SHAKESPEARE AND THE MARTYRS

by Rev. PETER MILWARD, S.J.

Whereas Graham Greene, in his well-known Introduction to Fr John Gerard's *Autobiography of a Hunted Priest* (1952), expresses surprise that "the martyrs are quite silent" in Shakespeare's plays, it is precisely the opposite that transpires from a careful reading of them, if only "between the lines"—according to the literal meaning of "intelligence". The case of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* would have been immediately recognized by an Elizabethan audience with reference to the "lopping" of limbs of those who similarly suffered on what the dramatist elsewhere calls "Love's Tyburn that hangs up simplicity". Not a few scenes in such famous plays as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Merchant of Venice* that clamour to be cut by an impatient producer have distinctly recusant implications, not least Hamlet's famous but misunderstood soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," which evidently refers not to modern existentialists but to Elizabethan recusants, for whom existence had been made intolerable by their cruel persecutors.

In the old-fashioned, now largely discredited manner of defending a scholastic thesis, the manner in which I was brought up in the old pre-conciliar days in both philosophy and theology, we would begin with the *status quaestionis* followed by a precise definition of the terms before proceeding to demolish our distinguished adversaries, such as Descartes, Kant and Hegel. So today, in speaking of "Shakespeare and the martyrs", let me begin by mentioning my distinguished adversary Graham Greene before I proceed to demolish him. Much as I regret having to criticize so distinguished an author, there are words of his, set forth in his widely read Introduction to Father John Gerard's *Autobiography of a Hunted Priest* (1952), to which I cannot but take exception. "Isn't there," he asks, "one whole area of the Elizabethan scene that we miss in Shakespeare's huge world of comedy and despair?" And he answers, "The kings speak, the adventurers speak, … the madmen and the lovers, the soldiers and the poets; but the martyrs are quite silent."

To this objection of Graham Greene's I might give a preliminary response in the other question of Marcus Andronicus faced with the bleeding form of his poor, ravished niece Lavinia, "What stern, ungentle hands/ Have lopp'd and hew'd and made thy body bare/ Of her two branches?" and the other answer given by his brother Titus, speaking to Lavinia, "Thou hast no hands to wipe away thy tears,/ Nor tongue to tell me who hath martyr'd thee." (*Titus Andronicus* iii.1) Indeed, in all the plays of Shakespeare Lavinia is the only martyr in the crudely literal sense of the verb, which is three times applied to her in this one scene; and she has been reduced to silence for the simple reason that her tongue

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has been cut out by her ruthless persecutors. In any case, it may be pleaded on Greene's behalf, that Lavinia isn't one of the English martyrs he has in mind, but only a fictitious character in this first and goriest of Shakespeare's tragedies. Yes, but who, at least among the first audiences of the play, watching the scenes of Lavinia's martyrdom, and then hearing it described as such by her uncle and her father, could have failed to draw the comparison with the many contemporary scenes beneath what the same dramatist calls in another early play of his, "the shape of Love's Tyburn that hangs up simplicity" *(Love's Labour's Lost* iv.3). Thus we may well point out, against Greene, that once we see the plays enacted on the stage, or read them printed in books for the study, that the English martyrs have no need to speak to our ears. They appeal to our hearts, so long as we read between the lines, according to the etymological meaning of intelligence; and so they may be said to speak even or especially in their silence.

But that isn't all there is to be said against Greene and the multitude of whose who mindlessly repeat what he has said in this Introduction. There is also what Hamlet says about Hecuba, and what Shakespeare implicitly says about all the characters in his plays, not least about his poor heroines like Lavinia and Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia, "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba/ That he should weep for her?" What are they all but creatures of his fantasy? What are they all but, in the words of another such creature, "walking shadows, poor players/ That strut and fret their hour upon the stage/ And then are heard no more"? Or, I beg leave to ask, are they no more than that? Does the dramatist really mean the words he puts so glibly into the mouth of the despairing Macbeth? Doesn't he rather mean the words he puts into the mouth of Hamlet, with reference to a more personal, subjective, contemporary reality? Isn't he rather applying the faked sorrows of the player for Hecuba to the real sorrows (within the fictitious context of the play) which Hamlet feels he ought to be feeling for his murdered father? And then, may we not further argue, isn't the dramatist expecting his audience, or at least the more perceptive members among them, to apply the fictitious sorrows of Hamlet to his own real sorrows for his martyred countrymen? After all, what has Hamlet just said to Polonius in the context of this same scene about the visiting players, "They are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time"? In other words, what these players seem to be saying in a play entitled "The Murder of Gonzago", they are really presenting as what happened in the garden when Hamlet's father was murdered by his uncle. And what Shakespeare seems to be presenting in plays like *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*, he is really implying a situation in contemporary, Elizabethan England with which he and all the members of his first audiences are only too familiar—though for obvious reasons he dares not put it into so many words. As Hamlet himself says at the end of his opening soliloquy, "But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

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But that isn't all there is to be said about *Hamlet* with at least implicit reference to the martyrs. The whole play has, it may be said, and indeed all the authentic plays of Shakespeare have, implicit reference to the martyrs—if only we read not on the lines but between them, that is to say with intelligence. Take *Hamlet* again. Isn't it such a long play, one of the longest of all Shakespeare's plays, far too long for what he calls in the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* "the two hours traffic of our stage"? Isn't it a play that positively calls for cutting even by the least ruthless of producers? And what speech in the play can most easily be cut, without prejudice to the plot as a whole or the immediate context, than the great soliloquy, "To be, or not to be, that is the question"? Consider the contrast between this soliloquy and Hamlet's opening soliloquy, "O that this too too solid flesh would melt!" The one is so intimately personal, so immediately relevant to its context, so precise in its various reference to himself, his mother, his father, his uncle, though not his lover. The other is so impersonal, so seemingly metaphysical, so objectively meditative, and I might add so Biblical, based as it is no less on the Book of Job than on the Essays of Montaigne. If it begins with the impersonal, infinitive mood, it continues with the no less impersonal, generic use of "we" and "he", till in the outcome the speaker seems to notice the presence of Ophelia and suddenly adopts the more personal forms of "thy orisons" and "my sins". Yet we may well interpret the whole speech as put on by the prince for the sake of the two persons he knows to be concealed behind the arras—or put on by the dramatist for the sake of others who are variously concealed, whether as victimizers or as victims of the ongoing persecution.

Once we regard this famous soliloquy in such a contemporary light, as I think we are obliged to regard it, even in the face of an almost universal blindness to the light, what, we may ask, is the real, contemporary alternative posed in Hamlet's opening question? On the one hand, there is the meaning of "to be", which is no ontological, existentialist question of being or *Dasein*, but the all too practical "to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" And that is to go on enduring the unendurable persecution of English Catholics under the forty years' rule (I might well have said "cruel") of Queen Elizabeth, stepped up as it had been almost from year to year. It was precisely of this rule that the Jesuit saint and martyr Robert Southwell complained in his contemporary *Humble Supplication* (1600), "We are made the common theme of every railing declaimer, abused without hope or means of remedy, by every wretch with most infamous names; no tongue so forsworn but it is of credit against us; none so true, but it is thought false in our defence… So heavy is the hand of our superiors against us, that we generally are accounted men whom it is a credit to pursue, a disgrace to protect, a commodity to spoil, a gain to torture, and a glory to kill." And may we not add that what he says of the world in his time is hardly less true of the world, not least

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the academic world, in ours? Then, on the other hand, there is the other meaning of "not to be", which is not *le Neant* of Sartre or the Nirvana of the Buddha, but the similarly practical "to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them". And who, we may ask, in view of the contemporary situation of English Catholics, were so ready to take up arms as Catholics like Shakespeare's own cousin Robert Catesby and Francis Tresham, as in fact they did in support of the Earl of Essex in his rebellion of 1601—before going on to take even stronger measures in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605?

Further, we may consider how the remaining soliloquy is taken up with the second alternative, in which "not to be" is "to do" something violent and so "to die". Then, in the context I am now considering, may it not be read as a solemn warning uttered by the dramatist—as it were on behalf of priests like Southwell, who were always warning the younger, more ardent spirits among their "little flock"—not to have recourse to desperate measures, not to heed the all too persuasive policy of Hamlet's enemy, "Diseases desperate grown/ By desperate appliance are reliev'd,/ Or not at all"? After all, what is the almost certain outcome of such a policy, if only for themselves, but the uncertainty of "that undiscover'd country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns", as we find written in the Book of Job? Nor is this only the reflection of Hamlet in this dramatic context, but it is echoed by Shakespeare himself not just in dramatic but in poetic terms, with an intensely personal reference in Sonnet 66, "Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry/ As to behold desert a beggar born,/ And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,/ And purest faith unhappily forsworn,/ And gilded honour shamefully misplac'd,/ And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,/ And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'd,/ And strength by limping sway disabled,/ And art made tongue-tied by authority,/ And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,/ And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,/ And captive good attending captain ill." Such is Shakespeare's considered verdict on what is still perversely regarded as the golden age of Good Queen Bess, a verdict which he goes on to summarize in the succeeding Sonnet 67 as, in contrast to "days long since", "these last so bad". It is precisely against such a situation that Hamlet complains of the "cursed spite,/ That ever I was born to set it right!" Only, while he does nothing, and feels he can do nothing, he criticizes himself for his lack of what the other Jesuit Robert Persons calls "resolution" (in his popular book of that title), and for his inability to associate himself with Catholic "enterprises of great pith and moment" such as those undertaken in the 1580s by the French Duke of Guise and the King Philip of Spain.

Such at least is the meaning I propose to read between the lines of this most famous, yet least understood, of Shakespeare's memorable speeches. It is a meaning which I find at the heart of this most famous of his plays, yet inscribed in a soliloquy which seems to have least to do

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with the precise dramatic context of the play, and which for that reason might most easily be cut by an impatient producer—but for the fact that everyone in the audience is eagerly waiting to see what the actor will make of these lines. But now, jumping over all the other probable or possible references to the martyrs in such a capacious play as *Hamlet*, I wish to turn to the other, what I regard as the contemporary play of *Macbeth*, and to a couple of scenes in the third and fourth Acts which may well—like Hamlet's soliloquy—be cut by an impatient producer. Only, whereas the length of *Hamlet* clamours for cutting, while the fame of the soliloquy stands against such a desperate measure, the brevity of *Macbeth*, which hardly occupies a two hours traffic on the stage, withstands any cutting. I refer to the scene in which Lennox engages another Lord in a confidential conversation about the way "Things have been strangely borne", but he is afraid of saying which things or how strangely they have been borne. On the one hand, he seems to be commending the actions and reactions of Macbeth in relation to the death of Duncan and the flight of Malcolm and Donalbain, while on the other hand he is hinting at a contrary interpretation, with the prefatory words, "My former speeches have but hit your thoughts,/ Which can interpret further." It is a short scene, and one wonders why the dramatist has put it into his play at all, except to convey a certain atmosphere of uncertainty, owing to a situation in which, as Macbeth has been boasting to his lady, "There's not a one of them," such as the lords who have been speaking secretly with one another, "but in his house/ I keep a servant fee'd." (Such, we may note, was Lord Burghley's servant John Florio, whom he kept in the house of his noble ward, and the poet's patron, the young Catholic Earl of Southampton.) Even more impressive, and clamouring for the cutting scissors of the impatient producer, is the much longer scene between Macduff and Malcolm at the court of the saintly English king Edward the Confessor. Macduff is urging Malcolm, as next in line of legitimate succession to the Scottish throne, to return with him to Scotland at the head of an invading army; but Malcolm keeps putting him off on the excuse that he is unworthy—as Hamlet says of himself to Ophelia—to sit on the throne. Only, when at last he assents to Macduff's words of persuasion, he explains his reluctance on the plea that "Devilish Macbeth/ By many of these trains hath sought to win me/ Into his power." In other words, Macbeth is using his position of power as king to sow discord among his possible enemies, so as to prevent them from joining forces to attack him, according to the established Roman and Machiavellian principle, *Divide et impera*, Divide (your enemies) and rule (your kingdom).

But now, it may again be asked,what have these two scenes got to do with the English martyrs? What have they got to do with any form of martyrdom? At least, in Hamlet's soliloquy there was the grim alternative facing English Catholics towards the end of a long reign of oppression and persecution, between living (i.e. suffering) and doing (i..e. dying).

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But how, it may be asked, are these scenes in *Macbeth* relevant to the situation of English Catholics in the Elizabethan age? Well, the survival of English Catholicism during these 45 years of an unexpectedly long reign depended not so much on nobles like the Earl of Southampton, in whose house Burghley kept fee'd servants like Florio, as on priests like Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell, who had much need of prudence and caution in dealing with their countrymen, not least those who might seem to be most fervent. In fact, they were both of them betrayed, the one by a seeming Catholic George Eliot and the other by a daughter of the Catholic family, the Bellamys, with whom he was staying. They couldn't be too careful, and even the care they did take wasn't sufficient. One false step, and they were well on the way to the Tower and subsequent martyrdom. And that martyrdom entailed first a preliminary examination under torture, which was often described by the martyrs themselves as worse than martyrdom, then an obviously unfair arraignment before partial judges and an equally partial jury, then being drawn on a hurdle behind horses over the cobbled streets to the place of execution, then being hanged and pulled down while still living, then having their heart and entrails cut out and their limbs lopped like the branches of a tree, and all then unceremoniously dumped in a wheelbarrow and carted off before devout members of the crowd could come and take them off as holy relics. All these gruesome details, unmentioned in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, we have briefly noticed in the case of poor Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, but they are mentioned bit by bit in the history play of *King John*, in the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, and in the comedy of *Much Ado About Nothing*—often not without an air of flippancy, which may be explained as the dramatist's way of concealing his natural reaction of horror.

But now I wish to go back from the two tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, with the monologue of the one and the dialogues of the other, to the comedy of *The Merchant of Venice*, and the dialogue between Portia and Bassanio before the latter goes forth to make his choice among the three caskets of gold, silver and lead. Here, too, we come upon a scene, or a considerable part of a scene, which clamours to be cut—and may well be cut by an impatient producer. Only here it isn't only the possible producer who may be impatient. It is in the first place the hero himself, Bassanio, who is impatient to go ahead and try his luck with the caskets—as the two princes, of Morocco and Arragon, have already tried their luck, in vain. "Let me choose," he protests to Portia, "For as I am, I live upon the rack." But there Portia stays him. His mention of the rack is too much for her—or rather for Shakespeare, with his propensity for punning, or what Dr Johnson calls his "fatal Cleopatra". "Upon the rack, Bassanio!" she exclaims, "then confess/ What treason there is mingled with your love." Again Bassanio protests, "None but that ugly treason of mistrust,/ Which makes me fear the enjoying of my love." And he adds, "There may as well be amity and life/ 'Tween snow and fire, as

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treason and my love." But Portia refuses to let him off so easily. "Ay," she says, "but I fear you speak upon the rack,/ Where men enforced do speak anything." So Bassanio takes her up, "Promise me life, and I'll confess the truth." And Portia grants him his request, "Well, then, confess and live." And then Bassanio goes on with another Shakespearian pun, "Confess and love/ Had been the very sum of my confession." He further continues, "O happy torment, when my torturer/ Doth teach me answers for deliverance." And so for no fewer than 14 lines, the coincidental length of a Shakespearian sonnet, if without the rhyme-scheme (as in Romeo's first encounter with Juliet), the impatient Bassanio is detained by Portia, who presumably wants him to wait—precisely on the theme of the typical torture in the Tower awaiting Catholic priests like Campion and Southwell.

Nor is that all. For all his seeming impatience, once Portia steps aside and lets him advance to make his choice among the caskets, he wisely refrains from choosing at once. He pauses, like a true gentleman, to let the lady sing, and what she now sings is a warning against being misled by fancy, to the accompaniment of "Ding, dong, bell!" Then he meditates, as it were in anticipation of Hamlet's response to his mother, "Seems, madam! Nay, it is. I know not seems." "So may the outward shows," he reflects, "be least themselves:/ The world is still deceiv'd with ornament." In his subsequent speech, it is not without significance that he makes reference both to preachers and to politicians, those two notorious enemies of the Elizabethan papists. "In religion," he observes, "What damned error, but some sober brow/ Will bless it and approve it with a text,/ Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?" What error, we may wonder, does he have in mind? The error, for instance, of those two Lutheran cousins, Sir John Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch, of relying on faith to excuse their deficiency in good works. As the latter exclaims with reference to the temptation of lechery, "I care not. Give me faith, say I." As for politicians, especially when supervising the torture of the rack, he refers to "The seeming truth which cunning times put on/ To entrap the wisest." Such, I may add, is what Macbeth calls "the equivocation of the fiend/ That lies like truth"—not least when the "equivocation" is sloughed by cunning politicians like Robert Cecil onto simple priests like Henry Garnet. And so Bassanio makes his choice of lead, and so he wins his chosen lady Portia.

But again, that isn't all. There was the gap filled in with the irrepressible punning of Shakespeare using Portia as his mouthpiece, with reference to the torture of the rack, and its implication that there is more to this gap and its filling than the casual reader or spectator may realize. And then there was the other gap filled in with the soliloquy of Bassanio, with reference to preachers and politicians (among others) who sponsored seeming as opposed to being. And then there is the sudden news of Antonio's arrest at the instance of Shylock and his projected trial for failure

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to keep the bond with Shylock. Then, too, it is that Bassanio describes his friend as "one in whom/ The ancient Roman honour more appears/ Than any that draws breath in Italy." On this point I must refrain from drawing on my thesis, which I have developed more fully elsewhere, that Antonio is "Roman" in a more contemporary sense, and so, too, is his friend Bassanio, while Shylock is his "Puritan" adversary. It is in this more than conjectural context that, when Portia decides to make her way to Venice as a lawyer for the defence of her husband's friend, she betakes herself to a learned jurist at Padua named Bellario. Then, one may ask, who is this Bellario, and why is he so named? Well, I may answer, who is he but the great defender of the Papists against the Puritans in the Elizabethan age, Robert Bellarmine, who also happened to be the teacher (among others) of the two Jesuits who came to England in 1586, Robert Southwell and Henry Garnet? This isn't just a far-fetched conjecture of mine, but it is the considered suggestion of my friend John Klause both in an article on "Catholic and Protestant, Jesuit and Jew: Historical Religion in *The Merchant of Venice"* (*Religion and the Arts*, 2003) and at greater length with reference to other plays and poems of Shakespeare in his book, *Shakespeare, the Earl, and the Jesuit* (2008). In these writings his conjecture about Bellario is incidental to his main thesis, in which he demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt, that the dramatist was deeply indebted to the Jesuit poet at least throughout his Elizabethan period up to and including *Hamlet.* Whether Shakespeare actually knew Southwell, he leaves in doubt; but from the evidence of the plays there can be no doubt but that the former was an avid fan of the latter, being familiar with most of his writings, in both poetry and prose, even to the extent of knowing them by heart.

For this reason, we may well hear the English martyrs not only speaking to our ears and our minds in comedies like *The Merchant of Venice*, and in tragedies like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but also communing in person with the dramatist himself—not only in this one case of Robert Southwell, where the evidence assembled by John Klause hardly admits of doubt, once one has taken the trouble to peruse it, but also, I would now add, in the earlier case of Edmund Campion. Now, therefore, by way of conclusion, let me present the evidence, as I have assembled it over the past twenty years, for a personal and not just literary connection between the dramatist and the martyr. It all began with an article in Japanese which I contributed to a book published by Sophia University in 1991 under the title of *Ignatius*, and in which I undertook to disclose the many interesting echoes of the *Spiritual Exercises* of the saint in the plays of the dramatist. That set me wondering how the latter could have familiarized himself with the writings of the former, seeing that the *Exercises* were not printed for common readership but presented as handbooks for the Jesuit director. In any case, they were only in Latin or else the original Spanish, and never translated into English at that time. So

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the only way Shakespeare could have come to such a familiarity with the text of the *Exercises* must have been through personal experience of them under the direction of a Jesuit. Then the connection came to my mind on the occasion of an article contributed by Richard Wilson to the *TLS* in the December of 1998, and I developed it further in a subsequent article of mine for the Jesuit periodical *The Month* in the April of 2000 (one of its last issues). It all depended on what is called "the Shakeshafte theory" of the young William's brief sojourn in Lancashire under the auspices of the recusant Houghton family in the spring of 1581, in the same region and at the same time as Edmund Campion was making his sojourn there under the same family auspices. In such circumstances, it seemed to me, what would have been more likely than that the experienced Jesuit would have directed the *Exercises* for the young would-be dramatist, while imparting to him something of his own knowledge of dramaturgy from his years of teaching at the Jesuit college of Prague? This may still seem somewhat conjectural, till we reflect on the background of three of the young William's schoolmasters at Stratford grammar school in the 1570s. First, there was Simon Hunt, who left Stratford with one of his students for the continent, where he became a Jesuit in Rome, while leaving his student Robert Debdale at the English college of Rheims. So when Campion came from Prague to Rome on his way to the English mission, he must have met the one English Jesuit there, Simon Hunt, who also took over the function of Robert Persons as penitentiary at St Peter's. Not long after his arrival in England, we can trace the footsteps of Campion to the neighbourhood of Stratford, to the house of Sir William Catesby (father of the above-mentioned Robert), where he may well have given a copy of the Spiritual Testament composed by the saintly archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, to Shakespeare's father John. Among the companions of Campion, who came to England about the same time, was a Thomas Cottam, brother to John Cottam, another of the young William's schoolmasters at Stratford, who also brought with him a letter from Robert Debdale for his family in Shottery, the village of Anne Hathaway. What is more, the Cottams were next-door neighbours to Alexander Houghton of Lea Hall near Preston, where William Shakeshafte is mentioned in Alexander's will of that year. As for the third schoolmaster, Thomas Jenkins, before going to Stratford, he had been a fellow of Campion's at their college of St John's, Oxford. This is all admittedly circumstantial evidence, but when taken together, like "the story of the night" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it grows, as Hippolyta remarks to her sceptical husband, "to something of great constancy", or, as John Henry Newman shows in his *Grammar of Assent*, to a convergence of independent probabilities which amounts to a moral certainty. And there I may rest my case.

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