

Shakespeare and the Resistance by Clare Asquith

Review by Tony Herbert

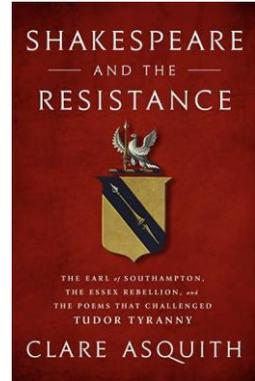
Clare Asquith's book *Shakespeare and the Resistance* is mainly a fascinating revisiting of Shakespeare's two long narrative poems (*Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*) which not many people now read. The fascination lies in the highly convincing way she reveals an interpretation of both – but particularly *Lucrece* – linking them to the murky political situation towards the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and the powerful undercurrents of resistance to the dominance of Sir William Cecil (Lord Burghley) and his son Sir Robert Cecil.

The book is hard to put down, but – and this is an important 'but' for Oxfordians – the identity of Shakespeare is an unexplored mystery floating in the background, amazingly never alluded to in any way.

Most of the book deals with the links in the two poems to Tudor politics. *Lucrece* has, in the words of Clare Asquith, 'sunk almost without trace', regarded as 'long, slow-moving, ponderous' and seemingly full to bursting point of irrelevant digressions. The underlying story would have been better known to Elizabethans, at least to literate and educated ones, than it is to us. Lucrece was raped by the young prince Tarquin, son of the King, and then she, to preserve her moral integrity, committed suicide, causing her fellow Romans to rise up against Tarquin and establish the Roman Republic – free of tyrannical Kings.

In Clare Asquith's hands, Shakespeare's 'digressions' are by no means digressions. They explore, in subtle cryptic ways, the appalling social consequences that followed from the dissolution of the monasteries many decades earlier and the corruption and greed of those who had benefited since then, including of course the Cecils.

Venus and Adonis is marginally more accessible to us modern readers, maybe partly because the myth has been the subject of so many paintings now in art galleries around the world. The story is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But Shakespeare changes the original Ovid version in a pretty dramatic way.



He turns Venus into a rapacious sexual predator. Adonis struggles to escape her clutches. Not the way it's told by Ovid. Clare Asquith shows how easy it is to align Shakespeare's Venus with Queen Elizabeth – cruel references to her denying that she is 'old, lean and wrinkled'. (Actually, Shakespeare's poem is even more cruel.)

One of the fascinations for us, living as we do in countries where criticism of the government is almost compulsory, is to try and understand how in the 1590s criticism could be achieved only in heavy disguise. The Elizabethans must have been wholly familiar with the tales of Ancient Rome and Greek mythology being used and adapted to make potentially dangerous political points, in situations where making the points openly would get you onto the scaffold.

But Shakespeare the man – where is he? The obvious question that literary scholars (and Clare Asquith is definitely a distinguished scholar and Shakespearean expert) seem to shy away from is how on earth could a man who we know was a businessman in a small market town have been so sensitive to the politics of the Earl of Essex and the Resistance, as well as sufficiently immersed in ancient literature, to have been able to write the two poems? It is, of course, no surprise that this question isn't mentioned. It somehow never is. But what is perhaps more surprising is that the man Shakespeare gets almost no mention at all – and that two of the references to him are at best dubious: the first that the Earl of Southampton was his patron; and the second that the sonnets were not dedicated to Southampton. But these are small points. The main one is that Shakespeare the author is such a shadowy figure. Would it not be interesting to confront at least the possibility that the author, writing as Shakespeare, was someone himself in the thick of the politics he refers to – such as, dare we say, Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford? But Clare Asquith is plainly no Oxfordian, by swallowing, uncritically, Alan Nelson's line in *Monstrous Adversary* about what an awful man he was.

A final, perhaps irrelevant, postscript. The author, Clare Asquith, is actually the Countess of Oxford and Asquith. Not a descendent of the 17th Earl of Oxford (that title being dormant) but married to the great grandson of prime minister H. H. Asquith who was created Earl of Oxford and Asquith in 1925.

