Professor David Scott Kastan weighs in on the question, ‘Was Shakespeare a Catholic?’

Professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, David Scott Kastan recently reviewed the PBS series In Search of Shakespeare for The Chronicle of Higher Education. While Kastan calls the four-part series, which runs through Feb. 25 (check local listings) “engaging” and “good fun,” he also finds it all “a bit too much like a Geraldo Rivera special.” One of the main themes that runs through writer-producer Michael Woods’ series and his companion book, called simply Shakespeare (Basic Books, 2003), is the possibility of Shakespeare having been a closet Catholic.

Woods paints a dark portrait of the Elizabethan regime, with its network of spies, public executions and persecution of Catholics, even calling it a “police state.” If Shakespeare was a Catholic, he would have had to have kept it secret, Kastan, the general editor of the Arden Shakespeare, notes that Woods qualifies his argument for Shake- speare’s crypto-Catholicism by saying “so often in the search for Shakespeare we can only talk of maybe.” But Kastan goes on to say ““that does not stop him from stringing his ‘maybes’ together into a fabric of assertion.” The generalist. Are there serious Shakespeare scholars who currently make the case for Shakespeare’s crypto-Catholicism?

Kastan: Oh, yes, a number of serious scholars have made this case. Richard Wilson, who’s at Lancaster University in Britain, is probably the most insistent about this. And a former colleague of his, Richard Dutton, who’s now at Ohio State, makes the same argument. And then there’s a wonderful emeritus professor at Newcastle, Ernst Honigmann, who probably sparked the modern academic interest in Shakespeare’s possible Catholicism. He wrote a book, Shakespeare: The Last Years—those seven years in Shakespeare’s life for which there are no records, and offered one plausible explanation for what he did during that time. Shakespeare may have served as a tutor in the Catholic household of Alexander Hoghton in Lancashire.

The son of a member of Shakespeare’s acting company, Christopher Beeston, said that Shakespeare had been a schoolmaster in the country, and we don’t know more than that. “We don’t know if it was true, we don’t know where in the countryside. Then there’s this kind of tantalizing reference in a will—Hoghton’s will, where he leaves annuities for various people in the household, including a William Shakeshafte. And people have speculated that that’s actually Shakespeare. Obviously, it isn’t the same name, but the spelling makes it remarkably plausible that it was Shakespeare.

Other people have estimated that it was a deliberately chosen pseudonym, that Shakespeare had been sent there to escape the growing persecution of Catholics in the early 1580s. The difficulty is that there were other William Shakeshaftes in the area, so it’s not at all clear that it’s a reference to Shakespeare from Stratford. And the other thing that makes this claim a little bit implausible is that Shakespeare was 17 years old when he was sent there. He’d only been in the household for a few months, and why suddenly he’d be one of the favored people—that doesn’t seem very compelling evidence.

Kastan: There is an enormous amount of circumstantial evidence that would identify Shake- speare with a plausible Catholic upbringing. His mother’s extended family, the Ardens, was Catholic. There is the fact that four out of the six schoolmasters at the Stratford school that Shakespeare would have attended have some kinds of Catholic connections. But there is no smoking gun that says Shakespeare or Shakespeare’s family was Catholic.

Some people focus more on what’s called John Shakespeare’s will and testament. John Shake- speare, William’s father, was born in 1529, and he would have been born into a Catholic family, but the problem with the will is it doesn’t exist any longer. It was a document that was reportedly found in the late 1770s and was first noted in a magazine article in 1784. And then it conveniently disappeared, though had been transcribed. The argument is that it has the form of a Catholic spiritual testament that his father found and adopted for his own purposes. It is pretty interesting. The major difficulty is, of course, that the document doesn’t exist, and there is some evidence that it is a forgery.

Record: What other evidence exists for the Bard’s adher- ence to the “old faith,” as Michael Wood likes to call it?

Kastan: In Shakespeare’s name we find the word “papist.” But there is no smoking gun. There is the parish register entry for the death of Shakespeare.

Record: Why is there this sudden interest in Shakespeare’s possible Catholicism? Or is it really sudden?

Kastan: It isn’t so sudden, really. In 1708, Archdeacon Richard Davies wrote a note that “William Shakespeare dyed a Papist.” It’s the first indisputable reference to Shakespeare’s sup- posed Catholicism. The idea is picked up periodically. Carlyle called for Shakespeare to be the poet of true Catholicism.” Chesterton was convinced Shakespeare was a Catholic. But it’s too late 10 years or so, it’s become an issue again.

The Record: Michael Wood is a Catholic, but he’s been identified by his research as a Protestant. Does it matter whether Shakespeare was a Protestant or a closet Catholic?

Kastan: Well, I think there are two aspects. One is, simply, that of purgatory. But there isn’t a polemical religious focus; if any- thing, there is a sense that the truth eludes the sharp partisan- ship of Elizabethan religion. As Hamlet says to Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and earth … than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Still, it does seem to me that Shakespeare becomes increas- ingly spiritual as his career goes on, and the late plays do have a spirituality that isn’t evident in the early plays, but not so much identifiable Catholic. Shake- speare’s religion is genial, not theological, but social.

The Record: To return to the original question. Why do you think that this a hot issue now?

Kastan: In the 19th century, Richard Simpson had all the bio- graphical data that people like Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton make use of today to make the case for Shakespeare’s Catholicism, so there really aren’t new facts. The idea of Shakespeare being a crypto- Catholic turns Shakespeare into a dissident, which is an interest- ing way to imagine him, because for so long Shakespeare has been the ultimate voice of establish- ment Britain. What’s happening, it seems to me, is that people want to move Shakespeare from the center of a British nationalist project. And move him to the margins, and see him as a dissi- dent working largely with his true identity kind of undercover. Shakespeare has been hijacked to be the voice of British excel- lence. And it runs all the way through the 19th and the 20th century. Even in Thatcher’s Britain, he’s a deliberate attempt to make Shakespeare a spokesperson for their values.

The cliché is that every age reinvents Shakespeare in its own image. And that’s quite true. Every age does what it has to do to stay in touch with him. At this moment, we like to imagine a dissident Shakespeare, not the official voice of the Tudor regime.