

Oxford the Actor

by Richard Malim

Responsible critics such as Professors Bate and Wells have sought to dismiss the authorship claims of Oxford by suggesting that he had no 'hands-on' connection with the stage. Indeed Professor Bate seems to suggest that this element provides incontrovertible evidence of the authorship of William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. ⁽¹⁾

The evidence of the plays entirely supports their underlying premise that the connection is essential, so we can all agree that the author was an experienced actor and producer as well, as the players scenes in Hamlet would indicate beyond much doubt. Peter Brook put the point even more succinctly in private correspondence: 'Would actors never discuss their lines? Would authors never reply to their questions, argue, laugh, cut, rewrite and adapt scenes on the spot? Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, were Shakespeare's fellow actors so dumb they never smelt a rat?'. Of course, not.

The evidence for William Shakespeare himself in the roles of actor and /or producer is slight indeed. Practically all the references can be shown to be to an unqualified investor rather than to an actor/producer/impresario - or are at least capable of more than one interpretation (perhaps deliberately?). Indeed in any of these roles he would have been a formidable and possibly dangerous figure to the up-and-coming Ben Jonson; yet Jonson in his *Everyman Out Of His Humour* satirises him as a newly - and undeservedly - rich, rustic culture-less buffoon and a criminal grainhoarder and speculator, and ridicules his pretensions to a grant of Arms. This and the absence of any worthwhile evidence rules the Stratford man out as actor (2) and therefore as writer too.

In contrast, Oxford's experiences with the stage and acting must surely begin at his ancestral home at Hedingham Castle. His father kept a troupe of actors and it is reasonable to deduce that the Great Hall at Hedingham Castle was put to dramatic use. It follows that this set of influences upon a child up to the age of 12 would affect the career of the adult. I do not need for Oxfordians to set out the influences and experiences that the next 15 to 20 years would bring to Oxford, which would amply provide him for his careers both as dramatist and actor. I do need to point out that Oxford's cast of mind was that of a post-mediaeval nobleman, to whom laws, customs and conventions did not apply. Thus (to put it mildly) he was cavalier towards his legal, financial, social and marital obligations as a citizen, estate owner, aristocrat and husband (2a). In spite of being an Earl, he may well have had no objection in himself to

being a playwright or an actor, indeed quite the reverse.

In 1575 on his return from Italy he again takes up his court life (3). I am satisfied that he wrote numerous of the plays listed in the Court Revels and that when he revised these for public performance later the titles too were altered. Thus *Tito and Gysippo* becomes *Two Gentlemen Of Verona*. Kenneth Branagh has sought to explain the unevenness of the writing of the play by suggesting that two hands are at work, but the simple solution to this type of problem (which always looks more persuasive than any other) is that the mature Oxford was re-writing part of his apprentice efforts for public performance by (and as) William Shakespeare.

In 1579 the Court Revels list the play *Murderous Michael* which has been identified as *Arden Of Feversham* and is considered Shakespearean by several critics including Swinburne. Although the construction of the play is not on the face of it Shakespearean the language most definitely is and may represent a blind alley in the dramatist's development. The play must have been particularly shocking to the Court as it portrayed Michael the lord's body-servant, who is a secondary character, as being in league with his master's adulterous wife, her lover, and the hired murderers Black Will and George Shakebag. Black Will (and who played that part?) on the run delivers as his last lines of the play:

For the constable had twenty warrants to
apprehend me

Beside that I had robbed him and his man at
Gads Hill.

Farewell, England. I'll go to Flushing.

We are reminded of *Henry IV Part 1* (to say nothing of *Famous Victories*) in which is repeated Oxford's own exploits in 1572. The point is that this production is reported by one Gilbert Talbot who writes in March 1579 to his father the Earl of Shrewsbury the custodian at the time of Mary Queen of Scots:

'At Shrove-tide were shews presented at Court before her Majesty that night. The chiefest was a device presented by the persons of the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Surrey, the Lords Thomas

essentially linguistic types of play metaphor, the 'acts' and 'scenes' and 'tragedies' typical of *Titus Andronicus* or the early histories of *Henry VI*. *The Taming Of The Shrew* with its deliberate enhancement of the actor's dignity, the new skill and competence of men who had been mocked in the original play, offers perhaps the first suggestion of Shakespeare's own attitude towards the theatre with which his life was to be involved. The conviction of the actor's greatness, of the power of illusion, works itself out again, in a darker sense, throughout *Richard III*. In ensuing years, the worth and brilliance of the stage becomes an even more forceful theme in Shakespeare's work, culminating in *Hamlet*. Then shortly after the turn of the century, it underwent a strange and precipitous reversal. At that point, the theatre and even the idea of imitation inexplicably went dark for Shakespeare, and the actor, all his splendour gone, became a symbol of disorder, of futility and pride.

'Not until King John does the superstructure of Shakespeare's theatre first become visible on the page. The Bastard decides that the citizens of Angiers are mocking the kings of France and England. They...

...stand securely on their battlements
As in a theatre, whence they gape and point
At your industrious scenes and acts of death
- II.1. 374-6.

'The scenes and acts of death are familiar from the *Henry VI* plays, but not this vivid image of the interior of a London theatre, a view from the stage of the galleries and pit, of an audience open-mouthed with excitement. A sense of familiarity with small details of the acting profession is conveyed by that passage in the last act of *Richard II* which describes the erstwhile king, riding through the streets of London in the train of Bolingbroke, a minor actor who suffers by comparison with a more impressive performer (*Richard II* V. 2. 23-30). The lines seem to link themselves with those that begin *Sonnet 23* :

As an unperfect actor on the stage
Who in his fear is put beside his part.....
So I, for fear of trust, forget to say
The perfect ceremony of love's rite...
-vv 1-2,5-6.

'In both cases, a quite precise and special observation about the theatre has become a natural means of expressing something which, to a man less deeply involved with the stage, might seem unrelated or far removed'.

No-one can show that William of Stratford was so involved. The comment fits Oxford perfectly apart from the 'dating' references, such as 'shortly after the turn of the century', which I deal with below.

Perhaps I can put in the quotation from *Richard III* Act III scene 5, which Professor Barton might have had in mind, where Buckingham says:

True, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian,
Speak and look back and pry on every side,
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw,
Intending deep suspicion; ghastly looks
Are at my service, like enforced smiles.

And also from *Hamlet* Act II Scene 2, where Hamlet says of the players to Polonius, the chief minister of the Kingdom of Denmark:

'Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After you death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live'

The social aspect of this command should be noted. The quotation from Professor Barton continues:

'In *Julius Caesar*, the idea of the actor's greatness works itself out in conjunction with the familiar theme of the Player King. In *Casca's* scornful description of the scene in which Mark Anthony offers Caesar a crown before the assembled –and dubiously enthusiastic – populace of Rome, the common people 'clap and hiss him, according as he pleas'd and displeas'd them, as they use to do the players in the theatre' (*Julius Caesar* I.2. 256-260). As is usual with Shakespeare, the theatrical imagery in this speech expresses the insecurity of the ruler's position, a fatal division between individual and crown. The actors appear in *Julius Caesar* in another and more honorific guise, however, one which seems to reflect an attitude towards the Elizabethan theatre itself. Brutus actually bids the conspirators model themselves upon the players:

Let not our looks put on our purposes,
But bear with it as our Roman actors do,
With untir'd spirits and formal constancy.

- II. 1. 225-7.

'Reality is enjoined to draw its strength from illusion, reversing the usual order. The actors are no longer the frail, shadowy figures of Love's Labours Lost or A Midsummer Night's Dream ; they are the creators and guardians of history. Immediately after the murder of Caesar the conspirators, bending down to bathe their hands in his blood, reflect even in the moment of violence the immortality they have gained:

Cassius : Stoop then and wash. How many ages
hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over

Brutus : How many times shall Caesar bleed in
sport,

That now on Pompey's basis lies along

No worthier than the dust !

- III . 1. 112-7.

'...It (this passage) serves, pre-eminently, to glorify the stage. The actors, Shakespeare's own companions and friends, have become the chroniclers of man's great deeds. It is in the theatre that the noble actions of the world are preserved for the instruction of future generations. Nothing quite like this attitude can be found in the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries'.

This argument should particularly appeal to Oxfordians. Oxford is seeking to glorify the stage to raise the status of the profession and to justify the apparent disgrace of his own appearances. There would be no need for any other dramatist to do this, as we know of no other whose social standing would be so greatly prejudiced by acting in public. It is legitimate to enquire whether a player of the social standing of William of Stratford would see himself as a creator and also a guardian of history, or create characters who see themselves thus ? In effect Oxford is constructing his own apologia.

For the period 1588-91 (by which date Oxfordians contend that the plays quoted above had been written at least in a first version) there is some evidence of a dramatic decline in Oxford's fortunes. His wife the daughter of Burghley dies: presumably Burghley was less interested, to put it mildly, in Oxford's cultural career (even his library was apparently no longer open to Oxford) , let alone defending Oxford's life-style. His finances appear to have reached their nadir: the

facts might seem to indicate something like a nervous breakdown. Certainly both Spencer in Tears of the Muses, (...Our pleasant Willy / Ah, is dead of late) and Nashe in Alarum Call to Sleeping Euphues - both 1589 - are together anxious to recall him as a writer ; Nashe continues:

Sundry other sweet gentlemen I know, that have vaunted their pens in private devices and tricked up recommendation company of taffeta fools with their feathers, whose beauty had not our poets picked up with the supply of their periwigs. They might have antickt it until this time up and down the country with the King of the Fairies (e), and dined every day at the pease- porridge ordinary with Delphrigus (f).

But Tolossa hath forgot it was sometime sacked, and beggars that they ever carried their fardles on footback ; and in truth no marvel, when as the deserved reputation of one Roscius (g) of force to enrich recommendation whole rabble of counterfeits . Yet let subjects (h), for all their insolence, dedicate a De Profundis every morning to the preservation of their Caesar, lest their increasing indignities return them ere long to their juggling to mediocrity, and they bewail in weeping blanks the wane of their monarchy.

- e In Groatsworth (see below) Chettle suggests that Greene was introduced to playwriting by a player magnificently dressed who was an author as well as an actor, one of whose parts was 'The King of the Fairies'. I suggest that Oxford played the part in London and others played it in rep in the country. Is this part Oberon in Midsummer Night's Dream ?
- f i.e. the poorhouse.
- g The chief classical actor of Rome, not known for any literary production.
- h i.e. lesser actors.

Incidentally Nashe supplies the answer to Peter Brook's question in my first paragraph : of course the actors knew he was the 17th Earl of Oxford, and also by 1592 virtually down and out. Only Oxfordians can make sense of The Epistle Dedicatorie to Strange Newes (published 1593) as it shows Oxford's relationship to the cultural set to which the actors and authors such as Nash belonged. Everyone knew his place ; and better than to reveal publicly what their noble colleague was doing – no conspiracy theory is required or need be entertained today.

And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

V. 5. 22.

The last plays culminating in *The Tempest* may provide evidence of the author's attitude to the stage but significantly do not seem to show the author acting.

There are other pieces of evidence to show Oxford acting. First, John Davies' poem: although it was published in 1610 and is in the present tense there is a case for saying it was written in 1603/4:

To Our English Terence (i), Mr. (j) Will. Shakespeare. (k)

Some say (good Will), which I, in sport, do sing,
Hadst thou not played some Kingly parts in sport,
Thou hadst been a companion (l) for a King;
And been a King among the meaner sort
Some others rail, but, rail as they think fit,
Thou hast no railing, but a reigning Wit:
And honesty thou sowst, which they (m) do reap;
So to increase their stock which they do keep.

- i P. Terentius Afer, an African slave believed in classic Roman times to be the cover author for the dramatic productions of a Roman noble.
- j Mr., i.e. at least a gentleman (unlike Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon) whose armigerous and class aspirations were the subject of Ben Jonson's humour in *Everyman Out Of His Humour* and of 'Shakespeare' himself - see *The Winter's Tale Act V Scene 2*, where the aspirations of the Clown and his father the Old Shepherd are wickedly mocked – not a rendition which would appeal to the man from Stratford.
- k Hyphen – showing a pseudonym being used.
- l companion, comes in Latin, later companion to the King, Count, or Earl in England.
- m Plagiarists.

A different John Davies wrote in 1603, 'Although the stage doth stain pure gentle blood.', and both can only refer to Oxford.

However I ought to deal also with the 1623 folio where the author is described as 'not having the fate ... to be the executor to his writings' -contrast this with the final period of Shakespeare of Stratford -Upon-Avon. Jonson in his *Ode* compares Shakespeare to Terence – see above –and says he outranks Kidd Lyly and Marlowe, and ignores the dramatists of 1595 on. He is 'the sweet (but mute, of

course, and not much use as an actor) Swan of Avon'. One has to recognize that that "Swan" usually refers to poets, but perhaps Jonson is employing irony.

Of the supporting poems, one is by Holland and remarks, 'Dried is the Thespian spring', i.e. the acting career is over. Then there is I.M.'s poem :-

To the memory of Master William Shakespeare

We considered, Shakespeare, that thou went'st so
soon

From the world's stage to the grave's tiring-room
(n).

We thought thee dead, but this thy printed worth
Tells thy spectators that thou went'st but forth
To enter with applause. An actor's art
Can die (o), and live to act a second part.
That's but an exit of mortality,
This, a re-entrance to a plaudite.

- n Actor's dressing-room; note (apparently) directly from the stage to the tiring-room, not via retirement at Stratford – Upon – Avon.
- o Why refer to it -, unless 'Shakespeare' was an actor, too?

And, finally, the 1623 folio introduction concludes with the names of the principal Actors in All these plays: (First name) William Shakespeare...., not because, as Ogburn says, of his social rank, which was supposed to be still being concealed, but because he was in fact the best actor.

In conclusion, I agree it is essential to show that the author of 'Shakespeare' had a substantial acting career and experience. No such argument can be made on behalf of William of Stratford -upon-Avon.

In contrast, the pieces of evidence and the application of logic to 'orthodox' criticism establish Oxford as sufficient actor to provide sufficient 'hands-on' experience for authorship as well.

It is interesting to see that a major point of 'orthodox' criticism of the Oxford case in fact provides proponents of that case with yet more cogent evidence and argument.

Notes and References

(1) And now , according to Professor Bate's website, on the same level as a holocaust denier !

(2) Apart from the lists in Jonson's Works (1616) and the 1623 folio, there is only one roughly contemporary reference to Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon's acting career. In 1635, Cuthbert Burbage made a statement in connection with some litigation involving the Globe and Blackfriars Theatres to the effect that in 1608 his brother and he purchased (back) the lease that their father Richard Burbage had granted to one Evans , "and placed men Players, which were Hemings, Condall, Shakespeare, &c". This statement is made 27 years or so after the event in question and conjoins with the name of Shakespeare the two nominal editors of the 1623 folio.

The three lists (i.e. the two in Jonson's Works and the one in the 1623 folio) are otherwise the sole evidence : They are thought to be evidence of Jonson's effort to keep the memory of Oxford alive, as well in the case of the folio to act as a defence argument should Jonson be accused of giving too much away about the real author in the introductory passages in the folio about the real authorship, e.g. in the introduction ostensibly by Hemings and Condall (which has been persuasively attributed to Jonson himself) the author is referred to as "not having the fate, common with some, to be the executor to his own writings"; in no way applicable to the retirement of William Shakespeare to his home town, and exactly applicable to Oxford who died in harness.

I deal with subsequently with the reference to acting in *Kind Heart's Dream* later in this paper. As it was published in 1592, it is certainly too early as a reference to William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. He first appears in London as the victim of mockery in *The Taming of A Shrew* (1594), the fore-runner of *The Taming of The Shrew* as Christopher Sly in the Induction passages, grafted on to the main action of the Play (and to what purpose ?).

I also mention later John Davies' poem : but as it is addressed to "Our English Terence Mr. Will Shake-speare.", it can scarcely inspire confidence as a piece of 'orthodox' evidence. Terence was believed to be in Elizabethan times the sheltering name for a playwriting Roman

noble, whose name was selected by Davies on purpose to make a similar point ; the hyphen in Shake-speare is prima facie evidence of the use of a pseudonym.

(2a) Professor Nelson in his new book : *Monstrous Adversary* : Liverpool University Press :2003 quotes (pp. 2 and 134) a letter from Oxford written from Siena 1st January 1575/6 to Burghley by way of confirmation of Oxford's attitude : 'I have no help but of mine own, and mine is made to serve me, and myself not mine', and correctly states that this attitude runs counter to the feudal ethos of land grant in return for service to the state and the community. However being an anti-Oxfordian, he does not entertain the idea that Oxford was establishing his own view of his role, namely that he knew that he was to be the cultural flower of the nation and of all time, and that was much more important than his position in society.

(3) It would be thought tedious to set out the references for Oxford's biographical details, which may be found in any of the respectable accounts of his life and the authorship controversy generally.

(4) Chatto and Windus 1962 from pp. 139 ff . Perhaps we should value Coleridge's reported opinion : 'it is my persuasion – indeed my firm conviction – so firm that nothing can shake it – the rising of Shakespeare's spirit from the grave, modestly confessing his own deficiencies, could not alter my opinion – that Shakespeare, in the best sense of the word, was a very great actor ; nothing can exceed the judgment he displays upon that subject..... Great dramatists make great actors.' The only example he can quote is the 'tradition' that Shakespeare played Adam in *As You Like It*, which would devalue his opinion if it were applicable to William of Stratford : apply it to Oxford and my case is fortified.

(5) The next piece of evidence for his presence in London is the famous record of his stay in 1604, which orthodox critics rely on for evidence of his continued residence until 'retirement'. In fact it is quite the reverse. Here we have a playwright at the height of his powers and fame, lodging with an immigrant hatmaker in a back street,

when in that same year seven or eight of his plays are produced at the Court Revels of 1604/5, which apart from the two plays of Ben Jonson produced at the same celebrations (one of which was *Everyman Out* a revival of the caricature of Shakespeare himself) seems to be a 'Shakespeare Festival'. One might at least expect something more fashionable and permanent, or perhaps residence as part of the household of some great personage, if the 'orthodox' scenario had any credibility. Note also Shakespeare's attitude in his Court evidence of that stay: he is anxious to draw as little attention to himself as possible.

- (6) Cambridge University Press 1932, p.64: "As it is only when they interfere with the straightforward movement of the play and clash with its dominant mood that it is profitable to consider his concessions to the audience, so it is only when they stand out from the body of the writing, when the particular intention has altered the quality of the style, that there is any point in recognizing personal allusions. Shakespeare's one allusion to theatrical matters (the 'little eyases' speech in *Hamlet*) proclaims itself for what it is: it seems probable that he would have made any other allusion equally unambiguous."
- (7) I cannot resist ending with the Quotation from Barnabe Rich's *Farewell to the Military Profession* (1581): 'It was my fortune at my last being at London to walk through the Strand towards Westminster, where I met one came riding towards me on a footcloth nag,

apparelled in a French ruff, a French cloak, a French hose, and in his hand a great fan of feathers, bearing them up (very womanly) against the side of his face. And for that I had never seen any man wear them before that day, I began to think it impossible that a man might be found so foolish as to make himself a scorn to the world to wear so womanish a toy; but thought it had been some shameless woman that had disguised herself like a man in our hose and cloaks; but our doublets, gowns, caps, and hats, they had gone long ago.... I began to muse with myself to what end that fan of feathers served, for it could not have been to defend the sun from the burning of his beauty, for it was the beginning of February, when the heat of the sun may be very well endured. No, if it were to defend the wind or the coldness of the air, methinks a French hood had been a great deal better, for that it had been both gentlewomanlike, and being pinned down about his ears would have kept his head a great deal warmer; and then a French hood on his head, a French ruff about his neck, and a pair of French hose on his legs had been right – a la mode de France; and this had been something suitable to his wit.' I note that the rider was going East, in the direction of the Blackfriars theatre, perhaps in February 1580 or 1581; I suspect that the reference to 'his wit' means that the writer well knew who the rider was – only the Earl of Oxford ready-dressed for an acting appearance fits.