

SHAKE-  
SHAPE  
& OTHER PLAYS



ROWAN WILLIAMS

FOREWORD BY  
JAY PARINI

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SHAFTS  
& OTHER PLAYS



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S L / . N T  
B O O K S

## SHAKESHAFTE & OTHER PLAYS

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## Foreword

ONE LOOKS BACK at the writings of Rowan Williams, formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012), with amazement and gratitude. He’s a compulsively readable and persuasive theologian and Christian apologist, one whose early work was strongly influenced by the bracing mysticism of Eastern Orthodoxy (his doctoral research being a study of the Russian theologian Vladimir Nikolayevich Lossky). Among his most arresting works in a theological vein are *The Wound of Knowledge* (1979), a survey of Christian spirituality from the New Testament through St. John of the Cross, and *Silence and Honey Cakes* (2003), a splendid reading of the desert monastics of the fourth century, who wrote movingly about finding Christ in community. But this scarcely begins to tell the story of Williams as a theologian – a journey that, to a degree, culminates in *Christ the Heart of Creation* (2018), a beautifully argued meditation on how over two millennia Christians have engaged with the paradoxes of the Christ figure and the relations between God and creation itself.

Williams is also a gifted poet and literary critic, prolific in both genres. His poems reflect his deep reading in poetry, in history, his love of art and music, and his alertness to landscapes (especially the Welsh landscape of his childhood), where nature and spirit live in easy correspondence. His evocative and sensuous language offers a rich experience. And as a

literary critic, especially in his luminous studies of Dostoevsky (2008) and C. S. Lewis (2012), he's an astute, responsive, and helpful reader – always at the service of the text, which he inhabits with an almost uncanny ability to lose himself in a writer's world, with an enduring interest in metaphor itself as the heart of communication – a topic he explored in tantalizing detail in his Gifford Lectures, published as *The Edge of Words* (2014).

All of which brings us to Shakespeare, the subject of his first play in *Shakeshafte and Other Plays*. In his youth, Williams entertained visions of the stage, acting in several plays. In a 2014 interview with *The Guardian*, he revealed his abiding love of the Bard, calling *The Winter's Tale* “one of the most linguistically dense, emotionally demanding, and spiritually rich of all the plays.” He said that he found the long-standing arguments about Shakespeare's Roman Catholic leanings of more than passing interest:

Shakespeare knows exactly where he does, and doesn't, want to go, in matters of church and state. He deliberately puts some of his plays right outside the Christian, Tudor/Jacobean framework. For instance, *King Lear* takes place in a pre-Christian Britain. Again, some people argue that *Cymbeline* is about a rupture with Rome, leading to a reconciliation. I think Shakespeare did have a recusant Catholic background. My own hunch is that he didn't go to church much.

In this same interview he refers to the first play in this collection, *Shakeshafte*.

Here he imagines a dialogue between young Will and the legendary Jesuit martyr, Edmund Campion. “We know they both stayed at the same house in Lancashire,” he says. “I found this a wonderful idea to play with: what might a Jesuit martyr and Shakespeare have said to each other?”

This play is more than simply an imaginary conversation between two major figures. It's a striking portrait of Catholic

life in Elizabethan England, when a secret papist might be exposed, leading to partial hanging, castration, disembowelment, and beheading – the hideous fate that actually befell Campion in 1581. The actual details of these executions terrified all Catholics in Elizabeth’s time, and this potential fate gives a sharp edge of anxiety to the drama that unfolds in *Shakeshafte* during the winter of 1580 and the summer of 1581.

The play’s setting is an opulent manor house in Lancashire, home of the wealthy Catholic Alexander Hoghton, who apparently left a bit of money to a young man called Will Shakeshafte. In Williams’s drama, this man is Shakespeare himself, who by tradition once worked for a Catholic family in Lancashire as a young man. (The evidence that Shakespeare may have had Roman associations is compelling, although some scholars disagree with the notion. In any case, Williams calls this a *fantasia*, a kind of “what if” play.) The lost years of Shakespeare are, of course, an inviting gap in history, and Williams rushes into this space with relish, giving us a wise and witty young man who more than holds his own with his elders, including the mystery man who shifts about the countryside under various names, here as Edward Hastings, a priest who belongs to “the Company,” which refers to the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit order.

The play, which includes a dalliance with a local lass for young Will, is provocative and entertaining, the language expressively idiomatic, the discourse bracing. In one key passage in Scene VII, for example, Will talks with Hoghton and Hastings, setting out his views of religion, which aren’t exactly a model of orthodox rhetoric. “For Christ’s sake, Will! You’re not turning Lutheran,” exclaims Alex. Here Will responds at his best: “I’m not turning anything, sir. I want to know the playbook’s there, in Rome or wherever. Perhaps it’s only what someone else did, what someone else said, hundreds of years ago, when they were on their own on a stage and there were no playbooks. And – you know spiders? They spin it

out of themselves, don't they; they get it out of the bowels and...." He's interrupted by Hastings, who says: "What's in those bowels, though? You know your catechism. What's in any of us except lies and tales and images of who we are, that we set up and worship?"

*Shakeshafte* is a densely woven fabric, a play that seems utterly plausible and tantalizing as well. And it plays well against *The Flat Roof of the World*, another full-length play about a writer, although the social context of this play, and its dreamlike setting, could not be more different. David Jones, its subject, has none of Will's easy way with words. He's occasionally halting and inarticulate, at other times as eloquent as we find him in his poems.

Jones was, indeed, one of the major modernist poets of Britain, best known for *In Parenthesis* (1937), a long poem (with an admixture of prose) set during the Great War, in which Jones fought for five years – a survivor of the trenches who suffered for many decades from post-traumatic stress syndrome or "shell shock," as it was called then. Perhaps his worst time was the disastrous battle at Mametz Wood in the summer of 1916, recalled by Jones in Williams's play: "Sounds odd, bloody great explosions going off all the time, all around, but there, inside the fog, in the dawn, walking forward as if you were on cushions, walking on air, walking on the flat roof of the world."

This riveting play draws a small circle around Jones, who lived an increasingly isolated life in his later years, never well enough to follow through with marriage, barely able to function in the world. In addition to his poetry, he was a major artist, especially known for his watercolors. Soon after the war, he was drawn (as a Catholic convert) to Eric Gill, a sculptor and typeface designer associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement. Gill was a Catholic himself, and a very strange man who wrote about his sexual adventures in his diary. These included incestuous relations with his two eldest daughters – the second of whom, Petra, was briefly engaged

to David Jones, who was later attracted to a vivid young actor and athlete, Valerie Wynne-Williams.

As Williams puts this cast of characters before us, the conflicts arise. Gill wants Jones to do something more serious, as an artist, than mere watercolors. “What do you think you’re making when you paint one of these?” he asks the mortified Jones. “It’s just...wallpaper for some capitalist collections; it’s not a thing with a purpose.” As Jones struggles in his halting relations with Petra and Valerie, he tries to make sense of a senseless world. His memories endlessly return to the trench, much as one’s tongue returns to a cavity or sore in the mouth. “It all comes back to that, though, doesn’t it?” he says to Petra in Scene IV. “A man hung up in public, dying. Don’t get me wrong, don’t think I’m getting a Christ-complex. It’s just that I suppose he hangs up there because that’s where we all are, one way or another. Dying, surviving. Waiting.”

Williams is, at core, a Christian playwright, interested in questions of sacrifice, even self-sacrifice. He shows not the slightest fear in approaching the oddities of Gill, the torment of his daughter, or the frustrations of Valerie, who says in rejecting him for another man: “If you’d really wanted me – if you’d really wanted me and – well, I’d have.... Oh, Christ, I don’t know.”

*The Flat Roof of the World* is rooted in Jones’s poetry – the title itself comes from *In Parenthesis*. And it has all the brokenness, splintered idealism, and desperate grip on the physical and spiritual realities that one associates with this poet. And yet the play is dreamlike, as characters step in and out of time, the conflicts in the poet’s life coalescing in powerful clusters of confrontation and engagement. A kind of imaginative smoke seems to swirl around their legs as they lift their heads above the clouds. The total effect of this play is, finally, both devastating and hauntingly beautiful.

The final short play is *Lazarus*, a meditation in three voices. The sequence is largely a riff on the great line from the

Lazarus sequence in the 11th chapter of John's gospel: "I am the Resurrection and the Life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." These words, in the King James translation, are heard "as if in church" on a grainy recording. This gives us the feeling that truth, as ever, lies at the bottom of a well, rippled over by water that obscures and distorts it. We hear the voices of a middle-aged man and woman, and a young male as each of them struggles with unique circumstances that involve death and resurrection. We're in the past, in biblical time, and the present as well. All time becomes irrelevant in the face of death and, by implication, in the reality of Resurrection thinking. Needless to say, there is much confusion on the part of our speakers, who keenly participate in the grief around and within them, and who understand on some level that Jesus wept because he saw the suffering of poor human beings, and his own humanity drew from this same depth in an act of sympathy.

This is a dramatic poem in three voices that raises some of the most profound questions that we ask about life and death. Did Lazarus really want to come back? Did his sister actually wish for this? Can we build on the process of dying, which is possibly an opening into new life? "I'm what's alive here," says the first voice near the end, in a totalizing moment. And it's this recognition that lights up this memorable little drama.

Rowan Williams invites us into three dramatic sequences that range widely, as the author's mind invariably does. And yet certain key questions play throughout: What matters to us most? What is life worth? How do we come to live in community in a way that celebrates and values who we are, perhaps who we were meant to be? It should surprise no one that Williams asks these questions, here with the kind of shimmering indirect eloquence that the drama affords.

– Jay Parini

# SHAKESHAFTE

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# Shakeshafte

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## NOTE

In August 1581, Alexander Hoghton, of Lea and Hoghton Tower in Lancashire, died, after making a will in which he left bequests to a number of members of his household – a large one, as befitted one of the wealthiest men in the region, occupying an ample and spectacularly situated mansion not far from Preston.

Among the beneficiaries are Fulk Gillom (who can be traced with some likelihood as belonging to a Chester family connected with the productions of the guild plays in the city) and William Shakeshafte. In addition to receiving legacies, these two are also recommended to a neighbour, Sir Thomas Hesketh, for patronage and/or employment; the context clearly suggests that they are involved with providing entertainments for the household.

Nothing more can be learned for sure about Shakeshafte. But since Hoghton's will was first published in the nineteenth century, the similarity of the name to that of a better-known sixteenth century figure has generated a wealth of speculation. A local tradition was unearthed that Shakespeare had worked with a Catholic family in Lancashire, and John Aubrey's report that Shakespeare had in his youth been "a schoolmaster in the country" was prayed in aid. The possible

Catholic connections and sympathies of Shakespeare at various points of his life gave the thesis added plausibility for some; and Lord Strange, later Earl of Derby and an early patron of Shakespeare, had close links with Lancashire and its gentry families. More significantly, it emerged that John Cottam, schoolmaster in Stratford from 1579 to 1582, came from a family living near Houghton Tower.

Cottam and the Hoghtons were loyal to the “old religion”; and when the Jesuit, Edmund Campion, toured the north of England in 1580-1, he stayed with different members of the Hoghton family, among other Catholic gentry households. Converted to Catholicism after a brilliant Oxford career, Campion had moved abroad to study for the priesthood, joined the Jesuits, and made a stellar reputation in Europe, spending time at the court of the Holy Roman emperor Rudolf II in Prague. He returned to England in 1580 – along with Thomas Cottam, brother of the Stratford schoolmaster, also a Jesuit priest.

At this period, Catholic missionaries from abroad were regarded by Elizabeth I's government as automatically treasonous, given that the Pope in 1569 had sanctioned the removal by force or assassination of the Queen. Their reputation was much the same as that of ISIS or Al Qaeda in the present context, though very few indeed actually supported violence or rebellion. Both Cottam and Campion were executed in 1581 by the usual barbaric method of partial hanging followed by disembowelling. Campion was made a saint by the Roman Catholic Church in 1970.

So there is a strong likelihood that Campion was either at Houghton Tower or at Alexander Hoghton's other residence at Lea during some period in 1580-1. Whoever William Shakeshafte really was may well have been there at the same time. Scholars differ very sharply about the likelihood of the identification of Shakeshafte with the young man from Stratford; several leading Shakespearean experts such as Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jonathan Bate believe that the

Lancashire connection is wholly discredited, and a plausible local candidate for identification with Shakeshafte has been traced; but others still consider it a possibility, given the slender but strong chain of connections with various well-documented aspects of Shakespeare's life.

Short of decisive new documentary evidence, it is unlikely that the question will ever be settled. But that at least allows for a *fantasia* (borrowing Thornton Wilder's term for his historical novel, *The Ides of March*) on the events of these years – particularly on what a Campion and a Shakespeare might have had to say to each other: the intelligence of the martyr and the intelligence of the poet. And that is what this play attempts, without wanting to press the historical case too insistently.

Practically all the names are taken from Hoghton's will or other documents from the same period and area. Hoghton's exiled older brother was actually called Thomas, like the younger half-brother who inherited his estate; since this half-brother appears here, I have renamed the older brother William to avoid confusion. Similarly, I have rechristened Roger, Margaret Crichlow's husband, as Walter to distinguish him from Roger Livesey. There is a codicil to Hoghton's will revoking, without explanation, the legacy to Margaret. "Hastings" was one of several assumed names used by Campion in his travels.

It is worth remembering that this is a period in which accent has nothing to do with class. Lancashire gentry and servants sound much the same, and they will all sound rather different from a Midlander like Will or an internationally mobile intellectual like Hastings/Campion.

## Characters

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### *The Family*

ALEXANDER HOGHTON, of Hoghton Tower

THOMAS HOGHTON, his younger brother

MARGARET (MEG) CRICHLOW, his daughter

### *The Household*

ROGER LIVESEY, steward of Hoghton Tower

ROB TOMLINSON

MARGERIE GERRARD

FULK GILLOM

WILL SHAKESHAFTE

THOMASIN

ALICE

SUSANNA

### *The Visitor*

EDWARD HASTINGS / EDMUND CAMPION

*The setting is Hoghton Tower, Lancashire: for these purposes, a general “Great Hall” space, door towards back, with hearth downstage right, settle, long table (downstage left), benches, a couple of stools; and a staircase to an upper level.*

*The action takes place between the winter of 1580 and the summer of 1581.*

## Scene I

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*[Heavy knocks on a door. THOMAS HOGHTON – brisk, late fifties – enters noisily, discarding riding cloak, etc. To servants:]*

THOMAS [*loudly*]: Alex! Alex! Roger! Alex! Roger, where are you?

*[ROGER LIVESEY – in his forties; undemonstrative but capable of some very strong emotions – enters in nightgown, dishevelled and irritable.]*

ROGER: Christ’s sake, Master Tom! D’you know what hour it is?

THOMAS: I’m not here for my health. Where’s Alex?

ROGER: I don’t care what you do or don’t do for your health, but you might think about your brother’s.

THOMAS [*slightly chastened*]: Aye, I know, I know. How does he go on?

ROGER: Not good. Six nights out of seven he won’t be asleep till around now.

THOMAS [*pause*]: How long?

ROGER: Surgeon says nine months, maybe twelve, no more.

[ALEXANDER HOGHTON – early sixties, heavy and formidable, slowed down by physical pain – has appeared at the head of the stairs, in nightgown.]

ALEX: Nine if I'm lucky, twelve if I'm not. What the hell's all this, Tom?

ROGER: Master Tom can come up to your chamber; you need to be back in bed.

ALEX: Well I'm awake. What's the use? [*Comes slowly and painfully downstairs.*] Roger, get me a... [*looks around; ROGER pulls up a stool to the table*]. Ay, that'll do. Now, find yourself some work; the whole bloody house'll be awake by now thanks to Tom here. [*ROGER goes; to TOM.*] This had better be important or I'll have your guts.

THOMAS [*pauses*]: Have you slept?

ALEX: Not above an hour. Now: if I've got nine months left, I don't fancy wasting them waiting for you to tell me what you've got for me. Bad news, yes?

THOMAS: Tom Cottam.

ALEX: They've taken him?

THOMAS: Last week in Dover, soon as he'd landed. I guess he'll be put to the question any day.

ALEX: Christ. How do you know?

THOMAS: Letter from Jack in the Midlands. He sent it to one of our people in Preston and they brought it to me last night. I rode straight here.

ALEX [*pauses*]: You'll be needing something. Roger! [*Back to THOMAS.*] What's Jack Cottam after apart from prayers?

because by God he'll need those almost as much as Tom will.  
[*ROGER comes in.*] Get us some ale.

ROGER: Trouble?

ALEX: Bad trouble. Tom Cottam, Tarnacre.

ROGER: Aye. Taken, is he?

ALEX: Taken. It's his brother writing to us, the schoolmaster down in where is it, Warwickshire? [*To THOMAS.*] So what does he want? [*To ROGER.*] Ale.

THOMAS: Perhaps Roger should stay a moment. It's – well, it'll have...it might have something to do with the household [*Sits.*].

ALEX: How do you mean?

THOMAS: Tom Cottam came back to England with some of the, you know, the, er, the Company, and he sent one or two of them to the Midlands with his list of known men. Jack Cottam introduced a few of his lads from the school to them. So they'll have their names any minute once Tom's put to the question, if they haven't got them already. Jack says he'll stay there as long as he can, but he thinks the lads need to get out before someone starts taking an interest. Specially as he thinks one or two might be headed overseas. He needs an answer soon as we can.

ALEX: You're telling me he wants us to take them here? Bloody maniac. Doesn't he know they're watching us already? [*Turns towards fire*] As if, well, as if he didn't know about William, God rest his stupid soul. [*Back to others; more loudly.*] And so: we take on a few young men with accents from the midlands and suspicious backgrounds asking about passage on a ship to Antwerp or some such? God help us; Jack's as big a fool as William was. We might as well write to the justices and say, here's a nest of foreign papists, come and

collect them and while you're at it we'll be glad to oblige you on the rack and kindly pull out our fingernails.

THOMAS: Ay, well. Can't quarrel with that. But what he says is there's just one he wants us to take that he thinks might pass up here. Sixteen or so. Plays and sings, writes a good hand, he says, not just one of the yokels. His father's an alderman or something like.

ALEX: One of ours?

THOMAS: Well, Jack's got a bit to say about that. Sounds like the old man's playing both sides. He's paid the fines, but he paid for pulling down the images and whitewashing the church and all. Jack says he's a close old bastard and pays the fines for not going to church so that no-one has a chance to arrest him for his debts when he's out and about; says it's cheaper that way.

ALEX [*laughs shortly*]: Sounds like a proper hero of the faith. Is his son the same, then?

THOMAS: Jack says he's been listening to the priests when they come and he doesn't know what he should do, and he's...not happy with his father's ways.

ALEX [*sighs*]: Let's see this letter, then. [*THOMAS passes it over, ALEXANDER scans it, THOMAS wanders over to the hearth.*] Well; I see what he means about him passing up here; the name's nearly right. There's Shakeshaftes ten miles away. Maybe they've got a long-lost cousin down south that they're just about to discover. Roger, what do you reckon? Can we find room for a – what, for God' sake? Player, tutor, dogsbody? Along with that other lad from Chester who's coming?

ROGER: Happen we could. But you're not seriously telling me you want him here, are you? Him and his little trail of

agents running after? It's no time for you to be giving yourself more to trouble you.

THOMAS: No, look, if we get straight back to Jack, today, we may be ahead of any agents. And by the time they've picked it up, he should be here and we can, you know, sort out the story. [ALEX gets up, begins walking back to the stairs.] But you'd better finish the letter.

ALEX: God, you mean there's more? What?

THOMAS: It's one of Tom Cottam's friends from the Company. He's travelling up here. He'll need a place to come and go from a bit.

ALEX: Jesus and Mary. So it's more of "Here we are, lads, come and arrest us," eh? [Sits again.] Come and pick up the servants and the family and find out what the old man's been saying in his cups, and.... [Trails away, rubbing forehead, very tired.]

ROGER [*fiercely*]: Tell them to go to hell. You've earned some peace; what business is it of yours if some fancy priest from overseas wants to come and stir things up? We can wait for changes. We don't need....

ALEX: Shut up, Roger [*Silence; reads; sighs*]. Thing is, I'll be dead in the year if they're right. There's not a lot they can do to scare me. And I'm going to have to face my Maker and say to him, I couldn't be bothered when it would cost me nothing or next to nothing. I don't fancy that. I've got enough on my slate to need a few good works in the balance.

THOMAS [*pause; then*]: Shall I get a message to Jack?

ALEX: All right. Yes. Yes, get him a message, today. We'll take his young man. And I guess we've no choice but to take this priest from the Company and all. Roger, you're sitting there like a wet Sunday. [ROGER opens his mouth to snap

*back, thinks better of it, shakes head/tuts.] Get some bloody ale for Christ's sake! And another gown. I'm cold. [Rises slowly and starts for the stairs.]*

*[Blackout.]*