

Shakespeare: The Concealed Poet
by Robert Detobel (assisted by KC Ligon)
Privately Published in Germany
reviewed by Bonner Miller Cutting

pening with an existential flourish, Robert Detobel quotes the final lines of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's depressing, barren landscape is the perfect metaphor for orthodox Shakespearean biography. The two actors remaining on the stage at the play's end agree to exit, but do not leave, presumably because they have nowhere to go -- which represents the predicament of mainstream Shakespearean biography and literary criticism, in which masses of scholars have trawled through the ancient documentary records in search of a detail or two which might support the incumbent bard. They do this in hope of finding what masses of scholars from previous generations may have missed.

It is ironic that traditional scholars have responded to the Shakespeare authorship question (and the accompanying demand for evidence) with a surge in biography; yet these same scholars refuse to admit that the authorship question even exists. Beckett himself would be hard pressed to wrestle with this Gordian knot. Nevertheless, in both the genres of biography and literary criticism, the academic community cultivates an impression that there is robust documentation to support their position. What is this documentation? Where can it be found? And what does it mean? These are the questions to which Detobel has devoted a full measure of time and expertise.

With an impressive command of the historical, legal and literary records, Detobel reveals the many lapses in the official story of William Shakespeare. It takes persistence in addition to knowledge of the period's history to mine the records as deeply as Detobel has in this book, and the process can be tedious. But the results are worthwhile as the documents, when studied carefully, have much to tell us.

Shakespeare the Concealed Poet is divided into three parts. It begins with an examination of the role of 16th century printers and delves into information from contemporary records, especially the Stationers Register. Detobel uses his command of this complex resource to evaluate the customary practices that controlled the

Elizabethan printing trade. As he progresses through this material, the traditional rationales that have been constructed to account for the publishing of the various plays and poems of Shakespeare fade away. His work on authorial rights, the Register entry of *The Merchant of Venice*, and the riddles of the publication of the first and second quarto editions of *Hamlet* should leave orthodox scholars in a state of panic.

In Part II he takes a renewed look at the well-trodden *Greenes Groatsworth of Wit*, and extracts a great deal from this pamphlet that others have overlooked. A close study of Robert Greene's work encompasses other Elizabethan writers with whom he has literary connections, and this, in turn, leads into Part III.

Assuming that an orthodox professor has the fortitude to read through Parts I and II, an even more compelling experience awaits him in Part III, where Detobel delves into the intricacies of the Harvey-Nashe controversy.

For readers unfamiliar about this literary war of words, it consisted largely of a vitriolic exchange between the high-profile Cambridge academician Gabriel Harvey and the notorious poet, playwright and essayist Thomas Nashe. Each writer sought to humiliate the other publicly through letters and essays published as pamphlets. Though the controversy attracted a great deal of interest at the time, it might appear to us today as an arcane literary quarrel — were it not for the fact that it serves as a linchpin in unraveling the Shakespeare mystery. Detobel's insightful investigation into this material, in and of itself, makes his book invaluable.

The significance of the Harvey/Nashe feud is quite simple: buried in the letters and pamphlets are references to someone who is "Shakespeare." As Detobel notes, "Shakespeare is strangely absent from the contretemps (or is he?)." In fact, references to a mysterious individual nicknamed *Apis Lapis* and also to a *Will Monox* are prominent in the exchanges, and these allusions point to a respected but *unnamed* poet whose identity is submerged — a "concealed poet." Detobel concludes (and other researchers concur) that the elusive *Apis Lapis* and *Will Monox* are literary personae of the 17th Earl of Oxford.

As Detobel systematically explores the historical context, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is "Shakespeare" who exerts the powerful yet invisible presence in the Harvey/Nashe quarrel. To make matters worse for orthodoxy, when the literary and personal associations of Harvey, Nashe and Greene are factored into the equation, it becomes self-evident that the feud which erupted in the early 1590s had its origins in 1580 with letters published by Harvey, including his vehement poetic satire on the Earl of Oxford's effete, Italianate manners. It all merges: "Shakespeare" and the "concealed poet" are one and the same, and none other than the Earl himself. Why didn't Harvey, Greene and Nashe just give us all a break and say so?

In closing, it must be stated that there are a few drawbacks to *Shakespeare the Concealed Poet*. One senses that there are, indeed, a few pieces of the puzzle that remain to be put together. Detobel is an accomplished writer and translator of scholarly works in German and French; even so, his narrative is difficult to follow in some places. Moreover, the wealth of detail in his research is a mixed blessing, and his brilliant observations are sometimes obscured by the abundance of facts that are too often loosely strung together. The information that Detobel has gleaned from the records is

valuable, but sometimes he doesn't organize it sufficiently to formulate conclusions.

In the translation of the German text into English, Detobel worked with the late KC Ligon, who died before the book was completed, leaving behind a manuscript still requiring clarification in certain places. Nonetheless, her gifted presence is felt in this book.

Given its detailed research, *Shakespeare: the Concealed Poet* is a text that will press the reader to revisit many issues, though it will be well worth the effort. All in all, to paraphrase Churchill's famous remark, the book brings the study of the Shakespeare authorship issue far beyond the end of the beginning.

Shakespeare: The Concealed Poet can be ordered for \$20 (plus shipping) through Hanno Wember of the Das Neue Shakespeare Gessellschaft in Germany at gesellschaft@shake-speare.de.