

Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004. Pp x, 326.

Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance*, it must be said at once, and all at once, is an important, difficult, and problematic book. It is important because it offers a series of historical contexts that together strongly suggest that Shakespeare's family occupied a social position with unusually close, strong, and no doubt dangerous connections to recusant politics and Catholic resistance in the face of the Protestant 'hegemony' of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The cumulative evidence in Wilson's book forces us at least to qualify Anne Barton's objection, via an 'eminently sensible conclusion' by James Shapiro, that any identification of the Shakespeares as secretly Catholic or definitely Protestant 'misses the point that except for a small minority at one doctrinal extreme or other, those labels failed to capture the layered nature of what Elizabethans, from the queen on down, actually believed'.¹

Shapiro's is admittedly a helpful point, especially regarding the queen herself; even a short study like David Starkey's *Elizabeth: The Struggle for the Throne* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001) underlines the complexity of Elizabeth's religious position, from her adolescent interest in reformed doctrine to her increasing conservatism in later years. In fact, the complexity of her ideological position, not to mention the political pressure she experienced from various factions, renders questionable those moments in *Secret Shakespeare* which come close to demonizing her, rather simplistically, as a persecuting Protestant tyrant. Nevertheless, what Elizabethans 'actually believed' and what they actually got up to politically are two different things, and Wilson convincingly traces significantly active forms of political resistance very close to the supposedly sleepy, idyllic pastoral world of sixteenth-century Stratford.

It is not necessary, as a reader, to credit all of Wilson's claims in order to find the overall picture he paints worthy of continued scholarly attention. I for one find the general examination, by Wilson and previous commentators, of the 'Spiritual Testament' linking Shakespeare's father to a secret but recalcitrant Catholicism as more or less clinching its case, in spite of the unfortunate loss of the original hand-written copy. On the other hand, the suggestion that William Shakeshafte, a player kept by the Houghton family in Lancashire, is now confirmed 'beyond reasonable doubt' (49) as identical with the playwright, still raises reasonable doubt, in spite of the valid and interesting

connections Wilson establishes between Catholic relations in Warwickshire and Lancashire. While these are probably the two most famous pieces of the puzzle concerning Shakespeare's Catholic origins, Wilson also convincingly focuses on other key historical episodes which have been curiously downplayed by scholars, such as the application by John Shakespeare in 1599 to the Garter King of Arms for permission to combine his arms with his wife's family's, the Ardens. To Wilson, this suggests 'not the arrivism of the Shakespeares but their temerity in aligning themselves at this moment with one of the most notorious Catholic families in all of England' (104). He goes on to consider the connections between the Somerville Plot to assassinate the queen and the machinations of the same Warwickshire Ardens. Wilson's book constitutes a kind of minor treasure trove of these kinds of historical anecdotes; it is as a sourcebook for such information that it will hold its importance in Shakespeare studies for the foreseeable future.

While scholars will, and should, continue to consider this type of evidence, and continue to evaluate its significance, the book is less 'user-friendly' than it could be because of the opacity of its arguments and the uncertainty of its development. Six of the chapters have appeared previously as articles, and Wilson has not made much of an effort to narrativize the overall argument of the book. Certain examples and claims awkwardly recur with no acknowledgment of their repetition, such as the quotation from the Puritan John Speed, associating Shakespeare with Robert Parsons (5, 65, 126, 206). Additional signposting at the beginnings of each chapter would also aid the reader in following the stages of the argument; it is curious, for example, that the chapter whose main rhetorical purpose is to draw a parallel between Prospero and an illegitimate son of Robert Dudley introduces the latter abruptly as 'an exiled English duke' eight pages in, and only then goes on to explain who he is (or was).

Wilson also has the habit of jumping back and forth between playtexts, and of apparently shifting focus even in the course of a single paragraph, which can be bewildering. The density of his historical allusions can be overwhelming. Given Wilson's subtly expressed contempt for the 'Americanization' of early modern studies, this may be deliberate; certainly, this North American reader often desired a clarification and expansion of references to the English social context. For example, the concluding paragraph on *Macbeth* takes me from a 1617 masque at Hoghton, performed for James I; through a quick review of the Lancashire gentry's flirtation with rebellion over the previous fifty years; through that 'coded edict' of Catholic toleration, the (anti-Puritan)

Book of Sports; to James's summoning of the surviving Lancashire witches; to a reference in *Macbeth* to Southwell and others, suggesting Shakespeare's association of 'martyrdom with conspiracy,' which raises a significant allusion in *The Tempest* to 'Mistress Line,' apparently 'the Jesuits' aged landlady,' whose execution by hanging offers us a final enigmatic image of Father Garnet ripping pieces of her stockings for relics, leaving her heavily bandaged legs exposed as 'thin as rope'. At this point I need, I confess, an expanded social and historical contextualization for what strikes me at times as 'stream of consciousness' criticism.

But it is Shakespeare's increasingly negative reading of 'martyrdom' which raises perhaps the most problematic aspect of Wilson's thesis. While he establishes convincingly a high frequency of recusant zeal in Warwickshire and Lancashire, one can, I think, imagine a Shakespeare more alienated than Wilson implies from these ideological and social origins – not to mention one more cynically opportunistic. The description offered on the back blurb by Greenblatt of a Shakespeare 'guardedly loyal to the Catholic faith' might seem an easy assumption in the light of all the textual and historical evidence amassed here. Yet the murky narrative offered by Wilson renders even this generalization questionable. Shakespeare, according to Wilson, became increasingly critical of Catholic extremists like the Jesuits, in a political move supposedly aimed at recuperating the reputation of more moderate Catholics. However, the recurrence of such potentially 'proto-Protestant' elements in Shakespeare's plays could lend itself to a very different kind of argument, with just a slight shift of emphasis. In fact, this study suggests for me that Shakespeare as an artist was reacting *to*, not *against*, the Reformation. In spite of the richness of historical detail offered by the book, its readings, in the final analysis, strikingly and paradoxically work to narrow our view of Shakespearean texts which for hundreds of years have fascinated through the profundity of their psychological and political insights.

In conclusion, we might pause to reflect on the often highly loose connection between historical conditions and their imagined or fantasized versions in contemporaneous literature. How many will rest satisfied with a *Macbeth* in which the pilot's thumb can only allude to the one body part of Edmund Campion which disappeared into the relic-hungry crowd at his execution, so that 'the effect of flaunting [it] at a witches' Sabbath must have been to taint all who found a meaning in martyrdom, whether of treason or of truth' (193)? What of a *Tempest* which primarily clarifies the political predicament and sufferings of one Roberto Dudleo, pretended Duca di Northumbria,

and (for a moment in history) the hopes he offered the English Catholic community? Where these innocent questions ultimately lead may be, in fact, the whole issue of the real purpose of historicizing in literary studies. Our increasing knowledge of historical contexts must surely be integrated with an acknowledgement of the issues within texts that have made them perennially interesting and significant from changing cultural viewpoints. For me, Wilson shuts down one extremely important facet of Shakespeare's art when, in his introduction, he attacks a construction of the playwright that 'serves the ideological function of annexing the plays to the dominant Anglo-Saxon discourses of populism and individualism' (3). Shakespeare's social origins within a persecuted Catholic community may certainly explain his unusual political circumspection, especially when compared to such artists as Marlowe and Milton. But to ignore his deep engagement with the new masculinity and the whole question of increasing personal agency on the grounds that such themes have been falsely imposed by scholars with 'Protestant' political agendas is to miss much of the meaning and relevance of Shakespeare's artistic output. Possibly the playwright's alienation from his parents' families only rendered his engagement with these issues more complex and acute. By energetically exploring this 'possibility' we can work through the relevance of the social contexts established by Wilson without starkly limiting the meanings of texts to the topical allusions which, while sometimes providing fresh insights, often constrain this critic's readings of Shakespeare.

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Notes

- 1 Anne Barton, 'The One and Only', *New York Review of Books* 53.8 (May 11, 2006).