

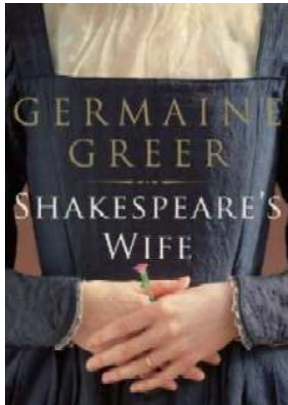
Welcome to the penultimate Newsletter of 2007. It's a bit late this time around, but we've been positively drowning under the deluge of new releases over the last couple of months. There have been no fewer than three major Shakespeare-related biographies, two of which are reviewed below, while the other, Charles Nicholl's *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street*, though a little late for this issue, will get the full treatment in our pre-Christmas issue, allowing you to weigh up its potential as a stocking-filler. Best wishes, Will Sharpe (editor)

Shakespeare's Wife

Germaine Greer

Bloomsbury £20.00

ISBN 9780747590914 Hbk



Germaine Greer's new book is a fascinating and provocative account of the life of Ann Shakespeare, famed by numerous biographers of Shakespeare as the woman who trapped him into an early marriage and the wife who was left only the second best bed. Greer's biography sets out to challenge these assumptions and presents an alternative view of this long neglected woman. There are a limited number of solid facts about the life of Shakespeare, and even less about Ann so an account of her life seems hugely ambitious. By necessity much of what Greer presents is speculative but she never attempts to hide this fact, as the witty and knowing chapter headings indicate. Ann's life is obviously the central basis of the book but it also acts as the springboard that allows for a broader discussion of women and their domestic lives during the period. It is as much a social and cultural history as it is a straight biography and it is all the richer for this. By placing Ann firmly in context

Greer is able to speculate and present her theories with a degree of conviction. She is direct, refreshingly blunt and immensely readable. Many myths taken for granted are challenged and practical alternative readings offered. She explains for example why she doesn't believe that the newly married Shakespeares would have lived with William's parents on Henley Street, and why she believes Shakespeare returned to Stratford and, more importantly, to Ann. Greer has made comprehensive use of the Birthplace Trust's archives and grounds much of her discussion in solid documentary evidence before drawing her own conclusions. She also takes on the opinions, equally speculative, of Shakespeare's biographers regarding Ann and the state of their marriage. Always thought to have been an unhappy union, Greer's account of what a marriage represented in the sixteenth century goes a long way towards overturning this narrow and presumptuous view. She also draws on Shakespeare's work to support her conclusions, and dares to suggest that his work offers the closest, perhaps most intimate, evidence we have for understanding what he thought and felt about Ann. *Shakespeare's Wife* provides us with a tantalising glimpse of Ann Shakespeare and Germaine Greer has thrown down the gauntlet to all future biographers of Shakespeare. It is a dense, intriguing book that opens up new avenues to explore and offers much food for thought. Though Ann ultimately remains as elusive as her husband, Greer has suggested a life beyond the gossipy reputations.

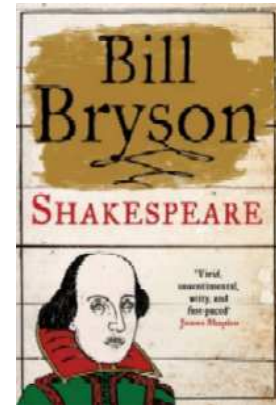
(Emma Mulveagh)

Shakespeare

Bill Bryson

Harper Press £14.99

ISBN 9780007197897 Hbk



Bill Bryson has managed to fashion something of a popular literary persona as the wry, amiable, Anglophile American, a wide-eyed traveller whose amused and affectionate distance from the culture is precisely the thing that makes him the perfect commentator on it. He is very much a modern day Washington Irving, whose *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-20) took a markedly similar tack, expounding wittily on old-world cultural curios of all sorts with an amused new-world journalist's flair. Irving put the spotlight on such unconsidered trifles as 'London Antiques', 'The Pride of the Village', 'The Angler', 'Rural Life in England' and 'Little Britain', and the work was a sort of Georgian equivalent of *Notes From a Small Island*, Bryson's transatlantic tract in the role of dutiful conduit of strange experience, deriving endless amusement from us and our barmy cucumber-sandwich, public-transport, wait-in-a-queue, "I'm terribly sorry", "no, really, my fault", fish-and-chips ways. Irving's essay, "Stratford-Upon-Avon", was a centrepiece of his miscellany, though

he was keen to insist that his literary pilgrimages were bogus but pleasantly amusing and somehow oddly fulfilling. Yet there was something paradigmatic in its style, in its evocation of the writer as world citizen, as front-line correspondent that became absorbed by American journalism, taken to its most extreme verge in the roaring hedonism of Hunter S. Thompson, or the Conrad-esque ventures of Norman Mailer – who sadly died this month – as he followed the Ali-Foreman circus into Africa's heart of darkness. Now, I'm scarcely proposing that what Bryson has produced is a kind of "Fear and Loathing in Stratford-upon-Avon", merely pointing out that Shakespeare might be more profitably imagined as an extended, stylish magazine piece. It is as interested in where the man himself sits in modern life as with what he did when he was alive, and it is very good at expressing the sense of mysterious fascination we all get when encountering Shakespeare for the first time, avoiding false sentiment, false quantities, and the opposite extreme of excessive sobriety. It is again precisely Bryson's status as an outsider which makes him the kind of narrator one instantly feels an affinity with. In this case the Anglo-American divide is scarcely important, though it may be observed that the book is topped and tailed by semi-apologetic tales of odd and obsessive American takes on Shakespeare, in the figures of Charles and Hulda Wallace, who claimed to have examined 5 million documents in the Public Records Office and came up with the reference to Shakespeare's involvement in the Mountjoy case – the subject of Charles Nicholl's latest book, reviewed in our next issue – in the former instance, and Delia Bacon, originator of the theory that her namesake, Francis, wrote the plays, and self-professed incarnation of the Holy Ghost in the latter. Rather, Bryson here paints himself as an outsider to the academy, manfully tackling vast swathes of scholarship, and serving it up not only in readable, witty prose, but also in such a way as to imply that it's as new to him as it is to you and me. The book is filled with phrases like 'it is held', 'it is said', and 'so the scholars say', which can be seen as a line in the sand: Bryson is on our side of it, and is like the one who has drawn the short straw, having to don the tin helmet and go over the top into the battlefield that is 'Shakespeare scholarship'. The resultant narrative style feels like a fantastically compact, witty, sane and moving series of reconnaissance reports. To claim an inexpertise in a thing that you are in

fact writing about with fluency and grace is an old journalist's trick, having the double function of winning the reader's confidence while wowing him/her with your effortless versatility. The second part is hardly sinister, and is essential to a writer's survival, but the first part, if done artfully enough, is a sincere pleasure; the disingenuous good humour of the bumbling amateur sleuth:

'Every Shakespeare biography is 5 per cent fact and 95 per cent conjecture', one Shakespeare scholar told me, possibly in jest.

This self-distancing from the position of scholar, even biographer, obviously frees Bryson up to raise a few sardonic eyebrows in the direction of both, yet it is his disciplined unwillingness to do either that is his real virtue. Biographies often try to champion the idea that, contrary to popular belief, we can know a lot about Shakespeare's life from extant documentation, yet to the observer gripped by the inescapable sense that he remains an absurdly shadowy figure for a man of his prominence, this is ultimately as unsatisfactory as the well-worn novelistic padding that sees him walking across Warwickshire fields to Anne's house, or swallowing hard at the sight of traitors' gate on his way into London. Shakespeare was the chief dramatist of the King's company, and yet we know less about his personality and physical appearance than we do of far more minor figures of the age. To Bryson, Shakespeare is:

at once the best known and least known of figures ... he is a kind of literary equivalent of an electron – forever there and not there.

And he is inescapably struck by:

how little we know of the details of Shakespeare's life, and how the little we do know seems always to add to the mystery rather than lighten it.

The book's chapter structure is crisp and logical: 'In Search of William Shakespeare', 'The Early Years', 'The Lost Years', 'In London', 'The Plays', 'Years of Fame', 'The Reign of King James', 'Death', and 'Claimants'. Though in some cases these sound over-familiar, or over-ambitious in others, each one has been roundly 'Brysonised', making them very much worth reading in their own right anyway. To my mind, *The Plays* sounded the most unassailable job for any writer of a brief life, but rather than play-by-play criticism or a weighty chronology it is rather a swirling portrait of what Shakespeare did for the professional stage, for the

English language and for humanity itself, a sort of love letter from one man who makes a living with his pen to another. Another preoccupation the book keenly displays is with dirt and disease; no fewer than three chapters begin with a look at the "ten thousand several doors / For men to take their exits", both those supplied by nature as well as the man-made variety. Yet the effect is to vivify Shakespeare's world and to heighten our sense of his achievements, occurring as they did within "a world that was short of people and struggled to keep those it had". It is also marvellous at deftly sketching the major social, religious, and political upheavals of the day, and the restless worlds of early modern theatre and literature.

When I first heard this book was coming out, I seem to remember reacting with a 'tut' and a skywards glance, what with the shelves already creaking under the collective weight of the recent glut of Shakespeare biographies (eight have been released since I began working here in 2001, excluding this one). Yet what I feel I now have is a book I would heartily recommend to even the most recalcitrant novice, confident in the belief that they'll get something out of it. I've wondered many times over the years what the customer with fear in their eyes made, in the end, of my well intentioned advice that they read Schoenbaum's magnificent but monolithic *Documentary Life*. Was it too much? Bryson already has a huge, devoted fan base, so this book is likely to reach a lot more people than a run-of-the-mill bite-sized biography of the Bard (apologies for tabloid alliteration there, but it's in keeping with my dogged insistence on the journalism theme). In this respect, the book's other beacon-like virtue then is its overwhelming sanity. A simple thing, you would think, but with the recent petition being signed by many prominent actors and thinkers demanding official recognition that our man from Stratford couldn't possibly have written his own works, perhaps Bryson's last words on the matter will join Stanley Wells's *Is It True What They Say About Shakespeare?* in competing with prominent media figures like Mark Rylance and Derek Jacobi for the souls of the multitudes of unwary travellers venturing, for the first time, into the wilds of Shakespeare country:

These people must have been incredibly gifted – to create, in their spare time, the greatest literature ever produced in English, in a voice patently not their own,

in a manner so cunning that they fooled everyone during their own lifetimes and for four hundred years afterwards. The Earl of Oxford, better still, additionally anticipated his own death and left a stock of work sufficient to keep the supply of new plays flowing at the same rate until Shakespeare himself was ready to die a decade or so later. Now that *is* genius.

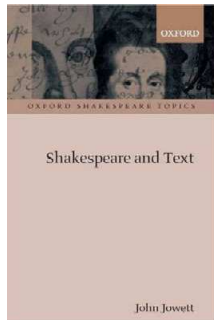
It sounds so simple when you put it like that, Bill.

(Will Sharpe)

Shakespeare and Text

John Jowett

Oxford University Press £12.99
ISBN 9780199217069 PBK



I have already written about the *Oxford Topics* series as part of my review of its rival *Companions* series launched by their chief competitor, *Arden*. However, while the latter seems to have dried up now, with the last volume on *Elizabethan Popular Culture* published only in hardback format, priced at an eye-watering fifty-two sheets, Oxford's slightly lower production values and clearer sense of direction have ensured that they are still going strong. This latest addition is, I must admit, something of a boon for a salivating bibliophile such as myself, so you're actually going to get an energetic review on a book dealing with an aspect of Shakespeare scholarship often seen as the realm of nerds and pedants. Editors are often thought of as an idiosyncratic bunch, speccy obsessives whose skeletons are likely to be discovered in the dark recesses of rare books rooms, draped over a collating machine. But 'Shakespeare the

Book', as it were, has received a lot of mainstream critical attention in recent years, made sexy again – well, up to a point, admittedly – by critics such as David Scott Kastan, Laurie Maguire and Andrew Murphy. The Trust also ran a major exhibition this year on Shakespeare's 'Complete Works', displaying all the major Shakespeare editions since (and including) the 1623 First Folio as material objects in and of themselves. *Shakespeare and Text* has a fascinating chapter on 'The Material Book', which works descriptively in terms of how an early text was put together, but also conceptually in terms of its status as "a cultural object that exists in relation to posited readers". Jowett neatly synthesises huge areas of intellectual enquiry in the field of Shakespeare studies in recent decades, such as reappraisals of the principles of scholarly editing, of theatre history, of our acknowledgement of Shakespeare's status as a collaborative writer, of performance studies, and draws it all into a discussion of how it affects our evolving sense of preparing a useable performance text of a play in the study. Thus, this study is positioned at something of a crossroads, working brilliantly as a digestible resource on the history of editing, on the processes by which Shakespeare's texts have come down to us, and on all the major conundrums facing a textual scholar. Yet it is also refreshingly honest and forward looking in its recognition of the frailty and necessary mutability of the convictions it identifies. There is a lucid account of the practical considerations of editing text, and the appendices boast a useful glossary of terms along with a list of all early editions of the plays and poems. Thus the book considers the needs of a wide putative readership. Jowett is unquestionably one of the most skilful and exciting editors at work today: he was himself a collaborator on the preparation of what is still the biggest landmark in recent Shakespeare editing, the 1986 *Oxford Shakespeare* and its accompanying *Textual Companion*. He also prepared *Richard III* and *Timon of Athens* for the *Oxford World's Classics* series, the

latter of which was reviewed in these very pages when it came out in 2004, and was exemplary in its illustration of Shakespeare at work with Thomas Middleton (whose collected works are about to be released this month, containing work by Jowett). *Shakespeare and Text* is much more than a brilliant introduction to the field of textual scholarship as it relates to Shakespeare; it is a gauntlet thrown down to any future editors of these inexhaustible works.

(Will Sharpe)

New Books

Shakespeare in Parts by Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern (Oxford University Press £20) is a groundbreaking study of the original form in which Shakespeare's plays were circulated, - that is, as actors' parts, the bare cues and speeches that made up each individual role. Palfrey and Stern brilliantly demonstrate the dramatic opportunities that this only partial knowledge of the play opened up for Shakespeare's actors and ask us to reconsider our perception of Shakespeare's dramatic art. Laurie Maguire's **Shakespeare's Names** (Oxford £24.99) examines literary precursors and cultural attitudes to the names of key characters in Shakespeare's plays, in a wide-reaching study that also draws on classical literature, social history, popular culture and performance criticism.

In **How To Do Things With Shakespeare** (Blackwell Publishing £19.99), Maguire broadens her critical approach still further by inviting twelve academics from various disciplines to bring their own expertise to bear on questions about Shakespeare and sources, history, text, animals and posterity. The result is a fresh and original collection of essays that is also deliberately candid about the nature of literary research.

(Adam Sherratt)



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