

By Richard Malim

SHAKESPEARE: A LIFE

By Park Honan

Oxford University Press, £25, pp.478

Professor Honan has given us fair warning that he found 'many assumptions about the dramatist had to be overturned and that others could be fleshed out to give a much stronger sense of the man's experience'. Unlike Professor Schoenbaum, he is not tempted to 'despair of ever bridging the vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and mundane inconsequence of the documentary record', which Honan treats with alarming nonchalance.

Honan identifies Willy as 'the upstart crow' in Greene's *Groatsworth* but ignores Chettle in his "Kind Hart's Dream" who virtually admits authorship of 'Groatsworth' apologising not to the "upstart crow" but to one of the three established dramatists warned by 'Groatsworth'. Honan gives to Stratford Willy the flattery and commendation actually addressed to that dramatist.

Honan ducks the phrase in the preface to the 1623 folio relevant to an author who died mid-flow, "Not having the fate....to be the executor of his own writings". (unlike Willy who died in rustic ease).

Honan overlooks the paternal attitude of the early sonnets and how Stratford Willy became so impossibly familiar with the Earl of Southampton as to judge his conduct as growing "common" (Sonnet 69, line 14).

Honan describes one signature on the Will "vigorously made....'by me William' when energy abruptly failed him", followed by some version of Shaksper (and likewise on the earlier two sheets) in 'a feebler scrawling hand'. Honan does not discuss that

some else may have written the 'by me William' part or the signatory was unfamiliar with signing his name.

Professor Honan does not refer to the authorship question except to associate it 'with "pop" lives or nutty books.' Some may prefer to compare the picture of teenage Willy in the last paragraph with the actual documented life of the Earl of Oxford who was tutored in leisured luxury as a 14 year old by his uncle Arthur Golding while he has translating *Metamorphoses*. Contemporaneously with Willy's business activity Oxford was touring his beloved Northern Italy, borrowing hugely from Venetian moneylenders. The Professor is most incautious to refer to the 1604 visit to London where Willy stayed neither with his aristocratic friends nor with the theatre community, but with an immigrant French hat maker in a back street. Nor did Willy present himself for lionisation as the author of seven of his plays performed at the Court Christmas revels of 1604. The Earl of Oxford died mid-flow in June 1604; the 1604/5 folio of *Hamlet* was published as if it were a memorial edition.

Shakespeare, *A Life*, simply skates over these and the many other problems which afflict the orthodox Stratfordian biographer. When "Apes are turnèd forth" no doubt the book will be a collector's piece.