Shakespeare and the Gunpowder Plot

Part 2 of “Not without Mustard”

Read Part 1 here.

by Peter Dreyer (October 2023)

The Execution of the Conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot (Guy Fawkes), Claes Jansz Visscher, 1606

> *Honie-tong’d Shakespeare when I saw thine issue*
> *I swore* Apollo *got them and none other,*

—John Weaver, *Epigrammes in the Oldest Cut and Newest Fashion* (1599)

On November 5, 1948—or perhaps it was 1947 or 1949—my brother Michael and I dragged a scarecrow figure around in a small cart in De Aar, in the heart of South Africa's Great Karoo, chanting the traditional refrain: "Remember, remember, the Fifth of November! A penny for the old Guy!"—a ritual commemorating the failure of the so-called Gunpowder Plot in London in 1605, when a handful of Catholic rebels aimed to blow up the Palace of Westminster during the state opening of Parliament, killing King James I, his ministers, and the assembled MPs. I would turn nine (or perhaps it was eight, or ten) a few days later that month. Michael was younger.

We had doubtless been put up to this by my mother, the granddaughter of George and Sarah Bailey, who had arrived at Cape Town in 1862 in a shipload of assisted immigrants. In the manifest of the chartered wooden ship, George Bailey is listed as a Dorset farm labourer. My mother must have played at "Gunpowder, Treason, and Plot" herself as a child. My memory of those days is dim, but I am pretty sure that Michael and I never acted it out it again.

Guy Fawkes Day is a relic of early seventeenth-century England, whose Catholic and Protestant inhabitants were as divided as the Northern Irish were during the Ulster Troubles of the late twentieth century (1968–98), if not much more so. Anglican worship was obligatory in England and Wales, and Catholic "recusants" who refused to enter a Protestant church (a mortal sin to them) were massively fined—revenue that would ironically become a vital support of the Jacobean monarchy.

Other penalties went to fiendish lengths. When the Oxford bookseller Rowland Jenks was found guilty of distributing banned Catholic texts in 1577, his punishment might have been

dreamt up by the marquis de Sade himself: “His ears were to be nailed to the pillory and he was to be given the choice of cutting himself free or remaining there indefinitely.”[1]

Pious young English Catholics slipped across the Channel to study at Jesuit colleges in France and Italy, then returned home as ordained priests to minister to their co-religionists. Since a Spanish invasion to unseat Queen Elizabeth and put a Catholic monarch on the English throne threatened, when caught, these priests were summarily condemned to be hanged, drawn, and quartered (if you don’t know what that entailed, see here). As Alice Hogge’s study *God’s Secret Agents* recounts, English Jesuits were attracted to such martyrdom like moths to a flame, and they perished by the dozen. “Elizabeth was keen to devise a new method of execution … even worse than hanging, drawing and quartering. However, [her chief adviser] William Cecil [Lord Burghley] advised that the hangman should simply delay the conspirators’ deaths for as long as possible, ‘protracting of the same, both to the extremity of the pains in the action, and to the sight of the people to behold it’. This decision was amended after the first batch of executions when the Crown expressed revulsion at the savagery.”[2]

A tremendous storm had fortuitously wrecked the Spanish Armada that had set out to conquer England in 1588, but if it had succeeded, elite Spanish *tercios* could quickly have been brought over from the Hapsburg Netherlands (today’s Belgium and Luxembourg), where Spain’s Ejército de Flandes (Army of Flanders), “the first modern professional standing army,” was based.[3] Protestants were terrified that another armada would be launched—and King Philip II was reported to be assembling one.

Anglicans and Nonconformists alike remembered the persecutions under the Catholic reign of Mary I, called “Bloody Mary,” preceding that of Queen Elizabeth, when hundreds of Protestants had been burned at the stake, as well as the Saint

Bartholomew's Day slaughter in 1572, when perhaps as many as thirty thousand Huguenots had died in France.

The wars of religion were pitiless, and Tudor theater was never simply art or entertainment—it served as propaganda too. As a secret agent of Elizabeth's Privy Council, Christopher Marlowe, an important influence on Shakespeare, evidently visited the Jesuit seminary at Rheims in France, and in Marlowe's play *The Massacre at Paris,* King Henri III of France (himself subsequently murdered by a friar on behalf of the Catholic League) speaks contemptuously of "a sort of English priests" trained there "to hatch forth treason 'gainst their natural queen" (5.2.106–10).

In the first part of "Not without Mustard" (*NER,* September 2023), I wrote in error that Shakespeare was 14 in 1588 at the time of the Spanish Armada. He was in fact 24 then, and he would surely have been conscripted into any force assembled to oppose a Spanish invasion. Albeit not recusants, Shakespeare's family were covertly Catholic, and they would have been torn between English patriotism and obedience to the pope, who had publicly endorsed and motivated a Spanish attack.

A key charge against the Jesuits was their "equivocation," devious logic by which they supposedly reconciled these positions for English Catholics. Shakespeare has this in mind in *Macbeth,* "that dark and most dreadful of plays," where a drunk porter imagines himself being a gatekeeper in hell:

> *Knock, knock! Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come in, equivocator.*[4]

Shakespeare must have witnessed the executions of priests—almost all Londoners did. Hundreds of Catholics, including some of his kinsmen, "were brutally killed or tortured during Shakespeare's lifetime, with the Queen's express connivance, often for no worse offence than the practice of their religion," Eric Sams writes. "And Shakespeare was not only a cradle Catholic but a known admirer and servant of another such, who had always made or spelt trouble for Elizabeth—the young Earl of Southampton, whose father before him she had twice imprisoned for his popish sympathies."[5]

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The major American poet and scholar John Berryman postulates that Shakespeare experienced a "personal catastrophe of the spirit" that ended what Berryman calls his "Second Period" (1594–1600),[6] years in which he wrote twelve plays, among them *Romeo and Juliet, Richard II, King John, The Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar,* and *As You Like It.* What must likely have been the most terrible moment in Shakespeare's personal life certainly occurred in the summer of 1596, when his only son, Hamlet, died, aged eleven and a half. In *King John* 3.4.88–98, a play usually dated from that year, he has a character say what he must himself have felt:

> *Grief fills the room up of my absent child,*
> *Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,*
> *Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,*
> *Remembers me of all his gracious parts,*
> *Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form*

Shakespeare nevertheless went on writing and performing on stage, growing "steadily more rich and famous from 1594 onwards … impressive profits were generated by theatres and

the new popular entertainment they provided, which were the television programmes of Tudor times and hence a licence to print money."

If the years between 1594 and 1609 were his professional hey-day, however, they also saw a tremendous political crisis for England. In 1603, the redoubtable Queen Elizabeth I was 69. She had ruled with the proverbial rod of iron since 1558, almost 45 years—Shakespeare's entire lifetime, and much longer than the lifetimes of all but a tiny few of her subjects. The great question was thus *what would happen when she died.* Her most probable successor was King James VI of Scotland, the nominally Protestant son of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots—who had been imprisoned and executed by Elizabeth. James seemed likely to adopt a much more tolerant policy toward English Catholics, and he was the candidate favored by the fabulously rich young earls of Essex and Southampton, friends and patrons of Shakespeare's. Southampton, whose father had been a sidekick of Henry VIII's in plundering the monasteries, evidently at one point gave or lent Shakespeare £1,000, the specious equivalent of US$4 million today.

In 1599, the earl of Essex was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and sent there with a huge army to subdue a rebellion led by Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, backed by Spain and Scotland. His troops decimated by typhoid and other sicknesses and defeated in several battles, and himself perhaps not all that unsympathetic to the Irish, Essex concluded a truce with Tyrone on equal terms (itself regarded by the Tudor court as a disgraceful concession to the aboriginals), then returned to England, although expressly forbidden by the queen to do so.

Charged with dereliction of duty and found guilty, Essex was deprived of office, and in February 1601, he foolishly attempted a coup d'état, backed by his friends, including Southampton. Their rebellion was quickly defeated, and the two earls were proclaimed traitors. They had once both been favorites of hers, but Elizabeth signed their death warrants

herself. Essex was executed. Owing to the special pleading of Lord Burghley, who had been his foster father, Southampton's sentence was reduced to life imprisonment in the Tower of London. King James would pardon and free him as soon as he succeeded to the throne.

A performance of Shakespeare's play *Richard II* commissioned at the Globe theater by the conspirators on the eve of their uprising "featured the smashing of a looking-glass, an article notoriously banished from her presence by the ageing Queen" and contained a scene of abdication and deposition that was not in any of the three published Quarto editions of the play in 1597–98. "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" Elizabeth said bitterly, aware "that the conspirators had sought to strike at her crown and her life, and that performance of Shakespeare's *Richard II,* with its rebellion and regicide, had played an important part in their propaganda."

"Essex carried his letter from King James in a bag tied round his neck; he burnt it during his uprising, as too incriminating. Southampton also received a favourable reply. So, it seems, did Shakespeare. How else can posterity explain the later testimony … that King James penned 'an amicable letter to Mr. Shakespeare'? It has not survived, and it may even have been suppressed as too personal and revealing. But its existence is well avouched; it 'remained long in the hands of Sir William Davenant [Shakespeare's godson—who is claimed also to have been his illegitimate son]."[7]

This could easily have been a good deal more than just a "personal catastrophe of the spirit" for Shakespeare. He might have gone to the block with Essex and four of the other leading conspirators, had he not cannily taken care to be back home at Stratford in Warwickshire while all this was going on. The queen evidently had a soft spot for him too. Once when Shakespeare was acting the part of a king, it is said, "as he was about to make his exit, she stepped before him, dropped her glove, and re-crossed the stage, which Shakespeare

noticing, took up, with these words, immediately after finishing his speech, and so aptly were they delivered, that they seemed to belong to it: 'And though now bent on this high embassy, / Yet stoop we to take up our Cousin's glove!' He then walked off the stage, and presented the glove to the Queen, who was greatly pleased with his behaviour."[8]

After James's accession "there would be no civil war, and there was peace with Spain. The new Queen was a Catholic; the new King was no tyrant but a knowledgable scholar, whose works were introduced by a quatrain colourably ascribed to Shakespeare … The release of Southampton was among his immediate acts on accession, a surprising priority unless [James] had already been in clandestine contact with the Essex faction and perhaps even covertly supported their insurrection. Another instant provision, almost a year before the official entry of James into London, was the unprecedented and quite unnecessary acknowledgement of Shakespeare and his fellows as the official court theatre company … now they were also to have the grand title of the King's Men."

Unfortunately, having become an essential part of the royal revenues, the fines imposed on Catholic recusants were not rescinded, however, and the blatant injustice of this led Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators to concoct their ill-fated plot. Fawkes was discovered lurking among kegs of gunpowder in the parliamentary basement and put to torture. No one could hold out against this for long. He and his friends were hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1605.[9]

The Tempest was first performed on Hallowmas night, November 1, 1611, with Shakespeare himself playing Prospero and King James in the audience. It is the final play attributed to Shakespeare alone, though he is thought to have collaborated on a couple more. Still a relatively young man, he progressively bows out in the last four and a half years of his life, retreating to Stratford domesticity and his wool and grain business. John Berryman comments: "Shakespeare was a man

whose son had died, who was publicly ridiculed and insulted, who followed a degrading occupation, whose mistress got off with his beloved friend, whose patron [Henry Wriothesley, the earl of Southampton] was condemned to death and imprisoned for years, whose father died."[10] Add to this that his younger brother Edmund, also an actor, and the latter's young son both died in 1607, and that Shakespeare's elder daughter had been "defamed for adultery." Moreover, at some point, "he fears, or indeed knows, that his married mistress, the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, his 'bad angel', is suffering from a venereal disease ([Sonnet] 144.14) which he is as likely as his dear friend [Southampton, reputedly a promiscuous bisexual] is certain to catch from her."[11]

Shakespeare's world was very small by our standards—the population of England and Wales was then only about four million, and that of London not much above 200,000 people. The population that was literate and that qualified as gentry was miniscule, and it seems quite probable that Shakespeare would personally have known some of the executed perpetrators of the Gunpowder Plot. Some of them had probably been framed and railroaded in a rush to judgment: "thy records and what we see doth lie, / Made more or less by that continual haste," Shakespeare writes (Sonnet 123.11–12), perhaps of this. As "cradle Catholic," he might well also have had friends among the martyred Jesuit priests.[12] Perhaps conversations with these men brought him to believe that the theatre and its arts were, after all, mere vanity. In the 1599 Geneva Bible he would have read the resounding words of King David: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher: vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity / What remaineth unto man in all his travail, which he suffereth under the sun? … the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."

Might we not perhaps suppose, then, that sickened by the state of his society and perhaps of the hash his personal life had turned out to be, Shakespeare experienced a moral and

spiritual crisis, as Leo Tolstoy did in the 1870s—or, for that matter, as John Berryman did when he killed himself by jumping off a bridge into the Mississippi River in 1972? Unless new evidence comes to light, we'll never know.

The cause of Shakespeare's death at the age of 52 in 1616 is unknown. Half a century later, Stratford hearsay had it that he "drank too hard" with his friends the poets Michael Drayton and Ben Jonson and "died of a feavour there contracted." But such gossip is hardly a satisfactory account, and Drayton and Jonson, both middle-aged themselves, would scarcely have undertaken the hundred-mile, two-day journey to Stratford just to get drunk with Shakespeare. They might have done so to bid him goodbye if they knew he was dying. Seventeen feet deep the grave is supposed to be.[13] Perhaps he sought to put as much space between himself and his fellows as possible.

On the question of what happened to his papers and MSS, a "strolling player" demanded in 1729: "How much is it to be lamented that Two large Chests full of this great man's loose Papers and Manuscripts, in the Hands of an ignorant Baker of Warwick (who married one of the Descendants from Shakespear) were carelessly scatter'd and thrown about, as Garret Lumber and Litter … till they were all consumed [in 1684] in the general Fire and Destruction of that Town?"[14]

"He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul," John Dryden, England's first Poet Laureate, wrote. "I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind."[15]

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[1] Alice Hogge, *God's Secret Agents: Queen Elizabeth's Forbidden Priests and the Hatching of the Gunpowder Plot* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 162. This book surely merits reissue in paperback by some enterprising publisher!

[2] Ibid., 163fn. Hanging, drawing, and quartering was

technically the lawful penalty for treason in England as late as 1870, but it was last actually done in 1781–82. "The sentence remained in place under Scottish law until 1950," Hogge adds (142fn).

[3] See J. R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620* (London: Fontana, 1985).

[4] *Macbeth* 2.3.4–12; quoted in Hogge, *God's Secret Agents*, 388.

[5] Eric Sams, *The Real Shakespeare: II. Retrieving the Later Years, 1594–1616* (e-book, Centro Studi Eric Sams, 2008, rev. 2009), 105; https://ericsams.org/index.php/onshakespeare/books-on-shakespeare/828-the-real-shakespeare-ii (accessed September 13, 2023). All otherwise unattributed quotations here are from this important source.

[6] John Berryman, *Berryman's Shakespeare,* edited with an Introduction by John Haffenden (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 50.

[7] Simon A. Stirling, *Shakespeare's Bastard: The Life of Sir William Davenant* (Stroud, England: History Press, 2016). John Aubrey says of Davenant: "His father was . . . a very grave a discreet Citizen; his mother was a very beautifull woman, & of a very good witt and of conversation extremely agreeable. Mr William Shakespeare was wont to goe into Warwickshire once a yeare, and did commonly in his journey lye at this house . . . where he was exceedingly respected. . . . Now Sr. Wm would sometimes when he was pleasant over a glasse of wine with his most intimate friends . . . , say, that it seemed to him that he writt with the very spiritt that did Shakespeare, and seemed contented enough to be thought his Son. . . . in which way his mother had a very light report, whereby she was called a Whore." *Aubrey's Brief Lives,* ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949), 85.

[8] An anecdote in *Dramatic Table Talk, or, Scenes, Situations, & Adventures . . . in Theatrical History & Biography,* ed. Richard Ryan, vol. 2 (London: J. Knight & H. Lacey, 1825), 156, cited by Sams.

[9] "The prisoner's severed head, 'which had imagined the mischief', was held aloft to the watching crowds with the traditional cry 'Behold, the head of a traitor!' . . . parboiled in a mixture of salt water and cumin seed [supposed to deter seagulls] . . . [and] hoisted above the battlements of London Bridge . . . as a deterrent to other traitors." Hogge, *God's Secret Agents,* 142, citing Philip Caraman, S.J., *Henry Garnet, 1555–1606, and the Gunpowder Plo*t (London: Longmans, 1964).
[10] Cited in *Berryman's Shakespeare*, Introduction by John Haffenden, lviii.
[11] Sams, *Real Shakespeare: II,* 57.
[12] For the record, I should perhaps note that I have never been a Catholic—or a member of any religious body for that matter. I was baptized into the Anglican communion, but as a babe in arms had no say in it.
[13] *Berryman's Shakespeare,* 153, referencing E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 2: 261, citing William Hall as the source in 1694.
[14] John Roberts, *An Answer to Mr. Pope's Preface to Shakespear. In a Letter to a Friend. Being a vindication of the Old Actors who were the Publishers and Performers of that Author's Plays. Whereby The errors of their Edition are further accounted for, and some Memoirs of Shakespear and Stage-History of His Time are inserted, which were never before collected and publish'd. By a Stroling Player* (London, 1729). Cited by Sams.
[15] Dryden, *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), quoted by Berryman, ibid.

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