

Swansong at the Seattle Shakespeare Company;
Or, Historical Fiction vs. Disciplined Historicism:
A Swansong for Speculative Biography?

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Abstract

This essay opens with a review of the Seattle Shakespeare Company's production of *Swansong*, Patrick Page's new play about the stormy friendship between Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. After examining the highpoints of the script and performance, the essay proceeds to read the rivalry between the two playwrights as a meta-commentary on the unspoken rivalry between academic scholarship and historical fiction. Since New Historicism has in effect elevated the "plausible" to an acceptable target of scholarly inquiry, historical fiction has gained an unprecedented respectability. As literary historians now retreat from speculative methodologies, historical fiction may provide a significant alternative venue for imaginative reconstructions eschewed by documentary biography.

Swansong, by Patrick Page. Seattle Shakespeare Company. 7-23
January 2008. *Director* Stephanie Shine. *Scenic Designer* Jason Phillips.
Lighting Tim Wratten. *Sound* Matt Starritt. *Voice and Text Director*
Kimberly White. *Music Consultant* Sean Patrick Taylor. *Stage Manager*
Mary Cannon. *Performers* Tim Gouran (William Shakespeare),
Brandon Whitehead (Ben Jonson), Ian Bell (John Heminges).

Despite the best efforts of literary scholars such as I. A. Shapiro and Samuel Schoenbaum to huff and puff and blow it down, the Mermaid Tavern continues to enjoy the designation of a protected landmark in the Shakespeare mythos.¹ While it has been declared off-limits to the serious biographer — even Greenblatt's notoriously speculative best-seller avoids perching on one of its bar-stools — tours of the hallowed tavern have been and still are conducted by historical fiction, from Alfred Noyes's *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern* (1913) to George Cronyn's *Mermaid Tavern: Kit Marlowe's Story* (1937) and Shirley Barker's *Liza Bowe: A Novel of Elizabethan Times and the Mermaid Tavern* (1956), to more recent works like Robert Nye's *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* (1999, first published in 1998) and Robert Brustein's play *The English Channel* (2007, published in 2008). The reasons for the myth's persistence are not difficult to comprehend; we need to humanize our cultural icons, to sense the pulse beating within the bloodless marble. Particularly since the biographical record on Shakespeare is so scanty and dull, consisting mostly of legal and financial documents, the urge to enliven it by picturing him and Jonson trading quips and talking shop over a flagon of sack is all but irresistible. The Mermaid Tavern allows us to give these literary titans a local habitation and, more importantly, provides a kind of cockpit for a sparring match between the two opposing artistic temperaments they are believed to represent. Inevitably, the tavern serves as the *mis-en-scène* for some verbal jousting in a new play about this famous literary rivalry, entitled *Swansong*, which debuted at Westport in 2002 (earning a nomination for Best New Play by the American Theatre Critics Association), played off-Broadway and at the Kennedy Center last autumn, and received its West Coast premiere this January from the Seattle Shakespeare Company.

Jonson vs. Shakespeare

Although its author, Patrick Page, is an actor by trade (*Swansong* is his first stab at playwriting), he evidently steeped himself in the biographical and critical reception of his subjects. *Swansong* by and large sketches the familiar diptych of the two playwrights that goes back at least to Restoration wits such as Thomas Fuller and John Dryden: Jonson, the quarrelsome poet of plodding erudition, versus Shakespeare, the gentle poet of nature who never blotted a line. Page dramatizes the contrast in a scene at the Mermaid in which Jonson pontificates on the Unities, while Shakespeare rebuffs him with a spontaneous monologue about holding a mirror up to nature (which he then scribbles down in his notebook, vowing to insert it in his new tragedy, while Jonson rambles on, oblivious). In this moment, Jonson inspires Shakespeare, but for the bulk of the play the opposite prevails: Under Shakespeare's tutelage, Jonson learns to shun pedantic allusions and take dictation from the voice murmuring within. Thus, we learn that Shakespeare was, if not the co-author, the co-muse of Jonson's famed love song "To Celia."

In essence, Page turns the story of this literary rivalry into a meditation on the nature of creativity itself, in which Jonson plays Salieri to Shakespeare's Mozart — the parallels with *Amadeus* are at times actually obtrusive. But considering that Page wrote the part of Jonson for himself and is best known for his performance in the title role in the Broadway production of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, perhaps a more revealing analogue for his conception of the character would be with Seuss's impish malcontent. Certainly, Jonson comes across in the early scenes as something of a green-eyed monster bitterly envious of Shakespeare's talents, his heart barricaded against the miracle of the Bard's immortal genius. The play opens late at night in Jonson's study as he struggles with Heminges's commission to write an encomium for the late colleague whom he suspects will put his own reputation in permanent eclipse. In order to finish the poem before daybreak, Jonson must set down his quill and recall the saga of their volatile friendship in an extended flashback that comprises the majority of the play.

We first see Shakespeare befriend a surly Jonson, who has just joined the Chamberlain's Men, and the two authors play a drinking game in which Jonson must name something he loves and Shakespeare something he hates. Ten pints of sack later, these stereotypes collapse as Shakespeare spews venomous insults at his family and social hypocrisy, while Jonson displays a more tender side — until, in an ominous and heavy-handed image, he whips out a pistol and takes target-practice at a swan. The action then shifts to the Mermaid in 1600, where we listen to the lickspittle Heminges begging Shakespeare to finish his new masterpiece while ignoring Jonson, who stands beside him clutching the completed manuscript of *Volpone*. Only then does Jonson rail at Shakespeare for pandering to the masses and mock the anachronisms in *Julius Caesar*, as Page insinuates that jealousy motivates his critiques. In the play's penultimate scene (reminiscent of Edward Bond's *Bingo*), Jonson visits Shakespeare languishing in retirement in Stratford. Now their situation is reversed: Jonson sits at the zenith of his popularity, while Shakespeare appears dispirited and neglected, a Prospero figure serenely resigning his plays to oblivion — that is, until Jonson unveils a copy of his *Works* in Folio fresh from the press. Far from the "merry meeting" described in Ward's journal, the two exchange some bitter words and Shakespeare, in a fit of self-pity, leaps into the Avon on a winter's day, catching a fatal cold. His death is in effect a suicide, prompted by envy at Jonson's success. Thus, while Shakespeare's ghost never actually materializes on stage, it haunts Jonson in a very literal sense. If Page's version seems a bit — well, theatrical — his ability to make this scenario even seem remotely feasible testifies to how little we know for certain about Shakespeare's final days. Written fifty years after the event, Ward's testimony is too late to be admissible (not to mention medically implausible; drinking does not induce fevers).

When *Swansong* returns to Jonson's study in the closing scene, both his writing block and his enmity have been lifted by the reverie. After witnessing Shakespeare instruct his colleague to imagine Celia's face in his mind's eye when composing his love song, it becomes evident that in conjuring the flashback, Jonson was following Shakespeare's advice when he completed "To the Memory of My Beloved." Fittingly, the poem that commemorates Shakespeare's transcendent genius is represented as the triumph of Shakespeare's fluidity and naturalism over Jonson's calculating classicism.

The cast of the Seattle production did a phenomenal job of sustaining the intensity in what is basically a two-man show, punctuated with a few brief appearances by Heminges. The goateed Gouran created three distinct and credible Shakespeares: a young, amiable bohemian, a successful middle-aged gentleman — the proud owner of New Place — and a prematurely old, world-weary cynic. Brandon Whitehead gave an even more dynamic performance as Jonson, altering not simply between the acts, but a dozen or so times within the span of a single scene at the whim of his fierce mood swings. Although on occasion, Whitehead's voice became shrill in his self-righteous tantrums, his recollections of a traumatic boyhood and his quarrels with his philistine bricklayer of a step-father rendered Jonson more sympathetic than he is usually represented, even in sympathetic biographies, such as that by David Riggs. One of the more memorable aspects of the production was Whitehead's eerie habit of staring out into the audience when addressing Shakespeare's ghost. During such moments as though we — the patrons and subscribers of the Seattle Shakespeare Company — were a living embodiment of the Bard's legacy, a tribunal of posterity which, simply by purchasing a ticket, had already issued its verdict: While *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* can still hold the stage, there is no Seattle Jonson Company. There is, then, an element of irony in the fact that while literary scholars have become more appreciative of the interplay between literary text and social context, it is the eminently topical nature of Jonson's comedies and his commitment to replicating that context with his pungent realism that render much of his plays' humor impenetrable to modern audiences.

Academic Scholarship vs. Historical Fiction

The most intriguing feature of *Swansong*, however, was not its vivid, yet conventional, exploration of the Jonson/Shakespeare rivalry, but the way in which it inadvertently conducted a meta-commentary on the rivalry between academic scholarship and historical fiction. In the current critical climate, so attuned as it is to the way in which literature engages with history and, conversely, the literary qualities that suffuse historical narrative, *Swansong* demonstrates the peculiar authority of historical fiction to generate truth-claims that vie with and undermine

those advanced by traditional criticism.² Much of the substance of Page's play-text is cobbled together from the same evidence raided by literary historians: Jonson's musings in *Discoveries*, his quips recorded by Drummond, his remarks in the Prologue to *Bartholomew Fair*, and a string of apocryphal anecdotes about their poetry slams in the *Mermaid*, inter-larded with some of Page's own fabrications. Since Jonson commented in print on Shakespeare far more than Shakespeare commented on Jonson, our understanding of their relationship remains rather one-sided. But by stitching together the documentary evidence, the lore, and creative patchwork into a stimulating and plausible yarn, *Swansong* reflects the acuity of Anthony Burgess's observation: "The virtue of a historical novel is also its vice — the flatfooted affirmation of possibility as fact" (Burgess 2003, 271-72). The vice, wild and unverifiable conjecture, is self-evident and one to which (as we shall see) academic criticism is by no means immune; the virtue Burgess alludes to is the genre's capacity to piece together the fragmented historical record and mythos into a logical and compelling narrative, to realize with conviction what literary history can only posit with circumspection.

Take, for instance, the scene in which Page incorporates the mid-seventeenth century anecdote that Shakespeare once teased his friend with an impromptu epitaph:

Here lies Ben Jonson
 Who while he liv'd was a slow thing
 And now being dead is no thing.

While I had always considered this inane couplet beneath Shakespeare, Gouran's imitation of the drunken Bard giggling as he pronounced the lines made them sound almost authentic, just the sort of playful doggerel the poet would come up with in his cups. Page then embellishes the legend by having Jonson retort with his own mean-spirited epitaph on Shakespeare. Jonson's supercilious couplet on his rival foreshadowed the elegy he would later write for the First Folio and made its praise of Shakespeare seem all the more sincere and poignant. Although the play does not demand that we accept its hypothetical ruminations as facts, it invites viewers to see the game of Epitaphs as a cunning metaphor for the critical process by which each of these poets would be involved in establishing the reputation of the other. Curiously, James Shapiro opens his chapter on Jonson and Shakespeare in *Rival Playwrights* with this exact same anecdote about the epitaph and extracts from it a very similar lesson to that of *Swansong*. Like Page, Shapiro is not concerned with the "truth" of this incident, but rather with what it reveals about "the weightier influence that an established dramatist can wield over a rival's place in literary history" (Shapiro 1991, 134). In its willingness to sift through the disreputable mythos for critical insights, *Rival Playwrights* encroaches on the terrain also annexed by historical fiction.

Like many scholarly studies of Renaissance dramatists, *Swansong* also vets literary texts for traces of the authors' personalities. Just as Russ McDonald juxtaposes Shakespeare's and Jonson's

plays to construct a dialogue between the playwrights (McDonald 1988), Page contrasts Sonnet 116 and "To Celia," *Julius Caesar* and *Sejanus* to indicate how the two authors borrowed and learned from each other. Predictably, the balance of allusions slants in Shakespeare's favor, as Page's script features a number of episodes adapted from his plays — some of them inspired (Jonson serving as Shakespeare's Horatio who must tell the story of his friend's achievement to the world) and some downright silly (Jonson approaching Shakespeare for love-advice, which leads them to re-enact Orlando and Rosalind's role-playing charade). By deciphering spurious legends and fictional texts as clues to the dramatist's life, *Swansong* again calls attention to the unsettling similarity between the rhetorical tactics of the literary historian and the creator of historical fiction.

There is, of course, one obvious difference: The historian ostensibly pursues the elusive "truth" of past events, while the fiction writer need aspire only to verisimilitude. Faced with a dearth of evidence, however, many biographers have embroidered the documentary record to construct merely plausible scenarios about their subjects. By making the "plausible" a respectable target of scholarly inquiry, New Historicist methodology has, in effect, narrowed the gap between these genres. While much scholarship that passes as New Historicist manages to dodge this rhetorical indiscretion, it seems particularly rife among biographies, when the focal point shifts from the culture at large to the subject's own internal drama. Indeed, the very notion of New Historicist biography might be considered a contradiction in terms, given that its return to history had been emboldened by post-structuralism's coroner's report on the death of the Author. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt lists as the very first article of the New Historicist credo: "There can be no appeals to genius as the sole origin of the energies of great art" (Greenblatt 1988, 12). Readers familiar with the theoretical sophistication of his prior work were therefore taken aback by some of the locutions in Greenblatt's recent biography, in which Shakespeare forges his masterpieces in the "core of his being" (Greenblatt 2004, 321). Furthermore, in its most graceful articulations, New Historicism (unlike its "Old" forbearer) had never demanded that the author have a precise knowledge of particular historical occurrences, much less be physically present as they unfolded. Plays such as *Tamburlaine* were seen to feed off the "acquisitive energies of English merchants, entrepreneurs, and adventurers" (Greenblatt 1980, 194) without stipulating that Marlowe himself ever set foot in Sierra Leone. But under pressure to locate the individual in the thick of his contemporary cultural drama, the New Historicist biographer unwittingly nudges his subject deeper into the swirling currents of historical fiction. Thus, the critical furor that greeted *Will in the World*, with its fairy-tale invocations to "let us imagine," not only stems from the way the book crossed the boundary between academic and popular biography — as M. G. Aune suggests in a recent issue

of *Borrowers and Lenders* — but also from its disturbing mash of historical fiction and academic discourse (Aune 2006).

Lately, a backlash has been mounting against the unbridled conjectures in biographies on Renaissance playwrights. In a new collection on the subject, J. R. Mulryne cautions against "the pitfalls of a slipshod historicism" (Mulryne 2006, 1), while Alan Nelson issues a "Plea for Documentary Discipline" (Nelson 2006, 55). Following this more rigorous approach, another contributor, Ian Donaldson, demonstrates that the very notion upon which *Swansong* hinges — that Jonson harbored a grudge against Shakespeare — is largely an eighteenth century invention (Donaldson 2006, 244-45). While this return to a more scrupulous historicism is warranted, historical fiction will and should continue to provide an outlet for imaginative reconstructions of the past. The relationship between the genres is at bottom not an antagonistic, but a symbiotic one. The recent spike in historical fiction set in the Elizabethan era has been galvanized by a permissive attitude towards speculation in academic criticism; Greenblatt, for instance, served as a consultant on the fanciful blockbuster *Shakespeare in Love* (Hedrick and Reynolds 2000, 25),³ while Burgess acknowledges his debt to Charles Nicholl in the afterword to *Dead Man in Deptford* (Burgess 1993, 271), to name just two examples. Conversely, the audacity with which historical fiction parades supposition as fact can illuminate how little historians do know for certain. This is not to suggest that historical fiction can serve as a laboratory for testing the likelihood of, say, Shakespeare's crypto-Catholicism or Marlowe's assassination. Few critics would accept that *Dead Man in Deptford* makes the conspiracy theories of *The Reckoning* seem more convincing. Moreover, just as Shakespeare tinkered with Holinshed, fiction writers often succumb to the temptation to embellish or falsify evidence for the sake of dramatic effect; and *Swansong* does contain some distortions that undercut its pretensions to historical veracity: Page pushes the date of Milton's sonnet forward to insert it in the First Folio, pushes back the date of Hamnet's death, and misquotes the probable misquoting of "To be or not to be" in the First Quarto. Given postmodernism's recognition of "the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of truths inherent in any account of past events" (Rozett 2003, 2), historical fiction's real merit consists in offering a useful reminder of the contingencies and surmises that dog literary history, which may help critics to achieve a greater measure of openness about them. As Schoenbaum so memorably demonstrated, conjecture is endemic in Shakespearean biography (Schoenbaum 1991). While Renaissance biography will eventually sober up from its speculative binges, it should not overstate its power to manufacture truth-claims about the past. If criticism eschews speculation

entirely, writers of historical fiction will be all too happy to play the Shakespeare of "excellent phantsie" to scholarship's cantankerous Jonson.

Notes

1. While the Mermaid tavern did exist and was frequented by Jonson, Beaumont, and Donne, it appears highly unlikely that Shakespeare ever attended the gatherings there. I. A. Shapiro traces the myth's origin back to the Frank Gifford's 1816 biography of Jonson in "The Mermaid Club" (1950). See also Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (1991), 214-16, and Schoenbaum, "Shakespeare and Jonson: Fact and Myth" (1970).
2. A sophisticated account of the odd affinity between New Historicism and historical fiction can be found in Martha Tuck Rozett, *Constructing a World: Shakespeare's England and the New Historical Fiction* (2003). The theoretical portion of this review is also greatly indebted to John Coldewey and Tom Postlewait for their stimulating seminars on, respectively, New Historicism and Renaissance biography.
3. Apparently, co-screenwriter Marc Norman dismissed most of Greenblatt's suggestions, such as depicting a love affair between Shakespeare and Marlowe, as too radical for the Hollywood studios (Hedrick and Reynolds 2000, 25-26).

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