

ULF DANTANUS

Shakespeare: In Search of a Solid Life

Opening speech

Every year, on or near 23 April, Stratford-upon-Avon celebrates Shakespeare's birthday*. A procession, led by the Mayor and including local dignitaries and eminent visitors, leaves the house in Henley Street known as the Birthplace (visited by 603.899 pilgrims in 1990), makes its way through the town and ends up at the church of the Holy Trinity in the leafy surroundings of the river Avon. There speeches are given in honour of the local lad made good, who is, of course, Stratford's most famous citizen. But is it really the immortal poet and playwright William Shakespeare who lies buried in the Stratford parish church? Or is it a much more down-to-earth character, a lowly country fellow by the name of Will Shakspere, who could barely write his own name? The suggestion is far from new, and since the middle of the last century much has been said and written in order to contest the traditional story about the young man from Stratford who went to London and established himself there as the greatest writer of all time. There has never been a lack of challengers to Shakespeare and his unique position in world literature, and of the fifty-seven (!) names that have been put forward as the true author of Shakespeare's plays and poems, the philosopher Francis Bacon has had numerous supporters and Queen Elizabeth I rather few. In general, however, serious Shakespeare studies have relegated any discussion about an alternative Shakespeare to a remote and obscure location. Instead, scholars have with remarkable energy and vitality claimed new advances in the name of literary research: in 1985 the young American Gary Taylor added a new poem, "Shall I die", to the Shakespeare canon; in the same year Eric Sams published Shakespeare's 'lost' play *Edmund Ironside*; today there exist side by side two very different versions of *King Lear* and in 1989 the remains of two Elizabethan theatres (The Rose and The Globe) were discovered on the south bank of the Thames. In the eighties a radical politicization of Shakespeare took place, with feminist and political approaches furnishing literary criticism with new and exciting interpretations. And in *Reinventing Shakespeare* Gary Taylor tried to knock the Bard off his pedestal by reducing him to just one of many stars in the firmament. Articles and books about Shakespeare's work continue to be produced at an amazing rate. This activity, however, is not as futile and questionable as some people may think. It is Shakespeare's role as cultural icon which makes him a suitable and perhaps necessary locus for debate, a place where *our*

*There is no documentary evidence to establish Shakespeare's birthday as 23 April 1564. The parish register only shows that 'Gulielmus, filius Johannes Shakespeare' was *baptized* on 26 April. Traditionally, his birthday has been celebrated on 23 April, which is also the feast of St. George, England's patron saint.

own contemporary values are contested and discussed.

Witness

But the so-called 'authorship question' is not dead. Efforts are still being made to prove that the man from Stratford-upon-Avon did not write Shakespeare's plays. The latest attack came in the form of a brick of a book nearly 800 pages long, intended, so its author hoped, to drive the last nail into the coffin of anyone who supports the traditional story. Like so many times before, this offensive was met with repugnance by the literary establishment in England. It is never easy to try to dismantle a national monument.

In *The Mystery of William Shakespeare* Charlton Ogburn has collected twelve years of dedicated detective work. After first dismissing the myth about the man from Stratford as an absurd bluff, Ogburn argues for a more suitable and impressive name. His candidate, Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604), is not a newcomer to the fray. In 1920 a school teacher from the north of England, John Thomas Looney (an unfortunate name for him and his theories), put forward the Earl of Oxford as the true author of the works we normally attribute to William Shakespeare. Ogburn completes the work begun by Looney and with great energy and volubility he now pleads on behalf of the Earl. Ogburn's argument can be broken down into four main parts: (1) there is no way that Will Shakspere from Stratford-upon-Avon can have written Shakespeare's plays (Ogburn consistently distinguishes between two different people and two different spellings); (2) the real author was the Earl of Oxford; (3) as a nobleman who was closely associated with the court and with Queen Elizabeth I he could not allow his aristocratic name to be tainted by any involvement with the dubious and questionable business of popular theatre. Oxford approached a young man from the provinces who had been attracted to the capital and who was making a living by holding the horses of wealthy people while they went to the theatre (an old Shakespeare legend). Will Shakspere (that was the young man's name) agreed to sell his name and his silence and promised to return to Stratford, where he bought property and got involved in various court cases, hence the documents traditionally seen as supporting the Stratfordian theory; (4) after the Earl's demise in 1604 his family, with the assistance of literary people like the poet and playwright Ben Jonson, conspired to sweep away all traces that might link Oxford's name with Shakespeare's work, an activity which has resulted in a veritable maze of lost and problematical documents that have plagued Shakespeare specialists ever since.

In an intriguing, striking and often enjoyable style Ogburn tries to convert all orthodox believers to his own heretic confession. The first two links of his theory are perfectly plausible and often convincing, the last two in no way as attractive. What we know about the man from Stratford (not an aw-

ful lot) is, Ogburn argues, totally incompatible with the personality that wrote the plays (this is also the startingpoint of all so-called anti-Stratfordian theory). These few facts rather point to an uneducated and grasping little opportunist whose greatest interest was money and other worldly goods. There is in the scant biography of this man no possible explanation for the rich variety of knowledge, experience and emotion that characterizes Shakespeare's work. How was it possible for the uneducated young man from Warwickshire (there is no proof at all of Shakespeare's education), who wrote nothing before the age of 26, to turn so quickly into such a great polymath and writer? Ogburn shows how detailed and precise Shakespeare's knowledge really was in a number of different areas: Greek and Latin classics; the Bible; Italian and French geography, language and culture; music, medicine, warfare on land and sea, for instance. His vocabulary, which has been estimated at 17,000 words (or more), was twice as large as Milton's, who has always been seen as a learned and bookish author. And last but not least Ogburn instances Shakespeare's close and intimate familiarity with the court and with royal personages, which made it possible for him to move behind their official and private masks to create psychologically convincing characters. "I am Richard the Second, know ye not that?" Queen Elizabeth is supposed to have exclaimed to a surprised visitor, referring to Shakespeare's play of that title. The claim that Shakespeare's poems and plays are written from the point of view of a nobleman is often supported by orthodox scholars, who acknowledge that the fear of the fickle mob in *Julius Caesar*, for instance, reveals a political way of thinking that must have been alien to the son of a small-town Warwickshire glover.

This far Ogburn's reasoning assumes a clear relationship between an author's life and his literary production. This connection is often made automatically and gratefully when we discuss Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw and Strindberg, and we encourage the life and work of modern writers to mirror each other. Why is it then, as Frank Kermode suggests in the Riverside edition of Shakespeare's work (p. 1135), so futile to speculate how Shakespeare could write a masterpiece like *Hamlet*? If we do we soon realize that Shakespeare from Stratford could not be the author. In Ogburn's eyes *Hamlet* is a partly autobiographical play, with Oxford and his first wife Anne Cecil in the leading roles, with Lord Burghley (Anne's father and the Queen's Lord Treasurer) lampooned as Polonius and with other high-ranking courtiers only barely disguised in their Danish parts. Oxford's knowledge of Danish affairs was considerable and he had received first hand accounts from a relative who had been on a diplomatic mission to Elsinore. With this kind of neatly elaborate and inventive analysis Ogburn pulls together all the loose strands of the Shakespeare enigma and in the process he demolishes all the traditionalists' well-known arguments: it was not Shakespeare from Stratford that Robert Greene was talking about in 1592, in a famous reference to a gifted newcomer to the London theatre ("an absolute Iohannes fac totum,

[who] is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country"); Ben Jonson's famous remark that Shakespeare had "small latin and less Greek" has always been misinterpreted by critics, and John Aubrey, whose book *Brief Lives* is often used to support the Stratford story, is revealed as an unreliable gossip.

Closing speech

The logical conclusion of Ogburn's long and detailed argument is that it was Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, who wrote so many of the greatest literary masterpieces in the world. Oxford was well educated and much travelled, and, of course, well connected at court (and, some people say, Elizabeth's lover). He had established himself early as an excellent poet and in tests carried out by Ogburn it was difficult or impossible to distinguish Oxford's early work from Shakespeare's poetry. In his later work, of course, the Earl went on to use the pseudonym William Shakespeare. There is no doubt that if we accept Oxford as the author of Shakespeare's work we will, at one fell swoop, solve a number of riddles that have always baffled Shakespeare's biographers: where did the author gain the knowledge and the experience that he has so ingeniously woven into his work?; why did he so often write about the upper layers of society?; what happened during 'the lost years' (when there is a gap of several years in the orthodox story of his life)?; how can you explain the cryptic dedication of the sonnets to the Earl of Southampton?; why did he show so little interest in printed versions of his work etc.? But, you may wonder, if Oxford died in 1604, how could he have written *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and other plays usually dated after 1604? The traditional dating, Ogburn explains, is far too late. The plays were written earlier, and references to later historical and political events (used to date them) were incorporated in later productions in the much same way that inventive directors today try to make the plays more 'relevant' by suggesting contemporary correspondences. This, certainly, is a plausible explanation, and it should not be forgotten that the orthodox dating of many plays is still contested (see, for instance, Eric Sams in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 March 1992).

In the twentieth century the Earl of Oxford has taken over from Francis Bacon as the main contender for Shakespeare's throne. In *The Mystery of William Shakespeare* Ogburn confirms this development and presents a solidly researched and well argued case in his favour. He also relies on the support of surprisingly many well-known names from Henry James and Sigmund Freud to Charlie Chaplin and Enoch Powell, who all have their doubts about the traditional life of Shakespeare. And yet the academic establishment will not be swayed. They treat all anti-Stratfordians as amateurs (which most of them are in the sense that they are not professional academics) and see 'the authorship question' as a kind of freakish sub-industry of Shakespeare studies; their concerns remain the man from Stratford and the

works he wrote. In a recent standard bibliography (*Shakespeare: A Bibliographical Guide*) Stanley Wells is very reticent on the subject of anti-Stratfordianism. In a one-sentence reference to Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare's Lives* he states: "Schoenbaum includes a study of attempts to prove that Shakespeare was someone else" (Wells 4). To give too much attention to these theories may indeed confirm their significance, but Schoenbaum's book is, in fact, the natural point of departure for anyone interested in Shakespearean biography, as long as the author's obvious anti-anti-Stratfordian bias is kept in mind. Apart from conventional lives of Shakespeare, Schoenbaum outlines the theories of those who question the Stratford story (in a chapter entitled "Deviations"!). He does, perhaps, protest a little too much, and in accusing them of being paranoid, conspiratorial and compulsive he may be unnecessarily harsh on them (Schoenbaum 440). It may also, of course, be a question of six of one and half a dozen of the other; Ogburn does not mince his words either and accuses Stratfordians of "mindlessness" (Ogburn 21) for their failure to accept his arguments.

The judgment

The main difficulty with Ogburn's position is that the proposition that the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare's plays is the sort of statement that can be neither proved nor disproved (unless some new and significant find is made). As such it may be both an enterprise filled with excitement and controversy and, at the same time, pretty meaningless. There is in Ogburn's case more 'evidence' *against* the man from Stratford than *for* the Earl of Oxford. I have allowed Ogburn to present his case in some detail, not only in order to exemplify some of the issues involved but also to illustrate the degree to which the question of whether you believe in the man from Stratford or not is an act of faith. It *is* easy to become convinced of the existence of an alternative author, whose biography can satisfy our craving for a settled and organized life, and whose life may reflect conventional ideas about the genius and greatness of Shakespeare's work. Some people may have preferred Shakespeare to have had a more complete and solidly documented biography, but that is, in itself, no reason to start looking for such a life somewhere else. There is no doubt that the mixture of myth and elusive fact that makes up Shakespeare's life continues to fascinate, and many writers are attracted to it by the very freedom that it offers.

There is another problem with biographical criticism. We may know enough about Chekhov to see the relevance of his life for his work, but it is a much more precarious project to interpret *from* a writer's work *to* his life the way Ogburn and other anti-Stratfordians are reduced to. Shakespeare's knowledge about kings and life at court, for instance, does not necessarily presuppose a direct and personal involvement. Macbeth's guilt after the murder of Duncan is totally convincing; does that reflect the author's own experience? Shakespeare wrote with great insight and feeling about women;

does that mean that he was a woman?

Nor are Ogburn's claims about the great knowledge and expertise he can detect in the Bard's work in any way incontrovertible. Most modern playwrights would agree that even a fairly shallow wade through a subject where the professional might recognize the depths will satisfy the demands of the average audience.

New chapters are still being written in the saga of Shakespeare's life. In April 1990, in a secret drawer of a woodworm-eaten desk in Shipton-under-Wychwood in Oxford, a manuscript was discovered that was purported to be the autobiography of the 17th Earl of Oxford. It was rushed into print as *The Lost Chronicle of Edward de Vere: Lord Great Chamberlain, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, Poet and Playwright William Shakespeare*. In it the Earl speaks openly about the queen and life at court, his travels in Europe and about his impending death. One of his last acts was to go to the theatre and see what he thought was a scandalously poor production of one his own plays. As a result, he despairs of their future success and reputation and professes to have greater hopes for his poems.

However, this sensational find soon began to arouse suspicion. Behind the impressive title is hidden an Australian academic, Andrew Field, who admits he used known facts about the Earl of Oxford's life to make a fictional intervention in 'the authorship question'. The book is, in fact, described as a novel on the dustjacket, and this modern Macpherson is happy to share his practical-literary joke with the reader. With Field we are clearly entering into an area where the boundaries between history, (auto)biography, fact and fiction are deliberately blurred. This is precisely the kind of support Ogburn can do without in his more serious quest for credibility and acceptance.

The step from Field to Robert Nye is not a long one. Recently he published the fictional memoirs of Anne Hathaway-Shakespeare (*Mrs Shakespeare*), providing the portrait of a wife more suitable for Ogburn's simple Will Shakspeare than for the great Bard. Earthy, practical and mundane, she remains totally unimpressed by her husband's literary exploits, and she fails to appreciate his gift for metaphor: "You take one thing and you say it is another. It does no good to anybody." Innocent fun or heretical iconoclasm? Since it makes no claims to be anything else it would be fatuous to criticize its humorous intent on serious grounds. It does, however, illustrate again the abiding interest Shakespeare retains in the imagination of English-speaking people. Only Shakespeare's life can do this, because its status as a national monument refreshes the parts other biographies cannot reach.

Even acknowledged biographers of Shakespeare, however, work in and out of scholarship and speculation. In order to engage in Bardography it is sometimes necessary to fill in the grey or empty areas between the dots with a colourful crayon. Long-standing assumption, well-known legend and

quaint anecdote must be dealt with and either convincingly assimilated or persuasively discarded. Peter Levi's *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*, for instance, relays to the reader the idea that William "went to school and church with the other Stratford boys, prayed for the queen, heard sermons and took communion when the time came" (Levi 20). These propositions, although completely unsubstantiated as facts, may be harmlessly accepted by most people. Here and there, though, Levi may provoke hostility with some unnecessary guessing. Shakespeare, he suggests, did not take the shorter way to London (via Banbury) but "seems often to have used the Oxford route, probably because at Oxford there were books" (Levi 9). This statement is unsubstantiated not only as fact, but also as speculation. Levi himself may indeed have preferred to go via Oxford, and it is a curious characteristic of many Shakespeare biographers that they attempt to re-create their hero in their own image.

In *William Shakespeare: A Life* Garry O'Connor introduces a novel method in his search for an authoritative biography. In an effort to approach William through people who have worked with him, O'Connor interviewed numerous 'contemporary witnesses' (contemporary with himself, not with Shakespeare). He hoped that "from lifelong familiarity with [Shakespeare's] work, something might have rubbed off" on the actors, directors and academics that he spoke to (O'Connor 3). The result is the kind of bold mixture of fact and fiction that is sometimes described as 'faction.' This is an honest, lively, imaginative and compassionate 300-page long portrayal of the Bard. Those who prefer the documentary facts are referred to eight pages of 'facts and traditions' surrounding Shakespeare's life, which O'Connor helpfully appends. And so O'Connor gives birth to *his* Shakespeare.

At the end of the day (or in O'Connor's case the first sentence of his book) it is perhaps necessary to concede that "Shakespeare left his true biography in his plays and poems" (O'Connor 1). This is not at all a new idea. In fact, the editors of the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays (the *First Folio*, 1623) included a short verse (by Ben Jonson) about the engraving (by Martin Droeshout) that adorns the title page. Since the engraver could not include Shakespeare's wit in the drawing, Ben Jonson suggests, the reader should "looke not on his Picture, but his Booke." But none of the several existing portraits claimed to be of Shakespeare can be safely authenticated. And is there not in Jonson's advice a deliberate attempt to draw our attention away from the portrait (and the life?)? Strangely enough, Garry O'Connor lets slip a curious hint that we have heard before. Shakespeare's life seems ordinary, he acknowledges, which may be because "[h]e covered his tracks so well that it is not unreasonable to assume that his secrecy was deliberate and calculated" (O'Connor 1). Which brings us back to Ogburn.

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CURRENT RESEARCH

At the English Department, University of Gothenburg, a large-scale syntactic investigation is being carried out, dealing with the use of extractions in English from the time of King Alfred to the present day. As is commonly recognized, such extraction constructions exhibit an intriguing structure that has changed in important ways over the years, and the aim of the project is to chart this development in terms of, for example, type of fronting, hypotactic depth, extractability of different constituents, conjunctive usage, and resumptive strategies. To give the study a comprehensive statistical basis, a 1.4 million word corpus of running prose text was compiled, divided into 14 subperiods with 100 000 words in each. The forthcoming report on the project has the title *The History of Extraction Patterns in English*, and is co-authored by Aimo Seppänen and Gunnar Bergh. Address: University of Gothenburg, Department of English, S-412 98 Göteborg, Sweden.