

WAS SHAKESPEARE A CATHOLIC?

Whether Shakespeare was a Catholic is and will always be a moot point. The only thing we can say with any certainty is that his grandfather was. The only way we know that is because, until Henry VIII fell out with the Pope, everybody was.

Shakespeare had the advantage, as a writer, of living at a time when, thanks to the tolerance of Elizabeth I and her love of dancing, nostalgia for old England, which meant Catholic England, was permitted. He could write, in one of his sonnets, a lament for the destruction of the abbeys ('Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang') and he could put into the mouth of Sir Toby Belch resentment of Puritans ('Dost think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?')

What Sir Toby was referring to was not cakes and ale but Cakes and Ale, an event in the church calendar which had been suppressed by the Puritans and was greatly missed, as much as if not more than the church buildings they had destroyed and the statues they had defaced. What touched Shakespeare even more closely perhaps was the suppression of the old Mystery Plays. The last great peasant rebellion, which took place in Norwich in 1549, began on the day of an illegal performance of the Corpus Christi plays at Wymondham. The looting of stones from Wymondham Abbey and the theft of common land (they called it enclosing then, we call it privatisation) were among the many grievances the rebels listed in their petition to the king.

Robert Kett's occupation of Norwich, like Robert Aske's occupation of York in what became known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, were not isolated events. The discontent of ordinary people led to numerous protests, or 'risings' as they were called, all over England. There were 40,000 men camped on Mousehold Heath outside Norwich and at six weeks it was the longest lasting of all the risings. But it came to nothing, except the sight of Robert Kett hanging in chains from the walls of Norwich Castle.

The historian Eamon Duffy, who happens to be a Catholic, documented the response of ordinary people to these changes in a book called *The Voices of Morebath*. It tells us, indirectly, more about Shakespeare than most books of literary criticism and does so on the basis of records kept by a parish priest called Christopher Trychay (pronounced 'Tricky') from 1520 to 1574. Morebath was a small village in Devonshire, a county which also had its risings. 'Christopher Trychay's accounts,' Eamon Duffy writes in his introduction, 'provide us with our only direct evidence of the motives which drove hitherto law-abiding West Country men into a disastrous rebellion against the Crown which left at least three thousand men dead and the West Country traumatised.'

R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* provides other insights into the social and religious revolution which had begun a few years before Shakespeare was born and was still going on in his lifetime. Anyone like me, with a grandfather who volunteered in the First World War and a father who was called up in the Second, knows that people want to forget things like that. They don't talk about them. Shakespeare never wrote directly about contemporary events. But to think that means he didn't think about them and wasn't influenced by the experience of his father's and grandfather's generation is to forget that he was human and believe only what you read.

Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, is about a man trying to come to terms with his mistreatment by people whom he should have been able to trust. Should he take his revenge on them or should he forgive them?

Shakespeare begins the play with a stark depiction of the difference in attitude and morals between ordinary people (the Boatswain and other Mariners) and nobles (Antonio and Sebastian). When the storm breaks, the nobles are alarmed. 'Good boatswain, have care. Where's the master?' The mariners just want to be left to get on with their job. 'I pray now, keep below.' Gonzalo, the most reasonable of the Boatswain's passengers, reminds him that one of them is the King of Naples, to

which the Boatswain replies, 'What cares these roarers for the name of king? To cabin: silence! trouble us not.' Gonzalo takes this in good part. He says, 'I have great comfort from this fellow,' and makes a joke of it. 'Methinks he hath no drowning-mark upon him; his complexion is perfect gallows.'

These exchanges are sometimes given less attention than they deserve. They need to be clearly heard over the noise of the storm, which after all is still only beginning. When Gonzalo follows the others below decks, the Boatswain goes on giving orders to the Mariners to deal with the worsening storm and, when the nobles come back on deck, he doesn't hide his impatience or hold his tongue. 'Yet again! what do you here? Shall we give o'er, and drown? Have you a mind to sink?' Sebastian and Antonio object to being spoken to in this way by an inferior. Sebastian: 'A pox o' your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!' Antonio: 'Hang, cur, hang! you whoreson, insolent noise-maker, we are less afraid to be drown'd than thou art.' The Boatswain's not unreasonable reaction is to say, 'Work you, then.' In other words, 'You do it!' The class war in Tudor England.

What follows, after the storm, is the long speech in which Prospero rehearses his own history. This is a history, not of class war, but of war between brothers, who happen to be nobles but could be anyone, a story of personal ambition, greed and betrayal. As the significance of the first scene can be lost, if not deliberately hidden, beneath the noise of the storm, so the significance of Prospero's speech can be played down by directors afraid of losing the audience's interest and wondering what could have possessed Shakespeare to give Prospero such a tedious speech in the first place. So they play Miranda's lines for laughs and tell Prospero to get through his as quickly as possible.

The mistake is to think that forgiveness comes easy to Prospero. Why should it? The story he tells to Miranda should be told in a way that makes the audience realise that he has told this story to himself many times and only recently come to that state of grace (to call it by its Catholic name) which will allow him to forgive. He could as easily have used his magic to get his revenge.

*The direful spectacle of the wrack, which touch'd
The very virtue of compassion in thee,
I have with such provision in mine art
So safely order'd, that there is no soul -
No, not so much perdition as an hair
Betid to any creature in the vessel
Which thou heard'st cry, which thou saw'st sink.*

If the audience is left thinking that this was an easy thing for Prospero to do, the whole meaning of the play is lost. He has had to fight against every human instinct to show mercy instead of taking revenge. 'Mark his condition, and the event,' he says to Miranda, telling her how his brother treated him, 'then tell me if this might be a brother.' He ignores Miranda's comment that 'Good wombs have borne bad sons' and goes on with his story. When he calls Ariel to hear his account of the shipwreck and asks, 'But are they, Ariel, safe?' and Ariel replies, 'Not a hair perish'd,' how should he react? A moment's hesitation? A hint of regret?

A few moments later, Ariel begins a dispute with him about the terms of his employment.

*Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains,
Let me remember thee what thou hast promis'd,
Which is not yet perform'd me.*

Soon they are embroiled in a bitter argument which ends only when Prospero threatens his servant with the most cruel punishment.

*If thou murmur'st, I will rend an oak,
And peg thee in his knotty entrails, till
Thou'st howl'd away twelve winters.*

Are these the words of a kind, forgiving man?

Shakespeare was neither Catholic nor Protestant, he was a poet and a playwright. He gave people voices and let them speak for themselves. The conflict within and between the characters in his plays is always a conflict of loyalties based on differing views of who owes what to whom - monarch and subject, father and daughter, master and servant. He wrote in a brief interval of peace between peasant rebellions and civil war. In his last great work, he gives us Catholic magic, Protestant conscience and Renaissance humanism, all rolled up in the complex poetic metaphor that is Prospero.

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