**Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *William Shakespeare: Seine Zeit - Sein Leben - Sein Werk*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003. 399 pp., c. 250 illus.**

**English edition: *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare. 1564-1616*. London: Chaucer Press, 2007. xii + 400 pp.**

A new study on Shakespeare has appeared, which is destined to generate turmoil in the ranks of the academic Shakespeare scholars. Hammerschmidt-Hummel's new book, *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare 1564-1616*, is the latest in a series of original discoveries the Mainz University professor has made. She was the one to prove the authenticity of several Shakespeare portraits (the "Flower" and "Chandos" portraits), and to identify the Darmstadt Shakespeare death mask as Shakespeare's. She then provided a convincing solution to the mystery of the "Dark Lady" in the sonnets, showing that it was Elizabeth Vernon Wriothesley, Countess of Southampton. In 2001, she published *Die verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare. Dichter und Rebell im katholischen Untergrund*, which documented Shakespeare's Catholic faith. Now, in her latest work, she has elaborated a full biography and examined the works, from the standpoint of this religious factor.

> The author is fully aware of the implications of her findings. As she writes in the Foreword, "The statements of this book cohere with many findings and mooted facts, which are here developed, expanded and not least verified. However, they also contradict dominant teaching, and to a not insignificant extent. The author took care to link her theses together in a network free of contradictions, in that they support and confirm each other. With her in many ways new kind of attempt to come closer to the historical truth, she hopes to stimulate a discussion, which can lead to further research and knowledge about Shakespeare's time." (P. IX)

Introducing her presentation of Shakespeare's Catholicism, Hammerschmidt-Hummel starts by setting the historical record straight, by characterizing the legal statutes which were established under Queen Elizabeth, against Catholics, following her accession to the throne in 1558. During the short reign of Queen Mary I, Catholicism had been reintroduced, and massive persecutions of Protestants carried out. Elizabeth reversed this again. After reintroducing the Supremacy Act of Henry VIII in 1559, Elizabeth had leading Catholic bishops arrested. Scottish Queen Mary Stuart's flight to England in 1568 provoked a Catholic rebellion the following year in northern England, which was brutally suppressed. After Pope Pius V had excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570, many Catholics went into exile, especially to Flanders and France. Educational institutions were established, like the Collegium Anglicum in Douai, Flanders, in 1568, which was later transferred to Rheims (1578-1593). These schools were designed to offer a thorough lower and higher academic education and to prepare Catholic priests for the missionary work.

Starting in 1580, a movement was launched by Rome, for the re-Catholicizing of England, obviously on a covert basis. The missionary movement, was led by Edmund Campion and Robert Parsons, both Jesuits. Priests entered England secretly, and worked under protection of the Catholic gentry, who provided them housing as well as hiding places (known as "priest holes"). The priests used the "spiritual testament" of Milanese Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, which Catholics would sign, declaring their faith.

In response to this missionary effort, Elizabeth's government and parliament issued a series of new rigid laws, in 1581. The gist of the new legislation was that any missionaries and those converted, were to be considered traitors. There were fines for celebrating mass, fines and jail terms for those who attended mass, fines for those who did not attend Protestant services (called "recusants"), fines for employing a Catholic teacher, etc. The most draconic punishment was meted out to those who incited to treachery, gave refuge to traitors, or kept secret information about the same for more than 20 days. Such persons had their belongings confiscated and were jailed. By 1585, a new law was introduced, which banned all Jesuits and priests from

England, and foresaw the death penalty for a second offense. People belonging to these circles were also considered traitors, and could be executed, their belongings confiscated. Anyone who supported Catholic institutions (schools), or sent his children abroad to such schools, was fined.

The author writes:

> The new legal position created by Elizabeth I's anti-Catholic legislation had devastating consequences for the Catholic population. The English Catholics were not only deprived of their rights, ostracized, criminalized and persecuted, but also had to endure draconic punishment. This changed only with the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 (Catholic Emancipation Act). In (authoritative) English historiography to date, all of this is only marginally discussed, if at all." (p. 27)It should be remembered that, on the contrary, the great German playwright, Friedrich Schiller, provided an exact historical depiction in his drama, "Maria Stuart", of the social conditions in England under Elizabeth. (27)

It should b remembered that, conversely, the great German playwright Friedrich Schiller, provided an exact historical depiction in his drama, "Maria Stuart," of the social condition in England under Elizabeth.

In England, Catholics who refused to accept the new Protestant faith, the "recusants," set their hopes on Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (1566-1601), known for his religious tolerance and his determined opposition at court to the all-powerful Cecils: William, Lord Burghley. who ruled as advisor to Elizabeth from 1558 to 1598, and his son, Robert, later Earl of Salisbury, who, as successor to secret service chief Walsingham, carried on his father's policy. The Cecil faction led the persecution drive. Essex's attempted coup d'etat on February 7, 1601, and subsequent execution, was a blow to Catholics. Only when King James VI of Scotland assumed the throne (as James I) after Elizabeth's death in 1603, did they revive hopes in a more tolerant regime, as James I, who had been an ally of Essex, had promised to relax the strict religious laws. Many exiled Catholics returned to England full of hope, but the king betrayed their aspirations, and on February 10, 1605, issued an ultimatum, allowing Catholics one year to accept the new religion. It was in this context that the Gunpowder Plot was organized on November 5, 1605, a plot to blow up the Parliament in Westminster. The plot was discovered in time, and the conspirators, tried for high treason.

Against this background, Prof. Hammerschmidt-Hummel traces the biography of Shakespeare. As family records document, John Shakespeare, the poet's father, was a Catholic, whose Borromeo testament, hidden in the attic, was discovered in 1757 and published in 1790. John Shakespeare, who served as mayor, alderman and justice of the peace, suddenly stopped attending meetings of the council in 1577, an odd occurrence which the author puts in connection with the first execution of a Catholic priest, Cuthbert Mayne, that year, after the introduction of the new laws. In 1578-1579, the poet's father sold and/or rented out several pieces of land, in an effort to raise funds required to send young William to school on the continent. Since students who went to Oxford or Cambridge had to swear an oath of allegiance to the new religion, Catholic families would send their sons to the schools in Douai or Rheims, for a Catholic education. This required cash funds, for a two-year period of study. Bolstering her hypothesis that indeed, this is what father John sold his land for, are two pieces of evidence: first, that John Shakespeare was fined in 1580, as one of 140 persons in England, probably for having sent their children abroad; and secondly, that among the names on the student register in Douai/Rheims, were entries, partly erased, corresponding to Shakespeare's name (page 47). In March 1592, John Shakespeare's name was officially placed on the recusants list.

The author's reconstruction shows that William studied those two years (1578-1580) abroad, then returned to England, where he married Anne Hathaway in November 1582. His first child was born in 1583, and twins, in 1585, whose godparents were Catholics. Then from 1585 to 1592, there is no trace of the poet in any English records. Hammerschmidt-Hummel solves the mystery of the "lost years," again by considering the religious factor. It was in 1585, the year William fled, that the fate of Mary Stuart was sealed. She was executed in 1587. 1585 was the year in which a recruitment drive was launched in England, for supporting the war of the Netherlands against Spain; in 1585 the English Catholic opposition, supported by Philip II of Spain and the Pope, began organizing in Rome for armed struggle against the Protestants.

William Shakespeare had been mentioned in the will of Alexander Hoghton, a leading Catholic named as recusant, at whose home the young William had lived two years as a teacher. In the will, Hoghton (whose family head had helped establish the Collegium Angelicum in Douai) established regular, lifelong payment for several people, organized in a trust, among them William Shakeshafte alias Shakespeare. It is known that the name Shakeshafte had been used by William's grandfather. The author, who has studied the

coded language used by underground Catholics, has offered a decipherment of the entire will (and other documents), according to which it would appear that the trust was a secret Catholic organization, which was to provide "players" with "playclothes" and "instruments belonging to musics," which refer to priests, garments and liturgical instruments. In another important document, published in 1592 and newly found by the author, the "puppets" just like the "players" also stand for priests, and William's job, therefore, was to serve as a liaison for the priests. In this document an Elizabethan actor, identified as William Shakespeare, states that in the last seven years he has been an "absolute Interpreter to the puppets" (p. 69). The author's hypothesis is, that William spent the lost years on the Continent, especially in Italy, mainly Rome, in such activities. According to the author's new documentary evidence, the poet used to lodge in friaries. Since all English friaries or monasteries had been destroyed by Henry VIII, William must have stayed in cloisters on the Continent.

The most striking evidence given for the notion that William was on the continent, and in contact with Catholic circles, are the three (perhaps four) entries in the pilgrims register at the hospice of the English College in Rome. There, in the years 1585, 1587, and 1589 (perhaps 1591), the author found entries of names that correspond to Shakespeare, again quasi-coded. For example: "Gulielmus Clerkue Stratfordiensus", Latin for "William, Clerk of Stratford". All names were in coded form, given the massive espionage networks that Elizabeth had deployed to the continent, in search of English missionaries. The entries correspond exactly to the time period of the "lost years," and provide a convincing argument for the author's hypothesis.

It is well documented that Shakespeare was in London in 1592, and started a meteoric career as a playwright,-- with "Henry VI", an instant success - which he continued, with brief interruptions, until 1613. At that time, he started purchasing land and buildings, including an old cloister of Blackfriars in London, together with three trustees. The building had been used for decades as a hiding place for Catholic priests and monks. The author suggests that the trustees engaged in support activities for Catholics. Seven years after Shakespeare's death, the ceiling of the third floor of the building collapsed, and about 100 people died. It was thus revealed that the 300 people convened in the room, were there to practice a secret Catholic mass.

When looking at Shakespeare's works from the standpoint of his Catholic faith, the author is able to provide answers to hitherto open questions, regarding the kinds of plays Shakespeare wrote, their dating, and their publication. Hammerschmidt-Hummel reports that the reason why Shakespeare stopped writing history plays dealing with English history, was that a ban was issued by John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1599, affecting satires, epigrams and plays on English history. At that point, Shakespeare started the Roman plays, and later dealt with history in the great tragedies, but always located in countries other than England (Denmark, Scotland, etc.).

The reason why the playwright gave up writing comedies, according to the author, lies in the trauma provoked by the execution of Essex. Shakespeare knew Essex and Essex's close friend Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, who was the poet's patron, friend and (later on) rival. Southampton was also jailed after the Essex rebellion, but was later released by James I. Shakespeare's poem, "The Phoenix and the Turtle," published in 50 copies after Essex's death sentence, is shown by the author to be dedicated to the two men. In addition, she provides further evidence to support the claim, first made by the English Shakespeare scholar Dover Wilson, that Essex supplied the model for Hamlet, hero of the play by the same name, completed in 1602. She also sees William Cecil as the historical figure behind the character Polonius. It was Cecil who had been responsible for the anti-Catholic Elizabethan legislation and had arranged the execution of Jesuit priest and missionary Edmund Campion in 1581.

That Shakespeare was a member of the Essex circle is also indicated by the fact, noted by the author, that he did not compose one line of eulogy or commemoration on the occasion of the death of Queen Elizabeth -- quite unusual considering his stature as the leading playwright of his time. It was, of course, Elizabeth who had ordered Essex executed; she reportedly kept the man's decapitated head in her chamber, and showed it to French Marshall Biron, on his visit to her in London in September 1601.

The author moots that Shakespeare went into a sort of "internal emigration" in the period between the death of Essex, 1601, and the death of the queen in 1603. With the ascent of James I to the throne, the poet, like other Catholics, hoped for improved conditions; when such hopes were dashed, Shakespeare turned to the great tragedies, including "Othello" (1604), "King Lear" (1606) and "Macbeth" (1606). The hero of the latter play, according to the author, may have been modelled on James I, not only because of the Scottish context, and the role of witchcraft (which James I was an expert on), but also because the protagonist turns from a great hero into a monster. The view that Rome had of the king was that he was a traitor.

Reviewing the plays for explicit references to Catholic rites and concepts, the author turns up a treasure trove of findings. Fully recognizing Shakespeare's universal genius, the author in no way tries to "reduce" his works to a Catholic factional view; rather, she points out references, showing the poet's intimate knowledge of this culture, in many of the plays. The most obvious are in "Romeo and Juliet" and "Measure for Measure." In the former, there are many metaphorical references, for example, to pilgrimages, and numerous references to Jesus Christ, Mary, and the saints; the two lovers place their faith in the monk, and are secretly wed according to Catholic rites. "Measure for Measure" features the heroine Isabella, a novice who is willing to become a martyr, and the hero, Vincentio the Duke, who disguises himself as a monk. But there are also references in other plays. The ghost of Hamlet's father, for example, complains of having been killed without having had confession, and describes his torment in Purgatory, a doctrine which had been eliminated by Henry VIII. The notion of mercy argued by Portia in the "Merchant of Venice", is another example.

In the late plays, written after 1606, "Pericles", "Cymbeline", "Winter's Tale" and "The Tempest", the author sees a tone of reconciliation, and the predominance of supernatural powers, which intervene to solve tragic situations happily.

Hammerschmidt-Hummel's study, it has been said, reads like a mystery story. What indeed makes it gripping, is the fact that the author proceeds from one fundamental hypothesis - that Shakespeare maintained the old faith - and moves from one nested hypothesis to the next, to explain biographical events as well as features of the works, which had been hitherto incomprehensible. The hard evidence she presents in the form of historical documentation supports each of the hypotheses most convincingly.

Although the author does not raise the question explicitly, there are hints here and there in the book, that some aspects of the Shakespeare file, may have been manipulated, in order to conceal the Catholic factor. Thus, for example, she notes the curious anomaly, that no one, not even the Stratford council, or any other authority, intervened in 1759, to prevent the then-owner of Shakespeare's New Place, from razing the building to the ground. The owner, Francis Gastrell, was a Protestant minister. Furthermore, after John Shakespeare's (Borromeo) will had been published in 1790, the original disappeared, and may have been destroyed. The author writes: "It appears as if there were an interest in withholding this piece of evidence of John Shakespeare's Catholicism from the public." (36) And, most important, she notes that in the educational institutions of the Jesuits, not only did theatre play a central role, but the kind of theatre was strictly anti-Aristotelian, with the rejection of the unities of time, place and action - typical of Shakespeare's theatre.

The book is richly illustrated, with almost 250 pictures, including portraits of all the leading personalities, maps, paintings of buildings, and other monuments, all which contribute to reinforcing the author's theses. There is also a very useful time line, and a Shakespeare family tree.

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach