

Catholic Shakespeare? A Response to Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel*

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The secret or coded meanings of Shakespeare's plays have been discussed since at least the eighteenth century. Horace Walpole's *Historic Doubts* (1768) explained *The Winter's Tale* as an apology for Anne Boleyn, James Plumptre's two pamphlets on *Hamlet* (1796, 1797) were "an attempt to prove that [Shakespeare] designed it as an indirect censure on Mary Queen of Scots," a thesis later repeated by Lilian Winstanley (1921).¹ Coded Catholic interpretations of the plays (and of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*) have recently become more fashionable, and no one has pressed these claims more energetically than Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel in *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare*.² In her new life of Shakespeare the dramatist's Catholicism is taken for granted and becomes a major preoccupation.

What is the evidence for this "Catholic Shakespeare"? The hard evidence is surprisingly thin on the ground. Richard Davies (if it was he) stated in the later seventeenth century that "he died a papist," referring on the same page to Shakespeare's "unluckiness in stealing venison" and confusing Justice Clodpate and Justice Shallow;³ much earlier, in 1611, John Speed alleged that the Jesuit, Robert Parsons, was indebted for his account of Sir John Oldcastle to "the stage-players," dismissing Parsons and Shakespeare as "this papist and his poet."⁴ This is not evidence that one would wish to rely on in a court of law. So the "Catholic Shakespeare" depends on two kinds of circumstantial evidence: the known or suspected Catholic sympathies of the drama-

*Reference: Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *William Shakespeare—Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2003).

tist's family, friends and patrons and the Catholic attitudes embedded in his plays (e.g. the role of purgatory in *Hamlet*).

Having grappled with this problem long ago,⁵ I think it fair to say the great difficulty for modern readers, especially readers not brought up in England, will be to understand the position of English Catholics from 1577, when the first priest from Douai was executed and anti-Catholic laws became more menacing. Hammerschmidt-Hummel surveys the historical background helpfully, and the general picture that emerges (fines for Catholics, imprisonment, torture, execution) is convincing. German readers will compare it with their own more recent history, and know only too well how such tragic situations can arise.

A special factor of the Elizabethan settlement, however, complicated the persecutions in England, as compared with Germany, Iraq, Bosnia, Ruanda etc.: the hunted minority was indistinguishable, both racially and in its language, from the majority. The authorities relied on spies and informers to identify their Catholic quarry, and naturally most of those arrested denied all charges. "Church papists," who attended services in their parish church and also went to mass when they could, were not easy to identify. "Lord Burghley's Map" of suspected strongholds of Catholicism was based on rumour, and rumour and proof were two different things. Even today we cannot be certain that some of the highest in the land (e.g. Ferdinando Lord Strange and the Earl of Southampton, two of Shakespeare's patrons) were or were not Catholics, while the loyalties of lesser men were even more murky. Hammerschmidt-Hummel, I repeat, is good on the general picture but perhaps less so when there is conflicting evidence about individuals. Sometimes she repeats gossip and does not inform readers of evidence to the contrary. Lord Strange and the Earl of Southampton, she thinks, were pillars of Catholicism,⁶ whereas Park Honan, in his recent *Shakespeare: A Life*, tells a different story.⁷ Hence she paints black or white pictures of the principal players that are more one-sided than those in English or American biographies. This would not matter so much if readers could compare hers with more traditional accounts: but Ger-

man studies of Shakespeare have neglected biography (perhaps wisely) and therefore Hammerschmidt-Hummel may impress them as authoritative rather than as questioning and often iconoclastic.

One of the most striking features of this book is that the author is no respecter of reputations. She goes her own way and waves away the views of E. K. Chambers, Samuel Schoenbaum, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and many more. Healthy scepticism? Up to a point, yes, except that I think she attaches too much importance to Shakespeare's Catholicism, which she erects into an article of faith. Like Hammerschmidt-Hummel I favour a Catholic Shakespeare, though with a difference: her Shakespeare studied at the English College at Rheims ("Alles deutet darauf hin," 43), visited the English College in Rome in 1585, 1587, 1589, 1591, under various assumed names ("Arthurus Stratfordus Wigorniensis," "Gulielmus Clerkue Stratfordiensis" etc. 72), 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.

To put it crudely, the difference between Hammerschmidt-Hummel's Catholic Shakespeare and mine is this: she offers a tidy interpretation of the evidence, where every detail fits in with her main thesis; I prefer to leave gaps and uncertainties when clear-cut evidence is lacking. Thus, to answer the questions "why did Shakespeare not buy a house in London?" and "why did he move so often from one lodging to another?" she suggests that a recusant, crypto-Catholic Shakespeare wanted to escape the attention of the authorities whereas Schoenbaum thought that, as some Shakespeare taxes were left unpaid, his moves were tax-evasive. I do not say that these explanations are impossible, only that others are also possible: perhaps he did not

get on with his landladies or fellow-lodgers, or he disliked the noise or the food or the smells—in short, there are too many possibilities for us to choose any one with confidence. When every problem points to the same solution—Shakespeare’s Catholicism—even those who, like the present writer, see the young Shakespeare as a Catholic may still wonder whether this answer remains the only possible one throughout his life. Must Sonnet 29 (“When in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes / I all alone beweepe *my outcast state*”) allude to the poet’s disadvantaged state as a Catholic (28)? Does Hamlet’s “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.242) allude to the hardships of Catholics in England (213) and “To be or not to be” continue with the same grievance (215)? Was the purchase of the Blackfriars Gatehouse in 1613 fixed by the Catholic underground, a near-perfect arrangement for the benefit of priests and other hangers-on of the Old Faith (260)?

If we place ourselves in the position of a crypto-Catholic Shakespeare, or of a biographer convinced of his underground activities, we must nevertheless concede that anyone engaged in such activities will be bound to view the world in a very special way. Think of *Crime and Punishment* or *The Diary of Anne Frank*: if Shakespeare lived all his adult life knowing that he might be arrested at any time as an enemy of the state, this would have affected his thinking as Hammerschmidt-Hummel suggests—he might have moved lodgings, he might have written his sonnets and “To be or not to be” thinking of his secret religion (among many other things) but, since we cannot prove it, does it matter?

To be fair, let us mention that Shakespeare’s evasiveness is puzzling and calls for an explanation. Everyone in the literary world soon knew of him, and few knew him. Near the beginning of his career, already hailed by Greene as “in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country”⁸ and clearly the darling of the London theatre-goers (why else was Greene so angry?), Shakespeare was not known to Henry Chettle. Chettle, a printer since 1584, had literary ambitions and yet, professionally active in London’s then much smaller literary world, had not met the “only Shake-scene”!⁹ After Shakespeare’s death John

Aubrey recorded that he was "the more to be admired [because] he was not a company keeper [...] wouldnt be debauched, & if invited to writ; he was in paine,"¹⁰ and throughout his life he seems to have been a far less visible presence than other, less admired writers. He neither offered nor requested complimentary verses, he seems to have suppressed his sonnets and other occasional poetry, he did not proof-read or write dedications for his plays—why? I have always regarded this "evasiveness" as purely temperamental, yet it could be that he had a reason for lying low. And let us not forget that his world was much more dangerous than ours today. His two greatest rivals, Marlowe and Jonson, both had underground contacts, both experienced interrogation and imprisonment (and in Marlowe's case probably murder) in circumstances very like those depicted in this biography. The general picture is convincing, some of the detail may well be correct, but the author's insistence on Shakespeare's omnipresent Catholicism, though understandable, is I think counterproductive.

It all depends on Hammerschmidt-Hummel's view of John and Mary Shakespeare. She describes both of the poet's parents as strict Catholics, though mentioning that John voted with the Protestant majority in Stratford at the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's reign (8). So far so good. Now her narrative becomes more selective. She assumes that when John prepared his "exemplary" accounts for Stratford's joint chamberlains W. Tyler and W. Smith (1566), he personally held the pen. Other biographers believed that, since John always signed his name with a mark, he must have been illiterate. Whoever is right, her reproduction of the 1566 accounts seems to be drastically reduced (9), which makes John seem a neater penman than in the more sprawling full-page facsimile in Schoenbaum's *A Documentary Life* (32).¹¹ (Incidentally, something has gone badly wrong with her version of the Blackfriars Gatehouse conveyance [260-61], compared with Schoenbaum's [221-22].) Again, she assumes that John sent his son to the free grammar school, where he would be taught by Simon Hunt, a Catholic who fled to Douai in 1575 and later became a Jesuit priest: this is very likely, though it is relevant that the school records

for these years have disappeared and we do not know for certain that William was taught there. These assumptions, implying that John Shakespeare was literate and valued learning, help the author to make her biggest jump when she contends that, as a Catholic, William could not take a degree at Oxford or Cambridge (he would have had to swear the Oath of Supremacy), therefore he must have studied at Rheims. "The Shakespeares were strict Catholics and continued as such for the rest of their lives. It is unlikely that they did not make use of the only available Catholic [higher] education at Allen's college at Douai, i.e. Rheims" (32, my translation). She believes that John Shakespeare mortgaged part of his wife's inheritance and conveyed more acres, in November 1578, to finance his son's studies abroad. "It is unlikely that" quickly becomes a fixed point in the narrative and therefore one must ask whether Shakespeare's parents would attach the same importance to "higher" education as a professor in a modern university. John Shakespeare, a glover and shop-keeper, would surely want his eldest son to help him in his business. John, said Rowe in the first *Life* of Shakespeare, "could give him no better education than his own employment"¹²—as was usual at this time.

The theory that Shakespeare studied at a Catholic college strikes this reader as wishful thinking, and of course much of Hammerschmidt-Hummel's later narrative points back to this supposedly crucial experience (e.g. the notion that he bought the Gatehouse as a bolt-hole for priests). Does the general theory of Shakespeare's Catholicism collapse as a consequence? Not necessarily. In Shakespeare's life-time the Reformation and Counter-Reformation were not old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago. As Hammerschmidt-Hummel shows, religion and politics were inextricably linked and threatened the lives of the highest and lowest—of Queen Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots, Essex and Southampton and their followers, including the Lord Chamberlain's Men. "Men may sleep, and they may have their throats about them at that time; and some say knives have edges."¹³ In such a dangerous world it would not be too surprising if Shakespeare, probably brought up as a Catholic (the first child of John and Mary

Shakespeare was baptised in the reign of Queen Mary), remained a Church papist or underground Catholic in later years or at least retained many Catholic friends and sympathised with their difficulties, just as he understood the difficulties of Jews, Moors, North American Indians and other minorities. We must not think of Shakespeare's Catholicism as an established fact, but equally it would be a mistake to rule it out as an impossibility.

While Hammerschmidt-Hummel proposes many new ideas (too many, if I may say so), these do not invalidate the theory that Shakespeare was probably brought up as a Catholic. Let us glance at two more of her new ideas. (1) The fresco of Tobias and the Angel (11-12), usually dated in the 1560s, depicts a man in a coat edged with fur: as Stratford's bailiff, John Shakespeare was entitled to wear such a coat. During John's year as bailiff he welcomed Worcester's Men, therefore he was a friend of the theatre, therefore he probably played in a 'mystery' or civic performance. Since Tobias wears gloves and John was a glover, Tobias and his wife in the fresco may represent John and Mary Shakespeare! (2) The most sensational new idea makes a number of even more daring jumps and lands ... on a royal personage. It reinterprets two portraits (150, 156)—the first, hitherto known as *The Persian Lady* by M. Gheeraerts, presents a beautifully dressed and very pregnant lady, with her right hand resting on a weeping stag and an elaborately framed sonnet at her feet. The second, *Elizabeth Wriothsley, Countess of Southampton, at Her Toilet* (viz. the wife of Shakespeare's patron, dedicatee of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*), has, we are assured, the same features as the *Persian Lady*, therefore identifies her too as the Countess. The sonnet is said to be by Shakespeare, and to allude to the fact that the *Persian Lady* is carrying the poet's child. This child later married Lord William Spencer, one of whose descendants was Diana, Princess of Wales—so William Shakespeare emerges (how apt!) as one of the ancestors of Prince William of the House of Windsor.

A summary, of course, cannot do justice to an intricate argument, and it is not always clear to me how seriously Hammerschmidt-

Hummel takes her own ideas. But it would be a pity if wild guessing—that is how I react to some of her ideas—were to bring the theory of Shakespeare's Catholic background into disrepute. We may, surely, accept that coded flattery was widely practised—what, though, of coded criticism? For whose benefit were such criticisms intended? In the 1580s and 1590s, when the Privy Council expected Catholic invaders and spies lurked everywhere, it could not be healthy to express criticism of the government, coded or otherwise, or even to hint that the Southamptons were breeding a bastard (if you depended on their goodwill). Looking through the other end of the same telescope, when it is asserted that in Greene's attack on Shakespeare and the actors ("those puppets [...] that spake from our mouths"), puppets means "priests," a point repeated again and again,¹⁴ we may ask why, if this is correct, Greene—who wished to injure those he thought responsible for his own misfortunes—did not call them priests. After all, he did not scruple to call Marlowe a notorious atheist. Decoding Shakespeare and his contemporaries is sometimes less straightforward than Hammerschmidt-Hummel assumes.

The publishers have produced a beautifully printed and lavishly illustrated book. The author has read widely, her enthusiasm is unmistakable, and we should all applaud when a colleague has the courage to challenge received ideas. I have to confess, however, that Hammerschmidt-Hummel's decoding of hidden meanings too often fails to persuade, and I fear may do more harm than good.

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NOTES

¹See E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1930) 1: 411.

²Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare: Dichter und Rebell im katholischen Untergrund* (Freiburg: Herder, 2001).

³Chambers 2: 257.

⁴Chambers 2: 217.

⁵Ernest Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The "Lost Years"* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985; 2nd ed. 1998).

⁶Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *William Shakespeare* 97, 106.

⁷Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 66, 192.

⁸Chambers 2: 188.

⁹Chambers 2: 189.

¹⁰Chambers 2: 252.

¹¹S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1975).

¹²Chambers 2: 264.

¹³*Henry V*, II.1.21.

¹⁴Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *William Shakespeare* 70, 75, 80, 165.