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IGOR SHAITANOV, *SHAKESPEARE*

From an English perspective Professor Igor Shaitanov's life of Shakespeare is a valuable addition to the ever growing mass of Shakespearean studies. More than just a biography, it places Shakespeare in the broad political, social and cultural context of his time, and traces the history of Shakespearean production and criticism from the seventeenth century right up to the present. Professor Shaitanov interweaves the facts of Shakespeare's life known to us from documentary sources with an exploration of the Sonnets and a comprehensive survey of the plays. He makes some important suggestions for dating Shakespeare's earliest works, laying particular stress on the plague years 1592–94, when the closure of the London theatres compelled the young playwright to branch out into poetry, and secured him lasting prominence as both poet and playwright at a time of huge change in both English society and the English language itself. Professor Shaitanov is concerned above all to demolish the myth that the author of Shakespeare's works was some hidden celebrity rather than the plain man of the theatre from Stratford-upon-Avon, and the evidence he employs to rebut the claims of the 'anti-Stratfordians' is massive and conclusive. In dispelling this bogus mystery he leads us on to the genuine mystery of Shakespeare's mind. Shakespeare's personal feelings, he shows, cannot be elicited from the posthumous anecdotes of his youth, or from his legal and business transactions, or even from the possibly artificial passions displayed in the Sonnets, but must be sought in the plays. Even in the plays, however, we are confronted most of the time with the genius of an author able and willing to portray every possible human character, emotion and circumstance – except his own.

Igor Shaitanov, Shakespeare, Shakespearean studies.

To Ben Jonson, his fellow playwright, so jealous but also so generous, Shakespeare 'was not of an age, but *for all time*.' What a staggering claim to make for an author! Yet today, four whole centuries after his death, he commands the same awe. To my father (Philip Snow's parents are the novelists C.P. Snow (1905–1980) and Pamela Hansford Johnson (1912–1981). – *Editor*), an author himself, Shakespeare was not only the greatest writer who ever lived but in all probability the greatest writer who ever *will* live – a rather dispiriting thought for young people with literary ambitions. Coming from a literary family I was lucky enough to have Shakespeare's works put in front of me, without introduction, at the age of seven. I was enthralled from the start by the history plays, with their kings and battles, by the opening of *Henry VI Part III*, where the rebel Yorkist nobles burst into the Parliament-House to describe their recent victory, how the king cravenly abandoned his troops

Whereat the great Lord of Northumberland
Whose warlike ears could never brook retreat
Cheer'd up the drooping army...

I used to imagine Northumberland as a bald man with huge flapping ears, like an elephant's. Over the years I gradually worked my way from the histories to the tragedies, from the tragedies to the comedies, mouthing the lines to myself as I sprawled on the floor of our London flat. Now of course I couldn't understand every word I read; *but it never occurred to me that I couldn't*. Shake-

spere was a continual source of wonder, magic, excitement. I felt sorry for my schoolfellows to whom Shakespeare's works were presented for the first time as dry classroom textbooks, to be explained painfully, phrase by phrase.

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'Not of an age, but for all time'. Jonson might equally have written 'for all countries' or 'for all peoples'. I think it was first borne in on me that Shakespeare was not for the English alone in August 1964 when I visited Moscow with my parents, who were travelling there at the invitation of the former Soviet Writers' Union. I was shown the new Russian film of *Hamlet* starring Innokenty Smoktunovsky – a Prince of Denmark vastly more impressive than any other I have ever seen, before or since. Back in England two months later the same point was made to me in a slightly different way, when I heard how a couplet from *Hamlet* ('There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio...') had been used to alert a crew of Soviet cosmonauts to certain changes that were taking place in their country's leadership... Now, reading the new life of Shakespeare by Professor Igor Shaitanov, I am reminded of the astonishing volume of Shakespearean scholarship that has been published in Russia since the nineteenth century, the flow of translations by authors ranging from Grand Duke Konstantin Romanov to Samuil Marshak and Boris Pasternak, the new works prompted by Shakespeare such as Turgenev's *Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District* and Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of*

Mtsensk. I am struck to learn that even such masters as Pushkin and Dostoevsky were prepared in some measure to concede Shakespeare's primacy (not however Lev Tolstoy, to whom *King Lear* seemed absurd). And I am inspired by the sheer dedication of Professor Shaitanov, to whom Shakespeare has clearly been even more of a source of wonder, magic, excitement than he has been for me.

Professor Shaitanov's book is presented simply as a life of Shakespeare, but it is really a 'life and times' – and then some. It is a work of formidable erudition, discussing as it does the political and social history of Elizabethan and Jacobean England; land tenure and local politics in the English countryside; the origin and evolution of the English theatre; the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries; Greek mythology and Roman literature; the thought, verse and visual art of the European Renaissance; late Tudor preoccupations from heraldry to the euphuistic style of prose writing and the theory of the four humours; the transmission of Shakespeare's texts; the staging of Shakespeare's plays from the seventeenth century and Shakespearean criticism starting with Edward Malone at the end of the eighteenth; the response to Shakespeare of modern authors from T.S. Eliot to John Wain and Ted Hughes. There is plenty here that will be new to most British and American readers, and indeed the book cries out for an English translation. At the same time Professor Shaitanov conveys for a Russian reader the latest developments in Western thinking, the now general readiness to accept that Shakespeare did collaborate extensively with other authors during the first and final stages of his career and by the same token to see his hand in such plays as *Edward III*, *Sir Thomas More* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* which had previously been excluded from the canon.

The book is a skilful interweaving of the facts of Shakespeare's life known to us from his legal and business transactions with the intriguing but possibly deceptive emotional record set out in the Sonnets and a survey of the individual plays. Professor Shaitanov misses nothing, exploring not merely the great tragedies but the more 'English' plays such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* which are perhaps less familiar to a Russian reader; not merely the major poems like *Venus and Adonis* but the smallest scraps of attributed epigram. He analyses many key passages, drawing on the apparently inexhaustible range of Russian translations and not hesitating to fault Marshak, Pasternak and the rest where he feels they have failed to convey some critical nuance in the original. He compares and contrasts the themes of various pairs of plays which appeared at around the same time, *Romeo and Juliet* (family and love) with *The Merchant of Venice* (business and hate), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (young love thwarts parental hostility) with *Romeo and Juliet* (parental hostility sabotages young love). And he notes cases in which plays appear to have been written in part in response to the works of other dramatists, *Richard II* a vastly more sensitive recreation of *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe, *Timon of Athens* a darker portrayal of the

corrupting power of money which had just been satirised in Jonson's *Volpone*.

His chronological judgements are telling. He points out, for example, that the early comedies are too polished and too sophisticated to have been Shakespeare's first efforts, as has sometimes been supposed, and were probably commissioned for private staging after the author had already gained a popular reputation through such comparatively crude works as the revenge drama *Titus Andronicus* and the historical chronicle *Henry VI Part I*. He stresses the huge importance of the plague years 1592-94, when the London theatres were closed and Shakespeare was obliged to branch out into poetry, securing the status of a poet (a far higher calling than that of a playwright, in Elizabethan eyes), and at the same time ensuring that playwrights began to be recognised as significant artists and not just anonymous technicians. It was a wonderful time for a great writer, with the last remnants of the Middle Ages giving way to the early modern world of domestic and bourgeois concerns, and Professor Shaitanov traces the emergence of this new society in such creations as *The Merchant of Venice* and *Merry Wives*. It was also a wonderful time for a wordsmith, with the modern English language just beginning to crystallise. Professor Shaitanov refers to the extraordinary number of entirely new words that Shakespeare introduced into English – some 1700 in total, including 600 in *Hamlet* alone. One might add in this context the astonishing versatility with which Shakespeare handled the words already at his disposal. My mother once drew my attention to the farewell address spoken in *Antony and Cleopatra* over the dead Queen of Egypt by her attendant Charmian:

Now boast thee, death, in thy possession lies
A lass unparallel'd.

Any other writer who ever lived would have written 'A *queen* unparallel'd'. Only Shakespeare would have thought of making this farewell salutation ten times more human and ten times more powerful by substituting the homely colloquial '*lass*'.

This is also a work of profound common sense. Professor Shaitanov's major concern is to nail the myth, so long current on the fringes of Western scholarship and now apparently making inroads in Russia as well, that there is such a thing as a 'Shakespearean question'; that these masterworks couldn't have been produced by a nobody, a 'butcher's lout', a part-time moneylender from a provincial town like Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare, the argument goes, was nothing more than a front man for the real author, who must have been a personage of high social standing and refined education – Sir Francis Bacon, perhaps, or the Earl of Oxford, or a Marlowe who somehow survived his reported death in a tavern in 1593. But the facts are really quite straightforward. A large amount of contemporary comment survives about Shakespeare, much more than about the other authors of his day; and these sources consistently testify to the existence of a man of the theatre from Stratford, of limited schooling ('small Latin and less Greek', as Jonson put it), a competent but

not outstanding actor who none the less managed to establish himself as a playwright and poet of unimaginable power ('not of an age, but for all time'). The 'anti-Stratfordians' ask us to accept that the many allusions made to Shakespeare during his lifetime and after his death, some hostile, some grudging, some dazedly admiring, up to and including the Latin inscription engraved underneath his bust in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church, all formed part of a gigantic cover-up – a secret kept for decades by Jonson and everyone else both at court and in the theatrical world, nudging and winking and smirking at each other in their knowledge of who the real author was and never once giving the game away. The idea is patently ludicrous. How, Professor Shaitanov asks reasonably, could the supposed noble author have taken part from the distance of his estate or from Italy in the minute effort which went into the production of each individual play? By mobile phone?!

Rather than getting to grips with the substance of what Shakespeare wrote the anti-Stratfordians hover around the edge of his work, teasing out hidden clues to his 'real' identity as though the great master had nothing better to do than devise ciphers for the puzzlement of future generations. I remember in 1969 one researcher proclaiming triumphantly that the rather dull epitaph on Shakespeare's tombstone in the Stratford church ('Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear...') was in fact an anagram conveying the message 'Here lie buried 38 plays, Sonnets - and Christopher Marlowe's bones'! This bizarre claim was finally demolished a few years ago, if any further demolition was needed, by the discovery of a second tombstone with near-identical wording in another part of Shakespeare's native county of Warwickshire, strongly suggesting that the epitaph was a production line item routinely supplied by the local stonemasons. The one possible 'signature' I have ever suspected in Shakespeare only seems to provide more support for the pro-Stratford case, namely the constant references in both plays and poems to *swans**. Swans evidently frequented the river Avon at Stratford in Shakespeare's time, as they do today, and Ben Jonson even addresses Shakespeare in his encomium as the 'sweet Swan of Avon'. Were these swan references a kind of trademark scattered through his work by the author, or, perhaps more likely, the habitual metaphor of a local boy?

The one genuine oddity, the one real weapon in the hands of the anti-Stratfordians, is the absence of any mention of books in Shakespeare's will. Could the creator of this imaginative universe really not have possessed any books of his own? Professor Shaitanov however points out that Shakespeare in the course of a somewhat vagrant life moving from lodging to lodging in London would scarcely have been in a position to build up a library; that books were expensive items even for a prosperous theatrical entrepreneur such as Shakespeare became; and that any books Shakespeare may have owned at his death probably formed part of the 'rest of the property' he bequeathed to his son-in-law, Dr John Hall. No doubt he would also have had access over the years to

the books he encountered in the libraries of his various patrons.

Now of course we all love a good mystery. It's exciting to contemplate the idea that King Richard III of England did *not* kill his nephews, the Princes in the Tower, that Tsar Alexander I did *not* die in 1825 or the Tsarevich Alexei in 1918. But that doesn't make it inherently likely. Professor Shaitanov observes that the concept of a 'Shakespearean question' didn't even arise till the mid-nineteenth century, when it coincided, significantly, with the rise of the detective story.

Professor Shaitanov admits at one point having got somewhat 'carried away' by his crusade against the anti-Stratfordian fantasists, and it did occur to me once or twice that he was perhaps giving these fantasists more attention than they deserve, or as we say in English, using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Still, a victory for reason is always welcome, and it is hard to imagine a more conclusive dismissal of the anti-Stratfordian arguments than Professor Shaitanov provides in this book. Yes, Shakespeare was Shakespeare all right.

But if Shakespeare was Shakespeare, how much more can we usefully say about him? Professor Shaitanov is wary of any attempts to understand the great writer through the external evidence for his career. He gives some credence to the indications that the young man from Stratford may have spent part of the supposedly 'lost years' of the early 1580s in the household of the Houghton family in Lancashire, and perhaps obtained there his first wide-ranging access to books. But he is cautious about the picturesque stories of Shakespeare's 'wild youth', most of which seem to have circulated no earlier than the eighteenth century. And he is especially scathing of efforts to reimagine Shakespeare in the light of modern preoccupations, noting of Germaine Greer's bulky feminist volume about his wife Ann Hathaway that the amount of hard information we have on poor Ann wouldn't even fill a paragraph. The Sonnets present 'endless problems' of dating, and such biographical facts as they may contain have to be weighed against the poetic conventions of the period with its imitations and subversions of Petrarch. The young male addressee of the first part of the Sonnet collection probably was, as has long been supposed, Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, but the tempting identification of the 'Dark Lady' of the second part with the poetess Emilia Lanier has been sadly undermined by the recent discovery that the word 'brown' used in one manuscript to describe her should in fact be read 'brave'. We still don't know who the Dark Lady was, and perhaps never will.

No, the place to look for Shakespeare, as Professor Shaitanov insists, surely rightly, is in the content of the plays. But here too the picture isn't entirely simple. In one striking case it seems possible to trace a direct impact of the dramatist's personal experience on his work – in

the death of his son Hamnet, aged eleven, in August 1596, which finds an immediate echo in the portrayal of Arthur, the tragic young prince in *King John* who escapes being blinded only to leap from the castle walls to his death and evokes the heart-rending lament of his mother Constance, 'Grief fills the room up of my absent child...' We may conceivably be able to detect the marks of this trauma still further, in the darkening mood of the later comedies and in Shakespeare's choice of the story of *Hamlet*, a name so close to Hamnet, as the subject of his first tragic masterpiece. Most of the time, however, our efforts to probe Shakespeare's personal feelings are thwarted by his extraordinary gift for conveying all possible human viewpoints while hiding his own. Was he a Roman Catholic or a Protestant? He grew up, it seems clear, in a Catholic milieu, and this may be reflected at one or two points in the plays: the Ghost of Hamlet's father has stepped out of the Catholic Purgatory. Yet his depiction of Catholic cardinals in the history plays is consistently negative; King John states robustly that 'no Italian priest Shall tithes or toll in our dominions'; and the Porter in *Macbeth* takes a swipe at the Jesuits with their notorious penchant for 'equivocation'. Was he a radical or a conservative? In *Richard II* he describes the removal from office of an unworthy king, an appallingly subversive topic ('I am Richard II, know ye not that?' gasped Elizabeth I to an official of her court). But Richard's personal agony is conveyed with the utmost compassion, and the deposition of an anointed monarch is shown to be a heinous act with dire consequences. In the Roman play named after him Julius Caesar is murdered as the result of his tyrannical rule; but his murderers pay for the deed with their own lives, and there is certainly little support for democracy as represented by the capricious and savage mob. Was Shakespeare a nationalist or a world citizen? *Henry V* can be read as a hymn to patriotic resistance, and was indeed used for that purpose by the British government through Laurence Olivier's film of the play shot during World War II, just as Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky* was used to rally the Soviet public in face of the Nazi threat. Read another way, however, *Henry V* also offers an unflattering view of the dark side of war, with the squalid fates of the king's former drinking companions, the common soldiers bleakly awaiting their deaths on the night before Agincourt, the lovely French countryside laid waste by the invading English army. *The Merchant of Venice* appears to reflect for the most part the conventional anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's time; yet Shylock is unexpectedly made to appeal to our broader humanity with his plea 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands?...' One thing Shakespeare was not, as Professor Shaitanov observes, was a satirist, so that any quiet prejudices he may have harboured are not allowed to show through.

He was not called 'gentle Shakespeare' for nothing. I suspect that to talk to he may have come across as a polite, retiring, rather unimpressive individual, the bland exterior concealing that enormous inner life. I believe that his genius lay precisely in his ability to view the world from above and present every issue impartially in all its aspects, like the swan's down-feather that in *Antony and Cleopatra*

stands upon the swell at full of tide
And neither way inclines.

Only one other writer I am aware of had Shakespeare's ability to look down on human affairs from a godlike height, and that was of course Tolstoy – one further reason perhaps why Tolstoy was unwilling to cede him the primacy.

In the course of a comprehensive and masterful study Professor Shaitanov has succeeded both in sweeping aside the bogus Shakespeare mystery and in leading us to the genuine mystery of Shakespeare's mind. Maybe one day some miracle of discovery will enable us to penetrate deeper into his mind than we have done so far. But we will still be left with the ultimate mystery of how any human being can have produced what he did.

* Swan references in Shakespeare include:

'I am the cygnet to this pale faint swan
Who chants a doleful hymn to his own death'.
King John, Act V Scene III, ll. 21-22

'So doth the swan her downy cygnets save,
Keeping them prisoner underneath her wings'.
Henry VI Part I, Act V Scene III, ll. 56-57

'...as I have seen a swan
With bootless labour swim against the tide
And spend her strength with over-matching waves'.
Henry VI Part III, Act I Scene IV, ll. 19-21

'For all the water in the ocean
Can never turn the swan's black legs to white
Although she lave them hourly in the flood'.
Titus Andronicus, Act IV Scene II, ll. 102-104

'...the swan's down-feather
That stands upon the swell at full of tide
And neither way inclines'.
Antony and Cleopatra, Act III Scene II, ll. 48-50

'...I will play the swan
And die in music.
Othello, Act V Scene II, ll. 245-246

'And now this pale swan in her watery nest
Begins the sad dirge of her certain ending'.
Rape of Lucrece, ll. 1611-1612

ИГОРЬ ШАЙТАНОВ, ШЕКСПИР

Жизнь Шекспира в изложении профессора Игоря Шайтанова является весомым вкладом в активно развивающееся шекспироведение с точки зрения англичанина. Эта книга больше, чем биография, поскольку жизнь Шекспира вписывается в широкий политический, социальный и культурный контекст того времени, а история публикаций и критики шекспировских произведений прослеживается с семнадцатого века до настоящего времени. В своей книге профессор Шайтанов сочетает повествование о фактах жизни Шекспира, известных нам по документальным источникам, с исследованием сонетов и комплексным анализом пьес. Он выступает с несколькими важными предложениями для датировки ранних произведений Шекспира, особо подчеркивая время распространения чумы в 1592–1594 гг., когда закрытие лондонских театров заставило молодого драматурга обратиться к поэзии и тем самым обеспечило ему широкую известность и как поэта, и как драматурга в период значительных изменений в английском обществе и даже в английском языке. Профессор Шайтанов озабочен, прежде всего, разрушением мифа о том, что автором произведений Шекспира была некая замаскированная известная личность, а не обычный человек театра из Стратфорда-на-Эйвоне. Доказательства, которые приводит И. Шайтанов, чтобы опровергнуть утверждения «антистрэтфордианцев», являются основательными и убедительными. Разоблачая фиктивную тайну, он предлагает нам подлинную тайну шекспировского сознания. Он показывает, что чувства и эмоции Шекспира нельзя определить по посмертным историям о его юности, или по его юридическим документам и деловым бумагам, или даже по искусственным (что возможно) страстям, описанным в его сонетах, но их следует искать в его пьесах. Но даже в этих пьесах мы сталкиваемся с гением автора, способного и желающего представить всевозможные характеры людей, их чувства и обстоятельства их жизни – любые, но не свои собственные.

Игорь Шайтанов, Шекспир, шекспироведение.