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Encoded Wording of a Marginalised Faith. A Conjectural Quest for Shakespeare's Shrouded Catholicism

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Abstract

This paper investigates the possibility that William Shakespeare embedded concealed Catholic references within his works, produced in the deeply anti-Catholic climate of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. It draws primarily on Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay*, which argues that Shakespeare cultivated a sophisticated coded system of religious allusion deliberately crafted to remain "deniable" and therefore resistant to definitive proof. The discussion further engages with the scholarship of Alison Shell, Curtis Bright, Jason Pearce, and Beatrice Batson to extend this interpretive framework. By situating Shakespeare's writing within the recusant political and religious context of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the study considers how symbolic language and oblique references may function as a covert Catholic lexicon. Although the analysis concentrates on a selection of sonnets, it suggests that broader examination of Shakespeare's plays and biography could yield stronger evidence for this encoded mode of expression.

Keywords: encoded wording; marginalised Catholic faith; conjecture; Shakespeare's sonnets; shrouded Catholic symbols.



1. Introduction

This study seeks to unearth a series of instances in which William Shakespeare may have encoded veiled Catholic allusions within his writings in a cultural and political environment profoundly hostile to Catholicism during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The present argument draws substantially upon the conjectures advanced in Clare Asquith's *Shadowplay*, wherein she contends that "Shakespeare developed this hidden code into a sophisticated art form, integrating it into his more familiar work with dazzling skill. The essence of this coded method of writing, of course, was that it be 'deniable' – in other words, incapable of proof" (Asquith 2005, 7).

Building upon Asquith's thesis, this paper develops further conjectural reflections based upon the scholarship of Alison Shell, Curtis Bright, Jason Pearce, and Beatrice Batson, doing so in a manner deliberately akin to an intellectual thriller, wherein each clue opens onto further interpretive possibility rather than definitive closure. The study begins by exploring the epistemological foundations of conjectural thinking through the lens of Karl Popper's philosophy of knowledge, which regards all knowledge as provisional, grounded in conjecture, and perpetually subject to criticism and revision. It then proceeds to outline the changing religious circumstances of Shakespeare's England, from the reign of Henry VIII through those of Mary Stuart, Elizabeth I, and James I.

Thereafter, the study applies its conjectural methodology to close readings of Shakespeare's sonnets as possible sites of spiritual dissimulation and coded witness. By engaging with the theoretical perspectives of Popper, Carlo Ginzburg, Umberto Eco, and James C. Scott, this paper argues that conjectural literary interpretation offers a provocative – if necessarily provisional – means of reading Shakespeare as a recusant poet whose work subtly and artfully resists the confessional politics of Elizabethan England.



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The study further advances a series of conjectures regarding Shakespeare's allusive wordings and symbolic language, many of which appear to point toward a concealed lexicon of Catholic resistance. These conjectures are derived not only from the aforementioned scholars but also from the present author's own interpretive reflections. While the scope of analysis is limited primarily to selected sonnets, the clues uncovered herein suggest that a broader inquiry into Shakespeare's dramatic works and biography might yield even stronger evidence for the existence of such a carefully constructed coded language.

2. Conjecture

2.1 The Concept Outline of Conjecture

Conjectural thinking may be defined as the process of forming an opinion, theory, or conclusion on the basis of insufficient or uncertain evidence rather than upon definitive proof. It entails educated speculation and the formulation of ideas where full information remains unavailable. The term is frequently employed in contexts such as scientific hypothesis formation, historical reconstruction, and literary interpretation, wherein conclusions must often be drawn from fragmentary or circumstantial evidence rather than from incontrovertible documentation.

In a world that frequently seeks certainty, conjectural thinking occupies an uneasy yet invaluable intellectual space. To conjecture is to propose an idea without claiming final proof, and this act constitutes a form of epistemic humility insofar as it acknowledges the possibility of error while continuing earnestly to pursue understanding. This mode of thought resists dogmatism, privileges curiosity over closure, and dares to interrogate even the most entrenched assumptions. In many respects, it constitutes a kind of cognitive adventure: a journey not toward final answers, but toward increasingly refined questions.

This section explores the virtues of conjectural thinking through the works of major philosophers and scholars including Karl Popper, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Carlo Ginzburg, and



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Umberto Eco. It also acknowledges the conjectural historical paradigm associated with the philosophical school of the Scottish Enlightenment (Palmeri 2016). The argument advanced herein is that conjectural thinking is not merely an academic exercise but a vital intellectual ethic central to serious inquiry.

2.2 Conjecture in an Intellectual Thriller Study

Furthermore, this study proposes that an intellectual inquiry grounded in conjectural thinking may be metaphorically understood as an “intellectual thriller,” resembling a dynamic narrative filled with puzzles, suspense, reversals, and unexpected revelations, in which the journey itself proves more captivating than the destination. A thriller is defined not solely by plot, but by tension, uncertainty, reversal, and discovery. Likewise, a philosophical or literary study grounded in conjectural thought builds suspense through provocative questions, offers possible answers, destabilises them, and then presents new and perhaps more unsettling possibilities.

Just as a thriller compels its reader onward not to confirm what is already known but to discover what remains unknown, so too does a conjectural study guide its reader through uncertainty. It is dynamic rather than static, exploratory rather than declarative.

Nevertheless, no intellectual method is without its risks. Conjectural thinking can degenerate into aimless relativism if not anchored in rigour, evidence, and ethical responsibility. A conjecture is not a licence for arbitrary assertion; it must remain testable, debatable, and situated within a framework of scholarly accountability.

Properly practised, conjectural thinking constitutes a disciplined form of curiosity. It refuses complacency, challenges the boundaries of accepted knowledge, and invites scholars



to dwell within the liminal space between knowing and not-knowing, between theory and experience, between tradition and innovation.

When pursued effectively, conjectural thinking transforms philosophical and literary inquiry into something akin to an intellectual thriller. It seeks not to reassure but to unsettle in productive ways, drawing readers into the drama of ideas, the suspense of uncertainty, and the exhilaration of discovery. In an era increasingly obsessed with definitive answers, conjectural thinking reminds us of the enduring value of questions and of the asymptotic pursuit of truth and meaning.

2.3 Karl Popper's Theory of Conjecture

One of the clearest philosophical endorsements of conjectural thinking emerges in the work of Karl Popper, who built an entire philosophy of science around the principle of falsifiability. For Popper, scientific theories can never be definitively proven; they can only be falsified. Science progresses not by accumulating certainties but by proposing bold conjectures and subjecting them to rigorous attempts at refutation (Popper 1963).

Popper's famous dictum that "We are not students of some subject matter, but students of problems" (Popper 1963, 88) encapsulates the ethos of conjectural thought. It places the mystery, rather than the solution, at the centre of inquiry.

Although Popper's philosophy is centrally concerned with the logic of scientific discovery, its insights extend equally into the humanities. Popper argues that human beings never possess final certainty: "Our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite" (Popper 1972, 28). Knowledge advances not by inductive accumulation but by bold hypotheses subjected to severe criticism. Even when a conjecture survives such criticism, it remains provisional and perpetually open to future falsification.



Asquith's assertion that Shakespeare's Catholic code is "deniable" aligns closely with this Popperian model. The hypothesis cannot be conclusively proven precisely because it was allegedly designed to remain concealed, thereby affording Shakespeare plausible deniability. Consequently, the appropriate scholarly response is not to demand impossible certainty but to assess whether the conjecture is intellectually fruitful: whether it explains more evidence than rival hypotheses, whether it generates new questions, and whether it remains vulnerable to falsification.

Indeed, Popper insists that a legitimate conjecture must be risky: it must make claims that could, in principle, be refuted (Popper 1963). The thesis advanced herein satisfies this criterion, for if scholars were to discover explicit documentary evidence of Shakespeare's rejection of Catholicism, or if linguistic analysis demonstrated that the alleged code words occur entirely randomly, then the thesis would be significantly undermined.

2.4 Conjecture's Status with Other Scholars

Conjecture is by no means alien to literary or historical scholarship. Carlo Ginzburg's influential formulation of the "evidential paradigm" compares the historian to a detective reconstructing the past from scattered clues and circumstantial traces (Ginzburg 1986). Where documentary evidence is lacking, conjecture becomes the means by which lost realities may be reconstructed.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics reminds us that understanding always involves a fusion of horizons: readers approach texts with interpretive assumptions and questions that shape what they perceive within them (Gadamer 2004). Thus, interpretation is never neutral but always historically and intellectually situated.

Asquith's claim that Shakespeare's works contain a Catholic code exemplifies precisely this form of interpretive leap. The thesis cannot be proven in a strict positivist sense; it may



only be argued cumulatively through converging evidence and interpretive pattern recognition. This approach possesses both strengths and limitations. On the one hand, it encourages scholars to think holistically about recurring imagery, symbols, and thematic patterns across Shakespeare's corpus. On the other hand, as Umberto Eco warns in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, such approaches risk producing a "hermetic drift," whereby every textual detail is treated as evidence of hidden meaning (Eco 1992).

Ginzburg's microhistorical methodology offers an especially apt parallel to Asquith's conjectural method. In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Ginzburg describes how the past may be reconstructed from minute circumstantial traces (Ginzburg 1986). Likewise, Asquith gathers numerous textual details—images of martyrdom, purgatory, exile, and spiritual suffering—and arranges them into a pattern suggestive of Catholic coding.

Yet the risk of overinterpretation remains. As Gadamer reminds us, interpretation is dialogic rather than purely objective, and our interpretive horizon inevitably shapes what we perceive in texts. Asquith's Catholic interpretive horizon may thus enable her to perceive signs invisible to others, even while simultaneously risking overextension. The challenge, therefore, lies in maintaining critical balance between fruitful conjecture and interpretive excess.

3. Religious Strife and Recusancy in Shakespeare's England

3.1 Henry Tudor's Anglicanism

The Act of Supremacy of 1534 declared the English Crown to be "the only supreme head on earth of the Church in England," thereby severing papal authority and formally establishing royal supremacy over religious life within the kingdom. Through this legislation, allegiance to the Pope came increasingly to be regarded as an act of political disloyalty and even of high treason, insofar as the papacy continued to assert both spiritual and temporal authority over Catholic subjects across Europe.



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Anti-Catholic sentiment among many English subjects was fuelled not merely by theological disagreement but also by fears concerning the Pope's perceived attempts to reclaim political influence over England. Many Protestants regarded Catholic loyalty to Rome as inherently subversive, believing that the papacy, often in alliance with continental Catholic powers such as Spain, sought to undermine English sovereignty and destabilise the kingdom's newly established Protestant identity.

3.2 Catholic Queen Mary and Anglican Queen Elizabeth

The consequences of the original Act of Supremacy were temporarily reversed in 1554 by the staunchly Catholic Queen Mary I, who restored Roman Catholicism as England's state religion. During her reign, many Protestants suffered persecution, and her execution of Protestant dissenters earned her the enduring epithet "Bloody Mary" within Protestant historiography.

Following Mary's death, Queen Elizabeth I reversed these measures through a renewed Act of Supremacy in 1559, accompanied by the Act of Uniformity, which re-established Anglican worship as compulsory throughout the realm. Those wishing to hold public office were required to swear the Oath of Supremacy, thereby recognising the monarch as supreme governor of the Church of England. Refusal to comply exposed individuals to a range of punishments, including fines, imprisonment, and, in severe cases, execution. Attendance at Anglican services became mandatory, and recusants—those who refused attendance—were subjected to significant financial penalties and the risk of further physical punishment.

3.3 Queen Elizabeth's Struggle to Preserve Anglicanism

Anti-Catholic feeling intensified considerably during Elizabeth's reign, particularly as fears mounted concerning papal attempts to depose the Protestant monarch and restore Catholic rule. In 1570, Pope Pius V issued the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, formally excommunicating

Elizabeth I, declaring her a heretic, and absolving her Catholic subjects of their allegiance to her (Breight 1996).

This event greatly exacerbated English anxieties regarding Catholic disloyalty, strengthening the perception that English Catholics posed an internal threat to the security of the state. Matters escalated further with the outbreak of military conflict between England and Spain, the latter widely viewed as the military defender of Catholic Europe and, by extension, of papal interests. England's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 significantly reinforced Protestant national identity and further intensified anti-Catholic rhetoric.

In the aftermath of these events, Elizabeth's government intensified its persecution of Catholic clergy and suspected sympathisers. The execution of Jesuit missionaries and Catholic priests became increasingly common, with sites such as Tyburn in London becoming infamous for the martyrdom of those executed for treasonous religious allegiance. Many of these individuals were subsequently canonised by the Catholic Church.

3.4 Anti-Catholic Books of Protestant Propaganda

Protestant propaganda also played a crucial role in fostering anti-Catholic sentiment among the English populace. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was widely circulated and employed as a powerful instrument of Protestant ideological formation. This text memorialised Protestant victims allegedly persecuted during Mary I's reign and became so culturally significant that copies were frequently displayed in Anglican churches alongside the Holy Bible (Breight 1996).

Another anti-Catholic text, *Pyrotechnica Loyalana* (Ignatian Fire-Works), portrayed Catholics—especially Jesuits—as responsible for various calamities and conspiracies across Europe. The book's imagery famously includes depictions of Guy Fawkes descending into the vault beneath Parliament, visually linking Catholicism with treason and terrorism in the



English popular imagination. Fawkes, together with his fellow conspirators, became emblematic of Catholic sedition after being implicated in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, an attempted bombing of Parliament during the ceremonial opening attended by King James I.

3.5 Recusants and Religious Resistance

The term “recusant” came broadly to signify principled religious refusal. More specifically, Catholic recusants were those who refused to attend services of the Church of England and consequently incurred legal and financial penalties. Church-papists, by contrast, outwardly conformed to Anglican worship while privately adhering to Catholic beliefs and practices.

Puritans, too, could on occasion be penalised as recusants when they objected to certain Anglican practices or refused participation in local worship. More broadly, recusancy may be understood as resistance to enforced participation in religious and intellectual structures perceived as incompatible with one’s convictions.

It is within this context that some scholars have speculated whether Shakespeare himself may plausibly be situated among the recusant or crypto-Catholic community (Bright 1996; Batson 2006). Circumstantial evidence drawn from Shakespeare’s biography, familial background, and social associations has repeatedly fuelled such speculation, even though definitive proof remains elusive.

For Catholics in late Elizabethan England, public religious expression was fraught with danger. Recusants who refused Anglican worship faced heavy fines, while those found harbouring Catholic priests risked execution. In such a climate, covert forms of communication became a practical necessity.

Asquith (2005) places Shakespeare within a broader tradition of writers who allegedly employed allegory, parable, and coded symbolism to communicate Catholic sympathies



covertly. According to her reading, terms such as “truth,” “mercy,” “darkness,” and “exile” frequently carry subversive theological significance beneath their ostensibly neutral literary surfaces. The deniable quality of this code ensured that hostile readers could interpret such language innocuously, while sympathetic readers might perceive its deeper significance.

This dual-layered communicative strategy recalls the Jesuit doctrine of equivocation, whereby Catholics under interrogation could provide technically truthful yet deliberately misleading answers in order to protect themselves and their co-religionists (Zagorin 1990). James C. Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript”—the covert discourse of resistance developed by oppressed groups beneath the surface of official culture—provides an especially illuminating theoretical analogue for this phenomenon (Scott 1990). Through this lens, Shakespeare’s works may be read as participating in a hidden transcript of recusant resistance, subtly articulating forbidden meanings beneath the acceptable surface of public literary discourse.

4. Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Putative Catholic Symbolism

The Shakespearean corpus has long invited speculation precisely because the historical record surrounding Shakespeare’s life remains notably sparse. Relatively little is known with certainty regarding Shakespeare’s personal beliefs, and his religious affiliation in particular remains the subject of considerable scholarly debate. This paucity of definitive evidence has generated a range of conflicting portrayals of Shakespeare: as a loyal Protestant subject of the Crown, as a politically detached humanist, as a crypto-Catholic recusant, and even as a covert atheist. Clare Asquith’s *Shadowplay* (2005) offers one of the boldest interventions in this debate, arguing that Shakespeare developed a coded literary language through which he communicated Catholic

belief and political critique under a regime hostile to religious dissent. The present study adopts a position broadly sympathetic to this argument.

Asquith insists that this code was “deniable,” meaning deliberately structured so as to remain incapable of definitive proof (Asquith 2005, 7). This presents not merely a historical claim but also a methodological challenge. If the evidence can never be conclusive, then by what criteria ought such a thesis to be assessed? Here Karl Popper’s theory of conjectural knowledge proves especially useful. Popper rejects the classical notion that knowledge must rest upon fully justified true belief, instead maintaining that all knowledge remains conjectural and that progress is achieved through critical testing and attempted refutation (Popper 1963). Viewed through this Popperian lens, Asquith’s thesis—and indeed the thesis of the present study—must be regarded not as established truth but as an interpretive hypothesis perpetually open to scrutiny.

The proposition that Shakespeare required such a code necessarily presupposes the dangers associated with open Catholic profession in Elizabethan England. The fines imposed upon recusants, the surveillance networks directed against suspected dissidents, and the prosecution of priests under treason laws rendered overt Catholic expression politically perilous. Asquith therefore situates Shakespeare among a broader “cryptic” tradition of Catholic writers who allegedly employed allegory, parable, and emblematic symbolism to communicate forbidden truths to sympathetic readers.

The following sections provide detailed analysis of selected sonnets that may plausibly contain encoded Catholic allusions.

4.1 Sonnet 5

For never-resting Time leads summer on
To hideous winter, and confounds him there,



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Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
Beauty o'er-snowed and bareness everywhere...

These lines from Sonnet 5 may be interpreted as a symbolic herald of the arrival of the Reformation and the devastation it allegedly wrought upon traditional Catholic England. The “never-resting Time” may signify the relentless advance of historical change ushering in the Protestant order. “Hideous winter” becomes emblematic of the bleakness of the Reformation, while the imagery of beauty buried beneath snow may evoke the whitewashing of Catholic churches and the destruction of religious ornamentation. The barrenness described in the poem may thus signify spiritual desolation and the suppression of Catholic aesthetic and theological richness.

4.2 Sonnet 12

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silvered o'er with white;

These temporal and visual images from Sonnet 12 may similarly be interpreted as allegorical of religious decline. The transition from “brave day” into “hideous night” may symbolise the passage from the perceived radiance of the old Catholic order into the darkness of Protestant ascendancy. The blending of sable into white may again evoke whitewashed church walls and iconoclastic destruction. The sonnet’s pervasive emphasis upon decay and lost beauty aligns with a lament for a vanished religious and cultural order.

4.3 Sonnet 18

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, / And often is his gold complexion dimmed, / And every
fair from fair sometime declines, / By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed: / But thy



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eternal summer shall not fade,/ Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; / Nor shall Death brag
thou wand'rest in his shade, /When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.

In Sonnet 18, the repeated emphasis upon fairness and eternal beauty may be read as suggestive of Catholic ideals of divine beauty and permanence alluded to by: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade, /Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st." The term "fair" may function symbolically as an allusion to the beauty and sanctity associated with Catholic worship and doctrine. "Eternal summer" may signify the enduring truth of Catholicism despite outward suppression. The line "Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade" may additionally echo Psalm 23, reinforcing possible Christian theological undertones.

4.4 Sonnet 27

Sonnet 27 begins with spiritual and physical weariness: "Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed". The speaker's fatigue and nocturnal inward reflection may evoke the suffering of Catholics forced to practice their faith privately and under threat. The imagery recalls the "dark night of the soul" associated with Catholic mysticism, particularly the writings of St. John of the Cross. The poem's emphasis upon inward vision, spiritual struggle, and secret pilgrimage suggests the possibility of coded reflection upon hidden religious endurance.

4.5 Sonnet 29

Sonnet 29 opens with the speaker in a state of alienation: "When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes." The speaker's sense of exclusion and disgrace may plausibly reflect the condition of the recusant Catholic marginalised by Protestant society. The sonnet's movement from despair toward spiritual consolation may suggest hope sustained through faith amid persecution. The image of the lark "sings hymns at heaven's gate" reinforces the spiritual



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dimension of this consolation: "Haply I think on thee, and then my state, / Like to the lark at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;"

4.6 Sonnet 30

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought...

Sonnet 30's "sessions of sweet silent thought" may evoke meditative introspection, confession, or prayer. The speaker's mourning for "old woes" and lost friends may resonate with Catholic penitential and memorial practices. The beloved's restorative function in the concluding couplet may symbolise faith, grace, or divine consolation: "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restored, and sorrows end."

4.7 Sonnet 33

Even so my sun one early morn did shine
With all triumphant splendour on my brow;
But out alack, he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath masked him from me now.

The sun imagery in Sonnet 33 may be interpreted as a symbol both of divine radiance and of tragic personal loss. Some have speculated that the sonnet's numbering and language may allude autobiographically to Shakespeare's grief over his son Hamnet, though within this reading the sun may equally represent divine light obscured by suffering, perhaps recalling Christological symbolism.

4.8 Sonnet 53

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,



And you, but one, can every shadow lend.

The philosophical interplay of “substance” and “shadow” in Sonnet 53 may strongly evoke Eucharistic theological debates as present in: “What is your substance, whereof are you made, /That millions of strange shadows on you tend?” Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation claims that the substance of bread and wine changes during consecration, whereas many Protestant traditions denied this literal transformation. Thus, the vocabulary of substance and shadow may plausibly carry Eucharistic significance.

4.9 Sonnet 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments...

Sonnet 55’s claim that poetry shall outlast monuments may be read as asserting the endurance of suppressed truth beyond temporal destruction. Asquith and Batson both suggest that such claims may hint at the preservation of forbidden religious or political truths through literary artifice.

4.10 Sonnet 60

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, /So do our minutes hasten to their end;

The relentless passage of time in Sonnet 60 recalls Christian meditations upon mortality and spiritual endurance. The waves hastening toward shore may symbolise both life’s transience and baptismal purification, while the poem’s assertion that verse may withstand time suggests the preservation of transcendent truth against decay.

4.11 Sonnet 62



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Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,/ And all my soul, and all my every part;
And for this sin there is no remedy, / It is so grounded inward in my heart.
Methinks no face so gracious is as mine, (...) / But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
Beated and chapped with tanned antiquity, / Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;

The repeated invocation of “sin” in Sonnet 62 strongly recalls Catholic preoccupation with sin, confession, and moral self-examination. The poem’s introspective movement from pride to penitence aligns with traditional Catholic spiritual disciplines. “Tanned” signifies “sun-burnt” which betokens the corollary of closeness to God. The recurrent word “self” may lead us to understand the poet’s lofty spiritual reign. The repeated mention of “sin” may bespeak a Catholic age-old dilemma regarding the boundaries of sin. We agree with Pearce that the emergence of the concept love may also act as a symbolic counterpart of dauntless allegiance to spiritual truth. (Pearce, 2013)

4.12 Sonnet 66

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
...And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill...

The lament that “art [is] made tongue-tied by authority” has often been cited by Asquith as an especially potent allusion to censorship and suppression. The phrase may reflect the silencing of Catholic voices under Protestant authority and the frustration of suppressed truth. The poem’s woe that “purest faith [is] unhappily forsworn” could be read as a veiled allusion to Catholics forced to outwardly conform. The desire for “restful death” tallies with the Catholic concept of a “good death” referring to the idea of dying reconciled to the faith, perhaps even as a martyr.

4.13 Sonnet 73



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That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

The famous phrase “bare ruined choirs” has been interpreted by Alison Shell as evocative of the ruined monastic institutions left in the wake of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (Shell 2010).. The poet views himself as old, in the late autumn season which is an allusion to the old religion. An image of overall decay grips the reader. There sweet birds once sang. “Yellow leaves, or none, or few” may be read as referring to the diminished amount of Catholic population. The autumn imagery betokens the nearing death and the frailty of life, calling up Catholic themes of *memento mori* (“remember you must die”) and the preparation for the afterlife. The intensified love challenged by mortality suggests faith in resurrection secretly confessed by the marginalised Catholic believers who were still in England in Shakespeare’s time.

4.14 Sonnet 94

They that have power to hurt and will do none...

Sonnet 94’s meditation on restrained power and silent endurance may be read as praise for those who outwardly submit while inwardly maintaining moral and spiritual integrity. Such restraint parallels the concealed resistance of recusants living under persecution.

From Clare Asquith’s viewpoint, this could be read as a coded commentary on those who outwardly appear compliant or powerless such as secret Catholics or dissenters under Elizabethan rule, yet who put up discrete, deliberate resistance. The sonnet’s focus on latent power and potential “ruin” thrusts a political subtext: true strength lies in restraint amid oppression.



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Beatrice Batson (2006) remarks the sonnet's ambiguity; it simultaneously admires and warns, creating a "deniable" space where Shakespeare can comment on power being shielded from direct confrontation. This description of moral restraint and resistance to temptation ties in well with Catholic ideals of virtue, self-control, and steadfastness amid persecution. The sonnet's praise of silent strength can be read as covert admiration for clandestine Catholic stoic endurance.

4.15 Sonnet 97

How like a winter hath my absence been...

The winter imagery in Sonnet 97 may again symbolise emotional, spiritual, and religious desolation, aligning with the metaphor of Catholic hardship during Protestant ascendancy. From another point of view, Shell's (2010) interpretations of desire and hidden emotional truth highlight the pain of enforced separation, which could encode Shakespeare's or the Fair Youth's experience of enforced exile or secrecy, whether they be political, religious, or any other kind.

4.16 Sonnet 104

To me, fair friend, you never can be old...

Sonnet 104's meditation on beauty enduring against time may symbolise the preservation of faith or spiritual truth beneath outward decay. The sonnet's tension between appearance and reality supports readings focused upon concealed identity.

Jason Pearce (2013) rightfully has an esoteric take on this symbolism looking upon this as an exploration of appearances versus reality, a coded meditation on the tension between



spiritual or poetic immortality and physical mortality. Asquith (2005) also rightfully reads the sonnet as a subtle claim for the preservation of identity or faith beneath the eroding forces of time and persecution, a “deniable” hope embedded in seemingly conventional praise.

4.17 Sonnet 111

Thou corrupt'st the youth with thy foul drug...

Sonnet 111's language of corruption, shame, and redemption may be read in relation to Catholic penitential theology, suggesting moral failure followed by hope for spiritual cleansing. Asquith rightfully claims that Shakespeare uses this sonnet to explore themes of moral failure and hope for redemption, embedded within a seemingly personal apology.

The coded nature protects the poet from censure while allowing exploration of a Catholic sense of penance. This adds a spiritual depth to the sonnets often overlooked in secular readings. The “grave where buried love doth live” paradoxically bespeaks both death and spiritual life, things that are reminiscent of Catholic beliefs in resurrection and the sacredness of the body and soul. The imagery of burial and trophies summons the idea of martyrdom and memory.

4.18 Sonnet 126

O thou my lovely boy, who in thy power...

The unusual omission of the concluding couplet in Sonnet 126 may signify mystery, silence, or the ineffability of divine truth. The textual gap may symbolically evoke hidden meanings left deliberately unspoken. Both Batson (2006) and Shell (2010) both insist on how this formal irregularity warns us of a coded meaning, perhaps of the unspoken, ineffable nature of the Fair



Youth's identity or role. The sonnet praises the youth's "power" over "Time's injurious hand" yet owns up to the dictum that even he will eventually succumb.

We believe that the formal omission of the concluding couplet might stand for the ineffability of divine mystery, something like the "cloud of unknowing" in Catholic mysticism. The "Time's fickle glass" acts as a metaphor for mortality and the ultimate sovereignty of divine time. The gap calls upon the readers to fill in the silence, standing for the unspoken secrets and hidden truths central to the sonnets' shrouded craft.

4.19 Sonnet 129

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action...

Sonnet 129's intense moral condemnation of lust strongly resembles penitential discourse and confessional rhetoric. The language of shame, guilt, and damnation reflects a profoundly theological moral framework and betokens a soul's grappling with sin. Under Asquith's rightful conjecture, the poem might shroud not only sexual guilt but mainly spiritual anguish over apostasy of even Shakespeare's own conformity to the state church, we believe.

4.20 Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks...

This sonnet thus unsettles traditional representations of female beauty and hints at a broader cultural critique embedded in Shakespeare's poetry. Taken at face value, the sonnet is an exquisite love poem. Yet subversive readings alluding to an allegory of Catholic faith



confession may be prompted by certain rhetorical elements. “My mistress eyes seem to give off light” (of faith, we presume), white may allude to the good deeds of the Catholic Church and red may recall the purple symbol of martyrs. Red roses are redolent of the old and beautiful Catholic faith, symbolised by the sun, too. Red are also the Pope’s garments and the books of prayer.

Sonnet 130 famously throws out the Petrarchan idealisation of the beloved’s beauty according to Shell (2010), who interprets this as a challenge to the racial beauty standards of Shakespeare’s day, especially since the “Dark Lady” has been said to represent a woman of darker complexion or foreign origin. We do quite agree with Batson (2006), who observes that Shakespeare’s irony serves both to mock poetic clichés and to affirm a more honest, physical, and potentially transgressive love. We believe that the sonnet’s humour and realism baulk at any neat classification, offering perhaps a veiled celebration of difference.

4.21 Sonnet 145

Those lips that Love’s own hand did make...

The simplicity of Sonnet 145’s style may itself function strategically, disguising coded meaning beneath apparent innocence and stylistic plainness. Sonnet 145 is stylistically distinct from the others, using simpler language and rhythm, almost childlike in tone. This difference suggests a deliberate masking or lowering of complexity. Clare Asquith rightfully interprets this as a strategic move meant as a coded message disguised in simplicity to shun censorship.

The sonnet’s theme of “hate away” and the transformative power of the beloved’s words might suggest a spiritual or political reconciliation hidden beneath plain expression. The play on “hate” and “love” and the theme of mercy mirror Catholic notions of sin and forgiveness,



grace overcoming condemnation. The upshot thereof reads that the sonnet's simplicity could be a deliberate concealment of deeper spiritual meaning.

4.22 Sonnet 146

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth...
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

Sonnet 146 is among the most overtly theological of Shakespeare's sonnets as it brings out its essence in: "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth." Its emphasis upon interiority, penitence, and triumph over death strongly recalls Catholic devotional spirituality and Counter-Reformation theology.

4.23 Sonnet 147

My love is as a fever, longing still, / For that which longer nurseth the disease...

The fever imagery of Sonnet 147 may symbolise spiritual illness and temptation. The speaker's inner torment resembles confessional discourse surrounding sin, temptation, and repentance. Sonnet 147 is a dramatic exploration of destructive passion. Here, the speaker likens his love to a consuming illness, uttering inner turmoil and self-destructive desire. The "fever" metaphor could also be read within a religious framework, as Clare Asquith might justly argue, symbolising sin, spiritual sickness, or temptation under moral strictures. The metaphor of love as fever and disease falls in with the Catholic concept of spiritual sickness and the struggle against temptation and sin. The sonnet's self-awareness of "madness" mirrors confessional themes of inner distress and repentance. The concluding lines bear witness to this mindset:



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Past cure I am, now reason is past care, / And frantic-mad with evermore unrest; / My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are, / At random from the truth vainly expressed; / For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

We claim that this powerful paradox unmasks the conflict between appearance and reality, faith and doubt, sanity and madness, which can be read as a shrouded expression of forbidden desire and spiritual crisis.

4.24 Sonnet 152

And all my honest faith in thee is lost.
For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,
Or made them swear against the thing they see.

Faith occurs as a loadstar running throughout this sonnet. Yet the poet writhes about in dilemmas alluding to the forsworn oaths of allegiance taken by the old English Catholics forced by the tidal onslaught of Reformation. From our point of view the sonnet refers us to the Acts of Supremacy and of Uniformity imposed by Queen Elizabeth I: „In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn, / But thou art twice forsworn...”

As we hinted at this before, the charge of perjury echoes powerfully in a recusant context, where Catholics were forced to swear the Oath of Supremacy. The sonnet's bitterness may mirror Shakespeare's own sense of spiritual compromise, a conjecture that tallies with our portrayal of him as a marginalised Catholic negotiating survival in a hostile state.

5. Conclusion

The present paper has examined the troubled historical and religious environment surrounding William Shakespeare's life and has sought to advance a broad range of conjectures concerning the allusive metaphors, similes, and symbolic expressions found throughout his



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sonnets, which may plausibly be interpreted as constituting a shrouded language of Catholicism—a marginalised faith operating beneath the dominant Protestant culture of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

The analysis has proposed that this encrypted language may have been so skilfully embedded within Shakespeare’s literary practice as to remain perpetually deniable by its author and effectively impossible for Anglican authorities to prove conclusively, thereby allowing Shakespeare to remain shielded from accusations of recusancy or religious dissent. In this respect, the hypothesis advanced herein aligns with Clare Asquith’s argument that Shakespeare’s coded symbolism was deliberately designed to preserve plausible deniability while still communicating deeper truths to sympathetic readers.

The claims developed throughout this study represent a bold experiment in conjectural literary history. Building upon Asquith’s arguments as well as the critical perspectives of Batson, Shell, Breight, Pearce, and others, the paper has argued that Shakespeare may have embedded subtle, systematic, and deniable Catholic code wording within his poetic corpus. Through close engagement with selected sonnets, the study has sought to demonstrate how conjectural reading may illuminate Shakespeare’s recurring preoccupation with guilt, redemption, suffering, spiritual endurance, penitence, and transcendence—motifs that align closely with Catholic doctrine and devotional traditions.

At the same time, the study recognises that such interpretations remain necessarily provisional. The very nature of the alleged code renders it resistant to definitive proof, and thus the argument advanced here must remain within the domain of informed scholarly conjecture rather than incontrovertible historical certainty. Yet this does not invalidate the interpretive enterprise; rather, it underscores the importance of maintaining openness to alternative



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possibilities in Shakespearean scholarship, particularly where biographical evidence remains fragmentary and textual meanings remain richly ambiguous.

Ultimately, conjectural thinking remains both a risk and a necessity in Shakespeare studies. Where documentary evidence is scarce and authorial intention elusive, interpretation inevitably requires the careful balancing of textual evidence, historical context, and theoretical reflection. When practised responsibly, conjectural reading enriches our understanding of Shakespeare by preserving the possibility that his works may contain meanings at once personal, political, theological, and spiritual – meanings that may forever remain “incapable of proof,” yet nonetheless worthy of continued scholarly pursuit.

Future research extending beyond the sonnets into Shakespeare’s dramatic works, narrative poems, and extant biographical evidence may yet reveal further clues capable of strengthening – or challenging – the conjectures proposed herein. In this sense, the present study should be understood not as the final word on Shakespeare’s possible Catholicism, but as an invitation to further inquiry into one of the most fascinating and unresolved questions of Shakespearean interpretation.

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