

Shakespeare on our televisions

The 30th Olympiad has provoked the powers that be into staging a cultural festival in tandem with it, though the connection between the physicality of the one and the sublime artistry of the other defeats me. It has meant that our newspapers and television screens are bombarded with pro William of Stratford propaganda. Nevertheless, even unchallenging programmes (but, wonderful photography) like Count da Mosto on 'Shakespeare and (did he mean "in"?) Italy' only serve to point up the difficulty of attributing the canon to William. Milan University has announced that some of its courses will be conducted entirely in English: must be Oxford's fault, I contend !

In a different league was James Shapiro's Channel 4 programme entitled 'The King and the Playwright', which attempted to steer away from the authorship controversy (no doubt with the concealed objective of highlighting those plays which "must have been written" after Oxford's death in June 1604). Just as it was beneath Shapiro's dignity as a scholar to examine modern Oxfordian contentions in his book *Contested Will*, so in these programmes he deals only with his own narrow interpretation. While he sticks to his rigid plan of not extracting any autobiographical elements from the plays he deals with, he commits the even worse scholarly sin of cherry-picking elements of events which he considers topical to the play-dates he wishes us to accept. On this far from complete menu he then constructs a baseless scenario of the relationship between William Shakespeare and the King.

He starts from the accession of King James in 1603, and correctly ascribes Sonnet 107 to the relief felt by the poet at the peaceful change of sovereign, without mentioning the poet's relief that Southampton is now out of the Tower. However, he can offer no explanation of the phrase, "and death to me subscribes", which must be *somebody's* autobiographical reference, but certainly not William's.

Then, as his first Jacobean play he tackles *Measure For Measure*, in which he says the King's lack of charisma is subtly highlighted. Never mind that the play can readily be dated from the topicalities of arrangements at the French Court to the period round 1580, from the very names of the courtiers as characters in the play. This illustrates the 'cherry-picking' fallacy of Shapiro's approach : he takes one item of topicality (not necessarily even a valid one), and ignores the obvious connections from an earlier period.

Timon of Athens is mentioned next; the story of a man whose own ridiculous generosity bankrupts him is supposedly mirrored by King James's attitude to expenditure and leads to Timon's total downfall - surely not the most tactful approach by a playwright of William's class, however brilliant? Incidentally, the say-so most accomplished poet of his generation was never employed by the King in the Court masques: this is not explained at all.

Again, the numerous autobiographical elements in *King Lear* are ignored in favour of a dream of William acquiring from a book shop in London a copy of an old play which he then tarts up to reflect the perils of dividing one's kingdom - which is quite the opposite of James's intention to unite his two kingdoms in one country. The 'old play' is presumably *King Leir*, whose connections to *King Lear* are much more concrete than Shapiro's cursory mention would lead one to expect.

The second programme opens with a long disquisition on 'equivocation', the Jesuitic practice of giving a literal, but not a full and direct answer to any question; Shapiro makes particular reference to the Gunpowder plot and the trial of Father Garnett in 1606. We are not told that the practice was well known for at least ten years before, and Shapiro treats its appearance in *Macbeth* as a new revelation to the play-going public, even though there is no record of any performance before 1611. There is no nod to the possibility that it might be a late topical inclusion. Shapiro suggests that the Porter is satirically the devil welcoming in the equivocator to hell, but typically does not deal with the farmer "that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty", farcically mirrored by the career of Sordido in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (III, ii), and excoriated also by Hall in his *Virgedemarium* (IV, 6, ll.23-5), both dated to 1598-9. Again he totally ignores the *Macbeth* source,

the *Buik of the Chronicles of Scotland* in the ownership of the Countess of Lennox (aunt to Mary Queen of Scots), and the problem of all contemporary playwrights (except the One) of access to it. One wonders how politic it would be for any playwright to deal derogatorily with Scottish history at this period anyway.

Shapiro then tries to link *Antony and Cleopatra* with current (1607) politics, without much conviction. He is anxious to tie in the revolts of the starving citizenry of 1608 to *Coriolanus* (again there are no contemporary performances recorded) - even William would more likely have linked these to the disturbances in Stratford ten years earlier. *Coriolanus* the character, Shapiro parallels with James, again hardly a convincing match that would appeal to the King.

The third programme opens with another Shapiro dream sequence, this time a portrait of a royal couple becoming detached as in *The Winter's Tale*. At this stage we are told that Shakespeare experimented with collaboration and lighting at the new indoor venue at Blackfriars, so that he could display Hermione's resurrection with the help of lighting effects. As Forman records seeing the play at the Globe in 1611, one wonders why it went back to outdoor productions. The evidence is that Shakespeare had nothing to do with the new Blackfriars Theatre, and it is mere invention to suggest he did. The caricatures of William and his father as the ignorant Clown and the Old Shepherd, who think they have reached the sea when they come to the Danube, pass Shapiro by.

Shapiro then makes a major error: he connects *The Tempest* to Strachey's *True Reportery* of the storm that wrecked Admiral Somers off Bermuda in 1609, which I believe has ever decreasing support even among the most rockribbed 'orthodox' critics. He fatuously claims the play echoes James's plans for his own children. He maintains that Blackfriars was necessary for the fairy and music content of the play. He suggests that Jonson's 1614 play *Bartholomew Fair* may be a comment on the formalism of *The Tempest* compared to the riotousness of Jonson's play: so it may be, but how that fixes the date of *The Tempest* he does not explain.

Shapiro's thesis is that the events of the reign and the character of the King fired Shakespeare's imagination. This only hangs together if you ignore all the autobiographical references and ninety per cent of the topicalities in the plays he reviews. Most of the ten per cent which he relies on can readily be seen as late interpolations, and not part of the original effort. Soon, to his 'explanation' of why we must ignore the autobiographical references, he must add the reasons why that other ninety per cent of topicalities must be ignored also.

Useful reading:

Richard Malim: *The Earl of Oxford and the Making of Shakespeare* (McFarland, 2012)

Kevin Gilvary: (Ed.) *Dating Shakespeare's Plays* (Parapress 2010)