

Review by the Hon Secretary of the DVS, Richard Malim with an afterword by the Newsletter Editor

## *Will In The World – How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*

By Stephen Greenblatt – Jonathan Cape, London/Norton, New York 2004.

430pp + 16 pp illustrations

Stephen Greenblatt is Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University and every reader of his new biography will be impressed by the presentation of the material and the style of English. His sub-title appears to ask the right questions, but in the course of answering them he does not mention the Authorship Problem or contemplate the possibility that his basic premise [that Shaksper of Stratford did write 'Shakespeare'] might be wrong. As Oxfordians we are certain that he sets himself an impossible task, but it is instructive to see how far he can persuade this most jaundiced reviewer to take his thesis seriously.

To be fair, he does set out the central question. In the Preface he states, 'To understand who Shakespeare was, it is important to follow the verbal traces he left behind back into the life lived and into the world to which he was so open.' In this he follows Ben Jonson's celebrated advice under the portrait engraving in the 1623 folio: 'Reader, look Not on his picture, but his book.' But then the Professor ends his Preface, 'And to understand how Shakespeare used his imagination to transform his life into his art, it is important to use our imagination.'

This is precisely the major problem. Most recent 'biographers' admit that their imaginations and intuitions are the only weapons they have to surmount the problems of Shakespeare's biography, that 'vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record' (*Shakespeare's Lives* 767) of which Schoenbaum was ready to despair. By ignoring Schoenbaum's other dictum that 'Intuitions, convictions and subjective judgements generally carry no weight as evidence. This no matter how learned, respected or confident the authority' (Internal Evidence p.178). These 'biographers' in effect are writing not scientific works of biography, but works of their own imaginations, veering towards historical novels without the dialogue.

One can readily admire the artful and picturesque manner in which the Professor deploys his imagination. For example, he attributes the writing of *The Merchant of Venice* to the Lopez trial and the example of Marlowe in his *Jew of Malta*, ignoring the existence of the 1579 *The Jew* as a first version,

or the Venetian local colour and references which are imported into the play; this should be recognised as incredible in a writer, however imaginative or talented, who had never left England, let alone, as Oxford did, spend a considerable time in Venice. As with so many scholars, the idea that Marlowe borrowed from 'Shakespeare' is not contemplated, despite the warning which Nashe gives in his Introduction to Greene's *Menaphon*, 'if you entreat him fair on a frosty morning, he will afford you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfuls of tragical speeches.'

This of course, since it was written in 1589, we are told, does not relate to 'Shakespeare's' *Hamlet*, and so the Professor tells us that although the attack is not directed at Shakespeare, he 'would have understood' the 'withering attack also perfectly applied to [him]' (203). The sensible and indeed obvious argument is that Nashe was referring to an early version of the one and only *Hamlet* (c.f. E. Jolly's Chapter 19 in *Great Oxford*) and that the author of *Hamlet* was being plagiarised, and that this author cannot have been Shakespeare. This passes by Greenblatt.

Occasionally even the Professor's imagination fails him, along with the entire absence of anything classifiable as evidence. He is apparently quite satisfied with the suggestion that Shakespeare might have spent a considerable time in his mid-teens in Lancashire, staying with a succession of Roman Catholic families as a tutor, even to the extent at the age of 17 of having his future cared for by his dying master's Will. For no apparent reason, within a year he returns to Stratford and has to get married – a scenario which hardly fits with itself.

### Failure

Perhaps the Professor's greatest (and inevitable) shortcoming is the failure to link Shakespeare's reading experiences with his literary production; Greenblatt does not even attempt a connection. With Shakespeare's acting, he does try, and the hash he makes of it must have (my imaginative intuition in play this time) convinced him that it was wise not to attempt to construct a link with the actual poetry or plays. As for acting, he enquires (71) 'How did the son of a failing glover make it into the theatre?' Some

'tantalizing hints' are explored: others, principally of attitude, character and approach are ignored. He confirms that Shakespeare was a comparatively adult man when he first went to London and was thus too old for a formal apprenticeship.

So what is the answer? 'Even without a formal theatrical apprenticeship, Will must have acquired much of what he needed during his Stratford adolescence (Sorry, I thought he was in Lancashire). Local talent abounded (no evidence); filled with linguistic exuberance and rich fantasy (no evidence), Will could have studied the lute with one of his accomplished neighbors (which one? Were there any?) dancing with another, swordsmanship with still another. Observing his reflection in a glass or his shadow on a wall, he could have recited grand-sounding speeches and practised courtly gestures! And with his mother's link to the Ardens of Park Hall (no evidence) and his father's faded but still notable distinction, he could have arrived at the sense that he could confidently carry off the role of gentleman and fulfil his parents' dreams.' (75–6).

### Intriguingly speculative

I am sorry, I can only describe this as tosh [intriguingly speculative – Ed]. If an Oxfordian attempted to imitate this in an article for the De Vere Society *Newsletter*, the editor would surely blue-pencil it. Such an approach belongs to Park Honan's school of 'scholarship'. Greenblatt (392) describes Honan's *Shakespeare: A Life* (OUP, 1998) as 'the most thorough, informative and steadily thoughtful' among the more recent 'biographies.' Honan found that some assumptions 'could be fleshed out to give a much stronger sense of the man's experience' (London *Daily Telegraph* 10 Oct 1998); an example from Honan is the performance of Snout playing the Wall in *Midsummer Night's Dream* which Honan (214) sees as a reference to constant repairs to the School wall at Stratford in the 1570s.

Greenblatt avoids some of the more outlandish literary and dramatic speculations which have decorated other recent biographies, e.g. a list of the parts Shakespeare played at the Globe and the fatuous suggestion that Shakespeare wrote five-act plays for the new Blackfriars Theatre. But his unsubstantiated musings on Shakespeare's relations with his family might appear to be outlandish; they are at least amusing and no concern to the real author.

### Richard Malim

'**Let Us Imagine**' are the opening words of Greenblatt's long-awaited and 'highly-respected' new account of Shakespeare's life (*Newsletter* Editor Kevin Gilvary adds). Stanley Wells describes it as 'deeply imaginative', while much-admired actor Simon Russell Beale calls it 'a love letter to a man we will never know.' Greenblatt admits that 'letters and diaries, contemporary memoirs and interviews, books with revealing marginalia, notes and first drafts' would make for a detailed and richly documented biography. But for Shakespeare, 'nothing of the kind survives' (13). How then can one write a biography?

Two cases spring to my mind: firstly **was Shakespeare a Catholic?** To which Greenblatt's answer lacks even the conviction of a lapsed agnostic: he could well have had a Lancashire connection (or not); Catholic sympathies are possibly present in the works, sometimes, but perhaps not at others, and the 16-year-old Shaksper may have 'exchanged whispered words' sitting down with Edmund Campion in Stratford (108) or not. Greenblatt can tell us far more about Campion from contemporary sources than about England's greatest poet, playwright and, some would say, propagandist. Finally Greenblatt states (113): 'If his father was both Catholic and Protestant, William Shakespeare was on his way to being neither.' So now we know.

My second case concerns *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which Greenblatt in his excellent edition of the complete works (*The Norton Shakespeare*, 1997) places as the first play. Now, in an account of a poor-man-made-good, one might expect the aspiring author's first work to receive coverage. Amazingly it does not; and there are just five brief references, showing that Shakespeare had an ABC, was interested in wooing, had demonstrated great strengths as a comic playwright, had used Jews as a measuring device of heartlessness and that TGV was roughly comparable to *The Merchant of Venice*. Nowhere does Greenblatt discuss the genesis of the play (surely the aim of any literary biography), the use of a Spanish source, or its conflict of friendship and love.

Professor Greenblatt's deserved reputation as a scholar of the highest order will ensure that sales of this latest biography are buoyant. Nobody, however, will ever recommend it: neither the acclaimed director to the promising actor, nor the learned professor to the enquiring student. The dust cover is most fetching – scant solace for a book that will remain on the shelf for a long time.

### Kevin Gilvary