

Based on his doctoral thesis awarded by Brunel University London 2015

Review

The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare

By Dr Kevin Gilvary; Routledge, 2018

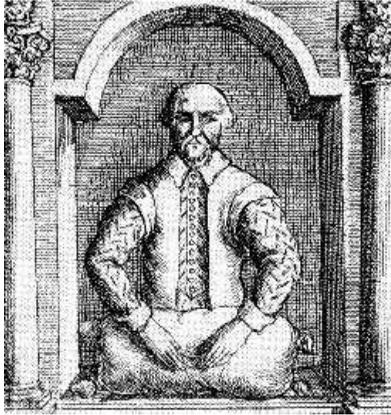
The Fictional Lives of Shakespeare is crammed with facts. This is immensely significant, because Dr. Gilvary's argument is essentially that biographies of Shakespeare have so few facts underlying their construction they are no more than 'biografiction', created to sate the appetite of all those passionate to have a 'story' about our greatest playwright, William Shakespeare. Yet while Gilvary's

book appears to close down the possibility of yet further biographies based on speculation, or conjecture, or inference, or 'self-projection,' the book as a whole is a mine of information about scholars and Shakespeare, pointing to all sorts of directions research might take, and – in the challenging area of literary studies – how a more critical approach might be taken,

perhaps more in parallel with the 'scientific' or fact-based approach employed by other academic disciplines.

Where should one start, with this feast of information? The *Contents* page alone alerts us to the argument ahead: 'Biography: Much Practice, Little Theory', 'Gaps in Our Ignorance', 'Inventing the Myths', 'Doubting the Myths', 'Re-Imagining the Life' and so on. The book as a whole is a robust questioning of just how much we really know for certain about the playwright who brought us such an unmatched and inspiring series of plays and poems.

Gilvary begins by examining the typical materials that have been the essential information underpinning any biography from classical times onwards.



He alludes to Plutarch's distinction between 'Histories' and 'Lives;' he comments on how there 'must be sufficient primary sources from which a narrative can be constructed'. Gilvary also comments on different types of biography, and gives examples of approaches ('cradle to grave', linear and coherent), and the different types of evidence which might be *pertinent to any biography*.

Except sufficient primary sources aren't quite what we have for Shakespeare. The uncertainties of what purports to be evidence are introduced:

can we see Hand D as Shakespeare's when we have to rely on his signatures for his style of writing? Does Greene in his *Groatsworth* reference the actor, or the playwright, or someone else in the company? Where was Shakespeare really born? The different images of him presented by Dugdale, Hollar and the monument at Holy Trinity Church, and the engraving carried out by the young Martin Droeshout for the frontispiece of the first folio – these don't appear to be of the same person. We cannot be sure whether any one of them is an accurate portrait of our playwright. Of course, those only relate to his life; when Gilvary comes to review the plays, there are more questions. Did Shakespeare revise? When did he actually write those plays? In honesty, we simply do not know; however, the critics and scholars may assert and speculate.

Punctuating Gilvary's overview and discussion of the documentary evidence are a series of plates, illustrations, and tables. The plates show us some of the title pages which are inaccurately dated, or claim to be 'Newly imprinted and enlarged' when they are mere copies of earlier editions. The tables show us the paucity of years in Shakespeare's lifetime when there are documented references to him. There are more gaps than years with references. It's disappointing, but it's true.

Gilvary's examination of the trends in constructing a life of Shakespeare covers the last two centuries, with a chapter given to the most recent. There are nearly thirty of them. It's a modern cottage industry. He lingers over the use of modal verbs ('would have', 'must have') and adverbs ('probably', 'doubtless') brought in to introduce conjectures by the biographer. He draws attention to different techniques by which biographers amplify their story, such as using the plays and sonnets to make biographical inferences about the playwright, or perhaps an 'appeal to norms.' This is an extensive deconstruction of biographers' techniques – take these away, and the would-be biographer is left with such a slim collection of facts s/he would have to agree with George Saintsbury that a biography was impossible (and also perhaps that on Shakespeare a 'vast amount has been said which is not in the least worth saying, which is for the most part demonstrably foolish or wrong'). We might recall that Malone spent much of his adult life researching Shakespeare and did not write a life; Chambers, equally busy in the field for many, many years, produced two volumes called *Facts and Problems*, not a biography.

Two examples of the ways in which myths have hardened into 'facts' in the narratives about Shakespeare are given, one about the third Earl of Southampton as Shakespeare's alleged patron, and one about Jonson as Shakespeare's alleged rival. Both examples demonstrate the source, the lack of evidence, and the elaborations of biographers. Perhaps some who long for a romantic story about Shakespeare, from glove-maker's son to global playwright, will be disappointed, but it is refreshing to see a carefully researched and reasoned approach to biographies of Shakespeare.

It is not surprising that Gilvary ends his account with a simple statement that a biography about Shakespeare is not possible. He acknowledges that he isn't alone to argue thus: David Ellis, Graham Holderness and Helen Hackett have also written recently upon the matter. Perhaps Gilvary's book too will urge caution upon would-be biographers, and scepticism among their readers.

Reviewed by Dr. Edi Jolly