

James Shapiro: *1599 A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (Faber 2005)

Review by Richard Malim

We Oxfordians owe a debt to those professionals who continue to produce 'biographies' of the Stratford man, as every time one appears we can deploy fresh arguments or strengthen old ones. Chiefly these works are useful because they enable us to point up the chasm between the biographical facts and the mind behind the works.

In his new book (p.xvii) Shapiro writes : '(We know) too little, because we don't know very much about what kind of friend or lover or person Shakespeare was. ... It's unfortunate, because even if we don't know about his personality, we know a great deal about his career as a writer (more than enough to persuade a reasonable sceptic that he wrote the plays himself).'

Now that is just the point: we do know a great deal about the life and personality of William Shakespeare, and none of it bears any relationship to writing or acting. The few contemporary references are so general – and with that statement we may join the total absence of any specific references – as to be quite useless as evidence, and alone justify the sceptic in his scepticism. Conversely we can deduce from the plays a great deal about the personality of the playwright, and none of it ties in with the character of William Shakespeare.

Shapiro illustrates the problem well enough: his 'Shakespeare' appears as a leading light in, but there is no evidence that Shakespeare had anything to do with, the reconstruction of the Globe in 1599. He was a shareholder in the Company and plays bearing his name as the apparent author appeared in 1599, but the volume of evidence is that he was infrequently in London and is more likely to have spent 1599 skulking in Stratford away from the London public and out of range of Jonson's vicious attack on his character and activities in *Everyman Out Of His Humour*. The un-evidenced Shakespeare as the great writer, actor and impresario makes up a large portion of Shapiro's book, which ignores the thrust of Jonson's portrait. The biographical element is simply bolted on to the narrative without any connective evidence.

Elements of that personality appear in many 'orthodox' biographies and can now be tested in two ways. First, how does the author deal with the Catholic problem ? Shapiro seeks to dodge it by not setting out the dichotomy between the strict Roman Catholic upbringing inside the Shakespeare family and the comparatively liberal attitude of the plays. A scientific biography would set out the facts and indi-

cate how these relate when applied to the mind-set behind the plays, but that book has yet to be written: it is certainly not Shapiro's. One can only conclude it is an insuperable problem for the 'orthodox'.

The second problem is Shakespeare's social climbing allied to his Stratford business practices. The plays show consistent mockery of someone of Shakespeare's attainments : the adolescent William Page's defective scholastic skills in *Merry Wives*, Christopher Sly in *Taming of The Shrew*, William in *As You Like It* and the Clown's social rise (with his father's) in *Winter's Tale* etc., and to this list some join Malvolio and Bottom.

To a 'reasonable sceptic' it is impossible to reconcile the mind that wrote these caricatures with the victim of them, the social-climbing coat of arms seeker portrayed by Katherine Duncan-Jones and viciously caricatured by Ben Jonson in *Everyman Out...*

Shapiro does not help: writing of the gap between 'the fantasy of a heroic Shakespearian past' (to which we may attach the social climbing desire) and the actuality, he says (p.279) : 'One of the most teasingly mysterious things about Shakespeare is his ability to sustain such contradictions...'. He does not tell us how, or in what, that 'ability' consisted. A most important point of any biography is to explore and reconcile such difficulties. Shapiro tells us he is faced with 'contradictions', which means he concedes in advance that the reconciliation between the playwright's mind and the putative personality is in his own judgment impossible, and he has nothing to offer towards a solution. If he meant to write 'apparent contradictions', then he should have attempted the reconciliation required by any 'reasonable sceptic'.

For Oxfordians, then, the book is not a failure; it merely serves to show the accuracy of my first paragraph. As a review of the politics and theatrical background, it is an interesting and thought-provoking review of that background. Professor Stanley Wells is quoted on the jacket : 'A passionately written study, the product of deep scholarship and acute critical thought'; maybe, but without sufficient analysis of evidence and application of logic, as a piece of biography it adds nothing.

Clare Asquith: *Shadowplay*
 Katherine Duncan Jones: *Ungentle Shakespeare* (*Arden 2001*)
Great Oxford, ed. R. Malim (Parapress 2004)