

David Bevington. *Shakespeare and Biography*. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 179 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-958648-6 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-19-958647-9 (paper).

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Over the past fifteen years, Oxford University Press has published twenty titles in their Shakespeare Topics series — brief overviews of selected subjects such as Marxism, genre, race and colonialism, and the sonnets written by notable figures in their fields. The audience is primarily undergraduates, but the books also provide ideas, overviews, and bibliographies useful for more advanced students. David Bevington was asked to write the most recent entry, *Shakespeare and Biography*. As the jacket copy quickly informs us, it is not a biography of Shakespeare, but an account of the work of biographers since Nicholas Rowe and the challenges they have faced.<sup>1</sup> With the remarkable productivity of Shakespearean biographers (nearly one biography produced annually since 1995) and changes in the theoretical climate since Samuel Schoenbaum's revision of *Shakespeare's Lives* (1991), the book is timely and welcome. It addresses the jacket copy's goals and more, coming close to exceeding its remit.

Bevington begins his introductory chapter, "The Biographical Problem," by acknowledging that, contrary to popular belief, we know much more about William Shakespeare than we do about his contemporaries. Paradoxically, this knowledge has not resulted in the writing of satisfactory biographies because Shakespeare's ability in his plays "to present opposing sides with rare insight" has "erect[ed] a barrier between the work of art and the artist who created it [which] affords little opportunity or desire for the artist to speak on his own behalf" (4-5). In other words, we have information about Shakespeare's life, but his works do not help us to augment or to contextualize it. This is vexing because we want desperately to know what Shakespeare was like: "What were his beliefs, his ideals, his hopes, his fears? Was he happily married? . . . What did he look like? Did he retire to Stratford?" (2). These questions and others like them provide Bevington with an approach to his project. He poses them at the beginnings of his chapters and then traces how a variety of biographers have provided answers. The first chapter also introduces and summarizes important twentieth-century biographers and identifies those on whom Bevington will draw most

heavily: Peter Ackroyd, Jonathan Bate, Katherine Duncan-Jones, Stephen Greenblatt, Germaine Greer, Park Honan, and René Weis.

"The Art of Biography," Chapter 2, is the most conventional. It sketches biographical writing about Shakespeare from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, touching on the most familiar of the sources and traditions that have accumulated around his life. The expected names appear here: Robert Greene, Francis Meres, John Aubrey, Edmond Malone, and Rowe. The chapter is expository, but with occasional caveats such as: "we must be wary of a gathering movement to idealize Shakespeare in the decades, and then centuries, after his death" (28). The next three chapters focus on "topics that have fascinated biographers and readers ever since the early days of Shakespeare biography": sex, religion, and politics (30).

By sex, Bevington means gender and identity, marriage, and sexual orientation. The chapter begins with a discussion of gender and love in the plays and refers to interpretations suggested by biographers. Though the comedies offer rich examples of gender conflicts, little substantial biographical information can be taken from them. In what becomes a kind of refrain in the book, Bevington explains that Shakespeare so persistently provides multiple points of view on any given issue that it is impossible to ascertain what his own views may be. Various biographers' explanations are given for the questions about Shakespeare's married life: why so comparatively few children? Why the second best bed? Did he have a venereal disease? The sonnets and their connection to Shakespeare's sexual orientation, a topic that "has caused considerable distress" occupy the most space (43). Early biographers went to great lengths to draw autobiographical information from the poems, but at the same time affirm Shakespeare's heterosexuality. Modern biographers are much more circumspect. Bevington is of this mind, noting that the plays and poems provide examples of hetero-, bi-, and homosexual longing and that because early modern poetic language did not possess the same gendered boundaries as modern English, it is often difficult to interpret.

Just as we cannot know Shakespeare's true feelings about his wife, we also cannot know if his politics were liberal, conservative, or centrist, Bevington contends in Chapter 4. As the performance histories of the history and Roman plays in particular have demonstrated, Shakespeare's works are available to a great range of interpretations. What is most important, Bevington reminds us, is that the plays were and are extremely popular. As a result, Shakespeare's politics are most likely conservative, ensuring the broadest, most positive reception.

Though it has always been a point of contention, Shakespeare's religion has become most controversial in recent years. In Chapter 5, Bevington establishes the various positions and partisans carefully, including substantially more factual evidence than in previous chapters. He

again does not support one theory over another, only agreeing with Jeffrey Knapp that audiences did seem to see the theater as a kind of religious experience and that Shakespeare recognized this in his playwriting. The chapter ends with an account of Judaism in Shakespeare's culture and plays, though oddly no mention of Islam.

Departing from the thematic organizational principle, Chapters 6 and 7 are based on Edward Dowden's quadripartite organization of Shakespeare's biography.<sup>2</sup> According to Dowden, Shakespeare began in a developmental mode (ca. 1589-1594), then experienced a phase of great success (1594-1599), a third stage characterized by *Hamlet* and an exploration of tragedy, and a final phase that appears optimistic and contented. In these two chapters, which borrow Dowden's labels, "Out of the Depths" and "On the Heights," Bevington looks at the great tragedies, *Twelfth Night*, and the later, generically slippery plays. The final chapter, "L'envoi," returns to what we do not know about Shakespeare's life. It segues smoothly into an account of Shakespeare's education and then to a brief description of the anti-Strafordian position, its supporters, and its most effective opponents. As with all his sources, Bevington is careful and generous in his summaries. At the same time, he has no doubt that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the plays and poems attributed to him.

Throughout the book, Bevington treats his sources with respect and equanimity. The brevity of the book requires a narrow focus, and his favorites are drawn from the last fifteen years. Greenblatt and Duncan-Jones are cited most often, followed by Weis, Bate, and Honan. There does seem to be a slight bias toward those who have written the most speculative (Greenblatt), unorthodox (Duncan-Jones), or outrageous (Weis) statements, but Bevington does not use these moments to judge. Greenblatt's speculations are sometimes excessive, but always strongly supported. Duncan-Jones provides an unlikable Shakespeare, but in a thoroughly documented historical context. Bevington reports some of Weis's curious conjectures (that Shakespeare never intended *Coriolanus* to be performed), but avoids others (that Shakespeare had a limp; cf. Sonnets 37, 66, 89, and 90).

Though the book jacket claims that *Shakespeare and Biography* is not a biography of Shakespeare, it inevitably must be. By contextualizing the work of biographers, Bevington has to provide biographical information about Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> Rather than distract from the book's focus, the biographical element makes the book all the more valuable, especially to the general reader. So, too, does its tendency to provide extended readings of the plays and poems as they pertain to points in Shakespeare's life. Bevington is careful to avoid suggesting that we might read the plays as sources of unmediated information about Shakespeare's life and character. At the same time, he finds it impossible to resist suggesting connections. After observing that *Hamlet* was not

written until several years after Shakespeare's son Hamnet died, Bevington goes on to note that *1* and *2 Henry IV* contain the death and mourning of a son, Hotspur. In particular, Kate's attack on Northumberland for arriving at Shrewsbury too late to help his son "bears a suggestive resemblance to the way Shakespeare could have felt if he had been unable to reach in time the bedside of his dying son" (102).

In many ways, *Shakespeare and Biography* follows the example of Dowden rather than Schoenbaum. The book is committed to providing its readers with an account of not only what has been said about Shakespeare's life, but also how Shakespeare's life and works can be seen as inevitably intertwined. The study of Shakespeare is presented as populist and holistic. Readers can learn much about the man by reading the plays and poems and vice versa, in a kind of feedback loop. Some readers may chafe at this approach, seeking one that strives to separate the two.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of readers, however, will find much useful material here.

### Notes

1. In this brief interview, Bevington provides some context for his project: "David Bevington on Shakespeare and Biography," Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 22 June 2010, <http://vimeo.com/12767835>.
2. Edward Dowden's *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875) and its condensed follow-up, *Shakspeare* (1877) were enormously influential biographical and critical studies of Shakespeare and his work. Strongly guided by Romantic and Darwinian epistemologies, Dowden wrote eloquently about Shakespeare's life and art such that in the relationship between his life and his writings, "[t]he *oeuvre* is an autobiographical poem, and the autobiography holds more importance than the poem" (Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* [1991], 356).
3. Though Bevington has not written a full biography, he did contribute a brief sketch of Shakespeare's life to David Scott Kastan's *A Companion to Shakespeare*, which though distinct, shares a similar approach to *Shakespeare and Biography*; see "Shakespeare the Man," in David Scott Kastan, ed. *A Companion to Shakespeare*, 9-21. Bevington's *Shakespeare: Seven Ages of Man* (2005) is also not technically a biography, but it does provide substantial information about Shakespeare's life and his plays, keyed to Jaques's speech from *As You Like It*.
4. Several recent articles might be of interest here. The 2005 installment of *Shakespeare Survey*, "Writing About Shakespeare," contains several essays on Shakespearean biography, the most thorough being Lois Potter's "Having Our Will: Imagination in Recent Shakespeare Biographies" (1-8) and James Shapiro's "Toward a New Biography of Shakespeare" (9-14). See also Stanley Wells, "Current Issues in Shakespeare Biography" (2005). A special number of

*Critical Survey*, "Shakespeare and the Personal Story" was edited by Graham Holderness and Katherine Scheil and consists of papers from the 2008 International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford ( *Critical Survey* 21.3 [Winter 2009]).

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