

Shakespeare : not quite the Last Hurrah?

By Richard Malim

CONTESTED WILL : WHO WROTE SHAKESPEARE? by James Shapiro (Faber & Faber 2010)

The publication of a book such as this should be the most exciting event in the Authorship controversy since J. Thomas Looney's book *Shakespeare Identified* (Cecil Palmer 1923) appeared. At last, we would hope, a recognised literary scholar reviews the whole gamut of anti-Stratfordian candidates and ideas. We are disappointed.

In the first place, he does not simply say that Oxfordians and Baconians are predisposed by personal snobbish attitudes to downgrade William of Stratford upon Avon as the author; no, his attack is much more subtle than that: anti-Stratfordians are so predisposed because of their fundamental beliefs, characters and psychological defects. Thus Looney, caught up at a young age in Positivism, can readily persuade himself that provincial William is not a valid candidate. He opts for the Earl of Oxford – a poor candidate for Looney in Shapiro's terms, for did Oxford not write :

'The labouring man that tills the fertile soil,
And reaps the harvest fruit, hath not indeed
The gain, but pain: And if for all his toil
He gets the straw, the lord will have the seed'¹?

These are not sentiments on the feudal hierarchical system which, according to Shapiro's rather strange take on Positivism, should have appealed to Looney.

Likewise Freud, who sought in Oxford's history confirmation for his views on the development of Shakespeare attitude to life, was predisposed, says Shapiro, to find them. Of Freud Harold Bloom wrote, '(he) is nothing but belated Shakespeare.'²

These predispositions are irrelevant, just as those predispositions which persuaded Shapiro to be a professor of English Literature and write biographical rubbish about Shakespeare are also irrelevant. Indeed he writes, 'My interest, again, is not in what people think ... so much as why they

think it (p.7)', and so he disqualifies himself, as an investigator and commentator on 'Who wrote Shakespeare?'

An anti-Stratfordian, in order to justify his presence on the anti-Stratfordian platform, has to present arguments for his/her case for analysis. Those arguments are either right or wrong, defensible or indefensible. That is the position which Shapiro should be attacking frontally.

In his book he begins by denouncing the Baconian Wilmot forgery, that document which purports to be the report by one James Cowell (non existent) of the meeting in 1810 of the Ipswich Philosophic Society (non existent) under the Chairmanship of a (unidentified) member of the Cobbold family recording Wilmot's failure some 25 years earlier to find any document or letter in any of the libraries within 50 miles of Stratford³. He goes on (wasting acres of paper on stories we all know) to discuss the Ireland and Collier forgeries, the creation and acceptance of which tells us of our ancestors' desperation to find more reliable evidence of Shakespeare's authorship, to the extent that scholarly standards were not upheld when the bard came to be studied.

Ireland's forgeries were finally exposed by Edmund Malone (d.1812), but to Shapiro, Malone is a greater villain than the forger. 'Both were committed to rewriting Shakespeare's life: one forged documents, the other forged connections between the life and works.'^(p.52)

The non-existence of documents makes Shapiro lament the absence of the inventory of the testator's household effects which in 1616

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was with the application for Probate of the bard's Will. The innocent professor writes: 'Had the inventory survived – or if by some miracle it ever surfaces - it would finally silence those who, misunderstanding the conventions of Elizabethan Wills and Inventories [and what are the relevant ones?] continue to insist that Shakespeare didn't own any books and was probably illiterate' (p.55). He is 'innocent' because he does not contemplate that such a document (and perhaps its absence if Collier found it first) might add to the evidence of exactly that contention.

'Malone had failed in his decades-long quest [for clues to Shakespeare's personal life] because every thread leading directly back to Shakespeare's interior life had been severed. Most likely each had been cut for well over a century' (p.53). Malone also, in spite of spending his last 24 years in the effort to write a biography, failed to get beyond 1590, and one logically suspects that he became disillusioned with the obvious impossibility of an honest endeavour in that regard. However, by beginning his dating scheme in 1592, he opened the floodgates to autobiographical speculation, purporting to connect biographical aspects and details with references in the works, which flows to this day in an endless tide of rubbishy bard biographies.

Rightly, Shapiro proclaims that all such efforts are valueless. He wastes scores of pages on these efforts for William Shakespeare's case, and on Baconian efforts in this direction and is properly scathing of their attempts at finding codes in 'Shakespeare' identifying their man. He then turns to the Oxfordians, and once more we are treated to a historical summary of Oxfordianism from Looney to Charlton Ogburn junior (say, 1920-1980), again with an emphasis on why they contend for Oxford, rather than on attacking the basis of their thought.

i.e. the facts, and the logical conclusions derived from those facts.

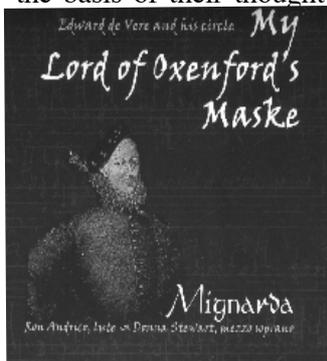
So, as the most disappointing section of his book seems to demonstrate, the truth is that Shapiro does not want to analyse the modern Oxfordian case closely; it is so much easier to track after royal bastards and codes, than argue with the definitive case. Our Oxfordian facts (based as so many are on circumstantial evidence) are in themselves deficient enough when they are divorced from the logic we apply to them, to attract the doubts of a clear-minded researcher.

There are no interviews with Mark Anderson (author of *'Shakespeare' By Another Name* – Gotham 2006), or anyone else of our persuasion, which I would have thought a *sine qua non* for Shapiro. The book would have been much stronger with a definitive statement of Oxfordian contentions, and an attempt at direct rebuttal with an analysis of those conspiracy, groupist and 'open secret' theories, where Oxfordians are far from persuasive, even to each other.

He is scathing about the alleged literary relationship with Golding the nominal translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work completely atypical of the rest of Golding's oeuvre and composed while in the same household (which Shapiro omits to draw to our notice) as his 16-year-old nephew Oxford.

And the same treatment for Lyly: Shapiro cannot find room in his 316 pages to quote from the dedication to Oxford (Lyly's one time employer – a relationship mocked by Harvey) in his *Euphues, his England*, that of his 'two children' (the two Euphues books), he 'was delivered' of the first 'before my friends thought me conceived', which 'he sent to a Nobleman to nurse, who with great love brought him up for a year, so that wheresoever he wander he hath his Nurse's name in his forehead.'

Shapiro then makes a determined effort to rubbish Roger Stritmatter's researches into Oxford's bible at the Folger Library. He accepts that it was owned by Oxford with underlinings corresponding to references in the works, but seizes on the absence of any reference to the bed-trick in *All's Well That Ends Well* for which there is no underlining of the passage in Genesis 29: 23. His attitude to this absence countermands his thesis that anyone, after the book passed out of



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Oxford's possession, could have made the underlinings; but what really escapes him is the plausible scenario that Oxford was compelled to accept a version of the bed trick to preserve the face of Burghley his father-in-law and the legitimacy of his daughter Elizabeth: he needed no precedent, or Biblical stimulus, to write the scenario in *All's Well* except his own life experiences.

AND THAT'S IT. That is all Shapiro can write in disparagement of the middle-of-the-road Oxfordian case. He dare not venture into the minefield of the correspondences between events in Oxford's life and the references in the works. He cannot use such correspondences for William Shakespeare, and so on the inapplicable principle of what is sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander he has to leave that vital aspect of the Oxfordian case inviolate. There is of course some stuff about Elizabethans not writing from their own experiences, but common sense indicates that such a thesis will not wash. Certainly the writer of 'Shakespeare' was not constrained by conventions that might circumscribe other writers. Shapiro also relies too often on the conclusions reached by Alan Nelson (*Monstrous Adversary* – Liverpool University Press 2003), that competent researcher and flawed critic – wittily described by Peter Moore as the Doctor Jekyll of research and the Mr. Hyde of criticism.

For the last section of his book Shapiro turns to Shakespeare. Now I can continue this review in the style that should have been viable in reviewing the Oxfordian case.

His first and probably his best point is that George Buc, a prominent civil servant and Master of the (Court) Revels, wrote himself a note on the authorship of a play. He was told the author was a minister who had acted in it himself (an unlikely circumstance, perhaps Buc's leg was being pulled) '*teste W. Shakespeare*', (on the evidence of W. Shakespeare). As Oxford was certainly using that name as a pseudonym, the case is far from proved, especially as William himself was probably back in Stratford permanently by the time the note was written

Shapiro does not appear to have read Peter Moore on the hyphen as it appears in typesetting of Shake-speare, but repeats the discredited

notion that this hyphen had to appear to protect the type from breaking between k (or e) and s. He shows that general anonymity for plays published before 1598 was the norm by reference to *Mucedorus*, *Arden of Feversham* and *Edward III*; never mind that two of these plays are claimed as Oxfordian juvenilia, and that 1598 signals not only the mention of the alleged playwright's name, but also the death of Burghley, which probably meant that Oxford could not be stopped from publishing under the pseudonym.

Shapiro then contends that Shakespeare was so close to the acting company that he wrote specific parts for the actors in his plays. But my contention, that Oxford himself was an actor-producer as well as a playwright, and therefore would have been in a position to rewrite an existing play to adapt it to the current theatrical talent available, is unaffected. Indeed, Shapiro is mightily struck by the two epilogues in *2 Henry IV*, Act 1 (ll. 24-32) to be spoken by a member of the cast (probably Kemp) for a public performance, the other (ll.1 -15) by the author, and both put in by the editors or composers. Shapiro is quite right to be struck, but the author who spoke it to the Court was Oxford, and Shapiro omits the evidencing interim lines: what mere journeyman actor could say to the Court:

All the gentlewomen here have forgiven me; if the gentlemen will not, then the gentlemen do not agree with the gentlewomen, which was never seen before in such an assembly [splendid irony, no doubt wasted on a twentyfirst-century critic]. (ll.20 -3)?

The points then raised by Shapiro with regard to Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*, and Mere's incompetence as merely a theatrical annalist, are known to many Oxfordians but our arguments are not dissected or even mentioned by Shapiro. Numerous contemporary references in praise of Shakespeare are not (indeed cannot be) attached to the biography, but they are still presented as 'evidence'. A determined effort to link Shakespeare to the new indoor Blackfriars Theatre from 1608 does not deal with the irrefutable arguments from orthodox critics like Allardyce Nicoll or Harley Granville to the contrary, let alone the factual problems in relation to the lawsuits involving both this theatre and the 1599 Globe, which demonstrate the absence or unim-

portance of William during those events.

Shapiro deals with the alleged collaborative plays, and even he struggles with the attribution studies raised by his 'orthodox' colleagues. 'They certainly have not brought us any closer to unravelling Shakespeare's literary DNA (p. 291)'. For Oxfordians there is no problem: post-1604 writers simply took the shreds of Oxfordian plays not in the printed folios or otherwise preserved in (near-) completeness and tacked on their bits. Recent commentators have tried to show that the authors both started their parts of the play at the same time, evidenced, they contend, by the fact that Fletcher managed to make a mess of his continuities in Act 2 of *Two Noble Kinsmen*. The thought that Fletcher (*Poor poet Ape... At first he made low shifts, would pick and glean, Buy the reversion of old plays;... Fool! As if half eyes will not know a fleece* [theft by deception or plagiarism] *From locks of wool, or shreds of the whole piece.*' - Ben Jonson) might have been careless or incompetent or that this is evidence that 'Shakespeare' was not around to correct him, does not enter the heads of these commentators.

There are a number of old-style, historical novel-type biographical inventions (e.g. p.284: 'By 1610, then, Shakespeare was writing for a new group of actors and alongside [as often as not collaboratively] a new generation of playwrights'). This is the technique of those critics whom he roundly denounces for their misconceptions between the works and their 'biographies'; and who, like him, do not realise or admit that they have neither evidence nor facts on which to base their conclusions in logic.

Finally he waxes excitable on the manuscript note at an unknown date on the inclusion of Shakespeare's name in the description of Stratford's famous sons (*et Guglielmo Shakespear planè* [ostensibly?] *nostro Roscio*): in other words the writer thought that Shakespeare was the greatest English actor, not a playwright – a singularly unhelpful addition to the 'orthodox' case.

Shapiro's book depends on the rejection of apparent topical and autobiographical references in the works, and on asserting the peerless unsupported imagination of the writer. He calls in aid a recent winner of the Whitbread First Novel Prize, who wrote a book on the Cultural Revolution without ever going to China, or knowing Mandarin. How

had he done it? 'He found his China in the London library, and from films, newspapers and the internet. (p.309)' These books, films, newspapers and internet articles are the novelist's education and life experiences; similar ones I believe were not available to William Shakespeare. I was not aware that the Verona street map had made it to the internet in 1580, but then I am not a literary critic.

The anti-Stratfordians' case that Shakespeare did not have enough formal education to write the works excites Shapiro (who completely ducks the controversy over the standard of literacy revealed by the signatures): 'Are we to imagine that the sons of other leading figures in Stratford, some of whom went on to Oxford, were unlettered before arriving at University?' (p.312). In point of fact only one man from Stratford in the forty years or so before 1610 went to Oxford, and he after time spent at Winchester College. The claims for the quality of teaching at Stratford Grammar School are seriously compromised by that fact alone.

'Even if Shakespeare occasionally drew in his poems and plays on personal experiences, and I don't doubt that he did, I don't see how anyone can know with any confidence if or when or where he does It is wiser to accept that these experiences can no longer be recovered' (p.305). The question remains therefore, how are we Oxfordians supposed to treat of Oxford's experiences as they appear in the plays and poems? To Shapiro, they must be the products of Shakespeare's imagination: to us they cannot be ignored, merely to convenience 'orthodox' professors.

IF THIS IS THE BEST a leading Stratfordian scholar can do, we Oxfordians will not in the least be concerned. By Shapiro dispensing with any connection between the works and the biography of William Shakespeare, the field in this respect is left open to us Oxfordians. Coleridge's critique of Malone's play-dating Schedule, and the principles behind it (it receives only faint praise from Shapiro) was that 'although Malone had collected a great many external particulars in regard to the age of each play', they were all, in Coleridge's mind, much less satisfactory than the knowledge to be obtained from internal evidence: if

he were to adopt any theory upon the subject, it 'would rather be physiological and pathological than chronological'. This is attracting academic approval. Oxfordians have been following Coleridge's approach for a long time now.

We could be forgiven for thinking that Shapiro's book represents William Shakespeare's Last Hurrah as an authorship candidate, but there is still three centuries-worth of academic mud passing as scholarship to be washed away.

R.M.

1. A brilliant riposte by one of our American members Sidney Lubow
2. H. Bloom: *Shakespeare's Invention of the Human* (Fourth Estate 1999) p.31
3. Without crediting our member John Rollett for the unmasking
4. GREAT OXFORD (Parapress 2005) pp.212-223
5. Nicoll: *Essay in Shakespeare's Later Comedies* (Penguin 1971) p.160. Granville Barker: Preface to *Hamlet* (Batsford 1970) p.36
6. Only the reference to the production in 1599 of *Henry V* as related to Essex's 1599 Irish expedition is applauded: it is a rehash of an earlier play which records the triumph of the Earl of Ormonde in Ireland in 1579 based in part on *The Famous Victories*
7. Lectures on Shakespeare by Coleridge (G. Bell and Sons London 1914) p.9.



Shakespeare and his Authors

Review by Richard Malim

Shakespeare and his Authors : Critical Perspectives on the Authorship Question

Ed: William Leahy

Pp.157 + bibliography and index: Continuum 2010 (hardback £75, paperback £24.99)

Bill Leahy is the head of the School of Arts at Brunel University and is responsible for the Authorship Studies course at the University. In this book of essays he provides, for an academic wishing to know more, a ten-page introduction to the academic taboo which surrounds the Authorship Question; indeed the point of assembling the essays is to be a corrective to the academic silence. He demonstrates that the Authorship Question has

'all the characteristics of an academic subject; all of the properties of an area of knowledge that should generate academic research, analysis and argumentation'.

In parenthesis, my gloss on Greene's *Groatsworth* (1592) differs from that of Diana Price as followed by Bill Leahy, because I do not see Shakespeare being in London till two years later; and I think Jonson's attack on the 'Poor Poet-Ape, who would aspire to be our chief' is an attack c.1612 on Fletcher rather than William Shakespeare, who is not known to have had any cultural aspirations.

Some parts of these essays, at first reading, may well seem to have been overtaken by Shapiro's *Contested Will*: subsequent readings show that even those essays from ostensibly 'orthodox' critics will have considerable value for those who can follow the recondite investigations into the interplay between Derrida and Freud. Your reviewer is not among their number.

The Oxfordian whose interests are confined more to purely biographical researches will however find much to delight and stimulate. Thus Bill Rubinstein (Professor of History at Aberystwyth University) repeats his triumph in *The Truth Will Out* (2005), and provides an unanswerable case for two propositions: first, Why there is an Authorship Problem and secondly, Why William Shakespeare of Stratford Upon Avon is not the answer to it. Nobody in anti-Stratfordian circles has written anything better since Diana Price in her *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (2001).

Of course, we Oxfordians quarrel with some of his deductions: the author's traumas, which 'orthodoxy' dates to 1601 on no evidence of any weight, he puts at the same date to comply with Neville's implication in the Essex putsch of that year and Neville's consequential incarceration in the Tower – disregarding the overwhelming evidence that Oxford's experiences lasted for a longer period c.1589/91.

Again, he relates Neville's interest in the London-Virginia Company to the authorship of *The Tempest*: I think most Oxfordians would follow the 1604 Spanish Maze hypothesis for this play, rather than any reference to the Bermuda shipwreck in 1610.

Of equal interest is Bill Rubinstein's analysis of the reasons for the 'iron wall' of hostility from the 'orthodox' academic literary establishment towards the Authorship question. 'It is un-