Introduction

Paul Edmondson and Paul Franssen

This volume is dedicated to the life of Shakespeare, from a variety of angles ranging from biofiction to what we would recognize as more traditional biography. To begin with the latter: from one perspective, Shakespearean biography may be said to be booming, with a major new account of the life, or even two, coming out just about every year. Paradoxically, from another perspective, Shakespearean biography might be said to be in crisis: not a crisis of dearth, but one of plenty. How can standards of quality be maintained as the quantity burgeons? Such questions are raised by the inconsistent, often even contradictory views on Shakespeare's life aired by biographers. One reason for this plurality is undoubtedly gaps in the record of Shakespeare's life, particularly where his private affairs are concerned. This is not to say that we know hardly anything about him, but rather that each new biographer will have a different way of joining the dots together.

It is almost inevitable that some speculation will be mixed in with the biography proper. Perhaps, as Graham Holderness has it, 'there

Notes for this section begin on page 8.

"SHAKESPEARE AND HIS BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERLIVES" Edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FranssenShakespeare

is no such thing as a speculation-free biography of Shakespeare' to begin with.[1] Taking the example of Shakespeare's death as narrated in half a dozen biographies, Holderness shows how this topos has lent itself to as many different readings, which to a greater or lesser extent reflect the biographer's own background or agenda. Some female biographers, for instance, focus on the role of Anne, one (Katherine Duncan-Jones) seeing her as the victim of her irascible husband, who becomes more and more intractable as the end (from syphilis) comes nearer; another (Germaine Greer) casts Anne as the loving provider of care (Holderness, 11). Similar analyses could be made of many other episodes in Shakespeare's life, for whereas we have a reasonable insight into his finances and his writing, his heart has remained locked to posterity. The role of his parents, his attitude to his children, the emotions to be read into his last will and testament, with its notorious bequest of the second-best bed, have all been subject to endless speculation, with vastly different outcomes. The same is true for his religious and political affiliations.

In this volume, Katherine Scheil investigates how the circumstances of Shakespeare's marriage have been rendered in almost antithetical ways in half a dozen recent scholarly biographies, and Robert Sawyer looks at representations of the relations between Shakespeare and his nearest rival, Christopher Marlowe, in the light of the reactions to the acts of terrorism carried out on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Both confirm that not only is Shakespeare biography (like, to some extent, all biography) a matter of speculation, but also that the biographer's own historical or personal background is likely to determine what the resulting portrait will be like. Nor is this plurality of scholarly views a recent phenomenon. As Wolfgang Weiss shows in his contribution to this volume, Shakespeare's religious affiliation was a topic of often heated discussion in Germany in the nineteenth century, fuelled less by the emergence of new documents than by internal German political tensions over the place of religion in the new nation state. Clara Calvo, similarly, shows how the 1916 Tercentenary, in the middle of the Great War, was an occasion for the various belligerent nations to claim Shakespeare, his person and his works, for their own side. This applied not merely to international politics, but also to rivalry between Stratford and London over the right to commemorate Shakespeare, and to the British class divide; and to the careful reader, it also reveals the incipient tensions between Britain and its colonies. Much

"SHAKESPEARE AND HIS BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERLIVES" Edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FranssenShakespeare

as Shakespeare was used to wallpaper over faultlines at the time, by now the incompatibility between Shakespeare the English patriot and the German construction of *unser Shakespeare,* just to mention one example, has become glaringly obvious.

Perhaps the most challenging of all possible questions to ask a biographer is 'How do you decide which are the most important moments in Shakespeare's life?' – challenging because it exposes a major faultline which runs through all Shakespearean biography: fiction. The way in which biographers decide which story they want to tell and how to give it shape will always include, to some extent, the same process as the writing of fiction.

Acknowledged fictions about Shakespeare's life are the subject of three chapters in this volume. All of these attempt to lay bare the discourses underlying the fantasies. Marga Munkelt asks herself what messages young readers may learn from juvenile novels featuring Shakespeare, focusing on the analogies between life and performance. Ángel-Luis Pujante and Noemí Vera have chosen two works by the contemporary Spanish author José Carlos Somoza in which Shakespeare features as a character. These turn him into a gifted craftsman, but otherwise a pretty ordinary, fallible man. In his chapter on what he calls 'Bard-baiting', Richard O'Brien discusses some recent developments in fictions about Shakespeare, which are less obviously bardolatrous. On the surface, these contemporary biofictions appear to cut Shakespeare down to size; yet, O'Brien argues, in the end they do subscribe to the canonization of his works, whatever their take on his person.

As we no longer find fault with Shakespeare's history plays for anachronisms or inaccuracies, we also accept a large degree of poetic licence in fiction about Shakespeare. But does that also apply to serious scholarly biographies? Should we welcome the multiplicity of possible readings of his life as more testimony to Shakespeare's myriad-mindedness, not merely in his works but even in his life? Perhaps we should just accept, as Holderness suggests, that we are incapable of transcending our historical moment, so that we can never know, only speculate; and we may accept, with Holderness, that an intelligent critic like Stephen Greenblatt, in *Will in the World,* can make sense of Hamlet's dilemma by comparing it to his own, and, what is more, that he is then justified in speculating that Shakespeare himself might have experienced a similar emotional state at the time he wrote *Hamlet*. Holderness argues that

"SHAKESPEARE AND HIS BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERLIVES" Edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FranssenShakespeare

it is possible to arrive at what he calls 'empathic speculation' that has the 'critical and satirical detachment necessary to distinguish between genuine critical revelation and narcissism in the biographical form' (17). Without that detachment, we may well end up with an infinite number of autobiographical readings. Oscar Wilde has said that 'the highest, as the lowest, form of criticism is a mode of autobiography', and suggested that biography, too, is often a mode of autobiography, in his 'Portrait of Mr W. H.'[2] Wilde's own thinking about Shakespeare as a person, and his gradual recognition that, indeed, he himself was also projecting his own personality and experience onto his hero in 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.', is the subject of Reiko Oya's chapter. Oya focusses on Wilde, but juxtaposes his views with those of others in Wilde's circle, such as Lord Alfred Douglas and Frank Harris, who also came to define themselves with reference to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

Is such total detachment demanded by Holderness even possible, however? Those who argue the impossibility of transcending one's own period and culture often hold that a similar limitation obtains when it comes to emotions: as every culture dictates or at least limits the emotions that are available to the subject in any given circumstance, this also casts doubt on whether, say, Greenblatt's emotions in the present really have any bearing on Hamlet's emotions described four hundred years earlier – let alone Shakespeare's emotions. If Greenblatt's emotional response is actually vastly different from that of someone in the early-modern period, how reliable does that make his interpretations of Shakespeare's emotional world? More practically, if biography is really no more than a species of fiction, albeit one that seems to follow a different set of rules, does it then have any claim to public funding, at a time when the academy is increasingly expected to prove its legitimacy – precisely by acting as a healthy counterbalance to the fact-free politics and fake news that have been with us for many years now? Many biographies are, after all, written by academics working for universities. In 2011, a leading Dutch social psychologist, Diederik Stapel, was disgraced for making up the data underpinning his research; how far is a biography based on a mix of real data and fantasy fundamentally different from such fraudulent practices? On the one hand, we may believe that the positivist attitude to biography expounded, for example, in the work of S. Schoenbaum is too restrictive; on the other, we must also heed the warning implied by a book such as Rodney Bolt's

"SHAKESPEARE AND HIS BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERLIVES" Edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FranssenShakespeare

History Play. In what seems at first sight like a scholarly biography of Marlowe, Bolt constructs a theory of how Marlowe faked his own death in Deptford, and then went on writing from the Continent, having his works produced and printed under the name of his junior colleague, William Shakespeare.[3] Rather than propounding a serious anti-Shakespearean argument, however, Bolt's book plays with history to make a serious point: that so-called scholarly biographies, too, are often based on a little fact and a great deal of speculation. As Bolt himself expresses it, borrowing Mark Twain's metaphor, Shakespeare biographies resemble those huge brontosaurus skeletons, reconstructed from 'nine bones and six hundred barrels of plaster of Paris'.[4] Bolt himself, in fact, goes beyond using plaster of Paris, and even hides one of the genuine bones, as he ignores the fact that Marlowe's death is one of the most thoroughly well documented: the coroner's report survives and is signed by sixteen independent jurors. Nevertheless, there may be some truth in Bolt's metaphor; and the least we might do is to follow Graham Holderness's example in his *Nine Lives*, in distinguishing as clearly as we can between what is more or less factual and what is wholly fictional: as if we built up a brontosaurus skeleton where the plaster of Paris has a distinctly different colour from the bones.

There may be an additional reason for being careful about using Shakespeare's name in vain. As Paul Franssen shows in his opening chapter on fictional appearances of Shakespeare's ghost, Shakespeare's authority has often been borrowed to shore up a variety of causes. At first this was more or less seriously intended, but as the special pleading in his name came to be more and more obvious, the very phenomenon of the Shakespearean ghost lost all its credibility, so that he dwindled from a regal spectre into a comic, even ridiculous figure. By analogy, too many biographies of Shakespeare as a man of flesh and blood, all claiming him for different views, may be detrimental to the reputation, not just of the biographical genre, but even of Shakespeare himself.

"SHAKESPEARE AND HIS BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERLIVES" Edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FranssenShakespeare

Paul Edmondson is Head of Research for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. He is the author, co-author, and co-editor of many books and articles about Shakespeare, including biographical and performance studies, as well as work on the plays and poems. He is also a priest in the Church of England.

Paul Franssen has been a lecturer in the English Department of Utrecht University since 1979. He obtained his PhD there in 1987. He specializes in early-modern English literature and in South African literature. His main research interest is in Shakespeare. In addition to authoring a wide range of articles on early-modern writers and J. M. Coetzee, as well as reviews of productions of Shakespeare, he has co-edited books on *Shakespeare and War* (Palgrave, 2008, with Ros King), *Shakespeare and European Politics* (AUP, 2008, with Dirk Delabastita and Jozef de Vos) and *The Author as Character* (AUP, 1999, with Ton Hoenselaars). He is the author of *Shakespeare's Literary Lives: The Author as Character in Fiction and Film* (CUP, 2016).

Notes

1. Graham Holderness, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (London: Continuum, 2011), 12.
2. Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (1889), in *Oscar Wilde: Complete Short Fiction*, ed. Ian Small (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1994), 47–79. The epigram comes from Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 21.
3. Rodney Bolt, *History Play: The Lives and Afterlives of Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).
4. Bolt, *History Play,* 313, quoting from Twain's 1909 pamphlet, *Is Shakespeare Dead?*

"SHAKESPEARE AND HIS BIOGRAPHICAL AFTERLIVES" Edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson. https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FranssenShakespeare