

Emperors With No Clothes

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David Ellis : *The Truth About William Shakespeare*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2012)

David Ellis is obviously appalled at the standard of biography when the life of William Shakespeare is tackled. Sometimes he feels like the little boy who pointed out that the Emperor has no clothes on. As an experienced biographer (of D.H. Lawrence and Byron) though not of Shakespeare, he points out that anyone seeking to write a biography has to become a historian. "This simple truth ought to serve as a reminder that writing biography should be subject to strict conditions and that none of these is met in the case of Shakespeare"(p.4). At one blow he demolishes by name the claims to academic respectability of Duncan-Jones, Bate, Weis, Greenblatt and Shapiro. While a *chronicle* of Shakespeare's Life can be constructed, as the careers and writings of Malone, Halliwell Phillipps and Chambers have in effect warned us for over two centuries, nothing much more can be achieved, but modern 'biographers' still contrive to make bricks without straw.

Ellis mercilessly exposes their methods; first how they conceal the thinness of their materials by speculation and conceal this from the reader, who might otherwise gather that he/she is faced with a historical novel, by the use of the weasel words, 'perhaps', 'if', 'probably', 'could have' and so on, which acknowledge that the rules are being broken, and then vanish on the subsequent occasions when speculative answers to the unanswerable questions are taken as essential narrative building blocks. Then there is the frequently produced argument that because there is no evidence the very absence of the evidence indicates the truth of the proposition the author wishes us to accept. Then there is the device whereby great reams of accurate and interesting historical background conceal and try to compensate for the non-existence of any biographical foreground. Finally there is the attempt to infer details of the life from the writings, although here Ellis does not pick up Shapiro's attempt to distance himself from this ploy by denouncing the author's autobiographical references in the works.

The remainder of the book Part I is devoted to showing across William Shakespeare's putative career how these academic devices are deployed to bolster the records – a melancholy catalogue of biographical invention indeed, and of little interest to Oxfordians. Ellis is a strict Stratfordian: it does not seem to occur to him that the Greene Groatsworth and Chettle episode might have nothing to do with William Shakespeare; or that the 1594/5 Treasury payment to "William Shakespeare" raises questions of evidence; and broadly that William Shakespeare might not be the writer and the basic Malone play dating scheme may be hopelessly defective. The examination of these items would bring Ellis' emasculated chronicle of Shakespeare's cultural standing below the level that a reasonable person would consider that Shakespeare has any substantive connection with the works at all.

Nevertheless the ideas in Part II of the book are of great interest. He denounces the idea that those 'gossip' items, i.e. those stories which arise anything up to fifty or more years after Shakespeare's death, are evidence of a 'kernel of truth' or are somehow 'representative' of a true scenario. More insidious in his view is the claim that because an academic is a great expert on Elizabethan politics, religion, social history or literature, that expertise gives the academic the right to have his/her speculations treated as history or at least seriously.

Ellis writes, "In all their prefaces and occasionally elsewhere, there are hints at the insubstantial nature of the evidence on which any life of Shakespeare has to be based that could be interpreted as bad conscience..... Usually, however, these hints are the implications of which their authors go on blithely to ignore. That anything more than a chronicle of his life is not possible is also something unlikely to be popular with the general public (and with publishers); but if academics do not tell it, who will? To not only fail to do so but also nurture the illusion that a life of Shakespeare is within our grasp, may well be *trahison des clercs*..... in the world of letters there is no obvious cost [for fomenting unreasonable expectations] beyond a general lowering of intellectual standards and the degradation of the art of biography." (pp.175, 177).

Thus the tribe of modern 'biographers' is ruthlessly exposed, and not by an Oxfordian but from deep inside the Stratfordian tent. From the Oxfordian point of view this is a substantial advance.

As a footnote, Shapiro in some way seems to realise the weakness of his position by his attack on his fellows for their addiction to spurious autobiographical references in their writings by seeking from his great eminence as a Shakespearean expert to persuade all scholars of whatever authorship persuasion not to consider *any* autobiographical references, and then only to consider that minority of the topical and political references which he recommends and finds in the works. He also seems to recognise that he may not succeed in that endeavour.

Shakespeare students of whatever persuasion therefore have a great debt to Ellis : we Oxfordians have held for a long time the greater part of his view of current 'orthodox' scholarship, but now one of the tribe has come to comparable conclusions to ours, it now becomes difficult for the 'great and good' to ignore their own manifest academic deficiencies. No longer therefore can our criticisms of modern Shakespeare biographies be dismissed as the vapourings of a tiny ignorable minority. The vertical chasm between the Oxfordians and the 'orthodox' is very deep, but now it is traversable horizontally by the one short step of questioning those few remaining alleged pieces of evidence which Ellis still appears prepared to defend.