

FLETCHER - THE 'POET -APE'

The world of Shakespearian 'orthodox' criticism appears to be in some turmoil with the publication of Clare Asquith's book *SHADOWPLAY* (Perseus 2005). Her thesis that Shakespeare's work contain throughout a coded Roman Catholic message of support for the Roman Church in England has received considerable support from many quarters and withering criticism from others. From Oxfordians the underlying argument should receive considerable approval: the book is a great work of scholarship and detection. Of course there are flaws – her account of the Counter-Reformation must command only limited support, marred as it is by the downplaying of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. She does not emphasise the sheer political incompetence displayed by the Pope (Gregory XIII) with his Bull purporting to depose the Queen and pulling every Roman Catholic apart between his religion and his nation. Her account seeks to show the vacillations endured by the playwright, but there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever deviated from the beliefs of his family.

Contrast the Earl of Oxford: brought up as a Protestant, and certainly not conforming to Rome on his Italian expedition 1575/6, he appears to have converted to Rome shortly after. Sickened by the Throckmorton plotters, he denounces them and becomes again an Established Church member, or perhaps as a senior member of the aristocracy sufficient of a supporter of the regime was able to avoid or not to be subject to the recusancy penalties suffered by ordinary Roman Catholics. Thus, to follow Clare Asquith, he could continue to use his writings as a repository for Catholic truth or Roman propaganda (depending on one's point of view).

The weakness of the argument from William Shakespeare's angle is over the question of protection: if we follow Clare Asquith's argument, why did not Mr. Friser simply plant his dagger between Shakespeare's ribs as well as in Marlowe's eye? He had powerful patrons, but the government spy ring was infinitely more powerful and efficient. *SHADOWPLAY* follows an 'orthodox' chronology for the plays without revealing any other supporting argument especially for the allegedly post 1604 plays. As for the work of Oxford the works themselves being those of a nobleman were safe from too rigorous a censorship, let alone alteration or destruction, at least until his death in 1604.

Then from the Oxfordian angle the book makes its most interesting claims. Somehow by 1611 life became very difficult for the putative writer Shakespeare. The new Archbishop Abbott was a virulent puritan and cracked down heavily on deviant literature: Shakespeare was silenced. Somehow, perhaps by government raids, Shakespeare's drafts etc. fell into the government's hands (much more likely if the writer was already dead), and the government anticipating the practices twentieth century dictatorships made its own modifications to those works. Just as Soviet Russia employed the hack Sholokhov to 'red-sanitise' 'And Quiet Flows The Don', so Fletcher was employed to 'sanitise' or forge 'Two Noble Kinsmen' and 'Henry VIII'.

Perhaps the best evidence for this comes from Jonson:

EPIGRAMMES - LVI. On Poet-Ape

Poor poet Ape, that would be thought our chief,
 Whose works are e'en the frippery of wit,
 From brokage is become so bold a thief,
 As we, the robb'd, leave rage, and pity it.
 At first he made low shifts, would pick and glean ,
 Buy the reversion of old plays ; now grown
 To a little wealth, and credit in the scene,
 He takes up all. Makes each man's wit his own :
 And, told of this , he slights it. Tut, such crimes
 The sluggish gaping auditor devours ;
 He marks not whose 'twas first : and after-times
 May judge it to be his, as well as ours.
 Fool ! as if half eyes will not know a fleece
 From locks of wool, or shreds from the whole fleece.

Epigrammes was published in May 1612. I quote this one in full as Clare Asquith does not. If the activity of the poet-ape enraged some (and perhaps it was dangerous politically to show oneself enraged) it did not enrage Shakespeare, or provoke him to 'leave rage, and pity it', which even in his hidden/retirement state, he could have turned his hand. The Oxfordian reason is naturally that, as he Shakespeare was not the author, he was totally unconcerned.

Clare Asquith is excellent on Two Noble Kinsmen and Henry VIII, where she shows by her analysis exactly how Fletcher carried out his commission. I would suggest the relevant chapters are essential reading at least for all Oxfordians. It is interesting that the first play did not make it into the first folio but Henry VIII did : she suggests that although it is by Fletcher, some of it is very good Fletcher and achieved with its nationalist outlook such a triumph that to leave it out of the 1623 folio would have attracted unwelcome attention to Jonson and the dedicatees who probably had their own political reasons for wanting it in and for the publication of the folio generally. Clare Asquith points out how Fletcher misuses the 'codes' employed by Shakespeare in his propaganda activities, so it is easy to follow the track of the real author.

Asquith notes that Fletcher wrote a pastoral verse play 'The Faithful Shepherdess' in 1610, which in its prologue attacks plays that celebrate Catholic rituals under the guise of a pastoral setting, and later a sequel to 'The Taming of the Shrew', in which the Catholic Petruccio is humbled by a second, this time protestant, wife. Jonson wrote only one pastoral verse play 'The Sad Shepherd' about 1612 as a counterblast to Fletcher but this was not published until after his death, and suspiciously is incomplete – perhaps the final parts contained too explosive material for its discoverers. His prologue contains quite enough to assist in the validation of my previous paragraphs :-

'Or that the man who made such one poor flight In his whole life, had with his winged skill Advanced him upmost on the muses' hill When he like poet yet remains, as those Are painters who can only make a rose.'	i.e. 'The Faithful Shepherdess'
	i.e. as far as he could go

Jonson's hero Aeglamour stands for 'Shakespeare' himself, and the true ring of Shakespeare language is caught, as Asquith says, with many resonances from the plays. Aeglamour's love is purportedly drowned but is in fact imprisoned by a witch in a split tree like Ariel in 'The Tempest'. She is a personification of the triumph of the canon but in baulk to an unworthy custodian, just like the lord's riches in 'The Taming of the Shrew' and Perdita in 'The Winter's Tale' in the care of the Clown and his father (see GREAT OXFORD pp.249,250). Aeglamour as a character's name is the virtuous suitor of Sylvia in 'Two Gentlemen'.

I rather think there may have been a secondary element in Fletcher's government brief. As Asquith says he resorted to a 'low trick to establish ('Two Noble Kinsmen's) credentials'. The heroine laments to her elder sister the death of her twin sister at the age of eleven in a passage (I.3.49ff.) completely superfluous to the action of the play – always a marker that we are being told something the writer wishes us to know. Shakespeare had lost a twin son at precisely the same age, but his daughters, the twin and her elder sister, survived him. Wells and Taylor 'Complete Works' suggest that this passage is 'Shakespearian', but any poet would hardly want to allude to his own family tragedy in such 'clunking' manner. So this is I believe Fletcher seeking very clumsily to establish not only the 'Shakespearian' element, but also that the man responsible for that element is William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon – a man still alive who would certainly be much enraged by the crass family reference if he were stuck with being purportedly responsible as the actual writer. Since he (Shakespeare) was safely out of the way in Stratford, he would be unlikely to hear of it and there would be no come-back from that far-away quarter. While this is by no means a smoking gun of confirmation that William Shakespeare did not have anything to do with the works that bear his name, it might be like the speck of blood between the floorboards which goes to convict the murderer.

Great Oxford (Parapress 2004)

Post:

See also my essay on TNK for critique of the Prologue to that play