

Review Essay

Five Full Years: Shakespeare and “The Catholic Hypothesis” Today

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What! Within the space of the five past years, no fewer than ten books all dealing more or less with what I call “the Catholic hypothesis” concerning the religion of William Shakespeare? “What!” as Macbeth exclaims in a somewhat different context, “will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?” (4.1.117). The question of the playwright’s religious beliefs and their influence on his plays must indeed, as publishers are wont to say, be “a hot topic.” Yet this is surprising news, since one rarely hears of such a thing as “the Protestant hypothesis” or “the Agnostic hypothesis,” still less “the Puritan hypothesis” with regard to Shakespeare, though in biographies one may come upon the half-hearted opinion that he seems to have been a conforming (if perhaps not a convinced) Anglican. Likewise, it seems remarkable too because readings of Shakespeare’s plays in terms of the various versions of Christianity are even today not infrequently written off as subjective, sectarian interpretations to be dismissed with a wave of the hand into the outer darkness or “lunatic fringe” to which they rightly belong. Yet the fact of at least ten Catholic, or semi-Catholic, readings of the plays in the past five years suggests that either a conspiracy or else a change in the critical climate almost too good to be true has taken place.

Not that all the authors I have in mind would concur with my lining them up in this way. For instance, in her study of *Religion and Revelry in Shakespeare’s Festive World* Phebe Jensen speaks of Shakespeare as “a playwright who clearly conformed to Protestantism” (6), though she gives no evidence of that assumed “conformity” and everything she says in her book goes to confirm Shakespeare’s Catholic viewpoint. Her assertion of

the Bard's Protestantism is based on a distinction she draws between "Catholic devotional aesthetics" and "Catholic belief," a difference which neither the dramatist himself nor his Elizabethan contemporaries would have recognized. Moreover, she leaves the unprejudiced (by which I mean non-academic) reader with the impression that "the revelry of Shakespeare's festive world" was by and large Catholic, not Protestant, in religion. Even though by the time she ends her volume she feels it incumbent to protest, "It is not this book's claim that generations of critics have been wrong about Shakespeare's festive world by underplaying its religious dimension" (230), it is her clearly unexpressed claim that most impresses.

Yet another scholar who may feel less than happy about being drafted to the cause of "the Catholic hypothesis" is John Klause, the author of *Shakespeare, the Earl, and the Jesuit* [reviewed, *Religion and the Arts* 14.1–2 (2010): 181–184]. Beneath the generalized nouns of his title, he has in mind two other S's (as if the dramatist is looking at the title, like that of a village inn showing two donkeys over the inscription "We Three"): the Earl of Southampton and the Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell. Following the suggestion of Christopher Devlin in his *Life of Robert Southwell*, he sees all three men as being related to each other not only as distant cousins but also as mutual contemporary influences. Even though once the Jesuit had suffered martyrdom in 1595 the other two—certainly the earl and possibly the dramatist—defected from loyalty to "the old faith," what Klause brings out, as no other author has ever done before, not even Devlin himself, is the remarkable extent of Shakespeare's loyalty, if not subservience, to Southwell. What he shows in quotation after quotation, until we feel ourselves as flies beneath the wielding of his inexorable sledgehammer, is the dependence of Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic imagination not just on Southwell's poetry but on all his spiritual writings—as if this Jesuit, and no one else, is the one main influence on his early life and work, culminating in the composition of *Hamlet*. As for confirmation of what I have just said, I must leave my readers to read this truly remarkable book for themselves. Here, even more thoroughly than in Jensen's book, I felt myself confronted with the final proof I needed for "the Catholic hypothesis," and yet at the end I felt myself let "quite quite down" by the author's admission that (in Burns's memorable words) "a man's a man for all that"—that no more than his noble patron the dramatist was unable to withstand the pressures from without and above on his religious allegiance.