

## CONTESTED WILL: WHO WROTE SHAKESPEARE?

by James Shapiro

At long last, a noted Stratfordian has got round to doing what Oxfordians have been asking them to do for years and published a considered critique of the Shakespeare Authorship Question.

Oxfordians on both sides of the Atlantic have welcomed the opportunity that this debate has initiated, and the blogosphere is buzzing with reaction to James Shapiro's musings.

Collected here are a variety of responses to this publication beginning with a review by DVS Secretary **Richard Malim**. There follows a letter by DVS Website Editor **Jeremy Crick** to The Times in response to a leading article in this newspaper which was not published for lack of space, according to a reply by the Letters Editor. There follows by a number of excerpts (and links to the full articles) beginning with a review by **Richard Whalen** of the **Shakespeare Oxford Society**; a review by American journalist **William S. Niederkorn**; an interview with James Shapiro by **Alexandra Alter** of the Wall Street Journal; and an essay by **Heward Wilkinson**.

### Shakespeare: Not Quite the Last Hurrah?

By **Richard Malim, DVS Secretary**

The publication of this book should have been the most exciting event in the Authorship controversy since John Looney's book *"Shakespeare" Identified* (Cecil Palmer 1923) appeared. At last (we might hope) a recognised literary scholar reviews the whole gamut of anti-Stratfordian candidates and ideas. We are disappointed.

Shapiro does not say that Oxfordians and Baconians are predisposed by their personal snobbish attitudes to downgrade William of Stratford upon Avon: no, his attack is much more subtle than that. Anti-Stratfordians are so predisposed because of their fundamental beliefs, character 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" <sup>1</sup>?

These are not sentiments about the feudal hierarchical system which ought to appeal to Shapiro's idea of Looney.

Likewise Freud, who sought in Oxford's life confirmation for his views on the development of Shakespeare's attitude to life, must have been predisposed to find them. Of Freud, Harold Bloom wrote, "(He) is nothing but belated Shakespeare," <sup>2</sup>

These predispositions are irrelevant, just like those predispositions which persuaded Shapiro to be a professor of English Literature and write biographical inventions about Shakespeare. 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/her presence on the platform, has to present arguments for his/her case for analysis. Those arguments are either right or wrong, defensible or indefensible. That is the way in 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 Cobham family recording Wilmot's failure some 25 years earlier to find any document or letter in any of the

libraries within 50 miles of Stratford.<sup>3</sup> 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 absence of documents prompts Shapiro to lament the loss of the inventory of the testator's household effects which in 1616 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), - "innocent" because he does not contemplate that such a document (and perhaps its absence if Collier found it first) might add to the proofs 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 of writing a biography, failed to get beyond 1590, and one logically might suspect that he became disillusioned with the obvious impossibility of an honest endeavour in that regard. However through his dating scheme, which began in 1592, he opened the floodgates to autobiographical speculation, purporting to connect biographical aspects and details with references in the works, which flow to this day in an endless flood of rubbish 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 for Bacon's, but is properly scathing of Baconians' attempts at finding codes in "Shakespeare"'s works which identify their man. He then turns to the Oxfordians, and 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 their man, rather than attacking the basis of their contention, i.e. the facts and the logical conclusions derived from those facts. He should have learnt from our experiences with the Prince Tudor theorists - ask them for their facts (defective) and their logic (none - why on earth should Queen Elizabeth consign her clandestine baby to the Wriothesley and Montagu families, both rock-ribbed Roman Catholic families and almost certainly politically disaffected ?) - and weak theories will be exposed.

So, as the most disappointing section of his book seems to demonstrate, the truth is that Shapiro does not want to analyse modern Oxfordianism that closely; it is so much easier to track after the PT-ers and code-sniffers, than argue with the definitive case. Our Oxfordian facts (based as so many are on circumstantial evidence) are in themselves quite deficient enough when they become divorced from the logic we apply to them, to attract the attention of a clear-minded researcher, or even devil's advocate. 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 if it had provided 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 of one another.

He is scathing about the alleged literary relationship with Golding, the nominal translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, though it was 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 applies to his treatment of 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."

He then makes a determined effort to rubbish Roger Stritmatter's researches in the Oxford Bible at the Folger Library. He accepts that the Bible 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. This absence countermands his thesis that anyone, after the book passed out of Oxford's possession, could have made the underlinings, but what really escapes him is that Oxford could have been 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 Oxford 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 point up such correspondences for William Shakespeare, and so, on the inapplicable principle of what is sauce for the goose has to be sauce for the gander, he has to leave that vital aspect of the Oxford 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 the imagined conventions that might circumscribe other writers. Shapiro relies too often on the conclusions reached by Alan Nelson (*Monstrous Adversary* - Liverpool University Press 2003), that competent researcher but 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 the evidence for the Stratfordian Shakespeare. Now I can write a review in the style that I would like to have employed 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 living back in Stratford permanently at the time the note was written.

Shapiro does not appear to have read Peter Moore on the hyphen as it appears in the typesetting of the word Shake-speare, and repeats the discredited notion that the 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; he fails to note 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 then 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. My contention, <sup>4</sup> that Oxford was an actor and producer as well as a playwright so that he was in a position to rewrite his existing play to adapt it to the current theatrical talent available, is unaffected. Indeed Shapiro is mightily struck by the two epilogues in *Henry IV Part II*, one (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 included by the editors or compositors. Shapiro is quite right, but the author who spoke it to the Court could have been Oxford, and Shapiro omits to mention the 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 twenty-first century critic]." (ll.20 -3)?

The points then raised by Shapiro in regard to Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* and Mere's

incompetence as merely a theatrical annalist are known to many Oxfordians but their arguments are not dissected or even mentioned by Shapiro. The numerous contemporary references in praise of Shakespeare are not (indeed cannot be) attached to the biography, but still are 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<sup>5</sup> 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 from or unimportance of William to those concerns.

Finally he 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 copies 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 Two 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 plagiarisation]

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 misconnections between the works and their "biographies", who like him do not realise or admit that they have neither evidence nor facts on which to base their conclusions.

Finally he waxes excitable on the manuscript note, at an unknown date, 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 the peerless unsupported imagination of the writer. He calls in aid a recent winner of the Whitbread First Novel Prize, who had written a book on China and 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 substitute for life experiences; similar ones I believe were not available to William Shakespeare. I, for one, 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 that was after time spent at Winchester College. The claims for the quality of education 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 so ... 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 need not in the least be concerned. By Shapiro's 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 criticism of Malone's dating Schedule for the plays and the principles behind it (it receives only faint praise<sup>6</sup> from Shapiro) was to the effect 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<sup>7</sup>. This is now attracting academic approval. Oxfordians have been following Coleridge's approach for a long time.

We could be forgiven for thinking that Shapiro's book represents William Shakespeare's Last Hurrah as an authorship candidate; however three centuries of academic mud passing as scholarship still needs to be washed away.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>. A brilliant riposte down to one of our American members Sidney Lubow

<sup>2</sup>. H. Bloom: *Shakespeare's Invention of the Human* (Fourth Estate 1999) p.31

<sup>3</sup>. Without crediting our member John Rollett for the unmasking

<sup>4</sup>. *GREAT OXFORD* (Parapress 2005) pp.212-223

<sup>5</sup>. Nicoll: *Essay in Shakespeare's Later Comedies* (Penguin 1971) p.160. Granville Barker: *Preface to Hamlet* (Batsford 1970) p.36

<sup>6</sup>. 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*

<sup>7</sup> *Lectures on Shakespeare by Coleridge* (G. Bell and Sons London 1914) p.9.

#### Letter to The Times in response to a leading article

by Jeremy Crick

Sir,

Oxfordians on both sides of the Atlantic have welcomed James Shapiro's considered critique of the Shakespeare Authorship Question. We particularly welcome Shapiro recognising the quality of Oxfordian scholarship and leadership in the field of research in establishing Edward de Vere as the best candidate to challenge the Stratfordian consensus. (Leader, Monday 5 April

It is now clear where the principal dividing line exists between Stratfordians and Oxfordians - the question of whether the poems and plays reflected and can reveal the biography of the poet. As you put it on behalf of the former, "conventional Shakespearean scholarship" was "sustained by a terrible mistake ... the notion that the author's life may be inferred from his writings." From which position you and Shapiro follow all modern orthodox scholars to the view that, "Shakespeare's are works not of autobiography but of imagination."

You also characterise our position as "a belief" which "does not respect the canons of historical evidence". This is odd because Oxfordian organisations like the De Vere Society have always framed the issue precisely as a question of historical evidence. The overwhelming weight of historical evidence is Oxfordians' strongest suit against a Stratfordian belief which calls doubters

'heretics'. There is a notable difference between writing autobiographical dramas and a poet using his acquired knowledge through vivid life experiences to bring the Elizabethan world of kings, princes and courtiers to life. All but one of the thirty-seven plays is set right at the heart of a royal court. In each play, the poet displays an easy familiarity with all the courtly formalities and shows a shrewd understanding of how powerful factions at court competed over policy. The poet was using his deep knowledge of the world he inhabited to give a solid frame to his soaring imagination. Oxfordians aren't snobs - we follow the evidence and all the evidence points to the poet being a senior courtier and there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever once attended court. Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, however, was also the Lord Great Chamberlain of England. Ever likely that he chose to adopt a nom de plume. It was common practice then as it is now and it didn't require a conspiracy to establish or maintain.

Stratfordians have always been in despair over the fact that not one single document has ever been discovered from his lifetime that proves that William Shakespeare of Stratford was an author. That he never appeared to have written any letters home - in spite of being apart from his family so often. That he was content to bring his children up to be illiterate. That there is not one literary reference in his long and detailed will - no books, no manuscripts, no collection of the Shakespeare Quarto editions to be handed down as heirlooms in remembrance of the 'soul of the age'. That must have been quite a conspiracy - to erase all Shakespeare's literary material from the archive record. Either that or it just wasn't there in the first place.

How much Stratfordians would love to have the compelling historical evidence, as Oxfordians do, of the poet's travels through France and Italy. In a series of letters home to his father-in-law Lord Burghley, Oxfordians have documentary proof that Edward de Vere visited every town and city mentioned in the many plays he chose to set in Italy. Edward de Vere shows again that he is using his detailed acquired knowledge of the princely courts of Italy to inspire him.

Stratfordians have no choice - they must renounce looking for the poet's life in his works, the chasm between them is too great. It is astonishing how impoverished their view of the poet must be in rejecting The Sonnets, for surely they must consider all the despair, passion and guilt displayed here to be nothing more than a whimsical Platonic exercise.

Jeremy Crick  
Website Editor, De Vere Society

### **Excerpt from Richard Whalen's review of "Contested Will"**

<http://shakespeareoxfordsociety.wordpress.com/2010/03/19/whalen-reviews-contested-will/>

"Shapiro cleverly describes the impressive success of the Oxfordian movement. Oxfordians in the early 1980s, he says, would never have believed the success they would enjoy in 2010. He demonstrates this with an imaginary article in The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter in 2010 that would have been beyond belief for Oxfordians in the 1980s. Filling a full page in his book, the imaginary article describes the Oxfordian successes:

- Universities offering advanced degrees in authorship studies;
- supporters like Derek Jacobi, Mark Rylance and others from the theater world;
- books by independent scholars and books for young adults from mainstream publishers;
- high school students competing to write the best Oxfordian essay;
- major articles in the Atlantic, Harper's, and The New York Times and programs on NPR;
- moot court debates before justices from the highest courts in America and England;
- peer-reviewed Oxfordian journals;
- international conferences;
- Oxfordian editions of the plays for teachers of Shakespeare;
- impressive Wikipedia entries and Internet web sites that are more professional and impressive than Stratfordian sites;

- and multiple discussion groups on the Internet.

"All this, says Shapiro, without any new documentary evidence.

"He ends the 'Oxfordian' chapter with an admiring description of John Shahan's '[Declaration of Reasonable Doubt](#)' at the website of the **Shakespeare Authorship Coalition (SAC)**, [DoubtAboutWill.org]. The Declaration and the SAC are deliberately anti-Stratfordian, not Oxfordian."

"Shapiro's 'Oxford' chapter concludes with additional recognition of landmarks in his history of the Oxfordian societies and the success of the Oxfordian movement since the 1980s. He cites the moot court before three justices of the U.S. Supreme Court as most important in making the authorship issue legitimate. He mentions the PBS-TV Frontline programs, Charles Beauclerk's lectures and TV appearances, Roger Stritmatter's doctoral dissertation on the markings in Oxford's Bible, and William Niederkorn's major articles in The New York Times."

**Richard F. Whalen** is the author of *Shakespeare: Who Was He?: The Oxford Challenge to the Bard of Avon*, co-editor with Professor Daniel Wright of The Oxfordian Shakespeare Series, editor/annotator with Ren Draya of *Othello* and editor/annotator of *Macbeth* in the series. He is past president of the [Shakespeare Oxford Society](#) and a regular contributor to the Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter.

### **Absolute Will**

William S. Niederkorn reviews *Contested Will* by James Shapiro

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/04/books/absolute-will>

Journalist William Niederkorn has some form when it comes to James Shapiro's research work on his history of the Shakespeare Authorship Question. As a brief excerpt will illustrate, not only have the two men corresponded with each other, Shapiro acknowledges the influence of Niederkorn's journalism on the topic. So he is very well placed, in this very considered review, to identify the principal weaknesses of Shapiro's arguments - whether addressing the lack of evidence for the Stratford man or attempting to provide clinching arguments against the sceptics.

Niederkorn is at his best when he tackles Shapiro's position on the question of revealed biography in the poems and plays. The modern orthodox view, as any reader of Jonathan Bate will know, is that it is a waste of time trying to fit the poet to the man. Oxfordians have long pointed out that they would do this wouldn't they, given what we know about their man, before listing an extensive catalogue of direct concordances between the Earl of Oxford's known biography and the works.

On the Oxford case in general, he writes:

*"The customary way to dismiss the Oxford case is to note that Oxford died in 1604, name some Shakespeare plays and insist they are of later date. Shapiro names nine. But the traditional dating of the plays is largely based on the assumption that Will of Stratford wrote them, so it's a circular argument. There is no definitive post-1604 dating. That is why Stratfordians keep introducing new 'Shakespeare' works that date from after de Vere's death. It happened with the insertion of the poems 'Shall I Die?' and 'A Funeral Elegy'; into editions of the Shakespeare canon, and now it is apparently happening again with a play appropriately titled 'Double Falsehood', which the Arden Shakespeare is adding to its Complete Works."*

And of his correspondence with Shapiro, he writes:

*"Indeed, Shapiro assigns a share of the blame for the Oxfordian theory's momentum to me. Incidentally, in a brief exchange of email messages with him, which he quickly cut off, I said I was agnostic, not 'an agnostic,' with its tone of heretical religiosity. I count myself among journalists who aim to be objective, but if authorship articles are not slanted toward their side, Stratfordians get upset. The worst Shapiro can say about me seems to be that I spoke at an Oxfordian dinner and an Oxfordian conference: Oxfordians were 'delighted when Niederkorn spoke to them at their*

*annual Oxford day banquet in April 2002. 'I have spoken at three Oxfordian conferences - as well as the dinner - all different groups, and at all of them I have strongly affirmed that I take no side in the controversy. I would be happy to speak at a Stratfordian conference, but have not yet been invited, though I have spoken on neutral stages at the invitation of the University of Tennessee Law School and the Rowfant Club of Cleveland.'*

### **Interview with James Shapiro**

Alexandra Alter of the Wall Street Journal interviews James Shapiro about his book, *Contested Will*  
[Wall Street Journal article](#)

Shapiro is at pains throughout this interview to argue a rejection of looking for Shakespeare's biography in his writings as an academic pursuit. As a brief excerpt from this interview, his answer to the following question is extraordinary - he is accusing all the recent Shakespeare biographers of "spin[ning] the story however you want". Oxfordians have been making this very point for years.

### **Excerpt**

AA: "Do you think that scholars might give up trying to read Shakespeare's life into his plays at some point?"

JS: "I'm trying to, I wouldn't say shame, fellow Shakespeareans into doing that. Every half century or so someone writes a piece like this. There's money in Shakespeare biography... I should know, I've written one... And people want a good story, and the good story's going to have to turn on some kind of imagined sexual or psychological or religious crisis in Shakespeare's life, of which we have no documentary evidence - which is great, so you can spin the story however you want. So this is a book that argues against the possibility of a cradle-to-grave biography of Shakespeare. I have no doubt that there are elements of Shakespeare's life that appear in the plays. But having spent 25 years reading and teaching those plays, I don't know how anyone has the authority to say when and how these aspects of his life shape his works. It's lost."

### **De-Imagining Imagination**

#### **An Essay on "Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?" by James Shapiro**

by Heward Wilkinson

<http://hewardwilkinson.wordpress.com/>

Heward Wilkinson, in this extended essay, approaches Shapiro's book with his usual intellectual rigour. He is particularly good on the question of the poet's biography being reflected in the works.

### **Excerpt**

"And my sense of it is that Shapiro is caught in a basic contradiction, as follows. He sets out to diagnose the assumption that both many Stratfordians, and Oxfordians, are caught in, the fundamental theme of his book, namely the biographical assumption that Shakespeare's works reflect his life. And he does this on the presumption that his own position is neutral, is correct, is "how it is",

and is not an assumption, and so that he can then "diagnose" the creators and supporters of alternative authorship narratives.

"But, in reality, it is an assumption, also, one which mirrors the one he rejects, and which he oversimplifies to something two-dimensional. It does not seem to cross his mind that the relation between the position he espouses, and the oversimplified one which he opposes, may be dialectical, that, in J L Austin's words, the positions take in each others' washing..."