

Foreword: Shakespeare's Biography and Its Discontents

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For Stanley Wells

This second online issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* is meant to be a follow up to the issue on *Authorship*, which was part of the former series of the journal and the last to appear in print (2012). That issue dealt with the ecdotic question of the absence of an original text within Shakespeare's canon; it focussed, in fact, on "il testo che non c'è", according to the witty definition of the late Giorgio Melchiori. It is now the turn of an investigation of the paradigm of authorship as it relates to Shakespeare's biography – an investigation which must inevitably wander, at times, navigating scarcity of evidence and the dispersed traces of the self's presence; to rephrase Melchiori's statement, "una vita che non c'è", that is, Nobody's life: a life that lacks the centre of a full identity, both empirical and existential, in keeping with the very essence of the theatre.

The *vexata quaestio* of Shakespeare's life echoes the Homeric question, as Giambattista Vico first felt – and it is no accident that Vico is taken as a starting point in Paola Colaiacomo's opening essay in this issue. Although "not so anonymous", as Stanley Wells reminds us with characteristic vigour substantiated by admirable scholarship (in his pro-Shakespearean manifesto written with Paul Edmondson, *Shakespeare Bites Back: Not So Anonymous*, 2011), Shakespeare's identity remains a compound and enigmatic one, in spite of the variety of modes in which narrative forms of biography have coped with the *disjecta membra* of his multiple theatrical personality: at once player, share-holder and writer; a company man, a collective character – consistent with the collaborative textuality of his plays.

With that having been said, it must be added here – so that misunderstandings and misplaced expectations may be dispelled once

and for all – that the editors of this issue take full responsibility for their decision to turn down contributions from supporters of the anti-Stratfordian cause, which are mostly non literary-minded – as proven by a number of unscholarly and badly written biographies, better suited to debates on Wikipedia or to the commercial demands satisfied by biography shelves in bookshops. When not the products of intellectual snobbery for Shakespeare's middle class status, deemed by some (Sigmund Freud and Henry James are just two examples) to be incompatible with the stature of his artistic achievement, resentment is the emotion they grow out of and foster. Resentment may of course be attractive – even when treated by serious scholarship as in the case of James Shapiro's *Contested Will* (2010) – but above all it sells: and it matters little whether the target of the challenge is the authority of tenured academic professors, or the prestige of the literary over the theatrical, or the ghostly authority of a powerful father-figure, a founder of the British nation. Not to mention the bitter ideological resentment in some North American circles against the cultural hegemony of the 'Englishness' that is incarnated in the myth of Shakespeare and therefore rejected, by Emerson and Whitman among others, so that an American identity may be built along the lines of a self-created Adam, with no past at his back, and with no need of a Shakespeare that is identified as an archetype of the founding origin of a nation. An attitude which may be relevant, for example, in Delia Bacon's first challenge to Shakespeare's name. Today, however, those who openly contest historical evidence are using the Internet as their weapon of choice, with the clear intention to expand the 'conspiracy theory' by making it pass as supremely democratic – the legitimate speculation of 'open minds': in fact coming across as extremely aggressive and mean. And of course Shakespeare strikes back in several ways – not only in the above mentioned vindication by Wells and Edmondson, but also, for example, in Harold Bloom's highly entertaining mockery of a 'politically correct' Shakespeare, which we are very glad to be able to reprint here with the author's permission.

Incidentally, irony is an oft-wielded tool in the debate over Shakespeare's identity within the academic sphere, where life writing, previously a form tackled mainly by professional writers, has become a field that is highly frequented by specialists in 'biographical studies', in partial response to the demands of the cultural market. In other words, it has become a lucrative trend in the Shakespeare

industry, brilliantly commented upon by David Ellis in his contribution to this issue: on either side of the Atlantic, "biography became a prize for those Shakespeareans from the Academy who had become eminent in their profession. Given the limitations of data with which they had to deal, this was as if highly trained athletes were required to qualify at international level so that they could then participate in an annual British sack race" (see p. 24 in this issue). Which reminds one of Sterne's comment on the effects of the press in *Tristram Shandy*: "Tell me, ye learned, shall we for ever be adding so much to the *bulk* – so little to the *stock*? Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another?" Obviously the core issue is not so much the bulk, that is the quantity of information, as the kind; Stanley Wells is right about the amount of historical material that we do possess, but even such material may prove inadequate if we take *life*, not minute detail, as the true subject of a biography. Which inevitably causes frustration in the biographer, who must resign her/himself to welcome Shakespeare as a stranger.

New, however – as Ellis argues – are the perspectives on the same, 'old' material that rely on an original use of background history, as in the case of Stephen Greenblatt's juxtaposing of empirical records with conjectures prompted by his creative imagination, as well as in James Shapiro's brilliant 'micro-biographies', which breathe new life into historical data by concentrating on two seminal years of Shakespeare's life: 1599, a year that is surveyed in the light of claims about the genesis of *Hamlet*, and 1606, denominated as the year of *King Lear* because of some patent symptoms of the civil strife that was to come. Equally new is the emphasis on an 'ungentle' Shakespeare, as Katherine Duncan-Jones would have him from a feminist point of view – corroborating Edward Bond's vision of Shakespeare's late years, written and staged in *Bingo* as having been spent in cynical exploitation of his daughter and of the victims of the tragedy of the enclosures.

Shakespearean biographies still continue to appear under changing perspectives, and yet discontent persists as a keyword for them, bearing the imprint of Samuel Johnson's skepticism in spite of his deep commitment to the theory and practice of biography at a time of its secularization and involvement in the construction of subjectivity. Johnson's awareness – to which he lucidly resigned himself in *The Idler* (n. 84, 24 November 1759) – of the change brought about by the genre's

emancipation from its religious and classical avatars amounts to the statement that “by conjecture only can one man judge of another’s motives or sentiments”. A biographer’s portrait, therefore, cannot but be inherently imperfect.

Johnson’s meditations have provided a guideline for this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare*, together with Virginia Woolf’s own take on the theory and practice of biography, which she would elucidate many years later, wondering if biography could not be said to be an art after all: thus shifting the focus of the authorial/authorship question from the aim of ‘life writing’ in the nineteenth-century documentary style (anchored in her own father’s *Dictionary*) to the goal of ‘writing life’, in the form she experimented with in *Orlando* – a way to overcome the discontents of biography, and one which gave a voice to the epistemological crisis brought about by the modernist investigation.

Within Shakespearean scholarship, a similar crisis can be said to have struck the founding paradigms of selfhood and authorial character, including national identity. It undermined the Romantic quest for the origin of the author’s life to be reflected in his *oeuvre*, which, however, continued to be endorsed in Italy by Benedetto Croce. One wonders, in fact, whether the absence of a tradition of Shakespearean biography in Italy should not be attributed to Croce’s hegemony in twentieth-century Italian culture. But the crisis also affected the grounds of the empirical trend in favour of positive records, of which Sidney Lee’s 1898 biography is a monumental testimony (interestingly, it was republished by Cambridge University Press in 2012), not to mention the even more influential studies of ‘facts and problems’ by E. K. Chambers (1930) and Samuel Schoenbaum (1975) (see Gary Taylor’s essay in this issue).

Precisely the change brought about in Shakespearean biography by the breakdown of the constitutive codes of biography-writing in Romantic and Victorian culture is the key to which the analyses offered by most of our contributors is attuned. Some essays reflect the waning of a long-standing, incurable antagonism between fact and fiction (Greenblatt’s successful and controversial *Will in the World*, 2004, is a case in point). Others, on the other hand, echo the heyday of deconstruction under the influence of Foucault and Derrida which so strongly affected the paradigm of the centrality of the self as a measure of identity (so that Nadia Fusini can discuss Shakespeare’s “many lives” and Paola Colaiacomo can outline a global image that reaches

far beyond national identity). All of this leads to the emancipation of biography from its endemic marginality with regard to the established canon of history: but it also leads to its very liberation as a form of literature, which increasingly moves towards the acknowledgement of its hybrid form as one that is intrinsically endowed with value. As a hybrid form, it is given the credit that Remo Bodei associates with piano playing (in his *Immaginare altre vite*, 2013), where the right hand plays the light key of the imagination while the left hand strikes the grave, low key of solid facts, the two moods interrogating each other according to the biographical vision of Virginia Woolf (see, on this, John Drakakis' contribution). And throbbing between the two is the ghost of Shakespeare's life, an absence. This is precisely what happens in life writing: the traces of Shakespeare's life (as in Stephen Greenblatt's essay reprinted here) are evidence of the author's presence being deferred in the writing process, which according to Derrida involves an ontological separation between the body (the hand) and its symbolic representation (the pen). Derrida's argument is all the more relevant if we consider Shakespeare's many uncanny references to the tyrannical violence of penning and imprinting, as well as his aversion to the inscription of a (his?) name. Paradoxically, Shakespeare's biography today can be enfranchised from the myth of evidence only to acquire the definitiveness of a tombstone.

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