

# The Quest for the Historical Shakspere

Reviewed by Warren Hope

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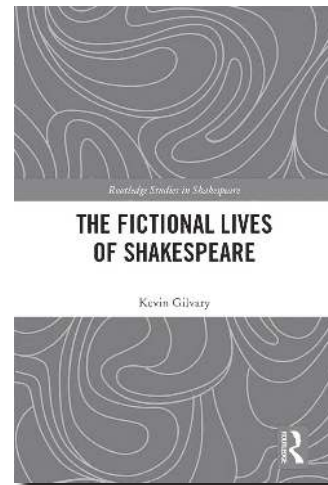
The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare. By Kevin Gilvary. New York and London: Routledge, 2018 260 pages, (hardcover \$149.95, Kindle \$142.45)

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Readers should be warned not to turn to this book with the expectation that they will find in it a contribution to the Shakespeare authorship question. On the contrary, the author at the very outset, in a page headed “Acknowledgements,” provides a note that reads: “Throughout this study, I have accepted the traditional attribution of the plays and works to William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, endeavoring to show that no biography of his life is possible. The question of authorship is entirely separate and any reader who wishes to pursue this interest might usefully begin with *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, Eds. Stanley Wells & Paul Edmondson (2013) and *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?* Eds. John Shahan & Alexander Waugh (2013).”

This raising and setting aside of the authorship question gives the book an odd feel from the very beginning. The book constitutes an attack on the fakery of the academic world with regard to the writing of Shakespearean biography while wanting to be a part of that dreadful trade, to use Shakespeare’s phrase from *King Lear*. While the attack is thorough, it is also overly respectful and tactful. What might have been an effective polemic or a hilarious send up by an anti-Stratfordian has become another volume of Shakespearean studies to fall from the press and land on the shelves of university and college libraries.

As a result, the book takes an approach that might best be described as academic. It starts with a consideration of the Western tradition of biographical writing in general and then becomes more and more specific. It considers William of Stratford’s biographical records, the myths that have



grown up associated with him, the gaps in the life, a survey of the writing of Shakespearean lives, establishing Samuel Schoenbaum as a turning point in the academic approach to Shakespearean biography, and a consideration of two inventions—Southampton as patron and Ben Jonson as rival. The book concludes with a brief summary of findings and recommendations—the most important and far-reaching of which is the recommendation that those who wish to write a life of the Stratford man as the author of the plays and poems should use historical fiction. The book's main thesis is that ALL the traditional biographies of Shakespeare are in fact fiction. The author even makes the point that academics choose not to describe their work as historical fiction because biography has more “prestige.” What this suggests is that dishonesty is the path to prestige among what passes in our time for Shakespeare scholars.

There can be no question in the mind of anyone who reads this book that the author makes his case in a definitive way. He shows that no one for the longest time took any interest in Shakespeare and once they did found anecdotes that could not be verified. He shows that the best of the earliest Shakespeare scholars—Edmund Malone—recognized that it was virtually impossible to determine the order and dates of composition of the plays and, in the end, gave up his desire to write a biography of Shakespeare. He shows that the first real attempt to write a life of Shakespeare did not come until 1843—more than two hundred years after the death of the Stratford man.

What Kevin Gilvary does not point out because of his stance on the authorship question is that between this life by Charles Knight and the next by Sir Sidney Lee, Delia Bacon's work appeared, announcing that there were in fact two Shakespeares in the literature—the one in the biographical record and the other the author of the plays and poems as described by literary critics. It is the attempt to pretend that these two Shakespeares are in fact one and the same person that has bedeviled Shakespearean biography ever since. All the faults Gilvary pursues like a terrier cry out for explanation, but he offers none and I suspect that is because he wishes or needs to avoid the authorship question.

J. Thomas Looney argued that his identification of the Earl of Oxford as “William Shakespeare” meant that there needs to be a re-evaluation of the lives and reputations of two men—Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, and

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William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. My guess is that Looney could not have imagined that almost a century after he published his book a university press would publish a life of the Earl of Oxford (titled *Monstrous Adversary*) by a university professor that took for its inspiration and title an attack on Oxford by a traitor to the Crown and a paid agent of Spain--or that more lives of the Stratford man as the author of Shakespeare's plays and poems would continue to appear despite the fact that nothing new has been learned about him.

Worse, Looney could not have guessed that this veritable pollution of the academic environment would be caused in part by his theory and the growing number of adherents it has attracted. Alan Nelson at least openly stated that his biographical attack on Oxford was an attempt to undermine the case for Oxford as Shakespeare. The professors who palm off their works of historical fiction as biographies do not admit they do so to prop up the weak case for William of Stratford, but that is no doubt at least part of their motivation. Gilvary comes close to suggesting as much in his oblique way by quoting Sir Edmund Chambers at the very end of his book—"after all the careful scrutiny of clues and all the patient balancing of possibilities [regarding Shakespeare], the last word of self-respecting scholarship must be that of nescience."

But we must settle for "nescience" only if we insist on accepting the traditional attribution of the plays and poems to William Shakspeare. It should be possible to write a biography of the Stratford citizen based on the documents that would show the life of someone who was born in a rural village in the age of Elizabeth, married, produced offspring, tried to make his way in the world, and died in his hometown. There would of course be gaps in this story, but we need not elevate them to "the lost years" as if we were discussing the life of Jesus as depicted in the gospels. Lives have gaps in them and the lives of people of little interest who died four hundred years ago will no doubt remain something of a puzzle to us. What makes the so-called Shakespeare Industry so monstrous is its attempt to thrust the reputation of Shakespeare on Will Shakspeare's unwilling head.

It must be said that if, from my point of view, the biggest fault with this book is its position on the authorship question, it has numerous other faults. Let me give some examples.

Too often, typographical errors occur when Gilvary wishes to make a point. For instance, in his criticism of Samuel Schoenbaum on page 117, he objects to the fictional tone Schoenbaum takes when he writes of Shakespeare, "He died in rainy April." Gilvary's comment reads, "Finally, the mention of rain seems may be a literary reference to Chaucer or T.S. Eliot, but is not

only irrelevant to a historical review.” The author or an editor or a proof-reader certainly should have decided between “seems to be” and “may be” and deleted the “not” to make the irrelevance of the weather clear. Twice while writing about John Aubrey, Gilvary inserts the name “Fuller,” another early collector of Shakespearean anecdotes, for that of Aubrey. On page 56 he writes, “Fuller states that ‘His father was a Butcher....’ ” On page 58 he writes, “Altick dismisses Fuller’s claims as ‘porous assertions’ comparing them to other dubious claims that Francis Bacon died after contracting a cold while deep-freezing a fowl, and that Ben Jonson killed Marlowe on Bunhill ‘comeing from the Green-curtain play-house.’ Schoenbaum makes some use of Aubrey’s anecdotes even though he states that they ‘belong not to the biographical record proper but to the mythos.’ ” Finally, Gilvary quotes the Welsh psychoanalyst Ernest Jones in his text on page 111, but refers to him as Emrys Jones—surely a Freudian slip—in the footnote on page 114. Jones regains his proper first name in the bibliography, but disappears completely from the index.

Errors of this kind notwithstanding, Kevin Gilvary no doubt states the truth in the first sentence of his Acknowledgements, “This book is the outcome of many years of study, which resulted in my doctorate being awarded at Brunel University London in 2015.” I only wish he would have acknowledged the importance of the authorship question to his subject and taken more care with the preparation of his text.



