The Shakespeareologists

Doctors have long had a fascination with Mankind's poet—and their inquiries have sometimes taken bizarre turns.

by Theodore Dalrymple

A man is seldom as innocently employed as in writing (or reading) Shakespearean criticism. The great essayist William Hazlitt remarked that such criticism is also futile, though he indulged in it extensively himself; but we are not obliged to agree with him. There must be ends in themselves, things done not for the sake of anything else, and the free play of intelligence is certainly one of them. Shakespeare is a suitable object of such free play because, as Doctor Johnson said:

> *Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his*

> *readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are . . . the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion.*

To criticize Shakespeare, then, is to reflect upon life, an activity as necessary and inevitable as it is inconclusive and without end.

I have a small library of books about Shakespeare, a kind of Folger corner, from which I have derived an innocent pleasure; and I once delivered a lecture about books that doctors had written about Shakespeare. The lecture was not a success—in fact, it was dull—in part because I found no suitable way of classifying the books (and classification is the mother of lucidity as well as of a false sense of mastery). Should the classification have been by the medical specialty of the author, by the individual plays or characters with which the books dealt, by the type of pathology examined, by the era in which the book appeared? The classification of books is as necessary but also as inconclusive as reflection on life.

Alienists (as psychiatrists were once called), toxicologists, neurologists, general and orthopedic surgeons, otologists, dermatologists, and even urologists have taken up the pen to write about Mankind's poet (though I know of no book devoted specifically to the urology of Shakespeare). Doctors have waded into the fraught authorship question—that of whether Shakespeare the boy from Stratford was or was not Shakespeare the author of the plays. At least two Baconian doctors—that is, doctors who thought that the author of Shakespeare's plays was really Francis Bacon—are of great interest.

The first was a surgeon named W. S. Melsome (1865–1944). He

had a lucrative private practice in Bath, having been for some years the director of medical studies at Queens' College, Cambridge—and was a man of formidable intellect. He was the author of an 1898 article in the *British Medical Journal* titled "The Value of Bacteriological Examination Before, During, and After Surgical Operations," but his real passion was the Bacon–Shakespeare controversy. Some said that he had the whole of Bacon and Shakespeare at his recall and, if either was quoted, could instantly produce a close analogy from the work of the other, which, in his view, proved their identity. He left part of his fortune to ensure the publication of his book, *The Bacon–Shakespeare Anatomy*.

I find it strangely consoling that Melsome pursued his obsession during the years when the world about him was collapsing, as if the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, and of Stalin farther east, were but historical epiphenomena, and that the real question confronting Mankind was: "Who wrote Shakespeare?" Implicit in this view is a civilized—though not, under the circumstances, very practical—rejection of politics as the dominant influence in human life: an attitude from which one could learn something today.

But Melsome was utterly conventional compared with another Baconian doctor, Orville Ward Owen of Detroit (1854–1924). Owen convinced himself that Shakespeare's works were a ciphered message from the real author, Bacon, to a future decipherer—Owen—and that they provided a secret history of Elizabethan England, revealing, among other things, that Bacon was Queen Elizabeth's son. Owen published these ruminations in five volumes (that I happen to possess) of the most appalling and boring sub-Elizabethan doggerel. Owen came by what he called *Francis Bacon's Cipher Story* by means of an ingenious but absurd machine that collated the works of Shakespeare with those of Bacon and many other writers of the epoch; poor Owen, in a magnificent feat of self-deception, never realized that he had first decided on what the coded message was to be—and

then uncovered the cipher to “prove” it.

Owen found a message in Shakespeare’s works to the effect that the manuscripts of the plays were buried in a metal chest at the bottom of the River Wye at Chepstow, just over the Welsh border. He managed to convince others of the plausibility of this theory, and spent several years dredging the river at his and their expense, finding some ancient detritus but no manuscripts.

Having finally conceded, even within his own mind, that the manuscripts were not going to turn up at the bottom of the river, Owen returned to America, where, on his deathbed, he lamented that he had ruined himself and his family through his fruitless research, and warned others against taking up the Baconian theory of Shakespeare’s authorship. He reminds me irresistibly of Henry King in Hilaire Belloc’s *Cautionary Tales*, whose “chief defect” was his habit of eating little bits of string, which eventually tied themselves into knots inside.

Physicians of the Utmost Fame
Were called at once; but when they came
They answered, as they took their Fees,
“There is no cure for this Disease.
Henry will very soon be dead.”

His parents stood about his Bed
Lamenting his Untimely Death,
When Henry with his Latest Breath,
Cried: “Oh, my Friends, be warned by me
That Breakfast, Dinner, Lunch and Tea
Are all the Human Frame requires . . .”
With that the Wretched Child expires.

In fact, Orville Ward Owen is to me a most attractive figure, a failure on a truly heroic scale. I find such failure more appealing (provided it does little harm) than any smashing

success can ever be; his failure, belatedly acknowledged, had a disinterested purity of purpose that was a kind of sanctity. He was the Don Quixote of Shakespearean scholarship; and who cannot find it in his heart to love the Don?

Owen's story also puts me in mind of two of my favorite pieces of Shakespearean criticism of the eighteenth century: Richard Farmer's *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare* and Maurice Morgann's *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff*.

One of the principal reasons that enthusiasts (keen amateurs usually, rather than professional scholars) are so determined to find the hidden author of Shakespeare's works is that they find it difficult or impossible to believe that the mere lad from Stratford, with only a few years of grammar school education, if that, could have been the true writer of the greatest canon of work in world literature. The true author was learned in so many things, such as the law and navigation, and so familiar with many walks of life, including those at the highest level of society and politics, that he could not have been a semi-bumpkin from a provincial wool town. He must, on the contrary, have been a university-trained aristocrat who had traveled widely in Europe and practiced law.

I once tried to refute, or at least undermine, this argument by reference to Shakespeare's level of medical knowledge. In addition to relaying in his plays many of the superstitions of his time, Shakespeare (who, as far as we know, had no medical training, though like everyone else in those times of heightened mortality, he must have had a lot of experience of disease) made many shrewd and accurate medical observations. One has only to compare them with the observations in *Cures Both Empiricall and Historicall Performed upon Very Eminent Persons in Desperate Diseases*, the book by his son-in-law, the university-trained physician John Hall, to realize that the medical education of the day was not necessarily an advantage in the art of seeing what was before one's eyes. Hall's book

was a farrago of nonsense, as well as of disgusting medicaments, and whatever Hall had learned at university bore little relation to any reality external to the medical theorizing through which he then saw his patients. Unlike Hall, Shakespeare (as Dryden put it) "wanted not the spectacles of books to read Nature." In other words, some kinds of education can be an obstacle to understanding: not, perhaps, an unfamiliar phenomenon even today.

Farmer's little book—a pamphlet, really, published in two editions in 1767—dealt with the question of whether Shakespeare possessed much in the way of classical learning. In Doctor Johnson's opinion, "The question is now for ever decided"—in the negative—by Farmer's work. This was high praise indeed from Johnson, who knew all too well how few literary disputes were ever truly settled. Unlike most literary disputants, Farmer relied upon evidence of forensic strength. He was a clergyman of the Church of England (one who turned down a bishopric on the charming grounds that he enjoyed the theater and the public house too much to have made a good bishop), but he was also clearly a man of the Enlightenment, recognizing that evidence was important in deciding opinion.

Why was the question of Shakespeare's classical accomplishments even of interest (apart from the fact that everything that pertains to the greatest writer who ever lived must be of some interest)? Two possible answers: first, that his knowledge of the classics was such as anyone with a minimal education of the time and access to English-language books might have acquired; and, second, that he must have had an intimate knowledge of the classics to make the frequent allusions found in his works.

A Marxist might see at issue a class struggle between, on the one hand, an aristocracy and landed gentry, whose badge of belonging was what was called polite learning, a familiarity and ease with the ancient languages; and, on the other, a

rising bourgeoisie that, while not altogether despising ancient learning, emphasized practical knowledge and wisdom. Marx himself was a classical scholar, his doctoral thesis being on Democritus; but he was ever the class traitor. Farmer, though a classicist, was the son of a trader who traded in the same commodities as Shakespeare himself—malt and wool.

But also latent in the question is the incipient conflict between the romantic and classical views of life: that understanding of the world, genius, and wisdom is as much a matter of direct apprehension or instinct as it is of knowledge and learning. Not all the knowledge in existence could have produced Shakespeare, and while the work of most of the erudite is forgotten the moment they die, that of Shakespeare lives on forever. Though Farmer was a man of the Enlightenment, he was therefore also a forerunner of Romanticism. His little book, incidentally, serves to undermine, though not completely to refute, one of the arguments of the anti-Stratfordians (those who deny that Shakespeare, the boy from Stratford, is identical to Shakespeare, the author of the plays) before it became popular with luminaries such as Mark Twain and Sigmund Freud: that only someone with a deep knowledge of the classics could have written Shakespeare's works, that only someone of high social class could have had such knowledge, and that therefore Shakespeare, the writer of the plays, could not have been Shakespeare, the boy from Stratford.

Farmer's book starts delightfully: " 'Shakespeare, says a brother of the Craft [that of literary scholarship], is a vast garden of criticism': and certainly no one can be favoured with more weeders gratis." He then uproots the arguments for Shakespeare's classical accomplishments by demonstrating—irrefutably, I think—that where Shakespeare quotes a classical author, he is actually quoting a translation, complete with the errors of that translation, or

his allusion is so commonplace that it was available to everyone. To talk of neurotransmitters does not make one a neuroscientist.

So Farmer's book, full of learning, establishes that learning is neither wisdom nor genius—a point implicit in his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: "He [Farmer] . . . contributed a sonnet to a collection of poems on the death of George II. It is well that he changed to prose in later life." And precious little of that: he published nothing else of note, perhaps because his fondness for the public house precluded prolific prose as much as it did a bishopric.

Maurice Morgann's book teaches a different lesson, or at least makes us reflect on a different subject: the nature of courage, for it is Morgann's counterintuitive opinion (first published in 1777) that Falstaff, far from being a coward, was in fact a brave man. Doctor Johnson found this opinion as preposterous as a defense of Iago's character—that underneath it all, Iago was a decent fellow—would have been; but Morgann makes out an intriguing case.

Little is known of Morgann because he directed that all his papers be destroyed after his death, a demand that was carried out; but he was clearly an interesting figure. As governor of Quebec, he promoted a conciliatory policy toward the French inhabitants; because he had been favorable to the Americans in the War of Independence, he was sent to New York in an attempt at reconciliation, though Congress refused to receive him; he supposedly persuaded Shelburne to accept the inevitability of American independence; and he wrote a tract denouncing slavery, predicting that, if not abolished, this monstrosity would have disastrous consequences. But insofar as he is remembered at all, which is only faintly, it is for his *Essay on the Dramatic Character of Falstaff*.

At its end, Morgann describes his short book as "an Essay, professing to treat of the courage of Falstaff, but extending

itself to his whole character, to the arts and genius of his maker, SHAKESPEARE; and through him, sometimes, with ambitious aim, even to the principles of human nature itself." This somewhat belies Morgann's preface, where he claims that his object in writing his book is only the delight that exercise undertaken for its own sake gives. But his larger ambition is not mere presumption.

The common conception of Falstaff's character, that he is a constitutional coward, is superficial, says Morgann, based solely on first impressions. Closer consideration demonstrates that Falstaff was, in fact, a redoubtable soldier, and Morgann brings forth much evidence of this. Justice Shallow, for example, remembers Falstaff in his youth as a formidable fighter; and he had been page to the Duke of Norfolk, who, in those days of a militarized aristocracy, would not have taken a poltroon into his service. Immediately after the episode of the robbery—in which he, having robbed some travelers at Gadshill, is himself victimized by his coconspirators, taking ignominious flight at once—Falstaff finds himself entrusted with the command of 100 men; and in the battle of Shrewsbury, he leads his men into battle, only three of whom survive. There is no reason to think that he led from behind; and later, the Lord Chief Justice says that Falstaff will be forgiven his attempted robbery because of his service during the battle. Falstaff captures Sir John Colville of the Dale, "a most furious knight and valorous enemy," who surrenders to him merely on account of his reputation—which cannot, therefore, have been that of a coward.

But having shown him to be a man of courage, Morgann does not claim that Falstaff is therefore a good man—very much the contrary. We delight in his inexhaustible wit, his vivacity, his larger-than-life-ness; but (says Morgann) this cannot compensate for or cancel out his vices, which would make such a man in real life someone to avoid. Falstaff is a lecher, a glutton, a robber, a parasite; underneath the exterior of

delightful bonhomie lies truly bad character.

The point is not whether Morgann is right; most people will probably think, or certainly feel, that he is too hard on poor old Falstaff, who adds so much to the pleasure and glory of existence (not that we would want there to be many Falstaffs, for one Falstaff is a blessing where ten would be a nuisance). Rather, Morgann has shown that the possession of courage, often claimed to be the virtue of virtues, without which the others are nugatory, is not enough to make a man virtuous. This is a mistake we often make: that a man with virtues is a virtuous man. But a sanguinary dictator is still a sanguinary dictator, even if he is kind to animals, faithful to his wife, abstemious in his personal habits, and so on. A seemingly obvious lesson, but in times of ideological polarization, we are inclined to take the expression of right opinion (opinion that we agree with) as the indelible mark of a virtuous man. But even the possession of a virtue, let alone its mere expression, is not enough to make a man good.

Like many virtues, courage does not by itself mean much in the assessment of character, for example. For it to reflect well on character, it must be exercised to a worthy end; courage in pursuit of evil is not desirable, though it is no less courage. A cowardly evil man is probably preferable, on the whole, to a brave one, especially if he lacks cunning. Again, we often forget this: proof of which is that we often designate terrorist attacks as cowardly, when in fact they are often courageous. It is as if we feared that ascribing courage (or any other virtue) to the perpetrators would be to admire, excuse, or act as apologists for them; reading Morgann should inoculate us against this error.

Perhaps reading Shakespearean criticism, even two and a half centuries old, is not quite pointless after all. But I note that my personal copies of both Farmer and Morgann come from public institutions of higher learning, one in England and one in America. Such institutions no longer treat their holdings

as repositories, but as items almost of commerce: if no one wants to read them, out they go, a waste of shelf space. From this, I deduce that literary studies are no longer much in fashion. For those dinosaurs for whom they still hold some interest, such texts are easily found on the Internet.

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