

Shakespeare the Man

Reviewed by Sky Gilbert

Shakespeare the Man: New Decipherings. Edited by R.W. Desai. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014. 308 pages.

Shakespeare the Man is a collection of twelve essays on various topics that attempt to relate the life of the Stratford man to Shakespeare's plays. Unfortunately, these essays are of very little value. Yet the book has already been accepted by the Stratfordian establishment. The only review of *Shakespeare The Man* available at time of writing was from *Choice Magazine*, an associate publishing division of the Association of College and Research Libraries, which states: "The conjectures and religious evidence are well worth reading. Recommended. Graduate students, researchers, faculty." By blithely placing 'conjecture' and 'religious evidence' together, this review conflates fact and fiction. Desai also does this in his introduction: "the essays in this collection may be regarded as forays of informed speculation, or intuitive recreation" (ix).

Now, Donald Trump may have recently invented 'alternative facts,' but there's still no excuse for an academic publication – recommended to university professors and students alike – that treats 'information' and 'recreation' as synonyms. In point of fact, the ideas in this book are mostly wild, unsubstantiated, irrelevant conjecture. However, an analysis of *Shakespeare the Man* does offer valuable insight on how not to analyze Shakespeare's work. And it provides a useful warning to Oxfordians – or anyone interested in Shakespeare and the authorship question.

Desai in the introductory essay equates the essays in *Shakespeare the Man* with New Historicism:

Accordingly, while this collection of essays does take cognizance of striking linkages between the literature and the art, these are embedded within the matrix of what may be seen as a wider background, thus employing a New Historicism methodology that includes the circumstance that most probably conditioned his writing as well as his personal life. (xx)

Unfortunately Desai does not fully understand New Historicism. In *Renaissance*

Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt concisely explains the New Historicism methodology saying that his work on early modern authors began when he attempted

to analyze the choices they made in representing themselves and fashioning their characters . . . But as my work progressed, I perceived that fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions – family, religion state – were inexplicably intertwined.” (256)

The process here is clear. Greenblatt begins with the writer and analyzes, let’s say, a play by Marlowe, but later fans out to examine early modern cultural attitudes and institutions, and their effects on the work. The question often asked about New Historicism is: why bother to put the work in historical context at all? Why not concentrate on the text? Well, consider the oft-heard critique of Shakespeare’s work that it is ‘sexist.’ By present-day standards it certainly is. But in the context of his time Shakespeare forged quite a revolutionary pro-female stance. Shakespeare’s *Venus* (of *Venus and Adonis*) is singular for her time as an aggressive, desiring woman who is nevertheless sympathetic. And *Lucrece* (in Shakespeare’s poem of the same name) is arguably the first literary instance of a discussion of rape from a woman’s point of view. Thus New Historicism, when properly employed, helps us examine plays from the early modern period more clearly, by placing them in context.

However, the essays in *Shakespeare the Man* – instead of employing New Historicism – reverse the technique. They do not begin with the text and then fan out to the culture, instead they begin with the alleged facts of the life of the man from Stratford, and attempt to interpret Shakespeare’s work. Needless to say, this is not an effective scholarly method; it requires that they bend the work out of shape to fit the fact of the Stratford man’s life. I consider myself an Oxfordian, but I would never use the facts of Edward de Vere’s life – as fascinating as their connection to Shakespeare’s work might be – as a method of interpreting the plays. *Shakespeare the Man* harbours a perhaps not-so-hidden agenda, which is to find proof in the plays that the author is a small-time businessman from Stratford – a person who, depressed by the death of his son later in life, abandoned the extravagant trappings and false disguises of theatre, to find something deeper, a Lutheran redemption, because he was firmly Christian.

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Of course confirmed facts about the life of the man from Stratford are few. We know he was a pecunious and litigious businessman, that he married an older woman, that he had three children (one of whom, Hamnet, died young), and that his father unsuccessfully pursued a family crest which the man from Stratford was able, finally, to secure. We also know that a man named Shakespeare may have been involved in various acting companies in London, as he was paid as an actor in small parts.

In “But I Have Within that Passeth Show: Shakespeare’s Ambivalence towards His Profession” Desai notes records show that Shakespeare the actor played only small parts (Adam and the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, later in life). The thrust of Desai’s thesis is that after the death of his son Hamnet, the man from Stratford lost interest in the theatre. This is why he suggests that the last tragedies are lacklustre, compared to *Hamlet* – “the tragic figures who come after Hamlet – Othello, Lear Antony, Cleopatra, Lear, Timon, Coriolanus – are, when compared to Hamlet, simple-minded, non-intellectual, non-complex characters” (103). This is simply not true. These tragic characters are incredibly introspective and complex. Desai also says “evidence from the Sonnets of Shakespeare’s distaste for his profession has, of course, been noted in Shakespearean criticism, but as far as I am aware, the presence of such an attitude in Hamlet has never been suggested” (101). For someone who claims to be familiar with New Historicism, this is a perplexing statement. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt speaks extensively about the early modern distrust of disguise and representation, a distrust that found its way not only into early modern anti-theatricalist writers like Stephen Gosson but into early modern plays as well. Shakespeare’s work, like the work of many of his contemporaries, is replete with suspicion about the dangers of theatre, art and representation. Desai is not the first to notice this, and these views in *Hamlet* certainly don’t represent a change in Shakespeare’s attitudes. Indeed, Shakespeare’s love/hate relationship with beauty, poetry, art, disguise and representation is a consistent theme that pervades all his work.

In “Outbraving Luther: Shakespeare’s Final Evolution through the Tragedies to the Last Plays” John O’Meara also asserts here was a change in Shakespeare’s outlook late in life which meant that Shakespeare “would finally abandon writing comedies (there would be no more comedies after *Twelfth Night*)” (158). This point is more than debatable. Leaving aside the vexed issue of dating the plays, it could easily be argued that the late romances are significantly comic. At any rate, O’Meara attributes what he sees as Shakespeare’s lack of interest in comedy late in life to a profound disillusionment related to his discovery of Martin Luther. Citing (but not detailing) the many references to Martin Luther in *Hamlet*, O’Meara goes on to say of Shakespeare, that “because of the remarkable transformation he does go through, he could not have remained a tragic skeptic” (160). According to Desai, his discovery of Luther caused Shakespeare to fully understand the baseness of human sexuality: “It was easy to see, at the same time, how Luther’s emphasis on our ineradicable

human depravity would absorb a large part of the humanity of that era tragically, and from *Hamlet* onwards, that view, it would seem, came to absorb Shakespeare tragically” (162). O’Meara proceeds further to contend that Shakespeare found an unconventional way to escape this hopelessness, as his later plays show that “by no obvious route at all, does Shakespeare imagine his way beyond this point of utter hopelessness” (167). O’Meara believes Shakespeare’s later plays demonstrate redemption through sacrifice. But whether or not one believes the late tragedies offer redemption or skepticism, it’s difficult to prove that Shakespeare made a progressive inner emotional movement from the former to the latter later in life (due to Luther, or not).

This idea about Shakespeare as a kind of ‘late Lutheran’ is consistent with the commitment in *Shakespeare The Man* to paint a picture of a very Christian bard. Whether ultimately Shakespeare was Catholic or Protestant is left to the reader to decide. The essays in *Shakespeare the Man* go to great lengths to prove Shakespeare’s Christian leanings. Suhajit Sen Gupta in “Look in the Calendar” argues, as does Foker in the final essay, that Shakespeare set his plays in pagan environments not because he himself was pagan, but in order to write in code about the controversial enmity between Catholics and Protestants that so dominated the era. Thus Calpurnia’s visions in *Julius Caesar* – which are treated with some skepticism by other characters in the play – are really about Catholic visionaries in early modern England who were treated with skepticism by Puritans. Gupta’s theory is highly improbable. For if we place the paganism in *Julius Caesar* in the context of the many pagan settings, images, metaphors and ideas that crowd Shakespeare’s work, it seems unlikely that this kind of Christian proselytizing is the only explanation for Calpurnia’s nightmares. Indeed a close examination of Shakespeare’s plays reveals that the author employs fairies and witches and other supernatural beings with alarming consistency – at least from a modern Christian perspective. And never is there a sense that Shakespeare is challenging the presence of these pagan beings because of his Christian beliefs. More significantly, Shakespeare’s work is free of Christian didacticism which pervades the work of his preaching peers, Sidney and Spenser. If anything Shakespeare’s obsession with love and beauty reveals a knowledge of, and perhaps interest in, neoplatonism.

But even the ludicrousness of this analysis is surpassed by several bizarre attempts in *Shakespeare the Man* to articulate a fundamental relationship between the mundane world of business and the aesthetic flowering of a young artist. In the second essay, Joseph Candido paints a picture of Shakespeare as a ‘Willy Loman-esque’ figure. He says “the vibrant world of monetary exchange was one, moreover to which the young William Shakespeare was unusually close” (18). Candido sees the world of finance as melodramatic or nearly tragic. Apparently not only do “trade, commerce and the like manifest themselves in Shakespeare’s plays” but the sad tale of the man from Stratford’s father’s disappointment at not acquiring a family coat of arms

became, for Shakespeare, the inspiration for the bard's great tragedies.

The third essay continues this train of thought. R.S. White is confused by the *Sonnets*. He is particularly perplexed by their lack of straightforward narrative, which he proposes was not likely to have been intentional. White's theory is that Shakespeare – like any enterprising entrepreneur during the deadly plague years, apparently – was driven to write a “successful long prose romance with embedded songs, sonnets, elegies, complaints, and other poems which would hit the fashion and make some money [so] . . . he devised a story linking several fictional characters” (52). Alas, according to White, he was never able to finish this project, which is why the sonnets don't make sense. The ever-mysterious sonnets, that have hypnotized us for four centuries – explained away as a money-making scheme that didn't quite work out? I suppose there have been less rewarding sonnet theories, but it's difficult to think of one.

However there are two essays in this book which make particularly ridiculous assumptions based on extremely scanty evidence and convoluted imaginings. They deserve note because of their implications for Shakespeare scholarship. Shormistha Panja in ““Those lips which loves own hand did make”: Anne Hathaway and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*” offers a psychoanalytical portrait of the Stratford man, suggesting that *Venus and Adonis* – in which an older woman attempts to seduce a young man – was likely inspired by the man from Stratford's marriage to the older Anne Hathaway. And in another essay “Shakespeare's Churches” Lisa Hopkins observes that when the Stratford man was living in London, he stayed with a family named Mountjoy, whose home was near St. Olaf's church on Silver Street. Hopkins reveals that the character of Hamlet may be based on a real person named Anlaf Cuaran – also known as Olaf. He concludes that the character of Hamlet was named after St. Olaf's church – which the man from Stratford must have passed every day.

The level of scholarship in these two essays is particularly low. Their argument is something akin to ‘Of course there is a God. I mean, can you actually prove there isn't?’ Certainly, it is possible that if in fact that man from Stratford was Shakespeare, then Anne Hathaway could have been the inspiration for Venus in *Venus and Adonis*. And it is certainly possible, again that if the man from Stratford was Shakespeare that he might have decided to name Hamlet after a church in London that was familiar to him. Yes, of course all this is possible. But how can it ever be proved? And much more significantly, what is accomplished by this kind of conjecture? At best, it turns us away from the text. Instead of looking at what Shakespeare actually wrote, we end up twisting and bending the work to make it fit his imaginary life. It's possible that Oxfordians have spurred this desperate speculation. After all, it is so terribly easy for Oxfordians to find links between Edward de Vere's life and Shakespeare's work. Might this have sent Stratfordians into a panic, desperate to, at all costs, uncover even a casual link between the life of the man from Stratford and the writings of William Shakespeare?

The final essay (also the longest essay in the book) is “Was Shakespeare a ‘Church Papist’ or a Prayer Book Anglican?” by Charles R. Foker. It contains valuable historical facts concerning material manifestations of the hostility between Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans in early modern England. Foker resists speculation on Shakespeare’s religious beliefs or his personal life. He spends some time detailing the strategies employed by Catholics to practice their faith in early modern England. He also makes it clear that the conflict between Puritans and Anglicans had much to do with rituals – the performance – of religion. Anglicans were nostalgic for the more theatrical aspects of religion, and Puritans were opposed to a religion that was theatrical. This tension over the question of external beauty versus internal virtue, is one of most persistent themes in Shakespeare’s work.

The fifth essay in *Shakespeare the Man* is Gupta’s “Look in the Calendar: *Julius Caesar* and Shakespeare’s Cultural-political Moment.” Gupta dismisses the post-structuralist theory commonly referred to as death of the author. Gupta suggests that if one deems the author irrelevant then the work will have “no determinate meaning” (86). But stripping the work of meaning is not the purpose of the death of the author theory. Foucault, for instance, speaks of the author function to remind us that by identifying the author we may limit interpretation. This is certainly true for *Shakespeare the Man* – which seriously limits the possibilities for interpretation by focusing only on the aspects of Shakespeare’s work that seem related to the life of the man from Stratford. Barthes (in his ‘death of the author’ theory) would have us open ourselves to a very different experience – where there are many possibilities for understanding, so that readers become (in a sense) authors themselves. This is very relevant to Shakespeare, whose polysemous word usage invites so many different interpretations.

Like the Shakespeare literary establishment, *Shakespeare the Man* ignores so much, at its peril. Indeed, what began as the concerted Stratfordian strategy to ignore Edward de Vere, has now reached its sad apotheosis in a deliberate attempt to ignore Shakespeare’s work itself.

Works Cited

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