

The Best is Silence

By Philip Johnson

What happens when Stratfordians come across evidence that militates against the man from Stratford? Philip Johnson, who gave this paper at the London meeting of the DVS in May 2003, shows how biographers simply omit unpleasant details.

Recently, in one of my favourite and more productive second-hand bookshops, I found a volume, which looked interesting – and it is. It was published in 1922 by Basil Blackwell, a reputable name, and is dedicated to Sir George Greenwood, quote: “from the study of whose works, principally, I gained my own emancipation from the trammels of an outworn creed”. It develops material written by the author for the National Review in 1911.

The title is *Will O’ The Wisp or The Elusive Shakespeare*, by George Hookham (1922). John Michell quotes an extract in *Who Wrote Shakespeare?* But I know nothing more about George Hookham than what he discloses in his preface. He goes further towards the Baconian hypothesis than the neutral Greenwood, but does not expect or desire to convince readers that Bacon wrote the plays, not being convinced of it himself. He concedes that the Stratfordians have two simple facts in their favour:

“first, Shakspeare’s name, in the form of Shakespeare, or more often Shake- speare, plainly and indubitably on the title-pages of poems and plays. Secondly the lack of any contemporary expression of contradiction or doubt, negating the ostensible authorship”.

“The point on which I approach a state of certainty most nearly”, he writes, “is that Shakspeare of Stratford did not write the plays.”

So we can happily welcome Hookham to our company. However, about halfway through the book is this footnote – remember the date, 1922:

“Mr J. T. Looney has lately advanced the claims of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, to the authorship of the plays, with, I think, greater assurance than can belong to such doubtful matter”.

Some of you, I suspect, may now have reservations about Hookham, but I trust he is still welcomed by most! Hookham more than once criticises Stratfordian writers – his main target is Sir Sidney Lee – for misleading readers by inexactitude in their

presentation of information about matters Shakespearean: distorting historical facts, not accurately quoting original documents, producing half-truths. I would add to that the cunning method of total silence – suppressing information, or (if you want me to be more charitable) not bothering to mention significant related facts.

At our previous meeting, I bought a book in the Globe Theatre shop: *Documents of the Rose Playhouse*, revised edition (1999), edited by Carol Chillington Rutter, Senior Lecturer in English at Warwick University, and published by Manchester University Press in *The Revels Plays Companion Library*. So it’s obviously a respectable book. It’s also a fascinating book, because it reproduces documents relating to The Rose theatre, many of which are extracted from Philip Henslowe’s accounts. Each of these documents is introduced by an often lengthy editorial commentary, offering background information and explanation.

Here is an extract from the *Rose Playhouse Receipts* for early June 1594. A restraint had closed the playhouses, but the Admiral’s Men (with whom Henslowe was involved) were permitted to share the theatre at Newington Butts, some distance south-east of Bankside down the Old Kent Road, with the Chamberlain’s Men. Henslowe records all the performances by both companies and the receipts (rd).

In the name of god Amen begininge at newington my Lord Admeralle men & my Lorde chamberlenmen As ffolowethe 1594

3 of June 1594	Rd at heaster & ashweros	vij s
4 of June 1594	Rd at the Jewe of malta	x s
5 of June 1594	Rd at andronicous	xij s
6 of June 1594	Rd at cvtlacke	xj s
8 of June 1594	- ne -Rd at bellendon	xvij s
9 of June 1594	Rd at hamlet	vij s
10 of June 1594	Rd at heaster	v s
11 of June 1594	Rd at the tamynge of A shrowe	ix s
12 of June 1594	Rd at andronicous	vij s
13 of June 1594	Rd at the Jewe	iiij s

Two of the plays came from the Admiral’s repertoire: *The Jew of Malta* by Marlowe and *Cutlack*. The new play *Bellendon* was the Admiral’s, because it was next performed at The Rose exactly a week later, when it reopened. The other four were in the Chamberlain’s Men’s repertoire: *Hester* and

Ahasuerus (a biblical drama), Titus Andronicus (“almost certainly Shakespeare’s”, writes Rutter, at its first mention in January 1594 when Sussex’s Men premiered it at The Rose), Hamlet and The Taming of a Shrew. Hamlet? – in 1594? According to Stratfordian dating this is six years before it was written!

At this point, Stratfordians might mutter phrases like ‘Ur-Hamlet’, or ‘Thomas Kyd’s Hamlet’ and similar speculations and suppositions. My point is the silence of Stratfordians when faced with awkward facts. And Carol Chillington Rutter, for all her ready commentary on many other matters - including speculation about the ownership and performance of that well-loved play Bellendon - neither murmurs nor speculates about the 1594 Hamlet. She ignores it!

All right, the origins and date of Hamlet are not her immediate concern. But she finds time for a comment on the registering of The Taming of a Shrew that year; and elsewhere, with reference to performances by the Admiral’s Men of Harry the V, she curtly adds “not Shakespeare’s” (though I wonder how she knows). So why, with Hamlet, is the rest silence?

Eleven documents in this book, either in Henslowe’s original accounts or in Rutter’s commentary on them, bring up the name ‘Francis Langley’. We learn a number of interesting facts about him. In 1594 Langley announced his intention to build a new playhouse on Bankside, and The Swan opened the next summer, 1595. Its rivalry caused Henslowe several problems, not only with audience numbers, but with players who had once worked at The Swan. There were acrimonious legal disputes about money and costumes: in the autumn of 1597 the players accused Langley of withholding costumes that belonged to the Admiral’s company and of converting “the same to his best profytt by lending the same to hyre”. On 19 September 1598, Henslowe lent the Company “in Redy money A bowt the agrement betwext langley & them the some of” £35. On 04 October, he lent the Company £19 “to by a Riche clocke [= cloak] of mr langleyes which they had at ther a grement”.

The dispute with the “ever-vexatious” Francis Langley (Rutter’s phrase) went on into Spring 1599 when Henslowe lent William Bird, the actor, £1 “to descarge the areaste betwext langley & hime”. Meanwhile in July 1598, a vestry meeting at St Saviour’s, Southwark, made proposals to close down the Bankside theatres because of the trouble they caused, and appointed churchwardens to prosecute the cause. Rutter comments: “But where Langley

probably met them with cudgels – such was the story of his life – Henslowe undoubtedly smoothed their way”.

Let me briefly summarise what we know about Langley so far, from his actions: he was disputatious and litigious, on the make and ready to use physical violence. But Rutter’s introduction to Langley considerably amplifies his unsavoury character. I quote: “Langley’s decision to build a playhouse shows that the industry had grown up into big business. He would hardly have been interested in it otherwise, for by nature Langley was a profiteer, a land-pirate constructed upon the Cockney model.” After stating that his official trade was inspecting woollen cloth, she continues: “He also called himself a goldsmith ... little more than a euphemism for ‘money lender’.”

If you think this little excursion into the Rose Playhouse documents has taken us far from where we started - the authorship question and Shakspeare of Stratford - please temper your impatience and consider. In Francis Langley, we have arrived at a businessman who made easy money in the Bankside theatre world by legal and less legal methods, and used his profits to make himself even more rich through money-lending – a “goldsmith”. Who else, like Langley and Henslowe, made himself rich in the London theatre world at this time (and scholars now agree that his money didn’t come from writing plays), so rich that by 1597 he could buy New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon?

Diana Price, in Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Biography, suggests that by 1594 “Shakspeare is as valuable to his company as Henslow is to the Admiral’s Men. Like Henslowe, he provides both working capital and tangible assets”. Later she adds “Shakspeare was a company financier, just like Henslowe and Langley”. She finds support for this interpretation in the Stratfordian scholar, E. A. J. Honigmann. In this same excellent book, Diana Price also reminds us that Shakspeare was linked to Langley not merely by similarity of business, as a successful theatrical entrepreneur – his involvement with Langley on one occasion is documented.

In November 1596, a justice of the peace for the Bishop of Winchester, whose palace was in Southwark, issued a writ of attachment to the sheriff of Surrey, who had jurisdiction in Southwark. This was a court order for surety of the peace. The petitioner seeking protection was one William Wayte, who thereby claimed that he stood in danger of death, or bodily hurt, from the named parties, whom the sheriff would arrest and bind over to keep the peace.

And the named threatening parties? “William Shakspeare”, Francis Langley and two women. Earlier that autumn, Langley had himself sought legal protection from Wayte - described in a similar case as “a certain loose person of no reckoning or value” - and from Wayte’s step father, William Gardiner. Langley elsewhere described Gardiner as “a false, perjured knave”. The words ‘pot’, ‘kettle’ and ‘black’ spring to mind!

Gardiner had risen to wealth and civic dignity – for he was a Surrey JP – through a fortunate marriage to a prosperous widow, money-lending and sharp practices, including defrauding members of his new family. He was detested in the district and made numerous enemies. (These details are in Samuel Schoenbaum’s *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*).

‘Gentle’ Shakespeare’s charming gangland associates are, of course, a severe embarrassment to most Stratfordians. Schoenbaum suggests “the poet may have been an innocent bystander”, who “somehow ... was drawn into this feud”. He concedes that “Langley’s theatrical associations suggest a more direct involvement”, then scurries away from this “single laconic record” and the “speculation” of others about it - to speculate himself, about Shakespeare at Whitehall Palace, with the usual expansive surmises: “one can readily imagine”, “a harmless fancy to toy with”, “perhaps” and “must have”!

Of course, it would be no surprise to Hookham to learn that Carol Chillington Rutter says nothing at all about any involvement of Shakespeare with the disreputable Langley, whom she has mentions so often.

Clearly, for Stratfordians, there are times when silence is best.

References

- G. Hookham – *Will O’ The Wisp (or The Elusive Shakespeare)* Oxford, 1922
- D. Price – *Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Biography* Westport & London, 2001
- C. C. Rutter – *Documents of the Rose Playhouse* - Manchester & New York, 1999
- S. Schoenbaum – *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* – Oxford, 1977