

CONNECTING THE DOTS:
THE CATHOLIC QUESTION AND THE
SHAKESPEARE AUTHORSHIP DISPUTE

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Doubts about the authorship of the Shakespearean works and suspicions that the incumbent Bard from Stratford-on-Avon might have been a secret Roman Catholic have a fascinating but highly divided history since the 1850s. That compartmentalization of the two issues still serves the interests of orthodox Shakespeare scholars who want to avoid embarrassing questions about how such a person—living a double life of concealment and secrecy—could have ever penned the Bard's literary works. Taken as a whole, these works do not point to an author willing to creatively engage religious issues, but instead reflect a strong humanist, cosmopolitan spirit lacking the narrow sectarian mentality of crypto-Catholics trying to survive and (in some cases) overthrow the regimes of Queen Elizabeth and King James. Nonetheless, those who are increasingly convinced that the Stratford man was indeed a secret Catholic believe that this exposé is the best strategy for ending the authorship dispute because it provides a credible explanation as to why the incumbent Bard is so mysterious, so elusive in terms of meaningful historical documentation. These Catholic Bard advocates gained considerable momentum over the past year with the appearance of Michael Wood's BBC-financed book and documentary film and a veritable flood of other books exploring the Catholic connection.

Along with commentary on the history of the Catholic Question and its spillover impact into the current authorship debate, this essay provides a detailed discussion of key documents that sharply divide orthodox scholars and Catholic Bard advocates in the Stratfordian camp. Perhaps as a joint effort at damage control, both factions have confined their increasingly nasty exchanges to three legal-political documents: the wills of John Shakespeare and Alexander Hoghton, each dated to the Elizabethan period, and the former's name on a 1592 list of recusants. However, Jacobean-era documents showing the Catholic recusancy of the incumbent Bard's

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favorite child (Susanna) right after the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and his own purchase of the notorious Catholic hideout in London (the Blackfriar's Gatehouse) in 1613 provide powerful confirmation of an abiding attachment to Roman Catholicism through the end of his life in 1616. These two documents (the authenticity of which is above reproach) ensure a schism among Stratfordians for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, with or without media attention, the divisive implications of the Catholic Question will persuade more and more observers that the Stratfordians simply have the wrong man—that the gap between the literary works and the incumbent Bard (if he was a secret Catholic) has become too wide to overcome.