

# Detobel's Collected Essays

## INTRODUCTION

By Robert Detobel, copyright 2009

This set of essays arrives on the heels of a spate of new Shakespearean biographies, all clearly seeking to place the man's life within striking distance of his immortal works, an endeavor that has, due to the apparent paucity of the documentary record, been conducted primarily in the realm of speculation and fiction. It is our observation that this relatively recent explosion of searching for a connection between Shakespeare's life and his art is in direct response to increased public awareness of a growing body of evidence that the man traditionally accepted for centuries as the Bard of Avon may not in fact have been the true poet.

Apparently in hopes of dispelling all doubt in the Stratford player and shareholder's identity as 'Shakespeare,' traditional biographers have stepped up their attempts to locate the life of the incumbent bard in a literary historical context, presumably poring over all extant contemporary documents in the quest of any salient detail that might have escaped detection until now. Nevertheless it is our contention, based upon our own research, that a number of key primary source documents have not been thoroughly examined and placed within their rightful historical context by previous scholars and historians of the era. In our view searching for Shakespeare (according to the traditional biography) is like waiting for Godot. Godot, we note, is actually a pseudonym, in everyday life his name is God. For many, certainly, Shakespeare is also a

deity, a god. And was Shakespeare in everyday life called Shakespeare, or was the name a pseudonym? Who was Shakespeare?

Pozzo (*peremptory*): Who is Godot?

Estragon: Godot?

Pozzo: You took me for Godot.

Estragon: Oh no, sir, not for an instant, sir.

Pozzo: Who is he?

Vladimir: Oh, he's a... he's a kind of acquaintance.

Estragon: Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.

Vladimir: True... we don't know him very well... but all the same.

The traditional biographer/Vladimir would certainly challenge our parallel here: 'We know more about Shakespeare than we do about the majority of contemporary authors. True, we wish we knew more about him *as a writer*. We have no letters *from* him because none are extant. But we do have letters *to* him, well...we have *one* anyway. It was found among his papers, that is, the papers of the man who wrote to Shakespeare. It was his neighbor Richard Quiney who sent the letter, or more exactly, intended to send it. But he never did. But all the same.'

Beckett's play is staged in a barren landscape, except for one tree – which is withered. At the end of the play the sun sets, the moon rises, lending the withered tree a spectral nimbus.

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

*(They don't move)*

Vladimir and Estragon rather famously stay put, never advancing a single step. So ends many a biography of Shakespeare, searching for the man behind the works without progress; even though these 'biographies' may move 'upward' by imagining his life, or 'downward,' toward the underground, concentrating on the atmosphere influencing those who lived and worked around him. The proponents of the bard-as-secret-Catholic theory, for example, argue that in the Tudor and Stuart police state Shakespeare was forced to lie low. He dared not speak too much too openly, due to his religion. Yet can this be the reason Shakespeare's real life in the *literary* world is virtually invisible?

...

We too will be following an underground route, or subway. It will take us but three stations to meet the author of the Shakespearean works. The first stop is St Paul's Churchyard, at the sign of the Half Eagle and the Key, the shop of William Jaggard, printer of the First Folio. The next is not far off, Stationer's Hall, the building of the Stationer's Company, where Shakespeare's works were registered for printing. Finally we arrive at Botolph Lane, where Francis Meres resides. We call it "subway" because the primary concern will not be to find the author. His identity at this moment is only a by-product of our first goal: to find answers to problems related to publication in general and of Shakespearean works in particular. These questions are of a technical nature. Some have thus far been unsatisfactorily answered by scholars, others haven't been addressed at all. To begin with, how is the prefatory material to the First Folio to be understood? Secondly, what was the true role of the printer James Roberts in the publication of

Shakespeare's plays between 1598 and 1604? Finally, what is the significance of Francis Meres' "Comparative Discourse", a symmetrized name-dropping of ancient and English authors, in which Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies are set upon a par with the hallowed classic tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Plautus?

At the end of part I the identity of the author will be known, but of his personality we shall have learnt hardly anything. The advantage of a formal approach, a trip by subway, is also its limitation. The goal is all, it is firmly traced between the walls of a tunnel, eye and mind undistracted by a variegated landscape. Contrary to Vladimir and Estragon we'll have made headway, but our scene will still be no less barren than theirs. Having attained our goal of identifying the author (in our estimation unequivocally) by a very formal procedure, we still cannot claim to know anything of him as a man, the singular individual who would one day be named 'the soul of the age.'

But orthodox theorists have claimed to know at least something personal about him. Therefore (before pursuing our own way in part III) we will look at what is universally regarded as their principal evidence, said to be found in Robert Greene's infamous invective against Shakespeare as "Shake-scene" in a letter in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*. Is it possible that all puzzling aspects of this letter have not been thoroughly examined within the proper historical framework? To contextualize this question we have reviewed a wider base of contemporary information, including an examination of the possible role of the distinguished but controversial scholar Gabriel Harvey in the transmission of Greene's papers, among them the famous letter in *GGW*. According to traditional biographers, this letter provides the first glimpse of the personality of

Shakespeare, as penned by an embittered playwright and poet who was envious of his fellow's success. Yet after careful review of the events surrounding the publication of this pamphlet, and of the language in related documents, our conclusion is that 'Shake-scene' was anything but a playwright, though he was most certainly an actor whose prominence as a player would have made his identity instantly recognizable to any contemporary reader and/or theatregoer. On the other hand, some unorthodox theorists have concluded that he was a cold-hearted moneylender, based in large part upon a legal record known as the Clayton suit. We will also examine this document, one that has in our view been misunderstood by orthodox and unorthodox theorists alike.

The subject of part III is the concealed poet, without quotation marks, for his presence is no longer a mere scent in the wind, he is now visible, palpable, and he is less concealed than not named. He first comes into view in one of Greene's pastoral romances, reappearing later in a brief report by another author as the foremost poet of the 1580s. We see him in the midst of the famous literary quarrel raging in the first half of the 1590s between Harvey and Thomas Nashe, the outstanding satirist of his time, though Shakespeare is strangely absent from the *contretemps* (or is he?). We witness that he is repeatedly apostrophized by both Harvey and Nashe as the dominant figure amongst the London literati of the 1580s and 90s, a prolific patron and premier poet in his own right. Curiously, he has remained a blind spot in English literary history.

He will turn out to be the same person we identified as the poet Shakespeare at the end of part I, and here we find him, the pre-eminent literary light at the teeming centre of the world of English literature for the last two decades of the sixteenth century.

