

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, eds, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). 284pp. ISBN 978 1 1076 0328 8.

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This book is a collection of essays about the debate over the authorship of Shakespeare's plays and poems, and one which employs specific terminology: when writing of those who are sceptical about Shakespeare's authorship, the editors have chosen to replace the term 'anti-Stratfordian' with 'anti-Shakespearian', and, for the sake of consistency, I shall use the term 'anti-Shakespearian' in this review.¹ There is a recent and cogent history of anti-Shakespearian writings in James Shapiro's *Contested Will* (2010), but this present collection, whilst covering some of this same historical ground (without dwelling on such figures as Twain or Freud) is primarily concerned with more recent history. Its animus is largely directed at more contemporary targets. There are three principal impetuses which give rise to this book: the establishment of university courses which study the issue of the authorship of Shakespeare's plays (given short shrift and dismissed in a couple of pages); the 2011 film *Anonymous*, which characterized the Earl of Oxford as the author of Shakespeare's plays; and the petition 'Declaration of Reasonable Doubt', launched in 2007, 'whose signatories assert that there is reasonable doubt that William Shakespeare was the true author of the plays attributed to him' (p. 201).

I should like to begin this review with some general observations about the book and its methodology. Written on behalf of the Birthplace Trust, this is an angry book, which

¹ I should make it clear that I believe that the plays and poems conventionally attributed to William Shakespeare were written by him, sometimes in collaboration with other professional writers, during the time he spent in London.

attacks not only these specific anti-Shakespearian targets, but also pro-Shakespeare organisations which one might have assumed were allied with the Birthplace Trust, but which are criticised here by the editors for their failure to respond to these attacks upon the idea that Shakespeare wrote the works commonly attributed to him (see, for example, 'None of ... The Folger Shakespeare Library, The Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare's Globe ... seemed to wish to do anything in response to Emmerich's film', p. 229). It is not clear that all the contributors to this volume share the same level of ire. The book consists of an introduction by the editors and nineteen individual essays arranged in three sections: 'Sceptics', 'Shakespeare as Author' and 'A Cultural Phenomenon: Did Shakespeare Write Shakespeare?'. Each of these sections has its own brief mini-introduction, and the book concludes with an afterword by James Shapiro plus a selected reading list.

Two of the contributors are identified as independent scholars (lower case), whilst the editors themselves are identified by their affiliation with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. The fact that not all the writers are academics is significant in a work where the tension between professional academics and amateurs looms so large. At the outset, we are told that, of those who contribute to the debate on anti-Shakespeare theories, some 'are amateurs, others are persons of high intellectual ability fully conversant with the techniques of academic scholarship' (p. xii), and that 'until the end of the twentieth century the subject was the province of amateurs ... with no professional commitment to literary or historical studies' (p. xiii). It would appear, then, that amateurs are ill-informed and not to be trusted, whereas the views of professional academics should be respected and supported. Yet the collection includes contributions from some who are not professional academics, and one of its targets is the newly established anti-Shakespearian university courses at Brunel University (London) and at Concordia University (Portland, Oregon). Moreover, the anti-Shakespearians themselves are ridiculed for the snobbery of their project, because it 'generally works from the premise Shakespeare's origins were too lowly to allow him to scale the upper peaks of Parnassus' (pp. 29–30). So, it is snobbery to wonder whether a non-academic could have written the plays of Shakespeare, but not snobbery to suggest that it is only the views of academics which should be heard. Those non-academics whose views are to be disparaged are amateurs, but those non-academics whose views are to be applauded are independent scholars. And those academics teaching non-orthodox courses are to be scorned, to the extent that even the fees charged for their course are paraded for our ridicule (p. 226). To add just one further level of confusion for the casual reader, one of the contributors uses the distinction between amateur and professional in a quite different

sense to discriminate between those aristocrats who did not write for money (amateurs) and professional playwrights like Shakespeare who did (see p. 100).

There is, moreover, an odd strain of anti-Americanism running through the collection. Some of this is perhaps excusable as being nothing more than the charting of the history of the anti-Shakespearian project which had its origins in the USA (see pp. 2, 21), but one contributor goes rather further, writing of ‘an odd tradition in which Americans, having cast off English monarchy, grow besotted with English aristocracy’ (p. 39).

There are also occasions when the essays rail against the most recent platforms for the anti-Shakespearian amateurs on the web. For example, Matt Kubus, writing of bloggers, suggests that ‘the democratization of the Shakespeare authorship discussion — that is, the putting of the discussion into the hands of the amateur — is a primary reason for its perpetuation’ (p. 59), yet the editors themselves have produced their own ebook, *Not So Anonymous*, and this collection also references the programme which was produced by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and which is available on the web (see p. 230). Moreover, at least one of the contributors, Graham Holderness, has written a blog post which includes his critique of the film *Anonymous*. We might wonder why, then, given the existence of this freely available ebook and other blogs, the editors chose to publish this print collection at all. The answer seems to be, in part, that the editors felt that they needed the full weight of academia behind them, and the full paraphernalia of the university machine (including a University Press) to come into play. The web is not enough.

They may also be in fear of the evanescence of the internet: the copyright page carries the warning that ‘Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in the publication’. Websites may come and go, and may be as egalitarian as journalism, but the academic book will be superior and have greater credibility. Sadly, of course, academic books take a long time to publish and an even longer time to have their errors corrected: blogs (and online reviews) do not. Anger leads to error, and this collection is by no means free of editorial and typographical errors (in addition to the lack of consistency of anti-Shakespearian and anti-Stratfordian, see also p. 76 and p. 277, where the ‘xxx’ and ‘000’ have not been updated, and the many slips in the index).

A book which charts the views of amateurs attempting to undermine the authority of received opinion will inevitably move to charges of Conspiracy Theory, and this collection

is no exception. There is one whole chapter addressing this question, contributed by Kathleen E. McLuskie, to which I shall return later, plus another dozen references to conspiracy theory scattered across the book (the index is not helpful here in guiding the reader to all these references). Some of these attacks are quite justified: for example, Andrew Hadfield, having reviewed the available data on what is known of the education of writers such as Dekker and Munday, concludes that ‘what looks like ... a strange series of lacunae, so odd that a disturbing conspiracy must be assumed to have taken place ... simply describes a normal series of life records’ (p. 64). Hadfield is absolutely right: we must not make judgments about what we know of Shakespeare’s education or, for that matter, his will, unless we compare that knowledge with the context of what is known of his contemporaries.

However, this sort of careful analysis which leads, for example, to the concluding remarks in Hadfield’s contribution that ‘early modern authors did not ever pretend to be other people’ (p. 72) is somewhat undermined by the ranting tone of the editors in statements such as these:

the anti-Shakespearians, whose cause is parasitic, need always to oppose something ... When anti-Shakespearians are labelled as conspiracy theorists, they see their accusers as part of that conspiracy (p. 227).

And so it would seem that literary theory is good, conspiracy theory bad.

The contribution by Kathleen E. McLuskie merits further discussion, not least because Professor McLuskie’s work is so highly regarded. She touches upon *Shakespeare in Love* (for more of the discussion of this film in the collection, see below), *Anonymous* and the petition “Declaration of Reasonable Doubt”, but her chapter is principally concerned with conspiracy theory, drawing extensively on David Aaronovitch’s *Voodoo Histories*. My difficulty is that the matter of the authorship of literary works is of a whole different order from debates on the Kennedy assassinations, 9/11 or the Hillsborough tragedy. These were events of great significance, and it is unsurprising that there have been many theories about who might be responsible for (or guilty of) these tragedies. The issue of who wrote these plays and poems involves no deaths, no crimes and no government cover-ups. On the one hand, McLuskie seems to acknowledge this, citing, for example, the work of Richard Dutton in charting the censorship of plays and demonstrating that there was no wholesale government intervention against the theatre in Shakespeare’s time. On the other, she notes

that the creation of a fictional life for Shakespeare is attractive even for scholars of the status of Stephen Greenblatt:

Evidence that the Earl of Worcester's Men and the Queen's Men were paid for performances in Stratford in the year that Shakespeare was five years old transmutes itself into an 'unspeakably thrilling' event in the imagination of the boy himself.
(p.172)

This, then, is a very powerful myth.

The dismissal of the Anti-Shakespearian university courses merits only a couple pages, whereas the destruction of the film *Anonymous* has a whole chapter by Douglas M. Lanier devoted to it, and the cause is taken up again in the contribution by Paul Edmondson. It is a simple task to discredit the authenticity of this film, and Lanier does the sort of effective job one would expect from him. He rightly points to one of the most egregious errors in the film: that 'it is *Richard III* that Oxford writes and has performed to support the Oxford rebellion, not *Richard II*, as the historical record indicates' (p. 219), and is careful to explain why this inaccuracy was inserted. In reading this section of the collection, I was taken back in time to 1999 and the first of the Lancastrian Shakespeare conferences hosted at the University of Lancaster. That conference led to the publication of two volumes of essays, one of which I reviewed for the journal *Literature and History*.² That conference came shortly after the release of another Shakespeare-related film, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and, although there was discussion of that film at the Lancaster conference, it was, in general, warmly received. Indeed, there were several delegates there with screenplays in their hands: I am not sure whether they would be classed as amateurs or independent scholars.

Shakespeare in Love is referred to in this collection too: indeed the cover of the book features a still from that film (and not one from *Anonymous*). Both films include fictional treatments of the origins of *Romeo and Juliet*, but the version in *Anonymous* attracts the

² I reviewed Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson, eds, *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) in *Literature and History*, Second series, Volume 14, Number 2 / Autumn 2005 pp 81-2.

greater opprobrium here, presumably because this fiction has Oxford as its author, whereas *Shakespeare in Love* at least attributes Shakespeare to Shakespeare. *Anonymous* did not do good business at the box office, was not written by Tom Stoppard and won no Oscars, but I believe *Shakespeare in Love* to be the more dangerous of the two films, simply because it is good and it is still being seen. In that overall positive context, its presentation of the genesis of *Romeo and Juliet* in the early play *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter* might just be believed.

The anti-Shakespearian petition gets a whole chapter, which consists for the most part in the anatomizing of its signatories. The actor Michael York is one of those ridiculed for the way he signs himself: 'Michael York's preface is signed 'Michael York, MA (Oxon), OBE' and he is even listed in the contents as 'Michael York, MA, OBE' (p. 204). Somehow, it is wrong for anti-Shakespearians to declare their qualifications, yet it is apparently acceptable for Edmondson and Wells to represent themselves on their ebook as 'Rev. Dr. Paul Edmondson & Prof. Stanley Wells, CBE'.

We learn quite early in the collection that it is "now an established orthodoxy ... that Shakespeare worked in collaboration with other writers" (p. 61), and, even earlier, that this was the hypothesis of Delia Bacon, the first anti-Shakespearian (p. 5). *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* is also a collaboration, but it is by no means clear to me that these collaborators were all aware of the unfolding plot of the work as a whole: that is just my own conspiracy theory. One contribution is not really relevant to the thesis of the book at all. Barbara Everett's chapter is full of interest but only tenuously connected with notions of anti-Shakespearianism. James Mardock and Eric Rasmussen produce an excellent argument for the plays having been written by someone well-versed in the ways of the theatre (and therefore not by an aristocrat without this intimate knowledge), but their contribution is rare, in that it is accessible and measured. Other contributions are less likely to be accessible to the general reader, even though the publishers describe the collection as 'authoritative, accessible and frequently entertaining'. Some contributors use odd terminology (for example, 'disintegrationist' on p. xi and 'biographicality' on p. 219); others, like MacDonald P. Jackson, employ difficult methodologies, such as stylometrics. I was intrigued by Jackson's chapter: his analysis demonstrated a cohesion in style among the works of the core Shakespeare canon which is not shared by works by Bacon, de Vere or Marlowe. However, this careful work did not justify the conclusion that 'William Shakespeare of Stratford was the author' (p. 110) because there is no other reference to Stratford in this chapter at all.

In the first chapter of this book, Graham Holderness describes Delia Bacon ‘inspired but in error’ (p. 12) and cites this quotation from James Shapiro:

Delia’s Bacon’s claim that the plays were politically radical was ... ahead of its time. So too, was her insistence that some of the plays should be read as collaborative. Had she limited her arguments to these points ... there is little doubt that ... she would be hailed today as a precursor of New Historicism.

In a parallel fashion, there are many acute observations in these essays: it is just a pity that they are yoked together in this anti-anti-Shakespearian diatribe.

This collection was not the product of a conference, and was therefore not winnowed through the process of debate. Dissenting voices are not allowed to be heard. Kathleen E. McLuskie begins her contribution with a quotation from ‘Our Disinformed Electorate’:

We humans tend to marry, date, befriend and talk with people who already agree with us, and hence are less likely to say, ‘Wait a minute — that’s just not true’. (p. 163)

Sadly, there is no contributor to this collection who does not agree with the orthodoxy: it would have been interesting to have seen just one anti-Shakespearian included here. For what it is worth, I repeat that I believe that the plays and poems conventionally attributed to William Shakespeare were written by him, sometimes in collaboration with other professional writers, during the time he spent in London. However, the amateur anti-Shakespearians are likely to win the debate in the popular imagination, not least because they have no other concerns except their obsession, whilst professional academics like Wells *et al* have other concerns to fill their lives.

Kathleen McLuskie rightly points to the power of ‘confusion between narrative resolution and a literal understanding of complex historical events’ (p. 168) and Alan H. Nelson to the perception that ‘Academic Shakespearians are like the spoil-sport Gower [in *Henry V*]’ (p. 45). But telling a story will often be more attractive and more popular than telling history. There is a popular culture figure called ‘Shakespeare’ and there will be tales spun about him for a popular audience: the anti-Shakespearian camp may be the equivalent of the Cavaliers in *1066 and All That* - Wrong but Wromantic. As a popular force, they may

continue to prove hard to defeat. Certainly, the counter-attack from the establishment needs to be much more even and to be better-edited.

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