



What Shakespeare's Editors Don't Know

People have been saying that Shakespeare was a Catholic for a long time. Newman thought so, and his contemporary Richard Simpson, St. Edmund Campion's biographer, was the first scholar to assemble the evidence. In the last twenty-five years or so the sheer pressure of that evidence has led a fair number of Shakespeare scholars to concede that Shakespeare had a Catholic upbringing. But the idea that, unlike John Donne, he remained Catholic has so far proved unacceptable.

Anglo-American cultural traditions, after all, are decidedly Protestant. England is still, by statute, an anti-Catholic country. Shakespeare is England's national poet, and for English Shakespeareans and their Anglophile American colleagues, to accept a Catholic Shakespeare requires an unthinkable revision of the entire historical narrative.

The strongest evidence of Shakespeare's continuing Catholicism is in his writing. He refers to Catholic practices and beliefs. He uses Catholic language, and evidence is accumulating that he knew Catholic texts well—in particular the Breviary and the Catholic Book of Hours or Primer, including the Little Hours of the Virgin.

Shakespeare's editors, though, do not know these texts, and ignorance added to deep-seated prejudice means that we will not find these and other Catholic references annotated in the Shakespeare editions. As the following examples show, Shakespeare's occluded Catholicism includes some of the most striking and important passages in the plays.

To begin with *Hamlet*: in Act 4, when Ophelia comes on stage "distracted" or, according to the First Quarto's stage direction,



Ophelia Before the King and Queen (detail), Benjamin West, 1792.

"playing on a lute, and her hair down, singing," she is already embarked upon a song:

How should I your true love know
From another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon.

The editors know that this is a stanza from a variant of the famous "Walsingham" ballad, but because they tend to know little about music and almost nothing about Catholics, Elizabethan or otherwise, they do not know that the "Walsingham" tune was a marker for Catholic nostalgia and grief over the destroyed monasteries and pilgrim shrines, of which Our Lady of Walsingham was one of the most popular and important. Nor do they know that the two great Catholic virginalists of the time, William Byrd and John Bull, composed important sets of variations on the tune.

Then, when Ophelia makes her final exit to the words, "God-a-mercy on his soul, And of all Christian souls, I pray God", the editors do not pause to notice that when

Shakespeare wrote that little prayer for the dead into his play ca. 1600–1601, prayers for the dead had been forbidden in Protestant England for forty years.

Other Catholic references in the play go equally unnoticed. When Ophelia goes to her watery death chanting "snatches of old Lauds", the editors do not know what "Lauds" are. The new *Pelican Shakespeare* thinks the word means "hymns", but it turns out that the Oxford Dictionary has only one example of *laud* meaning "hymn", and it is this one—an excellent example of what we call a circular argument. John Dover Wilson thought that "old lauds" were religious songs on the Italian pattern of *laude*; but that is impossible—no-one in England, including Shakespeare, had ever heard of them. No: Lauds is one of the hours of the Church's daily office. That is what the word means, and the version of the office that a girl like Ophelia would know well enough to *chant* (not *sing*) would be the Lauds of the Little Hours of the Blessed Virgin, which she would have found in her Primer. Some verses of the first psalm of that office (Psalm 92) are surprisingly apt in the circumstances:

The floods have risen (O Lord): the floods have roared.

The floods have lifted up their waves: with great noise and roaring of many waters.

The editors know nothing about this.

Hamlet's urgent prayer, "Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!" also defeats the editors because they think (a) that this is just fancy writing, and (b) that angels are the only ministers of grace. The Arden 3 editors, for instance, think the prayer is a *hendiadys*, a way of saying the same thing twice: "angels, i.e., ministers of grace, defend us!" To a Catholic mind, although the angels might be one's first recourse, they are neither the only ministers of grace nor one's only defense against spiritual evil. There are the saints and the Blessed Virgin, too, ready to intercede for us if asked.

Then there is the little Latin phrase *hic et ubique* that Hamlet uses as the Ghost moves about under the stage in Act 1, scene 5. All the editors have enough Latin to know that it means "here and everywhere". What they do not know is that it occurs three times in the prayers of a memorial "for those at rest in a cemetery" in the Sarum missal:

O God . . . grant unto thy servants and handmaidens, whose bodies *here and everywhere (hic et ubique)* are at rest in Christ, a place of refreshment, a blessed rest, and a clear light.

The ghost, unfortunately, is not "at rest" in a cemetery, and that is the reason for Hamlet's nervously joking use of the phrase.

Eventually, one begins to suspect the editors of willful ignorance. Harold Jenkins, editor of the famous Arden 2 edition of *Hamlet*, which is still in print, knows that Horatio's words spoken over Hamlet's body, "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" are reminiscent of the opening of the antiphon *In paradisum*, sung as the body is taken from the church at a requiem Mass: "May the

angels lead you into paradise". Yet he prefaces his quotation from the antiphon by saying, "No specific source can be alleged or should be sought for so traditional a conception". What, though, is "traditional" about invoking angelic aid for the soul? There is no such tradition in England or in Protestant America. The Anglican church's burial service has no hint of angels in it.

Jenkins also knows that Horatio's "cock, that is the trumpet to the morn", that puts to flight the uncanny visitors of the dark, has a parallel in the Lauds hymn, *Ales diei nuntius* ("The bird that heralds the day", sung at Tuesday Lauds), but again he attributes the similarity of speech and hymn to "tradition". In other words, Shakespeare just plucked his line out of the cultural atmosphere. What Jenkins does not know is that another Lauds hymn, St. Ambrose's *Æterne rerum conditor* ("Eternal creator of the world", sung at Sunday Lauds), also celebrates the cock as the herald of the dawn, and that whereas the lines on the flight of the spirits in *Ales diei nuntius* are *not* sung in the office, similar lines in *Æterne rerum* are, and are therefore more likely to have been in Shakespeare's mind.

*Hoc excitatus Lucifer
Solvit polum caligine:
hoc omnis errorum choros
vias nocendi deserit.*

When the cock crows, the sun
wakes up
and frees the skies from darkness:
when he crows, all night-prowlers
leave the paths of sin.

What Jenkins and editors like him either do not know or are not prepared to acknowledge is that these references have a common source in Catholic liturgical material, and that Shakespeare was familiar with it.

The best-known religious reference in *Hamlet* is the Ghost's lament that he was denied the rites of the dying, that he was:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd.

In other words, he made no confession, received no absolution, no communion, and no anointing. In a splendid essay on the fortunes of those words, Dr. Thomas Merriam has shown not only that Shakespeare was the only dramatist to bring those three terms together to describe the single encounter with Christ that the three sacraments ensure, but that in doing so he was revealing expert, well-instructed Catholic knowledge forty years after the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles had banished those sacraments from the country. Dr. Merriam then shows us that it took Shakespeare's readers and editors over two hundred years to understand what the Ghost's words mean.

Perhaps we should not be too hard on them. A contemporary Protestant dramatist, Henry Chettle, admiring the passage, and wishing to imitate it a year after Shakespeare wrote it, did not understand the words, either. He thought that "unanel'd" meant that no knell or funeral bell was rung for old Hamlet. That fact brings home to us the extent to which these Catholic things were lost, forgotten knowledge among the Protestants when Shakespeare was writing his greatest plays. That is why his way of drawing so expertly and spontaneously on Catholic material throughout his career provides one of the best proofs of both his knowledge and his continuing Catholic practice.

Here is one last, curious note before we leave *Hamlet*. It is a decidedly political play, and many people think that Polonius is a caricature of William Cecil, recently deceased, and for forty years the power behind the English throne. In that context, Hamlet's exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2 becomes charged with political implication:

Hamlet. Denmark's a prison.
Rosencrantz. Then is the world one.
Hamlet. A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons; Denmark being one of the worst.
Rosencrantz. We think not so my lord.

Hamlet. Why then 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.

One of the editors thinks that this exchange was cut from the Second Quarto text because it was feared it might be taken as an insult to the new Danish queen's country. It is equally likely that it was taken as an offensive remark about contemporary England. In November 1600, an imprisoned priest, John Pibush, wrote a letter to Father Henry Garnet which Garnet found so interesting that he sent it to Rome, translated into Italian. He probably showed it around among his English friends, too, for the original English version survives. In it, Pibush says:

At my coming I found England a prison for all such professors as yourself and your Company are, who yet in your imprisonment have proved yourselves still profitable. . . .

Evidently more people than Hamlet found their homeland a prison, and were prepared to say so. Hamlet's remark was no doubt the kind of thing said about England at Ben Jonson's dinner parties to which, he assured his guests, no spies (like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) were invited.

John Pibush was executed in the usual way, February 18, 1601, at St. Thomas Watering, Southwark.

Other Catholic passages can be fraught with extra-dramatic implication. Consider, for instance, Macduff's words on Duncan's murdered body in *Macbeth*:

Most sacrilegious murder hath
broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple and stole
thence
The life o'th' building,

All the editors, Christian or not, are sufficiently well-instructed in the Bible to know that St. Paul told the Corinthians that their bodies were the temples of the liv-

ing God. Some of them even know that a king's body was anointed at his coronation. But none of them knows that the physical fabric of a Catholic church is anointed at its consecration, and that the life of such a building is in the reserved sacrament or body of Christ, its presence indicated by the burning sanctuary lamp. That being so, they do not know that the vehicle of this metaphor is a sacrilegiously despoiled church, and it certainly does not occur to them to think that in the England of Shakespeare's time, where there had been no reserved sacrament since 1559, every parish church and cathedral was just such a sacrilegiously despoiled church.

In the "dark" comedy, *All's Well That Ends Well*, there is even a reference to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. The old countess of Rousillon, deeply upset by her son Bertram's weak character and misbehavior, wonders what will become of him:

What angel shall
Bless this unworthy husband? He can
not thrive,
Unless her prayers, whom heaven
delights to hear
And loves to grant, relieve him from
the wrath
Of greatest justice.

Some editors ignore this passage, and others, in a kind of desperation, suggest that the lines refer to the Countess's new daughter-in-law, Helena. The Arden 2 editor, G. K. Hunter, opted for Helena in terms that spell out with unusual frankness the animus behind his kind of editing:

Even a straightforward reference to the Virgin as intercessor is too Popish to be probable. The word *husband* points to Helena; since heaven has already granted her prayers for the King's recovery, and since she has signified her intention, just above, to sanctify Bertram's name, it is most probable that it is she who is referred to.

Helena, however, did not cure the King

with prayer but with her father's prescription; and her intention to make a pilgrimage for herself and Bertram has nothing to do with the countess's fear that nothing short of supernatural intercession can save her son. The countess's words refer to Mary's intercession, she alone being the one whom "Heaven delights to hear, and loves to grant".

The most extraordinary Marian reference in Shakespeare's plays appears at the climax of *Pericles*. King Pericles' ship has sailed into the harbor at Mytilene, and there he has been cured of life-threatening sorrow, brought back to life by the recovery of his lost daughter, Marina. "O come hither", he says to her, "Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget". In the Introduction to his edition (a very good one), Philip Edwards wrote that those were the play's greatest lines. Yet neither he nor any other editor knows that Pericles' words are a near paraphrase of a respond in the Matins of *The Little Hours*: "Blessed art thou, Virgin Mary: Thou hast borne him that made thee."

Three major editions of the play have appeared since that information was published twenty-five years ago in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. None of them mentions the respond in the notes to that scene. As a scholar who has published some of this material, I find myself falling back upon a belief that in the end, truth always emerges and will prevail. In the meantime, though, I am prepared to admit that in asking the Shakespeareans to accept the Catholicism of Shakespeare's mind and work, what we are really asking for is nothing less than the conversion of England and its off-shoot, the Protestant culture of Anglo-America. At the very least, we are asking them to admit they have been wrong about a lot of things for a long time. The admission is not going to be easy.

Frank Brownlow is professor emeritus, Mount Holyoke College. He has published books on Shakespeare, John Skelton, and St. Robert Southwell.