

## Introduction: Shakespeare's Catholic Background

OVER THE PAST SIXTY-FIVE YEARS THE DOMINANT VIEW OF SHAKESPEARE'S theology has been fashioned from a Reformed Protestant perspective and set in the context of the "Whig" version of the English Reformation. Influential scholars have dismissed and overlooked medieval and Counter-Reformation sources or blended them with Reformed sources without attending to certain crucial differences and distinctions. Thus Richmond Noble's *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge* (1935) overlooked references to the Rheims New Testament. E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943) synthesized medieval Catholic and English Reformed sources. In *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (1963), Roland M. Frye dismissed the possibility of any Roman Catholic influence on Shakespeare, oddly omitting, for example, any mention of the purgatorial background of *Hamlet* in his list of theological topics. And R. G. Hunter in *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (1965) fused Aquinas and the Church of England into a fictive "orthodoxy" on the question of penance. More recently others have continued the trend, claiming, for example, that Shakespeare satirized and demystified monastic life and that he was "profoundly nourished" by the Book of Common Prayer, the Homilies, and English translations of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the conventional approach based on the texts and Reformed theology of the Elizabethan Church, this study explores Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of Roman Catholic theology and the revisionist history of the English Reformation. It provides positive evidence of Catholic theology in the plays, concentrating on several important points of difference in theological doctrine, sacramental liturgy, and devotional practice. Thus, the first chapter takes up Shakespeare's treatment of the sacrament of penance, a crucial point of difference between Catholic and Reformed theologians. It calls attention to numerous points in the plays where Shakespeare is at serious odds with the Homilies. There follows in

chapter 2 an examination of the representation of the action of grace and merit in *All's Well That Ends Well*, revealing the integral connection of the notion of merit with Helena's two roles of miracle worker and pilgrim. Next, chapter 3 deals with the sympathetic treatment of Franciscan monastic life in *Measure for Measure*, another important point of theological divergence that shows Shakespeare's striking departure from the conventions of Reformed drama. In chapter 4 the conception of the marriage ceremony is traced through several of the plays. The presence of Franciscan friars sanctioning marriages raises intriguing questions. Chapter 5 investigates the purgatorial background of *Hamlet* and the Catholic discourse that pervades certain scenes, particularly the encounter with the Ghost and the graveyard scene. Chapter 6 explores Shakespeare's conception of nature and grace in *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare's addition to his source, essentially the whole of act 5, again shows traces of Catholic devotional practice. Chapter 7 deals with two problematical plays, *King John* and *Henry VIII*. Finally, in chapter 8 the epilogue of *The Tempest* is analyzed with an eye to the doctrinal implications of Prospero's language and dramatic stance, particularly as he appeals for intercessory prayers, implies that justification is intrinsic, and plays on the word "indulgence." The appendices provide a detailed review of scholarship on Shakespeare's use of the Bible and the Elizabethan Homilies, alleged evidence that he conformed to the Elizabethan Church. My main purpose is, of course, to demonstrate the impact of Catholic theology on the plays, but I also want to suggest new avenues of exploration, particularly those of a historical-theological and dialectical nature, whereby the plays might be illuminated. This approach runs against the grain of much previous and current Shakespearean scholarship, which has largely assumed that a Protestant hegemony existed in Elizabethan England and as a result has not sufficiently taken into account the issues that divided Catholic and Protestant.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE DOCUMENTARY RECORD

In approaching Shakespeare's theology, one must first acknowledge that the biographical record is ambiguous at every turn. The documents of Shakespeare's baptism, marriage, and burial indicate nothing as to his religion except that he was a Christian. Very strangely there is no convincing, unambiguous evidence for his con-

formity to the Church of England. Shakespeare seems to have evaded to one degree or another any indication of his faith, a fact that suggests his Catholicism rather than his adherence to the Elizabethan Church.<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, if the plays contain references to English Protestant translations of the Bible, they also abound in references to Catholic doctrines, sacraments, and devotional practices. They contain Catholic roles, they represent Catholic schemes of the virtues and vices, and they seem to address Catholic issues (the assassination and deposition of tyrannical monarchs). As Robert Miola has pointed out, Shakespeare even projects Catholic practices onto the ancient world: "the Romans value oaths and relics; Diana's servitors practice a nun's chastity; in Ephesus a miracle occurs; authorities explain sacred writings to bewildered laity in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*."<sup>4</sup>

It has long been known, of course, that Shakespeare's family background was heavily Catholic. His mother Mary was from the Catholic Arden family. His father John concealed in the roof of his house a signed "Spiritual Testament" in the popular Roman Catholic form devised by Charles Borromeo, a document that in the recent judgment of Patrick Collinson constitutes "very nearly conclusive" evidence that he was a Catholic.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, we have long been aware that, during Shakespeare's youth in the 1570s, two out of three of the teachers at Stratford's grammar school, Simon Hunt and John Cottom, were Roman Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Hunt went on to become a Jesuit, and Cottom was the brother of Thomas Cottom, a Catholic priest who was arraigned and executed in 1582 with the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion. Thomas Jenkins, the third Stratford schoolmaster, had likely been tutored in rhetoric by Campion at St. John's College, Oxford, whose founder had strong Catholic sympathies.<sup>7</sup> After having been a fellow, Jenkins left the college without taking orders, an action which suggests Roman Catholic sympathies.<sup>8</sup> Oxford in general and St. John's in particular was notoriously papist in sympathy.<sup>9</sup> Gregory Martin, the translator of the Rheims New Testament, was a cofounder of the college. Archbishop Laud was educated there, became a Fellow in 1593, and was made president in 1611. In 1598 a former student, Sir Thomas Tresham, converted by Campion, made large donations to the library, one of which was the eighteen-volume *Opera Omnia* of Aquinas. At the very least, then, we may conclude with T. W. Baldwin that "Shakespeare is not likely to have been subjected to any anti-Catholic bias from his schoolmasters."<sup>10</sup>

But Baldwin's conclusion is surely too tame. If the Catholic tend-

encies of Shakespeare's schoolmasters must be taken into account, so also must the religious makeup of the town of Stratford itself. Patrick Collinson has observed that "It is probable that most members of this community were church papists," and not until 1585 did the town begin to be "reformed."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even much later during the Gunpowder Plot of 1604, Stratford was "the centre of [the] recusant map."<sup>12</sup> So it seems likely that a more positively Catholic education was given Shakespeare. It is difficult to imagine his education being conducted along Protestant lines, particularly under the eye of a recusant father and mother, in a heavily Catholic town, by schoolmasters who were at the very least Catholic in tendency. Elizabeth's national policy was resisted by Catholics at every turn with various subterfuges, and local Stratford, as its choice of schoolmasters suggests, probably subverted her catechetical program.

#### RECENT EVIDENCE

Over the last twenty-five years, some new evidence has surfaced and suggested even more strongly that Shakespeare was a Roman Catholic. In 1972, on the basis of the records of the Stratford ecclesiastical court for May and December 1606, E. R. C. Brinkworth concluded that Susanna Shakespeare along with Hamnet and Judith Sadler, for whom the Shakespeare twins were named, were most probably "church papists." He cautiously admitted that "although Susanna Shakespeare appears among Stratford church papists we cannot be absolutely certain that she was indeed one of them. But it certainly looks like it." Less plausibly, and somewhat inconsistently, he went on to suggest that Susanna and her father were "primitive anglo-catholics."<sup>13</sup>

Subsequently, E. A. J. Honigmann in 1985 argued that the young Shakespeare had spent some time in Lancashire as a schoolteacher in the employ of a Catholic family. This periodically resurgent theory, resurrected in 1973 by Peter Milward, then by Honigmann in 1985 and Richard Wilson in 1996, argues that Shakespeare taught in the Catholic household of Alexander Hoghton. Following the research of D. L. Thomas and N. E. Evans of the Public Record Office, Honigmann further maintained that John Shakespeare's Spiritual Testament and withdrawal from meetings of Stratford's Corporation "drives us to the conclusion that [he] was a Catholic." In 1989, after a study of the recusancy return of 1592 for Stratford, F. W. Brownlow

came to the same conclusion.<sup>14</sup> Somewhat earlier, examination of the communion rolls of the parish of St. Saviour in Southwark, carefully kept during the period Shakespeare lived there (ca. 1599), revealed that the poet did not take communion in the Church of England, a fact suggesting that like his father and daughter he did not conform.<sup>15</sup>

There is also Robert Southwell's evident connection with Shakespeare.<sup>16</sup> Southwell was a distant relative. Martyred in 1595, he had written a volume of poems, entitled *St. Peter's Complaint* (1595), with a prose preface whose salutation, "To my worthy good cousin, Master W. S.," appeared in its fully initialed form only in 1616 when it was printed abroad. The preface alludes to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.7) and to *Venus and Adonis*:

Poets by abusing their talent, and making the follies and fayninges of love, the customary subject of their base endeavours, have so discredited this facultie, that a Poet, a Lover, and a Liar, are by many reckoned but three wordes of one signification. . . . For in lieu of solemne and devout matter, to which in duety they owe their abilities, they now busy themselves in expressing such passions, as onely serve for testimonies to how unwoorthy affections they have wedded their wils.<sup>17</sup>

Southwell goes on to say that "Still finest wits, are stilling Venus' Rose, / In Paynim toyes the sweetest veines are spent, / To Christian workes, few haue their talents lent." The reference to "Venus' Rose" and the call for "solemne and devout matter" put us in mind of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), two poems written in the same stanzaic form and published before the 1595 preface to *St. Peter's Complaint*. Shakespeare's connection with the Jesuits apparently did not end there. The Blackfriars Gatehouse he purchased in 1613 had "a tradition of Catholic intrigue." At least five Jesuits are documented as having called there in the 1590s, and John Robinson, who is named in Shakespeare's will as dwelling there and who may have signed the will, was very likely the brother of the Jesuit Edward Robinson.<sup>18</sup>

All of these recent lines of converging evidence point to a Catholic Shakespeare and to a continuity of Catholicism in the Shakespeare family. Thus it is not surprising that several recent books and articles by Peter Milward, Frank Brownlow, Gary Taylor, E. A. J. Honigmann, Eric Sams, Ian Wilson, Margarita Stocker, and Richard Wilson contend that Shakespeare was a Roman Catholic, albeit not

always throughout his entire lifetime. After recently surveying all the evidence, Eamon Duffy has concluded that "whether or not Shakespeare can be claimed as a Catholic writer, he was certainly not a Protestant one," and Arthur Marotti adds more precisely that, although Shakespeare "may have outwardly conformed to the official state religion, [he] could not, and apparently did not wish to, sever his or his culture's ties to a Catholic past and its residual presence."<sup>19</sup> Even the skeptical Samuel Schoenbaum, who gives the nod to an "Anglican" Shakespeare, admits that we "need not find [a Catholic Shakespeare] too puzzling."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, one must concede that conclusive and unambiguous documentary evidence of Shakespeare's Catholicism is still lacking. I will argue that nevertheless, given Shakespeare's background, Catholic rather than Protestant theology understandably predominates in the plays.

#### REVISIONIST HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

Moreover, if we place all of these developments into the context of recent revisionist historiography of the English Reformation, which has documented a popular resistance to the Protestant Reformation, the influence of Catholicism on Shakespeare's sensibility does not appear to be at all incredible.<sup>21</sup> The work of Christopher Haigh, J. J. Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy, and others has shown that the "Whig" version of the English Reformation is largely untenable. The notion that the late medieval Church was corrupt and unpopular, that its clergy were ignorant, and that the Reformation was welcomed by the general populace and rapidly accomplished, has been rejected. It has been replaced by a notion of it as reluctantly accepted by the populace and imposed by Elizabeth and her minions. In other words, in place of a Reformation that was "fast" and "from below," we now have a Reformation that was "slow" and imposed "from above." In specific terms, this means that the Reformation did not begin to establish itself in most areas until 1580 and after.<sup>22</sup> Even then there was considerable continuity with the past in terms of liturgy, catechesis, and doctrine, so that Haigh has claimed that "for a decade or more, the Church of England was a Protestant Church with many Catholic churches; for even longer, it was a Protestant Church with many Catholic, or at least conservative clergy."<sup>23</sup> This residual Catholicism would account for Shakespeare's many references to Catholic ritual and doctrine, for example, his repre-

sentation of the sacraments of penance and marriage, and also for the odd remnants of Catholic belief we find in Spenser, as for example his conception of Extreme Unction and Matrimony as efficacious signs of grace.<sup>24</sup> Even further, when we come to questions of cultural transformation, it appears doubtful that the Italianate, baroque, and Catholic style of literature that we find in the Elizabethan sonnet, epic, and drama can be reconciled with the plain style advocated by the engineers of the emerging Protestant culture.<sup>25</sup>

However, Shakespeare's use of Catholic theology raises several new questions and presents two major problems. First, how was it possible to stage plays with Catholic features before Elizabethan audiences? Second, even more importantly, how was it possible to get those plays past government censors? Here I can only sketch some possible solutions to these two difficulties.

#### SHAKESPEARE'S AUDIENCE

If we turn to the problem of the audience, several considerations bear on the question. First of all, we know that Shakespeare's plays were sometimes put on before Catholic audiences. In 1604 *Love's Labour's Lost* was put on at Southampton House, a notorious Catholic center where in 1605 it was said "above two hundredeth pounds worth of popish bookes [were] taken about Southampton house and burned in Poules Churchyard."<sup>26</sup> In 1609–10, *King Lear* and *Pericles* were put on by Catholic players, Cholmeley's Men, at recusant houses in Yorkshire.<sup>27</sup> However, this allowance for some more or less private venues cannot account for productions in London at public theatres like the Globe. A more important consideration, therefore, is that in many respects English audiences were still Catholic or well disposed toward Catholicism, as the revisionist historians have suggested.<sup>28</sup> In July of 1603, a Spanish diplomatic report on King James's "Councillors of State . . . and other notables," possibly slanted, identified a quarter of them as favorably disposed to Catholicism, and in November of 1604, a second report by the Constable of Castile found "grounds for optimism in the favorablè reports about King James and Queen Anne, the known Catholic sympathies among many aristocrats and the increasing number of Catholics."<sup>29</sup> This latter report estimates that the religious makeup of England was one-third Catholic and that, of the other two sects, the Protestants were losing numbers and the Puritans increasing. Matthew

Hutton, Archbishop of York, complained that Catholics had "grown mightily in number, favour and influence," and a similar complaint was voiced in a letter of about the same time: "It is hardly credible in what jollity they now live. They make no question to obtain at least a toleration if not an alteration of religion; in hope whereof many who before did dutifully frequent the Church are of late become recusants."<sup>30</sup> Since those attending plays cannot have shared the Puritan hostility to the stage, it seems reasonable to suppose that Catholic figures on the stage were simply tolerated, especially if they were marginal characters or presented in a dramatically ambiguous way. The Protestant revolution was far from complete, and, as Patrick Collinson and others have shown, a truly Protestant literary culture, based on the "plain truth" of the Bible, was still in the process of formation.<sup>31</sup> Dramatic performance was affected, then, by a variety of complex circumstances that preclude our thinking of Shakespeare's plays as always and everywhere presented before a predominantly Protestant audience under the eye of rigorous Protestant censorship.

"THE MIRROR UP TO NATURE":  
CENSORSHIP AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF THEOLOGY

The second problem concerns censorship. To be sure, Elizabethan censorship had effectively forced religious and political controversy from the stage. As the role of theology in popular drama was marginalized, the theater took a more ethical turn.<sup>32</sup> In 1572 the Queen's Privy Council instructed London officials to allow "such plays, enterludes, comedies, & tragedies as maye tende to represser vyce & extol vertwe."<sup>33</sup> A decade later, with more philosophical sophistication, Philip Sidney laid out a similar program for poetry—the "figuring foorth" or representation of "notable images of vertues, vices, or what els [that is, passions]" so that the audience may see and love "the forme of goodnes."<sup>34</sup> This is in full accord with both Edmund Spenser's aim in *The Faerie Queene* to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" and with Shakespeare's dramatic poetic of "hold[ing] the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn [pride] her own image."<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, such an ethically focused program, whether for poetry or drama, necessarily carried with it concomitant theological notions of sin, repentance, providential order, natural law, an

afterlife, and so on. It would have been virtually impossible for Shakespeare to have remained free of the theological orientation of Elizabethan culture. Thus, even though the plays are largely "secular," they contain notions of Purgatory, penitential satisfaction, pilgrimage, and religious life. Franciscan friars hear confessions, preside at marriages, provide advice, and carry on benevolent intrigues. There are cardinals, bishops, parsons, all roles with a religious dimension. All of this would be excluded in a modern secular play, with its materialistic assumptions and relegation of religion to the private sphere. But such was not the case in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

It is important to realize, moreover, that, as an external regulating force, the official censors were permissive, inconsistent, and often ineffectual, although no doubt their activity had the interior effect of causing writers to exercise some measure of self-censorship.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in order to escape censorship and personal penalty, Shakespeare had to avoid explicit theological expression, in the form of doctrinal controversy or declamation, but he could expect some latitude and tolerance in the representation of Catholic matters on the stage. The example of *Sir Thomas More* (ca. 1592–93), a play in which Shakespeare had a hand, confirms this. Sir Edmund Tilney, Master of the Revels and censor from 1579 to 1610, wrote in the margin of the manuscript, "Leave out the insurrection wholly and the Cause ther off and begin with Sir Thomas Moore att the mayors session [a succeeding scene]."<sup>37</sup> Tilney objects to potentially seditious matter, but not to the sympathetically portrayed figure of Thomas More.<sup>38</sup> In other respects as well, we can discern a certain latitude given to theological expression. The final scene of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, for example, is suffused with theological implications regarding prayer, grace, and salvation. And Prospero's project in *The Tempest* (4.1.68–82; 5.1.28–32) is to bring men from sin to "heart's sorrow" and "penitence," the first step in the sacrament of penance. If theological controversy was steadily marginalized on the Elizabethan stage, the formal purpose and the moral images of drama still carried considerable theological force.

Thus, Tilney seems to have been mainly concerned with inflammatory language and possible insurrections, not with ideas and the promotion of ideological orthodoxy.<sup>39</sup> It has even been argued that between 1590 and 1625 the theater had come to be seen as politically powerless and disinterested, so that the authorities "do not seem to have thought it possible for the players seriously to disrupt

the political order."<sup>40</sup> Here we see part of the solution to the problem of how it was that Roman Catholic roles, whether of Helena as miracle-worker and pilgrim or Isabella as novice, were played before an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience. The problem recurs with Shakespeare's favorable portrayal of Franciscan friars, specifically Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Francis in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Friar Peter in *Measure for Measure*. Except for Shakespeare and John Ford, English Renaissance dramatists depict Franciscan friars as "duplicitous, immoral, and satanic."<sup>41</sup> Thus, as far as official censorship is concerned, Tilney did not object to certain theologically sensitive roles being played on the stage, but rather to seditious matter.

These two problems, the makeup of the Elizabethan-Jacobean audience and the government censorship of plays, still stand as incompletely resolved problems for a Roman Catholic interpretation of Shakespeare's work. But they do not present as large a problem as the opposite hypothesis of a Protestant author addressing a predominantly Protestant audience. If Shakespeare was a Protestant, he had nothing to lose by overtly expressing the doctrines and attitudes of the Church of England. Certainly there are some traces of Protestant influence. We must keep in mind that many English men and women would have been rather eclectic, clinging to some of the old beliefs, devotions, and practices while accepting some of the new, without the consistency of the Reformed clergy, the Jesuits, and the more fervently devout. The numerous references to the English Bible, the unfavorable treatment of Joan of Arc, the division of Psalm 114-15, the antipapal lines spoken by King John, and various references to the Psalter provide some measure of evidence. But critics favorable to this profile are driven to adduce as evidence some rather commonplace Christian doctrines. The weakness of the flesh, the authority of conscience, predestination, justification by grace, and a number of other overlapping and generalized doctrines common to Catholic and Protestant alike are employed as if they are distinct points of difference. The occurrence of such doctrines in Calvin or Luther, without a careful differentiation from an authority like Aquinas, hardly indicates anything. Consequently I have sought to concentrate on doctrinal issues where there are distinct differences, and I have tried to provide quotations from sixteenth-century authorities on both sides of the doctrinal divide that spell out those specific differences. Without such a dialectical methodology, there is a danger of assigning certainty to evidence that is merely ambigu-

ous or indeterminate. Past investigations of Shakespeare's theology have stumbled in precisely this way, probably because of the facile assumption that because Shakespeare was English he must therefore have been "Anglican" and because of a fear of producing a "sectarian" figure to either side of the "via media." But this line of investigation leaves Catholic influences out of the equation, simplifying the historical complexity of the English Reformation, a simplification and imbalance which it is my intention to redress. The question of Shakespeare's personal religious allegiance aside, it seems hardly possible for him to have avoided the influence of Catholicism, given his family background, his early schooling and life in heavily Catholic Warwickshire, and the slow pace of the English Reformation. The profile of Shakespeare as an "Anglican" is too simple and exclusive, and the profile of him as "secular" too abstracted and detached from history. A reconsideration and reassessment of Protestant, Catholic, and secular influences is clearly in order.