1593)."

²⁴See Carsten Greiwe (ngz-online, *Neuss-Grevenbroicher Zeitung*) (updated 12 August 2003). Greiwe is summarizing a review by Lothar Bleeker of *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare*, which appeared in *Carbones* [Wissenschaftliche Schriftenreihe der Kardinal-Frings-Gesellschaft—a scholarly series of works published by the Kardinal-Frings-Gesellschaft]. Greiwe quotes: "Die These stellt sicherlich eine der wenigen echten Sensationen in der Geschichte der Shakespeareforschung dar" ["The thesis is certainly one of the few genuine sensations in the history of Shakespeare research"].

²⁵See A. L. Rowse, *Shakespeare the Man* (New York: Harper Row, 1973) 59-60.

²⁶Quoted from Rowse, *Shakespeare the Man* 60.

²⁷See the detailed discussion in *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk* 68-71.

²⁸Peterborough Cathedral Library. Repr. W. E. Buckley for the Roxburghe Club (1878) 61-62.