

# Honors Program

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*Underground Religion:  
Catholicism and Shakespeare*

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## Introduction

What was William Shakespeare's religion? Can we now or will we ever be able to answer this question with certainty? Does it matter? These are questions that have been asked many times by many scholars for hundreds of years. They began to be asked even as soon as seventy years after he died, when an Anglican minister wrote that, according to a local legend, Shakespeare had "dyed a Papyst" (Fenty 23). Scholars have only really begun to delve into this topic enthusiastically, though, in the last fifty years or so. There is a lack of direct evidence supporting with any certainty that William Shakespeare was a Catholic. However, there is evidence that indirectly supports the claim that Shakespeare may have had Catholic loyalties. This paper outlines some of this indirect evidence and explores its strength in supporting the argument that Shakespeare was a Catholic.

Many instances of religion and religious references appear throughout Shakespeare's plays. These include both Protestant and Catholic ideals, and many of these ideals influence larger parts of a play as a whole. By looking at evidence from his play *The Tempest*, the historical context of religious issues in England during his lifetime, and also evidence from his personal background, one can see that Shakespeare used his dramas as a way to continue his connection with Catholicism during the reign of Protestantism in Elizabethan England.

## Historical context

Before exploring the evidence, it is important to understand the historical context of Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare was born in approximately 1564, only thirty years after Henry VIII of England enacted the Act of Supremacy, which made the king the supreme head of the Church of England, officially separating the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church. Henry VIII's initial confrontation with the papacy stemmed from his denied requests for an annulment from his wife, Catherine of Aragon, on the grounds that the union was not

legitimate because Catherine was his brother's widow. In reality, Henry VIII was unhappy that Catherine had not produced a male heir yet; their only surviving child was a daughter, Mary. He wanted an annulment in order to marry Anne Boleyn ("BBC..."). It is important to note that this initial break with the Church of Rome was not motivated by any particular issue with church doctrine, but instead was motivated by personal and political reasons. However, many issues then came forward regarding the Roman Catholic Church and challenging the papacy. Henry VIII's decisions to forgo the papacy gave a foothold to Protestant ideas that had already begun circulating in the early 1520s. Those who supported these ideas gained encouragement and an opportunity to become more vocal and spread their views throughout England:

From 1536 to 1540, Henry VIII began to dismantle the Catholic churches in England. As supreme head of the Church, [he] began to confiscate monastic property, eventually suppressing all the religious houses in England and Wales. Ten thousand monks, friars, nuns and their servants were made homeless. Much of the property was sold on, mostly to local gentry. The cultural and social impact was significant, particularly as monasteries had been providers of support for the poor. ("BBC...")

The churches in England had not only been a place of religious worship, but they were also very important to the economy of the country, and so the people most detrimentally affected were those found in towns and villages, particularly the smaller ones. The church was often the center of life, especially in rural England, and by dismantling them, Henry VIII caused even more complications. The people were not always receptive to these changes, though. Christopher Haigh states, "It is clear that the Church of England was not immediately protestantized in its clergy, furnishings, services and the beliefs of its people...bibliocentric Protestantism proved

unattractive to the rural masses” (Haigh 39). The monarchy may have imposed a new religion on the people of England, but it was not entirely well received.

By 1536, Henry VIII had grown tired of Anne Boleyn, whose only surviving child had been a daughter, Elizabeth, born three years earlier. Henry had Anne Boleyn executed, and eleven days later married Jane Seymour, who was able to give him his only male heir, Edward (“BBC...”). Three different marriages, and three different sets of offspring, caused great religious upheaval, as each eventually ruled England, and each had a different opinion on England’s religion and what role it should play.

By 1552, Henry VIII had died and his son Edward became king. Since Edward VI was only nine years old (1547), Henry VIII had prepared the Council of Regency to govern England. The Council of Regency’s second leader, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, and eventually King Edward VI himself were both “in favour of the accelerated reformation of the Church. Protestant orthodoxy was enforced by a new and more stringent Act of Uniformity” (“BBC...”). However, more religious turbulence occurred in 1553 when Edward VI died. Edward had excluded his half sisters Mary and Elizabeth from succession, instead nominating Lady Jane Grey as queen; Jane’s reign lasted only days due to widespread support for Mary’s succession to the throne (“BBC...”).

Mary I, Catherine of Aragon’s daughter, was unchallenged in taking her place as queen in London, even though she was both the first female monarch in England crowned in her own right and a devout Catholic; “she was determined to halt the growth of Protestantism initiated by her father, and return England to Roman Catholicism” (“BBC...”). Mary I’s aspiration to reinstate Catholicism in England and remove all other forms of Protestantism led to many executions and exiles of religious dissenters during her reign. Less than a decade before Shakespeare was born,

England had once again flipped its religious identity, at least superficially. During all of these changes imposed by the monarchs, the people of England, especially those in academic circles, began to form their own opinions about religion and the state.

In November of 1558, Mary I of England died, and Elizabeth became the new Queen of England. Mary had viewed her half-sister as a threat during her own reign because Elizabeth was Protestant, but Mary did not attempt to prevent Elizabeth's succession to the throne. Under Elizabeth's rule, the 1559 Act of Uniformity declared the "new hastily-printed Book of Common Prayer, a revision of Edward VI's Protestant prayer book of 1552," the only prayer book to be used in the parish churches throughout England and Wales ("BBC..."). "The Catholic mass or any other form of worship...was henceforth illegal" less than a year after Elizabeth's accession to the throne and only five years before Shakespeare's birth ("BBC..."). The only legal religion was now the Anglican Church of England and the only acceptable form of worship was what was outlined in the Book of Common Prayer, which also required every person to attend church every Sunday. The Act was passed in an effort to eliminate ties to other religions, especially Roman Catholicism, and to unify the Church of England itself.

In early 1570, Pope Pius V signed a papal bull that excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I and declared that "her subjects owed her no allegiance." The document was sent in support of a rebellion of northern earls in 1569 ("BBC..."). However, the rebellion had already been put down by the time the bull reached Elizabeth in England. Elizabeth was therefore encouraged "to abandon religious toleration and allow[ed] the Church of England to become more expressly Protestant" ("BBC..."). Elizabeth ruled until her death in 1603, and since she was childless, her cousin James VI of Scotland acceded to the English throne, uniting Scotland, England and Ireland under one ruler. The first of the Stuart rulers in England, he became James I of England

and continued to rule through the rest of Shakespeare's lifetime. James I's religious philosophy was a balancing act; the countries he ruled each had a different predominant religion. Scotland tended to be Calvinist, Ireland continued to be Catholic, and England was part of the Anglican Church of England. Initially Catholics in England believed that James I would support Catholicism and practice religious tolerance, however he began to persecute Catholics in order to accommodate and satisfy the Puritan denomination. This continued to cause religious turmoil throughout England.

This politically motivated religious upheaval was mostly concentrated in the three decades before Shakespeare's birth, and continued to shift and fluctuate during his lifetime. He would have had some understanding of what had happened before his birth because many people, including his father and mother, had lived through it and would have been able to talk to him about it. However, Shakespeare, as well as people like him living in outlying towns somewhat removed from nobility and politics, would have been affected on a different level. In bigger cities, many papers and books were published outlining opinions of what the country and what the people ought to believe and why. Even those who did not participate in academic circles interacted with the Roman Catholic Church at the very least on a weekly basis, and many of them began to show dissent with the Catholic Church.

Some issues with the Church of Rome were related to money. People were frustrated by the Archbishops and other church higher-ups who participated in pluralism as "an accepted feature of church life" (Sheils 5). Pluralism called for a bishop or other similarly positioned clergy to serve multiple parishes and so receive a joint income, plus possibly holding several cathedral posts, which brought in extra income as well. These men would often leave their parishes in the hands of "poorly-paid curates while they enjoyed the profits" (Sheils 5). Those

left in charge were often not well educated and were very poor. "Pluralism represented an unfair division of labour between a minority of very wealthy clergy and a majority of poor men who did most of the parochial work" and this led to criticism of the Catholic Church, particularly as a source for religious negligence and immorality (Sheils 5).

Another money issue that surfaced revolved around tithing and fees. The Catholic Church received funds through tithes, which was a tax of sorts that all parishioners were expected to pay in order to support the church's maintenance, both its structure and its ministries. Fees were also charged for spiritual services, of which indulgences were the most infamous. The fees themselves were not the problem most of the time, rather where they went and whom they supported became the main issue. Instead of paying a local priest, the money often went to a distant pluralist or a wealthy monastery. Because money had so much influence within the church court system, there were also problems with a fair system of checks and balances within the Catholic Church and so some saw the Church as putting itself above the law. When people spoke out about the problems within the Church and called for spiritual renewal and reform, the Church called these criticisms heresy. The Church leaders began to overreact, trying to eliminate all heresy, and although this instilled fear in the people, it also led to stronger anti-Church and anti-clergy attitudes (Sheils 9).

More specific problems with Roman Catholic Church doctrines surfaced in England, particularly under the reign of Elizabeth I and James I. The first doctrine that was challenged, however, was during Henry VIII's rule and came from Lutheran tenets on the continent. The doctrine of transubstantiation, in which the Catholic Church believed that the Eucharist was the real presence of the body of Christ, was challenged. Lutherans believed that this ritual acted as a representation of the body of Christ, not his actual flesh. "Some of the English reformers went



further than Luther...[and] saw the Eucharist simply as a memorial of the Last Supper and denied any real presence in the sacrament,” but this was not a common view and even the Protestants exiled many who believed this (Sheils 9-10). Another doctrine that took hold and transformed early English Protestants was Luther’s notion of Justification by Faith. This doctrine “placed the crucifixion as the central and sufficient act of salvation for all who had faith in it and acted in accordance with that faith” and so it “cut through and rendered theologically superfluous much of the intercessory and penitential ritual of the late medieval Church” (Sheils 9). Puritans, Calvinists, Lutherans and other Protestants examined various parts of Roman Catholic doctrine and, in addition to transubstantiation, they objected to the “crypto-popish doctrines of absolution and auricular confession” (Milton 17,19), which involve the forgiveness and ultimately the removal of sins by a priest. The Protestants were also “concerned with the doctrines of free will, hypothetical election and universal grace,” which were newly developed doctrines some Protestants wanted to include, but were not beliefs held by the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, some people in England still continued to profess, teach and/or live by the teachings of the Catholic Church. According to Christopher Haigh, “It has been suggested that pre-Reformation religion was primarily a matter of customary observance”, but after the religious turmoil taking place within the Catholic Church’s realm, many changes were made within the Church itself. “There arrived a brand of post-Reformation Catholicism, a dynamic foreign importation brought by missionary priests” and after around 1570, “a combination of spontaneous revival in England and missionary effort from the seminaries abroad created a new Catholic body” (37). This is very important to note because many believed that the Catholic Church no longer had support at the lower monastic and priestly levels. Instead, out of the Reformation emerged two new religions “of individual choice and involvement, a bibliocentric

and evangelical Protestantism and a reformed and regulated Catholicism” (Haigh 38). The first Jesuit priests came to England in 1580, and many Catholics were fearful and suspicious of them, but it did not take long for a “number of committed new Catholics” to understand and embrace the emphasis and “quality of Jesuit-inspired lay spirituality” (Haigh 39). Most of the attacks on the Catholic Church during Elizabeth I’s reign came from the academics and dissenting religious personnel that were more concerned with the policies of the country, whether they were helping to create them, were threatened by them, or were studying them.

This epoch in history brought a lot of religious critics to the foreground and even “the structure of English Protestantism was itself changing in the 1590s” (Milton 13). The only real connection Protestantism, or the Church of England, had among its many different branches was “to unite against the common enemy – the Church of Rome” and as such, attacks against Catholicism offered a “means of Protestant unity against the threat of inter-Protestant tensions” (Milton 14,15). Not even Protestants could agree on what they believed, which caused problems with determining who believed what and why at this time in history. Most of this tension was focused in the cities that held large churches and cathedrals, particularly in cities like London where more learned men discussed what should be done regarding religion. “Away from the cathedral cities and the main towns, official Protestantism made little real progress... There was, in the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, considerable uncertainty over the future of English religion: it was widely believed that Catholicism would be restored once again” and it is no wonder why. With all the flipping back and forth from Catholicism to Protestantism and even Elizabeth’s *via media* political strategy which straddled the line between the two in order to use religion for her own political advancements, it would be very difficult to keep track of all of the changes, especially keeping in mind that religion is one of the most influential parts of a culture.

Clearly, “for the peasantry the old religion was a complex of social practices, many of which remained available...and many clergy made the Prayer Book services as much like masses as circumspection allowed” (Haigh 40). As one can see, it was necessary to be guarded about one’s religion, particularly when those in charge often held the power of the death penalty and had proven that they were capable and willing to use it. Keeping all of this in mind, one can also understand the necessity of looking at indirect evidence to support that Shakespeare was a Catholic, if only for the reason that he kept his religious views as ambiguous as possible, so as to not fall out of favor with whomever was enforcing their view, whether it be the monarchy, the theater owners, or those whom he relied upon for financial reasons.

### **Shakespeare’s Catholic Context**

There is historical evidence to support the idea that Shakespeare himself was a Catholic or would have had Catholic loyalties. The parts of England that he is supposed to have lived in were “Stratford and Lancashire, two heavily Catholic areas important to Shakespeare’s youth” (Beauregard “Shakespeare...” 246). Stratford was where Shakespeare was born and raised, and also where he returned at the end of his life, and there is information indicating that Shakespeare possibly spent his “lost years” in Lancashire, most likely teaching members of a prominent Catholic family in that area. However, there is much debate surrounding this claim, particularly because the Lancashire theory often calls upon the idea of Shakespeare using the “variant spelling or singularly unimaginative pseudonym” Shakeshafte (Miola 27).

Another reason to look into the plausibility of Shakespeare’s being a closet Catholic comes from evidence that his family was Catholic. His father, John Shakespeare, composed his will in Roman Catholic form and its validity is Catholic; it also includes references to the Virgin Mary, the angels and purgatory, which are not necessarily only Catholic themes; however, they

arise from the beliefs and teaching of the Church, and would therefore support John Shakespeare's loyalties to at least some Catholic doctrines. Catholic tendencies and beliefs were part of his home life while growing up and lend support to his having Catholic loyalties. More recent criticism questions the authenticity of John Shakespeare's will. It survives only in transcription, no original can be found. It is difficult to know when it was written, but it is believed to have been written in the later years of John's life, most likely after 1570. Another example of Catholic loyalties in the family is the fact that both Shakespeare's father and Shakespeare's eldest daughter Susanna were cited for recusancy, on a list the authorities kept to record those who did not conform or adhere to the Church of England as well as the penalties and/or fines incurred because of such actions. In 1592, John Shakespeare was cited for Catholic ties, and Susanna was cited in 1606 for not receiving communion at the Church of England. Shakespeare's father was also cited two times for not attending Anglican services. A long-standing pro-Protestant counter-argument is that "reporters both times attributed his absence to fear of process for debt rather than to religious conviction" (Miola 27). It is interesting to note that John Shakespeare was cited for heresy instead of for trying to avoid his debtors; this may be indirect evidence that supports he had other reasons, religious reasons, for not attending the Church of England services. At the very least, there is a family connection to Catholicism, if not a continuation of the Catholic faith within the family.

Shakespeare's education has also been a puzzle to historians. His name does not show up on any public schooling records (these schools were also known as free schools and they were schools that Henry VIII expanded and created throughout England during the Reformation), but it is reasonably assumed by scholars that because of his talent, Shakespeare must have been well educated. He could have possibly been tutored or taught by a priest or other religious persons,

but this would most likely have been recorded, and it is highly unlikely that he attended a private school, since his family was not wealthy enough to have been able to afford it. His name would also have been recorded in the private school's records. His education, then, was most likely tied to a church, but the lack of records proves oddly curious and this has led some to think that Shakespeare was educated by Catholic means, which would possibly explain a lack of records.

Another fact supporting Shakespeare's alleged Catholic allegiance is the matter of his marriage and marriage license. Shakespeare was married by John Frith, an old priest who was ministering outside of the Protestant church, and "was reported as 'unsound in religion,' which often meant Catholic" (Miola 27). Furthermore, Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway's marriage ceremony most likely ended with a Roman Catholic Mass, since the traditions of the time, particularly in a small town like Stratford-upon-Avon, would have called for it. These and other occurrences are not enough to prove that Shakespeare was a Catholic, but they provide indirect evidence that does support the theory. "Catholicism, if it was going to exist at all, was to be a silent presence within the larger, Protestant structures of English life" (Edmondson 264). If Shakespeare was indeed a Catholic, he would most likely not have been outwardly vocal about it, but would leave his faith, as with all things Shakespeare, ambiguous.

### **Evidence in *The Tempest***

The ambiguity within Shakespeare's plays can be attributed to the complexity of each of his works. The plays contain many layers of meaning and can be interpreted in many different ways, which makes it very difficult to make certain claims regarding them. Peter Milward is a Jesuit priest and literary scholar who has studied the role of Catholicism in Shakespeare's plays since the middle 1970s. Through his in-depth search, he has outlined three basic layers of meaning:

The first and more obvious one being the layer of plot and character, which is in conformity with the “secular” characteristic of Elizabethan drama; whereas the second is the hidden “religious” layer of meaning implied in the many biblical echoes and allusions; and then there is a third or “topical” layer of reference to the religious situation of Elizabethan England. It is precisely in this third layer that one may recognize the Catholic heart of the dramatist and the well-spring of his dramatic genius. (Milward 452)

Not all scholars agree with this method, but most agree that many different layers and interpretations are present. Such complexity and contradiction is what continues to draw scholars to his work, searching for more ways to critique the author and his productions.

*The Tempest* is open to such a reading as a way to explore Shakespeare’s Catholic sympathies. Published posthumously, it is believed to be the last play that he wrote. Many examples within the play illustrate the Catholic undertones of Shakespeare’s writing and lend support to a hidden Catholic tie. Robert Miola, an English professor at Loyola University in Maryland, writes in his article, *Shakespeare’s Religion*, that Shakespeare’s plays reveal “evocative patterns of appropriation as Shakespeare draws on the rich traditions of Catholicism to create his drama” (Miola 25). This is not to say that Catholic loyalties are the only religious context present in the play, however, the indirect evidence in *The Tempest* can be linked to Shakespeare’s pro-Catholic tendencies. *The Tempest* is “Shakespeare’s play about a series of strange events on an island [and] reflects the earth-shaking transitions that defined Shakespeare’s cultural and religious context” (Edmondson 265). Todd Edmondson published his article “Prospero’s Exile and the Tempest of the English Reformation” in his fourth year as a doctoral student at the University of Louisville in Kentucky in 2010. In this article, he ties the character

Prospero in *The Tempest* to many Catholic priests at the time Shakespeare wrote the play:

Just as Prospero is presented to us as a character in flux between a former life and a future one, so the Roman Catholic priests of Shakespeare's England were also in flux. As their nation went through a religious reformation, new questions were constantly emerging about the Catholic clergy's status within a new and rapidly changing order. (Edmondson 253)

Prospero's exile is a theme that would be very well understood by most Catholics, priests or laity, at the time Shakespeare was writing this play, particularly because practicing Catholics would have felt themselves in cultural exile from the rest of England. Keeping up with all of the changes that were being imposed would be difficult, and so it is reasonable to assume that many people would have continued with what they knew. Catholicism, being the longstanding tradition, would have been the more natural choice, especially since the people were not certain if the religion of the country might be changed again.

Not only did Shakespeare paint Prospero in the same situation that many Catholic priests and lay people would likely have found themselves in at the time, but he also demonstrated some of the problems the Church itself had to deal with if it wanted to continue to function in England:

In Shakespeare's drama, Prospero must wrestle with some hard decisions about his own powers, decisions which came to bear on his return to Milan. Likewise, the Catholic Church of Shakespeare's time faced the difficult proposition of negotiating between different types of power in such a way that it might be able to minister to its faithful, amidst a shifting understanding of the relationship between ecclesial authority and political influence. (Edmondson 253)

In this way, it can indirectly be inferred that Shakespeare understood the difficulties facing the Church and its people and felt loyalty and sympathy for each, just as his audience does for Prospero.

Another way that Shakespeare links Prospero to Catholic priests and their need to hide their continued teaching of Catholic doctrine can be seen in Prospero telling Miranda about the events that led them to their exile on the island. “This King of Naples, being an enemy / To me inveterate... / Should presently extirpate me and mine / Out of the dukedom and confer fair Milan, / With all the honors, on my brother” (*TMP*. 1.2.121-22, 125-27). If Prospero is viewed as a priest in exile, Miranda would be the laity who wants to continue to know and understand her father’s teachings, just as those who continued to practice Catholicism would have wanted to hear the stories and teachings of the Church from their priest. “Like Prospero, if [Catholic leaders in England] were going to continue to exist, they would have to exist not above the community of the faithful laity, but within that community, in relative secrecy, ministering in silence to those who suffered in silence” (Edmondson 264-5). In this way, seclusion on the island can be equated to the seclusion in which Catholics would have needed to practice in order to continue following their faith. Likewise, outside the sovereignty of the King of Naples, Prospero reveals the truth of his exile to Miranda. This scene reflects the position of Catholic priests in England. In order to also illustrate the attitude of those who left the Catholic Church and a popular critique they often had of it, Shakespeare’s portrayal of Caliban, the “freckled whelp, hag-born, not honored with / A human shape” (*TMP* 1.2.283-4) can also be seen as those dissenting Protestants. “Caliban’s assertion that ‘You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse’ (*Tmp*. 1.2.363–64) shows that Prospero was equally capable of catechizing someone toward damnation” which would be something that intellectuals and Protestants would



have criticized the Roman Church and especially its corrupt priests, deacons, bishops, and cardinals of at that time (Edmondson 262).

Another scene from *The Tempest* that recalls the condition of Catholic clergy is when Prospero has to choose whether or not to give up his magical abilities. Towards the conclusion of the play, Prospero is ready to be done on the island, and is preparing to set Ariel, his spirit slave, free. He wishes to return to Naples and resume his place as Duke of Milan. If he returns, he must give up his magical powers. He agrees: "My charms I'll break" (*TMP* 5.1.32) and "But this rough magic / I here abjure... / I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book" (*TMP* 5.1.50-1, 54-7). He is willing to renounce all of his claims to controlling his world around him and begin anew.

Metaphorically, he is reborn. The symbol of this is drowning his book of magic spells. He washes away this past life and agrees to live in his newer kingdom (or in this case, dukedom). Shakespeare's imagery supports the idea that Prospero is willing to go back and live in the old world, even though times have changed. So would it be for Catholics who decided to stick with their faith and not become fully part of the Church of England. Instead, they would have to understand that they could perhaps continue in their own homes the way they used to publicly, but under Protestant rule, it was necessary to acknowledge the changes and try to continue life as if reborn.

Evidence of Shakespeare's use of *The Tempest* to portray the Catholic clergy's dilemma can also be found in Prospero's epilogue, which some scholars say demonstrates a connection to four Catholic doctrines. David N. Beauregard is a Catholic priest and Shakespearean scholar, with a Ph.D. in English from Ohio State University, and a Bachelor of Sacred Theology from the University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome. He states in his article "New Light On Shakespeare's

Catholicism: Prospero's Epilogue In *The Tempest*" that "the presence of one doctrine might perhaps amount to simple coincidence, but the presence of four distinctly Catholic doctrines in an interrelated complex constitutes rather formidable evidence of a Papist sensibility at work" (Beauregard "New..." 165-66). These four doctrines are identified by Beauregard as the uncertainty of salvation, the efficacy of intercessory prayer, the justification and remission of sin, and a reference to indulgences (Beauregard "New..."). The first of these, the uncertainty of salvation is illustrated in the lines "In this bare island by your spell; / But release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands. / Gentle breath of yours my sails / Must fill, or else my project fails" (*TMP* Epi. 8-12). Prospero realizes his survival is out of his hands and that he can only hope and pray that he be delivered to safety. He has made his choices, most recently to give up his powers and go back to Milan, but he, like all men, must in the end leave it all to providence to decide his fate. The lines "Now I want / Spirits to enforce, art to enchant; / And my ending is despair / Unless I be relieved by prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults / Mercy itself and frees all faults" (*TMP* Epi. 13-8) also offer evidence of Prospero's anxiety over the prospect of his death. If he had been speaking from the view of the Church of England, he would have had no need to worry about this because "Reformed theology saw no need for prayer for the dead, whose salvation or damnation had been decided before the moment of death", but instead his prayer is more consistent with Catholic theology in that every man's salvation is uncertain and there is no assurance, so it is necessary to pray for your soul and to also encourage others to do so.

This leads to the second doctrine, the efficacy of intercessory prayer, which is revealed when Prospero says, "And my ending is despair / Unless I be relieved by prayer" (*TMP* Epi. 15-6) and "With the help of your good hands" (*TMP* Epi. 10), in which Prospero asks the audience

to pray on his behalf. The reformed beliefs of the Church of England stated that it would have been enough for the prayer to come directly from Prospero and mediation or appeals from others is unnecessary. Prospero's appeal for intercessory prayer echoes Catholic ideology, especially the belief in purgatory.

The third doctrine alluded to in Prospero's epilogue is the justification and remission of sins. The phrase "frees all faults" (*TMP* Epi. 18) is the key to understanding the doctrine within the text. As opposed to the Church of England's view that the remission of sin is partial and gradual, the Catholic Church taught that sins were instantly and thoroughly removed and therefore implied a real and complete alteration of the soul. Protestants did not believe that souls could ever be free from all faults.

The last Catholic doctrine that Beauregard refers to in Prospero's epilogue is of the controversial belief in indulgences. This would have been a very contentious issue at the time, particularly because the Catholic Church was receiving highly critical attacks regarding indulgences and corruption from Protestants. The lines from the epilogue that refer to this issue are "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free" (*TMP* Epi. 19-20). Indulgences were paid for by Catholics who wished for spiritual intercession for either those souls who were in purgatory or for those still living that would be in purgatory someday, in order to move them to heaven. Catholics could pay clergy to pray for their salvation. Protestants denied this as one of their accepted doctrines. The idea of a man facing the end of his life and appealing for help and relief is not particularly demonstrative of a Protestant or a Catholic belief system. However, "Shakespeare's discreet use of doctrinal language is consistent with what we might expect of the sensibility of a 'church papist,' ambiguously alluding to but not explicitly stating the whole complex of doctrines surrounding indulgences" (Beauregard "New..." 170).

This allusion shows the deep and complex understanding by a man who had pondered the end of his days:

The fear of a life after death was ever present in [Shakespeare's] mind. Not only do we find this spiritual anxiety expressed in his worthy characters; it often appears in the reflections of his villains. The hereafter was an obsession that prompted the poet to pen many a memorable line. I think it is necessary to understand this if we are to fathom the mystery of redemption, as it is given to us in *The Tempest*. We may be sure the play came from the mind of a poet who was conscious of the creative power of God. (Neilson 185).

The placement of these Catholic doctrines in such an important part of the play is instrumental in supporting the claim that Shakespeare likely had Catholic sympathies. At the very least, they show that he had a deep understanding of Church doctrine. These doctrines, then, are yet another link in support of the theory that Shakespeare could very well have been a Catholic and hid his faith ambiguously in his texts.

### **Opposing Arguments**

The problem with trying to identify and assign a religious affiliation to Shakespeare is that “unlike such poets as Dante, Spenser, and Milton, Shakespeare gives us no clear window through which to see into his soul. Both Protestants and Catholics— like everyone else—can find ample evidence to claim him as their own” (Miola 25). Much debate surrounds this topic and many argue that Shakespeare was not in fact hiding his religious identity. Kathleen Doherty Fenty, who did her doctoral dissertation about Shakespeare and religion at the University of Birmingham in England, brings to light more questions about the nature of Shakespeare's religion. “Religion was a matter of life or death; and Shakespeare, like everyone else, walked a

precarious denominational line” (Fenty 23). In this way, at the very least it was important for Shakespeare to appear to be in line with the religious laws of the time, whether he was religious or not. Fenty also points out, “The theater seeks to entertain, preparing the heart and mind for reflection, while the purpose of sermons is to preach and instruct...When ideology reduces a living drama to apologetics, voices of protest will inevitably be raised” (24). Her claim is that it should not be about Shakespeare’s religion; instead, it should be about the art and the literature that he produced. Nevertheless, religion was a major factor in the culture and political sphere of the time Shakespeare lived and wrote, and his works reflect those cultural aspects. “But Shakespeare also tried to present an objective approach to Rome. For example, Franciscans are depicted for their honest vocations, although cardinals are notoriously portrayed as murderous cowards” (Fenty 24). Perhaps then Shakespeare did not really use religious subplots to illustrate his own beliefs, but rather sought to present plausible and understandable situations that mirrored Elizabethan England society.

Another position in the ever changing and shifting debate is actually more of a non-position. Dymphna Callaghan is a professor of Modern English literature at Syracuse University who resists aligning herself with any particular side of the debate. She says, “By religion what is most often meant is the very narrow sectarian divide between Catholics and Protestants” (Callaghan 2); however she also asserts that we cannot “simplify spiritual practice, and especially those acts of faith sometimes awesomely registered in literature, into the boiler-plate dismissal of institutionalized religion” (Callaghan 4). Fenty also points to the way modern day assumptions color the debate. She says, “Today most academics hold the view that Shakespeare had no religion at all” (25). Whether this is a generalization is not really the issue. It is more important to look at this as a potential position that scholars can continue to investigate, while

realizing that we will probably never know what Shakespeare's religious affiliation was, why he held that belief, or why he portrayed religion in his plays the way he did.

More alternative views to Shakespeare's Catholicism can be found in Wolfgang Weiss's article "The Debate about Shakespeare's Character, Morals, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany." This article covers Shakespeare as a person and a writer, as well as the works he produced. Weiss presents the view is Shakespeare did not fall wholly into one category of religion, but that he "certainly had the advantage...to work in a vital, Protestant country where...a true, naturally religious man like Shakespeare was free to develop his pure inner religious life without relation to any distinct religion" (Weiss 93). Another idea he offers is that "Shakespeare enjoyed that he was born and educated as Protestant. Everywhere he appears as human being, perfectly familiar with human nature. He is above illusion and superstition and only plays with them. He presses supernatural beings to serve his ends" (Weiss 93). Even those who agree that Shakespeare was a Protestant hold differing variations regarding what kind of Protestant. There is "a debate within the Protestant world, whether Shakespeare was a faithful and devout member of the Protestant church or a liberal Protestant" (Weiss 94) and still others "[criticize] all attempts to claim Shakespeare for any religious denomination or any political or philosophical ideology" (Weiss 95). Some claim that Shakespeare was neither Protestant or Catholic, nor did he hope to spread the teachings of the Bible. Instead, he was an "enlightened intellectual whose moral system was strictly secular and could be called Christian only insofar as he professed the love of men as highest value (Weiss 95). As one can see, there is a great difficulty in asserting there is conclusive evidence that Shakespeare was a writer who used his works as a way to continue either a specifically Protestant, specifically Catholic, or some other

sort of religious (or nonreligious) identity in secret in order to help him comment on the religious issues of the time.

### **Conclusion**

Although Shakespeare was living in Protestant England at the time he wrote his plays, the use of Catholic ideals and theology throughout his works can be viewed as a reflection of his mind's allegiance to Catholicism, even though he had probably outwardly identified himself as a Protestant. Persons in England at that time in history would have had to be careful not to reveal a connection to any religion outside of the Church of England. And as Francis Neilson questions, "Why should an actor of that day risk his living – perhaps his life – by declaring himself an adherent of the creed that was not sanctioned at the moment?" (184) There was so much religious turmoil that it would be unwise to be forthcoming about one's religion, especially when one was entertaining queens and kings as Shakespeare did. Substantial evidence exists, however, that "far from popular [was] the movement of Protestant reformation...in England and how it was rather an imposition from above, from the Tudor rulers with terrible threats from the law" (Milward 456). As a result, it would have been beneficial, regardless of his own allegiance, for Shakespeare to create multiple layers of religious support within his plays. "Shakespeare with his plays and poems could be shown no longer [only] as supportive of the existing 'orthodoxy' of the English Church but as subversive—and that at a time when it was more according to the public mood to be subversive than otherwise" (Milward 456). Shakespeare, then, had to find a way to make political and religious statements in a manner that would not be a direct threat to the monarchy, yet allowed him to "speak out" on the matter.

Although scholars can only speculate by looking closely at both his personal background and the background of his family, the historical context of the time, as well as digging into his

texts themselves, there is evidence that supports the theory that through clever use of hidden subplots and allusions in his dramatic works, Shakespeare was able to continue his association with the Catholic faith and comment in favor of Catholicism within a religious context, while all the while creating the illusion of ambiguity. He came from a small town that would have likely still had its religious ties to Catholicism. His family was also historically Catholic both before and after his generation. His works like *The Tempest* comment on the religious problems of the time, and did not always portray Catholic characters as evil or the enemy. He often illustrated them in a positive manner. I believe that Shakespeare was a religious man who found comfort and support in the theology of the Catholic Church. What is truly magnificent, however, is Shakespeare's ability to keep his religious identity as successfully hidden as he did, and that 400 years later, we are still trying to solve the mystery.



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