



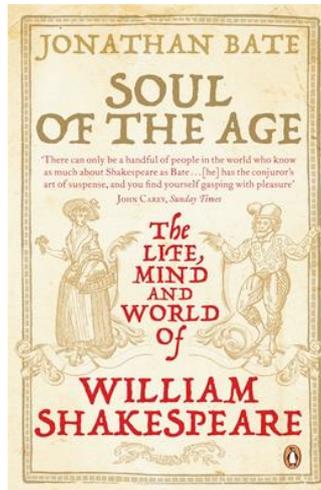
## Soul of the Age • Jonathan Bate • Penguin • 2009 • £9.99

**B**IOGRAPHIES OF Shakespeare are essentially works of fantasy, or at best historical fiction. Everything that we know about William of Stratford is as dull as ditchwater and throws no light whatsoever on the great works attributed to him. The relationship between his mundane and mercenary life and the Shakespeare mastermind is like chalk and cheese. This paradox is made very apparent from a reading of Jonathan Bate's *Soul of the Age*, subtitled 'The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare'.

It presses home in his chapter on 'Shakespeare's Small Library'. As Bate points out, we know from the records that William moved back from London to Stratford at least once a year and never had a permanent home in the capital. It is hard to imagine his book chest being carted along with him, so what did he do for books? Bate offers a few solutions. First, he may have borrowed rather than bought some. Then again, he may have skimmed many a volume on the bookstalls outside St Paul's. Or he bought a book and, having perused it, cast it aside. Bate's guess is that his book chest would have contained no more than about forty volumes and possibly as few as twenty.

So, there you are. The writer whose works are saturated with literary allusions, Latinisms and references to legal texts, who in the words of Prospero tells us that his 'library was dukedom enough', who in the words of Goethe 'drew a sponge over the table of human knowledge', and whose vocabulary was twice that of any other writer had no more than about 20 books in his possession?? This, despite the fact that more than 200 books are quoted in the plays or serve as sources for them.

Bate's inventory of William's books is actually an advance on 19th biographer Haliwell-Phillips in his *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (1887) that "whether he ever owned one at any time in his life is exceedingly improbable". This judgment seems to be borne out by William's will, which mentions plates, bowls, jewels, swords and a second-best bed, but of books there is a deadly silence.



In 1781 Rev James Wilmot was asked by a publisher to write a biography of the Bard. Believing that he must have had a large library, Wilmot spent four fruitless years visiting every grand house within a 50-mile radius of the town but could not find a single book, letter or manuscript that belonged to William. Wilmot concluded that he did not write the works ascribed to him.

Bate, who takes the title of his book from Ben Jonson's elegy prefixed to the *First Folio*, does at times seek to challenge the received opinion, but he never goes far enough and is quick to mock any suggestion that William was merely a front man for Bacon, Oxford, Marlowe, etc. Thus, although he says that Shakespeare's knowledge of the law rarely goes beyond commonplace jargon, he nevertheless suggests that we cannot rule out the possibility that he underwent some rudimentary legal training in the 1580s.

In point of fact, Shakespeare's legal knowledge is pretty extensive. In the 18th century Malone stated that his knowledge of legal terms has the appearance of technical skill; Lord Campbell in the 19th century was more definite: "To Shakespeare's law, lavishly as he propounds it, there can be neither demurrer, nor bill of exception, nor writ of error". In the 20th century Judge Thomas Webb of Trinity College, Dublin, was emphatic: "If anything is certain in regard to the Sonnets, the poems and

the plays, it is certain that the author was a lawyer". Sir Arthur Greenwood insisted that his legal knowledge is precise and indicates a mind well-trained and practised in the idioms and terminology of lawyers and judges.

More recently (2000), in *Shakespeare's Legal Language* B and M Sokal write: "Shakespeare shows a quite precise and mainly serious interest in the capacity of legal language to convey matters of social, moral and intellectual substance". A classic example is the famous case of Hales v Petit, in 1564, reported by Plowden in *Commentaries and Reports*, published in 1571. The gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet*, where they are discussing the death of Ophelia, follows the case so closely that it is evident that the dramatist had studied Plowden, which was hardly the favourite reading of a layman.

Anxious to establish Shakespeare's rural origins, Bate tells us that he was unique among the dramatists of his age in locating scenes in Warwickshire, but by this he really means near Coventry. He also quotes from *Henry VI, Part 3*: "In Warwickshire I have true-hearted friends". But this seems reasonable since the speaker happens to be the Earl of Warwick. I suppose we might assume that Shakespeare was Venetian or Cypriot from the settings of *Othello* or Viennese from the setting of *Measure for Measure*. Bate is really grasping at straws here, since the language of the plays is the language of the court and not the country, and for the most part it is spoken by kings, dukes or earls. When spoken by country yokels, it is generally mocked.

Bate mentions 'another' Warwickshire poet, Michael Drayton, and his poem *Poly-olbion*, which contains detailed maps of many interesting places in England. But what Bate doesn't tell us is that his map of Warwickshire does not even include Stratford-on-Avon, and, although Drayton wrote many letters to and about other literary figures, nowhere does he ever mention Shakespeare, which is a very strange omission indeed! →

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Anyone wanting a biography of Shakespeare will be more confused than usual by this book. It takes its template from the speech in *As You Like It* by Jaques about the seven ages of man and divides the life accordingly: infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, justice, pantaloon and oblivion. But a difficulty is that some of it does not apply: as far as we know, the dramatist wasn't a soldier and, at least according to Bate, his knowledge of the law was rudimentary. Moreover, although it might imply a linear narrative, Bate plays fast and loose with chronology, so that we are frustratingly pulled back and forward in time. Further, the writing goes off at several tangents, such as chapter 13 on Elizabeth and the long chapter on Essex, which dips in and out of relevance.

This is not to say that Bate's work is entirely worthless. Indeed, a heretic on the Shakespeare authorship will find enough ammunition in these pages. Of particular interest is the author's relationship with nobility. This has always been a tricky area for Stratfordians and Bate unwittingly reinforces the doubts.

Consider 4 noblemen connected with the works: Southampton, Essex and the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery. How did William – who, according to Bate, lodged cheaply in London theatreland, travelled back and forward to Stratford and more and less retired there after 1607 – manage to move in this elite social circle? Certainly, none of them seemed to notice his ghostly presence among them, for they never once mentioned him. Bate suggests that he probably spent the plague year 1593–94 in some form of service in Southampton's household at Titchfield in Hampshire. Really? Where is the evidence?

Orthodox scholars have to say that William of Stratford was close to Southampton because the two long poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) are dedicated to him – the latter beginning 'the love I dedicate to your lordship is without end' – and he is often identified as the 'fair youth' of the sonnets. It is hard to imagine a commoner like William making such a public declaration. Indeed, no one has found any written communication between the actor and the earl, nor any reference by anyone else to their friendship. The same applies to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, to whom the *First Folio* of 1623 is dedicated.

Bate has a long chapter on Essex, but here again the same point applies: no link has ever been demonstrated between William of Stratford and the Earl of Essex, and Bate doesn't even try to establish one. Like all the alleged noble relationships, he merely assumes that they existed, though he gets the sense that Shakespeare was only somewhere over halfway to being an Essex man. This would put him on the fringes of the Essex faction (which included Southampton) – curiously the same position occupied by Francis Bacon who, like the author of Shakespeare, had also been intimate with Southampton in the early 1590s. Indeed, if we constructed a list of the circle of friends of Shakespeare the author, there isn't a single name on it that would not also feature on Bacon's list.

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## Perhaps he is trying to convince himself that William qualifies as the Shakespeare mastermind – a gigantic leap of faith no more credible than belief in a loving deity

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One of Bate's concerns is to show that the Shakespeare play *Richard II* played a less important role in fomenting rebellion against Elizabeth than is commonly supposed. So he suggests that the Queen's reported parallel between herself and the deposed Richard, made in a remark to Lambarde, the Keeper of the Records – "I am Richard. Know ye not that?" – may never have been uttered.

One of the reasons Bate wants to downgrade the controversy over *Richard II* is to offer an explanation of the fact that Shakespeare was the one dramatist of his generation never to be imprisoned or censured in connection with his work. It is certainly a remarkable fact that has never had a satisfactory explanation – except by heretics on the authorship. For if William was not the author of the works ascribed to him but merely a front man (an allonym), then it might explain why he was left alone.

A man from the sticks of no consequence is hardly a threat to the state, whereas a nobleman close to people like Essex clearly is. Significantly, the play *Richard II* was first published in 1597, anonymously. But anonymity attracts attention by inviting inquiry as to the author. In the next edition in 1598 on the title page appeared the name 'William Shakespeare', a nonentity hardly worth the fuss of pursuit and arrest by the authorities.

It gets curiouser and curiouser. In that very year of 1597 William popped up in Stratford, buying New Place. Where did he get the money for the purchase? Was he paid for the use of his name? After all, somehow he became far richer than any other playwright of the period.

This may seem fanciful and Bate certainly gives short shrift to us Shakespeare authorship heretics, though he cannot resist returning to the question, if only to mock it. Perhaps he is trying to convince himself that William qualifies as the Shakespeare mastermind – a gigantic leap of faith no more credible than belief in a loving deity.

As his book on *The Genius of Shakespeare* illustrated, Bate is at his best when interpreting the works. His chapter on *The Tempest* is for me the highlight of the book. I do wish he had stuck to this intellectual approach instead of wandering off into fatuous speculations about the man. Thus he surmises that the dedicatee of the Sonnets, 'Mr WH', is a misprint for 'WS' or 'WSh', the author himself. Again, he tells us that Shakespeare's portrayal of doctors after *King Lear* was probably inspired by the appearance of Dr Hall, who later married William's daughter Susanna. And yet again: after 1607 the dramatist probably settled in Stratford and sent his plays to London, 'without being involved in actually putting them on'.

To a Baconian like myself, these tedious speculative musings – which have become the norm of Shakespeare scholarship – are all 'airy nothings' of no relevance to the works because they are premised on belief in England's greatest myth, namely that William of Stratford wrote Shakespeare. Trying to marry the wrong man to the verse diminishes the greatest writer the world has ever seen to a kind of superficial folk artist. He deserves infinitely better than that. □