

**SHAKESPEARE MARLOWE JONSON :
New Directions in Biography (Editors
Mulryne and Kozuka): Ashgate 2006**

Review by Richard Malim

The editors have put together this collection of essays directly or indirectly derived from Warwick University's Centre conference at Stratford upon Avon in 2001.

While the essay by Professor Alan H. Nelson is of most interest to Oxfordians, other contributions ask for attention. Blair Worden and Nelson both have it in for the 'Honan's Wall Syndrome' - that propensity to find biographical or local allusions (e.g. the school wall in disrepair in Stratford, allegedly alluding to the character Wall in the 'rude mechanicals' play in *Midsummer Night's Dream*): Worden writes: 'Yet the difficulty of establishing such allusions - and the risk of looking silly in proposing them - tend to be proportionate to the size of the interpretative claims that are made for them. The gap between artistic achievement and biographical explanation for it seems unbridgeable, sometimes embarrassingly so' (*Shakespeare in Life and Art* p.27). The last sentence should be set in bright lights on our website.

Alison Shell's essay is entitled: 'Why Didn't Shakespeare Write Religious Verse?' and discusses the appeal to his 'loving cosen W.S.' to give up secular writing in favour of divine topics. The strongest argument, says Shell, is that Southwell in his writings made a considerable number of such appeals: the weakest is that Southwell asked the dedicatee to 'add the tunes'. Shell says, 'the commonsensical interpretation is that the dedicatee is a composer' which she agrees in the absence of any evidence effectively rules out Shakespeare: contrast Oxford, both as 'cozen' and as musician.

Helen Cooper resurrects a play called *Guy of Warwick* published in 1661 but dating in the 1590s. She draws attention to the irrelevant Clown character Sparrow. In Act V, 2 - an interchange dragged in with no plot requirement - always a sign that we are being told something we ought to know:

Sparrow: I' faith Sir I was born in England at Stratford upon Avon in Warwickshire

Rainborne: Wer't born in England? What's thy name ?

Sparrow: I have a fine finical name, I can tell ye, for my name is Sparrow; yet I am no house Sparrow, nor no hedge Sparrow, nor no peaking Sparrow, nor no sneaking Sparrow, but I am a high mounting lofty minded Sparrow.

Perhaps 'high mounting lofty minded Sparrow' is one in ridicule with 'Shaxberd' referred to in Nelson's essay below. In any event we are saddled with several pages of critical apparatus to divert

the reader's mind from the obvious meaning of the words used.

Nelson's own essay 'Calling All Biographers - A Plea For Documentary Discipline' begins with a swipe at anti-Stratfordianism: 'Though frequently presenting itself as a practitioner of honest and open scepticism, anti-Stratfordianism more often than not serves as a stalking-horse for "Prince Tudor" theorists', whose 'arguments' he then gleefully summarises. He well knows this to be a total misconception (just as Professor Holland, another essayist in this book, totally misrepresents the anti-argument in his article in the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*), and that most Oxfordians are adamantly hostile and desperate not be tarred with so-called 'PT'. Nelson then tells us that the support of prominent actors, Freud, and many other Great and Good [and I would add the ever increasing number of signatories to the Declaration of Doubt] 'casts no significant light whatever on the Shakespeare Authorship Controversy.'

Nelson properly cautions his readers against saying any document which does not fit their preconceptions is or must be a forgery. Oxfordians should accept the 1595 Heneage Declared Accounts, the 1604 Procession Accounts, the Court Revels Books and the Buc annotations in the Folger Shakespeare Library (which Nelson dates to 1599-1605) as contemporary productions. They are entitled to present their own gloss on each document. Nelson however says that anti-Stratfordians refuse to accept the Revel Books because of the references to 'Shaxberd' cut the ground from the argument that there were two distinct persons, one called with variations 'Shaksper', the other 'Shakespeare'. Again, this contention, with its effort to disparage anti-Stratfordian scholarship, is news to me. In this however and so often, the documents actually finish up as evidence in support of Oxfordian contentions.

The name 'Shakespeare' or Shake-speare' may well cover either the Stratfordian or the pseudonym of Oxford, depending on the context. Nelson decries those who think William Shakespere was merely a bit part actor or less, ignoring the clear reference in Jonson's *Everyman Out Of His Humour* 1599 to his incompetence in this and every other cultural attainment. Thus either Oxford or William Shakespeare as sleeping partner could be the person referred to in the Heneage Accounts; Oxford is the author in the 1604 Court Revels Books; and the witness ('teste') in the Buc annotation. Likewise the actor in the list of actors dragged in by Jonson in his collected Works 1616 (see essay 'Oxford the Actor' in *Great Oxford*). Again, it is William Shakespeare from Stratford who is the deponent in the Mountjoy litigation but there is no evidence that he was anything more than an intermittent lodger at the Mountjoy House, since from 1599 on the evidence shows that his business in Stratford was his paramount interest. We can accept the

signatures on the Will, save that, as many Oxfordians have pointed out, in the last signature the words ‘by me William’ are in a demonstrably more competent hand than that for the surname.

Nelson ends with a plea, ‘Calling all Biographers’, ‘Be very precise and accurate.’ He does not need to be reminded that his own claims to scholastic pre-eminence should be dying the death of a thousand cuts at the hands of his Oxfordian reviewers and of Nina Greene and her Phaeton website.

New Directions in Biography contains different approaches to the same dead end. Can there be none of the essayists and their friends who is beginning to realise that he/she is no nearer resolving the fundamental contradiction between, as Worden puts it, ‘The artistic achievement and the biographical explanation of it’? The proper way forward is to analyse those current alternative contentions produced by reputable Oxfordians, and this we hope Professor Leahy will encourage his students at Brunel to undertake. R.M.