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Woods, Gillian (2016) What was Shakespeare's Religion? Oxford University Press.

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What was Shakespeare's religion? It's possible to answer this seemingly simple question in lots of different ways. Like other English subjects who lived through the ongoing Reformation, Shakespeare was legally obliged to attend Church of England services. Officially, at least, he was a Protestant. But a number of scholars have argued that there is evidence that Shakespeare had connections through his family and school teachers with Roman Catholicism, a religion which, through the banning of its priests, had effectively become illegal in England. Even so, ancestral and even contemporary links with the faith that had been the country's official religion as recently as 1558, would make Shakespeare typical of his time. And in any case, to search for a defining religious label is to miss some of what is most interesting about religion in early modern England, and more importantly, what is most interesting about Shakespeare.

Questions such as 'was Shakespeare a Protestant or a Catholic?' use terms that are too neat for the reality of post-Reformation England. The simple labels Catholic, Protestant, and Puritan paper over a complex lived experience. Even in less turbulent times, religion is a framework for belief; actual faith slips in and out of official doctrine. Religion establishes a set of principles about belief and practice, but individuals pick and choose which bits they listen to.

'Catholicism' was an especially tricky category in this era. Under pressure of crippling fines and even execution, early modern Catholics maintained their faith in a variety of ways. Not every so-called papist supported the pope. The Roman Catholic Church of this era encompassed 'recusants' (who openly displayed their Catholicism by refusing to attend mandatory Church of England services) and 'church papists' (who conformed to the monarch's protestant customs, but secretly practiced Catholicism). Some Catholics supported Elizabeth politically, looking to the pope only in spiritual matters; others plotted her overthrow. Catholicism was in the eye of the beholder; hotter Protestants saw many elements of Elizabeth's own Church as horrifyingly 'Romish', but to average Protestants those puritanical objections seemed hysterical. Some accepted the theology and politics of the reformation, but still harboured an emotional

attachment to older traditions, like praying for the dead. Furthermore, people have a habit of changing their minds over time, shifting their beliefs at different moments of their lives. Asking about the confessional allegiance of any early modern individual is a much more difficult – and interesting – enterprise than figuring out an either/or choice. Whatever Shakespeare's personal faith was, he wrote plays that worked for audiences who had to feel their way through these dilemmas, audiences for whom Protestantism was the official state religion, but who experienced a far messier reality.

Playhouses provided spaces to explore these anxieties. Even though the direct representation of specific theological controversy was banned, Renaissance plays frequently featured elements of the Roman Catholic religion that had been practically outlawed in real life. Purgatorial ghosts and well-meaning friars still appeared on stage; star-crossed lovers framed their first kiss in terms of saintly intercession and statue veneration (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.206-19); and various characters swore 'by the mass', 'by the rood', and 'by'r lady'. Shakespeare wrote over sixty years after Henry VIII set the Reformation in motion. By the 1590s, English friars, nuns and hermits belonged firmly to the past, and many writers used them like the formula 'once upon a time': to create a safely distant, fictional world. Even so, Catholic Europe and Jesuit missionaries were perceived by state authorities as a very present danger. Anti-Catholic propaganda demonised that faith as fundamentally deceitful; 'papist' piety was mere pretence, a cover for lechery, treachery, and sin. Accordingly, some writers used Catholic settings as a shorthand for corruption (think of the decadent world of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, with its murderous and lascivious Cardinal). So Catholicism could point in different fictional directions: it could benignly and nostalgically suggest an unreal past, in the manner of a fairytale; or, it could paint a threatening image of a more contemporary fraud. But it's striking that Shakespeare uses Catholic content rather differently from his contemporary dramatists, often embracing the contradictory connotations of, say, a friar, exploiting the figure's nostalgic and threatening associations at the same time.

This exploration of ambiguity seems to have been one way in which he thought through not only religious controversies, but also the very act of making fiction itself. A figure who works both like a fairytale and like a fraud tests out what is good and what is dangerous about literary illusion.

All's Well that Ends Well is a case in point. This comedy tests fantasy ideals against real-life problems. Helen, the clever wench who miraculously cures a king and wins a husband of her own choosing, finds herself in love with a prince who isn't so charming. But critics have never been too sure about whether Helen herself is a virtuous victim of her snobbish husband, or if she's simply conniving and self-centred. By putting all of these possibilities in play Shakespeare invites us to interrogate the ideals that underpin romantic comedy: are the conventions we think of as happy endings really all that happy?

One way that Helen secures her own happy ending is by putting on a pilgrim's habit which allows her to follow (and eventually catch) her runaway husband. But this costume, with its mixed Catholic associations, further complicates the character and the morality of the plot. While the Catholic Church regarded pilgrimage to holy places as "meritorious" (a way of piously working to the salvation that only Christ could enable), Reformers scoffed at the notion that one earthly place could be holier than another, dismissed as idolatrous the intercession of saints usually invoked at shrines, and abhorred the idea that Christ's gift of salvation needed supplementing. Shakespeare hints both that Helen might be the hypocrite of anti-Catholic polemic, who uses a pious habit to conceal selfish intentions, and that she might be a prayerful woman, who would be justly rewarded with a happy ending. Furthermore, the comedy also draws on more secular associations of 'pilgrimage', which run through the love poetry of the period figuring amorous devotion. We first learn of Helen's pilgrimage in a letter that takes the form of the sonnet; at this point Helen is painted as something of a Petrarchan stalker, trekking her errant husband in the clothing of well-worn poetic metaphor. But Shakespeare unpicks other

threads of meaning in the pilgrim costume too. In anti-Catholic fabliaux pilgrims used their religious journeys for decidedly smutty adventures. It's probably no mistake that Helen uses her pilgrimage so that she can finally have sex. And again, there's a question mark hanging over this behaviour. On the one hand her active desire for physical intimacy with her husband is legitimate and liberating, but on the other, she repeatedly removes her husband's power of consent, most disturbingly in a bed-trick (a 'wicked meaning in a lawful deed'). The comedy questions her sexual scruples.

Shakespeare exploits the various associations of the pilgrim in post-Reformation England. In Helen, papist and Catholic connotations are compounded: she is meritorious and devious, miraculous and cunning. The 'happy ending' of this play sees husband and wife reunited and apparently reconciled. But the 'real' wonder of this moment is provisional: 'All yet *seems* well' (my emphasis). The audience is very aware of the pragmatic tricks that Helen had to perform in order to win this resolution. By drawing on the contradictory meanings of the pilgrim, Shakespeare creates a paradoxical character that engages his audience with the ethical dilemmas of fiction: when might the means justify the ends?

In this play, as in others, Shakespeare calls on the ambiguous associations of Catholic figures, images and ideas, as a means of engaging his audience with the problems he frames. He seems to revel in the pleasures of slippery meaning. By flirting with stereotypes and sectarian expectations he makes his audience think more deeply about the difficulties of the plays and their own culture. Whatever Shakespeare's personal religion was, the religion he put on stage was both playful and probing.