

INTRODUCTION: ON PROVIDENCE, HERMENEUTICS AND HISTORY

Shakespeare has always been a notoriously difficult writer for many readers. Consequently, the history of dissent regarding the authorship of his works implies an intriguing question which should not go unconsidered at this juncture in critical history: is it possible that the greatest obstacle to reading Shakespeare with appreciation is the obfuscatory veil imposed upon the text by the traditional view of the Stratford grain merchant as author, and the habitual silencing of rational questions of students with fundamentalist mantras like "incomprehensible genius?"

A history of Shakespearean scholarship reveals that Shakespeare's "personality" has been out of focus since long before it became fashionable to dilate on this fact in critical jargon. No conscientious reader can fail to be impressed by the duration and the extent of the problem (please see appendix M for details). An effective rule of thumb is: the more the Shakespeare critic trades in biography, the less he teaches about the Shakespearean oeuvre as a literary experience. The great works of criticism - one thinks for example of Harold Goddard's *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (1951) or the many illuminating essays of G. Wilson Knight or John Dover Wilson - dispense with biography as an impediment to literary understanding, and concentrate on analysis of the plays.

"Shakespeare" is consequently a text without a body - and the resulting absence of coherence is, naturally, disorienting. Active readers spontaneously employ the figure of the author as a strategy for making sense out of a text. As Hermann Melville writes in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), thinking of both Hawthorne and Shakespeare,

No man can read a fine author, and relish him to his very bones, while he reads, without subsequently fancying to himself some ideal image of the man and his mind. And if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture.

(249)

In recent decades a florescence of "theory" has substituted for open discussion of the authorship question invoked in Melville's essay. Since publication of *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984), Shakespearean studies has circumnavigated the issue of authorship, avoiding the actual historical problems raised in centuries of doubt about the bona fides of the official story of Shakespeare's identity.

Rather than admit the existence of the Shakespeare question, leading scholars have instead attempted to write the concept of authorship out of the lexicon of literary criticism, or they have waxed eloquent on the metaphysical omnipresence of the Bard, equating a pseudonym with a God. Such trends to substitute "theory" for discourse, critiqued with articulate vigor by Brian Vickers in *Appropriating Shakespeare* (1993), have allowed a temporary escape clause for a discipline otherwise in crisis.

Of course it is an elementary fallacy to treat any given line of a play as an unproblematic reflection of the author's own belief or direct manifestation of his personality. But this scarcely invalidates a biographical approach to criticism: a glance at any current issue of the *New York Times Book Review* is sufficient to indicate that biographical criticism remains one of the primary forms of literary discourse in "post-modern" life, both because the study of a writer's life is capable of enhancing a reader's appreciation of her work, and because that study is emotionally and intellectually satisfying in its own right.

It will not surprise close readers of "Shakespeare" that the plays and poems are themselves eloquent testimony to the intellectual failure of the traditional view of authorship and to the fundamental character of the concept of authoring expressed in the Shakespearean text itself.

Close reading reveals that the deepest anxiety in Shakespeare is not the fear of death, the state, or even incest; it is the quintessential author's fear of being reduced - posthumously - to a state of characterlessness, the condition of being unremembered in characters (words engraved on a durable surface). The dynamic interplay between authorship and remembrance, so vivid in the writings of Horace, Ovid, and the Shakespeare Sonnets, is a leitmotif of *Troilus and Cressida*:

Troilusafter all comparisons of truth,
As truth's authentic author to be cited,
'As true as Troilus' shall crown up the numbers
and sanctify the verse.

Cressida. Prophet may you be!
If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,
When time is old and hath forgot itself,
When water drops have worn the stones of Troy,
And blind oblivion swallow'd cities up,
And mighty states characterless are grated
To dusty nothing, yet let memory,
From false to false among false maids in love,
Upbraid my falsehood! (3.2.180-190)

For the humanist, both the written character and the thing characterized are primary epistemic categories, but the thing characterized is in Shakespeare more primary than the written character itself. The author of the plays would not have fallen into the post-modern pit of thinking that representation is a more essential category than being.

On the contrary, the distinguishing feature of the Shakespearean oeuvre is its animistic sensitivity to what actually is as well as what may be. Like other skilled dramatists, "Shakespeare" is first of all a consummate observer of human interaction and experience - starting with his own. His drama, the student of the de Vere heresy contends, is an expression of the need to objectify, and hence transcend, the actual contradictions of a real life.

The view of Shakespeare which emerges from the present dissertation, as well as from works such as *'Shakespeare' Identified* or *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, is consequently not only focused but in remarkable ways even intimate in character. Adherents of the 'Oxfordian' school do not assume that genius, whatever it consists of, is "essentially incomprehensible"; on the contrary, they posit that the mind of the author can be indeed be known, through the close and careful comparative study of the primary documents which attest to his existence and beliefs: the works themselves.

A corollary to this methodological premise is that no exegesis of the text even approaches adequacy which does not bring to bear a thorough or at least systematic knowledge of the pre-existing characters - characters exterior to, surrounding, and giving life to, the text itself - which have informed the author's imagination and been harnessed to his artistic intentions. When King Lear declares that "nothing will come of nothing" he is on the verge of a descent into cleansing madness. His words - paradoxically-- are not his own. They mimic an ancient paradox of ontology - and are borrowed from the 1st century Roman satirist Persius Flaccus, one of the most gifted but abstruse writers of the "Western Canon." But Cordelia's willful undersong of budding "truth" supplies the counterpoint to Lear's antiquarian nihilism: another pretext for the scene is the de Vere heraldic motto, *Vero nihil verius*, "nothing truer than the truth."

The present critique of the severance of life and art invoked by the Shakespeare establishment as the precondition for knowledge of the Shakespearean text was anticipated by leading poets and creative minds of previous centuries who did not necessarily endorse the solution set forth in these pages. In one of the most prophetic statements in the history of Shakespeare criticism, John Keats declared that "Shakespeare lived a life of allegory" - adding that "his works are comments on it." This prophecy of Keats remains unfulfilled today only because it is impossible to reconcile with orthodox premises of authorship; in no way are the works of "Shakespeare" an allegory for the life of the Stratford bourgeois to whom they are traditionally attributed.

An impressive body of critical literature, both orthodox and heterodox in its premises, does however concur in seeing certain characters of the canon - Hamlet, Falstaff, Biron, Duke Vincenzo, Troilus, Touchstone and Prospero spring to mind -- as expressively "authorial" in character. The humanity of these characters impresses itself so vividly on the mind of a sensitive reader that it is difficult to avoid the implication that in them "Shakespeare" embodies more than a little of his own persona and circumstance by means of allegory.

The Shake-speare Sonnets, furthermore, attest in vivid and direct symbolic language to the author's experiences and convictions. By cross-referencing the Sonnets to the plays, a vivid and coherent image of the bard emerges. This image, however, unfortunately, is impossible to reconcile with the orthodox view of Shakespearean authorship. For this very reason the wholistic methodology employed in the present study, which analyzes the Shakespearean literary corpus as a figurative allegorical manifestation of a real life, is rarely adopted by orthodox academicians, and never with significant success.

In concluding these preliminary remarks, it seems appropriate to say a word about the most difficult term in the title of the dissertation. When Hamlet declares that there is "providence in the fall of a sparrow" he means that every event portends a larger schema

of reality which is not immediately obvious to the biological eye. In his Geneva Bible the Earl of Oxford has underlined several notes from the books of Samuel (Stritmatter 1999), which express this concept as it was experienced by the 16th century Calvinist theological mind.

The author of the plays and poems, this dissertation argues, believed in a kind of mystical providence which provided him with the emotional sustenance needed to complete his work under conditions which would have crushed a more faint-hearted warrior. But "Shakespeare" was undoubtedly familiar with additional sources of insight into the essentially human problem of comprehending the structure of unfolding causality in the cosmos.

In places, in fact, Shakespeare sounds closer to Cicero's *De Providentia* than to the obvious theological sources of doctrine on this subject. Cicero, who is of course not a Calvinist, declares that foreknowledge of the future does exist, but only as a result of human skill in reading signs which point towards a larger and more comprehensive process which is unfolding in time. For Cicero, in other words, there is nothing supernatural about providence. The roots of the science of weather forecasting can be discerned in the practice of observation of natural signs associated with their likely consequences. Eventually the primitive philosopher could summarize the results of his observation in an aphorism: "red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailor take warning." It literally became possible, within limits, to "read" the future.

Alert students of the authorship question such as Eva Turner Clarke, Charles Wisner Barrell, and Charlton Ogburn Jr. have long noted the 1569 Court of Wards record in which the de Vere Bible makes its entrance into literary history, since shortly after B. M. Ward first documented its existence in 1928. Observing that de Vere makes reference to Exodus 3.14 ("I am that I am") in his infamous 1584 letter to Lord Burghley, these scholars commented on the existence of documentary evidence which demonstrated de Vere's firsthand knowledge of the source of these words - which are also, incidentally, echoed by "Shakespeare" in Sonnet 121 (pp. 142-43 this document).

I mean the term "providential", then, in this Ciceronian sense. It refers to the skill of the canny literary historian who is keen enough to sense the potential significance of some piece of evidence long before its actual significance becomes fully manifest. It is in this sense - and not with any necessarily theological implication - that the term appears in the title of the present document.

"Literary reasoning" is the process of the interpretation of literary texts to form conclusions about their meaning and significance. In literary reasoning, numerical symbols can play a role, but they are never the whole story. They are also not things-in-themselves; they are subordinate to logic and literary inference, to which they contribute when statistically robust.

No matter how impressive the number of marked verses which demonstrate an influence in "Shakespeare," the inner story of these annotations is not told by numbers, but in the brief sequence of marked verses (Micah 7.9, Matthew 6.1-4 and Revelations 3.5: see chapter 26) which comment on the condition of a man whose name has been erased from history and which set forth the divine promise of his eventual redemption.

This is a matter of hermeneutics, not calculus. No sentient being with an open heart and a critical mind, apprised of this evidence, can fail to be impressed by its profound implications for literary history.

It should not be supposed that the present document is the last word on the de Vere Bible or on the authorship question. It is instead a summary of nearly ten years of study and inner reflection on the possible meaning of a truly extraordinary literary document.

By "historical consequence" I mean the principle that, as I was once reminded by a University of Massachusetts graduate student in English, "truth is the daughter of time."

Eventually old conspiracies become addle-brained; they die, and something fresher and braver assumes their place in history.