

Asquith, Clare. 2005. *Shadowplay*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005. pp. xvii + 348. £18.99.

Wilson, Richard. 2004. *Secret Shakespeare*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 10 + 326. £47.50 hb, £15.99 pb.

Beneath the smokescreen of the invisible author, generated first by Shakespeare himself, then by those who saw the life in the works, and finally by critics who declared the irrelevance of the author, a great deal is known about the dramatist, and most of it suggests that he was a believing Catholic whose plays contain elaborately encrypted statements of regret at the faith's passing, delight at its secret continuity, and encouragement if not direct incitement to its revolutionary reimposition. In different ways, for different readerships, these volumes take this as their central argument.

Clare Asquith's book is a chronological excursion through the plays to explain how the code works. In *The Comedy of Errors*, the separated twins represent the Catholic church in exile in continental Europe and the bereaved, deprived English nation, a pattern repeated, with daring allusions to the Queen, in *Twelfth Night*. In *Othello*, the moor ('dark') is the protestant who destroys, through the veil of legal necessity and 'the cause', the Catholic ('fair') Desdemona, who on one level represents the *Madonna Vulnerata*, a statue damaged by English troops in the attack on Cadiz in 1596 and later worshipped as an icon of the despoliation of the English church. Later plays make the symbolism less direct, and Asquith is at pains to show how the code has been concealed or doubled after the accession of King James. All of this is convincing in its way, and the symbolic levels are hard to refute; but the book is strangely unsatisfying for several reasons. One is the lack of attribution: often, points are supported by 'resent research has shown' or 'many have argued'—the disturbing passives against which we all warn graduate students. Another is the reductive desire for simple solutions—Hamlet is, quite simply, Sir Philip Sidney, case closed. It is inappropriate in a non-specialist work to regret the absence of issues that have concerned Shakespeareans for the past two decades, or their deconstructive uncertainty; but the positivism the book displays has the cumulative effect of undermining rather than reinforcing its arguments. Odder still is the presence of a glossary, which explains the coded meanings of several words in the plays and in contemporary crypto-Catholic writing. Since so much of the book would

seem to rest on this, why is it presented as an appendix, and why is such limited explanation given of how the words acquired their meanings? Writing for a wide audience clearly makes its own demands, and in many respects Asquith fulfils them; but when the key arguments are undermined in consequence, the whole project suffers.

Richard Wilson's book is largely constructed of reprinted or revised versions of articles from the *Times Literary Supplement*, *English Literary History* and collections published in the UK and France—Wilson's links with European Shakespeare scholarship are strong, and deeply important. Despite this, it still works as a totality: indeed, the absence of simple linearity makes more apparent the task of restoring the diverse actualities the plays contain and conceal. Wilson is strong in combining issues of belief, local circumstance and what would appear to be their transformations in the plays. His approach is supple, exploring allusions and echoes in a network that spreads out to include most of the plays, but in a manner far more contingent. One of the chapters not developed from previously published material, for example, explores the link between the plays and John Somerville, husband of Margaret Arden and heir to Edstone, near Stratford, arrested on the way to London carrying a pistol with which he claimed he was going to kill the queen. Wilson argues that this was not the work of a lone madman as biographers have held but part of a larger, well documented conspiracy including Warwickshire Catholics and assistance from Spain. This is related to passages in *Hamlet*, and to the whole exile plot of *As You Like It*. Both Wilson and Asquith locate this play alongside the recusant communities in rural Warwickshire, but Wilson handles the material with far greater breadth. We may not accept this totally as proof of 'Shakespeare's terrorist affiliations', but the concealment of the issues by Shakespeare biographers eager to configure the playwright as the unknown national genius and Catholic historians concerned to conceal international implication certainly gives pause for thought.

Whereas Asquith deals with the 'bloody napkin' episode in *As You Like It* in simple oppositional terms, Wilson relates it to the 'handkerchief / Spotted with strawberries' prompting Othello's fit, explores similar tropes in *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, and discusses its implications in an elegant intellectual dance through recent historicist and feminist readings. The relation to the blood of martyrs, turning the handkerchief into a catholic relic, thus acquires far deeper, polyvalent

resonance. Throughout the book, references to revisionist historians including Eamonn Duffy and John Bossy, and to a range of recent Shakespearean scholars, give the arguments further weight.

What emerges from *Secret Shakespeare* is a series of implications, circumstances and textual readings to suggest that an awareness of Catholic iconography and the degrees of contemporary political actions are imbricated within a complex dramatic structure that challenges assumptions about belief, the state, morality and gender. If Wilson, like Asquith, does not examine the results of these shifts on the plays' theatrical identities, his approach embraces ways of seeing the plays that certainly allow the reader to consider how this might be done. And if at times the logical train seems strained to its tightest, the absence of a simple conclusion or a single answer makes the argument more, rather than less, involving.

Clearly the two books are aimed at very different readers—it is remarkable that Shakespeare's Catholicism retains interest for both specialist and general readers—so that detailed comparison is not wholly fair. Well, up to a point; general readers demand the same kind of precision in argument and attribution as any others, and to write without it seems either an act of patronage or a rather disturbing kind of elitism. Wilson's approach, with its fractured structure and multiple lacunae, is as generative in the rejections and questions that it raises as in those that it seems to answer: the questioning, one hopes, will run and run.

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