

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 13 (2000)  
  
**Artikel:** "Popish Tricks" and "a Ruinous Monastery" : Titus Andronicus and the Question of Shakespeare's catholicism  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99979>

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“Popish Tricks” and “a Ruinous Monastery”:  
*Titus Andronicus* and the Question  
of Shakespeare’s Catholicism

Lukas Erne

The earliest readers of Defoe’s *Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, published anonymously in 1702, believed that its advocacy of the death penalty for dissenting preachers was serious. It seemed impossible that a Dissenter could have written the pamphlet, and some of Defoe’s High Church opponents quoted from it approvingly to back up their arguments (Backscheider 99-100). Contrary to Swift’s satiric intention in “A Modest Proposal,” Defoe’s became apparent only once the secret of its authorship had been lifted. Henceforth, it was impossible not to understand Defoe’s text in a way that is diametrically opposed to earlier interpretations. Even though no single word of Defoe’s text had been changed, its signification was inverted. Rather than being different from and independent of authorial meaning, the significance attributed by readers was transformed by and largely coalesced with the meaning intended by the author.

The reception history of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, for which Defoe spent several months in prison and stood three times in the pillory, shows an extreme case of an interpretative procedure that is, I would like to argue, pervasive and inevitable rather than rare and fallacious, though it commonly has less drastic results. Preconceptions about a writer, his political stance and his beliefs open up or obstruct interpretative avenues which critics accept or refuse to explore. While for the adepts of textuality “[t]he biography of the author is, after all, merely another text, which need not be ascribed special privilege” (Eagleton 138), the reception history of texts by famous writers shows that interpretations are inextricably bound up with readings of these writers’ lives.

Rather than concentrating on Defoe, his dissenting background and the impact knowledge or ignorance of this background has had upon the recep-

tion of his writings, I will here explore the case of Shakespeare. More specifically, I will investigate the evidence for Shakespeare's Catholicism or Catholic sympathies and the way resistance to the implications of this evidence has affected the reading of both Shakespeare's life and his plays. In particular, I will examine Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus* and ask what interpretative paths open up once the possibility of Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies are taken seriously.

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Most biographers in the past have been reluctant to explore Shakespeare's possible recusancy despite the fact that the evidence for it is considerable: Several of his friends, most notably Thomas Combe and the Sadlers, were known recusants.<sup>1</sup> The Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated his narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, was issue of a Catholic family. Also, both his father John and his daughter Susanna appeared in lists of recusants, and John seems to have signed a Catholic spiritual testament. Finally, a Restoration witness affirmed that Shakespeare "dyed a papist" (Chambers, *Facts and Problems* 2.256). If we want to understand why twentieth-century biographers and critics have rarely taken this evidence seriously, we must briefly consider the legacy their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors bestowed upon them. The eighteenth century, as Michael Dobson has shown, made Shakespeare the national poet, while the nineteenth century with its "propensity to assume that poetic genius . . . must be matched by a high nobility of character" (Kay 3), turned Shakespeare into a national saint, his birthday being made to coincide providentially with that of St. George. As national poet and saint, Shakespeare's biography clearly had to live up to the expectations which the roles appointed to him entailed. To assume that Shakespeare could have adhered to the religion against which English nationalism had traditionally defined itself would have seemed preposterous.

This biographical prejudice has remained alive and well throughout the twentieth century as a look at a few of the most influential biographies will

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<sup>1</sup> Combe and the Sadlers are remembered in Shakespeare's will and appear in lists of recusants. The close friendship with the Sadlers is also testified to by the fact that the Shakespeares named their twins Judith and Hamnet after them (Schoenbaum, *Documentary Life* 76, and Mutschmann and Wentersdorf 85).

show.<sup>2</sup> As McManaway among others has shown, an investigation of the documentary evidence on Shakespeare's religious background must begin not with the poet himself, but with his father John Shakespeare, more specifically with his Catholic "Spiritual Testament." The document was found in 1757 by the master bricklayer Joseph Moseley, employed to retile the roof of what had formerly been Shakespeare's house in Henley Street. The document was derided as a forgery by Halliwell-Phillipps (399), Sidney Lee (647) and others until a Spanish version (printed 1661) of the same spiritual testament was found by Herbert Thurston in 1923. At the same time, the original was shown to have been drawn up by Carlo Borromeo, the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, a leading figure of the Counter-Reformation, who died in 1585 and was canonized in 1610.

Of course, the document tells us nothing about William Shakespeare's religious views. Supporters and detractors of its genuineness nevertheless agree on its importance. If Shakespeare's father signed a confession of faith which it would have been punishable to possess and if this spiritual testament reflects John Shakespeare's faith at a time when his son was in his teens, then the playwright's family background was not just mildly but intensely Catholic, indeed recusant. While scholars have long investigated the impact of John Donne's Catholic youth on his later works, they have barely started to explore its possible importance in relation to Shakespeare.

Impressed by the weight of the evidence, Chambers could only accept the testament as genuine. Unwilling to endorse the document's bearing upon William Shakespeare's religious upbringing, he added that "it probably dates from [John Shakespeare's] early life, and carries little evidence as to his religious position under Elizabeth" (*Facts and Problems* 1.16). Chambers gives no reason for his hypothetical dating, and it clearly derives from nothing else than a reluctance to blacken the national poet with the suspicion of a papist background. Less than two decades after the publication of Chambers' biography, evidence came to light which showed his dating to be wrong (de Groot 85-88). Rather than being pre-Elizabethan, the spiritual testament was signed by John Shakespeare no earlier than 1580, a time when William Shakespeare was approaching manhood.

In what is still the most authoritative biography of Shakespeare, Samuel Schoenbaum devotes an entire chapter to the spiritual testament. Having carefully presented the full evidence, he admits that "the document is genuine" and reached England "after 1580" (*Documentary Life* 46). Nothing in

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<sup>2</sup> For another common misreading in Shakespearean biographies which ultimately goes back to the eighteenth century, see Erne.



Schoenbaum's otherwise meticulous treatment of the question prepares the reader for his extraordinary conclusion: "But did [Shakespeare's father] in fact make such a Catholic affirmation? The faith in which William Shakespeare was raised is, after all, a matter of no small moment, to ordinary readers as well as to theologians. . . . [W]e must . . . as regards [Shakespeare's] father's Spiritual Last Will and Testament, settle (as on other occasion) for a secular agnosticism" (*Documentary Life* 46). Schoenbaum is clearly afraid to state the conclusions to which his evidence has led him. While Sidney Lee could regard the testament as spurious and Chambers date it so early as to make it innocuous, Schoenbaum, deprived of these possibilities, states not the conclusion to which the evidence has led him but that to which biographical tradition condemned him.<sup>3</sup>

If John Shakespeare was a recusant in the early 1580s, he may have sent his gifted son – to whom, as a Catholic, the entrance to the universities would have been barred – to an important Catholic household. This theory was first advanced by Oliver Baker (279-319) and has been supported by E. K. Chambers (*Gleanings* 52-56), Peter Milward (40-42), Ernst Honigmann (15-39), and Richard Wilson (11-13) who all believe that "William Shakeshafte," a player in Alexander Houghton's large Lancashire household of Catholic recusants in 1581, may be identified with William Shakespeare. This suggestion, far-fetched though it may seem at first sight, is far from preposterous. It squares with John Aubrey's assertion that Shakespeare "had been a schoolmaster in the country" (Chambers, *Facts and Problems* 1.22). Aubrey claimed to have this information from the actor William Beeston (d. 1682), the son of Christopher Beeston who acted in Shakespeare's company, a connection that seems plausible enough. The name "Shakeshafte" presents no problem considering appellations were more lax than they are today: the names of other Shakespeares appear in the records as "Shakstaff" or "Shakeshafte" and the playwright appears as "Shaxberd" in the Revels account (Chambers, *Facts and Problems* 2.371-72). Nor would it be difficult to explain how the Lancashire connection was established. John Cottom

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<sup>3</sup> For a balanced consideration of John Shakespeare's "spiritual testament" which is not afraid to state the conclusions the evidence leads to, one has to turn to de Groot's *The Shakespeares and "the Old Faith."* Of Calvinist background, de Groot, unlike some less balanced critics, did not have an axe to grind. He devotes some fifty meticulously researched pages to the question after which his view that "the document offers strong evidence that John Shakespeare was a Catholic throughout his life and that his household was infused with the spirit of the Old Faith" (110) is difficult to resist. Schoenbaum was equally biased and flawed in his discussion of John Shakespeare's appearance in a list of recusants in 1592 (38-39). For adequate responses to Schoenbaum, see Brownlow (186-91) and Honan (38-40).

taught at Stratford Grammar School from 1579 to 1581 after which he retired to Lancashire where he lived openly as a Catholic. Cottom's father was a tenant of the Houghtons and the two families were neighbours (Baldwin 480ff. and Honigmann 40-49). The theory has the additional attraction of providing an explanation for Shakespeare's interest in Samuel Harsnet's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), a long acknowledged source of *King Lear*. If Shakespeare was Shakeshafte, he may well have been acquainted with the circles Harsnet attacks in his anti-Catholic invective against alleged exorcisms (Honigmann 123-25, and Wilson 12).

It comes as a small surprise that Schoenbaum loftily dismisses the Lancashire theories as "tendentious constructs" (*Compact Life* 114). In fact, they are everything but implausible, though due to the scarcity of evidence, they cannot, pending further research, be more than conjectural. Since academic interest has now resulted in a conference on "Lancastrian Shakespeare" – at Lancaster and Houghton Tower in July 1999 – one can legitimately hope that new evidence will come to light.<sup>4</sup>

As Schoenbaum is often regarded as the "foremost Shakespeare biographer of the later twentieth century" (Honigmann x), his biased treatment of the evidence for Shakespeare's Catholicism deserves further attention. In 1606, Shakespeare's daughter Susanna appeared in a list of twenty-two people suspected of being "popishly affected" who avoided Anglican communion at Easter. Schoenbaum admits that "parishioners missing Communion laid themselves open to grave suspicions of Catholicism" and that a "third at least of the Easter Twenty-two were in fact known Catholics" (*Documentary Life* 234). He remains strangely silent about the likely implications of these facts for Susanna's parents. That Schoenbaum is aware of but anxious to play down these implications becomes obvious when he states in a later section of his biography that "even if we could definitely ascertain the religious convictions of Shakespeare's father and daughter, we would still not possess a sure clue to the poet's own faith" (*Documentary Life* 49). Not a *sure* clue, granted, but surely a clue, yet one which Schoenbaum refuses to pursue.

Schoenbaum is equally silent about the possible reason for the absence of Shakespeare's name from lists recording Easter communicants in the parish in Southwark where Shakespeare is known to have resided by the end of the century. He notes that "it is a curious fact that his name has not been

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<sup>4</sup> Note that Richard Dutton, in a recent article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, takes Shakespeare's possible Lancashire connection as a "starting-point" (1) for his investigations into "Shakespeare and Lancaster."

traced in any of the annual lists" (*Documentary Life* 163), but once more he shies away from mentioning the conceivable implication that Shakespeare was not a conforming Anglican.

Having mentioned Richard Davies' affirmation that Shakespeare "dyed a papist," Schoenbaum abruptly concludes that "such reports belong to tradition rather than to the factual record. The religious training provided for Shakespeare by his community was orthodox and Protestant" (*Documentary Life* 47). Schoenbaum dismisses Davies' Restoration account in one sentence and feels no need to investigate the possible source of his assertion. As David Beauregard has recently shown, "a very plausible line of tradition" (161) links Shakespeare to Davies, the likely mediators being the poet's daughter Judith Shakespeare-Quiney, who only died in 1662, and John Ward, vicar of Stratford from 1662-81. An extant document proves that Ward and Shakespeare's daughter knew each other personally, and Ward and Davies, both clergymen with an Oxford education and an interest in Shakespeare, may well have been acquainted. The fact that Davies was able to reproduce the gist of Shakespeare's epitaph increases the likelihood that the two clergymen met and talked when Davies visited Trinity Church in Stratford.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to argue that Davies' statement provides an answer to all questions. Its laconic brevity and directness indeed raise further questions: Did Davies – at a time when Shakespeare was not yet the "national poet" – think of the information as fairly unremarkable and thus not worthy of further comment? Or did he, as an Anglican clergyman, consider it an embarrassment to be dwelt upon as little as possible? And what of the formulation "he dyed a papist"? Did Shakespeare also grow up and live as a papist? If Shakespeare only *died* a papist, then so did Oscar Wilde and Waugh's Lord Marchmain. So I readily grant that even if the statement is accepted as true, it does not in itself settle the question of Shakespeare's religious background. Nevertheless, Schoenbaum's consistent refusal to consider the possibility of Shakespeare's papism is blatant and can only be understood as an inability to extricate himself from a biographical and critical tradition that

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<sup>5</sup> Note that, similarly, biographers long dismissed as mere "tradition" the suggestion that Shakespeare's father made an important part of his fortune from dealing in wool (as first affirmed by Rowe in 1709), which reliable evidence has now confirmed (Schoenbaum, *Documentary Life* 27).

reaches back to English anti-Catholicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

I have consciously confined myself to the documentary record so far and refrained from deriving any evidence from the plays. The danger of reading evidence into plays which then in turn hampers a fair evaluation of the biographical data needs to be resisted. The question, for instance, of whether Shakespeare's plays long for a better past and lament the direction England has taken since Henry VIII's break with Rome will be answered differently by critics depending on whether they believe Shakespeare to have been a conservative or a radical, a Catholic or a Protestant. To build too much on this kind of evidence results in a cyclical reasoning that is evidently flawed. The variety of responses Shakespeare's plays have prompted, testifying to their richness but also to the danger of ideological appropriation, is abundantly documented.

Nor is the generic mode of drama apt to convey straightforwardly any authorial view. Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a politician or a preacher, and therefore tends to be "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (219), as Stephen Dedalus put it. Nevertheless, even though we never have direct access to Shakespeare's religious views, his plays contrast with the fierce anti-Catholicism of many of his contemporaries, Munday, Nashe, Greene, Marlowe, or the author of *The Troublesome Reign*. Indeed, the friars in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Measure for Measure* compare favourably with the puritanical Angelo and Malvolio or with the Protestant vicar Sir Oliver Martext.

A considerable number of plays have been alleged to reveal Shakespeare's Catholic background, and no exhaustive survey can be attempted here. The purgatorial Ghost in *Hamlet*, "[d]oomed for a certain term to walk the night, . . . / Till the foul crimes . . . / Are burnt and purg'd away" (1.5.10-13, quoted from Wells and Taylor, eds.), is an obvious example. The specific reference to the Catholic Sacrament of Extreme Unction in the rare word "unaneled" (1.5.77) displays knowledge of a specific point of Catholic sacramental theology. *The First Part of Henry IV* is another *cause célèbre*. Falstaff, originally named Sir John Oldcastle, is a travesty of the Protestant martyr whom Foxe celebrated in his *Acts and Monuments*. This book, also known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, was probably more powerful than any

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<sup>6</sup> As the above pages have made clear, I agree with Gary Taylor's evaluation that "the evidence for Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies is convincing enough that we should be arguing about it" ("Opposition" 296).



other in shaping anti-Catholic feelings in sixteenth-century England. Not only did Shakespeare's play fall foul of the authorities – whence the change of name to Falstaff – but it also prompted another play, *Sir John Oldcastle*, co-authored by the anti-Catholic spy Anthony Munday, which presents the character in an orthodox Protestant light (Taylor, "Falstaff").

In *King John*, Shakespeare portrayed a Protestant champion in a surprisingly unfavourable light. He closely followed his source play, the anonymous *Troublesome Raigne of King John*, but conspicuously eliminated its fierce anti-Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare's changes of the source material seem also to have been aimed at mirroring near-contemporary politics, the proto-Protestant John, king by might rather than right, and his victim Arthur, thwarted claimant to the throne, being topical portraits of Queen Elizabeth and the recently executed Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots (Simpson and Campbell).<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Greenblatt has argued that Edgar's impostures in *King Lear* "bear an odd and unsettling resemblance to the situation of the Jesuits in England" and considered the possibility that the fortunes of Edgar and Edmund "resolve [themselves] into an allegory in which Catholicism is revealed to be the persecuted legitimate elder brother forced to defend himself by means of theatrical illusion against the cold persecution of his bastard brother Protestantism" (121). Discussing a recorded performance of *King Lear* by a company of travelling players in the manor house of a recusant couple in Yorkshire in 1610, Greenblatt adds that "[i]t is difficult to resist the conclusion that someone in Stuart Yorkshire believed that *King Lear*, despite its apparent staging of fraudulent possession, was not hostile, was

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<sup>7</sup> The question of the relative dates of *King John* and *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* is of importance here. *Troublesome Raigne* was long thought to have been composed first until Honigsmann argued a detailed case for *King John*'s precedence in his Arden edition. His dating first came under attack in a review of his edition by Alice Walker but was later defended by the proponent (*Impact* 60-62). More recently, Sidney Thomas has shown that *King John* features a Sheriff's unmotivated ghost entrance that can best be explained by its indebtedness to *Troublesome Raigne* where the Sheriff does play a part. Honigsmann's reply that "'Enter a Sheriffe' in *King John* is best accounted for as an insertion by the Folio editor' ('Rejoinder') was easily dismissed by Paul Werstine and by Sidney Thomas: "Why should an editor, presumably 'improving' *King John* for publication, have felt it necessary to borrow the stage direction . . . from *Troublesome Raigne* . . . thereby introducing a character who is completely unnecessary to the action, and who is given nothing to say or do?" Nor did L.A. Beaurline's New Cambridge edition (207) satisfactorily answer Thomas' argument. This important piece of evidence tips the balance of probability clearly, I think, in the direction of *Troublesome Raigne*'s precedence over *King John*.

<sup>8</sup> *King John* can profitably be contrasted with Book V of *The Fairie Queene* which also deals allegorically with the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, though from a Protestant perspective.

strangely sympathetic even, to the situation of the persecuted Catholics” (122).

In the last few years, it has further been argued that *Love’s Labour’s Lost* “shows signs of being a *roman-à-clef* about Catholic loyalism to Elizabeth” (Stocker 320), and that Prospero’s epilogue to *The Tempest* contains “a peculiar series of references . . . that are the expression of a sensibility rooted in Roman Catholic doctrine” (Beauregard 161). In April 1999, Annabel Patterson, in a paper on “Recusants and the Nation” presented at the Shakespeare-Tage of the German Shakespeare-Gesellschaft in Weimar (23 April 1999), argued that *Henry VIII* was written by a Catholic Shakespeare who was appalled by James’ religious persecutions against his fellow papists. And in a book published early in 2000, Velma Bourgeois Richmond fully explores the “affinity between Shakespeare and Catholicism” (208).

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*Titus Andronicus* is another play that can profitably be examined in the light of Shakespeare’s possible Catholic sympathies. Despite unconvincing arguments to the contrary, *Titus* is probably a very early, perhaps the earliest play by Shakespeare, and may therefore give us access to a Shakespeare who has only recently emerged from his Catholic environment in Stratford and, quite possibly, Lancashire.<sup>9</sup> As a revenge tragedy set in ancient Rome, *Titus* seems at first sight safely removed from sixteenth-century England and consequently the issue I propose to investigate has hitherto received little critical attention.

Shakespeare’s earliest tragedy has undergone a curious reversal of fortune in the twentieth century. While T.S. Eliot, early in the century, still held that the play was “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which it is incredible that Shakespeare had any hand at all” (82), more recent critics have increasingly recognized the play’s dramatic strengths following Peter Brook’s and Deborah Warner’s RSC productions in 1955 and 1987. It was notably E.M.W. Tillyard – much maligned by New Historicists and Cultural Materialists in the last twenty years – who insisted as early as 1944 that *Titus* was “an abounding play,” with “beautiful lyrical passages” and “a magnificent comic villain” (144). Eugene Waith usefully analyzed *Titus* as an Ovidian play whereas earlier critics, notably Fredson

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Bate is among those who have argued for a date as late as 1594 (69ff.). Honigmann, at the other extreme, suggested 1586 (“*Lost Years*” 128).



Bowers, only emphasized its dependence on the Senecan revenge tragedy, while Albert H. Tricomi, in another influential article, recognized one of the play's distinctive features in the literalization of its metaphors. In the finest edition of the play so far, Jonathan Bate has recently uncovered another neglected dimension of the play, its Reformation context. More of Bate below.

Another insight twentieth-century criticism has clarified is that *Titus Andronicus*, contrary to Shakespeare's other Roman tragedies *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, does not deal with a specific, well-defined portion of Roman history. Rather, it unfolds in what seems an amalgamation of historic moments, early and late, Rome at the moment of military expansion and Rome at the moment of near collapse. When Titus first enters with pomp and circumstance as he returns from another successful battle, the times seem to be those of military conquest and prowess, yet the Goths standing in Rome as the play closes suggest Roman decline if not fall.

The fuzzy historical setting is further contorted when Imperial Rome and Reformation England seem to merge at the beginning of the last act. Lucius, Titus' son, who has been exiled from Rome, has assembled an army of Goths and is ready to make head for Rome when a Goth leads in the villainous Aaron and his child and speaks:

Renowned Lucius, from our troops I strayed  
To gaze upon a ruinous monastery,  
And as I earnestly did fix mine eye  
Upon the wasted building, suddenly  
I heard a child cry underneath a wall.

(5.1.20-24)

The Goth reports the discovery of Aaron whom Lucius knows to be responsible for Lavinia's rape as well as her and Titus' mutilations. Lucius orders the execution of Aaron and his son, but the villain promises important revelations in case Lucius spares his son's life. Lucius agrees but is made to seal his promise with an oath:

Lucius	Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god. That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?
Aaron	What if I do not? – as indeed I do not – Yet for I know thou art religious And hast a thing within thee callèd conscience, With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies

Which I have seen thee careful to observe,  
Therefore I urge thy oath;

(5.1.71-78)

The two passages suffice for the moment to identify an aspect of *Titus Andronicus* which still awaits satisfactory explanation: why does Shakespeare’s Goth “gaze upon a ruinous monastery,” and why is Lucius credited with “twenty popish tricks and ceremonies”? It may not quite do to argue that these are Shakespearean anachronisms of a kind present in other plays, too. Granted, there is a Christian “doomsday” in both *Julius Caesar* (3.1.98) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (5.2.228), a “holy churchyard” in *Coriolanus* (3.3.52), penance in *The Winter’s Tale* (5.1.1-4), and an allusion to the Angelus, a prayer recited in honour of the Virgin Mary, in *Cymbeline* (1.3.27-38). But the anachronisms in *Titus Andronicus* are too frequent and consistent to belong in the same category. Besides other passages discussed here or below, *Titus Andronicus* features “begging hermits in their holy prayers” (3.2.41), a “christen[ing]” (4.2.70), “God and Saint Stephen” (4.4.42), “limbo” (3.1.149) and a “priest and holy water” (1.1.320).

Jonathan Bate, building upon an earlier article by Ronald Broude, has argued that these passages form a significant and coherent Reformation context, tying into the theory of the translation of empire (*translatio imperii*) which he sees at work in the play. According to this theory, the greatest imperial power shifts westward in the course of history – from Troy to Rome to London – and the Goths and their Germanic descendants thereby played the crucial role of liberating humanity twice from the Roman yoke, at the end of antiquity and again in the Reformation (16-21). Commenting on the beginning of Act Five, Bate holds that “[t]he Goths who accompany Lucius . . . are there to secure the Protestant succession” (21), and the play as a whole thus champions the aspirations of the English Protestant nation-state that emerges after shaking off the Roman oppression.

Although Bate was right in finding a significant Reformation context in *Titus Andronicus*, his specific conclusions seem prompted by his biased expectations rather than by what the play bears out. This is not the place to tackle the larger question of how likely an English audience at the time of the renaissance of the values and the literature of ancient Rome would have been to recognize itself in the Goths who, in sixteenth-century historiography, shared with the Vandals the disrepute of having destroyed Imperial Rome (Briggs 3). Shakespeare’s Goth, who pensively considers the waste of Henry VIII’s dissolution of the Catholic monasteries, seems particularly unlikely, however, to secure, topically speaking, the Protestant succession.

Like the famous “[b]are ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” (Sonnet 73:4), the Goth’s lines express regret, rather than sympathy, for the destruction of the monasteries.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the Goth, potential spoiler of ancient Rome, has undergone a conversion when he considers the waste of the spoliation of Roman Catholic buildings caused by England’s break with Rome. This is confirmed when the Goths finally do not attempt to destroy but instead help Lucius re-establish order and unity in it. Broude has argued that the final “regeneration of the Roman commonweal . . . has never seemed thoroughly convincing” (27).<sup>11</sup> If we believe, as he and Jonathan Bate do, that the ending should fit into a pattern according to which “the Gothic overthrow of the Roman Empire [prefigures] the Protestant break-away from the Roman Catholic Church” (30), the play’s conclusion is indeed unsatisfactory. The ending of *Titus Andronicus*, however, prefigures no such thing. Broude blames the play for not conforming to what he mistakenly considers its Protestant bias.

Bate also has to take considerable liberties with the text to make of Lucius, who observes “twenty popish tricks and ceremonies,” a champion of Protestantism. The derogatory terms with which Catholicism is seemingly denigrated are of course undermined by the identity of the speaker, Aaron, the villain. Rather than ushering in a new age in which the corrupt and divided Romans are superseded by proto-Protestant Goths, Lucius re-establishes the unity of Rome. A Roman and a direct descendant of Titus, he is hailed in the final scene as “Rome’s royal emperor” (5.3.140) and “Rome’s gracious governor” (5.3.145). The presence of his son in the play’s final moments even secures the Roman (and not the Protestant) succession beyond his own life.

In *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, Bernard Spivack argued that the central theme of *Titus Andronicus* is the threatened unity of Rome (382). While I agree with this view, I suggest that if we are sensitive to the Reformation context carefully woven into the play, the unity implied is not only that of ancient Imperial but also of contemporary papal Rome, synecdoche of the Catholic Church. The analogy, I suggest, would have been everything but far-fetched in the late sixteenth century when Rome had a multiplicity of highly charged and ambivalent, if not contradictory, meanings.

Several contemporary works, including Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (c.1599, printed 1623), Marlowe’s translation from Lucan (c.1586, printed

<sup>10</sup> See Empson’s famous analysis of this line (21).

<sup>11</sup> See also the recent critical debate about Lucius in *Connotations* 6 (1996-97) and 7 (1997-98) with contributions by A.B. Taylor, Jonathan Bate, Maurice Hunt, and P.C. Kolin.

1600), and Kyd’s closet tragedy *Cornelia* (1593, printed 1594), investigate the transition from Republic to Monarchy and its relevance to a country which, some fifty years later, was to be torn apart by a civil war involving Republicans and Monarchists. Others, such as Spenser’s *Ruines of Rome* (translated from du Bellay’s *Antiquités de Rome*), oppose the ancient splendours to what they see as the contemporary waste and corruptions of Rome. The attitude towards Rome was thus necessarily complex and divided. While ancient Rome was the Humanists’ source of inspiration, contemporary Rome was the Reformers’ whore of Babylon, but also the Catholics’ *mediatrix* of the *depositum fide* and the centre of the true Church. *Titus Andronicus*, I believe, exploits Rome’s polyvalence by fabricating an ahistorical ancient Rome interspersed with references to the sixteenth-century break-up of the Roman Catholic West.

It may be difficult to imagine today the urgency with which the question of the threatened unity of “Rome” posed itself to Catholics in the sixteenth century. Never before had Christ’s prayer “that they all may be one” (John 17:21, quoted from the *Geneva Bible* of 1560) been more dramatically disregarded. Never before had the first of the four marks of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church as defined in 325 in the Nicene Creed been more seriously jeopardized. Papal Rome had been the visible centre of the One Church in a tradition going back ultimately to the martyrdom of St. Peter – the first Pope and the rock upon whom Christ had built his Church – on the site of St. Peter’s Church in Rome. Catholic apologists in the sixteenth century did not fail to emphasize this role of Rome. In the seventh of Edmund Campion’s *Ten Reasons*, published in 1581 shortly after the beginning of the Jesuit mission to reconvert England and Wales, the Jesuit priest, who was to be martyred the year after, wrote:

Our Aduersaries do freely acknowledge (a truth so euident, that it lyeth out of the way of contradiction) that the Church of Rome was once Holie, Catholike, and Apostolicall. . . . When did *Rome* loose this Fayth so much aboue celebrated? When did she cease to be that, which afore she was? At what time, in what Pope’s dayes, by what meanes, by what force or stratagems, with what encreases and degrees did a strange Religion inuade *Urbem & Orbem*, not only the Mother-Cittie, but the whole world? (120-22)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Campion’s pamphlet was first published in Latin as *Rationes Decem* (London, 1581). I quote from the earliest English translation (STC 4535), *Campion Englished: or a Translation of the Ten Reasons* (London, 1632).

While Protestants equated Rome with the anti-Christ, the Catholics insisted that if Rome had once been the earthly centre of Christ's Church, it would always be so. One of the crucial bones of contention of sixteenth-century religious controversy, Rome – the questions of her unity and integrity or division and corruption – is similarly interrogated in classical disguise in *Titus Andronicus*.

When the play opens, Titus more than anyone else is closely identified with Rome. He is "Rome's best champion" (1.1.65), has "brought to yoke the enemies of Rome" (1.1.72) and is chosen by the people of Rome as candidate for the empery. Titus is the true centre of Rome. The fact that he is "surnamèd Pius / For many good and great deserts to Rome" (1.1.23-24) is likely to be for most spectators no more than an allusion to the legendary founder of Rome, Virgil's "Pius Aeneas." Yet English Catholics would have vividly remembered another Pius with good and great deserts to Rome: in 1570, Pope Pius V (1566-1572) had excommunicated Queen Elizabeth, thereby depriving her of her title to her kingdom and releasing her subjects from allegiance to her. In *King John*, Shakespeare recalls the same event when the Papal Legate, Cardinal Pandulph, pronounces John's sentence of excommunication in terms clearly reminiscent of the Papal Bull of 1570.

In the rest of the first act, Shakespeare shows a Rome in need of reform, undermined not only by assaults from the outside but, first of all, by corruption – "irreligious piety" (1.1.130) as Tamora puts it – on the inside. Her pleas for mercy go unheard and Alarbus, her eldest son, is ritually slaughtered. It may be significant that it is this religious sacrifice (cf. 1.1.127) which is at the origin of the ensuing horror just as the Catholic sacrifice of the Mass was one of the chief doctrinal bones of contention in the Reformation. Sixteenth-century Papal Rome was equally seen in dire need of reform by many Catholics with whom Shakespeare could have sympathized, for instance More and Erasmus.<sup>13</sup> Like these Catholic reformers, the play's close does assert, however, the need for "repair to Rome" (5.3.2) rather than a split with or a supersession of it.

While *Titus* shows the proto-Protestant Goths helping to restore peace and unity to Rome, two other plays dramatize a similar reconciliation between Rome and England or Britain: In the last act of *King John*, the English monarch "hath reconciled / Himself to Rome" (5.2.69-70), and Rome and England unite to fight off the French invasion. At the close of *Cymbe-*

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<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare's most obvious point of contact with More is the *History of Richard III* which Shakespeare made extensive use of in *Richard III* (see Jones 211-18). For Erasmus' influence on Shakespeare, see Baldwin, and Jones 9-13, 278-82.



*line*, a play set at the time of Christ's birth, Shakespeare transforms the material he found in the chronicles to make the Britons "submit to Caesar / And to the Roman empire" (5.6.462-63) and have "[a] Roman and a British ensign wave / Friendly together" (5.5.483-84). The language with which Marcus calls for peace in *Titus*' closing moments suggests a religious dimension that again ties into the play's pervasive Reformation context:

O, let me teach you how to knit again  
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,  
These broken limbs again into one body.  
(5.3.69-71)

The last line recalls the Pauline metaphor of the body as the universal church, understood by papists as being the Catholic, that is universal, Church. As St. Paul puts it in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

For as the bodie is one, and hathe many members, and all the membres of the bodie, which is one, though they be many, yet are but one bodie: euen so is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one bodie, whether we be Iewes or Grecians, whether we be bonde, or fre. . . . For the bodie also is not one member, but many. If the fote wolde say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the bodie, is it therefore not of the bodie? And if the eare wolde say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the bodie, is it therefore not of the bodie? . . . But now are there manie membres, yet but one bodie. And the eye can not say vnto the hand, I haue no nede of thee: nor the head againe to the fete, I haue no nede of you. . . . God hathe tempered the bodie together, and hathe giuen the more honour to that parte which lacked, Lest there should be anie diuision in the bodie. . . . Therefore if one member suffer, all suffer with it: if one member be had in honour, all the members reioyce with it. Now ye are the bodie of Christ . . . (12:12-27)

The body is thus St. Paul's central metaphor for the Church to express the unity of all her members not only to Christ – "the head of the body of the Church" (Colossians, 1:18) – but also among each other as part of the same body. Now the Reformation resulted in what Roman Catholics considered a mutilation of the Pauline body as several members cut themselves off from communion with the one Church. It is thus particularly appropriate that the play's central visual image consists of a mutilated body, that of Lavinia, and it is surely no accident that she is referred to as "martyred" (3.2.36), a charged term at the time considering some two hundred English Catholics died for their faith in the last two decades of the sixteenth century (Sullivan



32).<sup>14</sup> Called "Rome's rich ornament" (1.1.55) before the rape, she later enters "her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished" (2.4.0.2-3), as a stage direction puts it. She is the most eloquent but by no means the only visualization of the Pauline "diuision in the bodie." In Act One, Lucius exits with Alarbus in order to "hew his limbs" (1.1.129), in Act Three, Aaron "cuts off Titus' hand" (3.1.190.1), and in Act Five, Titus promises Chiron and Demetrius to "grind your bones to dust, / And with your blood and it I'll make a paste" (5.2.186-87), a project he has carried out by the beginning of the last scene. When Marcus wants to "knit . . . / These broken limbs again into one body" (5.3.69-71) after all the literal bodies, including Lavinia's and Titus', have perished, the metaphorical body he refers to is the unity of Rome with the additional resonance of the Pauline body, the Church, reunited around the "popish" (5.1.76) Lucius.

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*Titus Andronicus* appeared in print in 1594. The title-page states that "it was Plaide by the Right Honourable the Earle of Darbie, Earle of Pembroke, and Earle of Sussex their Seruants." Andrew Gurr (40-41) explains that the sequence of companies on the title-page probably indicates in chronological order Shakespeare's changing theatrical allegiances in the years prior to 1594 when he became a member and shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. This suggests that *Titus Andronicus* was originally written for the company of Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, who became the fifth Earl of Derby on his father's death in 1593.

Ferdinando Stanley's Catholic credentials are even better than Shakespeare's. The *Dictionary of National Biography* points out that "[f]rom 1591 some of the catholics cast their eyes on him as successor to the crown in right of his mother, Margaret Clifford. . . . In 1593 catholic conspirators abroad sent Richard Hesketh . . . to persuade him to set up his claims, promising Spanish assistance" (54.67). When the plot was discovered by government spies, Stanley informed against Hesketh, thereby saving himself. Hesketh was executed shortly after. Stanley unexpectedly died a year later, and rumours had it that the Earl had been poisoned (Honigmann, "*Lost Years*" 37-38, 59ff.). The evidence suggests that Shakespeare and Ferdi-

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<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare's reference to those "who die for goodness, who have lived for crime" (Sonnet 124:14) has often been understood as an allusion to Catholic martyrs.

nando Stanley may both have led successful and active public lives while secretly conserving Catholic links and sympathies.

In recent decades, critics have worried less about Shakespeare's religious stance than about his political one, fabricating a Shakespeare of their own making – be he a conservative or a radical – along parameters more relevant to the twentieth than to the sixteenth century. A Shakespeare with an acute political awareness but complete religious agnosticism and disinterestedness is an anachronism. Describing the situation of a sixteenth-century Englishman amidst confessional debates and persecutions, Gary Taylor wrote that "[i]t was impossible not to have a position, and any position entailed an opposition" ("Opposition" 288). The necessity of having a position derived not only from the socio-political situation upon which any confessional adherence impinged, but also from sixteenth-century religious beliefs. Several centuries before the rise of ecumenism, the one thing people of different confessions were likely to agree on is that adherence to the right or the wrong faith was a matter of saving or forfeiting one's soul, a matter, literally, of life or death. The psychic pressures on someone like John Donne, who converted from Catholicism to Anglicanism, can occasionally be glimpsed in his poems, particularly in the Holy Sonnets. The sixteenth-century attitude to beliefs was the precise opposite to the modern "anything goes," and a modern critic will do well not to underestimate its impact on sixteenth-century literature.

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I have argued in this article that the time is ripe for us to take seriously the evidence which strongly suggests Shakespeare's Catholic upbringing and, quite possibly, lasting Catholic sympathies. I have proposed to question both the traditional, Protestant and the recent, agnostic bias with which Shakespeare is often credited. Not that I hold that the evidence conclusively suggests Shakespeare's papism, nor would I like to encourage readings that plunder Shakespeare's complete works for crypto-Catholicism so as to yield up finally their real meaning. There is no doubt that *Titus Andronicus* is first and foremost a daring dramatic investigation of violence, of suffering, and of government. Yet occasional hints surfacing here and there may well converge to ulterior, less visible levels of meaning for which only an awareness of Shakespeare's likely religious adherence may prepare us.

Innocuous enough for the inattentive, yet meaningful for the insider, the Reformation context in *Titus Andronicus* is just such an additional layer of meaning which Shakespeare's Catholic sympathies may have prompted him to weave into some of his plays. It would be foolish, however, to argue for the presence of more than a fairly non-committal, optional meaning at which the play does no more than hint. To expect some sophisticated crypto-Catholic message to which the necessary key can provide access is not just to misjudge Shakespeare's dramatic art but also to reckon without the intense, religious pressures of his time. In Shakespeare's England, Roman Catholicism, as Arthur Marotti has recently put it, "was cast as the hated and dangerous antagonist" (37). The "Act to retain the Queen's Majesty's subjects in their due obedience" of 1581 had defined reconciliation to Rome as treason. Now Elizabethans were shrewd readers, always on the lookout for topicality and more likely to find it where it was not intended than to miss it when it was. Greville, it may be well to recall, destroyed his play on Antony and Cleopatra, fearing that its topicality (or what could be understood as such) might get him into trouble. So Shakespeare had to tread carefully if he wanted to portray Catholicism favourably in his plays.

Graham Greene held that Shakespeare's plays left "a vast vacuum where the Faith had been" and argued that an "old Rome has taken the place of the Christian Rome" (127). Even though Shakespeare does this on the surface, I have tried to show that he reintroduces Christian Rome in the guise of old Rome. Perceptive rereadings of Shakespeare that bear in mind the possibility that Shakespeare may have had Catholic sympathies are a *desideratum* which recent biographical research has only made more apparent. They might well allow us further glimpses at the possibilities and the limits of communication – imposed by the hysteria of religious persecution during the post-Armada years – in what has been called "the drama of Catholic survival" (Wilson 12).

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