

## REVIEWS

THE SHAKESPEARES AND 'THE OLD FAITH', by John Henry de Groot.  
(Cumberlege: Oxford University Press; 20s.)

That scholarly sleuthing which we so drably style research can seldom have resulted in anything more significant than *The Shakespeares and 'The Old Faith'*. The quest itself is exhilarating and its upshot most valuable, especially to Catholics. For here an American scholar, John Henry de Groot, has ratified and stabilised that speculative, shifting sense of a Catholic background which most of us experience in reading or hearing our Shakespeare. Catholic, Anglican and Puritan have claimed that theirs was the fashioning of Shakespeare's youth; that his father was a recusant, a conformist or a non-conformist, as the case might be. And now his father's own Catholic confession of faith—a 'testament' in the Villon sense, not a will, found under the tiles of his Stratford home and copied out in 1784—has been proved, one feels beyond all cavil, to be a genuine document and not a forgery.

The story of the Testament is Mr de Groot's clinching argument; but his book is divided into four parts, all bearing on the religious bias of William Shakespeare. The first part summarises all the extant controversy on the subject of Shakespeare's father's faith, giving due weight to all the sectarian evidence connected therewith. This is, for a Catholic, a momentous chapter enough; for it shows the impossibility of being openly and consistently an ardent anything at a time of doctrinal ferment coupled with State absolutism. Undoubtedly Shakespeare's mother—Mary Arden, the wife of John Shakespeare—was of Catholic stock. The Ardens were involved in 'Popish plots' and one of them was executed at Smithfield. Undoubtedly John Shakespeare got into trouble for not going to church—but so did the Puritans. Yet John Shakespeare applied for a coat-of-arms and encouraged 'players'—both forms of worldliness abhorrent to Puritans. The first round, one feels, goes—but only just—to the Catholic hypothesis.

The second, the story of John Shakespeare's 'Spiritual Last Will and Testament' is the investigator's *pièce de résistance*. He does not seem to have seen the original document which—minus one leaf, which was lost when the Will was 'thrown about the house' by the bricklayer who found it—is now housed with other Shakespearean 'forgeries' in Birmingham Free Library. (It should surely be at Stratford or in the British Museum.) The man who rescued the Will to all intents and purposes from the imputation of forgery was the late Father Thurston, S.J., who between 1882 and 1923 wrote three articles on it and produced striking evidence of its authenticity.

The story of the Will must be read in detail. Roughly what hap-

pened was this. The bricklayer, one Mosely, who discovered it, gave it to a wheelwright, John Jordan, one of the highly suspect race of amateur antiquarians who like the author of *Barthram's Dirge* acquired fame—and sometimes more tangible emoluments—out of the eighteenth century Renaissance of Wonder. Jordan, however, got neither praise nor booty. He sent a copy of his find to the critic Malone; and Malone, at first captivated, turned it down. He printed it, however; and it was bandied about as a controversial missile, even Catholics doubting how such a precise series of acts of faith, in English, could have been drawn up by John Shakespeare—even if he were a Catholic. And then the tables were turned. Father Thurston discovered, in 1923 in the British Museum, a Spanish version of the same document; and since then other versions have turned up—in Romansch, Italian and French. The original was composed by St Charles Borromeo; and there seems, suggests Mr de Groot, little doubt that when Father Campion and Father Parsons sojourned at Milan, on their way to the English mission in 1580, they acquired copies of the 'Testament'. Moreover, when Dr Allen wrote in 1581 that Fr Parsons was ordering 'three or four thousand more of the Testaments, for many persons desired to have them', he was alluding to Cardinal Borromeo's 'Will'. The Rheims New Testament was not even published, let alone transportable to Elizabeth's England—four thousand quarto volumes of eight hundred pages apiece—by seminary priests.

The Will thus amply justified—and every page of the controversy is exhilarating—the critic proceeds to young William Shakespeare's possible upbringing as a recusant's child and (probably) as a pupil of Stratford Grammar School. His view of the Catholic home as the last Elizabethan citadel of the faith is impressive, if only because our own day has reversed what is obviously the wiser policy and weakened home influence in order to exalt citizenship. True, Shakespeare ran away from home; but, as we have seen, his father had no bias against actors and dramatists. They were comparatively free, as artists still are, to practise their religion—or irreligion—witness Ben Jonson. Moreover many of their patrons—Southampton, for instance—had Catholic sympathies.

Mr de Groot's final chapter, 'Catholicism in Shakespeare's writings', is admirable as evincing Shakespeare's sympathy with Catholic priests and familiarity with Catholic practice. His detailed comparison of 'King John' with the play Shakespeare found—or, less probably, wrote—as 'The Troublesome Raigne of John King of England' shows a wholesale and detailed emendation of a crude play full of anti-Catholic propaganda. The extraordinary violence of Shakespeare's spiritual oscillations—from the 'tick' of 'Titus Andronicus' to the 'tock' of 'The Tempest'—makes it just possible that both the 'King John' plays were Shakespeare's; and there is (probably forged) evidence for the notion—but it is unlikely.

Any Catholic library that fails to secure this book is doing itself less than justice. The only thing the author has not noted—because it is not there to note—is any striking echo of the spirit as opposed to the letter of the faith to which, according to legend, Father Parsons reconciled the wavering John Shakespeare. Why, one wonders, has the most memorable appeal to the compassion of Christ in Elizabethan literature come from a dramatist comparatively destitute—as far as we know—of Catholic background?

'Oh, I will leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?  
See where Christ's blood streams in the firmament:  
One drop would save my soul . . .'

This is the Southwell touch; and not all William Shakespeare's picturesque apparatus of bell, book and candle, orisons, robes pontifical, holy water, and the rest, substantiate Catholic England—the England of the Middle Ages, the England of the Elizabethan martyrs—as do these lines of the notorious atheist Christopher Marlowe.

H.P.E.

THEOLOGY AND SANITY. By F. J. Sheed (Sheed & Ward; 12s. 6d.)

'My concern in this book is not with the will but with the intellect, not with sanctity but with sanity'. Mr Sheed goes on to add, and with good reason, that 'the difference is too often overlooked in the practice of religion'. No longer can the complaint be made that there is, in English, any amount of 'pious reading' but no theology. In one leap Mr Sheed has supplied what was desperately needed, a clear and adult commentary on the truths of Faith which does not apologise for its use of reason in illuminating them. Writing with a lucidity of style and an aptness of illustration that reveal a disciple of St Thomas who is yet not a mere translator, Mr Sheed brings off the most tricky dialectical feats because he realises the capacity of the intellect to apprehend truth and, too, because he realises the intellect's limitations. Nothing is more impressive in this book than the confidence of its argument—and its fundamental humility. He is in no doubt about the relations of love and knowledge, but reminds us firmly that 'if a man loves God knowing a little about him, he should love God more from knowing more about him: for every new thing known about God is a new reason for loving him'.

It is needless to summarise *Theology and Sanity*. One can only urge every adult Catholic—priest, religious and layman alike—to buy it. The structure of the book is roughly that of the *Summa*: God, Creatures, Oneself. Its remarkable quality is most apparent in the chapters on the Blessed Trinity, where the necessarily abstract concepts of a technical theology are brilliantly expounded but by no means 'simplified' in the short-term interests of apologetics. The magnificent structure of truth which emerges at the book's close will inspire its readers to continue the exhilarating work of using their minds in the service of God, and the criticism (apart from the occa-