

## **Bacon's Verse Translation of Psalm 104**

*Father and King of Pow'rs, both high and low,  
Whose sounding fame all creatures serve to blow;  
My soul shall with the rest strike up thy praise,  
And carol of thy works and wondrous ways.  
But who can blaze thy beauties, Lord, aright?  
They turn the brittle beams of mortal sight.  
Upon thy head thou wear'st a glorious crown,  
All set with virtues, polish'd with renown:  
Thence round about a silver veil doth fall  
Of crystal light, mother of colours all.  
The compass heaven, smooth without grain or fold,  
All set with spangs of glitt'ring stars untold,  
And strip'd with golden beams of power unpent,  
Is raised up for a removing tent.  
Vaulted and arched are his chamber beams  
Upon the seas, the waters, and the streams:  
The clouds as chariots swift do scour the sky;  
The stormy winds upon their wings do fly.  
His angels spirits are, that wait his will,  
As flames of fire his anger they fulfil.  
In the beginning, with a mighty hand,  
He made the earth by counterpoise to stand;  
Never to move, but to be fixed still;  
Yet hath no pillars but his sacred will.*

## **Shakespeare's Humanism**

The question of Shakespeare's religion or lack of it is a subject of endless speculation. Was he a Catholic, as Clare Asquith suggests in her recent book *Shadowplay*? Was he a conforming Anglican, as A.L. Rowse steadfastly affirms in his numerous biographies? Or was he even an atheist, as Gary Sloan suggests in the April *Freethinker*? The answer, surely, is that the dramatist was a liberal Christian. Firstly, his works make an extensive use of the Bible and there is hardly a book in the Old or New Testament which is not represented by some chance word or phrase in one or other of the plays. Peter Milward cites numerous examples in *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973). Thus Adriana's speech on the ideal relationship between husband and wife in *The Comedy of Errors* (2:1) makes reference to *Psalm 8*, and her speech beginning 'How comes it now, my husband' (2:2) alludes to *Ephesians 5*. This passage is also used by Katherina in her speech on the duty of wives to their husbands in *The Taming of the Shrew* (5:2). Again, Portia's whole speech on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* is a tissue of texts from the Old and New Testaments. The same applies to Isabella's similar speech in *Measure for Measure*, a play whose very title echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 7:2*).

It has often been claimed that, nevertheless, the great pessimistic speeches of Hamlet, Macbeth and Lear are in no way biblical. Macbeth's 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' speech about life being a 'tale told by an idiot... signifying nothing' seems to be a powerful expression of existential nihilism and nothing to do with Christianity. But this view is mistaken. 'Out, out brief candle' seems to be taken from Job 18:5-6: "The light of the wicked shall be quenched... and his candle shall be out out with him". From the *Psalms* come the references to 'dusty death' (*Psalm 22:15*—'dust of death'), a 'walking shadow' and 'all our yesterdays' (*Psalm 39:6*—'every man walketh in a vain show'; *Job 8:9*: 'We are but of yesterday and are ignorant: for our days upon earth are but a shadow'), and 'a tale told by an idiot' (*Psalm 90:9*—'we spend our years as a tale that is told').

Of course, some of the works, particularly the last plays, have a pagan setting, but we should bear in mind the 1606 Act in restraint of 'abuses of players', by which any actor jestingly or profanely using the name of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost or the Trinity, was liable to a fine of £10. And in any case the playwright makes continued use of the Bible and Christianity in these plays. Since they look beyond death to resurrection and new life, they are surely expressing, at least in part, the Pauline ideal of the 'new man, the

'new creation', the 'new life' in Christ which the Christian first receives in baptism. Even Paulina's name in *The Winter's Tale* suggests St Paul. Her words to the statue transform the appearance of death into the reality of life for both Hermione and Leontes:

*"Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him  
Dear life redeems you".*

In *The Tempest* Christian symbolism is superimposed on pagan myth. Many Renaissance humanists including Shakespeare tried to reconcile ancient Greek and Roman religions with Christianity. Prospero is both Orpheus, who was the greatest musician and poet of Greek myth, and the Christian God; Ferdinand, who 'dies' during the masque and then ascends to heaven, is a Christ figure, Miranda is the 'bride' of Christ and Caliban is the devil. Ariel is not only the Greek Hermes, the messenger of the gods, but also plays the part assigned in the Old Testament to the Angel of the Lord and in the New Testament to the Spirit. In the Gospel story it is the Spirit which descends upon Christ when he has risen from the baptismal water and which leads him up to wander in the wilderness. Similarly, it is Ariel in the play who brings the travellers out of the sea to wander in the maze of the 'desolate isle'. The dramatist has consciously woven together pagan and Christian mythology because, as Colin Still argues in *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*, they share a 'timeless theme', namely man's spiritual pilgrimage in which through redemption and rebirth he can reverse the Fall. It is the story of the upward struggle of the human spirit, individual or collective, out of the darkness of sin and error, into the light of wisdom and truth.

So, despite their secular appearance, the Shakespeare plays often conceal a deep undercurrent of religious meaning, a meaning which has been woven into the very fabric of the works in such an unobtrusive manner that some critics have been led to imagine that it is not even there. This meaning can also be easily missed because of the nature of its content. For Shakespeare's Christianity is undogmatic and tolerant in the tradition of Erasmus and Renaissance Humanism in general.

There is, for example, never any argument on points of theology. Philosophy and religion should be kept separate because:

*"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt  
of in your philosophy" (Hamlet)*

The supernatural cannot be fathomed, and therefore rational argument is useless: 'the rest is silence'. As Lafeu suggests in *All's Well that Ends Well*:

*"They say miracles are passed; and we have our philosophical persons  
to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is  
it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming  
knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear" (2:3).*

This unknown fear must not be reasoned about but accepted as inevitable:

*"Must must endure*

*Their going hence, even as their coming hither:*

*Ripeness is all" (King Lear, 5:2).*

Shakespeare's treatment of the limits of reason is always presented in this supernatural context, as in Hippolyta's reference to 'something of great constancy' and Bottom's dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Reason is vital in human affairs, but in matters of religion it is not enough.

Shakespeare shared all the characteristics of a Renaissance humanist. He was a man of the highest culture and a large familiarity with the classics, which are of central importance in the plays and in the structure of his imagination. The works are saturated with his favourite classical authors, especially Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Plautus, Cicero, Terence and Plutarch. Indeed, he has the ancient mythology and history at his finger tips. He also shared the Renaissance desire to seek the truth about human nature. The ancient adage *nosce teipsum*—know thyself—was a key principle of humanist thought and Hamlet's speech about holding the mirror up to nature implies that poetry and drama can help us to acquire that wisdom. By doing so, we can better guard against the barbarism lurking below the surface which the baser side of human nature creates and instead promote the more civilised values. As Robin Headlam Wells writes, Shakespeare's plays show their humanist origins in the themes they dramatise: "Repeatedly, they come back to those matters that concern Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*: 'the properties of government', 'our city's institutions', 'the terms for common justice', 'the nature of our people'" (*Shakespeare's Humanism*, p27).

At first glance, his humanism seems close to the disillusioned brand of Montaigne, who stressed the limitations of reason and understanding in human affairs, in contrast to the optimism of Bacon, Erasmus and most other Renaissance writers, who believed that cultivating reason would lead to a better understanding of how to act and thus to great benefits for society as a whole. Shakespeare's apparent scepticism about such matters is exemplified in Hamlet's famous speech: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (Act II, Scene II). This appears to be a counterblast to Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Yet it is hardly the full picture. Hamlet in the early part of the play is a confused and disillusioned idealist. But he matures as he grows older. Ultimately the play challenges Hamlet's early cynicism. Similarly, the author himself shows progression from the tragedies to the late romances, where the message is quintessentially humanist. Prospero in *The Tempest* is a metaphor

for the civilising power of the artist and educator whose 'liberal arts' tame the tempests in the human spirit. He exhibits the ennobling qualities of compassion, generosity, friendship, wisdom, and so on. He does not seek to retaliate against those who wronged him; he seeks only to bring them out of the darkness of hatred and revenge. Bernard D. Grebanier writes:

"Shakespeare is perhaps the perfect expression of Renaissance humanism. His profound sympathy for humanity enabled him to pierce to the very core of his characters; his unexcelled gifts as a poet made his men and women unforgettable creatures of flesh and blood. This may be said as much of the best of his earliest plays as of *The Tempest*, where Prospero is himself a kind of incarnation of the best of what the Renaissance had extended to mankind" (Bernard D. Grebanier, *et al. English Literature and Its Backgrounds*. New York: Holt, 1950 (p 242).

It is also important to stress that, like many Renaissance humanists, Shakespeare had a sceptical outlook and delighted more in presenting issues than in espousing systems, and held critical awareness, as opposed to doctrinal rectitude, to be the highest possible good. It is precisely what Keats called 'negative sensibility' in which the author is content and proud to be in a state of doubt. An increasing number of writers are becoming aware of the deliberately dialectical and provisional nature of his works and the fact that they dramatise the unresolvable tensions that are the fundamental conditions of life. Similarly, his unparalleled realism may be seen as the ultimate embodiment, in poetic terms, of the intense concern for specificity endorsed by humanists from the 14th century on.

Shakespearean drama is a treasury of the disputes that frustrated and delighted humanism, including (among many others) action versus contemplation, theory versus practice, art versus nature, *res* versus *verbum*, monarchy versus republic, human dignity versus human depravity, and individualism versus communality. In treating of these polarities, he generally proceeds in the manner of Castiglione and Montaigne, presenting structures of balanced contraries rather than syllogistic endorsements of one side or another. In so doing, he achieves a higher realism, transcending the mere imitation of experience and creating, in all its conflict and fertility, a mirror of mind itself. Since the achievement of such psychological and cultural self-awareness was the primary goal of humanistic inquiry, and since humanists agreed that poetry was an uncommonly effective medium for this achievement, Shakespeare must be acknowledged as a pre-eminent humanist.

Shakespeare, however, eschews moralising. Preaching constrains the mind, a thought echoed by Lucio in *Measure for Measure*: "And yet, to say the truth, I had as lief have the foppery of freedom as the morality of imprisonment". The absence of an *obvious* ethical viewpoint has led some critics to assume that Shakespeare has none. Dr. Johnson lamented that "he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he

seems to write without any moral purpose". Yet Johnson forgets the Renaissance habit of instructing by pleasing.

Consider Hamlet's 'mirror up to nature' speech. Here the playwright seems to be telling us what he is trying to do in his plays, and Johnson concludes that Shakespeare is indeed a great poet of human nature in the sense of laying it bare in all its great variety. But Levin comments: "The Elizabethan conception of art as the glass of nature was ethical rather than realistic, for it assumed that, by contemplating situations which reflected their own, men and women could mend their ways and act with greater resolution thereafter" (H. Levin: *The Question of Hamlet*, 1959, p157). In other words, by exposing the weaknesses, cynicism and evil in the world and the destructive consequences which they inevitably produce, the playwright is educating his readers to avoid the same mistakes. And he is doing it through 'the foppery of freedom' rather than the 'morality of imprisonment'.

In fact, Shakespeare states this purpose clearly in Jaques' speech in *As You Like It*:

*"Invest me in my motley; give me leave  
To speak my mind, and I will through and through  
Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,  
If they will patiently receive my medicine".*

Shakespeare's plays are profoundly moral and deal with the deepest ethical themes and issues. The clearest indication of their moral purpose is that evil never triumphs in the plays. It always suffers ultimate defeat. *Othello* does not end with Iago gloating over the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona. *Hamlet* does not end with the prince destroying his enemies and ruling Denmark happily ever after. Even characters who are essentially good are punished for their evil acts; so in a sense Hamlet dies for the killing of Polonius and Romeo for slaying Tybalt. Despite its pervading presence, evil is always shown as being avoidable. Shakespeare invariably stresses man's moral responsibility for his actions. Hamlet, Othello, Lear and Macbeth all suffer for their sins, not because of some divine decree written in the stars. To be sure, there are often portents, such as earthquakes, comets and eclipses, as in *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*, but they are usually presented as a sign of God's anger to come if fallen human beings do not repent and avoid evil.

Again, when we seek to discover Shakespeare's basic ethical principles, we find a lack of fixed, predetermined dogma, though with some exceptions. 'Unbitted lusts' and passions, combined with egotism, overcoming reason is a constant theme. The title of *The Tempest* alone symbolises the storms of the emotions. Prospero seeks revenge for his banishment, but the movement of the play is towards the recovery of his humanity. In forgiveness he finds not only a way towards justice but also a road back into human society itself. And by submitting his capacity to reason, Prospero epitomises Renaissance

Humanist thought: "Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury do I take part: the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance". In *The Tempest* we see Shakespeare's supreme humanism at work, expressing not only a feeling for human fallibility but also an ability to see man as a potential godlike creature with powers of moral judgment finally equal to the emotional struggles these powers engender.

In Shakespeare we find also a preoccupation with 'balance' between self and others. It is noticeable that all his villains are individualists, motivated primarily by egotism. Richard of Gloucester sums it up: "I am myself alone". Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* avers: "Simply the thing I am shall make me live". And Iago says: "In following him, I follow but myself". The selfish ambitions of such people, or their lust or envy, lead to chaos and disaster. Moreover, by asserting themselves at the expense of others, they become isolated not only from other people but also from themselves. So, after the death of Duncan, Macbeth confesses that: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself". The evil acts snowball, and the result is described by Albany in *King Lear*:

*"If that the heavens do not their visible spirits  
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,  
It will come  
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep"* (Act 4, Scene 2).

Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and so on, are all faced with the choice of putting themselves or others first. Their tragedies therefore arise ultimately from their own selfishness.

On the positive side, Shakespeare extols the humanist virtue of '*philanthropia*'. Thus when Lady Macbeth suggests to her husband that his nature is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness', she wants him to become less human and more of a monster. An essential feature of kindness is the capacity for fellow-feeling, and clearly Shakespeare's good characters have this quality in common. It is also this quality that shines through the entire works and causes commentators to refer to the playwright's great compassion. Indeed, love of humanity is the overriding theme of the plays (the tragedies illustrate the loss of this love).

Repentance and forgiveness are continually stressed and Portia's great speech about the quality of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* expresses sentiments which surely lie deeply in the heart of the author:

*"It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth them show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice"* (Act 4, Scene 1).

[Article by the author which appeared in *The Freethinker*, July 2006]

## **Just William**

*Greenblatt reduces Shakespeare to a mindless snapper-up of trifles,  
argues Brian McClinton*

The tragic diminution of the author of Shakespeare continues unabated, with each successive biography plumbing new depths of banality. The latest *opus* from Harvard's Stephen Greenblatt is just about the worst, though you wouldn't think it to read some of the rave reviews which praise it to the skies, and the book has become a bestseller in the States—further proof that a lot of Americans are seriously lacking in taste and discernment.

Shakespeare wrote about the great themes: love, ambition, power, friendship, justice, revenge, dogmatism and scepticism, art and nature, appearance and reality, and so on, but they are largely absent from this dreary work. Instead the greatest writer the world has ever seen is reduced to a superficial folk artist, whose life and work are "a triumph of the everyday" and who wrote "as if he thought that there were more interesting things in life to do than write plays". Greenblatt does to Shakespeare what Hollywood does to every work of higher culture: reduces it to trivial, mindless entertainment.

The writer is obsessed with Elizabethan minutiae and facile psychologising. What we long for in his blighted biography is some attempt to reveal the greatness of the world's greatest poet and dramatist. But instead of a silk purse, we are offered an endless string of sows' ears. Examples abound everywhere. How about this? Do you realise that Shakespeare may have learned to 'poach' from other writers by being—a poacher!

Another example is that he was inspired to take an old play called *Hamlet* and rework it after the death of his son Hamnet in 1596. Just as plausible—perhaps more so—is the suggestion that the author of Shakespeare, not Kyd or anyone else, wrote the earlier *Hamlet* in the 1580s. Francis Bacon was in France in 1576-79 at a time when Belleforest's story of Amleth in his *Histoires Tragiques* was current and he could have been attracted by the fact that the name could be punned on his own (hamlet, a little bacon). Moreover, in 1579 Bacon was called home by the death of his father, and the play is, after all, lament of a son for his lost father, not a father for his lost son.

Greenblatt's theorising in general is of the level of gossip journalism, not academic insight. It seems that of such inanities are modern American university professors often made. He suggests that in Falstaff the author may be partly parodying his father, who he surmises turned to drink after the collapse of his fortunes in Stratford. It is more likely that Falstaff is a parody of Will himself. We could argue that he is not the shaker of the spear, who shakes a lance as brandished at the eyes of ignorance, but an impostor who carries a false staff.

In other words, in Falstaff the real author is making fun of the supposed author.

This is not as preposterous as it might seem (it is certainly no more ridiculous than Greenblatt's wild speculations which litter the text throughout), because Shakespeare is referred to as Falstaff in a contemporary document. It occurs in a letter written by Sir Tobie Matthew to Francis Bacon. Discussing a matter that he had handled for Bacon, Matthew writes to him: "As that excellent author Sir John Falstaff sais, what for your bysiness news, device, foolerie and libertie, I never dealt better since I was a man". This is a direct quote from Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part 1*. Why does Matthew refer to Falstaff, not as the character in the play whose line he quotes, but as the 'excellent author' of it? There is some sort of in-joke at work here. Is it that William himself was a drunken clown?

Greenblatt continues the recent speculation about Shakespeare being a Catholic, although this is not a new theory. He suggests that it is the reason Shakespeare left Stratford. Really? So he was safer in a city like London, then? To be sure, from the records, William seems to have kept a low profile in the capital, but the works suggest the opposite, depicting someone on intimate terms with noblemen such as the Earls of Southampton, Pembroke and Montgomery. Greenblatt believes that the young man in the sonnets is Southampton, and I concur, but how he came to be close to William—a country bumpkin and a Catholic to boot!—is anyone's guess. Whether Will was a Catholic—and there is no evidence of it—the real Shakespeare was surely not.

In the final pages Greenblatt mentions a letter by Machiavelli shortly after he had lost his position in Florence and had been forcibly rusticated. He writes with disgust of the vulgar arguments and stupid games he was forced to watch at the local taverns. His only relief came in the evenings when he would take down from his shelves his beloved authors—Cicero, Livy, Tacitus—and feel that at last he had companions fit for his intellect. Greenblatt comments: "Nothing could be further from Shakespeare's sensibility. He never showed signs of boredom at the small talk, trivial pursuits and foolish games of ordinary people" (p389). How could anyone read Shakespeare and write such total and complete rubbish? Shakespeare the author was steeped in these very classical writers and in 'extraordinary' people, though no one has ever found a book that belonged to William or a lord who mentions ever having met him.

*Will in the World* is the *reductio ad absurdum* of trying to marry the mundane and mercenary life of William of Stratford to the verse: Shakespeare as an empty-headed bore. It is a truly awful book in which almost every page is a travesty of the extraordinary mastermind behind the immortal works. Chuck it in the bin.

[This review appeared in *Humani*, journal of the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland, in issue No 92, May 2005.]

## **The Bard Stripped Bare**

The banalisation of the Shakespeare mastermind continues apace with Peter Ackroyd's 'biography' arriving hot on the heels of Greenblatt's grossly overrated *Will in the World*, itself a diminution of the bard to an empty-headed bore. If that was a truly awful book, this is, if possible, even worse. Ploughing through 488 pages of dull and usually incidental detail is a heavy slog. Occasionally, I surfaced from my stupor to spit blood at the book's misrepresentations and travesties of the world's greatest writer.

For example, Chapter 2 out of 91 (yes, 91 chapters!) devotes itself to a dreary description of Warwickshire. We are told that it is often depicted as the heart or the navel of England, and Shakespeare himself is "central to the centre, the core or source of Englishness itself". As if that wasn't enough drivel in one chapter, Ackroyd ends it with this unmitigated tripe: "The evidence of his work provides unequivocal proof that he was neither born nor raised in London. He does not have the harshness or magniloquence of John Milton, born in Bread Street; he does not have the hardness of Ben Jonson, educated at Westminster School; he does not have the sharpness of Alexander Pope from the City or the obsessiveness of William Blake from Soho. He is of the country" (p8).

Jesus wept! Shakespeare has the refinement of the Court and in *Henry VIII* he even shows that he is familiar with the court order of precedence at a coronation, for heaven's sake. He knows all about the machinations of Lord Burghley and is intimate with Southampton. Did the country boy have telepathy or a hotline to the Earl? Read the plays, Ackroyd.

Shakespeare of the country?? This is a nonsense because he does not 'warble' about banks and braes; he does not write sonnets to nightingales or odes to skylarks; he neglects to mention woodpeckers in the woods, squirrels in the trees or fishes rising from streams. If his plays have rural settings, as in *As You Like It* or *The Tempest*, they are fantastical, not realistic. The more usual settings are: faraway places such as Verona, Milan, Padua, Mantua, Venice, Messina, Rome, Troy, Athens, Bohemia, Vienna, Ephesus, Paris, Navarre or Marseilles; the courts, gardens and castles of kings, princes and the nobility; and London, the Tower, and Windsor.

In other words, Shakespeare gives no indication of having lived a country life. If the author were William and had passed his boyhood roaming through the woods and fields around Stratford, we would expect this local flora and fauna to feature in at least some of the works, but it is totally absent, whatever

Ackroyd tries to claim. There is no indication whatsoever of the poet having observed the habits of birds, insects or rural animals. Not only is there no Stratford colour in the works, but there is a lack of the use of dialect from that area. Indeed, there is no mention of the town at all, yet Ackroyd spends pages describing what the environment was like for this famous glover's son.

In his autobiography Charlie Chaplin wrote that "in the work of the greatest of geniuses humble beginnings will reveal themselves—but one cannot trace the slightest sign of them in Shakespeare". Chaplin concluded of the works that "whoever wrote them had an aristocratic attitude". Chaplin's verdict is well-founded and surely disposes of Ackroyd's nonsense about a country bumpkin made good.

The worst crime committed by biographers like Greenblatt and Ackroyd is to denigrate the works themselves. This book informs us that Shakespeare didn't know what he was writing until he had written it and that he had no message, no opinions, no religious faith, no 'morality' in the conventional sense. Thus is the bard stripped bare. Ackroyd writes: "He is one of those rare cases of a writer whose work is singularly important and influential, yet whose personality was not considered to be of any interest at all. He is obscure and elusive precisely to the extent that nobody bothered to write about him" (p487).

Greenblatt and Ackroyd both fail to detect Shakespeare the philosopher, whose plays consciously and deliberately *are* about great themes and antitheses: appearance and reality, dogmatism and scepticism, love and romance, justice and revenge, service and ambition, and so on. It is precisely the combination of philosophy, psychology and poetry which ensures Shakespeare's greatness for all time. Harold Bloom, who is much closer to the truth than Ackroyd, rightly deduces that his creations directly reflect their creator: his intelligence is more comprehensive and more profound than that of any other writer we know. "The aesthetic achievement of Shakespeare cannot be separated from his cognitive power" (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 1999, p729).

As for the man from Stratford, whose life these biographers vainly try to marry to the immortal works, he was a mediocre actor who played minor roles, a theatrical investor and moneylender, a shrewd businessman who knew how to make a quick buck, a skinflint who hoarded his wealth and gave nothing to the poor (see *Ungentle Shakespeare* by Katherine Duncan-Jones, *The Arden Shakespeare*, 2001), and a womaniser who consorted with prostitutes. Through the compounded errors of four centuries—and misguided biographies like Ackroyd's—this invisible man (of that at least he is correct) has had greatness thrust upon him.

[This review appeared in *Humani*, journal of the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland, in issue No 95, November 2005.]

## **Much Ado About Nothing:** ***Germaine Greer on Mrs. Shakespeare***

In the jolly jape *Shakespeare in Love*, our Will makes it up as he goes along. A street preacher attacks two nearby theatres by exclaiming, "A plague on both your houses", and he snaps up the trifle for his play *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*, eventually to metamorphose into *Romeo and Juliet*. Worse still, he is inspired to write the line, "Stay but a little, I will come again", after experiencing an orgasm. I remember thinking at the time that it would not be long before this *Carry on, Willie* approach would become the norm of Shakespeare 'scholarship'. Now, Germaine Greer moves the time ever closer with this inveterate feminist's flight of fancy on Ann(e) Hathaway.

Perhaps, she surmises, William taught his wife to read while she watched her cows grazing on the common. Perhaps he penned *Venus and Adonis*, "the housewives' favourite poem", at Ann's kitchen table. Perhaps she deserves credit for seeing *Shake-Speare's Sonnets* into print in 1609. And perhaps it was she who was instrumental in the publication of the *First Folio*, just before her own death. Greer writes (tongue-in-cheek?), "the idea that she might be entitled to some of the credit for the preservation of her husband's work is apparently too ridiculous to contemplate, which is why we shall now contemplate it". But why not take this absurdity to its logical conclusion and champion Ann(e) as another candidate for the authorship of the works?

Greer is normally a stickler for accuracy. Indeed, I recall about 5 or 6 years ago she appeared on the BBC's *Newsnight Review* and tore strips off *Pearl Harbor*—a fiction film—for playing fast and loose with the historical facts. In *Shakespeare's Wife* she cannot resist castigating Greenblatt, Holden and other scholars for their wild imaginings about the relationship between Ann(e) and William, but it has to be said that she herself has thrown all caution to the wind and joined the growing army of Shakespeare speculators. The difference is that while they have tended to side with William, she is, as we would expect, a feisty pugilist in Ann's cause. At times, she seems almost to be fantasising that the Stratford wife was actually an Elizabethan version of herself.

If what is known of William could be written on a postcard, then our knowledge of Ann(e) Hathaway could be scribbled on a tiny postage stamp. From the plate above her grave, which tells us that she died on 6th August 1623 aged 67, we deduce that she was eight years older than her husband, whom she married in 1582 when he was eighteen and she was twenty six and three months pregnant. Why this older woman married a teenager has been discussed *ad nauseam*, yet Greer spends about a sixth of the book, from pages

42 to 102, on the events leading to the marriage. She scornfully dismisses Holden's surmise that it was all the result of 'a careless roll in the hay', preferring to suggest that he courted her for years, perhaps even wooing her with some of the sonnets. Here she leaps at the alleged pun in sonnet 145 which concludes with the lines:

*'I hate', from 'hate' away she threw  
And saved my life, saying 'not you'.*

If Will wooed Ann(e) in one poem, he almost certainly wooed her in others, she boldly proclaims.

Greer's agenda is clear enough. She is trying to counter the misogynistic tradition of Shakespeare scholarship which says that the dramatist was obsessed with female infidelity in his plays because his own wife was an unfaithful, scheming harridan who could neither read nor write and had no inkling of her husband's achievement. Of course, there is not a shred of evidence for any of this conjecture, but it is presented in order to justify Will's behaviour in deserting her for nearly thirty years, failing to name her in the first draft of his will and, as an afterthought in the redraft, leaving her an old piece of furniture, the notorious second-best bed. Such surface facts are certainly open to interpretation, and it is entirely possible that Ann(e) was a good and true wife and a successful maltster and moneylender in her own right, or alternatively a cheese maker or haberdasher.

How should heretics on the authorship question react to Greer's rampant speculations? In one sense, it is all 'much ado about nothing' since so little is known about Ann(e) née Hathaway and in any case we do not believe that she was the wife of the writer 'Shakespeare'. Therefore, even if we knew what kind of person she was, she would not be of any particular interest to us. It has to be said that Greer does rather contribute to this apathy because her research into the family and background reveals an excessive amount of frankly tedious social detail. The book seems unnecessarily padded out, including mind-numbing information about brewing malt, the duties of churchwardens and even an inventory of a pedlar's pack.

Yet, in other senses, her book is a useful addition to the Shakespeare industry. First, she seeks to dispel many myths perpetrated in traditional biographies of the Stratford man and that cannot be a bad thing, especially as she displays a welcome dose of contempt for the scholarship of 'Greenblatt and his ilk', the 'Shakespeare wallahs' whose arrogant assumptions are often based on questionable interpretations of piecemeal evidence. More important, in order to counter the usual defamation of Ann(e), Greer is forced to denigrate William. Here she is on firm ground because, as the superficial facts indicate, it was he who left her and it was he who was probably unfaithful. Almost certainly, he consorted with London prostitutes, though whether he died of syphilis, as she surmises, is of course highly speculative.

Yet, we might well ask, why not take the speculation a step further? Why not surmise that while Ann(e) was a literate and faithful wife, William was an illiterate and worthless womaniser? Now, that *would* be daring.

*Appendix F:*

**Timeline**

DATE	WILLIAM OF STRATFORD	SHAKESPEARE THE AUTHOR	FRANCIS BACON
1561			Born in London
1564	Born in Stratford		
1573			Enters Cambridge
1576			Leaves Cambridge without a degree, travels in Europe for 3 years
1579			Enters Gray's Inn to train as a lawyer
1582	Marries Anne Hathaway		Becomes a Member of Parliament
1583			
1584	Twins Hamnet and Judith baptised		
1586/7	Goes to London, leaving his wife and children in Stratford		
1588			Southampton enters Gray's Inn and becomes friendly with Bacon
1589		Nashe refers to a <i>Hamlet</i> as written by a young lawyer	
1591		Plays first appear anonymously	Becomes friendly with Essex
1592	Name seems to be parodied as 'Shake-scene' in Greene's <i>Groatsworth of Wit</i>	<i>Henry VI</i> and <i>Henry V</i> recorded in Henslowe's Diary; no author is named	
1593		<i>Venus and Adonis</i> published, with dedication to Southampton	
1594	Name appears in a list of players	More Shakespeare plays listed in Henslowe's Diary, but again no author	<i>Gesta Grayorum</i> in which Bacon contributed performed at the same venue as <i>The Comedy of Errors</i>
1596	Son Hamnet dies and is buried in Stratford		<i>Richard II</i> and <i>Richard III</i> kept among Bacon's private papers
1597	Buys New Place in Stratford		First volume of <i>Essays</i> appears
1598	Listed on rolls of Stratford as holding ten quarters of corn. Richard Quiney writes him a letter, asking for a loan of £30	Name 'Shakespeare' first appears in title page of plays. Meres lists 12 plays and 'sugred sonnets among his private friends'	John Marston identifies Bacon as the author of <i>Venus and Adonis</i>
1600	Sues John Clayton of Stratford for £7 and obtains verdict in his favour	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i> recorded in Henslowe's Diary as written by Thomas Dekker and Henry Chettle	
1601			Essex executed; Bacon's brother Anthony dies

# Timeline

DATE	WILLIAM OF STRATFORD	SHAKESPEARE THE AUTHOR	FRANCIS BACON
1602	Buys two parcels of land and a cottage in Stratford		
1603	Appointed as one of Her Majesty's Servants for theatrical performances		Writes a letter to Sir John Davies, calling himself a 'concealed poet'
1604	Sues Philip Rogers in Stratford for £1 15s 10d for malt delivered and 2s loaned	<i>Othello</i> and <i>Measure for Measure</i> performed at Court	Apology on Essex affair published, in which he refers to 'one of mine own tales' which 'went after about in others names' and which deals with the deposition of Richard II
1605	Purchases a moiety of the tithes of Stratford and surrounding area		<i>Advancement of Learning</i> published, praising poetry as 'having some participation of divineness' and as currently having 'no deficiencie'
1608	Sues John Addenbroke of Stratford for £6	Period of late romances begins	
1609		<i>Shake-speare's Sonnets</i> is published	<i>Wisdom of the Ancients</i> published: Bacon's treatise on myths.
1610	Purchases 20 acres of pasture land at Stratford		
1611		<i>The Tempest</i> , a play about myths, is performed at Court	
1612	Brings suit to protect his interests in the Stratford tithes		
1613	Purchases a house in London for £140; mortgages it for £60	<i>Henry VIII</i> performed, after which the plays cease to appear	Becomes Attorney-General
1614	Assists in attempt to enclose the common lands at Stratford		
1616	Makes a will in March, dies in April and is buried in Stratford; his death is unnoticed by the literary world; relatives make no mention of manuscripts or books		
1618			Becomes Lord Chancellor
1621			Dismissed for taking 'bribes'; receives support from Pembroke and Montgomery
1623		<i>First Folio</i> appears, including 18 plays not published before, and dedicated to Pembroke and Montgomery	Praised by Tobie Matthew as 'the most prodigious wit' though 'he be known by another' [name]. 1623/24?
1626			Dies; eulogies praise him as 'the day star of the Muses'