

disparaging footnote and two entries in his bibliography—the scholarly equivalent of biting the hand that feeds him.

Unlike Grosart, Barbour is neither a scholar nor a critic. He is an ideologue. His book is a proselytizing tract for the ideology now dominant in the English departments of the Republic—an ideology Thomas Nashe called, centuries ago, “Idiotisme.” Here’s Nashe addressing an Elizabethan version of Reid Barbour:

Should we (as you) borrowe all out of others, and gather nothing of our selves, our names should be baffuld on everie Booke-sellers Stall, and not a Chandlers Mustard-pot but would wipe his mouth with our wast paper. Newe Herrings, new, wee must crye, every time we make our selves publique, or else we shall bee christened with a hundred new tytles of Idiotisme.

Shakespeare and the Secret Service

The Shakespeare Conspiracy

by Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman. London, 1994

Reviewed by Patrick Buckridge. Professor of English at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. Dr. Buckridge is author of The Scandalous Penton: A Biography of Brian Penton (Brisbane, 1994).

This book is targeted at a general readership to whom Shakespeare is not much more than a name but who can be intrigued by a nice bit of detective work designed to show that ‘the Bard’ was a spy. The authors are not literature professors but part-time media studies lecturers and journalists with a background of working on “unsolved mysteries,” the most recent being the true identity of King Arthur.

The book has a number of irritating features: careless factual errors and poor proofreading are two, and the lengthy point by point summaries at the end of each of the sixteen chapters is another. The most irritating feature of all, however, is that the book actually undermines its own credibility by its insistence - after a show of judicious deliberation over the major alternatives (Bacon, Derby, Oxford and Marlowe) - that William Shakespeare of Stratford was indeed the author of the plays.

Readers with an Oxfordian perspective might be interested to know the grounds on which Phillips and Keatman are able to dismiss the Oxford claim in six pages. First of all, there’s the double mention in Meres’ *Palladis Tamia*: if Meres referred to both Oxford and Shakespeare as playwrights, then ‘it seems

safe to assume that Meres himself did not believe that Shakespeare and Oxford were the same author'. (Not entirely safe, I wouldn't have thought; and we're not told exactly how it would damage the Oxford case even if it were.) The biographical parallels, we are told in a ludicrous misrepresentation, "consist of little more than identifying certain characters in the plays with Oxford's relatives, usually because the name sounds similar" (70).

The other grounds for dismissal are even weaker, consisting of arbitrary assertions about the kind and degree of "patriotism" in Shakespeare's plays, the supposedly incommensurable quality of Oxford's known poems with Shakespeare's plays, and the deferential tone of the dedications to Southampton in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. (The authors don't suggest what other kind of tone might be appropriate in a dedication - haughty, perhaps? It would make interesting reading!) This last argument is said to be so powerful that it 'eliminates Oxford as the author of the Shakespeare plays'.

The more interesting question is whether there is an otherwise credible case here to be undermined. I believe there is. Some of the evidence Phillips and Keatman have come up with really does suggest that William Shakespeare was involved in government secret service activities from the time of Marlowe's death in 1593 until well into the first decade of the new century. The fact that they have saddled themselves with the burden of showing that the man wrote great plays and poetry as well means that this core of real plausibility in their case is needlessly compromised and obscured.

The 'trail of evidence' they follow to their startling conclusions is far from unbroken; indeed the unprejudiced wayfarer would be hard put to discern a trail at all much of the time. But there are interesting moments. The authors associate Shakespeare with the circle of so-called 'atheists' who met under Sir Walter Raleigh's auspices in the early 1590s - conceivably the 'School of Night' alluded to in *Love's Labour's Lost*. There is no evidence for this association - Shakespeare's name is not mentioned in any of the several contemporary references to the circle. But the closeness of such doings (and of the government agents who spied on them) to the world of the theatre in these years serves to sketch a rather broader and less salubrious range of employment opportunities for the newly arrived Shakespeare than is commonly recognised. Phillips and Keatman may, in other words, have hit upon a much better motive for Shakespeare's coming to London in the first place than his supposedly overwhelming desire to become a common player. He may have had in mind the much more adventurous and lucrative prospect of becoming a spy or functionary in the vast surveillance network being actively recruited at this time by Burghley and Thomas Walsingham. Phillips and Keatman may even have identified the recruiter in Richard Field, the printer and publisher of *Venus and Adonis*, originally from Stratford and undoubtedly a boyhood acquaintance of

Shakespeare's, whom Phillips and Keatman argue on good grounds was almost certainly the 'stationer in Paul's Churchyard' mentioned by Thomas Kyd during his interrogation by the Privy Council concerning Marlowe's activities in 1593.

Where does speculation like this take us? It gives us a better explanation of the 1596 writ of attachment taken out against Shakespeare. In November 1596 it was recorded on the rolls of the King's Bench in London that one William Wayte craved sureties of the peace against 'William Shakspeare' and three others 'for fear of death and so forth'. The murders of Marlowe and, in all probability, of Lord Strange in 1593/94, both within days of testifying to the Privy Council, prove that the denizens of this murky world played for keeps. Why Wayte feared for his life we don't know; but we know that he did, and that it was William Shakespeare, among others, who he feared might kill him.

Wayte's other appearance (in surname only, so the identification is not certain) is as co-recipient of a payment of £15 in March 1596 from the Chamber Treasurer for 'messages' conveyed from the Netherlands to the Secretary of State. The other recipient is named as 'Hall', who may well be the 'Will Hall' to whom a payment of £10 was made in June 1592 for unspecified services to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Pursuivant, Anthony Munday. Munday was a very active spy for Cecil and Walsingham, personally responsible for the arrest and execution of some dozen Catholic priests, including Edmund Campion, in the course of the 1580s. By the 1590s his notoriety was such that he had begun to use proxies, and it is likely that Hall's services were of that kind. William Hall makes a few other appearances during this period, all indicative of secret service connections and functions.

Phillips and Keatman argue that William Hall was William Shakespeare, and it does seem possible. Code names were standard practice in the network, probably used merely as account names for recording payments rather than as genuine double identities. Anthony Munday's code name was George Grimes, and there are neighbourhood and family reasons why William Hall might have occurred to Shakespeare as a suitable *alias*. Even if this is true it doesn't tell us precisely why William Wayte feared for his life, but it certainly suggests that in the 'Spy vs. Spy' atmosphere prevailing in London at this time, he may well have had good reason to, and have had his eye on the right man.

The other possible Hall connection, of course, is with the publication of the Sonnets. The identification of 'Mr W.H.' with William Hall has been suggested before, but never as a Shakespeare code name. Here again, some winnowing of the arguments is necessary. Phillips and Keatman labour mightily to prove what is plainly impossible, namely that the 'onlie begetter' of Thomas Thorpe's famous Dedication is the same as 'our ever-living poet' whose blessings are invoked. If we charitably ignore that syntactically and logically absurd

proposition, their argument for the W.H./William Hall identification is quite strong, bolstered as it is by a lightly cryptographic case for joining the H to the next word, 'all', in the third line of the Dedication. They also argue cogently against both Henry Wriothesley and William Herbert as the dedicatee by pointing out the quite serious indecorum that would be involved in the use of 'Mr' for either of the earls, especially by a publisher.

What this suggests is the possibility that Shakespeare of Stratford had something to do with the posthumous publication of the sonnets, some crucial facilitating role that would warrant the figurative function of 'begetter'. From an Oxfordian viewpoint, that possibility is consistent with the implication of a continuing involvement in the De Vere family affairs of someone referred to as 'my dombe man' by the Countess of Oxford when naming him as a beneficiary in her will. Further investigation along this line would seem to be warranted.

Phillips and Keatman are guilty of one more piece of silliness that deserves to be mentioned before coming to the genuinely valuable contribution they make. True to their self-imposed mission to reveal Shakespeare as the great dramatist, they speculate, with no documentary basis, that he had free access to the Earl of Northumberland's large library at Petworth House in Sussex. This solves the problem of there being no evidence or likelihood that he received any education at all in Stratford, let alone an education sufficient to write the plays. In a scenario that reminds me irresistibly of Superman at work in the Metropolis City Library, Shakespeare is envisaged devouring the contents of Henry Percy's two thousand-odd books in the weeks when he wasn't rehearsing, spying, running secret errands to the Continent, and writing the early plays for which he presumably didn't need an education.

And so to the exciting conclusion. One of the great casualties of James's accession to the throne in 1603 was Sir Walter Raleigh. Robert Cecil, Burghley's son and successor as Secretary of State, had lost no time in turning the King against his father's old rival. In that same year Raleigh was implicated with Lord Cobham and others in the Bye Plot to assassinate James and his sons and replace him on the throne with his seven-year-old daughter, the Princess Elizabeth. Raleigh was tried, convicted (probably justly) and sent to the Tower for thirteen years. The book presents a convincing inference from a range of documents that the informant who brought the plot to the notice of Cecil was none other than William Hall (i.e. William Shakespeare).

If this was the case, and if Raleigh knew about it, his attitude towards the retired Stratford landowner when he emerged in 1616 would hardly have been neutral. Shakespeare made his will - second best bed, illiterate signatures, no books and all - just six days after Raleigh's release from the Tower. One month later Shakespeare was dead after a sudden and violent attack suggestive of

poisoning, and attributed by the local vicar to food or drink taken the previous evening. The circumstances point to the strong possibility that he was murdered at the instigation of Raleigh, and that he knew he was in danger as soon as Raleigh walked free. Here is how the authors sum up their case:

The evidence for William Hall being Shakespeare is compelling, the evidence for Hall betraying the Bye plot is overwhelming, and that Raleigh was involved in the Bye Plot is beyond reasonable doubt [though why this is relevant is not clear - he did the time anyway]. After thirteen years Raleigh is released from prison. Within only a few weeks the man most likely to have caused his incarceration dies, seemingly from some form of poisoning. (196)

They embellish their picture of Shakespeare's final years with a bizarre and unfounded theory that 'the playwright' burnt his writing hand and suffered facial disfigurement in a desperate but unsuccessful attempt to rescue his original manuscripts from the Globe when it burnt down in 1613. Thus, in one fell swoop, they purport to explain his bad handwriting (which is not noticeably worse in the will than in the other three signed documents, incidentally); his low (actually non-existent) profile as a poet or theatrical identity in Stratford - he became depressed and reclusive because of his deformity and disability; the fact that there are no Shakespeare manuscripts (see Globe fire above); the lack of any authenticated contemporary portraits - he destroyed them all (see depression and deformity); *and* Ben Jonson's lines about Droeshout's portrait 'out-doing the life' in his eulogy for the First Folio.

Clearly this is a book to be read with much more than a grain of salt. But books, like the curate's egg, can be good in parts. If William Shakespeare really was a secret agent, this is important news not only for Stratfordians (who will now have to fit yet another activity into their candidate's already overcrowded ten years in the metropolis), but also for Oxfordians who have understandably tended to characterise Shakespeare as a person of no inherent interest, an uneducated buffoon who mooched around the London theatres for a few years, had a lucky break, then took the money and ran.

The Shakespeare that emerges from this book is a more unusual and interesting person than the Shakespeare of Looney and Ogburn, a risk-taking, self-motivated, self-promoting man of action - ruthless, amoral and violent, more like Webster's Bosola than like any Shakespearean character I can think of (except perhaps Edmund). This may or may not be how others saw him. Clearly if Charlton Ogburn Jr. is right about 'William' in *As You Like It*, it is not quite how Oxford saw him; and Jonson's Sogliardo in *Every Man Out of His Humour* - generally accepted as a satiric caricature of the Stratford man in

at least the coat-of-arms scene (III, i) - projects a similar image of a pretentious but harmless bumpkin. (Has it been noted before that Sogliardo's coat-of-arms features 'a boar without a head, rampant'? The boar, of course, was Edward De Vere's family emblem, and Sogliardo's modifications seem to express very well the probable relationship between Shakespeare and Oxford.) Oxford and Jonson both might have been deceived.

None of this makes him any more likely to have written the plays, and his interest for those who don't believe he did might seem to be limited by that. It was, after all, an age of intelligence agents and Machiavels, in the world as well as on the stage; in himself the man was hardly unique. But there are, I believe, some important implications for the Oxford authorship claim in the possibilities this book brings to light. One is that, besides the reasons that may have existed for *divesting* Oxford of his plays - those reasons of class and family propriety usually mentioned in this context - there may also have been secret political reasons for *investing* Shakespeare with them.

For reasons I have not fully fathomed, Cecil and the Walsinghams all seem to have liked using poets and playwrights as agents for their secret European forays. Perhaps it afforded a useful alibi for frequent travelling abroad - 'William Hall' seems to have travelled to at least the Netherlands, Denmark and Prague in the course of his secret service career. It would no doubt have been unusual for a man with little or no education to find a place in such an apparatus, but it is remarkable what an overbearing personality and large amounts of nerve can achieve. And perhaps it was precisely Will Shakespeare's loud promoting of himself as enough of an all-round theatre person ('an absolute *Johannes factotum*') to pass muster in Europe that Henry Chettle reacted to so angrily in 1592 in his famous (and normally *misattributed*) pamphlet *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*. Perhaps the 'upstart crow' had been selling himself not primarily as an actor, let alone as a true playwright, but as a serviceable simulacrum of both, able to acquit himself in more lucrative and adventurous spheres abroad.

The further implication for the Oxford claim has to do with the vexed question of why the false attribution remained secret - or at the very least unannounced - after Oxford's death, and even reaffirmed (albeit equivocally in places) by the First Folio. Again, it is a matter of supplementing the 'Oxford-side' reasons which are usually offered, and which may well have their own validity: the embarrassment or resentment of those whose families may have been satirised in the 1580s, the snobbery of the Cecils, the merely unmentioned (rather than unmentionable) status of the secret. The 'Shakespeare-side' reasons for continued silence may well have been more important. What if, for example, the government felt it was important, for diplomatic and security reasons related to the activities of Shakespeare/Hall in the 1590s and early 1600s, to maintain the fiction of a commoner-playwright called Shakespeare

resident in London, but never actually available for interview or inspection?

Oxford's own connections with the secret service also remain to be thoroughly explored. His role in the propaganda department of the campaign against Spain has been powerfully argued by the B.M. Wards and Charlton Ogburn, and there is likely to have been some coordination with the government's security effort. Anthony Munday, the 'superspy' of the service, was after all Oxford's secretary for a time.

Some of this is rank speculation, admittedly, but speculation is justified if it opens up new paths for investigation, confirmation and disconfirmation. *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*, for all its faults - and they are legion - raises even more fascinating questions and possibilities than its authors realise.