

Glossary:

A SELECTION OF CODED TERMS

in the plays of William Shakespeare
as explained in Clare Asquith's
SHADOWPLAY



The list that follows merely hints at the complex hidden political level that exists in the literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries: it can be compared to a phrase-book designed to give an entry point to a long forgotten, almost foreign language. The word “pit,” for instance, is innocuous in itself; but a pit that is described as the mouth one of Hell’s rivers, the scene of imprisonment, blood, and death, would certainly have turned the minds of sixteenth-century Londoners to the notorious dungeon in the Tower known as the “Pit,” a disused well-shaft where Catholic prisoners were incarcerated.

Caesar Centralized Catholic authority (see also **Rome**).

Dark The “dark” new Protestant religion, associated with black print and sober dress.

Fair Coded attribute of Catholicism, taken from the stress placed by Catholics on outward beauty, parodied by Protestants as the “Scarlet Woman.”

Five Devotion to the Five Wounds of Christ was widespread in England on the eve of the Reformation and was pictured on the banner of uprisings against the new regime. The patterned number—in a flower, birthmark or heraldic “blazon”—is one of Shakespeare’s Catholic markers.

Gazers A nickname for superstitious Catholics who “gazed” on the host.

Hercules The classical hero who fought the many-headed hydra, Hercules was a favorite Counter-Reformation image of resistance to the many heads of heresy. Shakespeare’s Hercules, often a humiliated figure, is associated with various aspects of the Catholic resistance to the Protestant Reformation in England.

High Catholic, or ceremonial, religion, still associated with the term “High Church.” Shakespeare is always aware of this secondary meaning.

Low The new “Low Church” religion, in which a simple communion table replaced elevated altars.

Luke St. Luke’s feast day had a personal significance for Robert Southwell, a famous Catholic martyred by Queen Elizabeth. It was the day on which he joined the Jesuit order. Shakespeare regularly attaches variations of the name to Catholic places and characters.

Merchants In coded Jesuit newsletters, souls were “merchandise,” priests were “merchants,” pursuivants were “creditors,” Jesuits were “journeymen,” prison was a “credit house,” the sacraments “gems,” the gallows at Tyburn in London “a place of much trading.”

Moon To represent Elizabeth, Shakespeare used the classic image of inconstancy, the moon. The beauty of this marker was that it had been sanctioned by the Queen herself, who as associated with Diana, the moon goddess, more often than with any other classical figure. Officially, the moon represented her virginal purity. But there were other aspects developed by more critical writers. The moon ruled over darkness; it was barren; it was eclipsed by heaven’s true light, the sun.

New Fire Revived, post-Reformation spirituality, both Protestant and Catholic. Shakespeare keeps it Protestant.

Nightingale The story of Philomel, who was turned into a nightingale and sang plaintive songs in the night after being raped, was used as an image of the desecrated Catholic Church and its covert protests.

Oath A consistent theme in the literature of the time, the word invariably conjured up the dilemma of divided loyalty involved in taking the Oath of Supremacy (later the Oath of Allegiance) to the Protestant regime.

Old Of the old religion, Catholic. Shakespeare repeatedly describes himself as old in his sonnets.

Phoenix Image of purity and rebirth; a Christian symbol of resurrection adopted by the “virginal” Elizabeth but reclaimed by Catholics as an emblem for the revival of the persecuted church. Shakespeare’s poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” is a tribute to the two aspects of the resistance: the faithful turtle dove, exiled abroad, and the phoenix at home, which dies to be reborn.

Precise Puritan.

Rare Associated with Catholic poems, figures and situations.

Redbreast Like other compounds of “red” (redshanks, red lips, rosy cheeks), this had overtones of the old religion, with its red vestments and red-lettered prayer books.

Red Rose An all-purpose image, but used specifically by Catholics for the old religion.

Revenge An apparently motiveless or disproportionate desire for revenge in Shakespeare’s plays refers to the revenge of Puritans for the persecutions under Mary—the shrew, Shylock, Malvolio, Aaron. The question of whether or not to take revenge explores the response to the more recent persecution of Catholics under Elizabeth—Titus and Hamlet in Shakespeare’s plays.

Rome Classical Rome was the simplest cover for discussion of the Church of Rome, Caesar representing the papacy.

Shadow and Substance Terms which evoke one of the key differences between Catholic and Protestant interpretations of the Eucharist. Catholics (and Lutherans) maintained that the substance of bread and wine changed at the act of consecration; Calvinists held that the change was purely symbolic—a “shadow” of the original last supper. Shakespeare repeatedly uses the opposition in his plays and sonnets.

Sinon The treacherous Trojan who persuaded his countrymen to allow the wooden horse, containing Greek soldiers, through the gates of Troy. He was compared by John Leslie, a resistance writer, to William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth’s henchman. Shakespeare also gives him Cecil features in the *Rape of Lucrece*.

Sunburn The sun represented the divinity; sunburn suggested closeness to God. Sunburnt characters contrast with those who adopt the “new” fashion of masks or broad-brimmed hats to protect their faces from the sun. Beatrice, Rosalind, Cleopatra and Julia are all sunburnt. Shakespeare described himself as “tanned” in Sonnet 62.

Sweet, Sugared “Sweet” meant refined, or reduced to its essence. Shakespeare’s sonnets differentiate between “self” and “sweet self”—the second being the inner, refined, spiritual self.

Tempest The tempest was a widespread image for the Reformation upheaval in England, and it remains a central metaphor in the works of modern Reformation historians. It was often associated at the time with a tempest-tossed ship, image of the church. Petrarch uses a ship in the tempest as an image of the threatened church; Spenser takes up the theme; Protestant propagandists used a ship as an image of the Catholic “bark of Peter.” Chronologically, *The Tempest* was Shakespeare’s last work: its place at the beginning of the First Folio provides a subtitle to the book as politically loaded as “the Blitz” or “the Troubles” might be to a modern reader.

Thirty-Three The age of Christ at the time of his death. Southwell referred to it at his trial, associating it with his own age. Shakespeare alters his sources to include the number in *The Comedy of Errors*, where the abbess claims she has waited thirty-three years to be reunited with her family; in *Julius Caesar*, he gives Caesar thirty-three wounds. Sonnet 33 can be read as an expression of grief for the death of his son, which occurred in Shakespeare’s thirty-third year—like Southwell, he linked the number with Christ’s passion, a concealed theme in the sonnet.

Time Shakespeare’s sonnets dwell on a classic image of transience—that of *tempus edax*, or devouring time, an unusual theme for love sonnets. Here and in the plays, time is repeatedly given the characteristics of the new Protestant order, which, like time, defaces tombs and monuments, gouges lines on faces, alters royal decrees and historical records.

Well-Dealing, Well-Wishing Compounds of “well” frequently occur in odd contexts in the works of suspect writers and have overtones of the holy wells that were centers of Catholic recusancy—chief among them Holywell in Wales.

White and Green The Tudor livery, used by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Winter Catholic laments used winter as the obvious image of the sudden onslaught of the Reformation, when elaborate vestments and decoration were stripped from churches and replaced with whitewash.