

Shakespeare: The Biography (Chatto & Windus 2005), an Analysis of the book by Peter Ackroyd

by Richard Malim

Peter Ackroyd is the latest novelist/critic to join in the sport of writing a work on the life of William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. While he calls his book a biography, it is the usual compendium of baseless speculation and misappropriation common to all recent works. To Oxfordians, it is not without value, as it fortifies several contentions which will appeal to us.

Ackroyd agrees with an earlier scholar, who suggests that 'Shakespeare' was used as a nickname 'or perhaps a bawdy name for an exhibitionist': we may think of it as a typical piece of rigger club (or tilt-yard) humour, adopted by its owner for a pseudonym as a sly joke. Ackroyd follows Honan and others in describing Shakespeare's father's trade of whittawer with its nauseous smells and practices, which would make the lending of valuable books to the son of the house somewhat unlikely.

Ackroyd disagrees with the vast majority of 'orthodox' critics, who follow the Ur-Hamlet theory that there was an early play by another author which Shakespeare rewrote and adapted as *Hamlet*. He dates it to 1587, as a juvenile work which has not survived, along with *King Leir* and *Famous Victories*, where he does not commit himself to Shakespeare's authorship. He ignores Seymour Pitcher on the latter work, which proves beyond doubt that it is by the same hand as the Henry IV and Henry V plays, and in particular the major role taken in it by the then Earl of Oxford, the ancestor of the true author.

For the vast range of Italianisms, all Shakespeare needs is a speculative acquaintance with John Florio and his library, and Ackroyd disregards the fact that Florio never went to Italy, being the son of a Protestant Italian exile, while Oxford was fluent in Italian and spent most of a formative year there. This absolutely vital argument takes just half a page in a 488-page volume – thin stuff indeed. The he dates *Love's Labours Lost* to 1593, some dozen years after the hey-day of euphuism, that artificial style of conversation that probably Oxford himself brought back from Italy, which would have been a bore and a dead duck by 1585. While it could have been revived in 1593 and indeed was some ten years later for the Court, it would have been

perverse to sit down and write it in 1593.

Ackroyd has no intention of taking on board the whole of Ben Jonson's caricature of Shakespeare as Sogliardo-cum-Sordido in *Every Man Out Of His Humour*. We are allowed to mock the pretensions of the coat of arms, the motto and the use of gold in the coat, and link Malvolio's cross gartering with them, because 'it would come naturally to Shakespeare – to parody his pretensions to gentility at the same time as he pursued them with the utmost seriousness, to mock that which was most important to him'. Of course.

Ackroyd is interesting in his view of the Sonnets. While he prefers William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, as the 'lovely boy', he considers the Sonnets in regard to him as an exercise, rather than biographical. He is hard on those who consider the Earl of Southampton a more likely candidate: 'In the late sixteenth century, however, the impropriety of addressing a young earl in that manner (i.e. that of the Sonnets) would have been quite apparent; to accuse him of dissoluteness and infidelity, as Shakespeare addresses the unnamed recipient, would have been unthinkable.' Even as an exercise surely the same would apply to any other high born addressee? The answer to the conundrum is that the poet must have been of at least the same social standing as the addressee – and this rules out William Shakespeare completely.

Ackroyd nods in our direction unintentionally when he points out that the Court revels of Christmas 1604 were 'something of a Shakespeare festival, marked (also) by a special performance of *Love's Labour's Lost* at the London house of the Earl of Southampton', with the number of Shakespeare plays then performed, i.e. less than six months after Oxford's death. Where was the recipient of so great an honour – 'no contemporary dramatist had ever been so honoured by the ruling family', writes Ackroyd – ? Not apparently with his friends in London but (possibly) with the family of an immigrant hatmaker: even the Court records show the author's name as 'Shakberd' – a subtle joke here, I think.

Ackroyd's most serious error arises

during his discussion of Spenser's 'Tears of the Muses', which he places in 1591, and uses as evidence of Shakespeare's rise as a popular and successful writer and acceptance into the culture of the nobility: 'Our pleasant Willy' from whose 'gentle spirit' 'large streams of honey and sweet nectar flow'. But this suppresses Spenser's message in a most reprehensible way. Spenser is regretting the dearth of literary talent: more fully the quotations are

*Our pleasant Willy, ah! Is dead of late:
With whom all joy and jolly merriment
Is also deaded, and in dolour drent.
But that same gentle Spirit, from whose pen
Large streams of honnie and sweete Nectar
flowe
Scorning the boldness of base-borne men,
(!)
Which dare their follies forth so rashlie*

In other words, the leading writer – certainly the only one specifically referred to – is in retirement from his previous high status, not on the way up to it, as Ackroyd would have us believe. Oxford fits this description.

The really tricky problem for any post-Michael Wood- Richard Wilson- Clare Asquith biographer is, to what extent is Shakespeare beholden to his strict upbringing in the 'Old Religion'? Ackroyd devotes Chapter Seven of his book to the suggestion that the small town of Stratford was totally permeated by Roman Catholic adherents including of course all the Shakespeare family. While Ackroyd agrees that Shakespeare's plays make him an apologist for royal power - not a view which the English

Catholics would find palatable - there is no real discussion, let alone judgment, as to whether the plays are fundamentally those of an inward secret Roman conformist or of an opponent Anglican loyalist. 'The old religion was part of the landscape of his imagination, not of his belief', writes Ackroyd, without a shred of analysis to justify the statement. In my opinion this is why all current biographies are bound to be unsatisfying dodges of the problem, because to attempt coherence leads to the exposure of too many inconsistencies between the (catholic) biographical facts and the liberal critique.

In contrast, we remember the one, who in the words of Chapman : ' was beside of spirit passing great,/ Valiant and learn'd, and liberal as the sun,/ Spoke and writ sweetly, or of learn'd subjects/ Or of the discipline of public weals....'

Ackroyd belongs to a school of thought that purports to imagine there is no authorship question: he is consistently dismissive and makes no reference to it in his book. As a result he devalues his own labours and theories, which are always interesting and generally well argued.

NOTES

Shake-spear as a bawdy name : Ackroyd quotes from Jeanne Jones : *Family Life in Shakespeare's England* (Stroud 1996) p.22

The Case for Shakespeare's Authorship of The Famous Victories : Seymour Pitcher (Alvin Redman 1962)

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