

A VERY IMPORTANT BOOK

Richard Malim /5/06

Pseudonymous Shakespeare : Penny McCarthy :Ashgate 2006

Miss McCarthy's thesis is that there are many pieces of literature in the period from 1575 on that are by or contain references to a literary genius, who is anonymous or concealed behind the names of real or invented personages.

She begins with an 'offensive' account of the Court activities at Kenilworth in 1575 purportedly by Robert Langham, but conclusively shows that he did not write it and neither did another literary courtier William Patten who had the job of recovering the six copies that had been distributed. Miss McCarthy believes the account in the form of a literary letter is the work of the young Shakespeare aged 11 at the time, who was being employed by the Earl of Leicester's household as a page : this young boy was thought to be illegitimate, but of such literary and language skills (both Classic and contemporary European) that he deserved patronage. Oxfordians and many others will not need to take this part of the thesis further : no one can imagine the rock-ribbed Catholic family of Shakespeare entrusting their child however promising to the dyed-in-the-wool protestant milieu of the Earl of Leicester.

For the next twenty or so years Miss McCarthy identifies many other such aliases. The only one she rejects is that named 'Euphues' – the name given as Oxfordians believe to de Vere by Lyly in his works 'Euphues his England' etc. Her reasons are interesting, and I quote (p. 172) :-

'Lyly's protagonist is not an abstract personification of a quality, I believe : he is a real member of the coterie (i.e. the literary coterie round Sir Philip Sidney), one who was naturally brilliant, but not university educated.

If, as early as 1578, Lyly meant to allude to the presence of Shakespeare in this coterie by 'anatomizing' Wit, this brings out a feature of the phenomenon of contemporary reference to Shakespeare that I have not sufficiently stressed. I have written that other writers allude to Shakespeare out of pure admiration for his work. But by 1578, Shakespeare could not have achieved much that Lyly sincerely thought was superlative.'

By her Stratfordian mindset she is predisposed to these unlikely scenarios, which because she is so honest with her evidence her own logic forces her to adopt. Nor does she give any reason for the middle class Shakespeare to need a pseudonym – let alone several. Oxfordians will have little trouble in disposing of her argument and in reconciling either the author of the original Langham letter , Euphues and de Vere. If I am thus far critical to the point of destruction of the thesis, why does this review call the book, 'A Very Important Book'?

Miss McCarthy approaches both her theme and the evidence in a truly refreshing manner. She astutely and conveniently divides her chapters into the results of her investigations (odd numbers) followed by 'Suppositions' arising - her description – (even numbers): would every biographer and critic did the same ! She is totally

unconstrained by the 'orthodox, generally accepted' dating Schedule of the works. It is instructive to see her excellent mind brought to bear on those plays which Stratfordian biographers and critics resolutely date to after 1604, the date of Oxford's death, and use to attempt to dismiss the Oxfordian case. By way of examples :

- She dates Macbeth prior to 1600 and points out that Kemp's Nine Daies Wonder D3r – D4v contains a clear parody (p.31)
- She places an early version of Cymbeline in the late 1570's (p.187-9)
- She denounces Strachey's letter as a source for The Tempest (p.225) : again it is parodied this time by Nashe. She writes : " Many critics are adamant that William Strachey's account of the adventures of the ship Sea Venture of 1609 is a source for The Tempest. I would feel justified on the sole basis of Nashe's parody in supposing that Strachey echoed the play. Luckily the history of the Strachey publication supports this proposition, as does the odd literariness of the historical account, and the fact that Strachey was a sharer in a theatrical company, and presumably familiar with plays. His account was not published until 1625, though he wrote a private letter about it in 1610. Supporters of Shakespeare's indebtedness to Strachey therefore have to postulate that the letter was widely circulated and that Shakespeare saw it – the kind of argument they would never countenance in an opponent challenging the consensus date. Arthur Kinney, like Kenneth Muir before him, has doubted whether the Strachey letter has the slightest connection with the Tempest". See for Kinney *Modern Philology* 93 (1995) pp.161-77.
- She dates Winter's Tale to before 1598 (p.207), and contends that it antedates Mucedorus of that year, which contains a parody of 'Exit pursued by a bear'.
- When she comes to consider Two Noble Kinsmen and Henry VIII, and her thesis generally, then I again I ought to quote her fully (p.220) :

" I do not rule out the possibility that Shakespeare occasionally recast a play with the help of another, years after he had first written it. Two Noble Kinsmen and Henry VIII are obvious candidates. If unmistakable traces of the hand of another are found in some of the other plays, I shall suppose likewise that this other helped in the revision. But I remain suspicious of the stylometricians' findings, blasphemous though this sounds in the present climate of their ascendancy. Again it is partly my antedating that challenges their findings; though it is always open to them to say that they have the serial of Shakespeare's perfected plays, if not the decade of their composition, correct. However (if, and only if) my 'maturation' principle is allowed, and naïve plays antedate mature ones, 'Senecan' antedate 'confident vernacular', even this claim of theirs will be weakened. My principle is likely to be a good one, if the author is not dead, but embodied in a historical person. Allowing the possibility that the poet could grow in technical skill implies, too, the possibility and utility for the critic evaluating a work on aesthetic grounds.....

The strongest arguments for my case against the conclusions of stylometrics in Shakespeare's case are less speculative. If R.L.'s corpus, William Smith's works, three lyrics in the Shepheard's Calender, some verse in the Familiar Letters, 'Robert Chester's' Arthurian narrative, half the Poetical Rhapsody, Humfrey

King's work, and A. W.'s immature *Remedie* are indeed to be added to the Shakespeare corpus, the stylometricians' database for Shakespeare's practice has hitherto been woefully incomplete. Conversely their database for Philip Sidney and Spenser has been contaminated by alien Matter."

These last paragraphs are like a blast of fresh air to Oxfordians. It does leave certain questions for Miss McCarthy :...

- What DID Shakespeare write definitely after 1604 ?
- Does she agree that none of the plays show the slightest signs of having been written other than for Court production or for the Globe and not at all for the indoor Blackfriars 1608 on ?
- Would she agree her principle would be even more formidably founded if the author were dead in say 1604, and the additions and revisions by other hands were without his approval? Clare Asquith says that TNK was heavily rewritten by the Government hack Fletcher who also substantially wrote *Henry VIII*.

This refreshing critical approach has to be studied by our Oxfordian brains. I imagine that some will accept many if not all her attributions to 'Shakespeare', but others will be less sympathetic. In the meantime all of us, literary critics or not so qualified, must assist Miss McCarthy in keeping 'orthodox' criticism's eye on her argument.

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In her Bibliography she lists Kevin Gilvary's *Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream and the Earl of Oxford*. – DVS 2002

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It might be interesting to attempt to reconcile McCarthy's stance with the extreme (in some eyes) Roman Catholic thesis of Asquith. This looks an impossible task for an orthodox supporter of William Shakespeare. Apply therefore the usual rule that what is baffling to the orthodox is readily explicable to Oxfordians

Oxford was brought up in the Cecil household as an Anglican. The early plays *Famous Victories*, *Edmund Ironside*, *Edward III*, *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Troublesome Reign of King John* and *Henry VI part I* reflect this.

After his return from Italy (1575) he appears to become a Roman Catholic convert and endows his plays with much Roman Catholic symbolism.

In 1581 he breaks with the extreme Catholics in England politically but possibly remains broadly sympathetic, certainly to individual Catholics and the Catholic characters in the plays. However he is clearly influenced by non-Catholic ideas

In or about 1589 he seems to have suffered something like a nervous breakdown and in 1604 he dies.

After his death some of his plays are adapted : the Government hack Fletcher rewrites *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII*.

Asquith : *Shadowplay* : Public Affairs 2005

