Despite being the best-known playwright of the English language, Shakespeare’s personal life is shrouded in mystery. In the absence of information, debates have ranged without conclusion about matters ranging from the Bard’s authorship of certain plays to his sexuality and romantic life. Shakespeare did not leave behind personal diaries detailing his beliefs and the everyday matters in his life, so to learn about the man, we must dive into his thirty-six plays, one hundred fifty-four sonnets, and various poems that were his gift to English literature. One matter that remains particularly elusive, and perhaps more than any other, requires such digging into the works, is Shakespeare’s religious beliefs.

Shakespeare was born into an England ruled by Queen Elizabeth I, a woman whose first initiative upon taking the throne was to put an end to decades of religious flip-flopping during the reigns of her half-siblings by declaring the Church of England a Protestant entity unattached to the Vatican. In continental Europe, Protestantism tended to appeal to the lower and middle classes, but, ever since Henry VIII made the initial break with Rome, many English commoners were reluctant to embrace the new ideas of Martin Luther and John Calvin (Beauregard 160). During Elizabeth’s rule however, recusant Catholics were treated the same way Protestants were during Bloody Mary’s, and were forbidden by the Act of Uniformity from expressing their dissident beliefs. Publicly pronouncing oneself as a Catholic could result in hefty fines, imprisonment, and even execution, like in the case of the priest Cuthbert Mayne
These circumstances meant that if a Catholic Shakespeare wished to be a successful playwright, he would not be able to practice or express his beliefs openly. Any hints or suggestions in his works that his religious inclination drifted from the Church of England would have to be subtle or well masked.

Before turning to the evidence for a Catholic Shakespeare in his plays, it is necessary to review the historical evidence. Stratford-upon-Avon in the second half of the sixteenth century was situated in a particularly Catholic region and the Bard’s mother, Mary Shakespeare née Arden, came from a particularly recusant family (Beauregard 943). A number of teachers at his grammar school were known Catholics and his first biographer, an Anglican, reported that Shakespeare “dyed a Papyst,” a seventeenth-century term for a Catholic (Colston 60). Most significant, however, is the last testament that his father, John Shakespeare, left behind:

I, John Shakspear, do here protest that I do render infinite thanks to His divine majesty for all the benefits that I have received as well secret and manifest, and in particular, for the benefit of my creation, redemption, sanctification, conservation, and vocation to the holy knowledge of Him and His true Catholic faith… (Raffel 35)

While it is impossible to prove the authenticity of this document, the “Spiritual Testament” is supported by the fact that the elder Shakespeare married into a Catholic family, was affiliated with many recusants and, in later life, saw his prosperity decline, which could very well have been due to being a recusant (Raffel 36). While all of this evidence is sparse, and does not outright prove that the younger Shakespeare was a Catholic himself, it does nothing to support the alternative theory of Shakespeare being a conforming Protestant. To see how
plausible it is that Shakespeare may have been a Catholic, we must then look to his writings. For living in a world where expressing oneself as a recusant was a threat to one’s life, the number of Catholic references in Shakespeare’s work is overwhelming. To discuss all of the evidence would easily fill a large tome but strong evidence can be uncovered in *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*.

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, published in 1603, is one of Shakespeare’s most famous works, if not the most famous. It is in one of the most memorable scenes, the purgatory scene, where Prince Hamlet comes face-to-face with the ghost of his late father, that we find the Catholic writer coming out. Contained in the words of the ghost, who is one of the characters that the Bard is himself believed to have performed on the stage, are distinct references to performing penance:

> Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin
> Unhous’led, disappointed, unaneled
> No reck’ning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head. (1.5.83-86)

Allusions to the Eucharist (“unhous’led”), extreme unction (“unaneled”), and the sacrament of penance (“reck’ning”) make this purgatory scene distinctly Catholic, something largely absent from Elizabethan drama (Beauregard 946). Although subtle, a conforming Protestant writer would have been unlikely to be inspired to write such lines. That Shakespeare chose to play this character, when, as a middle-aged man, he easily could have played Polonius or Claudius, suggests that he may have been able to identify with the Catholic theme of performing penance for one’s sins.
One scholar, John E. Curran, goes further with the ideas of Catholicism in *Hamlet* in a recent book, *Hamlet, Protestantism, and the Mourning of Contingency*. He proposes that one of the main metaphors, although quite subtly placed for obvious reasons, is that Hamlet is a Catholic “caught in a strictly Protestant world” (5), where young Danish men like the prince and Horatio study at the University of Wittenberg, known for its Lutheran tendencies. In the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, he argues, Hamlet is caught between the “To Be”—which represents Protestantism—and “Not to Be,” Catholicism. Curran says that Hamlet desperately wants to believe in the Not to Be but finds that “no matter how pleasant we find the Not to Be, with its dreams of an individual human’s capacity to oppose the sea, all must yield to the Be, to the tidal wave of what is” (35). The importance of this argument may be that we are seeing Shakespeare, a man who believes in the old Catholic way, expressing his struggle with coming to terms with the Church of England that he must embrace if he wants to survive.

The lesser-known play, *Measure for Measure*—which was likely written around 1604 despite not being published until 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death—is dense with references to Catholicism. In act two, scene three, we again witness the sacrament of penance, when the Duke, disguised as a friar, hears the confession of Juliet, a young woman whose lover and the father of her unborn son, Claudio, has been condemned to death. One of Shakespeare’s sources for the comedy was *Epitia* (1583) by Giraldi Cinthio. In this play, the character Epitia corresponds to Shakespeare’s Isabella, who is a novice nun of the Order of Saint Clare and Claudio’s sister. Epitia, however, is a secular character and, unlike Isabella, she actually sacrifices her virginity to save her brother (Beauregard 948). English Reformed dramatists often attacked monasticism by depicting monks, nuns, and friars going against their vows, but:
with Isabella and the monastic figures in Measure for Measure, however, there is no serious transgression of a vow . . . Isabella (like her source figure) could easily have been made to sin against chastity and finally marry, and the drunken Bernardine could easily have been made a friar. Shakespeare declines to exploit these opportunities. (949)

Just as easily, Shakespeare could have left Isabella as a secular character, but by making her a nun; he emphasizes that not only is chastity a virtue, but specifically it is a Catholic virtue. Measure for Measure is not the only play where Shakespeare portrays holy Catholics as virtuous. The friars in Romeo and Juliet and The Two Gentlemen of Verona are portrayed as virtuous, holy men. In contrast, the holy men in the works of Shakespeare’s contemporaries such as George Peele’s The Old Wives’ Tale (1595?) and Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (1588-89) are portrayed in a very negative light (Raffel 39-40).

Another one of the Bard’s best-known plays, The Tragedy of Macbeth, is a treasury of Catholic references. In act four, scene three, Malcolm, the son of the murdered King Duncan, describes how the King of England is able to cure disease like a saint (4.3.146-159). In Catholicism, evil is the “privation of good,” which in Catholic Renaissance literature was often affiliated with laughter. Shakespeare represents this with the three witches, who are the opposite of the Trinity (Colston 62-63). Despite being a murderer, Macbeth is very aware of sin and understands that sin is the root of suffering, saying:

But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th’ inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends th’ ingredients of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. (1.7.7-12)

The treatment of sin in these lines, and throughout the play, is distinctly Catholic. Reformers held that one’s fate was predestined since before birth, but the Catholic view is that no matter how great the temptation, sinners have the free will to determine their fate and make the decision to sin or not to sin. Macbeth is acutely aware of this when he says, “we still have judgment.” Colston explains,

Shakespeare establishes the freedom of Macbeth’s act, while acknowledging the dark influences—his wife, the witches—on his behavior. His hesitations and cold-blooded premeditation make it clear that passion doesn’t occlude intellect. If Calvinists and Lutherans ever denied the freedom of the will, Shakespeare shows which side of the theological war he is on. (71)

Finally, there is Shakespeare’s last play: The Tempest. First performed five and a half years before his death, the epilogue of the play, spoken by the main character Prospero, is often regarded as the Bard’s farewell to the theatre (Beauregard 162). It is also teeming with references to Catholic philosophy. It is a speech of a man “appealing for intercessory prayers to relieve his despair at his impending death” (Beauregard 163). To a much greater degree than Catholics, Protestants regarded mortal sins as theologically equivalent: any and all were grounds for damnation. For Catholics, however, there was a distinct separation between venial (or forgivable) sin and mortal sin. Knowing this difference is important to interpreting the epilogue. Prospero pleads:
my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (5.1.15-20)

Prospero’s “faults” are his venial sins, “you” refers to the audience that he addresses, and the “crimes” are the sins that the Reformers make no distinction of (Beauregard 165). In essence, this epilogue should be seen as Shakespeare, a Catholic, speaking through Prospero to a mainly Protestant audience and making “an allusive religious plea for prayers,” telling them “as you Protestants would be legally pardoned for your public crimes or sins, let me, as a Catholic, be set free from temporal punishment and purgatorial confinement by an indulgence” (Beauregard 171). Other language in the epilogue, such as “mercy” and “indulgence,” also suggests a Catholic leaning.

While Hamlet, Measure for Measure, Macbeth and The Tempest together provide substantial evidence for the case of a Catholic Shakespeare, they are not the only works where signs of papism may be discerned. In Cymbeline, for instance, an oracle on a scroll is sent down by Jupiter and must be interpreted by a soothsayer (5.5.433) “in a figurative not a literal manner. Although Calvin and the Geneva Bible recognized figurative reading, here we have “authorities explain[ing] sacred writing to [a] bewildered laity’, suggesting Catholic practice” (Beauregard 951). Even in the sonnets, we find the Bard leaving marks of Catholicism. For example, in Sonnet 73, he writes, “bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” (73.4). “Bare ruined choirs” are the monastic houses that were emptied several decades before Shakespeare’s birth, when King Hen-
ry VIII enacted the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The words “bare” and “late” leave us with a feeling of intense nostalgia for the now decaying abbeys where men and women came to praise their god.

With all of this evidence that Shakespeare at least sympathized with Catholic beliefs, we are left to ponder why the issue of his religion matters even matters in the first place. Isn’t it enough that he left behind so many marvelous plays and poems to be appreciated and enjoyed today? We must remember that Shakespeare was one of many playwrights and poets who wrote during the Elizabethan and Jacobean era yet he is the only one that English society holds in such high regard to this day. Why is it we remember Shakespeare but leave Marlowe, Jonson, Kyd and Middleton to gather dust on the back shelf of libraries? Perhaps it is because the other playwrights of the time, who conformed whole-heartedly to the Church of England, were unable to put to pen anything so unique and memorable as Shakespeare. Often heavy with criticisms of Catholicism and Puritanism in their plays, these poets lost a certain timeless aspect that the works of Shakespeare managed to retain. As someone whose beliefs did not align with what was expected of an English subject, feeling trapped between expressing his religion and meeting the axe or hiding it and becoming a successful playwright, Shakespeare would have been able to see the world from a perspective different to that of his contemporaries. Perhaps this is why we will always cherish and continue to read Hamlet but few will even hear of The Dutch Courtesan.

Works Cited


