

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

§ I THE PROBLEM STATED

Horatio. 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.*Hamlet.* No, faith, not a jot: but to follow with modesty enough and likelihood to lead it.'

In describing this Essay as A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare, I am conscious that I may be charged with some presumption as well as that 'curiosity' which is deprecated by Horatio. I do not claim for proven a contention which rests on hypothesis, however buttressed with circumstance. With Hamlet I follow with modesty where likelihood leads.

It cannot be a matter indifferent to us to trace the natural stages which brought the Stratford boy to the heights of his transfiguration. The blank period of Shakespeare's youth can only be filled with material which is largely conjectural. But conjecture must not surpass the limits of the humanly credible, and it must begin with no postulates or undocumented assumptions. If it be assumed that Shakespeare stood apart from all the conditions which govern the rest of humanity, and that in the preparation for his life's work he neither had nor required the helps and suggestions without which the celestial fire cannot in other men be fanned into flame, then *cadit quaestio*. If the ordinarily accepted tradition of his stunted education, mean surroundings and coarse occupation at Stratford be an article of orthodox belief, then I should be fain to accept the Baconian faith, or

G

I

I

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Problem Stated

profess myself, with Sir George Greenwood, a pure agnostic. Convinced as I am that in neither position is salvation to be found, I advance a new hypothesis which may meet the objections raised by either heretical school to the not unreasonable belief that Shakespeare—spell his name as we will—wrote Shakespeare's Works.

I plead for common sense, for some evidence of fact and for the elimination of doubtfully 'doubtless' guesswork. Not without cause Baconians and Greenwoodians are afflicted and scandalised by the demands on which the Stratford faith insists. So far as it relates to Shakespeare's life before his emergence on the London stage, that creed rests on no evidence other than gossip—ignorant, confused, contradictory, and gathered a century or more after the time to which it relates. If Shakespeare be allowed to speak for himself he will tell us a good deal about Warwickshire—nothing about Stratford, nothing definite about any place near it—and, unconsciously, something about the conditions of his early life.

Of Shakespeare, poet and dramatist, Stratford has precisely nothing to say. All Warwickshire sings of him: his verses hang on every tree in Arden. Only Stratford is deaf to that music, and dumb for any echoes of its own. Bethlehem and the sepulchre door. 'Remember how he *spake* unto you.' No, Stratford remembers only the cradle and the grave. Standing in its glorious church, where the monument is neighboured and out-rivalled by

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Marlowe Fiction

the pomp of the Clopton chapel, I say to myself, 'He made his grave with the rich in his death, because there was no deceit in his mouth.' But, as was said to the first pilgrims at a holier tomb, I add, 'He is not here.'

But if not at the shrine which modern piety has enriched and hallowed to his memory, what quarter, it will be asked, has better claim to have been tenanted by him in his growing years, and to have had place in his memory in the time of his productivity? To destroy an old faith is not enough, unless a better way of believing is offered in its room. It is possible that many devout Stratfordians may welcome a creed which needs no artificial apologies. To substitute such a creed is the aim of this Essay. *Hoc opus, hic labor est*. I do not claim for my thesis that it is beyond the range of critical sharpshooters. I do claim for it that it is reasonable and that it offers a view of Shakespeare's education which obeys the laws of perspective. Further investigation in a field which I have only partially explored may bring to light evidence in its verification.

§ 2 THE MARLOWE FICTION

Dr Hotson's book, *The Death of Marlowe* (1925), is a monument of patient research resulting in a surprising discovery. It is equally remarkable as proving the worthlessness of gossiping tales, even when they are concerned with nearly contemporary

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Marlowe Fiction

matters, and of the inferences which in later times have been piled on such unsubstantial foundations.

Christopher Marlowe unquestionably died by a dagger-stroke on May 30, 1593. The circumstances of his death were utilised by contemporary precisians to illustrate their homilies on the evils of 'atheism' and debauchery. The first account appears in Thomas Beard's *Theatre of God's Judgements*, printed in 1597. Omitting prolix and pious scurrilities, we learn from it that the fray which resulted in Marlowe's death happened 'in London streets.' Francis Meres, in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598), citing Beard's authority, amplifies the details: Christopher Marlowe 'was stabd to death by a bawdy serving man, a rivall of his in lewde love.' In 1600, William Vaughan had a variation of the story: the scene of the fatality is laid by him at 'Detford, a little village about three miles distant from London,' the slayer is 'one named Ingram,' and the two were playing 'at tables' just before the quarrel: the 'lewde love' disappears in his version. Some eighty years after the event comes John Aubrey—one of the first remembrancers of Shakespeare—with the amazing statement that Ben Jonson 'killed Mr Marlow, the poet, on Bunhill, coming from the Green Curtain playhouse.' Lastly, Anthony à Wood, in 1691, adds the improving touches that 'Marlowe was deeply in love with a certain Woman,' and that his rival was 'fitter to be a Pimp.' In 1820 an antiquary elicited from the register of Deptford church an entry of Marlowe's

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Marlowe Fiction

burial on June 1, 1593, in which the slayer's name was read as 'Francis Archer.' With the substitution of Archer's name for Ingram's every writer, until the other day, implicitly accepted the story, only reconciling the discrepancies in its various versions and adding 'improvements' such as lent themselves to their interpretation of it. According to one of them the slayer was Francis Ingram, and he is variously described as a servant maintained by Marlowe, a lackey, a scullion, and so forth. According to another, Marlowe was in love with a woman described in language 'which we cannot bring ourselves to repeat': Ingram plots to meet this 'stolen lady-love' at a low-class tavern in Deptford, and thence comes the trouble.

Finally comes Dr Hotson to sweep away all these cobwebs of hearsay and speculation. He goes to Deptford and finds that the slayer's name is unmistakably written Francis Ffrezer. He discovers the return of the Coroner's inquisition, in which it is given as Ingram Ffrysar. He discovers further that Ffrysar is no serving man, but, whatever his character, is nominated 'generosus,' and he turns out to be a person of some social position. The meeting place is not in London streets, but at a rural inn at Deptford, which is of sufficient consequence to have a garden wherein Marlowe and Ffrysar walk. There is no woman in the case: the affray is about a dispute in the reckoning. The findings of the Coroner's jury bring out with minute precision all the circumstances of the story.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Marlowe Fiction

Contrast the beginnings and the developments of this Marlowe legend with the fictions about the early life of Shakespeare at Stratford. In the former case we have Beard's bald statement, which was in print within four years from the date of the occurrences. Within a year Meres added a fiction of his own devising, and three years later Vaughan furnishes an independent version conflicting with the previous tales. And Aubrey, whom Sir Sidney Lee calls 'Shakespeare's first biographer'—what is to be said of his wild invention? In the nineteenth century a torrent of guess-work fills the vacancies unoccupied in the earlier narratives.

Now take the Stratford legend. Shakespeare had been in his grave for two generations before anybody thought of jotting down reminiscences of him. The earliest anecdotist confesses that he knew nothing of Shakespeare's plays. Those who followed him in the seventeenth century are convicted of gross blunders, mis-statements and contradictions. They affect to know what had happened, a century before their time, to an obscure youth, but of the great man who died in their town half a century later they have nothing whatever to say. The first printed account of Shakespeare's life appeared ninety-three years after his death, when his last descendant was long dead, and even the house in which he lived and died had been destroyed*. So

* Fuller, who died in 1661 and whose *Worthies of Warwickshire* was published in 1662, supplies no facts in the life of Shakespeare.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Marlowe Fiction

far as it deals with recorded fact, Rowe's narrative is honest enough: but fact had less attraction for Rowe and his age than its elegant presentation, and episode, such as that of the deer-stealing, needed no close investigation of evidences to justify its introduction in an otherwise bare recital. Whatever his fault in that matter, nineteenth-century 'criticism' far outwent him in its suggestion that the unproved is doubtless or certainly true, and the assumption that Shakespeare's genius was exempt from the laws that operate in the case of lesser men has fostered in biographers the notion that in his case the work of fancy is believable *quia impossibile*.

Such is not the way to fill the void places in Shakespeare's career before the rising of his star in 1593. There is but one way—to let Shakespeare reveal himself in unconscious reminiscence of the conditions of his early life, and to exclude such supposed direct references as he expressly tells us are opposed to the principles of his art. If to the evidence of his word we can add such facts as without improbability may be brought into relation with that evidence, we shall stand on, not secure, but safer ground. And if the facts and that evidence can be wrought into a continuous clue, I think that it may be claimed that we are in a way to emerge into daylight. That the day has yet come I am far from asserting, but with better knowledge it may come.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Greenwood Theory

§ 3 THE GREENWOOD THEORY

Before I proceed to the discussion of the sources of the Stratford Legend I am drawn into a bypath by the attractive and ably argued theory of Sir G. G. Greenwood that the Plays and Poems of 'Shakespeare' were not the work of the man who wrote his name 'Shakspere,' who was born and died at Stratford, and was merely a popular actor. Inasmuch as the actor was a Warwickshire man and the Plays are full of Warwickshire, the divagation is not so irrelevant as at first view it may seem.

Sir George Greenwood is by no means out to substitute an impossible Bacon for an actual but unwriting Shakespeare. In one contention I hold that, for all that the Orthodox have alleged against it, he is signally right. I agree with him that William Shakespeare, as he figures in the Stratford Apocrypha, was not, and could not be, the William Shakespeare who wrote the Plays and Poems.

But, if not Bacon, then Who? Sir George offers us only an unknown and neuter *Tertium Quid*. What I want, and what in reason everybody demands, is a *Tertius Quis*. Can we realise no more of the author of *Hamlet* and *Lear* than we do of the something called Homer? In the dual Shakspere-Shakespeare of his begetting, Sir George, by not confounding the persons but dividing their substance, imperils my faith in human individuality. I confess myself so far an orthodox Shakespearean that I must clothe his unessential dramatist in some

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Greenwood Theory

likeness of a man. Somewhere in this breathing world there lived a man, whose name may or may not have been Shakespeare, but who wrote plays, which were 'Shakespeare's Works.'

To follow and discuss the long train of Sir George's argument* that 'Shakspere,' the actor, was not the same man as 'Shakespeare' of the Works is beside my purpose, which is to suggest a simple way of identifying 'the rustic' with the only man whom it is worth our while to call Shakespeare—the man whose name, so spelt, is prefixed to most that in quarto or folio passed for Shakespeare with his contemporaries. I cannot convince myself that 'Shakespeare,' or 'Shake-speare,' was merely a *nom de plume*, veiling another writer. That the Stratford man wrote his name 'Shakspere' counts for little. The name, a common one in Warwickshire, was written in a great variety of ways, and though it cannot be proved that the dramatist's kinsfolk ever wrote it 'Shakespeare,' the London printers showed no uniformity in spelling it 'Shakespeare,' or 'Shake-speare,' in the titles which were prefixed to the quartos published while the author was alive. Briefly, I cannot believe that Jonson, who knew the actor Shakspere, was mistaken in crediting him with the authorship of Shakespeare's plays; I cannot doubt that his 'Star of Poets' was indeed the 'Swan of Avon'; I cannot

* Sir G. G. Greenwood, *The Shakespeare Problem Re-stated* (1908), *In Re Shakespeare, Beeching and Greenwood* (1909), *Is there a Shakespeare Problem?* (1916), *Shakespeare and a Tertium Quid* (1923).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00557-9 - A Chapter in the Early Life of Shakespeare: Polesworth in Arden

Arthur Gray

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The Greenwood Theory

doubt the statement of Heminge and Condell that they 'received from him (*i.e.* the dramatist) his papers with scarce a blot,' a statement accepted as true by Jonson. Some of the plays which they included in the First Folio were unquestionably printed from quarto texts, but others from stage copies in Shakespeare's writing, and it is hard to believe that they were unacquainted with the handwriting of their 'Friend and Fellow,' the actor.

It would be easy to multiply evidences of the identity of the player with the playwright. I content myself with mentioning one fact: I shall come back to it later. By his contemporaries and the generation next succeeding them the dramatist was constantly associated with Warwickshire. The connection, no doubt, was suggested by the fact that he spent his last years at Stratford, and that there he died and was commemorated by the monument in the church. Jonson's 'Swan of Avon' and Milton's 'native wood-notes' may very well imply no more than this. Sir Aston Cokain, in verses addressed to Dugdale 'upon his *Warwickshire Illustrated*' (1658), expresses the pride which he, a Warwickshire man, had in his famous fellow-countyman:

'Now, *Stratford* upon *Avon*, we would choose
Thy gentle and ingenuous *Shakespeare* Muse
(Were he among the living yet) to raise
T'our Antiquaries merit some just praise.