



Is Prince William, the current heir to the British throne, a direct descendant of William Shakespeare? Prince William's mother is the late Diana Spencer, whose family can be traced to Baron William Spencer of Wormleighton, who, in 1615, married Penelope, the (illegitimate) child of Elizabeth Vernon and... William Shakespeare. That none other than Shakespeare was Penelope's father is only one of the many breathtaking disclosures found in a biography of William Shakespeare, issued in 2007 in an updated English translation by Chaucer Press.

In a previous article about new proof regarding the hypothesis that Shakespeare was an underground Catholic (titled "The Shakespeare Code"), I quoted Hildegard Hammerschmidt Hummel, professor of English literature and cultural studies at the University of Mainz, Germany. The book I referred to most was *The Hidden Existence of William Shakespeare: Poet and Rebel in the Catholic Underground*, published in 2001 in German and never translated into English. Now I would like to point at Hammerschmidt-Hummel's extensive biography of the English poet, which is available for the English reader under the title *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*.

The impressive volume contains 420 atlas-size pages and 195 mostly-color photos and illustrations. Its extensive chronological outline of Shakespeare's life includes valuable historical background information, but above all a very detailed exposé of what recent research has revealed about the English playwright. The author shares step by step the result of meticulous studies of historical documents, pieces of art and Shakespeare's own works.

For instance Hammerschmidt-Hummel unveils how the mysterious "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's sonnets can be identified with Elizabeth Vernon, who married Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, although she was already pregnant. Besides textual hints in the sonnets and historical data, the author has discovered the face of a man in the *Portrait of Countess Elizabeth* on the subject's right elbow a hidden hint by the (unknown) painter "at the presence of a lover." His facial features have

been identified by a German criminologist “as identical with those of William Shakespeare.”

Moreover, an analysis shows that the woman in this portrait is identical with another painting called *The Persian Lady*, which has written on it the text of a sonnet. “Linguistic and literary analysis has revealed that it must have been written by William Shakespeare,” she writes, “turning out to be the hitherto missing final sonnet of the ‘Dark Lady’ sequence.” And this would then identify Shakespeare as her unhappy lover, Penelope his daughter, and Prince William his descendant.

Apart from these and many other surprising discoveries, the whole work provides an abundance of material to substantiate the theory that Shakespeare was and remained a Catholic throughout his life, a fact that offers “conclusive answers to many of the unresolved problems of the Bard’s life” and allows “unexpected insights into Shakespeare’s plays,” she writes.

Robert Miola, professor of English at Loyola College in Maryland, states in his article “Shakespeare’s Religion” (May 2008 issue of *First Things*): “The evidence for Shakespeare’s biographical Catholicity presents nothing like proof but only intriguing possibility.” While Miola illustrates plenty of Catholic tendencies within Shakespeare’s works, he is reluctant to admit the substantial historical evidence.

Much less credit is given to this cause by Alan Jacobs, professor of English at Wheaton College. In a spirited article titled “The Code Breakers,” published in the August/September 2006 issue of *First Things*, Jacobs takes a very critical stand. While he cannot be blamed for not having actually read the *Catholic Underground* book by Hammerschmidt-Hummel in German, this should not lead him to assume that she is offering little more evidence about Shakespeare’s Catholicity than some obscure “codes” á la Dan Brown in his works. Jacobs ridicules some examples of naive “code-breaking” attempts in Harry Potter or the Bible, and rightly so.

Insinuating, however, that Hammerschmidt-Hummel is among those who are falling into a “ceaseless over-reading of trivia” and lacking true understanding that “is achievable only by years, even decades, of scrupulous attentiveness to work

after work after work,” and those who “tell us that we don’t need to read carefully or think hard or labor for years on end” — this would not do justice to the scholarship she has shown in her present work.

“This Shakespeare biography is a fruit of a decade of research of labors,” she reports in the afterword. A careful review of her study will certainly come across hypotheses and theories, but the weight of the arguments as a whole, “applying interdisciplinary research methods from fields including medicine, physics, botany, criminology, architecture, history of art, archaeology, paleography, jurisprudence, theology, historiography, linguistics, and cultural and literary studies,” lead to conclusions that can’t be dismissed. Its many small pieces make up a mosaic. This is not a *petitio principii* (that one only finds what one has previously decided to find) work.

It is interesting that Jacobs accuses the “code breakers” of “supposing something to be true that there is simply no reason even to suspect is true” and then looking “for any evidence that might be construed as supportive of that supposal while resolutely ignoring any evidence that might be construed as refuting that supposal.” Doesn’t it sound like a contradiction when a few paragraphs later, Jacob himself concedes that there are “good reasons, biographical and even textual, to suspect that Shakespeare was a Catholic”? And then he enumerates data about the Catholic environment and relatives among which Shakespeare grew up. He will be pleased to find many more of these good reasons in *The Life and Times*.

The one “textual reason” Jacobs himself quotes and seems to consider acceptable (or, at least, as he writes, “telling”), is from Hamlet with a reference to purgatory. There are many more, as Hammerschmidt-Hummel and Robert Miola can show. But if there are any “codes” or hidden messages in Shakespeare’s works, the fact that they are often overlooked (or interpreted in contradictory ways) is not an argument against them. What makes a code a code is precisely that it cannot be easily detected, and the ambiguity of a text reveals rather the genius of the codemaker. Literary texts, especially if fictional and written in a time of religious warfare, in themselves are certainly not sufficient for knowing what the author really thinks. But if Shakespeare was a Catholic, this would be reflected in some way in his work, be it intentionally (encoded) or not. And if his works contain elements and passages that can best (or better) be understood by supposing that the writer was Catholic, why not admit them as an additional clue that he actually was?

Jacobs makes the following comment at the Anglican blog TitusOneNine: "*The Da Vinci Code*, *the Gospel of Judas*, and the new Shakespeare-was-a-closet-Catholic books all demonstrate just how eager readers are to believe in secret meanings. I am always amazed at how ready people are to accept claims that every single reader of the most-read books in history — every artist, every scholar — has managed to miss the real truth ... until today. Give me a break."

Break granted. During the break, Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel's new Shakespeare biography might make for very profitable reading.

William Shakespear