

A Letter in Response to “Catholic Shakespeare”*

Dear Sirs,

It was a matter of great interest for me to read Professor Honigmann’s “Response to Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel” and Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel’s reply “The most important subject that can possibly be,” as I had studied both *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare* and *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk*.

I am in the odd position of sympathizing with both professors, of agreeing and disagreeing with both. When Professor Honigmann states “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,” I am in agreement. I think that Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel weakens her case by bringing to the fore much circumstantial evidence which contains unresolved ambiguities, although I note that there is substantial agreement on this particular main point among both professors.

In studying the evidence proposed for Shakespeare’s attendance at the Collegium Anglicum, I could not find convincingly sufficient evidence that the term “divinity” was used exclusively at that institution to mean a theologian (“divine” in more common English parlance) as Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel maintains in her earlier book. I could not find unanimity among Shakespeare scholars that Shakespeare used the word “divinity” unambiguously in the passage she cited from *Twelfth Night*. It is a case of too many ambiguities—

*Reference: Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, “‘The most important subject that can possibly be’: A Reply to E. A. J. Honigmann,” *Connotations* 12.2-3 (2002/2003): 155-66; E. A. J. Honigmann, “Catholic Shakespeare? A Response to Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel,” *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003): 52-60; Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit—Sein Leben—Sein Werk* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2003).

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neither proof nor disproof. The word “syntax,” with which Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel claims Shakespeare was familiar, does not appear in Bartlett’s *A Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*, nor in an electronic search of the first edition of the Riverside Shakespeare. Where did she find his mention of the word?

Professor Honigmann states incorrectly in “Catholic Shakespeare?” that William was baptised during the reign of Queen Mary. He was born in 1564 during the reign of Elizabeth.

The positive aspects of Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel’s work are the energy and vision which permit her to connect circumstantial evidence which has been overlooked or dismissed by English-speaking scholars, partly, it must be admitted and probably won’t be, out of their desire to have Shakespeare as a model of national preference—in religion as in other matters. When Professor Honigmann states that “This is not evidence that one would wish to rely on in a court of law,” he omits the obvious and unwelcome truth that miscarriage of justice is not an infrequent feature of courts of law—in today’s society as in the past. In other words, the appeal to courts of law is a rhetorical device which sounds better than it is. Professor Honigmann is too intelligent a man not to realise this, and I suspect he is thinking of the kind of negative response which Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel’s researches have elicited from the guardians of the cult of Shakespeare in Stratford.

In conclusion, what the exchange between the two professors would seem to demonstrate is the need for extremely good nerves and cool heads in evaluating the force of evidence, all of which is far from rigorous proof.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Merriam